

THE BANDIT GIRL'S STORY

Qiao was a strange creature who took the form of a young man.

In the remote corner of the Xin-Chang Quarter of Chang-An, there was a collection of old houses. Though the outer shells were decrepit, broken by age and disregard, the most unassuming housed the legendary Fei Nü. I have no records of her family line, though it is said she is the maternal granddaughter of an unsuccessful merchant, and that her father had been killed when bandits struck his wagon. This case must be true, as the routes to Xin-Chang are patrolled by many brigands, and an unsuccessful merchant would not have enough trade for his name to be recorded. In the years since, Fei Nü had lived as a notorious masked bandit, robbing every merchant who came into Xin-Chang and storing her spoils in those empty homes. She had been the most excellent brigand China had ever experienced, as she had never been caught, and I am able to relay this story only because she had strangely vanished. When the investigative officer Dian MaoFen finally unearthed the stolen goods, the sum equated to 108,000 copper pieces.

On the fourth day of the seventh lunar month, Fei Nü returned from her patrol to discover a naked boy, about her age – sixteen or seventeen, dancing without caution in her property. Thinking that a traveller had discovered her stolen goods, Fei Nü panicked, resolving to rob and murder the intruder. Lying in wait under the cover of the low branches, she waited until the boy's dancing brought him

close to her hiding-place, and fell upon him with practised and graceful brutality. Holding a knife to Qiao's throat, she demanded, "I am the legendary Fei Nü; you will hereby forfeit all possessions, or die!" To this, Qiao's eyes widened, and he said in a panic, "Wait! I have no possessions - look at me, I am naked! There are no jewels or heirlooms on my body." Fei Nü hesitated, realising her error. She drew her knife back and said plainly: "Then, I need to kill you." The boy, pressed for a solution, responded, "As you are a legendary bandit, I am a legendary minstrel. My people are renowned for their beautiful songs - I can offer you music for my life." Fei Nü, finding this arrangement acceptable, sat in her yard and motioned for the boy to begin.

Qiao began to sing, and Fei Nü was immediately enraptured. Enthralled by the young man's incredible talent in storycraft and arts, her hardened bandit eyes, which could only recognize the value in gold, softened for the first time in years. At once, she remarked on the exceptional beauty of the boy, whose movements were smooth and graceful as a dancing willow, and whose voice cut, flute-like, through the morning's hush. Qiao sang gracefully, with a voice that carried on the gentle western wind over to his audience. He sang of one hundred thousand supernatural magpies, sacredly loyal to the heavens, which coalesced out of dark spots in the midnight sky once every year, on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, with a singular purpose – to fly over the Silver River, creating a black bridge, so two lovers could reunite for one night. Then, with tears hanging in his eyes, he sang of the magpies' death, returning to emptiness after their only purpose had been fulfilled. Fei Nü wept at the boy's beautiful song, small tears tracing their

way down her cheeks. Thanking Qiao profusely, she wiped her tears and gave him her blessing to leave unharmed. Qiao bowed, relieved, and walked towards the forest. When he had disappeared behind the trees, there was a rustling, and Fei Nü watched in amazement as a single Magpie flew over the treetops and into the sky. Realising Qiao's nature, Fei Nü scolded herself for being careless; she had figured, with the small scale of the world, that she would happen upon Qiao again. However, she could not possibly hope to encounter a Magpie twice, which could travel freely across vast distances unrestrained by dangerous roads.

The next day, Fei Nü was awoken from fitful dreams by the rustling of cloth. Thinking it to be the state officials, she leaned out of her window with a sword in hand, intent on fighting back. However, she spotted only a Magpie perched on a low branch, pecking at its plumage. As she watched, the bird tore out a feather, and at once the entire skin came free. Qiao stood on the branch, meticulously hiding the cloak in the same tree as before, before falling to earth and dancing into Fei Nü's courtyard once more. The bandit girl ran out to greet him and asked, bewildered but excited, why he had returned. Qiao, feigning fear, lightly asked if she was going to demand another story from him as compensation for trespassing. Laughing, Fei Nü demanded a story and sat down for Qiao's performance. That day, the fifth of the seventh lunar month, Qiao sang of a cowherd who stole a heavenly weaver-maiden's clothes while the maiden and her sisters came down from heaven to bathe on earth. From this strange relationship, he detailed the strange circumstances of their meeting, the curious romance which followed, and the marvellous life that they had built

together in the years which followed. At his song's end, he elaborated about the redemption that loyalty brought the lovers. Fei Nü placed a hand over her heart, which was beating extremely, and thanked Qiao profusely for his performance. As she watched the boy leave, turning once more into a Magpie with the aid of the feathered cloak, she felt a deep longing. Being a bandit all her life, Fei Nü knew nothing about courtship or romance, only theft. As such, she felt obligated to make Qiao her own and devised a plan.

The following night, Fei Nü slept not in her home but in the surrounding forest. That way, when Qiao returned in the morning in the form of a Magpie, and doffed his cloak to wander into her yard, Fei Nü swiped the hidden cloak from behind the tree and hastily shoved it into a jar. Then, running around to the back of her home, she hid the pot amongst her other riches and went out to greet Qiao. Qiao, smiling, feigned panic once more, and without missing her opportunity, Fei Nü demanded her story. As such, on the sixth day of the seventh lunar month, Qiao finished his tale from the previous day. "The Queen Mother of the West, discovering one of the immortal maidens had deserted her duty, flew to earth to retrieve her. At this time, the maiden and her husband had built a beautiful life together, and the weaving maiden went along reluctantly. Her husband, unwilling to lose his wife, rowed his boat to heaven with aid from his magical bull. In shock at a mortal man's defiance, the Queen Mother of the West tore the fabric of Heaven itself with a single slash, forming an impassable river of stars."

