

Morning Cloud, Evening Rain

Mist is not mist

Dream is not dream

In the cloud, a pining spirit

A myth in the chamber of sleep

It's dawn. Our cruise ship has passed the roaring Qutang Gorge and entered Wushan on the Yangtze. The deck is finally empty after an all-night party of drinking and gambling. I sneak past the sleeping guard to do yoga on the area reserved for the first-class passengers. When I look up from a back bend, she appears before me like an apparition, her slender waist and full hips shimmering through a silk gown, her painted toes curving through golden slippers, blond curls hugging her breasts.

Her beauty takes my breath away, though I am supposed to detest her--a woman dressed to give pleasure to anyone who can pay. Yet she pulls me like the moon. The melancholy between her eyebrows makes my heart throb with pain.

Below the deck, the tour guide is knocking on the first-class cabins, her shrill voice cutting through the metal floor. "Get up. We're reaching Wushan Goddess Peak. Your tour counts for nothing unless you see the goddess." When no one stirs, she shouts, "I've done my job. Don't regret it later. Don't ask for a refund."

I smile as I listen to the commotion downstairs. She knows how to move people. Money is the engine that drives China forward.

Thick clouds hang on the mountains, shrouding the river, the boat, and the girl in white silk. How did she get here? Since I boarded this three-star boat yesterday afternoon, I have combed through the first-, second-, and third-class passengers who live along the Three Gorges, or used to, before they were removed for the dam construction. I should have known better: why would any locals squander their money touring their homeland?

The girl couldn't have boarded the ship with us. I'd have spotted her right away.

Light peeks out of the clouds, casting her shadow on the river. Even her shadow is beautiful and forlorn. It points north to a steep mountaintop, where mist hugs the shoulders of a slender rock. Is that the Wushan goddess the guide has been bragging about, the crown jewel of our three-day tour? Everything else pales after her, she told Dan. I was struck by the enthusiasm in her gleaming eyes. She's a shrewd businesswoman. What's her interest in a rock that doesn't have much commercial value except that it provides her with a job?

We disliked each other the minute we met. I detest her heavy makeup and elaborate hairdo, her tight T-shirt and jeans that show every inch of her robust curves, her shrill voice and the purple bags under the bulging eyes revealing her oversexed lifestyle.

Likewise, she seems to hate everything about me: my blunt questions, my casual traveler's clothes, my fluent English and my American colleague. The minute we boarded, she pulled Dan to her side, announcing in her broken English that it was her duty to give him, the only foreigner on board, her personal attention. Dan laughed when I translated her words into comprehensible English. She glared at me with her watery eyes: *Just watch how I snatch the meat right out of your wrinkled mouth, you arrogant hag!*

"There she is, everyone, our goddess, our Chinese Venus!" the guide shrieks through a megaphone. The deck is packed. Dan stands next to her, craning his neck to locate the peak. She takes his hand and points it to the north shore. "There, the slenderest one. Doesn't it look like a girl facing clouds? Isn't she beautiful?"

There seems to be someone in the folds of the mountain

With eyes that hold laughter and pearls of smile.

She starts singing "Shangui" from Qu Yuan's *Nine Songs*, a ritual performance for gods and kings from two thousand years ago. Shangui is a goddess who roams the Three Gorges, gathering herbs as she waits for her wandering warrior god of wind and rain. I'm surprised that she knows this haunting love song, and sings it so well.

The girl in white seems afloat, her legs, waist, and hair circled by rings of mist, a perfect

illustration of Shangui, the pining goddess of Wushan mountains who rode tigers and made potions to call back her lover...

“My dear friends, our Wushan goddess appears everywhere in Chinese myth, history, folk tales, temples, mountains, dreams, poetry. She’s the twenty-third daughter of the Sun God and the Western Queen. She’s *yu fu*--a fish that can change into a snake, then a beautiful woman. She’s *linzhi*--the magic mushroom that helps lovers meet in dreams. She is Shangui--Qu Yuan’s mountain goddess, and the Tushan goddess who married Da Yu and helped him dredge a waterway to clear the Big Flood. She’s *nushi*--the priestess who guards temples and invites gods to the earth with her songs, who prays for harvest and prosperity with her sex, who cures the sick and blesses the dead with her dreams. She is the goddess of virginity, sex, birth, medicine, harvest, earth, life. And above all, she is the goddess of beauty, love and lust.”

