

The Legend of

# Two Serpents

Ka Wong



Night, as blue as new dyed indigo chiffon, hangs in the sky with sodden heaviness, longing for some breezes to dry it. Yet there is neither wind nor moon, only some scattered stars as a meager boon. Everything rests silently still in an almost transparent haze, the Hang Zhou City, the Golden Mountain, and the West Lake. Tonight, the lake is placid and flat like a mirror, reflecting the fragile gleams from the sky and the wilderness of mortal life. Heaven and earth, indeed, are the same color. In this very first night of spring, the whole world falls into a slumber, and time comes to a halt. This moment of tranquility seems like eternity.

Breaking this ink-painting of calmness a shooting star descends from the firmament. It drops into the water and awakens two immortal serpents, one white and another green, which dwell in the bottom of the West Lake. Irritated by this uninvited astral rock, the thousand-year-old white serpent abruptly swallows it and prepares to go back to her sleep. However, this falling piece is no ordinary star. It is one of the thirty-six thousand five hundred five-colored stones that the Goddess Nu-kwa, the half-human and half-serpent

creator of humankind, used to repair the dome of sky. It contains the essence of love and betrayal, happiness and sorrow. All of a sudden, the white serpent's eyes open wide, and her heart soars wildly. Her vanished youth, withered memories, and amorous desires all flash back and come alive. The once still lake now swirls with ripples.

"Do you know what 'love' is?" The white serpent asks.

"I have no idea. I'm only five hundred. You should know better than me," the green serpent replies with drowsiness from the winter hibernation.

"Love is the ultimate pleasure and most precious treasure of the secular world. It is the sweetest fruit and the prettiest flower. It is the star with the brightest light, the jewel with the most brilliant colors."

The vivid eagerness of the white serpent's eyes alerts the little green snake.

"But the Buddha said: 'emptiness is color; color is emptiness.' Love and passion can only ruin our spirit," the green serpent says.

"I have had enough!" The white serpent protests as its heart flits away from the bottom of the lake into the unbounded sky of blue like a kite with a broken string.



"I have been listening to all these dull proverbs and wisdom for ages," the white serpent says. "Yet what do I get besides lying in this frigid damp abyss year after year?"

"But you have me. Isn't it enough?"

The white serpent sluggishly slithers over and whispers: "It is different. Only a man's love can lighten up a woman's life; only a human's passion can warm a cold-blooded serpent."

"Do you really believe that?" The green serpent is agitated with the response. "Love will only doom a human to becoming a serpent."

"I know. But love can also transform a serpent into a human."

"Love is an evil addiction that will only lead us to mortality." The green serpent tries the last persuasion. "Love is poison."

"Remember my dear, we are snakes," the white serpent answers with an enigmatic smile. "We are already poisoned!"

## 2

With wind as the brush and rain as the paint, spring begins to color Hang Zhou City with a tinge of green and pink. Today is Ching Ming Festival, a holiday on which to pay tribute to departed ancestors, a time to sweep the dust off the beloved's grave. The West Lake, bustling with filial families and breezy tourists, covers itself with a fleecy shade of gray. Like many other dutiful travelers, the handsome youth Sen Hsui is returning home from the cemetery across the lake where his deceased parents were cremated.

Orphaned at the age of five, Sen lives with his uncle who has an herbal pharmacy store in the city. He is a good nephew who helps his uncle and brings him business, for Sen's comely face and genteel manner attract many young maidens from around the neighborhood. Yet a man needs more than merely good looks and a good heart in order to get a decent wife. Without any money or property of his own, Sen has neither been arranged for any marriage nor has he proposed to anyone. Indeed, he is not interested in the ordinary girls in town. Hoping for a promising civil service career and future, he studies diligently and sets his mind on

the government examination that will take place in the capital next spring.

While Sen is waiting for a boat ride back to the city, the sky is suddenly filled with a peculiar darkness as if somebody has knocked over a bottle of black ink in heaven. Then a hefty cloudburst begins to pour down before Sen can find a shelter to hide. The heavy traffic on the lake abruptly scurries for cover, and Sen finds himself standing alone in the rain. Soon he sees a boat moving sluggishly across the misty lake. Ardently, he waves and shouts. The boat comes by the shore and picks him up.

"Thank you very much for giving me a ride," Sen says to the old boatman as he climbs on board.

"Don't thank me. Thank the Madame." The boatman points to the inside of the boat.

As Sen steps into the cabin, a young woman in white instantly catches his eyes. No words can describe her voluptuous yet otherworldly beauty. Never before has Sen seen such a lady around here, for he would definitely recognize her amongst thousands. Her features and dress are a combination of sophistication and fascination. Her skin is snowy and flawless as if sculpted from the finest marble. Her hair, softly blowing in the wind, is smooth and shiny black

silk. Her thin white garment, slightly damp from the rain, clings tightly to every curve of her body. She has the elegance of a mellow matron as well as the sweetness of a callow virgin. She is a bewitching temptress as well as a beloved goddess. Captured by this beauty, Sen is frozen, both speechless and motionless, but his heart bounds like a wild deer in a meadow.

Sitting next to the lady, a young lad of fourteen or fifteen with lovely features dressed in green asks: "Sir, are you going to stand there and look at my sister like that without even saying `thank you'?"

"I'm sorry." Sen blushes like red-rose wine. Perhaps he is already drunk from a mere glance of the beauty. He has not even noticed that there is another person besides the lady on the boat. "Miss, thank you for letting me in."

"Don't mention it, Sir," the lady's voice drifts in the air like an exotic melody. "My little brother is always joking around. Green, please apologize to this gentleman."

"I am just kidding," the boy pardons himself with a smiling face and a racy wink.

"I hope this boat is not too small and simple for a gentleman like you," the lady continues. "Please come over and have a seat."

Sen thanks the lady again and lurches over to the tiny space next to her while the boatman begins to row. Being so close to her, Sen gingerly examines her exquisite profile and finds her beauty irresistible. Their eyes meet. Hers dazzle with angelic grace and primitive passion. His are full of awe and excitement. All he can hear is the beat of his heart leaping fervently beneath his drenched clothes, or perhaps it is just the drum-like rhythm of the falling rain.

"May I ask what is Sir's honorable name?" The lady asks.

"I am Sen Hsui from Hang Zhou City. I just paid a visit to my deceased parents on this day of Ching Ming, and all of a sudden was caught in this downpour," Sen says bashfully.

"Weather is very hard to predict. It is something out of a man's control, isn't it?"

"I guess so. Miss, may I ask where do you come from since I have never seen you around here before?"

"It's a long story..." The lady sighs feebly.

"We are from the Capital. I am Green, and she is my sister White." The boy behind them answers briskly as tears gather languidly in the beauty's eyes.