Yet, Fei Nü was not listening today. Too occupied was she with the thought that her treachery would be discovered.

Qiao, finished with his story, tried to leave. However, he found nothing where he had stored his cloak, no matter how many times he checked or how far he broadened his searching. After a period of fretting, Qiao ran to Fei's yard once more with tears in his eyes and proclaimed, "I have been inflicted with the utmost tragedy; my cloak. It has disappeared!" To this, Fei Nü feigned surprise and said, "This is truly terrible. It is coming to night, and you cannot leave without clothes." Qiao covered his eyes with his hands and sobbed, "In a day, I will have to fly to heaven to be Niu Lang's bridge, and I am trapped on earth. What will I do?" Fei held him close and brought him into her home, saying, "I will house you and dress you for now. I can provide you firewood and food." Without any other option, Qiao nodded a solemn 'yes' and followed Fei Nü into her home.

On the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, Fei Nü and Qiao watched a storm of Magpies ascend to heaven. A thin line formed over the Silver River and in hours died. Qiao wept profusely, and Fei Nü held him gently throughout. Qiao lamented, "I have lost my purpose, my only purpose," and hung his head. Fei Nü kissed his forehead lovingly and offered her solace, "But you are alive now; you are not bound to your duty anymore, and so can live." Qiao nodded, comforting himself in her body, and agreed silently. "It is true, I often dreaded this day equally as often as I anticipated it. Now, I at least can move onwards." That night, the two shared a bed. In the morning, Qiao dressed in the finest stolen silks Fei Nü offered him and walked into the world as a man instead of a strange beast. In time, Qiao began to truly embody the life Fei Nü had

given him. Fei Nü sold some of her stolen goods to purchase a large estate in the centre of the Xin-Chang province and instated Qiao as its master. The two became properly married and meticulously transferred Fei Nü's stolen items to their new home as heirlooms; Qiao, through careful study, eventually came to pass the social service exam and obtained a lofty position as a bookkeeper in a high-ranking man's circle. In the annals of the 700th year, his name is still rendered; however, as 'Qiao' is an unusual name, he used a pseudonym, though I cannot recall what it was. Thirty years passed like this, blissfully.

On the eighth day of the seventh lunar month in the 730th year, the Queen Mother of the West descended from heaven. She had realised that one of her heavenly magpies had fled his duty, and had come to collect and punish the deserter. Following the nearly invisible trail of heavenly magic left by the magpie's cloak, she entered Fei Nü and Qiao's estate with an entourage of soldiers. Fei Nü and Qiao, caught off guard and defenceless, hid in their storage room with their heirlooms. Qiao, believing he was doomed to return to heaven and die, turned to his wife with tears in his eyes and said, "I am truly sorry we must part like this. Thank you, deeply, for helping me rebuild my life from nothing after I was bound to earth. You have given me happiness beyond everything I could have imagined." Fei Nü, feeling the sting of guilt in her heart, could not hold her secret. She reached into the jar where she hid his feather-cloak and revealed it to him. She hung her head, crying out, "No, I have done nothing. I have stolen you from your home and your happiness, and masqueraded these long years as an innocent woman." Qiao stared aghast at his

cloak, running his hand over it, a tear running down his cheek. He looked confused, then angry. He shuttered his eyes with force and squeezed a bitter tear from the corner. In the end, he took a breath and resolved himself. "No. You have given me everything. There is anger in my heart, but it is nothing in comparison to thirty years of bliss. The Queen Mother will not go until she secures a wayward Magpie, so this will be goodbye."

Fei Nü steeled herself and, in a swift motion, pushed Qiao to the ground and donned the feathered cloak. In an instant, a Magpie stood where Fei Nü had, and the bird flew from the room before Qiao could yell out. Fei Nü, in the guise of a magpie, prostrated herself before the Queen Mother of the West, saying desperately, "Great Queen. I have transgressed, and I accept any punishment you deem fitting. Please, spare this good man's home, and take only me." Pleased by the straightforwardness of the Magpie, the Queen Mother of the West accepted the apology. However, as punishment, the Queen Mother opened her palm to reveal a pill of immortality and instructed the Magpie to eat it. The Queen Mother decreed that, to repay the thirty years spent on Earth, the Magpie would spend eternity as the vanguard for the heavenly bridge over the Silver River. Without complaint, Fei Nü swallowed the pill and was bound eternally to her Magpie form, ascending to heaven. The Queen Mother of the West retreated to her domain alongside her coterie, and only then did Qiao emerge from his room, alone in his enormous estate. He wept to the sky, as he had thirty years ago, looking for the bridge of stars that would cross the Silver River.

Qiao lived until he was seventy-nine, though he retired

at fifty. The stress on his heart had grown too enormous to continue the difficult work of bookkeeping, and he had resigned with honour from his position. From there, he rarely left his home and hired only three servants, who became close confidants in time. I am the first. On Qiao's deathbed, he relayed this story to me and instructed me to return his estate and wealth to the capital with this story as proof of legitimacy. At first, I felt skeptical about this story's details. I figured them to be the ramblings of an old man, but with research, I have confirmed that every date and name is accurate. Still now, I am shocked at the strange nobility of that woman, Fei Nü, who sacrificed a peaceful mortal life for an eternity of servitude out of love for this man, Qiao. Amongst men and women today, truly, she has no equal. Even her start as a brigand proves that no vice is too deep to escape from and that loyalty is an enduring and unmatched virtue. As for Qiao, though I did not have the fortune to hear him sing, as he swore never to court again following Fei Nü's departure, I feel enraptured to imagine a song so brilliant that it could ease the hardened heart and eyes of a legendary bandit. His love for her is proved by his lifetime of fidelity and solitude, for he has never held another woman.