The crowd becomes quiet. Everyone is listening, for a change.

“That’s right, the goddess of lust, my dear friends.” She nods at Dan, as if he could understand her words. “In ancient China, lust symbolized fertility, and therefore beauty and morality. The more lovers a woman had, the higher her rank, and the more respectful she became. Such women lived in temples and came out during the festivals to initiate youths into adulthood with music, dance, herbs, sex...”

Before I started the journey, a friend of mine from back home talked about the sex industry in China. The whole country has become a giant brothel, she lamented. Wherever you turn, you’ll see girls selling their bodies: hotels, bars, restaurants, massage salons, barbershops... Tour services have also joined in. Many tourists have government or company money, which means they can spend big and free. *Da kuan da kuan, da bu guo gong kuan*--no matter how rich you are, you can’t compete with government funds. When they book a tour, the first thing they want is a beautiful college student for their guide.

“And watch out for Sichuan girls,” she warned Dan, who planned to research human rights issues regarding the Three Gorges Dam. “Those spicy, bewitching girls will eat you up

alive.”

Sichuan is known for beautiful girls with bright eyes, fair skin, and well-toned legs. Most of the beauties, however, come from the Three Gorges, the land of clouds and rain. They say it is the morning mist and dusk drizzle that moisten women’s skin and eyes. And the sweet water from the most spectacular mountains on earth nourishes the herbs that give women magic power--hot, sweet, beautiful, vigorous, mysterious, and soul snatching...

Our guide is one of these spicy beauties who snatched Dan’s soul five minutes after we boarded the ship. She gave him a free pass to the deck, the best spot to view the river and gorges. I asked for one, arguing that I deserved the same privilege, since I had also paid for the first-class cabin, but she just laughed and took Dan to the deck where a party had begun with beer, music, and girls. From the hallway, I watched my colleague and the guide grind hips and grab each other’s groin. He was thoroughly enjoying himself. When he came down for the bathroom, I confronted him in the hallway. We were supposed to find the dam migrants and interview them, and his job was to videotape the conversations.

“Relax, will you?” His voice was slippery from beer. “How do you know I’m not working? How do you know she may not turn out to be a migrant we could interview?”

“She may turn out to be a whore.”

“You’re jealous because she likes me,” he laughed and kept walking.

“She likes your wallet, Dan. And you can’t get reimbursed for her services. We’re traveling on college funds.”

“Why not?” He stopped. “Finally, I got someone who is willing to talk to me. Remember, mingling is part of our research.”

“Not with your body,” I muttered through my breath. “Not with a prostitute.”

He turned to me. “Since when did you become my social worker? She’s a big girl, free to choose whatever she wants to do as long as nobody puts a gun at her head. It’s good money, perhaps her only way to earn a decent income.”

“It’s evil money, too.”

“You’re judging. Besides, how do you know she doesn’t enjoy it?”

“Oh, you must be having great fun judging China with your double-standard American human rights crap.”

His face tightened. “Do you know how many times, since we entered China, I’ve been pulled aside and told that you’re not really a woman, definitely not a Chinese woman?”

“Who said it, that bitch? Do her words count that much to you?”

“Other men and women said that, too. They called you *kuang*, maverick.”

I banged my cabin door on him.

“Dear tourists,” the megaphone blasts again, “who knows the love story between the goddess and the kings of Chu? And the poet who immortalized her?”

Her sharp eyes sweep across the crowd and fall on me. My heart thumps. Is she going to throw me off the deck? But she looks away. Perhaps I, too, have become invisible like the girl in white? No one seems to have noticed her at all, including the eagle-eyed guide and my amorous colleague.