"Our father, General Xe, was one of the most righteous and virtuous lures in the Capital," the lad

continues. "Unfortunately, his honesty made him an enemy to the corrupted politics of greed and lust. My father passed away a year ago from some baneful conspiracy, and many of those avaricious bureaucrats not only strived to steal his fortune and power but also starved for my beautiful sister. Mr. Sen Hsui, I am so useless, for I cannot protect my father's name and sister's safety with these two hands. That is why we have secretly departed on a journey, trying to escape from all those nightmares."

"What can a fragile woman do in such a terrible situation?" White's weeping eyes are the misted flowers in the rain.

"I am so sorry, Miss White. I think the world is unworthy of a lady like you."

"Thank you for your kindness," White says with a melancholy delicacy.

A hush falls in the little cabin, but sometimes people do not need words to communicate.

"Here is Hang Zhou City," Green exclaims.

"Mr. Sen, it is still raining and I know you have to keep going," White says. "Why don't you take my umbrella with you?"

"But..." Sen hesitates, not about taking the umbrella, but about having to leave this beauty so soon.

"Don't worry about it. I am staying in a village nearby for the moment," White continues as if she can read his mind. "Mr. Sen, you can return it to me any time at your convenience."

"Thank you very much." Sen feels relieved for he knows that he will see her again. "I'll take your gracious offer and return it to you tomorrow. Where do you live?"

"Just look for the Xe Residence near the Magpie Bridge. I will be waiting for you there tomorrow."

Sen gets off and spreads the dainty umbrella as he watches the boat merge into the background of blue haze. Under the umbrella, there is no wind and no rain. Under the umbrella, there is no worry and no pain. The raindrops fall softly like flowers and sparkle brightly like stars, beginning a dreamy and romantic drama.



### 3

Loneliness slithers across the empty room like the curling white smoke drifting from incense. Idly sitting on his bed, Sen stares at the umbrella by the door. A few raindrops still dangle from its edge, and the fabric of his heart still snags on the thread from the beauty's sleeves. It is a sleepless night, for he cannot stop thinking about White. Wandering in his reverie, he sees himself going to see her tomorrow.

It is a huge mansion with a grand red gate. He hears some dulcet music from the back of the house. Like guiding angels, the music leads him inside. He walks past a water-lily pond and into a hall of decorated pillars, columns, and screens. He traces the music into an inner chamber adorned with exotic flowers. White, dressed in a flimsy lace robe, sits elegantly in the middle of the room playing the Chinese harp.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Sen. I didn't know you were here. Please forgive my rudeness for not greeting you at the front gate."

"Don't worry, Miss White. I am the one who should apologize, since I have interrupted your music."

"It is a shame that I play music in front of a great

savant like you. Please sit down, and maybe you can teach me how to play well." White extricates herself from the seat and slowly walks over to him.

"I'm no savant, Miss White," Sen utters. "I'm just an ordinary man. I don't know how to play music." Sen runs out of words as White's alluring face draws close to his.

"Really? I guess maybe it is time for this humble woman to share something she knows with Mr. Sen then."

Every time White's long slim fingers touch the cords on the harp, Sen quivers as if she is caressing the strings of his heart. The night is young and unlike any other, and the music has just begun...

"It's just a dream!" Sen wakes up as sunlight comes through the bamboo blind. "But it's so real," he thinks while gazing at the still erect umbrella standing over its own shadow in the puddle of water underneath.

## 4

After a morning of longing and searching, Sen is perplexed and frustrated. Nobody around the Magpie Bridge seems to know where the Xe residence is. Just about to give up, he hears an amicable voice arise from behind.

"Mr. Sen. this way please." It is Green waving and skipping toward him.

"Where is your residence?" Sen asks. "I have been looking for it all day."

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Sen," Green smiles sweetly. "I hope you do not forget what I told you yesterday. Do you still remember that we are hiding from those evil people from the Capital?"

"I see," Sen understands immediately. "The fewer people who know where you live, the safer you are."

"You got it," Green says as he shows Sen the way. "I wish I could be like you when I grow up."

"Green, you are from an aristocratic family. Maybe times are a little bit tough right now, but I am sure you will be much more than an ordinary man like me."

"But I just want to be ordinary" "

Soon they arrive at the courtly crimson gate of White's residence which looks extremely familiar to Sen. As he follows Green in, everything in the house appears exactly the same as in his dream last night, the water-lily pond, the ornate pillars and columns, as well as all the refined decorations.

"How strange!" Sen doubtfully grumbles. "I saw this house before."

"Well, maybe this is what people call 'love connection,' Green giggles. "One does not need the splendid wings of a phoenix to get where he wants; it takes merely one thin string in his heart."

Sen is amazed, not only by the scintillating Green but also the sight of the magnificent garden. Finally, Green leads him to a red pavilion surrounded by a redolent sea of peach blossoms.

Sen's soul melts like the morning dews greet the rays of the sun when he sees his graceful dream lover.

"Welcome, Mr. Sen." White, lolling on a long bench in a white gown and gently waving a fan of white feathers, is more beautiful than Sen can remember. She makes the pretty flowers seem mediocre, and the lustrous sunbeams look dim.

"Please come over, Mr. Sen. I have prepared a little

refreshment for you," White says.

Overlooking the garden of peach blossoms, they sit down by the west window chatting and enjoying the remains of this spring day until the new crescent moon emerges from the foam of the clouds. She picks up a piece of fruit and has a small bite. Then she gives it to her handsome guest.

"It is very sweet and delicious. What is it?" Sen asks.

"It is the fruit of good and evil." White's laughter sounds like the melodic tone of the silver chimes. "It is called the fruit of passion."

"May you pardon my boldness, Mr. Sen, but I have a confession to make," White coquettishly continues. "Fleeing from my calamitous past, I have nobody to trust or depend upon now. I have witnessed the dark shades of fortune and fame, and I have suffered the grief of losing something and somebody I loved. I promised myself that I would never let that happen to me again. I know it may sound crazy, but do you believe in love at first sight? I think it is fate that I met you yesterday, and I feel that we are meant to be together."

Sen is grateful for yet thrilled at her directness. He is very attracted to her, but he has his own reservations.

"Miss White, to be honest with you, I have not stopped thinking about you since yesterday. I have the same

strong feelings for you; however, I am only a poor ordinary man who can barely support myself, needless to say, a family, especially a lady like you."

"Wealth is the image of the roses in the mirror, and honor is the reflection of the moon in the water. To a woman like me, fortune and fame have no meaning at all. Indeed, I still have some money, which will be enough for us to lead a simple but happy life together."

"I will make you very happy, White," Sen says as his eyes fill with boundless affection. "I swear by the blessed moon that covers the peach blossoms with her silver kiss..."

White's slim finger, as tender as an orchid petal, taps on his lips.

