

THE FOX WIFE



a novel

YANGSZE CHOO

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The
Fox
Wife

A NOVEL

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CHOO



HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY
NEW YORK

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This book is for Mika, who loves stories about foxes.

1

MANCHURIA, 1908

Perhaps you know this story: Late one evening, a beautiful woman comes knocking on an unsuspecting scholar's door.

"Who is it?" the young man asks, peering out into the neglected garden where flowers and shrubs bend into strange shapes in the moonlight.

"Let me in." She has a bewitching smile and a jar of his favorite rice wine.

And he does, hesitant at first because he's supposed to be studying for the Imperial examinations. Why is she alone outside this remote country villa, and why do her eyes gleam strangely in the rain-wet darkness? But he tells himself it's all right; she's likely a prostitute sent by his friends as a joke. They drink the wine, one thing leads to another, and despite her blushes and his untouched pile of books, he has one of the most enjoyable evenings he can recall.

Except he can't really remember it. The details are misted in lamplight and laughter. But he must see her again; he seizes her hands (such long-fingered, sharp-nailed hands) and won't let her go.

"My home is over there," she says, pointing at a curious little hill. "If you follow the road, it's the fourth house from the top."

The next night, he sets out after his old servant has gone to bed. If he paid attention, he'd see that the road peters out until it's barely a trail through overgrown grass, but he doesn't notice, so besotted is he. There are many curious houses along the way, all with darkened windows like empty sockets. Fine mansions, little hovels. Each with the name of a family prominently written on its lintel. The fourth house from the top of the hill is an imposing mansion; the name on its gate is *Hu*.*

Again and again he visits her, neglecting his studies while a pile of unopened letters accumulates from his angry parents. His skin shrivels like a withered leaf, his tonsils swell, and his spine curves. Finally, the worried old

servant brings in a monk to exorcise evil spirits. When the spell is broken, the scholar howls and weeps in humiliated fury, tearing his clothes with trembling hands. A raiding party is made up of local peasants who swear there are no houses or grand estates on that crooked little hill. Only a long-abandoned graveyard. The fourth grave from the top is constructed, as Chinese graves are, like a little house half sunk into the hill. Using hoes and spades, they break into it to discover that it has become a fox's den.

★ ★ ★

THIS STORY USUALLY ends with the shape-shifting fox boiled to death or skewered by an angry mob. That shouldn't happen, however, if you're careful. Most foxes are. How else could we survive for hundreds of years? The fox in that tale was greedy and stupid, giving the rest of us a bad reputation.

Foxes, people say, are wicked women.

Even in the best of times, it isn't easy for someone like me to make a living. To catch a train from Mukden to Dalian, for example, I had to make my way out of the grasslands of Kirin. The first day was the hardest, as I required clothing. I ended up dragging a peasant's blouse and cotton trousers off a washing line. A virtuous fox should not steal, but I needed the clothes desperately. Appearing by the roadside as a naked young woman is just asking for trouble.

I exist as either a small canid with thick fur, pointed ears, and neat black feet, or a young woman. Neither are safe forms in a world run by men. Frankly, I'd prefer to look like someone's grandmother; that would at least give me some dignity appropriate to my years. Which leads me to note in my diary that though most tales focus on the beautiful female foxes who live by devouring *qi*, or life force, little is said about the males. Women who run around willfully doing whatever they please are bound to be censured. A handsome, cunning man is a different matter. Most male foxes are only forced to retire or fake their deaths when their uncanny, ageless looks start to disturb people. Don't get me started on the unfairness of this—I generally avoid males of my own race.

Once I had clothes, I continued along, begging for rides. I had no money,

of course. That was the consequence of living in the grasslands, watching the clouds drift across the wide blue sky and eating field mice. I hadn't been to a city in ages. When I reached Mukden, there were foreigners spending money in the streets and starving peasants fleeing famine. Before Mukden had become the old Manchu capital of the north, it had been Shenyang, the garrison stronghold of the Ming Empire. The world kept changing, but battles for cities remained the same.

