

The Jade Monkey Laughs

She's not sure which is her favourite. Sometimes it's the monkey. The face carved with such detail that she imagines the animal is watching her as she cleans the room. Making sure that she dusts thoroughly. That she doesn't miss anything. Other times it's the rooster, which is her sign. He has an erect tail with beautifully detailed feathers. This is not some humble farmyard bird; this is a proud creature confident of its place in the world. She can almost hear it crow. An authoritative call making sure that everyone knows who's in charge.

They sit in a glass cabinet in the lawyer's study. Twelve jade animals corresponding to the zodiac. They've been there longer than she has worked for Senhor Almeida and that's a long time. So long that she has to sit down for a moment to stop and work it out. She's seventy-three this year so that makes it...what, fifty-five? No, fifty-six years since she left Lam Fung's house and came to work for the Almeida family, one of Macau's oldest. Fifty-six years. She wonders where the time has gone. She would have had grandchildren by now, great-grandchildren even, if things had worked out differently. Fifty-six years soon to come to an end. It was ten years before she was even allowed in this room. She was only a kitchen maid then and it wasn't until the housekeeper died that she started coming into this inner sanctum. Even then she didn't have a key to the cabinet.

She had to steal that.

Six o'clock and the front door opens. Senhor Almeida comes home from his chambers at exactly the same time every day. It doesn't matter if it's summer when the oppressive air is full and heavy, or whether the gutters and drains fill and threaten to overwhelm the streets. At six o'clock she is standing by the door waiting for him. She takes his briefcase from the young assistant who helps him home these days, and – if he is carrying one – his umbrella. Sometimes she takes Senhor Almeida's arm and guides him into the entrance hall. *Good evening, sir* – she will say and he will reply in kind. He will not ask about her day. He no longer asks about her day the way he did once. When things were different. She will bring his dinner at seven and then, after he has eaten, Senhor Almeida will retire to his study and she will not see him again until morning.

The snake was the first one that she stole - carved from a jade disc so that it coiled in on itself. She didn't mean to steal it, that's what she tells herself, not at first anyway. She was just curious. It seemed harmless when she took the key from the desk and removed the delicate jade carving from the cabinet. She turned the snake over in her hand, admiring the intricate craftsmanship. She wondered how old it was? That was all she wanted to know when she took it to the antiques dealer on the Rua de Santo Antonio.

'Where did you get this from?' the dealer asked when he had finished examining the snake with his eyeglass.

'From my mother.' She didn't know why she lied.

The dealer moved to the door and turned a sign from open to closed.

'It's lucky you came to me and not to somebody less honest. Do you have any idea of how old this is?'

'No.'

'This is late Ming. Four hundred years old. Give or take a few decades.'

She was silent as she took this in. There was of course another question that she had to ask. He answered before she spoke.

'You want to know what this is worth? I couldn't say, I could only guess, but collectors would pay a lot.'

Later, with the snake safely returned to its place in the cabinet, she looked at the jade animals with renewed interest.

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She had taken it calmly when he told her that he would be leaving Macau. Thinking about it later she was not sure if she believed him. He had been born in Macau and they had been together for so long.

'I'm going to Portugal to live with my niece.'

Yes, his eyesight was failing, but did he not trust her to look after him? There was a time when she would have trusted him with anything. How long ago was that? She can no longer remember, but she does remember his touch. His hand on her cheek. His lips.

She thought nothing more about the snake until the day she saw a piece of jade in a market meant for tourists. You didn't need to be an expert to know that it wasn't real jade – just a cheap jade-like stone – but the snake design was the same. Not as beautifully worked of course, nothing like the detail and quality, but still, at first glance, if you didn't look too closely...

She bought the snake.

They were going to be married, she and Senhor Almeida. His family had been doubtful, a lawyer and a housekeeper, but he had won them round until someone started spreading rumours. Lam Fung's wife she assumed, but didn't know for sure. She got the blame for the whole thing as if Lam Fung had had nothing to do with it. As if he hadn't forced himself on her in the kitchen that night. She never got the chance to tell her side of the story.

