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LAMENTATIONS FOR BYGONE DAYS

p. 1-16



TRANSLATOR'S NOTE TO READERS AND EDITORS

The language of the dialogues in "Lamentations for Bygone Days", and this includes particularities of grammar and spelling, is based on a combination of Black and White Southern dialects in the United States, since the people in the story all come from ~~South~~ <sup>South</sup> China and are speaking in a Southern Chinese dialect.

After having read the dialogues between the two old women, I feel this experiment has been successfully brought off. However, I do think some such explanation as the above must be made - perhaps in the form of an initial footnote - to forestall a lot of raised-eyebrows!

9/11,

2-9-80

One winter evening an old woman stopped before the main gate of the Li residence at One-twenty Lane<sup>120</sup> on Nanking East Avenue<sup>Road</sup>. She lifted her head, squinted, and gazed for a long time at the two doors<sup>double made</sup> of Chinese cypress; their vermilion paint<sup>on it was</sup> cracked and falling off, and spots of mould already surfaced. The old woman's spine was completely curved, her jagged shoulder-blades thrust up high, her bony little head sandwiched<sup>wedged</sup> in between in front<sup>On the forehead</sup>, her hair was almost gone at the back of her neck<sup>leaving only a small</sup> hung a scanty pepper-and-salt bun.

She was wrapped in a long, black sweater of heavy wool, loose, drooping, that sagged down<sup>hung loosely</sup> around her knees. Her body was shriveled to a skeleton; when the wind blew, her clothes<sup>the</sup> trembled and rustled. From<sup>On</sup> the crook of her left arm hung a<sup>she carried a bundle</sup> black cotton carrying-cloth.

The Li residence was the only old house in the whole lane; on all sides rose<sup>stood</sup> tall modern gray concrete apartment buildings surrounding<sup>of gray concrete</sup> the wooden one-story house, hemming it in. The Li house was dilapidated, broken-down<sup>quite</sup>, some of its roof-tiles missing<sup>were broken or</sup>, some broken and off<sup>wild</sup> out from the crevices in the ragged eaves tufts of grass sprang. Of the two<sup>pair of</sup> glass lamps over the gate,

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the one to the right was gone; only its empty black rusty iron bracket remained. On the dark bronze plaque shiny with age nailed to the upper corner of the door the words "LI MANSION," inscribed in the tomb-rubbings style, stood out clearly. The old woman stretched out her scrawny, bird-clawlike right hand; trembling she felt the doors, so cracked with the years, <sup>she</sup> wanted to push the doorbell, but after some hesitation she drew back her hand; head raised, she looked around in bewilderment, then finally she tottered round the house to the back door.

"Mamma Lo — " Standing down by the kitchen window the old woman ventured to call out; she had heard someone turn a faucet on in the kitchen.

Suddenly out of the darkened cavernous window popped a head. It was another ancient woman; her dishevelled white hair, still unusually thick and heavy, hung like a net woven of white hemp; her face, stout, <sup>and</sup> round, big-boned, liver spots and wrinkles piled on top of each other, was the hard, dried-up rind of a Chinese grapefruit; the <sup>black</sup> pouches under her eyes blackened, <sup>were</sup> swollen so her eyes <sup>became</sup> were two thin lines; her ears were big and fat, their low-hanging lobes pierced by gold earrings well worn to a dull reddish glow.

"Second Sister, it's me — Nanny Shun-en."

Shoulders hunched, her face lifted, Nanny Shun-en called up, <sup>in a</sup> her voice shrill and tremulous, <sup>voice.</sup>

"Good Lord almighty!" Mamma Lo burst out, <sup>loud</sup> <sup>from within,</sup> <sup>her voice</sup> hoarse and booming. Immediately there was a rapid thudding of feet and Nanny Shun-en saw Mamma Lo open the back door and come waddling over to greet her. Mamma Lo was twice as big a body as Nanny Shun-en; she wore a cotton-padded jacket of coarse blue cloth; her paunch stuck out as if she was holding a bamboo winnowing-basket in front of her; the apron tied around her waist practically reached her feet; as she waddled, her enormous paunch bobbed up and down, and her long apron billowed rhythmically.