It took me longer than I'd expected to settle some personal business, about which I'll tell you more in the future, but I managed to get onto a train by allowing a pimp to hustle me. I told him I urgently wished to go to the port city of Dalian.

"I see," he said, stroking my arm. Gauging the quality of meat. "You look very healthy. You don't have tuberculosis, do you?"

I shook my head. "I'm strong. I can pull a plow as well as any ox."

"You won't be the one doing the plowing," said he, smiling. "Come with me, I've a good job for you as a nursemaid."

* * *

HE BOUGHT US tickets. Third class, hard seats. Scent of sweat, salt fish, the iron tang of hot metal. The train was a revelation. I'd seen it before, charging across the grasslands like a metal horse, snorting billows of black soot. I'd thought about riding it, but I'd been busy then. Too busy, and too happy. With a snarl, I turned away from the window. I didn't want to think about what I'd lost. At least we were traveling fast. My heart thrummed with impatience; I was eaten up with rage and anxiety that my prey might escape me if I didn't get to Dalian soon.

The land raced by, outpacing the cloud shadows as the grasslands fled away. The unchanging landscape of Northeast China stretched out in flat shades of brown and gray, broken by avenues of poplar and willow trees. The pimp watched as I pressed my face raptly against the glass.

"Aren't you afraid to leave home?" He had a friendly manner. Girls, be wary of men who smile with their mouths and not their eyes.

"No." I usually tell the truth. It's too much trouble to lie. "That's not my real home anyway."

He smiled indulgently, no doubt thinking of a stricken hamlet clinging to a mountain. “Why are you alone, with no family?”

“Oh,” I said, “I’ve been married before.”

A frown creased his forehead as he calculated rapidly. Not a virgin.

“I had a child, too.”

Even worse. My price was sinking by the minute. I covered my smile modestly with a sleeve. Discomfited, he said, “What happened to your husband?”

“I’m no longer married,” I said softly. “And I’m looking for a man. A Manchurian photographer named Bektu Nikan. Have you heard the name?”

“No.” When the train paused at a station, the pimp bought pork dumplings made from pigs raised on garbage. “You eat very daintily,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Pause. Mouth full of dumpling.

“Such pretty white teeth.” His eyes devoured my smooth skin, unscarred by pox. My bright eyes. I stared at the pimp and his pupils dilated. Gripping my elbow, he hustled me into the corridor. I had a moment of doubt—had I timed my ambush too early? There was no stopping him though. In the corridor, he shoved me against the swaying wall. One hand seized me by the hair. The other groped roughly under my blouse. I struggled instinctively but was too weak in a woman’s body. This is always the most dangerous part for any fox. If I wasn’t careful, he might break my neck. Panting, he shoved his mouth on me, breath stale as a sewer. I closed my eyes, inhaled slowly, and focused.

★ ★ ★

A LITTLE LATER, the pimp lay on the floor, the whites of his eyes rolled up. He was still breathing. Searching his pockets, I removed his wallet and dragged his body towards the carriage opening. My stomach heaved. Was someone coming? The train leaned into a curve, yawing and shuddering. I gave the pimp a mighty shove. He rolled off like a sack of meal and tumbled down the embankment.

Returning to my seat, I wiped my face surreptitiously and rearranged my hair, tied in two neat braids like any servant. A girl traveling alone attracted attention. Leaning my head against the window to still my racing heart, I

considered my options. This third-class carriage was loosely packed with Manchu soldiers known as bannermen, with their distinctive half-shaven heads and long hair plaited in queues.

It was a dangerously unstable time. The current Manchu, or Qing, dynasty, a non-Chinese dynasty founded in the north, was in decline. Though they had ruled China for three centuries, the population still considered them invaders and was seething with restlessness. It didn't help that the throne was currently occupied by the Dowager Empress, a onetime concubine rumored to have poisoned her enemies. Meanwhile, the Russians and Japanese, who were busy carving up the northeast, were all sitting in first-class carriages. China, I thought gloomily, was being devoured like a roast pig. I'd better be careful that didn't happen to me.

