

## Fiction by Ree Davis

### *I kneel before you*

Light streaming into the room wakes me. I curl around Jaichin's body and close my eyes. Jaichin pushes me away.

"Get up," he says, his face buried in the pillow. "Get up, Xiao-li. It's your time."

The morning is my responsibility. The others always sleep late. I sit up on the mattress. This room is small, but the apartment is large with seven rooms. Our one window faces east, so we always get morning sun. It does not bother Jaichin, but the morning light reminds me of home. I miss my mother most in the morning, but now I push her from my mind.

I stand up and pull on my pants and t-shirt. Jaichin's long, lean body lies motionless on the bed. He wears only underpants. I would love to wake him and make love, but he needs the sleep. He will be hung over from last night. I leave, without disturbing him.

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*"I kneel before you" won first runner-up in the "South China Morning Post"/Radio Television Hong Kong's 2003 short fiction competition. After spending three years in China, Davis lives in North Carolina, where she is an architect and a writer. She is finishing her first novel, "A Terrible Energy."*

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I move across the hall to the toilet, not looking at the door to her room. I do not want to think about her yet, so I go into the toilet and rinse my face in the sink. My eyes are swollen with sleep. Everyone was up late. I cannot wait until they decide it is time for her to go.

I shuffle into the kitchen, pausing to listen at her door. There is no sound. I get a bowl of rice and sit to eat. I drink the tea that remains in my cup from yesterday. I sit longer than I should, delaying the start of the day. I wash my dishes and look out the window into the narrow space behind our building. It is lined with windows to other kitchens just like ours. Everything is filthy and worn; no one cares about this place. After putting the dishes away, I leave the kitchen, stopping in the toilet to get a bucket and cloth. I cross the hall to her room.

I open the door and peer in before entering. Around her, the room is empty except for some old construction materials stacked by the door. She is in the center of the room, just as they left her. Her head hangs down on her chest; she is still asleep. Her wrists are tied together behind the chair. Her ankles are bound and tied to the chair's legs. Her head is covered with her blouse; I tied it there myself last week. I cannot see her face.

I do as I have been instructed, cleaning the blood and urine that has collected on the floor at her feet during the night. She stirs; I step back. I know she cannot hurt me; she is bound too tightly. Her cloaked head faces mine. Can she see through the fabric? I look away. I hear her mutter through the tape covering her mouth. I ignore her muffled words and finish cleaning. As I stand to take the bucket from the room, she mutters again and a new pool of urine forms on the floor. I put down the bucket, soak the cloth in the puddle at her feet, and squeeze it over her. She struggles beneath the stream.

I clean the floor again and leave the room to dump the contents down the toilet and rinse the rag. When I am through, I return and sit on the floor behind her. As with every morning, my mind wanders and I think of my mother. I came to this house six months ago, soon after I started seeing Jaichin. Though I am much younger than he, we fell passionately in love. My father claimed Jaichin was a gangster and our affair brought shame to the family. He banished me from my home. That was the last time I saw my mother. She knelt on the floor behind him, sobbing not to lose her only daughter. Now, I can only take comfort in my memories of her. When I was not in school, I spent every moment with her. In the evening, after she put me to bed, she bathed my father's mother in our kitchen. I was quite young, but I remember watching them from the nook where I slept. My mother would help my grandmother undress. Then, my mother would wash her from a bucket of warm soapy water. In silence, my mother lifted each withered limb and stroked it clean. The ritual continued until my grandmother died.

My thoughts are interrupted when the woman shifts in her chair. She rolls her

head, trying to face me. She is crying. This makes me angry.

"It is your own fault. You stole from Mr. Wong." I am annoyed. "Your fault. Not mine. Your tears mean nothing."

She tries to move the chair with her body, but she is too weak. She has been here for four weeks. Wong, Jaichin, and Xin, Jaichin's younger brother, brought her here one night. I came to the door of the room, but it was locked. I asked Jaichin what was happening. He said to go to our room, where I waited for him. Through the walls, I could hear her crying to be left alone, to go home, to go back to her baby. They were beating her, calling her a whore and an addict. I was scared, but did nothing.

Before that night, everything was fine between Jaichin and me. I would do anything for him, but now, he spends most of his time with her. Jaichin said she used to buy drugs from them, but stopped when she had a baby. She stole from them, so they had to make an example of her. After seeing her, I wondered if they also brought her here because she was beautiful.

