

REQUIEM  
OF INSECTS

THEO KOLBE WANTED to teach his daughter Leah everything. Now he taught her death. Leah watched her father's head appear. His wisps of hair no longer concealed his bald patch. His dear face, sickly grey, was pockmarked with insect bites. She moaned softly.

The morgue attendant bobbed his head in acknowledgment of her dry anguish. "It was a squeeze to put him in. It would take three or four of your average Chineese to equal your father. I know, it's hard—"

"Don't," said Leah, flinching and turning away to hide her face.

He shut the drawer, and then led her back through the labyrinth of passages underneath the hospital. Occasionally he

glanced sideways to reassure himself that she was following. She was so young, so pretty. He had liked the openness of her face. Even in her grief-shocked state, she had been able to look. He had seen grown men suddenly faint or throw up. Once, a well-dressed European woman had hit him repeatedly with her handbag and yelled at him, as if he had been to blame for her husband's heart attack at his Chinese mistress's house, and for the body having been dumped at the hospital with the trouser flies still undone. There was no call to attack *him*; he was as white as them and doing a job no Chinese would do. He had nearly quit over the incident. But he liked the work and had developed a good rapport with the dead. They asked for so little.

Leah ignored the attendant's glances. Pity, sympathy, she could do without. What she wanted was answers.



DR. Welbury Mitton, Public Health Surgeon, gawked at Leah as he tried to reconcile obese old Kolbe with this lovely slim young woman with grey eyes set wide in her face, an expressive mouth and blunt high cheekbones. She glowed with intensity and the need to know. For a moment, he considered simply handing her the report and watching as she read his medical notes. But that would be an act of cowardice—and, in all likelihood, she would not understand his scrawl or the clinical words.

He held up the report and kept his eyes on the page as he intoned, "Mr. Kolbe died of heat paroxysm caused by his corpulent body's inability to cool itself during a walk in the

gardens of Victoria Heights.” He rustled the dry papers as if to prove his point.

“No,” said Leah. “My father never strolled in the heat of the day. He much preferred to take a rickshaw and see a skinny man sweat for them both.”

She pictured Theo in his flapping suit, red-faced, his hair slick with oil. How could he have left her? Already the tentacles of an approaching migraine were reaching out. She shut her mouth and stared back at Mitton, trying to will the creeping pain away.

Annoyed, Mitton frowned, drawing his craggy eyebrows together. “I’m not going to record our conversation.” He rushed on as he saw Leah open her mouth to protest. He wagged his head severely. “No point.”

“Please, I—”

“No,” he said more kindly. “Take it from me, it’s better this way. You really don’t want to go through the rigmarole of an autopsy. There’s no need, spare yourself, spare your father.” Her stare of outraged disbelief was so disconcerting that he felt compelled to add, “What if we did hold an inquest? How would that help? Hong Kong inquests are notoriously left open. It just muddies the waters. Those who are left behind are unhappier still, unable to get on with their lives. No, my girl, a man like your father, excessively overweight and living here as he did, well, anything could have killed him. Let him go with a little dignity.”

He patted her shoulder. He believed it was always best to tell the truth. He had never dealt directly with Kolbe, but he had heard the rumours. His antiquities business just skated the

edge of the law. Smarmy Theo had been an awful man: a liar, a cheat, and, probably, a thief. Besides, he was American. He didn't belong in Hong Kong. How the hell had he produced such a beautiful daughter? It had to be chalked up to the vagaries of genetics and evolution. But the girl would have to face facts. Kolbe was dead, and no one was much interested in why.

"I wish you all the best, my dear. My office will release the body later this afternoon. You'll need to make arrangements."

Dr. Mitton rose and bowed from the waist.

Leah nodded curtly, then walked out of the office, her head pounding with indignation and disgust.

Mitton's door closed with a firm click. In a little while his clerk would bring him his afternoon tea.