One of the Manchu bannermen finally made his move, sliding down beside me. "Where are you from?"

"Kirin."

"You don't look like a local girl. Are you Manchu?" A glance at my unbound feet in woven straw shoes.

The Manchus don't practice foot-binding, though the Han Chinese had done so for almost a thousand years. A terrible custom, I always thought. No other creature hobbled its females like this, breaking the arch of a child's foot at the tender age of four or five and binding it into a hoof, so that little girls could only creep along, wincing as they grasped chairs, tables, to take the weight off their broken toes. Poor little girls, biting back tears bravely in the belief that they'd be chosen for a fine bridegroom.

I shrugged, avoiding his question, but he wasn't deterred. "Are you going to Dalian?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"I'm looking for a man."

At this, he laughed, slapping his stomach. "There's a good one right here."

"I'm not looking for a good man." I smiled. "I'm hunting a murderer."

MUKDEN

“A body was found in the snow.”

The man rubs his face. His left eyelid twitches.

The detective leans forward. It’s early morning, and the rising sun paints the opposite wall blush gold. They’re sitting at an empty table in a popular restaurant that caters to the wealthy and fashionable in Mukden. Red lanterns hang from the eaves, and large round tables with rosewood chairs wait expectantly, as though at any moment, a well-known politician and his entourage might slide in, laughing and blowing clouds of cigarette smoke. Gu, the restaurant proprietor, has called him in: six weeks ago, the body of a woman was discovered in a nearby alley.

There was no sign of foul play, Gu says. She likely fell asleep and froze to death. That’s the best scenario. He bites his lip. Local officials were alerted and the body removed to the city morgue. It’s a sad but common story, the detective thinks, especially in this freezing city in the far northeast of China, the ancient capital of the Manchu dynasty. But why has Gu requested his services in such a secretive manner?

“The truth is, her body wasn’t found in the alley. She was propped up in a seated position against the back door of my restaurant. My staff notified me early in the morning, and we secretly moved the body to the next street. We didn’t do anything wrong.” He’s defensive, eyes sliding away. “But if word got out that she was found on our doorstep, people would gossip.”

A corpse is bad luck, especially for a popular restaurant like this, which specializes in hosting wedding and congratulatory banquets. Doubtless, Gu paid off officials to keep the case quiet. The detective wonders why he’s been called in if the corpse was moved without incident.

“I need you to identify her. We had a kitchen fire recently—exactly a month after it was found—and my wife believes that moving the body

disturbed her spirit. She consulted a monk who said we must find the woman's name to conduct a religious service." He blinks nervously. "She was dressed like a courtesan; I didn't want to get involved with a runaway from the brothels."

Many are connected to organized crime. The detective, a small, sturdy man with a doglike air, tenses. "What happened to the body?"

"Buried. It's been a month." Gu's fingers drum on the polished table, as though he'd like to be anywhere but here on this chill early morning.

"Where was she found?"

The restaurant proprietor stands abruptly. "I'll show you."

A dark passage with greasy walls leads to the restaurant kitchen. There's a door that opens on a narrow lane, barely four feet wide, between the double-storied bulk of the restaurant with its open-fronted upper pavilion where, in good times, people sit at the railings and drink tea behind hanging reed screens. But the alley is on the side, hidden from prying eyes. It follows the long length of the restaurant all the way back to the kitchen. The opposite side is a blank wall.

"The cleaner found her when he opened the door. Fortunately I was here—I'd stopped by early that morning to check the account books. Otherwise he might have lost his head and run screaming around the neighborhood." Gu hunches his shoulders against the blast of wintry air as he opens the door. It sticks a little. "She was huddled on the step. When he yanked the door open, she fell inwards. He gave such a shout!