“Anyone?” the guide asks again. I almost raise my hand, but think better of it. Why push my luck further? Besides, the story is better told by the guide. She is, after all, part of the Wushan legend.

“Our goddess is immortalized by Song Yu, a royal poet from more than two thousands years ago. When the king of Chu saw the cloud on the mountaintop rising and falling in the form of a lively girl, he asked Song Yu what it was, and the poet responded with the following story:

““Your majesty, this cloud is called Morning Cloud. Long ago, when your father visited here, a beautiful woman appeared in his dream while he was taking a nap and offered herself to him. When he woke up, the only thing he could remember was the dream and her promise that he could find her on the sun terrace of Wushan, where she lived as the morning mist and evening rain. For days your father gazed at the mountains and saw the clouds and rains exactly as the

goddess described. He named the peak “twilight cloud” and built this Twilight Cloud Temple where we’re staying now.’

“The young king asked the poet if he could meet the goddess, too. So the poet wrote an ode to praise Wushan’s terrifying storms and the melancholy calls from the long-armed gibbons in the forests. That night, the goddess came to the king in his dream. She lit the room like the rising sun, and softened it like the moonlight. Her skin was smooth and warm like jade, her face blooming like a flower. She was about to make love with the king, then changed her mind. At the threshold, she gave him a tender look that made the young king weep till dawn arrived. In the morning, he asked the poet to write another ode in memory of the goddess. Thus the loveliest goddess was born. Her beauty has no match on earth. Who he sees her will be haunted for the rest of his life, for his longing will never be fulfilled, and his love will only leave him empty-shelled.

“Alas, both kings of Chu lost their minds over the goddess. She had a slender figure, so the old king favored his women with thin waists, causing many of his concubines to starve themselves to death. He exiled his minister Qu Yuan, who wanted him to fight the king of Qin instead of chasing women, then ventured into his enemy’s territory to seek his dream goddess, only to die there as a hostage. His son fared no better. Following the path of his late father, he trusted those who flattered him and who provided him with pleasures, allowing his country to fall further apart under Qin’s constant attacks.

“In 223 BC, Qin annexed Chu. In 221 BC, China was united under the rule of Emperor Qin, the first emperor of China, who burned the books and buried alive intellectuals, sorcerers, astrologists, wizards, and priests, and along with them the music, dance, sorcery, astrology, medicine, ritual, and dreams, the fruit of the misty kingdom of Chu.

“Scholars believe that the goddess toppled Chu, the most sophisticated of the three hegemonies during the Warring States. China would have been a different civilization if not for her.”

I nodded. She had surprised me. The information went way beyond the guidebook, and

the emotions that came out of her voice...they have to be genuine. No actress can make it so touching. The whole ship is now wrapped in clouds. It starts to drizzle, but nobody moves. Even Dan, who has become obsessed with his umbrella, stays put. He seems to have understood the story, though I haven't translated a word for him. I raise my camera. The guide's wet face glows with a melancholy beauty. Her eyes linger on mine for a few seconds. I shiver. A pathway opens, wet, cold, and a bit dark, but still a pathway. Behind her, the girl in white gauze hangs by the edge of the crowd, her feet dissolving into the mist. The goddess is half hidden in white clouds.

"Dear tourists," the guide's voice resumes her cheerful tone, "because of the love story, Wushan clouds and rains became the synonym for love, sex, fantasy, and unfulfilled desire. Thousands of poets have written poems about the goddess and Wushan--Mount Wu. It connects Sichuan and Hubei Provinces, and the Daba mountain range, and through its belly flows the Yangtze. The mountain runs like its name--巫--two humans floating between the sky and earth, two female shamans who mediate between the humans and gods. They are the origin of Chinese medicine, astrology, astronomy, religion. It is women who initiate men into the world of the invisible and connect them with the spirits, souls, and gods, who make them see, hear, touch, and feel..."