My thoughts are interrupted when she starts banging the chair legs against the floor. I am afraid she will wake everyone, so I get up. I face her cloaked head, "Stop. Now."

I can see tears have soaked the blouse. This makes me angrier. She is naked from the waist up. Her skin is bruised and marked from these weeks with us, but her breasts are still beautiful. My face flushes. Her beauty, which shines through her beaten flesh, angers me more. Jaichin has been touching this skin instead of mine. Jaichin comes to our bed smelling of her. Jaichin does not want to touch me anymore.

Suddenly, the door bangs open and Jaichin enters. "Stupid, useless girl. Can't you keep her quiet?"

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I shrink at his rage. He picks up a pipe leaning near the door and crosses the room. In one graceful swing, he smashes the pipe against her head. Her torso slumps forward. He hands the pipe to me and leaves the room, slamming the door.

I am stunned and stand motionless with the cold pipe in my hands. Deep red begins to seep through the fabric covering her face. Her head hangs loose from her neck. I think she is dead. Hot tears race down my cheeks. I pace back and forth, clutching the pipe, scared by the thin stream of blood seeping down her bare breasts and by what Jaichin may have done.

It seems hours pass before I have the nerve to put the pipe down and untie the blouse. I remove the fabric, revealing her face. It is now slack with death. Her jaw falls loose from the blow. The tape hangs useless from her mouth. I kneel before her. I must compose myself; this is no time for self-pity.

I get up, go to the kitchen, and get scissors. When I return, I kneel to cut the bindings from her wrists. Her thin fingers are bruised and broken. The nails are ringed in blood and dirt. The bindings are tight. I must push the scissors into the flesh of her wrists to cut them. They have been there for so long, I must peel them off. Once discarded, the bindings form a broken ring on the floor. Her hands are stuck together with blood; I pull them apart and bring them around to place in her lap. Her waist is bound to the chair, so she does not fall. I kneel again to undo the bindings at her ankles and see bruises up the length of her legs. These are from the second week, when the men stopped beating her and began raping her. I listened from the other room as she struggled beneath them; my face grew hot with jealousy. I wanted Jaichin to stop, but for the wrong rea-

sons. During the mornings of that week, I spat on her. Now, I see how fragile she is. Her arms and legs are pale and thin. Again, I have to push the scissors into the flesh of her ankles to cut the bindings. Again, dried blood binds her limbs together. I will have to clean her to be able to remove the other bindings, so I get the bucket and rag. As I move across the hall, I notice the other rooms are quiet: no one else is awake.

I return, closing the door and locking it. I soak the rag in warm water and clean the blood from her torso. I gently soak the cords that encircled her before I unwrap them. When she is finally free, I pull her from the chair and lay her body on the floor. I cut her tattered and soiled skirt, pulling it off from under her body. She is naked, but covered with blood and filth. I change the water in the bucket several times, flushing the red liquid down the toilet and refilling it with fresh water. I rinse her blouse clean too. Each time after I return to her, I close and lock the door.

When she is completely clean, I put away the bucket, return to the room, and lock the door. I sit beside her. Her body is a map of the last four weeks. The yellowish purple areas of her face, arms, and hands mark week one, when every day she pleaded to be returned to her child, but instead was beaten unconscious. Dark purple areas on her wrists, ankles, and thighs mark week two, when they gagged her and repeatedly raped her. Burns on her face, breasts, legs, and feet were formed in week three. Red welts extend from these areas, indicating infection had set in. Some marks are chemical burns from caustic cleaning fluid. These were my contribution to her torment. I felt excluded, so I gave them ideas for torture and was proud to be allowed to participate. It felt good to hurt her then;

she was the woman who stole Jaichin from me. This last week, week four, they had grown tired of her, so she was beaten just to keep her unconscious. Despite the shroud of violence she wears, I know she was still beautiful until Jaichin's last blow. My hands tremble as I tie her shattered jaw closed with the blouse that has served as her mask. I close her eyelids.

As I sit beside her, I see the marks of childbirth on the skin of her stomach and the edges of her breasts. I see the holes in her earlobes that once held earrings, and the white bands on her fingers where there once were rings. There is a scar on one knee, perhaps from a childhood fall. I hold her hand in mine, as my mother held my grandmother's hand after preparing her body the day she died. I want to cry for this woman, but know I do not have the right, so we sit together in silence, she and I, for hours.

The room is peaceful until I hear the men waking in the rooms beyond. It is not long before they begin pounding on the door.

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