

The Tombwatcher's Tale

by Laurel Landis

My name is Lu-chen Wyatt, and I have watched this tomb for seven years with undying loyalty. Tomorrow I am going away, and I wish to set down the story of my leaving and to say goodbye to Set-Yi, whose burial place has been my home for so long.

Junk-el says that my mother brought me here, riding out of the desert on a horse as pale as her skin, her eyes wild, her weapon bound to her chest with a leather strap. The sight of her frightened the villagers. They were always frightened, the war had gone on for so long, and she, with a small brown child and no husband was to them an odd warrior.

I clung to her so tightly that help was needed to loosen my fingers from the folds of her cloak. I was set down on the hot sand with only a small parcel of my own. I reached for her, but she turned her horse away and was swallowed by the dunes. I had only just passed my second birthday.

Set-Yi is buried on a hill, his tomb made of square shapes set one on top of the other, growing smaller as they climb. From the road only its size is noticed, its beauty a secret held inside the heavy walls like fruit inside a shell. It is a large house for a small girl.

The news of my arrival spread quickly. The very next day, people began to come to the tomb, spilling out of buses like beans from a sack with their cameras and bags and bottles of water. They still come, almost every morning. Junk-el taught me to stand very still so they can take pictures. Afterwards, they leave gifts of food and coins, especially if I follow his advice.

"Lu-chen," he says, "You are the daughter of a warrior, not a happy little bird waiting in a nest for its mother. You must appear serious, and humble. Do not smile so much." He is right, the less I smile, the more they give.

The villagers are envious; they try to steal from me and click their tongues when he shoos them away. They are ignorant, Junk-el says, they can't read and write as he has taught me to do, and they are

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poor. This year their meager crops have been eaten by tiny blue bugs, and there is nothing left to sell, nothing left with which to build or to sow. Even the quarry is empty. They have found a tractor and will use it to help them knock down the stone monuments that mark the entrance to the village.

This work is simple and plain and you must do it with good spirit. In the afternoon when the sun is hottest, I take my books and my lamp and set them carefully inside the tomb, completing the day's record in silence. Set-Yi doesn't mind this, nor does he mind the small creatures that come in with me to share my crumbs. It is a lucky place to sleep when there are so many bandits about. Set-Yi is lucky too, to be buried here instead of in the desert where he would surely be dug up. That is what happens to everyone, though we pretend not to notice. There are some things, Junk-el says, that are better to wonder about than to know.

This morning he woke me very early, poking at me with his walking stick, and then hiding behind a column with only his big feet sticking out. Many times he has done this. Each time I pretend not to remember and to be surprised. We drank tea as we always do until the first bus arrived and he stood to begin his day's work.

After the visitors left, I made my final recordings in the books, carefully noting the day's number of visitors and gifts received. Every surface has been polished, except those I could not reach. The walls glow a pale greenish-pink in the lamplight and close at the top high above me, like a flower that is resting. It is quiet, as always. The tomb allows no sound inside; even the smallest chirp is eaten by the stone so that Set-Yi is not disturbed. Tomorrow, Barbara will come very early and take me with her in a big white car. Junk-el says Barbara comes from the Far Country, just like the people on the buses, but speaks our language. There must be many pictures of me there!

I am ready. I have washed my hair, and scrubbed the secret places between my toes and behind my ears. Already I have put on my best tunic; I will need to sleep carefully in it. My bed feels soft and familiar, but my legs and arms do not seem to fit. When I close

my eyes, new pictures appear that are not quite clear and I wonder, is the sky the same in the Far Country? Will the stars be as bright and cold, the sun as hot?

Barbara is tall and has hair the color of mine, and skin the color of my mother. She holds my hand while placing my belongings on the seat of the big car right next to where I will sit. I have never ridden in a car. There is only one in the village. Everyone has to share it.

Junk-el has come to say goodbye. It is hard for him to walk now, but his hands are still strong. He has brought me a small bird hewn from a piece of cypress. He has worked carefully; the bird has tiny feathers that look as though the smallest breeze would make them flutter. He folds my hands around the bird and holds them tightly.

