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Short Story: "Young Soldier, the Taxi Driver"

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Young Soldier got up with great content. He closed the door gently behind him and walked into the spacious living room. His mother, Eighth Grandma, was sitting at the breakfast table. She had prepared stir-fried eggs, soybean milk, and deep-fried buns for her son. Now they were getting cold.

“Ma, why didn’t you eat first?” Young Soldier gave a big smile to his mother.

“When have I eaten by myself? Why can’t you eat with me now?”

Young Soldier gave his mother another big smile. Eighth Grandma stood up and began to busy herself with heating up all the dishes.

“Look at you. You’ve lost your souls. I just can’t see why that wife of yours is so enchanting. Look at her: her eyes are as small as green peas and her mouth …. it can eat a cow with one swallow!”

What do you know about her? Young Soldier thought to himself. The first time he saw her, he could not tear his eyes away from her neck. It was so white and so long: as white as lotus roots, as smooth as porcelain. On his wedding night, he found out it was like nothing else. It was better than anything else. And her small eyes: they barely opened and barely looked around. But when Young Soldier caught them, he saw through them and saw straight to her heart. It was pure red, pounding and alive.

“I still can’t believe you chose her. All the girls I showed you, they’re one hundred times better than her.”

There were small noises from his bedroom. Little Red must have woken up. Eighth Grandma lowered her voice.

Young Soldier did not want to pick a fight with his mother. They were very close. Eighth Grandpa died when Young Soldier was still in his mother’s womb. At the time, Eighth Grandma was barely thirty. She brought her four sons up on her own. Young Soldier remembered when he was young, his mother used to throw her arms around his neck and cry, “My poor fatherless son! How can we live now? …. Heaven, show us a way!” At those moments, Young Soldier swore to himself: he would never talk back to his mother.
After Big Soldier, his eldest brother, became the head of the village’s East Wind Motorbike Co., Ltd., then a multi-millionaire, a Party member and a village leader, Mother urged Young Soldier to work for his big brother. However, when Big Soldier made his college-educated, English-speaking secretary, Baby Wang, first his mistress and then his wife, Young Soldier stopped going there.

“It must’ve been that long-faced Fox Spirit. Big Soldier threw away the best daughter-in-law in the whole village. Money, money made my son a blind man.”

In fact, Baby was always smiling and polite to Young Soldier. The more she acted like that, the more Young Soldier thought of his old Big-Sister-in-Law who had been abandoned. “She’s like a mother to me.” Now, the office became stuffy with Baby Wang’s perfume, lipstick, laughter and “hello” and “bye bye.” To make it worse, Big Soldier would push the door open and shout, “Baby! Baby! Come to my office. There’s a phone call from America.” “‘Baby’, ‘baby’, why does a married woman have to keep her nickname? Why can’t my big brother call her ‘Accountant Wang’?” Young Soldier could not sit in his office anymore.

Each month, Big Soldier sent his mother a big envelope. Now, he gave her two. The other one was Young Soldier’s salary.

After quitting the job at his big brother’s factory, Young Soldier wanted to become a taxi driver.

As Honest Village owned the long-distance bus station, the men of the village pulled rickshaws when they could not find anything else to make a living. In the past, when there was a wedding or funeral in the village, the whole city had to walk on foot. “I’ve been waiting here for an hour and I could not see even one rickshaw.” “A daughter of Honest Village is marrying my neighbor’s son. I guess you just have to walk today.” As time passed, rickshaws changed into three-wheeled motorbikes, then into Japanese-made Toyotas.

“Ma, could you tell Big Brother, I want to borrow some money from him to buy a Toyota?”

Eighth Grandma delivered the message, but Big Soldier only said, “Let me think about it.” It took three months for Big Soldier to think. During those three months, Eighth Grandma murmured to her youngest son every day, “It’s that Fox Spirit. My sons never say no to me. It’s that Fox Spirit. Bad influence.”

Eventually, Big Soldier did not lend his little brother the money. Instead, he bought a shiny red Toyota for him. “Good color. It catches your eye and brings business to you,” Baby said as she handed the keys to him.
Young Soldier was very careful. He never picked up anyone after midnight, and he always declined those who offered him extraordinarily good prices. Now, having Little Red waiting for him at home, he was even more careful. He welded a steel partition between himself and his passengers and only left a small hole for the passengers to hand him the fare. He also kept a thick steel club right under his seat.

“How long have we been married? Almost three months now. By Spring Festival, Little Red could give me a son, big, fat, and loud. Let his cries wake up the whole alley. Mother would be so happy.”

Young Soldier could not help smiling at his thoughts.

