5-22-2012

Short Story: "Celery's Dream"

Sophia Geng
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, sgeng@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/headwaters

Part of the Literature in English, North America Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/headwaters/vol26/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Headwaters: The Faculty Journal of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.
Seventh Grandma was the only nurse in the Honest Village, but what made her stand out was her skill in growing celery. Though they had the same seeds and the same soil, the celery growing in her garden was twice as thick and three times as green as the neighbors’. Seventh Grandma was very proud. Tending the celery in her garden, she would caress her bulging belly and murmur, “If this time it’s a daughter, I’ll name her Celery. Isn’t celery a beautiful plant? It’s upright, tall, and fresh. Yes, please give me a girl as beautiful as celery.”

When she got the girl of her prayers, she immediately named her Celery. Celery grew up to be just what her mother had in mind: tall, slender, and as fresh as the morning dew. Men’s eyes followed her as she walked to the village well to fetch water.

She ignored their attentions. Her heart had already been taken.

At the well, Golden Orchard was waiting for her. “Little Celery!” He waved. Celery’s face lit up.

Golden Orchard was the oldest grandson of Fifth Great Grandpa, the caretaker of the whole village. When Golden Orchard was born, a horse-drawn carriage was sent to Mountain Tai to invite the most renowned Buddhist fortuneteller. This baby boy was the heir of the most prestigious branch of the Honest family. In his grandpa’s eyes, the little heir would control all the wealth of the Honest Village in due time: the orchard, the sesame oil mill, the rickshaw shop, the pawn shop, and the horse farm. He needed to guarantee a long and auspicious life for his eldest grandson. The Buddhist monk first calculated all the stars’ positions in the sky; then, he examined the baby’s face and hands carefully. “This baby has fortune in his life. He will be a prosperous man. Trees, especially trees that bear golden fruits, are good for him. I saw the lush orchard that you own. Golden Orchard will be a good name for him. With woods enriching him, though, the boy has to be very careful with fire. Otherwise, fire will harm his roots.”

“What should I do to protect his roots?”

“Dig wells in the form of the Eight Trigrams.”

Fifth Great Grandpa hired the villagers to dig eight deep wells surrounding the apricot orchard in the form of an octagon. When other villages dried up, Honest Village
still had plenty of fresh water. For this reason alone, the Honest Village attracted many good daughters-in-law.

Celery and Golden Orchard sat down on the bank of the creek next to the well. “Celery, the Buddhist monk said I would be rich. I am twenty now, and I am just as poor as everybody else.”

Right before the Land Reform, Golden Orchard’s grandfather donated all of his property to the newly established Village Committee. In return, he got the title “Open-minded Landlord.” It was a smart move: the title helped the family survive the mass movements. But now, the new leaders were saying “to become rich is glorious,” and Golden Orchard began to question his grandpa’s strategy. “Why didn’t he hide one gold brick, beneath the lavatory or in the drainage? Even one brick would be enough for me to start a business.”

“Why do you have to be rich?”

“So I can build a big house for you.”

“I don’t care whether the house is big or small.”

“I care, Celery. I hate to be poor. I have an idea, but I need your help.”

Celery loved watching Golden Orchard talk about his ambitious dreams. However, now that he really wanted to carry them out, she wasn’t so sure she liked them. “What are you up to?”

“I need to borrow your grandma’s pinewood coffin.”

“What are you talking about? She has lived with that coffin for five years.”

Celery’s grandma had a dream one day about being married to her late husband. Believing the dream was an omen of her imminent death, she forced her sons to buy her a pinewood coffin. It had been sitting in the middle of her living room for five years now.

“Old Bachelor Li is dying. He said whoever prepared a pinewood coffin for him would get his house and courtyard after his death.”

“Why do you want his mud brick house? There are more holes in that house than stars in the sky. Anyway, don’t you own your house and courtyard already?”

“I heard it on the highest authority that a road was going to be built to run through Old Bachelor Li’s house. The house is my investment.”

