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Gu/Virgin Widows

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At the northern end of the Wuling Range, which cuts across south China, stands the mighty Celestial Peak, whose crags appear to soar up to its lofty summit. At its base lies a village of seventy or eighty households called Love Goose Shoals, which takes its name from the neighboring sandbanks. According to legend, it once nestled between Celestial Peak and Love Goose River, whose waters ran wide and deep, and whose banks were luxuriant with water plants. Neither blistering in the summer nor freezing in the winter, it was the perfect roosting place for wild geese, known locally as love geese, on their annual migrations.

Villagers floated log rafts and sailed cargo vessels up and down the Love Goose River, into whose waters were drawn Celestial Peak, the village at its base, the clear blue sky, and wispy clouds. Daring and powerful, Love Goose River seemed more majestic than Celestial Peak itself.

But, at some historical moment, Love Goose River carved out a new path for itself, changed its course as its floodwaters besieged Celestial Peak like a winter avalanche. A traitorous act of nature, a brazen tyranny! But Celestial Peak would not be moved; it held its ground, its unyielding summit affirming the dominance of history over the onslaught of Love Goose River.

Even more remarkable was the resilience of the tiny village at the base of the mountain; tenaciously it survived the ravages of time and the elements. Earthen walls crumbled, wooden houses rotted and collapsed, only to be replaced by stone walls and stone houses to begin a new cycle. As they watched their village withstand both the forces of nature and of man, the people sensed that they were protected by
Celestial Peak, the source of the village’s sheltered setting and auspicious geomantic omens.

When Love Goose River changed its course, it left behind a dry riverbed that ran for a dozen li or more. Wild geese no longer roosted on its banks, which were now covered with shifting cobblestones of every imaginable size, shape, and color. These seemingly insignificant cobblestones were not to be dismissed lightly; a legacy of the ice age, they were the detritus of glaciers, large and small, aeons older than even the ancestors of flora and fauna found in the mountains and on the plains. What they had witnessed, the history concealed within them, stretched back into antiquity, before Pan Gu divided heaven and earth, before the creation of nature’s vital principle, and before the existence of mythical rulers. Perhaps Nüwa used them to patch the skies, perhaps Jing Wei used them to stop up the oceans, perhaps the Great Yu used them to tame the flood. Who can say for sure?

Yet the glorious reputation of Love Goose Shoals was founded not upon prehistoric cobblestones but upon a stand of memorial arches to chaste women at the base of the mountain. Built of white marble from a place called Qiyang, they had flawless white marble walls and four pillars connected by stone beams. The arches, which rose twenty or thirty feet in the air, were carved with imperial seals, the names and dates of the honorees, and the year each arch was erected, in the calligraphic styles of famous scholars and officials.

The austere white arches varied in size – some were tall, some short; some were broad, some narrow – and were separated from one another by distances of thirty or forty paces. In all there were fifteen arches, whose provenance included the Tang, the Song, the Yuan, the Ming, and the Qing. Two were more famous than all the others: one had been graced by the calligraphy of the Song emperor Taizu, the other personally dedicated by the Yongzheng emperor of the Qing.
The remainder, aligned by dynastic period, had dark stone bases and low walls inlaid with stone-cut designs. Beds of glossy green privet, called chastity flowers, grew beneath the walls, like rows of uniformed sentries standing guard over their domain, or like sweeping emerald ribbons. Referred to by local inhabitants as the Street of Chaste Women, it was the wonder of the area around Celestial Peak, an oasis of purity in Love Goose Shoals.

The story was told of the great Qianlong emperor of the Qing, who passed this site on a visit to south China; in his own hand he wrote, "All Officials, Civil and Military, Dismount at this Spot," in large script. The edict was chiseled in stone and displayed at the head of the Street of Chaste Women, investing the sacred ground with even greater solemnity and purity. At the end of each year, on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, and at Qingming, the tomb-sweeping festival, local inhabitants and pilgrims from outlying districts brought their unmarried daughters, little girls included, to the memorial arches to light incense and burn spirit money, prostrate themselves and kowtow, and, with tears in their eyes, recount from memory the tales of chastity. The air above the Street of Chaste Women would fill with the curling smoke of incense and the ashes of burned spirit money, investing the site with palpable solemnity and mournfulness, with sadness and gentility . . .

The fifteen memorial arches on the Street of Chaste Women had stood as cultural treasures for over a thousand years, a true wonder in the eyes of countless generations of villagers. Then, in the year 1958, came the Great Leap Forward, a campaign intended to eradicate the power of superstition throughout the length and breadth of the nation, and a new mythology rose to supplant ancient marvels. At the base of Celestial Peak, people turned cooking pots into backyard steel, as the satellite of "high yield" was launched. The fifteen white marble memorial arches on the Street of Chaste Women were torn down and replaced by clay smelt-
furnaces. Day and night, a never-ending discharge of sparks and black smoke accompanied the smelting of steel pots, utensils, and tools into steel bars. China, it was said, was on the brink of creating a paradise on earth.

That brings us to late spring, 1983. Members of the older generation in the village lamented the disappearance of the memorial arches. For the young the significance of the loss was more mercenary. What a pity! they said. If only we’d preserved those fifteen white marble memorial arches on the Street of Chaste Women as well as the mournful stories of the women themselves – with a little TV advertising we might have joined the ranks of the great wonders of the world, like the Egyptian pyramids and the Sphinx, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Roman Coliseum, the ancient Greek Temple of the Gods, the pagodas of Borneo, and Cambodia’s Angkor Wat! Love Goose Shoals, here at the base of Celestial Peak, could have become a tourist attraction for visitors from all over China and the world, for scholars of women’s history and international feminists. We’d have generated foreign currency for the nation and breathed new life into our local economy.

People began indulging their fantasies: they proposed a local head tax and asked the government for loans to refurbish the few arches that had somehow survived but were overrun by artemisia and bore scars of demolished smelting furnaces; the Street of Chaste Women could be restored to its past glory. Fortunately, the marble of the dismantled arches had not been used for the smelting furnaces, which were made of limestone carted down from the mountain. Slabs of marble, marble pillars, marble tablets, and broken inscriptions were dug out of the artemisia and the mounds of rubble. It was a case of the world turning, of the vicissitudes of human existence, of the steady march of time . . .

What follow are tales of two incidents that occurred on this ancient shoal and were linked to the memorial arches for chaste women: the story of a young widow in the declin-
ing years of the Qing dynasty who chose to remain chaste in her widowhood and that of a modern woman who chose not to remain chaste in her widowhood yet retained her purity. Two stories, unrelated yet merging to reveal deeply rooted, commonly held conceptions that pervade both eras, tales calculated to give scholars of women's history and feminists food for thought as well as a stimulus for serious reflection.