

The Salt Fish Girl

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La senteur du poisson salé évoque plusieurs tensions complexes autour de l'amour et du ressentiment. Ayant dans sa tendre enfance été nourrie au poisson salé, une jeune fille voit son estomac réclamer ce goût et ses narines rechercher cette odeur. La senteur la conduit au marché, vers la fille du marchand de poisson salé. Défiant sa mère entremetteuse et se dérochant de ses devoirs domestiques, elle retourne semaine après semaine au kiosque de la fille au poisson salé—pour acheter son poisson, pour la sentir, pour l'aimer. Elle est accrochée, saisie par la senteur et fini par établir un plan audacieux et désespéré pour s'échapper avec son amante.

When I was fifteen and still many years from marriage, I fell in love with a girl from the Coast. She was the daughter of a dry goods merchant who specialized primarily in salt fish. It was, in fact, her father's trade that brought her to my attention. She stank of that putrid, but nonetheless enticing, smell that all good South Chinese children are weened on, its flavour being the first to replace that of mother's milk. They feed it to us in a milk-coloured rice gruel, lumpier than the real thing and spiked up good with salt for strength.

You might say saltiness is the source of our tension. Stinky saltiness, nothing like mother's milk. The scent calls all kinds of complicated tensions having to do with love and resentment, the passive-aggressive push-pull emotions of a loving mother who nonetheless eventually wants her breasts to herself, not to be forever on tap to the mewling, sucking creatures that come so strangely from her body and take over her life. Especially knowing from keen observation of her mother before her, that we eventually grow too monstrously huge for the memory of our births, and that we will eventually leave. Why give away too much of yourself, especially intimate bodily fluids, when you know you'll be abandoned, with or without gratitude depending on luck? Give 'em salt fish congee early and you'll forget about 'em sooner and vice versa.

That's the problem with girls. They leave. You can't rely on them. Of

course, in these modern times of difficulty and poverty, you can't rely on boys either. Who knows if or when their overseas uncles will call for them, change their names, call them "son" instead of "nephew," and leave you in the dirt. The red earth, I mean, that's the classical term, isn't it, so bloody and morbid, those old sages. So my mother started me on salt fish congee early. Who could blame her? She was never the type meant for motherhood. If it hadn't been expected of her, if she had had other options, she'd have been an empress or a poet or a martyr. Something grand, and perhaps a bit tragic. She loved those old sages, with their subtle cleverness and sad girl stories. But leave those to me. I didn't ask for them mind you, I'm as much a puppet of fate as anyone else.

I noticed the salt fish girl on market day. My mother had bribed me with a promise of sweet sesame pudding to do the shopping. Trying to make up for lost time, I guess. But why bother offering me sweet now, when it's salt I'm hooked on? She thought she could change me, but it was a bit late for that. Besides, while the sticky pot may be a great place for drowning spirits, its dark thickness doesn't entice. Perhaps later, when I've learned to love my dark self, thick and heavy, but sweet as sugar in spite of everything. Until then, it's stinky salt fish I'm after.

I went to the market more because I wanted to get out of the house than because sesame pudding does anything for me. Little did I know that my mother's intentions behind the black sesame pudding had nothing to do with making up for any neurotic, return-to-infancy, childhood-deprivation fantasies on my part. That she had something infinitely more immediate and material in mind.

I'm not saying that my take on the matter was entirely fabricated, mind you. My mother *was* thinking about abandonment. She wanted me out of the house that day so she could invite nosy Old Lady Liu the go-between over to talk behind my back about matters matrimonial. I know some girls are betrothed at ages much more tender than mine, but still! I was only fifteen. Wouldn't there be plenty of time for that later?! Talk about morbid, self-fulfilling fantasies! Oh sure, I know it's tradition. I know my mother isn't personally to blame, that she was just doing what all good mothers are supposed to do if they want their daughters to live respectable lives. Note I didn't say happy. We all know that joy and sorrow are entirely matters of fate and have nothing whatsoever to do with planning.

So she had only my welfare in mind, but did she have to start so early? It was a cruel trick of patriarchy to make her the agent of our separation

which she so dreaded. Dreaded and longed for, just to have it over with. It was a complicated black sesame pudding she stirred up that afternoon.

As for me, I went to the market with my baby brother strapped to my back and a belly clamouring for something savory.