“Don’t daydream any more. My granny will never lend her coffin to anyone.”

“If you beg her, she will. You are her favorite grandchild. She will do anything for you.”

“No, I won’t ask her to do that.”
“Okay, we won’t then. Let’s just go and visit her.”

From that day on, Golden Orchard visited Celery’s grandma almost every day. His sweet tongue and sweeter promises muddled the old woman’s mind. After three months, standing on her cane, she helped Golden Orchard lift her coffin onto a horse drawn-cart. “Golden Orchard, my grandson, make sure you clean that filthy old bachelor up before you let him lie down in my coffin.”

Now, Golden Orchard possessed the run-down house he had coveted, but the plan to build the road was stalled. The villagers began to laugh at Celery’s grandma. “I remember she used to dust her fine coffin every day, then she let a stranger live in it. It’s amazing that at her age, she could still be fooled by a young man’s sweet tongue.”

Celery’s grandma refused to be the laughing stock of the village. “I am tired of watching it. When the time comes, Golden Orchard will prepare a better one for me. Right, Golden Orchard, my grandson?”

“Yes, granny. I will hire the best carpenter in our town to make one for you. My friends and I will carry it around the village three times so everyone will see how big and shiny it is.”

Two years later, in order to build the first highway through our town, the village had to demolish Golden Orchard’s dilapidated house. Golden Orchard turned out to be a great strategist. In the daytime, he bargained hard with the leaders of the village. At night, he brought candies and sweeter flattery to the leaders’ wives and kids. Eventually, they agreed on the compensation for his falling-down house. The head of the village announced, “Golden Orchard, the township will build a two-story house as compensation for your house. We will also grant your wish to build it in the middle of the village’s orchard. This is our final decision. There’s no way you can get one more brick from this deal. I suggest you take it now. Be aware, your house is so torn that it may not withstand the next hail. If so, you then have nothing to bargain with us.” Thinking of all the gifts, the head switched to his uncle voice, “Golden Orchard, my nephew, really, this is all we can do. Now you will have the biggest house in the village; may your auntie bring our kids to visit when you’ve moved in?”

Golden Orchard turned his new house into a hotel and named it “Orchard Villa.” Soon afterwards, Celery became the hostess of the biggest house in the village.

The villagers watched the Orchard Villa with curiosity. At first, Golden Orchard hired the villagers to work for his hotel. Then, he upgraded it and added a teahouse. As the first teahouse in the whole city, it soon became the favorite gathering place of the powerful and rich. To the villagers’ great disappointment, Golden Orchard sacked all the villagers and hired outsiders to work for him. Instead of strong cousins, he now had retired army soldiers to guard his hotel. Instead of boisterous sisters-in-law, he secretly shipped exotic Southern women to be the new attendants.
The villagers saw dogs roaming around the wells that Golden Orchard’s grandfather had built to protect his roots.

“What do the dogs look for around the wells?” As everyone had running water in their home now, no one used those wells any more.

“I heard those women threw their unwanted babies into the wells.”

“How could Golden Orchard let those women poison our water?”

“They are so petite and thin. How could they wash the sheets and clean the floor for his hotel?”

It finally dawned on the villagers. “Good heaven, Golden Orchard operates a brothel in our Honest Village!”

But now, nothing could stop money pouring into Golden Orchard’s villa. When the money was overflowing, Golden Orchard had to build new villas to hold it. Within years, the villas took all the land of the orchard. Now, Golden Orchard had to find new land to hide his wealth. He chose a place none of the villagers had ever heard about and named the new estate he built there “Golden Orchard Village.”

For over a decade, Celery was the richest wife in Honest Village. Even the mayor’s wife did not dare to stand next to her. Her dress and jewelry would make the first lady pale in comparison. However, Celery was not happy. With Golden Orchard gone on business for weeks and months on end, the house was empty. In her forlorn bedroom, she dreamed of the days Golden Orchard and her chatted at the village well.