"My first thought was to notify the authorities, then I realized how bad it looked for us. I'd never seen her before, so I don't know why she chose to freeze on our doorstep. I had to take out a big loan on the restaurant and we're barely making our monthly payments. If business falls off, we're doomed, so I got the cleaner to help me lift her. We moved her to the street corner. Luckily it was so early in the morning that there was nobody around. The cleaner who works for me is a bit simple, so I made him swear not to tell anyone. That's also why I asked for your help." He looks imploring. "You have an excellent reputation."

The detective nods, understanding his meaning. "Detective" isn't quite the right way to describe himself. He considers himself more of a fixer. Someone

who smooths feelings, arranges deals. But his true value is his ability to spot a lie.

★ ★ ★

SINCE CHILDHOOD, HE'S been able to discern falsehoods. Nobody else seems to hear this mysterious sound, a faint warning when a lie leaves someone's mouth and hovers, like a bee, before their lips. When the detective was young, he briefly attended a school on the outskirts of Mukden. An older boy brought three steamed buns for lunch, stuffed with juicy meat, and the envy of other children. But when the bundle was unwrapped at lunchtime, there were only two buns left.

Accusations had flown around the schoolyard until the detective had piped up, "You ate it yourself. Don't pretend it was stolen."

He was eight years old at the time, small for his age, with a large head like a watermelon, and he still remembers the shock, then hatred on the face of the older boy who'd accused the others of theft. Two seconds later, his face was pressed against the dirt, blood seeping out of his left nostril.

To this day, he's never figured out exactly why the older boy lied. Was it to accuse another boy whom he disliked? Or was it simply one of those inexplicable impulses: the desire to stir up the classroom and their meek, sad-looking schoolmaster? In any case, that first lesson, bitterly learned in the dirt, has drilled into him the importance of keeping his knowledge secret.

He's older now, bandy-legged with a face like a loyal dog, and people ascribe his skill to wisdom and experience. Coincidentally, he has the same name—Bao—as the legendary Song dynasty judge who solved crimes. Judge Bao was so famous for his deductive powers that he was even deified as a god. And so, whenever a new case comes his way, the detective can be sure that there will be jokes, remarks, and even superstitious terror that Bao Gong himself is coming to investigate.

★ ★ ★

NOW BAO GLANCES swiftly around. He's seen a thousand alleys like this. The only interesting feature is that no other buildings open into it, as the

proprietor pointed out. An unknown woman freezing to death on his back doorstep is ominous. Has Gu's conscience afflicted him for secretly moving the body, or have there really been uncanny events, like the kitchen fire he mentioned?

"She was lightly dressed, no outer jacket."

"What were her clothes like?"

"An apricot silk *changyi* embroidered with flowers, loose trousers, and gilt hair ornaments. Flashy clothes like a professional entertainer. Snow had fallen on her like a layer of rice flour; I couldn't understand why she'd go out dressed so lightly."

"Was the body stiff when you moved it?"

Gu closes his eyes, trying to remember. "Her hands were icy, and her features had stiffened, but the larger muscles hadn't seized up." He looks ill.

So, she hadn't been dead very long. Perhaps only a few hours.

"And you're sure there was no foul play?"

"I heard later that the medical examiner found no wounds. It was a natural death." He sounds defensive. "Besides, there was that look on her face."

"Did she seem frightened?" Bao knows that the last expression on the faces of the dead can be pained, even uncanny.

"No, she looked delighted. She was smiling." Gu rubs his face. "I can't tell you how terrifying it was. There was a dusting of snow on her face and open eyes, so she looked like a bride on her wedding day, gazing through a veil—like she'd seen something wonderful."

Taken aback, Bao says, "You're sure she looked happy?"

"Yes. At first, I told myself that she'd had a good death, so it didn't matter that we moved her body. But when I mentioned it to my wife, she was extremely upset. Said it was the work of a fox."