EYES shut, Leah sprawled in a steamer chair in the hot garden as she recounted in a monotone to her old amah, An-li, what Mitton had said. The afternoon's events already seemed far away, hazy. She wished they had happened to someone else.

An-li nodded. "You must arrange the funeral."

Leah didn't respond, focused on the rill of sweat that had formed between her breasts in the thick heat that pinned her to the chair. A mosquito landed on her bare leg. As An-li raised her hand to shoo it away, the mosquito bit. Leah gave a heavy resounding slap, glad to be feeling something.

"Please, Leah, the funeral. Think about it."

"I can't, An-li. I know I must, but I can't. You do it," said Leah, opening her eyes to look at the small neat figure in her silk long-sleeved white tunic, black trousers, and soft slippers. An-li

seemed smudged around the edges, greying and disconcertedly frail. When had she grown so old? Leah closed her eyes.

Helpless in front of Leah's shuttered mourning, An-li said, "Very well, if that's what you want."

Leah heard An-li's quick shuffle over the dry grass and the opening and shutting of the conservatory door.

The last of the late afternoon heat built up. More insects swooped. Leah savoured their stings, rubbed at the bites. She longed for the bugs to mark her body like the sacred scarring of African women she had seen in magazines. She considered smearing her body with honey to attract more insects. Behind her eyelids she saw clouds of flies, swarming and buzzing over Theo's body abandoned in the gardens of Victoria Heights: a requiem of insects.

What were the last words they had spoken that morning as he had reached for his Panama hat, a lifetime ago? Theo had smiled that secret knowing smile of his and winked. She had said "Tell me," and he had shaken his head. Then she'd said "Be careful," and he had blown her a kiss and said "I can take care of myself." Now he was gone.

Leah shivered in the heat and opened her eyes to the garden with its covered walkways, its pond and artfully placed stones and willow trees. Already the Victoria Peak house appeared to be grieving. The house was massive. Originally designed to imitate an English country house, Theo had transformed it over twenty years into a Chinese scholar's paradise: the conservatory's sash windows had become moon windows to frame his oriental garden, gates had been built out the front to ward off ghosts, and the roof line had been altered to curve upward to show vitality of spirit. Inside, the house groaned with hand-

carved rosewood furniture, ancient scrolls of exquisite calligraphy, and priceless antiques. From its perch high in the misty green hills of the Peak, the mansion peered down onto Hong Kong Harbour as if boasting that here lived money to which due respect must be paid.

Even as a child, she had felt the house contract when empty of Theo's fat reassuring presence. In her dreams, she had sensed when Theo wasn't home, was perhaps with Mr. Everston and his pretty assortment of *singsong* girls at a grownup party. She would wake with a start to stare into the dark. Missing him, she would have to get out of bed and touch five things she liked, starting with her baby jade and her blue hair ribbons and ending in her wardrobe with her favourite silk-embroidered party dress. Often these familiar things soothed her, though once she had felt compelled to take the party dress into her bed. In the morning, An-li had scolded her for scrunching it into a ball.

The touching hadn't always worked. The dark might still hold Chinese ghosts, wanting to snatch her away. To escape them, she would run down the hall to An-li's room. There, she'd creep to An-li's low bed, fit herself into the tiny remaining space and place her hand lightly on An-li's worn nightshift. Usually, An-li slept on, while Leah had sniffed her fresh-laundered scents and wrinkled her nose at the astringent witch hazel An-li used to clean and whiten her skin. Asleep, Leah had sometimes dreamed that An-li kissed her.

Another insect bit, hard and vicious. Fat tears wet Leah's cheeks.



LEAH felt An-li's hand on her shoulder, shaking her awake in the soft dusk. On the table was a tray with cups, an iron teapot containing, no doubt, a concoction of herbs and teas meant to soothe and heal, and piles of gold paper and silver papers.