Outside, the once friendly villagers turned jealous. In front of her, they admired her new ruby necklace, diamond rings, and gold wrist watch. Behind her back, they badmouthed her. “I don’t know why she puts on airs and turns her nose up into the sky. She’s nothing but a living widow.”

“Look how aloof she is towards us. She thinks she’s a rich lady above us. Who knows what kind of diseases that crook husband’s given her? I wouldn’t exchange my life for hers even if I were given a diamond ring ten times bigger.”

Celery learned to be indifferent to all the rumors. She knew Golden Orchard missed her when he was away and wanted her when he was home. Was he faithful when he was away? She had stopped asking herself that question a long time ago.

One day, when Golden Orchard came back home, he could not help noticing how moody Celery looked. He tried everything to cheer her up, but it did not even bring half a smile to her beautiful face.

“I know you are lonely here. Why don’t you come with me to Golden Orchard Village?”

“What will our son Distinction do then? He is so used to my cooking.”
“I can let my father and mother move in and take care of him.”

“But I can’t do anything for your business. I’ll just be a burden.”

“I want you to be with me. You don’t know how tough and tricky the world is. Out there, there are more cheaters than snowflakes. If you’re with me, I can at least have a person to trust.”

Celery decided to give it a try. Distinction liked the idea too. He was sixteen and welcomed the chance to having a house without a fastidious mother.

Golden Orchard reminded his parents, Fifth Grandma and Grandpa, one more time before they drove to the airport. “Make sure the door is locked every night. This cell phone is for you. You only need to push this button, then you can reach me wherever I am.”

Celery went on the airplane with her husband. It was her first flight. She quietly looked at other passengers and followed what they did. She read magazines, threw up into the proper bag, and disposed of it in the right place. She was curious about the clouds but did not take out her camcorder to make a video.

Golden Orchard was impressed by her dignity.

It was a long flight, and Celery gradually dozed off. Her fragrant and smooth hair gently touched Golden Orchard’s chin.

“I didn’t know an airplane could be such a comfortable place,” Golden Orchard mused.

In her dream, Celery saw a pretty rooster, astute and full of spirits. It was walking leisurely on a grassland full of dandelions. Suddenly, an eagle as red as fire dove straight from the sky. The rooster was taken by the neck. It struggled a few times, but the grip of the eagle’s beak was too tight. The eagle carried the rooster to the sky and became a small black dot.

Celery woke up in a cold sweat. She told her husband about the dream.

“This is the first time you’ve flown,” he said. “That’s why you dream about birds.”

Celery felt it was not that simple. Then suddenly she realized Distinction was born in the year of the rooster.

“We have to go back, Golden Orchard. We have to go back to Honest Village. The dream is about Distinction.”

“What’s about Distinction? This is an airplane: you can’t get off an airplane whenever you feel like it. Stop shouting! People are looking at us. What’s wrong with you? You were doing so well just a minute ago.”
Celery could not be quieted down. Golden Orchard became angry for a moment, but looking at how upset she was, he felt sorry for her. “Okay, okay, we’ll buy a return ticket to Honest Village as soon as the airplane lands.”

Celery and Golden Orchard returned to Honest Village at dawn.

Approaching their house, Golden Orchard tried to comfort his agitated wife.

“You’ll see everything is fine. Tomorrow, we can drive to Golden Orchard Village. The first time I was on an airplane, I almost vomited my gallbladder out.”

When they got off the taxi, Golden Orchard could not believe his eyes. The walls of his villa had turned black and it had been sealed off by the police.

“Golden Orchard, I’m so sorry. I wasn’t able to save your son,” Fifth Grandma said. Her whole right arm was in bandages. She had tried to push open her grandson’s door, but it just would not open.

There were some theories about how the fire started. Fifth Grandma did not know how to use the gas stove, probably. When Fifth Grandpa woke in the middle of the night and turned on the light, there might have been a small explosion that set off a fire.