"Don't vow by the inconstant moon for it changes every night. In fact, don't speak." White's cherry lips, like the wings of a butterfly, softly landed on his.

## 5

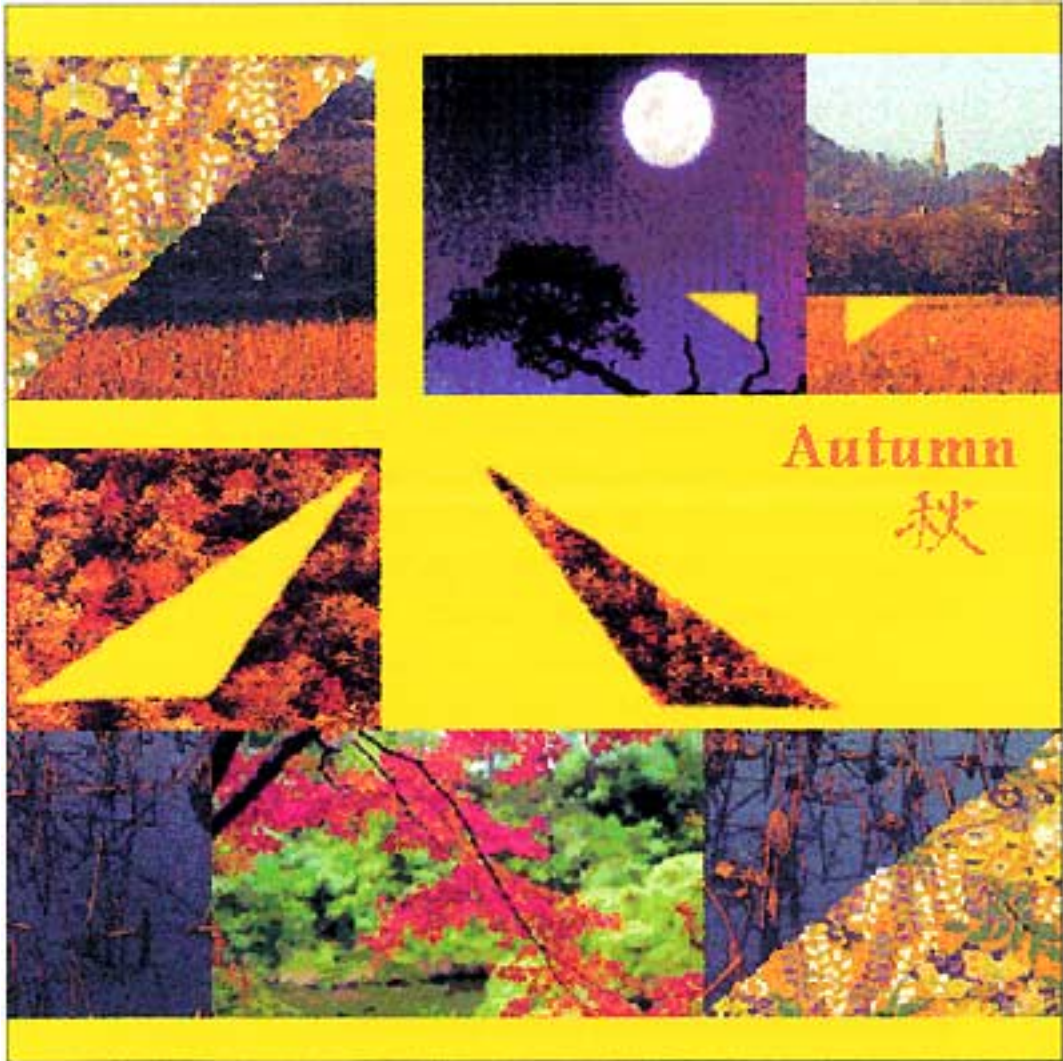
Into the placid lake a cassia flower falls, dusk has descended, and the lights are lit. Flaming red, sapphire blue, and shimmering yellow, hundreds of vivid ribbons and colorful lanterns are hanging everywhere on the street and the windows, celebrating the full moon in the Mid-Autumn Festival. The cricket spinners harmonize with the noisy songs of the happy drinkers. The lithe willows swing gracefully with the flushed dancers. Tonight, the glamorous parties in Hang Zhou City will never end.

"Tonight is such a special night," Sen says, holding White's hand while browsing in the jovial and populous night market.

"I know," White grins like a fully opened lotus. "It's the Moon festival; families are united, and lovers are connected. Look, everybody seems so blissful."

"You are only half right," Sen smiles at his cherished consort. "Tonight is also our six-month anniversary."

Graciously, he pulls out a silk packet from his inner pocket and hands it to White.



Autumn  
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"What a beautiful jade bracelet. Thank you so much."  
White is enraptured as she unwraps the gift.

"I should be the one who is grateful. You have done so much for me. You settled my uncle down in his home village where he always wanted to go for retirement; you took over the herbal shop and expanded it into a charity dispensary. You cure sickness and watch out for the poor. You look after our home and take good care of me. You are an excellent wife I'm so glad that fate brought us together."

"It is easy to find treasures that are priceless, but it is difficult to find a man whose love is ageless," White says. "My dear husband, are you sure this is what you want? Are you really happy about leading a simple life here instead of a brilliant civil service career in the Capital?"

"Certainly," Sen reassures his wife's worries. "Bureaucracy is a battlefield where brutal fights for fortune and fame never end. You bring me happiness that neither money can buy nor power deny. Yes, I relish our simple lives. Everything is perfect when you are by my side, and nothing in the whole wide world can change my mind."

While the couple mingles happily with the frolicking street party, a repellent lament from an old blind beggar sitting on the corner suddenly catches White's ears.

"Fishes dwell in the sea, and birds fly in the sky.  
A man must follow the man's way,  
And a serpent must follow its own kind.  
Go back where you are from  
Before the punishment arrives."  
"Let's go home," White says.

"The fun has just only started," Sen wonders. "Are you all right? You look so pale."

"I am sorry, but I feel ill. I have a headache." White falls weakly into her husband's arms.

"Perhaps it is too crowded for you. Let's get out of here. We probably should go back anyway. It's quite late."

"Besides, I worry about Green being home alone," White says. "We should keep him company, for tonight is also a night for families."

## 6

Part from the joyful people and the colorful carnival, Green sits by the mountain cliff all by himself. Watching the brilliance of the turquoise sky and the emerald lake deepen into an inseparable dark purple, he is as solitary as the Moon Lady under her cassia tree. The full moon coursing through the layers of clouds begins to smile. At the touch of a beam, a lonely wolf howls. Under the silver gleam, the whole world glows. The wild grasses moan and rustle as the clear wind blows. Green's heart wearies when he hears the song from a black crow.