"The funeral, it's arranged—the European way. The funeral people are putting a notice in *The South China Post*. The reception will be in the conservatory. They told me it's what people do," said An-li, not bothering to mention the hour-long telephone conversation she'd had with the rude Englishman. He'd said, "Are you certain you are able to speak for the family? It's most unusual." Then he'd quoted her an outrageous amount of money for the casket. Theo would need a very large coffin. When An-li agreed, he became nicer and explained the finer points of Occidental funerals.

An-li poured the tea and said, "It's not enough. Mr. Theo won't like it. We must do it the Chinese way, too." She studied Leah's face, expecting her to object, but Leah had retreated to some mournful place and was barely listening. "Leah," she said sharply, "Wasn't I like First Mother to you?"

Leah nodded mutely and sipped her tea.

"You can't become your father's ghost. You must put his spirit to rest. At nineteen, you have your own life to live."

The tea warmed Leah. The aroma was strangely spicy, prickly. She set the empty cup down. Her fingers played with the rattan of the chair. Nuggetty pieces came off in her bite-ridden hand, round o's. O is for orphan. She sounded the word slowly aloud: "Or-phan." In the same thin, childlike voice, she continued, "I was so little. I used to think my mother had disappeared behind Theo or retreated to some cool corner of the house instead of dying, and now—"

“Enough. Too much grief and his soul won’t leave. You have to provide for his journey.”

Had they ever discussed death, or what might come next? Yes, they had watched Chinese families burning joss sticks at their ancestors’ graves, witnessed funeral processions with their hired Chinese bands sometimes playing catchy Western songs like *Sunshine*, or marching tunes. But she was pretty sure Theo had not wasted a minute of his time thinking about the afterlife. He was too much of a pragmatist. Sweet Theo was only interested in the relics of death: century-old funeral urns, long-buried terracotta warriors entombed by dead emperors, and immortal jade pieces that had been used to seal the body’s orifices and keep it pure.

“Theo—” she began, then corrected herself, “My father had no beliefs. He devoted his life to antiquities and me.”

She would miss his touch. He took great pride in his hands. His fingers were long and tapered, remarkable in such a fat man. Vain about his hands, he had weekly manicures. The pads of his fingers were soft and pink. He loved caressing beautiful things. Often, instead of a kiss goodnight, he traced his fingers over the planes of her face, the prominent bones of her cheeks, her broad mouth. It was such a loving gesture. “Touch,” he said, “it never lets you down; it reveals perfections and imperfections, everything.”

An-li believed her employer’s ruthless pursuit of the next beautiful thing had caused his death. If he had his things with him, he might depart and leave Leah in peace. To Leah, she said, “He loved China. Let him have one small Chinese ceremony. Let him take his treasures, to help him on his travels. I



brought the paper.” She held up the gold and the silver sheets. They fluttered in the wind.

Leah had a sudden vision of a ghostly Theo, a jade figurine clutched precariously against his mountain of a belly. She creased the paper and made a fold, transforming one sheet into an ingot, another into a crude vase. When these replicas were burnt, he could take them with him on his final journey. She was glad Theo would not be going empty-handed.

An-li left the garden, returning with a terracotta pot. She blew on each offering, then dropped it in. Leah stood, straightening her sundress, but didn't bother with her discarded sandals. She had read somewhere that to be barefoot was a penance.

An-li hoisted the pot over her head. Leah followed behind, her feet cool on the smooth tiles. The procession ended in Theo's study. An-li placed the pot in front of Leah. They knelt on the floor. An-li pulled out a box of kitchen matches. Leah struck a match, hesitated as the flame grew, then in one swift motion set the gold and the silver objects on fire. They erupted into blue flame, burnt rapidly into curling ash. Smoke rose and circled round the room. An-li opened the louvres. The smoke eddied out into the night.

Leah tried to recall the last thing she had said to Theo. Was it “Be careful,” or had she been the one to say, after all, “I can take care of myself”?