Sky Burial

Xinran

1

Shu Wen

I can't tell you how much I regret all the foolish, ignorant things I asked Shu Wen in that tea house in Suzhou. There was so much, then, that I didn't know.

Her inscrutable eyes looked past me at the world outside the window – the crowded street, the noisy traffic, the regimented lines of modern towerblocks. What could she see there that held such interest? I tried to draw her attention back.

'How long were you in Tibet for?'

'Over thirty years,' she said softly.

'Thirty years!'

My amazement must have been apparent because the other customers in the tea house stopped their conversations and turned to look at me.

'But why did you go there?' I asked. 'For what?'

'For love,' she answered simply, again looking far beyond me at the empty sky outside.

'For love?'

'My husband was a doctor in the People's Liberation Army. His unit was sent to Tibet. Two months later, I received notification that he had been lost in action. We had been married for fewer than a hundred days.'

'I'm so sorry,' I said, shivering at the thought of a young woman losing her husband so soon.

'I refused to accept he was dead,' she continued. 'No one at the military headquarters could tell me anything about how he had died. The only thing I could think of was to go to Tibet myself and find him.'

I stared at her in disbelief. I could not imagine how a young woman at that time could have dreamed of travelling to a place as distant and as terrifying as Tibet. I myself had been on a short journalistic assignment to the eastern edge of Tibet in 1984. I had been overwhelmed by the altitude, the empty, awe-inspiring landscape

Copyright © 2004 Xinran
Published by Vintage / Random House

and the harsh living conditions. What would it have been like for a young Chinese woman going there over thirty years ago?

'I was a young woman in love,' she said. 'I did not think about what I might be facing. I just wanted to find my husband.'

I lowered my head in shame. What did I know of love that could induce such an extreme reaction? I had heard many love stories from callers to my radio programme, but never one like this. My listeners were used to a society where it was traditional to suppress emotions and to hide one's thoughts. I had not imagined that the young people of my mother's generation could love each other so passionately. People did not talk much about that time, still less about the bloody conflict between the Tibetans and the Chinese. I yearned to know this woman's story that came from a time when China was recovering from the previous decade's devastating civil war between the Nationalists and Communists, and Mao was rebuilding the Motherland.?

'How did you meet your husband?' I asked, hoping that, by going back to the beginning of things, I could encourage this mysterious woman to confide in me.

'In your Nanjing,' she replied, her eyes softening slightly. 'I was born there. Kejun and I met at medical school.'

That morning, Shu Wen told me about her youth. She spoke like a woman who was unused to conversation, pausing often and gazing into the distance. But even after all this time, her words burned with her love for her husband.

'I was seventeen when the Communists took control of the whole country in 1949,' she told me. 'I remember being swept up in the wave of optimism that was flooding China. My father worked as a clerk in a Western company. He hadn't been to school, but he had taught himself. He believed strongly that my sister and I should receive an education. We were very lucky. Most of the population at this time were illiterate peasants. I went to a missionary school and then to Jingling Girls' College to study medicine. The school had been started by an American woman in 1915. At that time there were only five Chinese students. When I was there, there were more than 100. After two years, I was able to go to university to study medicine. I chose to specialise in dermatology.

'Kejun and I met when he was twenty-five and I was twenty-two. When I first saw him, he was acting as a laboratory assistant to the teacher in a dissection class. I had never seen a human being cut up before. I hid like a frightened animal behind my classmates, too nervous even to look at the white corpse soaked in formalin. Kejun kept catching my eye and smiling. He seemed to understand and sympathise with me. Later that day, he came looking for me. He lent me a book of coloured anatomy diagrams. He told me that I would conquer my fear if I studied them first. He was right. After reading the book several times over, I found the next dissection class much easier. From then on, Kejun patiently answered all my questions. Soon he became more than a big brother or a teacher to me. I began to love him with all my heart.'

Copyright © 2004 Xinran

Shu Wen's eyes were so still – locked on something I couldn't see.

'Everybody admired Kejun,' she continued. 'He had lost all his relatives during the Sino-Japanese War, and the government had paid for him to go to medical school. Because he was determined to repay this debt, he worked hard and was an outstanding student. But he was also kind and gentle to everyone around him, particularly to me. I was so happy . . . Then, Kejun's professor came back from a visit to the battlefields of the Korean War and told Kejun of how the brave soldiers hurt and crippled in those terrible battles had to do without doctors and medicine, how nine out of ten of them died. The professor said he would have stayed there to help if he hadn't thought it his responsibility to pass on his medical knowledge to a new generation, so that more hospitals could have trained surgical staff. In war, medicine was the only lifeline: whatever the rights and wrongs of combat, saving the dying and helping the wounded were heroic.

'Kejun was deeply impressed by what his mentor had told him. He talked to me about it. The army was in desperate need of surgeons to help its wounded. He felt he ought to join up. Although I was frightened for him, I didn't want to hold him back. We were all suffering hardship at that time, but we knew it was for the greater good of the country. Everything was changing in China. Many people were packing their bags and heading for poor rural areas to carry out land reform; or going to the barren, uninhabited borderlands to turn the wilderness into fields. They went to the north-east and north-west to look for oil, or deep into the mountains and forests to fell trees and build railways. We regarded separation from our loved ones as a chance to demonstrate our loyalty to the Motherland.'

Shu Wen didn't tell me where Kejun's first army posting was. Perhaps she didn't know. What she did say was that he was away for two years.