"Ask the world what is love?  
Because of it,  
Life and death would easily be given up.  
From the south of heaven to the north of earth,  
We are two separate voyagers  
Whose old wings have flown through  
Countless summers and winters.  
The sweetness of meeting  
And the bitterness of being apart,  
We are two crazy folks  
Who still believe in  
Meaningless promises in our hearts."

"What a sad lyric!" Green sighs.

"In a situation like mine, how can just one word `sad'

grasp it all?" The crow wails.

"What happened to you?"

"They killed my love," the crow bawls. "The heartless and ruthless hunter shot my lover!"

Humans. It is all because of humans.

"You will not understand," the sobbing bird continues, "for you have never lost somebody you deeply love. I would do anything if only I could go back in time."

"I understand," Green sighs. He remembers the times when White and he were lying peacefully together in the lake, snickering at the absurdity and stupidity of humankind. Now they are human, the thing they despised. While White does it for the pursuit of love, he does it for the fear of loneliness. Yet Green has ended up lonelier than ever.

"What about you? Why are you alone on this very night of the full moon?" the crow asks.

"It's a long story."

"I have a lot of time to kill."

Green takes a deep breath and tells his tale seriously. "It all started five hundred years ago..." His eyes are wide open, sailing across waves of the shimmering moonlight through places and times to where his memory begins.

"I was a green snake born with ethereal delights,

endowed with magic and gifted with longevity. I watched the years go by and always wondered if I was the only one who was so different. I was terrified and troubled by the mundane world for decades. Soberly searching and seeking, I luckily met an immortal white serpent. She was older and wiser, more beautiful and powerful. Finally, we decided to live in the West Lake, meditating and practicing the merit of the Way. We breathed in the essence of Yin and Yang and took in the principle of the moon and sun. We witnessed the history of wrong and right as the world turned nights after nights. Sorrow never showed us its face; simple and carefree were our days. Centuries went by quietly until the first day of last spring. Something happened to White, and she suddenly changed. The lake was no longer large enough to hold her heart, and the world of red dust is where she wanted to find love."

"Then why did you follow her?" The crow asks.

"I don't know. The idea of wandering around in the mortal world sounded like fun in the beginning. Or maybe I'm afraid of loneliness."

"But you neither have any fun nor have escaped from loneliness."

Green nods. The silvery moonshine sparkling on the

black feathers of the crow reminds him of White's glistening skin plastered with luminous rays.

"The more I play along with and listen to her, the more anxious and frightened I am. She is now in love with a man and has become too compassionate towards human beings. If she is not spending her time curing people, then she is staying next to her husband. I feel left out. Yet she seems to forget that humans do not like snakes. They all think we are monsters who prey on their flesh and blood. It is so dangerous, for they will banish us and destroy our spirit if they know who we really are."

"Do you think leaving the mortal world and going back to some cold and remote mountain caves is the best thing to do?" the crow asks.

"I don't know what to do. Should not snake be with snake, and human with human? This was the history that I have seen and heard of. But I'm so confused now."

"Perhaps you should talk to her."

"I wish words could solve the problem," Green sighs again.

"There is always a magical word that can do so," the crow replies.

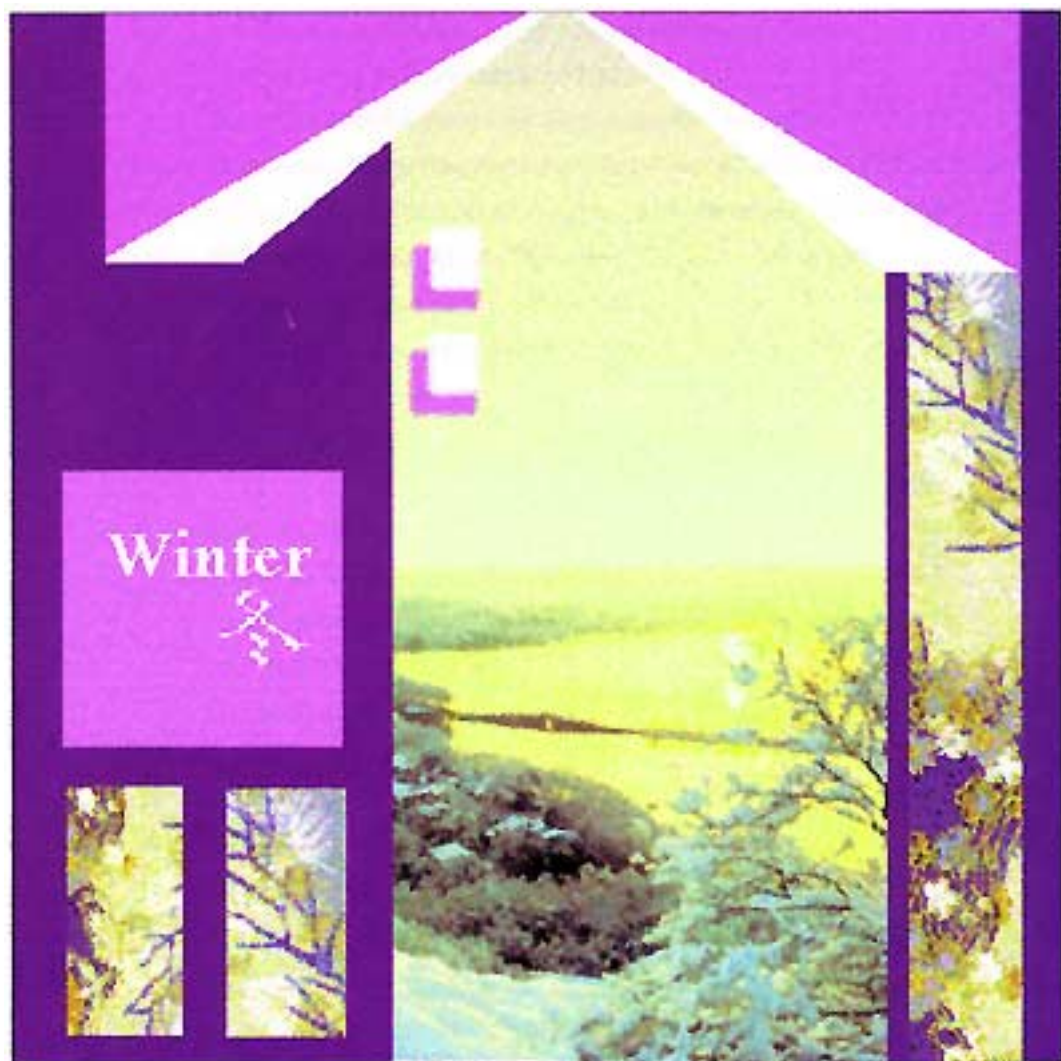
The paleness of the West Lake fuses with the mysterious gray from the sky. Snowflakes replace the leaves on the naked trees, and the mountains hold the remnants of the heavenly tears. The night is still, except a lone streak of white smoke rising from the remote hamlet.