Soon after the accident, the neighbors began to talk about a stranger they saw the night of the fire. He could have set fire to the house. “Golden Orchard cheated so many people; they may have traced him home and taken revenge.” “That must have been it.” “What a pity Distinction had to pay for his father’s wrongdoings. He was such a good kid.” The police were never able to confirm the existence of the stranger. But it became the most popular version of how the fire started. “Poor lad, his fate was to pay for his father’s sins.”

Celery lost her will to live. She threw food and water on the ground, on Golden Orchard, and on the servants. However, Seventh Grandma would not let her daughter go. She tied her hands onto the frame of the bed and injected glucose into her arm through a syringe. “I know you don’t want to live, but you have to. If I let you go, I will let myself go. Child, listen to me: time will heal the pain. I know you don’t believe me now, but time heals.”

Golden Orchard’s hair turned white. He sat on the sofa for days. Then one day he got up and became busy again. Distinction was only sixteen; he had never touched a woman. Now, he would be all by himself in the yin world; he had to have a companion and a good one. Golden Orchard visited all the families who had lost a daughter in the past year. Finally he found a decent family whose daughter drowned when swimming in the reservoir. They decided to let the kids get married by burying them in one tomb.
Now the two families became related by marriage. They visited each other when there were holidays and festivals, and they addressed each other according to their deceased children. “My daughter’s father-in-law, look: this is the last picture my daughter took. I bought that dress for her on a business trip in Canada.” “Distinction’s mother-in-law, this is our son’s bedroom. All of these are his video games. I kept everything in the same place.”

The two families never saw their kids in their dreams. “They must be happy with each other and don’t want to disturb us.” “It must be it.”

Secretly, Celery still wanted to meet her son. “I only need to see you once, to see how you are doing,” she would talk to him. “Please appear to me. Just appear to me one time.” She would lie down in his favorite chair. She took naps in his bedroom. But Distinction never came to her. A year later, she concluded, “He must be happy with his wife and forgot his Mama.”

Golden Orchard began to leave for the South again. On one trip, he brought back a girl of about five or six years old. “This is Jade. I adopted her for our old age. Jade, call Mama.”

“Mama!” The girl called in her innocent and clear voice. Like Distinction, she had Golden Orchard’s intense eyes. When she talked, a small dimple showed on her right cheek, just like Distinction. The villagers were saying Jade was Golden Orchard and one of his mistresses’ daughter. Nonetheless, Celery warmed up to the girl gradually.

“Call me Mama,” she would bend down and ask the little girl.

“Mama!” The girl called playing with her toys.

“Call me good Mama.”

“Good Mama.”

“Yes! Good child.”

Celery could not hear “Mama” enough. Each day, she asked the little girl to call her in her pure and sweet voice. She bought toys and cooked her favorite dishes to entice her.

When the girl got used to the routine, she found a shortcut.

“Call me Mama.”

“Good Mama.”

“Yes! Such a good child.”
Sophia Geng is an Assistant Professor in the Modern and Classical Languages Department and Asian Studies Program. She is working on a collection of linked stories set in a rural Chinese village — the Honest Village. The stories capture critical moments in the lives of the Honest villagers who live through the promises and horrors of a China undergoing urbanization. One of the stories in the collection, “Young Soldier, the Taxi Driver,” was published in the 2008 issue of Headwaters. Sophia sees her stories as a tribute to the ordinary Chinese villagers’ resilience confronting adversity and their unfailing passion for life.

Note

This is one of a collection of short stories on the Honest Village, which is made up of descendents of two brothers with the family name Honest. As a result and as in most cases of Chinese villages, the villagers are connected by kinship. The males of each generation are addressed by their birth order. For example, the seventh male of a generation is addressed as “Seventh Grandson” by his grandfather’s generation, “Seventh Nephew” by his father’s generation, and “Seventh Brother” by his own generation. When he gets married, his wife adopts his status in the clan. The narrator is a teenage girl who recounts the love story of Celery and Golden Orchard and the tragic death of their son Distinction.