"Sis, old gal!" The minute Mamma Lo reached Nanny Shun-en, she caught her by her thin, feeble arm and supported her into the kitchen. "My left eyelid's been jumping the whole day long, well I declare to goodness, who would of dreamt it was on account of you!"

Mamma Lo set Nanny Shun-en down on a low stool in the kitchen; she took over her <sup>bundle,</sup> ~~carrying cloth,~~ drew up another stool and sat with her, face to face. After the two old women were settled, Mamma Lo heaved a deep sigh.

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"Sis, honey, I thought you was never going to come by here and see us all again."

"Second Sister — " In great agitation Nanny Shun-en waved her bird-clawlike, bony <sup>claws in a gesture</sup> hands to stop Mamma Lo.

"How could a upstanding old lady like you say such things?" she said in a plaintive voice. "All the years since I left this house have I passed a single day with my health? I'm old now; I ain't no use no more; this old body just won't hold up no more — "

"That's right, isn't it, Sis." Mamma Lo took a good look at Nanny Shun-en. "You sure do look mortal poorly, more than you used to do a few years back. Is your blood-pressure down these days?"

Nanny Shun-en shook her head with a doleful smile. "Just you tell me where on this earth am I going to find that good fortune? All these years down there in Tainan I've been laying in my bed; dizzy spells, you see; just couldn't get to my feet. I'm being a heavy burden on Ch'i-sheng and his family, those poor souls."

"Now you've just got to count your blessings!" Mamma Lo stretched out her big, plump, dark, work-coarsened hand and patted Nanny Shun-en's shoulder. "Why, you've got yourself a mighty fine, dutiful son

to carry you to your last resting-place. Now me, I ain't got no son, I ain't got no daughter; when that day comes I don't know where I'll be laying my body down, in the head of a street or in the tail of a alley."

"Second Sister — " Nanny Shun-en held Mamma Lo's plump hand in hers. "Why, you've been in this house for scores of years! ~~Now~~ the day you go to the Western Paradise, would the General and Young Miss begrudge you your casket and your burial-clothes?"

Mamma Lo pulled her hand away out of Nanny Shun-en's and stared at her, nodding; after quite a while she let out a deep sigh.

"Gal, you've been away a long time; can't blame you noway, I'm afraid you just don't understand how things are with us now — "

Shakily Nanny Shun-en rose to her feet and unwrapped the black carrying-<sup>bundle</sup>cloth on the kitchen stove; in it one on top of the other lay <sup>a pile of large</sup> big snowwhite hen's eggs.

"Ch'i-sheng's wife has been raising several dozen Leghorns. I picked these here double-yolk ones special for the General and Young Miss for them to eat. Second Sister, would you kindly go and announce me to the General, just tell him Nanny Shun-en's come by to inquire after His Excellency's good health?"

"My, these sure are mighty big eggs!" Mamma Lo picked up a couple and held them to her ears and shook them. "You just as good to leave them down here a while. The General's feeling right poorly, he's got a upset stomach again; I just <sup>been</sup> waited on him to give him his medicine; he's laying down now; it'll be a good long wait for you."

"This time, no matter what the trials and tribulations, I had to come on this journey up here. At my age, you never know if they'll be a next time." Nanny Shun-en sighed.

"You'd have done better to have come to see them a long time ago — " Mamma Lo didn't even turn around. She took an empty biscuit-tin from the cupboard and with the utmost care placed the eggs inside it; she picked up the cake of alkali soap, again, stooped over and scrubbed away laboriously at the grease and dirt on the stove. Nanny Shun-en stood by the sink next to the stove; in the sink were soaking two washrags: black with use; she gave them a few good rubs and wrung them out for Mamma Lo, her thin, feeble arms trembling.