"It has been a while since the two of us came back here," Green coos as he coils onto a pine tree glancing at the misty horizon.

"I miss the days when I took the lush grass as my bed and wore the blue wind as my dress," Green continues. "The lake was my mirror, and the forest was my villa. This is where the clouds are born. This is where we belong. Sister, I am tired of living under the shadows of worry and fear in the human world. How long do you still want to play your game?" Green asks.

"Game?" White feebly says. "Love is not a game."

Green is annoyed by his romantic sister. "You have tasted what you desire. Haven't you had enough now? I think we should go back before it is too late."



"I can't go back now. I love Sen, and he loves me."

"You may love Sen, but he does not love you. He is in love with a lie, the woman whom you pretend to be. Do you think he will still love you if he knows who you really are?" Green finally bursts out.

"Stop it!" White hisses angrily. "He does not have to know, and he will never know. He promises that he would love me forever. Even if the rocky mountain shatters and the ocean runs dry, his love for me will never die."

"Forever, forever, what a beautiful promise," Green retorts.

"Please don't tell Sen about who I am." White feels dismal, for everything Green says is true. "Forever" to Sen is at the most fifty or sixty years. After he passes away, there will be nothing in the profane world worth my staying for, and I shall return. A few decades to us are just a blink of our eyes. Please let us enjoy the rest of his lifetime."

"You have been a human too long. You even forget snakes do not blink," Green sneers sarcastically. "I am not the one who forbids your loving a human. It is humans who prohibit us from loving them."

"But who has the right to draw the line of prejudice, telling someone whom he or she can or cannot love?"

White cries outloud. Her clamor echoes as if heaven knows.

An awkward silence falls between the two. Green gives up. Nothing can change a woman's determined mind. White has emptied her feelings like pouring out a bucket of water; there is no way to gather them back.

"You are so stubborn," Green says.

"After all, I am one thousand and one years old."

## 8

It is an unruffled afternoon in late spring. The forest is blessed with fresh green and balmy flowers. Sen is collecting medical spices and herbs when he hears the bell-like resonance of a monk's chant daintily filling the woods.

"The Bodhi fig-tree is originally not a tree,  
The spotless mirror also has no frame.  
Indeed, there exists not even a single substance.  
How can there emerge any dust?"

"It must be the monks in the Temple of the Golden Mountain," Sen thinks.

"Pardon me, young master," a deep voice suddenly arises from Sen's back. He turns around and sees an old monk, who is as almighty and solid as a holy stone statue, standing right behind him. The monk has a very taut and sober face. Under his thick silver eyebrows, resembling two arrows soaring towards his temples, are bronze-mirror eyes glittering with sagacity and vitality. His bright robe is as radiant as the summer sun. Filtering through layers of leaves, the sunlight makes a halo over his shaved head.

The old monk proceeds. "May I introduce myself: I am 'Sea of Law' from the Temple of the Golden Mountain." The

bare almond tree beside him breaks into bloom all at once. "While I was passing the West Lake today, I saw some evil spirits hovering over the city. I traced back the source, and here I find you. I can feel your exceptional good karma. That's probably why the fiend chooses you. Young master, you are bewitched by a serpent. Sooner or later, she will devour you if you do not listen to me."

"Really?" Sen's face falls like pale almond flowers dropping from the tree. "Great Teacher, please tell me where the fiend is?"

"Nama Amita Buddha. The serpent is your wife."

"That's impossible!" Sen denies in bewilderment. "My wife is perfectly virtuous. She is as pure as the snow and as chaste as the jade. Great Teacher, there must be a mistake. She is not a snake."

"Your eyes are blinded by her beauty and your heart is deceived by her lies. I can't blame you, for she is an old white serpent who was living under the West Lake for a thousand years."

"I don't believe you." Sen becomes aggravated, disputing the old monk whose bright halo is now replaced by a dark shadow as he walks towards Sen. "White is the most noble person I have ever met. She generously heals the

illnesses of the elders and saves the lives of the youths. Everybody in the city adores her. If a serpent is so kind and selfless, then it is not a monster at all. Besides, we have been married for a long time. I don't think a demon would wait for years just to eat a man. I think you are wrong."

"Young master," Law retorts with the deep voice and indifferent tone, which is as dry and lifeless as a desert. "Those are all delusions and illusions. Your mind is indulging in the sea of materiality and sensuality. Your worldly suffering will have no end; turning back is the only course."

"Thank you for your advice," Sen says wearily, "but I think I have had enough. Please excuse me. I have to go."

Sen quickly picks up his basket and turns his back. Although he wants to disregard Law's accusation, the monk's words drop heavily into his heart. His world will not be the same anymore; just like the path in front of him, it is now full of thorn bushes and spiked rocks.

Law sighs as he sees Sen clumsily scramble his way through the woods. All of a sudden, he senses something is watching him from behind. He blurts out fiercely: "Who is hiding out there?"

From among the leafy trees and verdant grasses, Green buoyantly emerges.

"Poor old thing, it seems your sermon didn't work," Green derides him. "I'm afraid love is something that a monk will never understand. Why don't you just leave them alone?"

"Nama Amita Buddha. Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form. Little green snake, shall I leave them alone the way they leave you alone? Is that really what you want?"

Green's face turns ashen, for Law's word breaches the wall where he secretly hides his grief. He is lonely, and he hates it. He is scared, but he can't help it.

Law keeps going on as he sees the baffled looks on Green's face.

"Listen, snakes are never welcomed or allowed to come to the human world, and I am the one who will make sure of that." Law coarsely hits the almond tree beside him and the tree breaks into fire. The old monk smiles obscurely. It seems as if he knows everything. "However, you can redeem yourself by leading a straying man back to the Way, and as a reward, you can win your beloved sister back to your side."

9

The sky is burning. The tinged clouds are restless flames, blazing with luminous orange, vivid yellow, and deep scarlet. They are constantly and instantly changing, in various colors and shapes, with cruelty and softness.

The West Lake is burning, eerily lit by the heavenly fire. The dragon boats, exhausted from a long day of racing, lie on the golden lake like flanks of burnt dumpling in a wok of oil. The raging clamor of drums and horns, the athletes' sweat, and the maiden's songs all dwindle with the melting sun. The celebration of the Dean Yang Festival is over, yet the early summer heat seems to linger forever. A weighty mugginess hangs in the air. Even the breeze is warm and stuffy, like the breath of a drunkard.

In the west chamber, Sen and White sit languidly together in this festive dusk of tipsy red, humid heat, and buzzing of raspy insects. A lazy evening: everything seems too heavy to move. Only the wavelike undulation from the mosquito veil occasionally flirts with the curvy white fumes from the jade incense brazier.