As we approached the market, a young woman turned the corner down a dark alley, one strong brown arm bracing a basket of salted dainties atop her lovely head. The scent of the fish, or perhaps her scent, or more likely still, some heady combination of the two wafted under my nose and caused a warmth to spread in the pit of my belly. I followed her right to the entrance of the market, ignoring the rice-wrap and sweet potato seller whose wares I otherwise would have paused to ponder over.

I followed her right to the salt fish stall that she ran with her father. She set the basket down among numerous others filled with tiny blue-veined fish so small it would take twenty to make a modest mouthful, and others filled with long dry flats of deep ocean fish the length of my forearm and half again. I bought enough to flavour a good-sized vat of congee and then breathed deeply to still my mind for the rest of the shopping.

After that I was hooked. The recollection of her bright eyes and lean muscular arms reeled me in as surely as any live fish seduced by worms, or perhaps more accurately by shreds of the flesh of their own kind. I made it my job to do the family's marketing in spite of the fact that it fell on top of all my regular chores, of which there were many—fetching water, feeding the chickens, sweeping the courtyard, taking care of my baby brother and chopping all the meat and vegetables for every meal. I was frugal, had an eye for fresh goods, and was a good bargainer, so my mother was happy to send me. Besides, my Saturday morning absences were a perfect time for the go-between to visit.

So while my mother secretly sweetened-up that meddling old nanny-goat, I managed to see the salt fish girl once a week, except when she went back to the Coast with her father for more supplies. At first she took little notice of me—just another skinny village girl with bad skin and bony fingers. She sold me my fish without a word beyond the few necessary numbers and then turned to the impatient aunties eager to get home for their morning congee.

Whether it was because I was such a staunch regular, or whether it was because of the way I gazed at her above the smelly baskets over which black flies hovered and dirty hands exchanged coins, I don't know, but she began to recognize me and put aside choice bits of merchandise in anti-

pation of my arrival. As she passed me the pungent preserves and took my coins, she stole a quick glance or two and flashed a shy smile through which her crooked teeth peeked endearingly.

A number of months passed in this manner before I worked up the gall to invite her to come with me when market day was over. Of course I would catch a scolding for shirking my day's duties when I got home, but the adventure would be well worth the bother. In the late afternoon, we walked down to the river together, lay down in the tall grass and played tickling games until the stars sprinkled down from the night sky and covered us like bright, hungry kisses.

Then we separated. I walked home reeking of salt fish, took my anxious mother's scolding with a brave and defiant face, went to bed and tumbled into a deep and contented slumber.

The following week, I announced my decision to become a spinster. Tradition allows this, if the family is agreeable and there is no protest from the local magistrate. My mother was furious. The go-between had found a suitable husband for me in the neighbouring village. He was the youngest son of a silk farmer, which was a common but respectable trade in these parts. He was blind in one eye, and ugly as sin. He was the only one of his brothers who had been sent to school and rumour had it that his father wanted to find him a position with the government. My mother had been making arrangements for us to meet that week.

"Forget it," I said. "I've got arrangements of my own."

"I never raised you to be so cheeky, I'm sure," she said.

"True. But aren't you glad I'll be here with you when you grow old, rather than scrubbing undies for my mother-in-law?"

I showed her all the money I had saved spinning silk for other village families, and announced that I would pay for my spinsterhood ceremony myself. I refused to eat until she acquiesced to my will.

It was harder for the salt fish girl. No spinsterhood tradition was observed on the coast and her father was dead set against her picking up the nasty customs of the locals. He forbade her to see me.

I hadn't expected this little difficulty. I had assumed she would follow my example. I hadn't asked myself what I would do if she wasn't able to. Did I still want to enter the sisterhood on my own? It is hard to retract such a grave decision as I had made without losing clout to make further autonomous decisions regarding one's life. Worse still, some of my sisters were upset with me for choosing spinsterhood for less than spiritual rea-

sons. I sat tight and continued to see it through even as I plotted how to rescue the salt fish girl.

Her father could not stop me from coming to the market. I continued to buy fish from her until one afternoon, in a fury, he closed his stand early and marched her to the mud hut on the edge of the market district which was their home when they were doing trade in town.

Desperation made me bold. I went to his stall the following market day, hoping to see her. I didn't, but the pungent odour of salt fish inspired a plan. Pumped full of fool's courage, I went up to him.

"Where is your daughter?"

"Thank-you for your concern, but if you don't mind my saying, it's none of your business."