Our ship is cruising through the impossibly narrow gorge, so narrow that I can see the deep holes in the cliff above the water, a path hanging like a thin rope. It looks ancient and crumbled, some of it submerged in the river. Could it be the famous *guzhandao*--the ancient road from two thousand years ago?

"Dear friends, we are leaving the Wushan goddess and the last stretch of *guzhandao*. If our goddess is the yin, then this road represents the yang of the Three Gorges. Even with our modern technology and equipment, it is extremely difficult to open a path along the cliffs. Can you imagine how our ancestors used their bare hands to drill more than ten thousand holes and pave a road on the cliff? It's a miracle, a symbol of wisdom and strength and courage, just like

the goddess as the symbol of beauty and sex. For two thousand years, we've been walking on the path to fight enemies, carry food and salt and other goods, and pray to our goddess. Please take a good look at both, and say good-bye, because our ship is leaving the Wu Gorge, and within a week, the dam will be complete, and the river will rise to 175 meters, and the entire path will sleep in the water forever. Our goddess will be left alone on the peak, cut off from this world and the Wushan people. Thousands of us have left our land for this dam. We sacrificed our old homes for the sake of the big family. They say we're given gold and silver for our sacrifice, but let me tell you something, my dear friends, gold nest or silver nest, it's not the same as our old dusty nest. Scattered in strange places, we're homesick, homesick."

She is choking with emotion, and my eyes sting with tears. I look at Dan, hoping he'll whip out his video camera to capture her. For once, Dan got it right. Our guide turns out to be a dam migrant we've been seeking for a whole week. She's our first opportunity, and all Dan can do is to gaze doe-eyed at the guide. I raise my camera, but only white drops of rain appear on my lens. I gesture wildly at Dan, but he ignores me. Is he losing his mind like the king of Chu? I start wondering if I should grab the video camera from him and start shooting myself when the crowd stampedes toward the counter piled with shiny souvenirs. The guide is holding up a gold-covered book and shiny brown mushroom.

"Dear friends, this mushroom, *linzhi*, is the magic herb that grows from the goddess' body, the best love potion on earth. A girl takes it, and she'll become the most alluring beauty; a man eats it, and he'll for sure have all his fantasies come true in his dreams. This book contains coins from the Warring State period that gave birth to our goddess. They are from the ancient graves about to go under the water. It is a limited edition of two thousand copies and since there'll be no more graves to dig after the water rises to 175 meters, your coin collection will increase in value ten, a hundredfold. Besides, 15 percent of the sale will go to the Wushan migrants. So I thank you, my dearest friends, for your compassion and support."

Before she finishes talking, a long line has formed behind the counter. People thrust big

pads of cash into the guide's hands. By the time Dan manages to push himself to the counter, all the *linzhi* mushrooms are gone. He grabs a coin book, his first purchase in China. The guide gives him a smile as she takes his money, tears still in her eyes. Suddenly, I realize how much she resembles the misty girl in white gauze. I look back to the tip of the boat. My goddess is gone; only a milky cloud floats uphill toward the peak.

A crowd gathers below to get off the boat. Our tour splits at Wushan Port. One group will sail into the Little Three Gorges, known for its jade bamboo on the cliffs, wild monkeys begging for corn, and locals singing love songs from their flower boats. The rest of us will continue toward Yichang to see the biggest dam on earth. There's a commotion among the first-class passengers and those from the hold. Everyone wants to get off first and grab a good seat on the smaller boat.

The guide hugs Dan and wishes him good luck for the rest of his trip. Suddenly, she turns and hugs me tightly.

"Sister, it's really good to know you."

I can't breathe. Her breasts feel warm and bouncy on my chest. "Th...thanks for your story," I stammer.

"It's yours, too," she says, then vanishes into the cloud.

She left something in my hands. In my right palm is a red pass to the deck, where I can see the river and mountains without obstruction. On my left, a giant *linzhi* shines with the color of red earth.

"Can we trade?" Dan thrusts his coin book into my face.

I hold the mushroom to my heart. "No, it's my ticket to home."