"Second Sister — " Hands gripping the two wash-rags as if she had suddenly remembered something, Nanny Shun-en called Mamma Lo. "Madame — "

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"Huh?" Mamma Lo, cheeks puffed out, panting heavily, was scrubbing the stove so hard it was filled with gray, sticky, slimy water.

"Madame — did she leave any last words behind?" Nanny Shun-en asked, her voice hushed.

Mamma Lo stopped, wiped the sweat off her forehead with her apron, she closed her eyes and pondered. "Seems to me I done heard the General say when Madame was carried to the hospital for the operation she woke up but once; she didn't utter but one word: 'So cold.' Then she didn't say nothing no more."

"That must be why . . ." Nanny Shun-en nodded her head, her face all at once filled with sorrow. Mamma Lo plucked the two <sup>wash rags</sup> out of Nanny Shun-en's hands and swatted away the grimy water from the stove. "Second Sister, do you still call to mind that grand mansion of ours <sup>on Cool-clear Mountain</sup> at Mount Coolandclear way back in Nanking? Wasn't there a powerful lot of peonies in that there garden?"

"Think I don't remember?!" Mamma Lo snorted, <sup>wash-</sup> ~~rags~~ twirling in the air. "Red ones, purple ones — they bloomed the whole garden round! Was there a single spring in those days our Lady didn't give a wine-party for her guests to admire them peonies?!"

"It's already three nights one <sup>after</sup> and another, Second Sister." Nanny Shun-en's tremulous voice suddenly turned mournful. "I been dreaming the dream about our Lady; she stood right in those peonies there, beckoning to me: 'Nanny Shun-en, Nanny Shun-en, go quickly and bring me my cape; the wind has risen.' Year before last when our <sup>Madame</sup> Lady passed away from this world I was took so ill I purely didn't know where I was; when <sup>she</sup> ~~her~~ ladyship was carried to the mountain to her last home I couldn't even join in <sup>for</sup> to see her off; all I could do was to burn two paper maids to serve <sup>our Madame</sup> ~~her~~ ladyship in the Other World; but in my heart I always felt it so bad. These two year since Madame is gone, in this house — " Nanny Shun-en's voice was choked.

Mamma Lo flung the two <sup>washrags</sup> back into the sink. "In this house? Humph!" Arms akimbo, paunch stuck up, she cut Nanny Shun-en short. "Who but this here old too-mean-to-die is here to bear all these burdens? Why, the First Seventh <sup>\*</sup> wasn't even over yet, <sup>that</sup> Cassia Joy and Little Wang ~~got to grabbing each other hole-in-corner~~ <sup>together</sup> ~~and then they~~ done run off; and them two goddamned no-accounts stole the whole of <sup>Madame's</sup> ~~our~~ lady's caseful of jade <sup>g</sup> didn't leave nothing at all."

I feel uncomfortable with "Her ladyship" — too English. Better stick to "Madame"

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"Lord have mercy — " Her eyes closed, Nanny Shun-en shook her head; her dried, sunken lips smacked in commiseration.

All of a sudden Mamma Lo flung her hand back and *grabbed her hair that looked like white hemp,* seized her white-hemp back hair, her other hand swooped *ing*

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up the flashing chopping-knife from the table and struck *a few times* ferociously at the chopping-block. "Day in and day out in this kitchen I struck this block and cursed," she growled. "I cursed them two wolf-hearted, dog-gutted traitors: May Heaven smite them! May Thunder strike them! May the Five Devils tear their corpses into pieces: I was the one who done bought Cassia joy for our Lady, wasn't I. That damned wench, didn't she wear silks and satins and I don't know what all sorts of fine feathers a plenty in this house? Little Wang. His pappy Wang the orderly before he died begged the General to see *look* after him. They raised him in this house for twenty years. Why! even a hound dog will howl three times when his Master's gone, won't he? I want to take a good look at the hearts in them two goddamned no-accounts and see what the hell they are made of!"

Nanny Shun-en was muttering responses, her eyes closed, her small head nodding up and down.