“Lu-chen, there are things I should tell you - ”

“There is no more time Junk-el! I am not leaving forever. It is only a long visit. You will see, one day I will come back and show you what I have learned.” He does not want to let me go. I kiss him. I wish he could ride in the car with Barbara too. People have come out of their huts to watch us. They want to come closer to see my new friend. I wave to them. Today, I don't mind. Laughter bubbles up in my throat, my heart is light and heavy all at the same time.

The car smells like something old. The door has closed now and my tears are coming out. Barbara says she thinks I need my seat belt just in case. I reach for my belongings but I know I do not have a seat belt.

“No, Lu-chen. Here.” She finds a long strap near my door and pulls it over me, fastening it to a piece of metal on the other side. Her fingernails have paint on them the same color as her mouth.

Junk-el waves and walks toward us.

“Wait, Barbara!” But she puts the key into a tiny slot and the engine buzzes. He steps back quickly and we begin to move. So long I have waited for this day, but I did not think that I would be watching Junk-el disappear behind me. I wave until he is gone.

Riding in a car is like being inside a hut that has fallen into the river. It is also like riding a donkey or a camel because the road has

got a lot of holes in it. There are so many things to look at! So many villages, each one with its own vegetables in bins and cloths for weaving hanging from poles, and men calling out to us; we must stop for a good bargain! They jump out of the way for the tiny motorbikes that ride too fast and too close. Sometimes in the quarry I sing songs, and when I stop, my voice forgets to stop with me. This is what they sound like as they pass. There is a bus, painted in bright colors, its horn plays a funny melody to all of the people inside. There are even men perched on its top, their heads bobbing up and down like berries in a puddle. I think it will tip over, or hit the white car, but it jerks away, bumping over the desert beside us until we pass. Barbara says she thinks she will put the air conditioning on. I feel a cool breeze on my face, just like at night when the wind blows, but it is steady and doesn't smell like the wind.

“Are you all right, honey?” She smiles. Her teeth are very white. I worry that she has made a mistake. I must tell her.

“My name is not Honey.” I lift my arm and point to the name on the silver bracelet my mother gave me.

“See?”

“Yes, Wyatt must have been your mother's name before she married. Did your father give you your first name?”

“Junk-el says tomb-watchers must have two names. It is a great honor, and I am the only one for many ages in history. That is why the people come in the buses.”

Barbara laughs.

“Did Junk-el tell you that?”

“Yes. He says that one day I may be a great warrior like my mother. They are hoping I will remember them.”

“I'm sure your mother was a good woman. And Junk-el has taken good care of you. But he is an old man, you must not take him too seriously.”

“What is seriously?”

“You know, he was just trying to make you feel better. Sometimes it's easier to tell a little lie when there is a truth underneath that

might hurt someone's feelings. Make you sad, you know? Do you understand?"

"Junk-el says it is always best to speak the truth."

She shook her head. "It's all right. You won't have to depend on tourists for your meals anymore, or old men's stories. There are many things you will learn now."

Barbara's head must be full of sand. This sometimes happens to people.

Past the villages the road is empty and the desert runs very fast, turning into mountains, then back into desert, a new desert, one I do not know. Somehow I have slept, already it is late and the air has started to cool. Barbara has had to think hard to drive the car and has hardly spoken for many hours. Now her voice is tired.

"Look, Lu-chen, there is the road to the temple. "

A long, plain road appears, stretching into the distance toward the horizon.

"The temple is at the end of the road, in those mountains in the distance. See?"

"I see only mountains."

"I'll bet you've never been there, have you? It is a beautiful place, so high it's almost in the clouds. You can't even get there in a car, only part of the way, and then you have to walk the rest."

"How far is your home? Are we close to it now?"

She laughs. Her laughter is different than Junk-el's, it makes me feel strange.

"My home is very far away, you have to fly in a plane to get there."