“Hi, Big Brother, could you send us to Blacksmith Liu Village? I was told it’s 90 miles away from this station.”

It was two men and a young woman. Weathered peasants. The woman was shy, hiding behind the men.

“Why are you going there?”

“For my daughter’s engagement banquet. Once in a lifetime. We don’t want her to stand on her feet when we arrive. She has to step down from a sedan when they come out to welcome us. We saved two hundred yuan for the ride.”

The man took a red envelope from his pockets. It was nicely wrapped and had “Happiness” written on it in large print.

Yesterday, Little Red opened a red envelope just like it. A gift from their wedding. Last night, they decided to spend the red envelope. They went out shopping in his new Toyota. Little Red bought him a handsome leather jacket. When he came home, his mother was waiting at the gate of their spacious courtyard. Big Soldier built the big house for their mother, and it was the envy of all the Grandmas in the village.

Even Eighth Grandma’s sharp eyes failed to detect a single defect in the leather jacket. “My Young Soldier’s as good as a mannequin; anything you put on him looks nice.” Little Red smiled and nodded, too.

“Get in the car. We can probably get there before sunset.”

The country fellows were talkative. They told him about the future son-in-law: how good an appetite he had and how strong he was. Young Soldier liked their tales. “What did Little Red tell her brothers about me?”

“Daughter, see, it’s getting dark outside. Where are we? There’re no people around here,” one of the peasants said.
Suddenly, Young Soldier felt a sharp pain behind his neck, and he instinctively pushed the brake down.

“Hard and accurate. No wonder they say you’re the best veterinarian in our town.” The man praised the woman, as he dragged Young Soldier out of his car. “We should get a good price for this new Toyota.”

The woman carefully put a big syringe away. It contained an anesthetic used on cows.

“Mama!” Young Soldier cried before his world went completely black.

Eighth Grandma became startled in her late afternoon nap in a dining room chair. It was getting dark. She called Big Soldier and wanted to tell him her bad dream. But the Fox Spirit picked up the phone, so she hung up quickly. Eighth Grandma began to pace around, feeling as if something was strangling her throat.

“Ma, it’s still early. Young Soldier usually comes back later than this. The lotus seed soup is ready. I’ll get a bowl for you.”

The next day, a group of kids found Young Soldier’s body floating in an irrigation ditch. They ran to the head of their village. The village head took Young Soldier’s leather jacket away before phoning the local police.

“Give this to our kids’ uncle. It’s very new. What a waste if they just burn it with the body.”

The wife of the village head hid the leather jacket at the bottom of her basket, put cabbages and eggs on the top, and hurried off to her birth home. “My mother had keen eyes: my husband is indeed a clever man. If he stumbles on a tree, he’d skin it to get something out of it.”

At home, Big Soldier knelt down before his mother. “Ma, it’s all my fault. I shouldn’t have bought that car for little brother. I knew it was dangerous. I’m a rotten big brother …. Baby said it’d make you happy, and I thought so too …. Ma, slap me!”

Eighth Grandma had a stroke.

Her left side was paralyzed. Big Soldier hired two nurses to take care of his mother around the clock and bought the best wheelchair for her.

Every day, Little Red pushed Eighth Grandma to the newly built village garden to get some sun.

“Little Red, you can’t live like this. Find a man and get remarried,” Eighth Grandma said to Little Red, while they were sitting quietly in the garden.

“Ma, I will. When you’re able to take care of yourself, I will then. Get well quickly.”
One night, Eighth Grandma called Big Soldier. She asked him to find a good son-in-law for her daughter, Little Red.

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 pains of a China undergoing urbanization. Sophia sees her stories as a tribute to the ordinary Chinese villagers’ resilience confronting adversity and their unfailing passion for life.

Notes

1. Young Soldier is the name of the protagonist in this story. In the Chinese culture, names carry meanings and often symbolize the hopes of parents for their children. To name a son “Soldier” means the parents want him to be brave and disciplined. In rural China, to make it efficient, parents sometimes name their sons in numerical order. In this story, the eldest is named “Big Soldier” and the youngest is named “Young Soldier.” For the two sons in between, who do not appear in this story, their names, accordingly, are “Second Soldier” and “Third Soldier.”

2. This is one of a collection of short stories about 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 eighth male of a generation is addressed as “Eighth Grandson” by his grandfather’s generation, “Eighth Nephew” by his father’s generation, and “Eighth Brother” by his generation. When he gets married, his wife adopts his status in the clan. The narrator is a teenage girl who recounts the story of “Eighth Grandma” and her son “Young Soldier.”