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Snow Flower and the Secret Fan

By Angela Workman

People say I'm sending Sebastian and Nina
to New York...

...so neither will take my job.

Hey, perhaps that's partly true.

Like these butterflies

that surround us this evening...

...it's a time of transformation,
new beginnings.

In preparing to open a new office...

...I wanted to place my very best people
in charge of it.

And you truly are my best.

Oh.

To Sebastian and Nina. A toast.

- Nina and Sebastian.

- Thank you.

Make us proud in New York.

And make us a lot of money in New York.

After dinner, we went to some restaurant.

And then someone came up and said...

Hello?

- Is this Nina Wei?

- Yes.

I'm calling from

Pu Tuo Qu Hongkang Hospital.

What's going on?

Sophia Liao is in a coma in our hospital.

What?

- What?

- I'm sorry.

Ms. Liao was on her bike

and was hit by a taxi.

God.

Yours was the last number

dialed on her phone.

She called me?

God.

Okay, I'm coming.

Oh, sorry.

Where is she?

Oh, my God.

I'm sorry.

How did we end up here?

You went away.

There is so much distance between us.
What happened
to the promises we made?
What's going on here?
Nina!
Please don't bring this music
into my house.
And these buns you always bring.
Look how oily they are.
Sophia.
When your mother died,
I promised her I'd raise you properly.
When you act out,
I can't fulfill your mother's final wish.
I know I'm only your stepmother.
Are you going to be against me forever?
Huh?
Nina, I'd like to have a word with you.
Follow me.
That liar. She never met my mother.
This is good music.
Come.
I'll find someone else to tutor her
in Mandarin.
Do not come here again.
A smart girl like you...
...with a bright future...
...shouldn't have to spend all your time
with her.
Come and meet my family for dinner.
This is so exciting.
I never get to visit a real family.
Here's the soup.
Ah. It smells wonderful, Mrs. Wei.
Thank you, Sophia. It's all homemade.
So your family is Korean, right?
Mom.
I already told you they come from Korea.
I didn't come to Shanghai till I was 14.
That's why my Chinese is so bad.
- Very good.
- Thank you.
Shanghai is a seaport.
Everyone from somewhere else.

People come and they go,
come and they go.

MRS. WEI:

Enough of this silly English.

Nina. Nina.

- Mrs. Liao's not at home.

- Hey, it's you.

So my niece told me Cixi Tai Hou
busted you for the Faye Wong tape, huh?

All I know

Teresa, huh?

Oh, what's this? These are so tiny.

These are not easy to come by.

This shoe was for women

with tiny bound feet.

See? Called...

...3- inch golden lilies.

It's a shoe?

Do you know our family came
from Hunan?

Oh, no.

She's talking about

my mother's mother's mother's mother.

- I think I got that right, huh?

- Mm-hm.

And her name was Snow Flower...

...and she had a laotong named Lily.

Laotong?

Sworn sisters for life, laotong.

Like us.

- Sister.

- Sister.

- Sister.

- Sister. Ha, ha.

Girls, you have a lot to learn
about laotong commitment.

See, marriages used to be made
for men's reasons.

To form business alliances,
to manage households, to produce sons.

And they were obligatory.

A laotong's commitment
was for women's reasons, by choice.

For companionship,
understanding and happiness.
What you're signing today is a symbol
of your deep-hearted love for each other.
Deep-hearted love. I like that.
Here is your laotong contract.
Your vow is written in nu shu.
Sign below it.
Oh, yes. The infamous Wong Faye CD.
Sophia's bag
is at reception. You can pick it up.
Okay, thank you.
This is the story of Snow Flower and Lily.
Two girls born in the same month,
on the same day.
Their feet bound on the same day.
At that moment,
their destinies tied forever.
Mama, when can I go out to play?
Lily, this is more important.
We must make your feet perfect so the
matchmaker can find you a good husband.
Madam, it is done.
Get up, walk.
Get up!
Walk.
Mama, it hurts.
Ten circles of the room.
Snow Flower! What are you doing?
Come back! Walk!
Only through pain will you find beauty.
Only through suffering
will you find peace.
I wrap, I bind.
But you will have the reward.
Come.
Come.
Back, again.
Again.
Mama!
These are the most perfect feet
I have ever seen.
These are true golden lilies.
I will be able to find her a good family.