A plane! What a day this will be. I wish I could tell Junk-el.

"Junk-el will be alone now," I tell Barbara.

"Someone will keep him company. He'll be all right."

"He will have to do my work at the tomb." I feel better now that I have thought of this. The visitors will keep him from being lonely.

She shakes her head.

“He's too old, it's time for him to stop his work. And now that the road will no longer go through your village, he won't have to spend all day making things to sell. Do you see? He can rest now.”

Junk-el stop making his little animals! This cannot be true. He loves them so much. Could this be a little lie as she speaks of? Is there something underneath it? My stomach feels the way it does when I smile too much and the visitors leave no food.

“Will we be going on the plane soon?”

“Oh, you didn't think I was taking you to my home, did you? We are going to *your* home, your very own place to live. There are many people who will take care of you. You won't have to work anymore, and,” she smiles, “you will have many friends your own age.”

The sun has grown bigger on its way under the desert where it sleeps. It is orange like fire and the color is falling onto Barbara's face. She is thinking now and is very still. We are coming to the edge of a village that spreads long into the desert. There is a big white tent with red markings on it, just like the ones on Barbara's car.

“Here we are, Lu-chen. Are you hungry?”

I do not know. I know only that this place is not my home, and it is not Barbara's home, or Junk-el's. It is not a home at all, it is only a tent full of beds and wooden tables. She holds my hand and leads me through a crowd of children.

“Here is your bed, quickly now, put your things down and we will get something to eat.”

She takes me to one of the tables where women dip ladles into big pots.

“This is my friend Mi-san. She comes from a very small village, much like yours.” Mi-san is small and round. She brings me a steaming bowl of rice with lentils and a thick, spicy sauce. Barbara sits next to me. I eat very slowly and take the second bowl that is offered. I ask for more but she laughs and tells me I must wait until morning. When I finish, she stands and says good night.

"I will not see you in the morning, sweetie, I have to leave very early."

"Will you be on the plane by yourself?" I ask. Junk-el will be angry when he finds that she has left me here. I see now the goodness of the little lie, I will not tell him.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I will. I hope you will think about me. I know I will think of you." My head is heavy and I don't want to look at her anymore. I will tell him I decided not to go after all.

There is a new tunic on my bed, its arms open. Junk-el will think it a very good one and will make me an ornament for my hair to match it.

Mi-san sits and takes my hand. Her voice is very soft.

"Did you have enough to eat?"

I nod.

"You must think of this as your home now. You will be safe here, and never hungry. You will have everything you need." She strokes my hair. "One day a family may come and take you to live with them. Would you like that?"

Mi-san wants me to sleep peacefully. I know there are not enough families for all of these children! Why has Junk-el never told me about the little lies? What will he say when I tell him this new game?

I have not removed my sandals and I slip my feet under the blanket so that Mi-san will not notice.

"Go to sleep now. When you wake I will introduce you to the others." She begins to tell me a story. I don't listen.

In my dream I see Barbara walking toward the car. I run back to my bed to get my things. I come and tell her, *I am ready, Barbara*. I open the door and put my things on the seat. But Mi-San comes, and reaches into the car. She takes the little bag out and puts it back in my hand. "You will need this."

The night is late, the sounds of restless children hushed. After a few moments I can see. My bag is under the bed where I put it. I

am careful not to make any noise as I rise and find a thin strip of light that shows me the opening at the back of the tent. A group of men sit smoking nearby and I am almost seen. Once I have gone a little farther I am only one child in a crowd of many, children who have not even a tent or a tomb for shelter. Through the dark I walk as quiet as a whisper, as Junk-el has taught me to do, until I can no longer smell the cooking fires or hear the voices of the villagers I will never meet. I begin to run, it is good I have brought my shoes. The road beneath my feet is the one we traveled only a few hours ago, when a bad dream sent its shadow into the daylight. One cannot live in a shadow.

Like a splash of water from the sea the cold night air has awakened me. I sing to myself, and the sound of my voice is swallowed by the dunes.

End

