

Leaf in a Stream

A short story by Lee Godden

You own no mirror to reflect your sun-wrinkled face, which appears older than its forty years. As a Buddhist you have learned that suffering is inseparable from existence. The inward extinction of the self illuminates a state beyond suffering, beyond existence. Toward that extinction you shun money, family, pleasure and planning. But memories remain.

From dawn to dusk you meditate while working in a farmer's field. At night you sleep on the cold floor of the farmer's tool shed. Each evening a barefoot walk to the farmer's house yields a bowl of rice and some fish. Although always invited to enter and join the family at their table, you simply bow your head in thanks and trudge back through the mud, past the animals in their pens, to the shed. You wash your simple clothes when it rains. You acknowledge no name, so the farmer calls you Ye Ren (uncivilized man).

Your childhood memory begins in an orphanage. At age eight a monk named Shu Zenin adopted you and took you to his Buddhist temple. He became your teacher and mentor. When you gathered the courage to ask Shu Zenin a difficult question, he replied that you were born to a young prostitute who could not care for her baby. Through your teenage years at the temple you were taught that the path to enlightenment was loss of self.

Shortly after you became a man, the temple was destroyed by a tremendous earthquake. Bricks fell, and you held Shu Zenin as he died. With face bleeding and hands shaking you walked through the fallen temple gates, down the unpaved road and toward the city. For twelve years you worked as a knife sharpener, then a carpenter, then a calligrapher. As the years passed, your adherence to Buddhist principles diminished. You lived in a co-op. You owned attractive clothes and shoes. You smiled at people and made friendships.

On a warm summer day, while finishing a sign for a local shopkeeper, Lei Dewu entered your life. She was young, pretty, and in need of a place to sleep. After two weeks of laughing and lovemaking she left, without a word. You cried a cry of self pity until the sun rose the next day. Walking out of the city, dropping your paint and brushes beside the road, you vowed to start anew.

Ten years have passed. The farmer's shed is now your temple. The sun sets and your back welcomes the hardness of the floor. Your eyes close as the night grows silent. The darkness is stirred by the call of a distant songbird, reminding you of a familiar laugh. You recognize the rare tightness in your face. A smile. With a deep breath your thought floats away into the distance, like a leaf in a stream. And you sleep.