But given your circumstances...
...we must make another match first.
I have found you a laotong.
Your sister in heart for life.
Her name is Snow Flower,
and she is from Tongkou.
Tongkou?
A rich girl is too good for my daughter.
This is true. Her family is privileged.
Her grandfather was an imperial scholar.
But these girls
have compatible astrology signs...
...so her mother does not mind
this class difference.
Can I meet her now?
Snow Flower?
Nu shu is a secret language
between women.
It is personal,
between you and your laotong.
That is why you learn it together.
So you will know what is in her heart.
Bright.
Moon.
- Correct?
- Yes.
The Temple of Gupo fair is a holy place.
We are here today in front of Gupo
to write your laotong contract.
And make your vows
of eternal commitment.
My hand opens to yours.
We of good affection...
...shall never sever our bond.
We will be laotong for all eternity.
Why can't you grow up?
Your mother's right.
You don't get these opportunities
every day.
You have to go to New York.
You shouldn't feel guilty.
Her accident had nothing to do with you.
Enough.
Stop trying to convince me.

I've decided to stay.
I don't even know what her life was like
these past few months.
Now, with this accident,
I need to find out what happened to her.
Uh, hi, Sebastian. It's Nina.
I'm not sure
when I can meet you in New York.
I...
I just can't leave.
I need to be here for Sophia.
Sorry.
I'll be at the house.
Call me when you land.
Bye.
I am to marry a boy I do not know.
He is from a distinguished family.
My life will change
because of my perfect feet.
Sister, you must come to my wedding.
Has Madame Wang found you a match,
Snow Flower?
What about bed business?
Mama has never said anything to me.
It cannot be as hard as embroidery
or cleaning.
Why are you laughing?
Stop laughing at me.
I am not a good daughter for leaving you.
We are women.
We are born to leave our families.
Mama.
Go.
Mama.
Lily.
Never forget we are vowed forever.
No one will come between us.
Snow Flower.
Sun, water and firewood are free.
But salt is a commodity.
The Taiping rebels
are creating chaos everywhere.
I am concerned about our son trading
in such a faraway place.

What do women know
about such things?
Within this household,
I make all the decisions!
Obey, obey, obey.
He will do what he wants.
My father has granted me permission
to travel to Guilin to buy salt.
I will return and sell it here.
Guilin. That is far.
Is it safe?
It is not a woman's place to worry.
I may be gone for a long time.
Excuse me, is Claire here?
- She's inside.
- Thanks.
Claire, you're here.
Sophia's aunt is not here.
I know.
Is there another way to reach her?
I'm in touch. She'll be back tonight.
Are these from Sophia's family?
Yes, Sophia gave us these.
They all belong to her family.
But the most important one is missing.
Perhaps Sophia has it.
This is a new interactive nu shu program.
You taught me how to be a good wife.
I must fulfill all my duties.
The wife of the eldest son
must serve and honor her mother-in-law.
My daughter's birth was a disappointment.
I must bear a son.
Madam, I would like
to visit Snow Flower...
...and go to the Temple of Gupo fair.
We promised to meet there every year.
I told you, Lily.
I do not approve of your relationship
with Snow Flower.
She is my laotong.
We are vowed forever.
Why do you forbid me to go?
You must go pray for a son.

Yong Gang will go with you.
Yong Gang.
Take this to Snow Flower.
We must rely on the wind
to carry our words.
Those winds are happy and sad.
We are forbidden to see each other.
But at every moment, I miss you.
Wait for me.
Snow Flower.
How does your husband treat you?
And yours?
Good.
However, I do not know why
Lady Lu disapproves of you.
But I am still here.
- I am happy.
- Me too.
Lady Lu, I know what I did was wrong.
Lady Lu!
Disobedience is a woman's greatest sin.
Auntie.
You're here.
I flew all night and all day to get back.
You know...
...Sophia and I haven't talked
since that night.
I know.
When she first came back from Australia,
she came to see me at the gallery.
How was she?
She seemed...
...very depressed.
And she was more depressed
the next few times I saw her.
She didn't even want me to know
where she lived.
Why?
Did she come back with Arthur?
No. She told me she left him.
I told her he was no good.
Nobody knows where she lives?
No.
I should have told you earlier.