"That may or may not be the case," I said, more boldly still, "but won't you tell me anyway?"

"She's sick at home, no thanks to you."

"Then tell her I wish from the depths of my heart that she would get well soon and come to see me," I responded politely.

If there had been fewer people standing around watching, he would have reached out and slugged me. I could read the restraint in his eyes. As it was, he refused to sell me any salt fish, but pointed me in the direction of the butcher instead and said perhaps the man with the bloody apron could do something for me.

I thought to stay and argue, but decided I'd better back off for the time being.

The next market day, I passed by his house just as he was leaving. I heard his daughter pleading with him to be allowed out, to be taken along to the market. He refused sternly and locked her in the back room where she wailed loudly long after he was beyond earshot.

An hour later, I approached him at his stall.

"Where is your daughter on this auspicious market day?"

"She's at home with a fever, no thanks to you."

"Tell her I am praying to the Goddess of Mercy for her health and hope that she will come and see me soon."

He grunted.

I tried to buy some fish, but he said I didn't deserve it and would find what I deserved at the execution grounds on the other side of town. I would have spat at him, but there were too many people watching.

The following market day, when I approached him, he lunged at me in

sheer fury, grabbed me around the neck and squeezed as hard as he could. I choked desperately. It took five big men, including the bloody-aproned butcher, to pull him off me. The first thing I could smell when I could breathe again was salt fish. The stink of it made me want to live more than ever.

I walked around the marketplace at a furious pace, contemplating. The sky grew dark and the vendors one by one began to close their stalls. My stomach started to grumble. I hadn't eaten since early that morning. I circled the market place looking for a cooked food vendor, but they had all packed up and gone home. The poultry man was busy with his fowl. He had three unsold chickens which he was trying to pack into the same basket, but they squawked and pecked at each other, as though each was to blame for her sister's unhappy fate. Suddenly the basket burst and the chickens ran about clucking madly. One ran farther afield than the rest. On an impulse I took off after it. The poultry vendor, in a hurry to get home, yelled after me, "If you can catch it, it's yours." The chicken led me right to the salt fish girl's back window, where I pounced on it and clutched it, squawking, in my arms.

She leaned out the window dangling a heavy fish hook. Expertly, she hooked me by the scruff of my collar and pulled me, chicken and all, into the house. "You could try to be a little more subtle," she said.

The chicken kept squawking. She drew a fish gutting knife from her skirt and solemnly slit its throat. Blood spurted up in a long arc, and drenched me in a dark shower.

In the downpour I hatched a plan. "Pack a bag," I said. "We're going to escape."

She gave me a mop and some clean clothes. I sopped the blood up quickly, put on the clean clothes and helped her out the window. With the chicken in one hand and the bloody clothes in the other, I jumped out after her.

We dug a shallow hole in the backyard, buried the bloody clothes and then ran to the river. There, we stole a skiff and floated downstream.

In the morning, finding his daughter missing, the old merchant ran to the police and accused me of kidnapping. The police searched my parents' house and found nothing. They said I had not come home since setting out for market the previous day. Eventually, questioning led the police to the bloody-aproned butcher and the other four men who had dragged the salt fish merchant off me the day before.

"Perhaps," said the butcher, "he's accusing the girl to conceal something terrible he's done to her. Surely it's at least worth searching his house."

The police made a careful search of the merchant's house and found nothing but baskets and baskets of sweet and pungent salt fish. The merchant shot a scornful look to the butcher, who stood in the doorway. The police were just about to call off the search for the day, when the youngest of them noticed some newly turned soil behind the house. As I had hoped, the bloody clothes were unearthed and identified by both my parents and the butcher as mine. The poor old salt fish merchant stood accused of murder.

Many miles downstream, munching on boiled chicken, I chuckled at the thought.

The salt fish girl asked me why I was laughing and so I told her. But instead of laughing with me, she pulled a long face.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I don't want my father to die," she whispered, and began to cry.

It's a bit late for that, I thought. You should have said so a long time ago. But I said nothing and put my arms around her. I could feel her heart pounding inside her ribcage. She sobbed and howled so desperately that I said, "We could go back. We'd still be in time to save him."

But she shook her head through her tears. "What's done is done," she said. "What happens is what's meant to be."

I held her and said nothing. She continued to weep and eventually sobbed herself to sleep. And that, I suppose, was the beginning of our quarrels.