I asked her whether she and Kejun wrote to each other. I received many letters from the lonely people who listened to my radio programme. Letters are a wonderful way to conquer loneliness.

Shu Wen gave me one of her hard looks that made me ashamed of my ignorance.

'What kind of postal system do you imagine there was?' she asked. 'War had created enormous upheaval. All over China, women were longing for news of husbands, brothers and sons. I was not the only one. I had to suffer in silence.

'I heard nothing from Kejun for two years. Separation was not romantic, as I had imagined – it was agony. The time crawled past. I thought I was going to go mad. But then, Kejun returned, decorated with medals. His unit had sent him back to Nanjing to take an advanced course in Tibetan and Tibetan medicine.

'Over the next two years our love grew stronger. We talked about everything, encouraging and advising each other. Life in China seemed to be getting better day by day. Everybody had a job. They worked not for Capitalist bosses, but for the government and the Motherland. There were free schools and hospitals. We were

Copyright © 2004 Xinran
Published by Vintage / Random House

told that, through Chairman Mao's policies, China's economy would catch up with those of Britain and America in only twenty years. We also had the freedom to choose whom we would marry, rather than obeying the choices of our parents. I told Kejun about how our friend Mei had, to everyone's surprise, married Li, an unsophisticated country boy, and how Minhua, who seemed so meek, had eloped with Dalu, the head of the student council. Their parents had come to the university to complain. But I didn't tell him how, while he was away, I had had other admirers, and people had advised me not to pin my hopes on a man who risked death on the battlefield.

'When Kejun finished his studies, we decided to get married. He was awaiting orders from the military headquarters in Nanjing. I was working as a dermatologist at a big Nanjing hospital. In the eyes of our friends, many of whom had children, we had already left our marriage late enough. Kejun was twenty-nine, I was twenty-six. So we applied to the Party for permission. Although my father found it difficult to get used to the idea of free choice in marriage, he was very fond of Kejun and knew I had made a good decision. In any case, if I delayed marriage any longer, he would lose face. My older sister had already got married and had moved to Suzhou, taking my parents with her.

'Our wedding was celebrated in true "revolutionary style". A high-ranking political cadre was the witness and friends and colleagues wearing little red paper flowers were our escorts. For the refreshments we had three packets of Hengda cigarettes and some fruit sweets. Afterwards we moved into the hospital's married quarters. All we owned were two single wooden plank beds, two single quilts, a rosewood chest, a red paper cut-out of two 'happiness' characters, and our marriage certificate decorated with a portrait of Chairman Mao. But we were ecstatically happy. Then, only three weeks later, Kejun's call-up papers arrived. His unit was to be posted to Tibet.

'We hardly had time to absorb the news before he left. The army arranged for me to be transferred to a hospital in Suzhou so that I could be close to my parents and my sister. We hadn't requested a transfer but the Party organisation said that it was only right that army dependants should have their families to look after them. I threw myself into my work so that I didn't think about how much I was missing Kejun. At night, when everyone else was asleep, I would take out Kejun's photograph and look at his smiling face. I thought all the time about what he had said just before he left: that he'd be back soon because he was anxious to be a good son to my parents and a good father to our children. I longed for him to return. But instead I received a summons to the Suzhou military headquarters to be told that he was dead.'

When Wen spoke these words, my heart stopped.

We sat in silence together for some time. I did not want to interrupt her thoughts.

That night, Shu Wen and I shared a room in the small hotel next to the tea house. Over the two days we spent together, she opened up to me in a way that I had hardly dared hope. When I got back to my office in Nanjing, I eagerly began to write up my notes. As I did so, I realised that there was still so much that I didn't know

Copyright © 2004 Xinran

about this extraordinary woman. My embarrassment at my ignorance had made it very difficult to ask questions. I didn't even have the words to describe the clothes she had been wearing.

I called the hotel in Suzhou where we had stayed, but she had already left. In a panic, I contacted the man who had called me about her.

'I don't know where she's gone,' he said. 'The other day she sent me a packet of green tea via the fermented-rice seller to say thank you for introducing her to Xinran. She said she hoped you would tell people her story. Since then I haven't met her again.'

I was determined to do as Shu Wen asked and tell her story, but I found myself struggling. This was a period of history that had been sealed up. Before I could make sense of what Shu Wen had told me, I needed to know so much more about Tibet. I began reading as much as I could, and interviewing people who had lived in the east of the country, or who knew about it. But it was not until I went to Tibet again in 1995 to make a documentary that I felt began to understand what it might be like to live there. I and my four cameramen were rendered speechless by the emptiness of the landscape, the invisible wind that swept across the barren land, the high, boundless sky, and the utter silence. My mind and soul felt clean and empty. I lost any sense of where I was, or of the need to talk. The simple words that Shu Wen had used – 'cold', 'colour', 'season', 'loss' – had a new resonance.

As I wrote Shu Wen's story, I tried to relive her journey from 1950s China to Tibet – to see what she saw, to feel what she felt, to think what she thought. Sometimes I was so immersed that I did not see the London streets, shops and tube trains – or my husband standing beside me with a cup of green tea. I deeply regretted having allowed Wen to leave without telling me how I could find her again. Her disappearance continues to haunt me. I dearly wish that this book might bring her back to me and that she will come to know that people all over the world are reading about her life and her love.

Copyright © 2004 Xinran
Published by Vintage / Random House