But I could not bear to tell you the truth.
My father was addicted
to the opium pipe.
He ruined our family.
Our fates have been reversed.
But our love will always be strong.
I am happy we are blessed with sons.
We are fulfilling our fates.
But now the typhoid epidemic is upon us.
Death is all around.
Everyone is afraid and anxious.
I hope you are safe where you are.
Dead, dead.
Madam, it is time for your medicine.
Everyone is dead.
Madam!
Madam!
Have some, madam. You will feel better.
- Children.
- Mother.
Do not come over here. Go back.
Mother, do not leave us.
I am not avoiding you.
I may be infected.
Mother.
I am always with you in my heart.
Good children.
Mother! Mother!
Mother! Mother!
The master is back!
The master is back.
Master and Lady Lu passed away.
They both succumbed to the plague.
On this day of the New Year...
...we became Master and Lady Lu.
Mrs. Liao.
It's Nina. I used to teach Sophia Chinese.
Do you remember me?
I remember.
I'd like to speak with you about Sophia.
She's had a terrible accident.
Accident? What accident?
I haven't spoken to her in years.
Sophia never saw me as her mother.

Don't touch me.
You see how I'm forced to live?
My husband died,
my stepdaughter abuses me.
I'm a squatter in my own house.
This roof could fall in any minute.
Understand now?
I hear you're doing well.
Good career.
You have a bright future.
I've lost everything. Everything.
- Madam.
- Don't call me "madam. "
Madam.
- Mrs. Liao.
- I'm not Mrs. Liao anymore!
When I had money, I was Mrs. Liao.
Now I'm just a ghost!
Today the stock market hit a new low due
to the liquidation of Peregrine investments.
Why did you invest everything
in the stock market?
You're losing all of our money.
Do they ever stop?
Since May '97,
major indices have been in a free fall.
We haven't paid our bills
in three months!
I'm losing patience with you! Stop now!
I can't take this. I'm leaving!
Dad.
The market goes up and down.
Up, down, up, down.
Yes, it does.
It'll come back, you'll see.
Mrs. Liao, I'm sorry for your loss.
Thank you for coming.
I didn't expect him to pass away
so suddenly.
And to do this in his own home?
His daughter won't speak to me.
She isn't even studying
for the college entrance exam.
If she fails,

I'm sending her back to Korea.
Nina, I feel sick.
I have to go to the bathroom.
What? There's no time. Quickly.
- Hold this.
- Let's go. There's no time.
I'll be right back.
Sophia.

Name:

- It's still too loud here.
- You can't hear? Okay.
- Where?
- Let's go inside.
Here.
- What did you wanna say?
- I still don't understand why you did it.
I didn't know what I was doing.
I just did it.
You thought I couldn't pass my exam?
I feel bad.
It's gonna be all right.
What about you?
Don't worry about me. Let's go.
Who's there?
I'm coming.
Does Nina Wei live here?
Yes.
Shanghai Education Board
Disciplinary Notice
Nina!
Have you nothing to say?
How could you take the exam
for someone else?
Look at me!
Do you know how hard your father
and I work...
...to give you the best education?
And this is how you show your gratitude?
Three years.
You can't retake the exam for three years.
Do you realize what you've done?
You've not only ruined your future...
...but ours too.

You have destroyed our family!

Dear Sophia:

By the time you read this letter,
you'll be in Korea.
I did what I did
because I wanted you to be happy.
Because I wanted us to be together.
And look what happened.
We're both being punished.
I don't expect my parents
to understand what I did.
But I'm going to make them
proud of me again.
I miss you. I love you.
Nina.

May I have your order?
Yes. I would like a Caesar salad
and T-bone steak, please.

- Hi.
- Hi.
- Miss Wei?
- Hi. Nice to meet you.
Nice to meet you. Sebastian Wu.

Hey. It's 9:

You should get home.
Yeah. I'm almost done.
- Okay. Good night.
- Bye.
We have lived through years
of separation and turmoil.
I can still feel your heart in your words.
I am happy we will be together soon.
Lily.
Snow Flower.
Snow Flower.
Come inside. Meet my children.
You live here?
If not for your perfect feet
and good marriage...
...I would not even be here.
The matchmaker did her best.
She did.