"It is strange that nowadays we memorialize the great poet Chu Yuan through feast and boat-racing," White finally breaks the sultry silence.

She has seen them all. She has heard them all: birth, old age, illness, and death, the suicide of the poet and the downfall of the kingdom. In the infinity of time, her thoughts flutter. In the eternity of the cosmos, human life is frail. White looks at Sen somberly, knowing that her handsome and vital lover will disappear like dust as the years go by.

"You have been very quiet lately," White continues.

"I guess it is the weather."

"Is there anything bothering you? You seem like you are hiding something from me."

"No. . . nothing," Sen utters uneasily. "Are you?"

"What?"

"Are you hiding some secrets from me?" Sen asks at last.

White sits there, motionless and wordless, for a few seconds can last longer than a century. Thousands of excuses, thousands of lies, but only one truth. Her pale lips finally shiver a murmur, "I . . . think I should tell you..."

"What a day!" Green's shrill voice rolls out promptly behind the vintage screen. Carrying a tray of delicate

dumplings and aromatic wine, he walks towards the couple and sets up a little table. "I have chilled some wine and made some snacks. It's too hot a day for a big meal."

There is a quivering tenseness in the way Green sounds. His hands under the olive-green sleeves are shaking as fast as his heartbeat.

"Thank you very much." White feels relief as Green's entrance momentarily delays her hesitant confession.

"Please join us," Sen says to Green.

"No," Green hastily declines and backs off. "I...ate already... I . . . have to go..."

He knocks over a lamp pole while hurrying out of the room. The paper lantern falls down, blazes into a ball of fire and then into black smoke.

"Be careful! Did you burn yourself?" Sen asks.

"I'm fine. Sorry about that... I'd better go." Green replies anxiously and soon leaps away.

"He is acting so strange today," White says while pouring out the wine.

"White, what were you going to say before?"

"I . . . forgot . . . It's probably something unimportant. Let's have a cup of wine and seal our everlasting pledge as husband and wife again."

They drink the smooth wine together, swallowing it with the truth that they both shroud from each other.

Abruptly, White senses a searing ache all over as if her head is on fire and her skin is bursting into flames. The blue porcelain cup drops from her hand and smashes into pieces. She falls down. The jade bracelet on her wrist hits the floor and breaks into two.

"Are you all right?" Sen tries nervously to hold his wife but he cannot. He is shocked by what he sees.

Moaning and twisting on the floor in intolerable agony, White not only loses her consciousness but also her human form. She is turning back into a white serpent.

Time seems to stop. Sen looks still as though he is about to cry, or is crying, as if he is about to die, or is dying.

A dark shadow suddenly hovers over his stiff body like a fatal thundercloud.

"Nama Amita Buddha." It is Law who wafts into the chamber and stands in front of Sen. "What a huge serpent! Young Master, do you believe me now?"

Without even a sigh, Sen faints.

"I'll take you out of this demon's nest." Law grips the collapsed Sen and carries him on his shoulder. Soon they disappear in the hazy twilight.

11 of a sudden, the thunder blares, and the wind howls. The clouds thicken, and the sky blackens. Rain starts falling crazily like tears of a mad woman. White uses all her strength to open her eyes. In a blur, she can only see a green silhouette.

"You betrayed me," White mumbles feebly as she strives to stand up again. Her large eyes sparkle in the dim candlelight with anguish.

Green keeps still, just gazing at his serpent sister as she is transformed into an ailing woman.

"You promised me that you would keep my secret and leave us alone," White continues.

"I didn't tell him. You showed him yourself."

"Why did you do this to me? I thought you cared about me..." White's furious accusation gradually turns into a muffled sobbing that shakes her whole body. "Don't you remember everything that I did for you and all those years that we spent together?"

"I do remember, my sister. You are the one who forgot. I cherish them so much that it rips me apart, for they are no longer a part of my life. Once, we were so close; I was

the green leaf, and you were the white rose. Now, I am just the filthy greenish moss sticking on your clean white shoes. I am the one from your past, and Sen is the one of your future. I don't like it, and I can't stand it. I want those memories to return to me. I want you to come back to my side again. Sister, I am afraid, being in this human world, this is not the place where we belong."

The rainy morning is as dark as night. The thick clouds are huge gray velvet curtains blocking out the sunlight. The chamber looks like a ruin with two surviving individuals after a gory battle.

"Where is Sen?" White suddenly notices her husband's absence.

"He is gone, and so shall we," Green says. "Let's forget everything that happened and go back to where we were. It's all over."

"It is not over yet." A flicker of hope twinkles in White's weeping eyes. "Only death will stop the silkworms from winding their threads; only by becoming ashes will the tears of the candle dry. I am not giving it up."

"We are snakes. No matter how hard we try, how many masks we put on, we are still snakes. It was right here where Sen saw you turning into one, and you still think he

would love you as he used to? Don't be so stupid! Why would a man love a snake?"

"Why wouldn't he?" White asks. "A man, a woman, a swan, a mermaid, or a serpent, what is the difference? I was once like you, obsessed with form and color, line and border. We are snakes, and they are human. We have our realm, and they have their kingdom. We represent malice to them, and they are fearful of us. Not until I met Sen, who has opened my narrow mind, did I see things in any other way. He taught and gave me love. From that moment, I realized that we are all equally beloved creatures in the universe. There is no I difference. The world should not be about why or whom or what we should love; it should be about how we can love."

White stands up resolutely. Her white dress, reflecting the dreamy flame from the candlelight, glows with radiant integrity and dignity like a lotus-blossom arising from murky water.

Green's clouded eyes suddenly become clear. He no longer sees White as a serpent or a woman, but a being that dares to dream and fight for love.

"I did it all out of love too, yet it seems I have done so much wrong," Green whines as tears fall down from his cheeks like the raindrops on a window pane. "I'm so sorry,

sister."

"The shadows of love are fear, jealousy, and hatred. They always come together until we reach the world of enlightenment where everything is illuminated and darkness does not abide. My dear brother, I too was wrong, caring only for my own passion and ignoring yours. This is the suffering that we both have to endure, the lesson we both have to learn," White says with a prudent firmness. "Green, please tell me where Sen is."

"What if he does not love you anymore?"

"If our love is not strong enough, then I shall resign. I cannot and will not make him love me. He should follow his own heart, and all that I want is to hear it directly from him."

"An old monk named 'Sea of Law' from the Temple of the Golden Mountain who gave me the drug in the wine has taken him away," Green grovels in front of White. "It is all my fault. Would you forgive me?"

"Green, you don't have to get down on your knees, just look into my eyes. I know you do not mean to hurt me," White says. "I have to go now. I have to find Sen."

"Law is very powerful. Please let me go with you."