Mamma Lo laid the chopping-knife down, straightened up and gave her small-of-the-back a few solid whacks with her fist. "It ain't only that Cassia Joy and Little Wang run off, but they done cast this old woman in the

pit. This whole house, inside and out, every little thing ~~down to the~~ sesame seeds <sup>of a thing,</sup> and the green beans, ain't I the one who lays my hands to it all? Soon as I get to fixing up the inside I have to leave the outside go to waste. Just cleaning this here kitchen alone is enough to break my weary back." Mamma Lo pounded her back again. Nanny Shun-en came over to her and held her plump, calloused hands in hers and raised them.

"I reckon you are the faithful one who has been taking care of them, Second Sister, and when Young Miss goes to wed, she surely will take you along to be the Venerable Matriarch of her house."

"My good old lady!" Mamma Lo jerked her hands out of Nanny Shun-en's. "That's a mighty fine thing for Your Old Ladyship to say, but I regret to tell you that just ain't my fate. Young Miss?" Mamma Lo sniffed, arms akimbo again, paunch stuck back up. "I'm going to tell you the truth, now, Sis old gal. In the very beginning of this year, Young Miss got stuck with some man with a wife to home, and she done got big-bellied; and she

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and the General had a horrible fight when she told him she was leaving home. The General beat her<sup>1</sup> most to death right there <sup>beat her till</sup> even her face got all swollen up. That gal ain't got no heart at all, she didn't let one tear fall! She told the General, 'Papa, if you allow me I'll go, and if you don't allow me I'll still go; all you have to do is just pretend you never had a daughter like me, that's all.' And she walked out and didn't even look back.

Just last month I saw her, at the Eastgate Market; she was carrying a vegetable basket, <sup>with her big belly and hair</sup> belly all stuck out, hair

all every which way. <sup>When</sup> she saw me, she hung her head, eyelids all reddened, and she called me 'Mamma.' <sup>Imagine</sup>

young lady from an official family, the way she looked!

I didn't even know where to hide my <sup>face</sup> head."

"Lord have mercy — "Nanny Shun-en <sup>gave out again with her mournful comment,</sup> mourned again."

"Things <sup>old</sup> here ain't nothing like the way they used to be no more, Sis honey," said Mamma Lo, shaking her white head. "These last two year the General ain't himself no more; soon as Young Miss gone he was so hurt and grieved he wanted to leave home and become a monk in a temple in Keelung. His old followers came by here every day to get him to change his mind. One day, I saw things had really gone way too far, so I walked into the living-room; first I ran to our Lady's memorial portrait and

I got down on my knees before it and knocked my head three times on the floor; then I stood up and spoke to the General: <sup>"Your Excellency,</sup> ~~"General,~~ Sir, ever since I first came into your family with my Lady, from the beginning to the end, it's been way over thirty years. I have seen all the glory and splendor of the days of your house. And now, those who have died have died and those who have gone away from home will not return; if but the sight of this broke your servant's heart, how much deeper Your Excellency's grief must be! Young Miss disgraced the family, and Your Excellency wants to renounce the world; I dare not stop you. Only one thing: I'm way past seventy, half of me is already in the grave; Your Excellency, when you're gone and leave Young Master behind all by himself, I'm afraid I cannot shoulder this burden alone.' The General <sup>me out, then</sup> heard ~~he~~ stamped his foot and fell silent."

"Second Sister," Nanny Shun-en faltered, "what's that you say? Young Master — he done come back, from abroad?" She reached out her ~~bird-clawlike,~~ bony hands <sup>that were</sup> and clutched Mamma Lo's arm, hands trembling.

Mamma Lo stared at her for a long moment; she nodded her head. "Sis, ~~honey~~ you poor creature, you must have been took so ill for true you purely didn't know where you was."

"Second Sister — " Nanny Shun-en whispered. Mamma Lo didn't pay her any attention; she freed herself, undid her apron and mopped the sweat and grime from her face; then she went over to the rice-vat, poured some water into the pot of washed rice on top of it and set the pot on the <sup>coal</sup> ~~cold~~ stove; finally she turned to Nanny Shun-en and spoke to her.