What does your husband do?

Butcher.

I would like to spend more time
with my laotong tonight.

No, I want you to come to bed with me.

The Taiping rebels are coming!

- What is happening?

- The rebellion is here.

What rebellion?

There is no time to explain.

Your mother will not come out.

I will get her.

Are you leaving too?

Snow Flower, I cannot leave here.

We have no time.

We all have to leave.

- I should stay here. My husband will find me.

It is time to go.

I will not go.

I cannot.

Put me down. I cannot go.

The cart broke! Get off!

Get the children.

You can rest soon. It is over here.

Lay her down here.

I will go fetch the cow.

Do not worry. I will return soon.

I am coming with you.

You take care of your mama.

- Are you all right?

- I am fine.

- How are your feet?

- They are fine.

My son!

My son! My son!

Nina, it's me.

I don't have Sophia's address yet,

but I have found out Arthur is in Shanghai...

...and has just opened a trendy nightclub
called Club Upside-Down.

I'll text you the details later.

Let this groove get you to move

It's all right, all right, all right

Let this groove light up your fuse

So stand up, all right, all right
Gonna tell you what you can do
Excuse me.
You know, this room actually works better
when you're drinking.
Why are you here, Nina?
Is she all right?
She's here.
Do you mind if I see her alone?
There, see? See the guy?
I've never seen this before.
Something on your chest.
Aah!
- So?
- They loved the whole idea.
They're gonna open an office
in New York.
- We did it.
- We did it.
I'd like you to come with me.
Wow.
Thank you.
There you go. Two Brain Hemorrhages.
Finally, your dream is coming true.
Ha, ha. I wouldn't call it a dream.
It's just like an opportunity.
Whatever you call it.
- Cheers.
- Cheers.
So when do you leave?
I...
I haven't decided if I'm going.
What? What do you mean?
Actually, I...
I worry about you.
Don't worry about me. I'll be okay.
I'm writing a book.
It's about laotong, the old days,
but I think it's really about us.
When I finish it, I want you to read it.
That's nice.
But writing a book won't pay the rent
unless you get it published.
I have a new boyfriend.

He has a lot of connections
and he can help.
I know these guys of yours.
Don't go there.
Come on. This one is different.
I want you to meet him.
Ladies and gentlemen,
I'd like to dedicate a song...
...to the most irritating, maddening,
stubborn woman I have ever met.
This song...
Yeah, she's actually here.
She knows who she is.
I'll keep you guessing
for a little while, though.
This song is about the place
I usually find myself when we're together...
...which is begging for a kiss.
Hit it.
Give me just one kiss
Just yes or no
All right, here we go.
A kiss on my cheeks
Leaving a mark of love
Give me just one kiss
Just yes or no
Excuse me there.
A kiss in my heart
Makes me miss you so
Here we go, everybody, ready?
See how she teases me?
Oh.
Yes, ladies and gentlemen. We're up.
What a surprise.
He's a surprising guy.
What does he do, exactly?
Well, he's an Australian businessman...
...and he owns a bunch of clubs
in Shanghai.
Great. He sounds wonderful.
And he's opening his new club in Sydney,
and he wants me to go there with him.
We are leaving soon.
What?

You're leaving with him?

- To Sydney?

- Yes.

How long have you known him?

And you've decided to go with him?

I've known you for so long.

I've been so worried about you.

So stupid of me.

Did I ask you to worry about me?

How can you talk to me like that, Sophia?

I just wanna tell you,
he's not right for you.

How do you know?

So it's all my fault.

Okay, fine. I won't bother you anymore.

- I'm going to New York.

- Good.

He will not tell me

where our son is buried.

My husband takes his sadness
and stuffs it into his fists.

So much has happened
in the years we were apart.

Fate has taught me
that I am just another woman.

I hope when I am reunited
with my husband...

...I will be a better wife.

There is no purer ambition for a woman.

I am happy you think so.

If I can change my fate...

...so can you.

You think these bruises are my fault?

I do not want you to suffer.

My relationship is different
but has something very important.

What is so important?

Lily.

Has your revered husband never shown you
that he loves you?

I seek only to help you
through this difficult time.

Our fates are so different.