"It may be fate that brings us here, but now I am going to face it my own way. You should go back to the West

Lake, taking our lesson and my love with you. I promise after I have done what I have to do, I will come back. "

"But ...it is so dangerous to go alone."

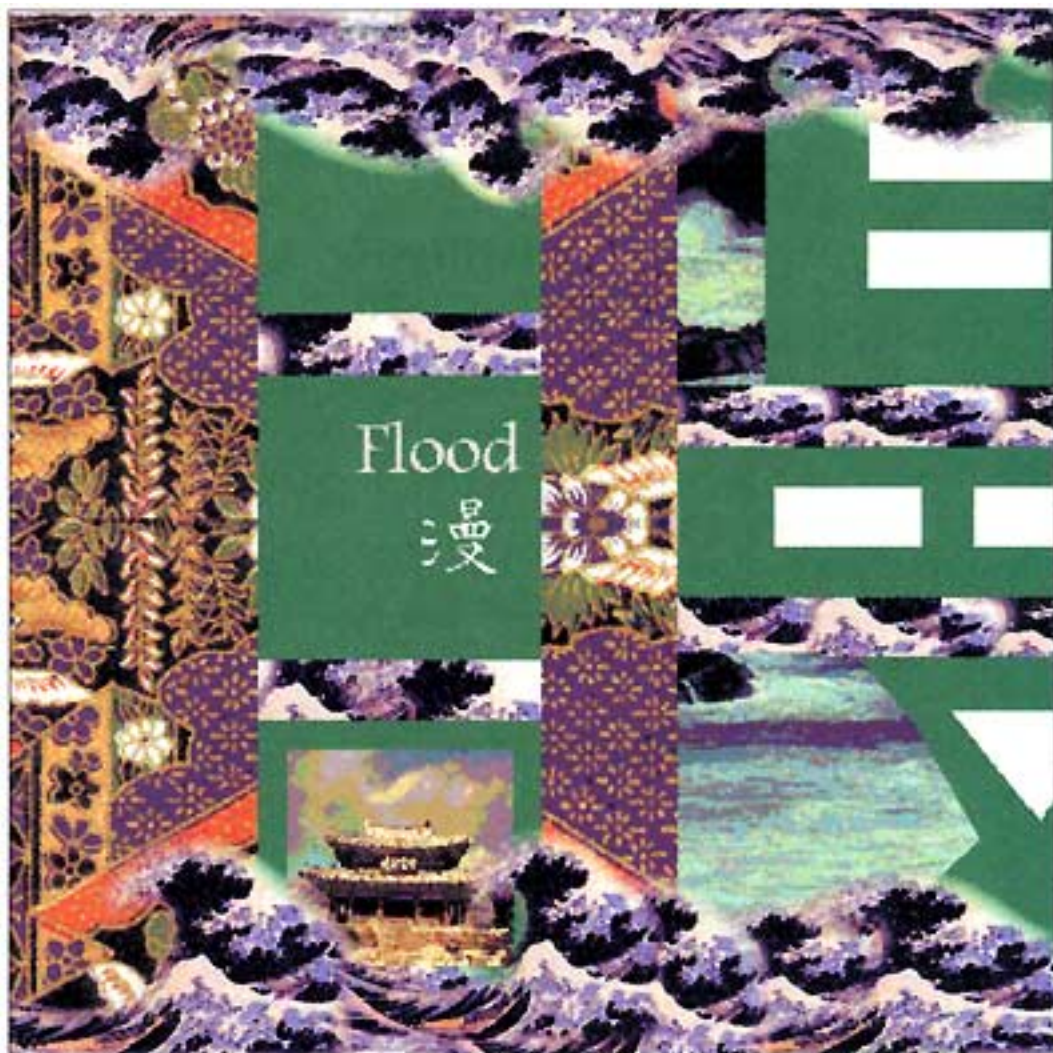
"I only want to know the truth, and I am not afraid of facing it. I think a monk of great virtue should understand that. Besides, what can Law do to me? Remember, I am immortal. I emanate from nature, and I can never die. He can condemn or confine me, but he can never kill me."

**S** In an uncanny darkness the downpour continues. The gusty storm bawls madly, and the dizzy lightning strikes in rage. Billowing clouds encircle the lofty Golden Mountain which is so high and steep that it looks like a lance spearing the sky. Heaven trembles in despair, and earth quivers in pain. The incense burner, the bronze bell, and the monk's chant remain collected and unchanged.

"Teacher Law," Sen kneels weakly in front of the old monk. "Please let me go."

"Nama Amita Buddha. Master Sen, you have meditated all night and still haven't figured out the right way?" Law says in his deep indifferent voice. "Your so-called wife is a serpent monster. You saw the true side of her with your very own eyes, didn't you?"

"She may be a serpent fairy, but she will never be a monster. Yes, I have seen her form as a serpent, but I have also known her soul as a human. Teacher Law, I have been thinking all night, and I believe that there is nothing more



precious and beautiful than loving somebody and being loved. I know she loves me, and I love her too. What matters is not her form but her soul."

"This is ridiculous! Your heart has been polluted by her venom." Law is furious.

"I am willing to kiss the golden poison on her lips and die. With the light wings of love, I can pass these stern walls and fly. Teacher Law, please be merciful and let me go."

"Master Sen, you must purify your soul from temptation and delusion; you must cleanse all the desires and passions from your mind. Then your heart will be as immaculate as a mirror."

"My heart is not a mirror that only reflects the will of others," Sen replies with ambivalence. "I want to see my wife. Let me go."

"I think the best way for you is to shave all your hair and join our practice of austerity. That will end your meaningless craving."

"You cannot force me to be a monk. Why don't you turn me into a snake?"

"Stop this nonsense!" The whole temple shivers as Law roars.

"I..." Sen startles, yet a familiar and consoling voice fluttering into the hall reaches his ears and lightens his heart.

"Sen, are you there?" Riding the lightning as her horse and wearing the white haze as her cape, White arrives promptly at the temple like a warrior. An array of monks march immediately towards her and form a great wall blocking her way into the inner hall.

"Pardon me, all the Great Teachers, I am here looking for my husband Sen."

"How dare a serpent step in and pollute the sacred temple of the Buddha!" Law jumps hastily over the monks like an enraged tiger and lands in front of White. He casts a disdainful glance at her and then turns his face away. "You are not welcome here!"

"I'm so sorry to interrupt you, Teacher Law. I just want to have a word with my husband. Please, kindly let me see him," she pleads earnestly.

"I have never heard such an absurd thing before, a snake looking for a human husband in a temple."

The stone wall of monks behind Law breaks into laughter.

"White, I'm here." Sen screams out and tries to run away while two strong abbots hold him back.

"That man whom your brothers are restraining there is my husband," White says stoically when she sees Sen. "Please have pity on us, and let me see him."