Bao exhales slowly. Since ancient times, foxes have been feared and revered. The very earliest ones, the celestial foxes, were regarded as divine beasts. In the Tang and Song dynasties, they acquired a reputation for trickster cunning and the ability to turn themselves into humans. Still, it's mostly peasants who believe in their supernatural powers.

Gu grimaces. "My wife comes from the north, where they believe in foxes who lure people to their deaths. She cries every day, saying we're cursed; I

shouldn't have touched the body or moved it. I'm at my wit's end! This restaurant is popular, but I borrowed heavily to open it. We're just beginning to break even."

At Bao's pause, he adds hastily, "I heard from our mutual connection that you were personally interested in foxes. Otherwise I wouldn't dare trouble you, especially since I heard you were thinking of retiring."

A shiver prickles Bao's scalp. For years, he's investigated any hint of foxes in unusual happenings. His friends laugh and refer to it as his hobby, while clients pass on rumors of twilight visitors. Bao merely smiles.

It's true, he's deeply interested in foxes.

3

Lots of men like to tell you they are bad. Often this is said with a wink and smile. *Little lady*, their eyebrows suggest, *you'd better be careful with a virile fellow like me*. But change the subject to murder and they back off. As I recall, the punishment for murder in Imperial China has always been gruesome. No wonder my statement about hunting a murderer made the Manchu bannerman get up and leave, ensuring a peaceful journey until we reached Dalian.

When the train stopped in a billowing huff of steam, I got off amid the rush of passengers. One woman had a pair of trussed live geese for sale, long necks protruding mournfully from her basket.

“How much?” I asked, running my finger down a feathered neck. The goose flinched. A gleam appeared in the woman’s eye. Brusquely, she named a price that I paid without haggling from the pimp’s wallet.



YOU NEVER KNOW how things will work out. The slightest change creates a swirl in the snowstorm of possibilities. Because I decided to buy two nice plump geese, the entire course of my investigation (that sounds so much better than words like “revenge” and “blood debt”) shifted. As I lugged the geese away, I wondered what had possessed me to buy them. Perhaps dealing with the pimp had shaken me more than I cared to admit. My initial plan of finding a quiet alley to eat them was laughable. Dalian, or Dalniy, as the Russians like to call it, was now a large modern city.

Situated on the tip of the Liaodong Peninsula in the far north of China, its deep, ice-free harbor was prized as far back as the Tang dynasty, passing through Manchu, Russian, and now Japanese hands. The Russians had laid out a Western-style city, but lost Dalian after the recent Russo-Japanese War.

As I observed from the wide boulevards, the Japanese had been busy adding to its construction.

I'd underestimated the speed at which things had moved. Living in the grasslands and watching the clouds drift had made me soft, I decided. And what had I been thinking, that I could set my hissing bundle down somewhere and eat it? That might be true in a village, but not in this bustling modern city. The sun was setting, flooding the street with a bright, sad light, the color of yellow forsythia blossoms. In the past, I'd watched it gild the grasslands. Instead of an angry goose, I'd held a child in my lap. Warm, sleepy. Full of milk and sweet dreams. It's when you least expect it that sorrow returns, like a thief who steals joy.

The ache in my chest would never go away; a hollow, bloody darkness that had swallowed me for the last two years. Grass had grown on my child's grave in the far north. I'd lain on top of it every night for months, in vain hopes of keeping her warm. It was so cold, and she so small, lost to me forever. Burying my face in the dry clods of earth, I thought I'd die of grief and fury. But unlike the dead, living creatures recover. I clung to my vengeance grimly, that thin vein of blood that pulsed and kept me alive. The man who'd commissioned her death was a Manchurian photographer named Bektu Nikan.

His trail had vanished for two years, but I'd recently discovered he'd gone south to Dalian. Hastily pursuing him, I was dismayed to discover this city was far larger than I'd expected. How was I to find Bektu while securing shelter for myself? The incident on the train had underlined how dangerous it was to appear as a lone young woman. If two or more men assaulted me together, I might be overcome.