She started visiting the markets and bric-a-brac shops looking for other cheap jade pieces. They had to be of a reasonable quality and they had to look like Senhor Almeida's collection. They

were hard to find but gradually, over the weeks and months, she added to the snake. A bull standing proudly. A dragon with scales along its back and tail, mouth open ready to breathe fire. Rat, sheep, horse, rooster, dog, pig, rabbit and finally a tiger; one by one she replaced the precious Ming in the display cabinet with their imitations. All except for the monkey. As hard as she tried she could never find a monkey that quite matched the original.

If it hadn't been for the abortion perhaps she could still have won Senhor Almeida round. She never found out who told him. Even Lam Fung's wife didn't know about that. Lam Fung had paid for it and given her money to disappear for a time. Not that it mattered how Senhor Almeida knew. It was enough that he did.

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'Suppose I had an almost full collection?' she asked the antiques dealer. 'Would you be interested?'

'All twelve?'

'Eleven. Not the monkey.'

'I'd need to see them, but yes, I'd be interested.'

'How much?'

The dealer gave her a number that was more than she had expected. More than enough to give her a very comfortable life once Senhor Almeida had left. Surely she deserved something after all this time? After the broken promises?

As the weeks to the lawyer's departure grew closer she supervised the packing of his life. The things that were to be sold; that were to go to charity; that were to go to Portugal. With the house in chaos, Senhor Almeida retreated more and more into his office, which was where she found him one morning.

'Senhor...,' she was momentarily caught off-guard finding the lawyer sitting at his desk. 'I didn't know you were here. I'll come back later.' She started to leave the room.

'Wait,' he called after her. 'There's no need to go. Stay. Come, sit down and take a moment.' She sat on an uncomfortable rosewood chair that she had never liked and noticed with apprehension that he was holding the dragon. She tried not to watch as he turned it round and round in his fingers. Could he tell that it was a fake? An interloper?

'How are you today Senhor?' She tried to keep her voice calm. 'I think the packing is going smoothly.'

He ignored her polite inquiry. 'In my mind's eye I can still see every detail of this dragon. These days I can barely make out its shape but I can remember the intricacy of the scales. The

nostrils flaring. The sharp arrowhead of the tail. Now...well, I can just about see that it's a dragon and not a rat.' He changed the subject: 'How long have you been with me?'

'It's been fifty-six years Senhor.'

'Fifty-six eh? That long? Longer than most marriages.' She winced inwardly and wondered if he had said that deliberately. 'I've been remiss,' he continued, 'too caught up in myself and my own future to ask about you. What are your plans after I've gone?'

'I'll stay with a friend for a time until I can find somewhere to live. Then, well...we'll see. What will be...'

'I should have done something for you. Fifty-six years, you should have some reward for putting up with me for so long. This dragon and its companions – they must be worth something. You could sell them; they'd give you some money to live on after I've gone.'

'Senhor, that's too kind, I don't know what to say.' In truth she really did not know what to say. Did he know? Was this some kind of joke?

'Jade has a very special feel to it. Cold, hard, tough even, and yet smooth at the same time. But, do you know, after a while it starts to feel warm in the hand, almost alive.' She watched as he ran his fingers over the dragon's back. 'Perhaps though I should take one of them to Portugal with me as a keepsake. The monkey I think. Would you get it for me?'

She stood and took the monkey from the cabinet and placed it on the desk in front of him. He held it in his hands.

'It's true what they say about losing your sight. The way your other senses compensate. Even though I'm not yet fully blind, my hearing is sharper than it was, almost as though I was a young man again. And my sense of touch...it is remarkable you know...I think I could tell the difference between two feathers. I could tell a green olive from a black by feel alone.' He stopped caressing the jade figures and looked at her. In spite of his approaching blindness she felt as if he could see into her soul.

'I'm...' She started to speak but he stopped her with a raised hand.

'Please leave now. I'd like to be alone for a while.'

As she left the room and closed the door behind her she was convinced that she could hear the monkey laughing.