"It's you is the one who done nursed him from a suckling babe at your breast; no matter what, it's you is the one who done wore yourself out for him; now I got to take you to see for yourself."

Mamma Lo helped Nanny Shun-en from the kitchen to the back court. Supporting each other the two old women <sup>made their way with effort</sup> ~~toiled~~ along the small stone courtyard path overgrown with moss. The wormwood on both sides of the path sprang up as high as a man's waist, fertile, rampant; ~~one on~~ ~~another~~ between their fat, gross stalks wove spiderwebs full of stuck-fast insect bodies. As Mamma Lo walked she swept the encroaching wormwood aside to let Nanny Shun-en pass. When Mamma Lo and Nanny Shun-en reached the end of the stone path, Nanny Shun-en was stunned to find, behind the wormwood shrubs, seated squarely on a round marble stool, a large fat man; the wormwood's leaves and stems rose above his head and hid him from view.

Over his head circled a swarm of gnats. The large fat man was swaddled in a baggy old worn wool overcoat, <sup>that was old & worn,</sup> its buttons all fallen off but the last one. His belly burst through his overcoat like a hempen sandbag overstuffed with sand and mud; his fly was half-fallen down and the string of his drawers was showing. He had taken off his shoes and socks and his big, plump bare feet, red with cold, were placed neatly together on the muddy ground. His head was big and fat, too; his short hair, parched brown and dried out, was almost gone, exposing his pink, tender scalp; his fleshy cheeks hung flaccid; they curved his big mouth, always half-open, downward like a bow. The large fat man was holding onto a bunch of dandelions already past their bloom; he was playing with them, and their white down was sprinkled all over him.

Mamma Lo helped Nanny Shun-en all the way over to the large fat man. Nanny Shun-en leaned forward and looked at the large fat man intently, for a long time.

"Young Master — " Nanny Shun-en called softly. The large fat man looked up at Nanny Shun-en blankly, his eyes vacant, dull, his face void of expression.

"Young Master, it's me, it's your Nanny Shun-en."

← Nanny Shun-en took a step closer and whispered gently in the large fat man's ear. The large fat man

turned towards her and stared; suddenly he opened his large mouth and broke into a silly laugh; spittle dribbled down from the corner of his mouth onto his lapel. Nanny Shun-en drew her handkerchief out from inside her jacket-flap under her arm and stooped to wipe the large fat man's mouth and his coat; as she wiped him off, all of a sudden she opened her thin, feeble arms wide and hugged the big head of the large fat man tight to her bosom.

"Young Master, Baby — you <sup>can</sup> still laugh — and you the one to be pitied the most — if Madame had lived to see this, her heart would have broke right into pieces — "

Nanny Shun-en pressed her withered cheek to the large fat man's balding crown and started to sob.

"This here"  
"That there family's ancestral graveyard, the Wind and Water done moved against them." Mamma Lo stood by, muttering to herself.

"Young Master, Baby — Young Master, my <sup>boy</sup> Baby — "  
Her arms around the large fat man's head, her thin, small body swaying to and fro, eyes closed tight, her dried sunken lips trembling, opening and shutting, Nanny Shun-en let out wail after desolate wail.

A blast of winter evening wind swept by; it set all the tangled, untended wormwood in the courtyard to hissing, lifted Nanny Shun-en's long, loose black sweater up

old the seated baby" keeping on a stick? 7. 1/2 15. for all, we must have been period between the time when the nursemaid was taking the young Master and his family abroad later, during which she no longer called the young boy "Baby". And now he is a grown man, 5 feet!

and blew it <sup>?</sup>up around the large fat man, covering him.  
Mamma Lo stood among the shrubs; her hands clasped around  
her paunch, eyes narrowed, she looked up at the heavens  
overcast with gathering evening clouds. The cold wind  
~~sent~~<sup>sent</sup> her thick hemp-like white hair flying in all  
directions.