

Widow San

I want to die. . . I want to die soon. . .

Widow San had not eaten or had anything to drink in ten days. She was cruelly set upon dying. She hoped to die soon, very, very soon.

I want to die . . . I want to die soon. . . Otherwise . . . I will bring disaster down on the children. . .

Widow San had had a hard life, she had endured a lifetime, she had held out for a lifetime. Near the end, she had fallen ill and couldn't get up.

It was jaundice, said the barefoot doctor.

It was fate, thought Widow San.

When no one was around, she got up and felt her way to the woodshed. She'd tightly grasp a stick of firewood and hit anyone who showed up. She'd hit her son or her grandkids. She hit her son and the doctor wearing shoes brought in by the commune. She also struck the bowls of food and water brought by her son.

Widow San decided that before she breathed her last, she would never come out of the woodshed.

That year, Caicai's dad had done the same.

In her youth, Widow San had spent some time in a brothel on Sandao Barracks Lane in Datong City. At first she was in charge of chopping firewood, carrying coal, and other such simple chores. She was also in charge of making sure that there was always hot water for tea. Later, the madam forced her to sleep with the customers. She even taught her how to writhe, pant, and moan when she was doing it with the customers. In a word, the more debauched, the better. But she was incapable of doing any of what the madam taught her. For this reason,

the madam let her go hungry so that she would remember what she was taught. But it was no use, she just couldn't do it.

She was homely, tall, and of large build—the type that only low-class customers would want. They would say, “Who cares? Blow out the light and they're all the fucking same, only she's cheaper.” They wanted to get their money's worth and would keep her awake all night long. They'd do it once and want to do it again and again.

She couldn't sleep nights, and during the day she had her regular chores to attend to.

Widow San couldn't take it any longer, so when the opportunity presented itself, she ran away with a pair of fire tongs. She wanted to go beyond the pass. She had heard that after her father had sold her to the brothel, he had gone to Hetao in Inner Mongolia. She wanted to find her father. She didn't hate him, even after he sold her to the brothel. She knew he had no other choice. Otherwise her mother would have had no coffin—they would have had to wrap her in a mat and bury her. She didn't hate her dad. She wanted to find him.



I want to die . . . I want to die soon. . . . Otherwise I'll bring disaster down on the children. . . .

She covered herself with her tattered leather coat. She faced upward, and tears welled from her tightly closed eyes that resembled dried apricots.

A large, coarse hand, rough as a corncob, wiped away the two streaks of tears. At eighteen or nineteen, she couldn't think of anyone, save herself, who had ever wiped her tears away.

After taking hold of his hand, she threw her arms around his neck.



She headed north after running away from Datong. She had no idea how far away Hetao was, but she knew it was to the northwest. Walking and walking, she discovered that five wolves, their ears erect, were following her. She knew they weren't following her just to follow her, nor had they come to accompany her in her loneliness. They were going to devour her. She didn't scream or shout. When her mother was alive, she said you couldn't scream when you saw a wolf, because the

moment you uttered a sound, it would pounce on you. Holding the tongs, she walked steadily and slowly. The wolves followed her for five *li* without making a move. Instead of the person she hoped to see, she saw an isolated melon hut. As she entered the melon hut, she stood blocking the door with her tongs.

She forgot how she had fought with the wolves. All she could remember was how someone outside had cleared them away and how his dog had savagely bitten them. She'd passed out and couldn't remember anything else.

"You're pretty tough. You stabbed three wolves to death—you ripped open the belly of one and tore open the throats of two others," he said. "One of them bit you," he said.

It was only then that she realized her thigh ached and learned that a wolf had bitten off a chunk of her flesh. Listening to him, she realized that three days had already passed and that she was lying on a *kang* in a dark little cave.

She wept, but she wept in silence. Her tears flowed, flowed down. That large, coarse hand, rough as a corncob, wiped away the two streaks of tears. At eighteen or nineteen, she couldn't think of anyone, save herself, who had ever wiped away her tears. First she seized hold of his hand, and then she threw her arms around his neck. From then on, they spent their days together. When they did it, no one needed to teach her how to writhe, pant, and moan. She never told him that she had run away from the brothel on Sandao Barracks Lane; she simply said that she wanted to go beyond the pass in search of her father.

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I want to die . . . I want to die soon. . . . Why go on living? . . . I'll just bring disaster down on the children. . . .

She stroked the tattered leather coat that he'd made from the pelts of those three wolves. He said when it was hot she should use it as a mat; when it was cold she should use it as a cover; and when it was cloudy or rainy she should wear it with the fur out. The skins had not been well cured, so they weren't very soft; at first the coat made a sound when she put it on, but later the sound stopped.

She always kept that wolfskin coat. When it was hot she used it as a mat; when it was cold she used it as a cover; and when it was cloudy or rainy she wore it with the fur out. But it had long since lost its fur and become bare, bare like his back.

“Mom, force yourself to eat something.” She heard a voice speaking to her.

She opened her eyes that resembled dried apricots. It was her son Caicai with some food for her. He knelt before her bed, holding a bowl in two hands.

“No. . . . I want to die. . . . I want . . . to die. . . .” Her lips moved as she spoke. She no longer had the strength to lift the club to strike anyone.

“Mom, the doctor says that they can cure jaundice at the county seat,” said Caicai.

“No. . . . I want to die. . . .”

“Mom, Uncle Pothook says he has gone to borrow money for it.”

“No. . . . I want to die. . . .”

She stuck out her tongue to lick away the tears that had flowed to her lips. She swallowed them.

“Mom, drink some water. Drink.”

“No. . . . I want to die. . . .”

She closed her eyes and her tears rolled down in two streaks. That large, coarse hand wiped them away again. She threw her arms tightly around his neck.

“Hurry and get up. Don’t cry. There’s no point in crying. Nearly the whole village has died from the jaundice, and now I have it. My time has come. I have to die too,” he said.

“If you die, I’ll die too,” she said.

“Hurry and get up. Get going. Go find your dad in Hetao; otherwise you’ll catch it from me,” he said.

“I’m not afraid, not afraid,” she said.

“That won’t do. You have to be afraid; otherwise it might harm the baby in your belly,” he said.

“Let’s call the baby Caicai,” he said.

“Okay,” she said.

When she wasn’t around, he’d climb into the woodshed and not come out. He’d grasp a stick of firewood and not let her approach. He knocked over all the food and water she brought to him. Seven days later, he was dead.

Her big belly sticking out, she threw the wolfskin coat over her shoulders and set off to the northwest, to Hetao to find her father. But she got no farther than the Wen Clan Caves. She gave birth to Caicai beside a pile of oat straw on the threshing ground. She stayed at the Wen Clan Caves and never left.

People asked her name. She told them San Ban. Nobody called her San Ban, they all called her Widow San. That’s what they called her for as long as she lived.



“Mom, Mom, Mom, you can stay at the county hospital. Uncle Pothook borrowed the money from the province,” said Caicai.

Widow San was silent.

Widow San didn’t even say “No. . . . I want to die. . . .”

She was no longer worried because she knew that she really was dead.