"I think it is not necessary," Law states rigidly.

"That will be his decision, not yours." She can no longer subdue her vexation.

"Leave the temple at once," Law clamors. "Or else I am going to force you to!"

"I will leave after I see my husband." White insists.

Law's face becomes as dark as the inky sky, and the veins on his neck bulge like the roots of an old tree. He bellows as loud as an angry tiger: "Go away snake! There is no place for you in a holy Buddhist temple."

"The temple of Buddha should be a place where all living beings are embraced and cherished equally with compassion," White declares. "Have you forgotten that it was the serpent deity Muchalinda who sheltered the Buddha on His way to enlightenment from rain and storm and protected Him from the evil Mara's aggressions? Do you remember it was the Nagas, our great serpent kings, who preserved the Buddha's perfect wisdom for centuries? Law, where were you when Pang-ku founded the earth? Where were you when Nu-kwa repaired the sky? We were there with the divinities

at the beginning, and you were probably still a flea in a previous life. Now you think you are the only legitimate interpreter of all gods."

"I can't stand you anymore!" A strong wind blasts out like a whip from a sway of Law's hand . Rocks and trees scatter everywhere it hits.

"I am not afraid of you, Law!" White says. "How can you detain somebody against his will? If you don't hand Sen back to me, I will deluge this temple with water."

White soars up to the sky and hits the mighty drums of thunder. The swollen rivers and lakes start their reverberating outcries. Roaring waves, like robust chariots in white armor, break violently against the embankment and rush towards the Golden Mountain. The temple will soon be engulfed in a turbulent whirlpool.

"This little flood is nothing to me. Watch out, white snake! I'm going to wrap you in my fire surplice and never let you out until the Thunder Peak Pagoda collapses and the water of the West Lake runs dry!" Law hoots loudly.

He sits down in the cross-legged posture, begins to mumble some incantations, and throws his surplice into the air. The orange garment turns into a huge ball of fire in the gloomy sky above him and lights up the watery world in a

lifeless maroon. It begins to roll towards White. Upon her command, the rains shoot at the blaze like thousands of sterling arrows, and the waves rise in front of her and form a water bulwark; however, none of them can stop the frantic fire ball. It crashes through all the obstacles and dashes toward White.

"Stop that fire, Teacher Law," Sen screams out. "I will be a monk, a slave, whatever you want. Please stop it!"

"It's never too late for you to become a monk, but it's too late to save your serpent bride now." Law answers with a vengeance.

Looking at the rolling ire ball, White is helpless yet fearless. "Even though I will be imprisoned in this hell of fire forever, I still have no regret for what I have done."

She closes her eyes and utters: "I love you, Sen."

At 11 of a sudden, a shadow leaps out from the sky and opens up a vast silver parasol. It is Green. He shelters White from the flaming ball and then hurls it into the sea of water. Backing up the parasol is an army of mortal creatures and immortal beings that Green has gathered overnight. The gull, the catfish, and the tortoise, the denizens of the sea and the fowls of the sky, out of sympathy and kindness, are joining together to support White for justice.

"Sister, are you all right?" Green says while holding White's hands. "Look, here are all the compassionate brothers and sisters who believe that we ourselves can make a difference. You are not alone."

White is speechless for there is no language or even sound that can describe her gratitude.

Green then turns to Law. "I'm so sorry about ruining your orange robe, but it is so out of fashion nowadays."

"You wicked green snake, I should never have trusted you in the first place!" Law roars.

"You old prejudiced Law, I should never have believed in you either," Green replies. "Let Sen go!"

The huge assembled demonstrators echo.

"I will not." Law still stubbornly asserts. "All you creatures, how dare you go against me?"

"Law, if you are sensible, we shall obey you, but if you are not, then we need not listen to you," the masses respond, "and we will fight for what we know is right."

Fearing the rebellious crowd, the monks abscond from the boiling scene. Sen seeks this chance to run to White and Green at once, but Law fleetly knocks him down and grasps his neck in his hand.

"Nama Amita Buddha," Law states. "I would rather take Master Sen with me to the afterlife than let him go back to you monsters."

"Please don't hurt him," White kneels down and urges. "It does you no good to kill Sen and yourself. Law, I beg you. Please let him go."

"I have always heard you saying that it is the serpent that devours humans, but it seems to me now it is the law that devours a man," Green notes. "Give up, Law!"

"You go away!" Law clamors.

The war stands still, for none of them will take a chance and make a move.

At this very tense moment, Heaven suddenly opens. Golden rays break through the dark clouds like polished

swords. The rains turn into falling flowers, and the winds become blissful music. Descending from the sky on a platinum carriage embroidered with glistening stars is the Godless Nu-kwa.

Everybody bows down humbly to her divinity that shines like a thousand suns.

"The fervent karma in the profane world was so intense that it broke the sky. The fallen piece that White swallowed is the essence of love that binds all of you together through a journey of harshness and sweetness, sorrow and happiness. It is through love, not war and violence, that all of you are able to obtain the fruit of enlightenment. Love is boundless. It embraces every creature despite its glories and defects. It erases the differences of colors, beliefs, and every visible and invisible dimension. We should protect and defend love but not restrict and narrow it. Law, you should not be obsessed with 'form' and 'difference' for they are all 'emptiness'. Green, you have progressively shown great maturity over time for your love has grown into a selfless one, and you should keep on with your good work. White, your love for Sen and compassion for others are strong enough to withstand the challenge of storm and rain. Sen, this is the last reincarnation in your life. When your secular

duty is finished, you will become an immortal, and I wish you and White happiness ever after."

The Goddess ascends back to Heaven in all her magnificence. The flood vanishes, and the crowd disperses. Holding each other in their arms, White and Sen relish the inexplicable calm, a tranquility that comes with no lies and no deceit, a love that can last for innumerable seasons and centuries.

"Nama Amita Buddha. Would you all leave the temple?" Law finally mutters. "I think I need some peaceful times."

"Law, take this with you." Green puts down the silver parasol, and it turns into a luxuriant fig tree. "It will be a good cover from sun and rain for your meditations."

"We all wish you the fruit of illumination." White and Sen say farewell to the monk.

"Do you think he is going to charge?" Green asks White on their way down the Golden mountain.

"I don't know. I hope he will be enlightened," White says.

"And you Sen? Will you change your love for my sister?"



"Of course not," Sen says resolutely.

"Well, it is so complicated. Sometimes we wish that things will not change, and sometimes we wish they will. I guess I will never truly understand unless..." Green winks to the beautiful couple, "I find a love of my own."

Then he spins around and turns into an angelic young maiden. "Do you think I will have better luck like this?"

Both White and Sen are amused.

"What a lovely morning for a new beginning!" Green says. Fading into the rainbow-colored hill, Green smiles at the world that is lying calm and still.



Colophon

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