I have felt your pity

since you first came into my home.
I feel pain in my heart for you,
Snow Flower.
He is my husband, Lily.
I love him.
Lily.
There are things about men
you will never know.
These are matters
you do not understand.
You are my laotong.
Everything I have is yours.
The rebels have been stopped.
Come to Tongkou.
Let me take care of you and the children.
Come with me.
I do not understand.
If I give this message to Lady Lu...
...she will misunderstand your meaning.
Your bond may be broken forever.
This is my intention.
My sister is at a different station
in her life.
I have become a burden to her.
She is far too stubborn and loyal
to accept this.
What you are about to do
will break her heart.
And mine, but it will set her free.
Loving her as I do, it is the only way.
- Lady, I am Lotus.
- I know who you are.
What do you want?
My sister asked me to return this to you.

My dear laotong:

My fate has brought me many sorrows.
I cannot be what you wish.
Three sworn sisters in Jintian
have promised to love me as I am.
You need not worry about me anymore.
Burn them.
But...
Burn them.

Yes.

Snow Flower is here.

Sorry my sisters and I are late.

I wish you happiness in your marriage,
Cousin Yan.

Thank you for traveling all this way
to celebrate our daughter's wedding.

I finally had to hire
a private detective to find Sophia's address.
Are you serious?

- Turns out she rented a little apartment.

She was holed up there
finishing her novel.

It's near her father's old bathhouse.

Bathhouse?

Yeah. It's her favorite place.

Where her father would go to escape
from his wife and the stock market.

And Sophia would wait for him.

They'd have tea or a meal.

It meant the world to her.

This is the address.

She never had visitors.

And didn't go out often.

If you find my rent money, tell me.

My dear Nina:

I'm writing a letter I will never send.

But I must tell you the truth,
even if it's only in my heart.

How could you know

how I felt all these years...

...about what you did for me?

How could I bear another sacrifice?

Giving up your future in New York...

...and yet...

...I knew your love was too strong.

There would be no asking you
to change your mind.

I had to make you hate me.

And so I lied.

I lied about wanting to move out...

...needing to be free.

The reason I moved to Sydney was

because I was pregnant with Arthur's baby.
But then I guess it was not meant to be.
I know what you think of me.
That...
That I didn't deserve her.
You're right, I didn't.
I mean, when we were first together...
...Sophia would disappear for, I don't know,
a few hours every night.
She'd never tell me where she'd been.
I assumed she was seeing someone else,
so one night, I followed her.
Where was she going?
To a bathhouse in Luwan.
I mean, the weird thing was...
...the bathhouse was restricted
to men only.
She had to disguise herself
to get in there.
Yeah.
She wore a suit, right?
Yeah, why?
It was her father's bathhouse.
Her father's?
Nina.
There's something...
There's something you should know.
She lost...
She lost your baby.
Excuse me.
My father left something here.
His locker number is 173.
I'm here to get it for him.
We're not open yet. They're still cleaning.
Old Ding, leave us alone.
This lady has some business here.
Please be quick.
Thank you.
The end of this story...
...is about things of the heart
that will never change.
- Madam.
- What is wrong, child?
My mother is very sick.

She calls for you in her sleep.
But she has other sisters.
She has no other sisters.
She misled you.
She has never had another laotong.
For 10 years, she was only their teacher.
She has only one sister of the heart.
You have to see her one last time.
I beg you.
I waited for you.
Madam,
I brought you some things from home.
I am sorry.
I knew you could not want me
to destroy the fan.
When Lily returned
home after Snow Flower's funeral...
...she looked at the fan and could not
allow things to end as they had.
So she opened a new panel...
...dipped her brush,
and wrote a final inscription.
The world is always changing.
Every day it's changing.
Everything in life is changing.
We have to look inside ourselves
to find what stays the same...
...such as loyalty...
...our shared history...
...and love for each other.
In them, the truth of the past lives on.
Now I understand Lily's last inscription
for Snow Flower...
...and what it means for Sophia and me.
My entire life, I have longed for love.
I always thought I understood it...
...but now I see, with shame and sorrow...
...that I understand nothing
of deep-hearted love.
The love between sisters.
So many years without you.
This is my penance.
If you will come back to me...
...I will never leave you.

Never again.

And we will be sisters for 10,000 years.