As I gazed despondently at the road, a middle-aged woman and her elderly maidservant stopped in front of me. Catching my eye, they hurried off. A few minutes later, the maidservant returned. Thin and nervous, she looked like a hare with large bulging eyes. "Are these geese for sale?"

I nodded.

"Where do they come from?"

"The north," I said. They looked like village-bred birds to me: small and rather tough.

“Is that where you’re from?”

“Yes, from Kirin.”

For some reason, that seemed to please her. In fact, if I were willing to carry the geese to her mistress’s house, I’d be paid extra. Having nowhere to go, I agreed. As we walked, she plied me with questions: Where did I come from? What did my family do? To which I answered vaguely, for I had questions of my own. Whether, for instance, she’d heard of this new art called photography and if anyone practiced it in Dalian.

She said, “Oh! That’s our young master’s hobby. He knows many photographers since his friend runs a studio.”

Eagerly, I quickened my pace. With any luck, I’d soon hunt down a photographer who’d come from Mukden.

★ ★ ★

OUR DESTINATION TURNED out to be a traditional Chinese medicine store. The sharp, bitter smell assailed my nose from afar: *dang gui* for menstrual irregularities, ginseng, red dates, and other herbs to be boiled with pigs’ trotters or sea cucumbers for medicinal soup. Constructed of gray bricks with a curved-tile roof, the building’s eaves were adorned with decorative rainpouts in the shapes of animals. The shop seemed prosperous from its wide frontage and the steady stream of customers exiting, clutching folded paper packets of dried herbs and roots. Behind the imposing double-storied shop front peeked the lower roofs of inner courtyards and a family home.

The front entrance was reserved for customers, not bedraggled peasants carrying geese, so we entered through a side gate. I was instructed to release the geese into a large poultry pen behind the kitchen. The bitter scent of medicine had given way to the aroma of braised pork belly wafting from the kitchen. My stomach growled as the maid told me to wait in the courtyard, before she returned with her mistress, the same woman who’d first spotted me with my geese. Her clothes were silk and fine cotton, appropriate for the wife of a wealthy merchant. On her finger was a ring of pale white jade, like a nugget of mutton fat.

The mistress studied me carefully. She had a smooth plump face and oiled black hair. Between her eyebrows and the downturned corners of her mouth

were creases exactly like the pinch marks from tofu pressed and drained in a cloth.

“I heard you came from Kirin—are you looking for work? It’s very easy; you’ll serve an old lady.”

“How old is she?”

“Over sixty.”

I stifled a snort. Sixty isn’t old to me. At sixty, humans are just beginning to understand that the weather will never obey them; that true love strikes at most twice in a lifetime; and that by saying yes in your youth, you may bind yourself unwisely to another’s cause. But that was beside the point.

“Why me?”

Most people don’t choose servants by picking up itinerant poultry sellers off the street. This woman didn’t seem a fool; her downturned mouth suggested she was capable of counting every pair of chopsticks in the kitchen.

“My mother-in-law has been very picky about who attends her. But if you’re from the north, she may agree. She’s from that region herself.” She pursed her lips. Clearly, there was more to the story, but it solved my urgent need of shelter while searching for my prey, so I nodded.

“She’ll want to see you before she decides.”

Before my interview, they agreed to provide me with clean clothes, a hot bath, and a good meal. They must have been completely desperate to offer such terms, and I began to wonder just what sort of terrible job this might be.

“Her first meeting with you must be at night. That’s one of her conditions before hiring anyone.”

I raised my eyebrows. Now that I was here, in this interesting house behind the medicine store, I could almost sniff out an aroma of mystery that curled through the winding passageways. Or perhaps it was just stewed pork belly.

★ ★ ★

AFTER A HOT bath, I was given clean clothes and a bowl of rice mixed with barley, topped with stewed pork belly and mustard greens. It was late, and the household had fallen silent when the maidservant finally led me through