

How the Tree of Wishes Gained its Carapace of Plastic

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HERE STANDS THE famed tree of wishes: See its vast hollow trunk, repetitively patterned and unnaturally brown. See how straight it stands in the middle of its cement courtyard, holding aloft its wide, sun-bleached branches and umbrella-like canopy. See its branches drip with red thread, dangling luminously bright oranges and red papers.

You are bewildered, Best Beloved, but did I not say wishes take the shape of red papers tied to oranges? It is more efficient now; there are checkboxes and a list of common blessings that you might want. I will pay the seller as you write. You can wish for all that you can fit into the allocated space.

Now tie it to the orange. It's a fiddly business. This nylon thread is slippery. I'll lend you a finger to hold down the knot.

The orange is light, as it is also hollow, and also made of plastic. It lacks the weight that makes for an easy throw, but I'm sure you can tangle it in the branches. One would think lighter things would fly further, but it is not so.

Perhaps you have been too greedy in your wishes, written too many.

But no, take another throw; the gods reward the persistent! Careful you don't dislodge the wishes of others as you throw. And don't step on the papers that have fallen. I know they are wet and soaked with rain, but it would be rude.

It is not designed to be easy.

Of *course* it was designed, Best Beloved. Trees of plastic do not grow on their own; this tree was made.

Then listen: Some stories start before the counting of days, but this is not one of them. Our roots are not so deep in the ground, Best Beloved, for all that some may say they are. We did

not always live here, and were not always one people. Our history is a tangled one and our wishes are heavy.

This village that encircles the tree and exists on the far edge of the harbour you call home, this village is not one village. We are, all together, named Forest; and there are many who live under this name. There are those who pretend to have always lived here. There are those who came to mine for salt and dive for pearls. There are those who came south at the rise of the horse lords and the fall of the dynasty. There have been many falls.

See this ancient temple with its bright shingles and new bricks?

Its first brick was laid on the eve of the Great Clearance, when the Emperor of the North made cold war upon a son of pirates who was loyal to the old dynasty. The son of pirates had declared himself Prince of the Jewelled Isle, so with a wave of his horse-hoof sleeve, the Emperor of the North had the southern coast emptied. Along with all the other villages, both walled and sprawling, the village that is not one village was uprooted and the people scattered.

For eight long years, no second brick was laid atop the first.

And yes, this is a long story. But you knew that already, didn't you?

When the edict was rescinded, the villagers returned, and with them came new people who called themselves the 'guest people.' Even as the land grows familiar and their tongues twist to new languages, they remain strangers.

Together they built this temple.

Not this structure, precisely. We have built it again and again, yet we call it ancient, for it is not the age of the bricks or mortar that we measure, nor the idols that live within.

The village that is not one village first worshipped the dragons of the sea, they who governed the fall of rain. When they proved impossible to bribe, the village that is not one

village put aside their idols and cast new statues to the Jade Emperor, who writes the writs that the dragons must follow in the celestial bureaucracy.

Why yes, Best Beloved, our heavens are full of gods and Buddhas. It is better to believe everything than nothing at all. You never know which of the immortals has a spare blessing and a watchful eye.

So, when the Emperor ignored our petitions, the village that is not one village offered incense to the Third Prince, vanquisher of dragons. When he too was unmoved by the village's plight, they put aside that spoilt child of a god and gave incense to the Mother of Dragons, for even the gods of the seas must be moved by filial piety...

The guest people watched on, bewildered, since their own god, Old Man Uncle, lived not in a shrine or a temple, but in humble trees. They knew Old Man Uncle was following them, for after all, it is impossible to get rid of relatives.

You shouldn't roll your eyes so, Best Beloved, I'm telling you a story, and it is your story too.

Thinking it would be more spacious than a living tree, the guest people housed Old Man Uncle in a hollow tree, offering him incense at its roots. As the faithless gods changed with the seasons and their idols were orphaned outside the temple, Old Man Uncle remained sacred.

Remember the old banyan tree by the mouth of the village? The one propped by a spider of bamboo struts? With sawed-off branches and barely any leaves?

It is not that tree.

That tree comes later.

So the fisherfolk were forbidden by ancient law to set foot on dry land but for one day a year, living almost all their lives on their flat, covered boats by the coast.

They did not lust after a life on land; they owed their allegiance to sky and sea, presided over by a single queen mother. But once a year they came to call upon Old Man Uncle, the

god who squats upon the land, no more than a pebble in the unbroken seam between sky and sea. They made no worship within the ancient temple.

Instead, they bound up their prayers in string and threw them into the branches of the tree. Prayers are light and airy things by nature, so in order to be thrown, they need first be tied to sticks and small stones. The weight gives heft and momentum.

And seeing their tree blossom with ink-red paper, the villagers began to follow suit.

Yes, yes, Best Beloved, well spotted. That was the beginning of the tradition of wishes.

So the years passed and we who live at the margins of a great empire, we became the price paid to buy peace, after a war fought over the bartering of breathable bliss.

We became the edge of a different empire, one that esteems the sea and ships above land and learning. It was an empire so vast that the sun never set upon their queen's soil. They valued this whole peninsula and the island as a harbour, and so they harboured: revolutionaries and radicals, refugees and renegades. That selfsame bliss that began the war flowed freely here, and it bled and broke us, changed and twisted us, filled us with insatiable hunger.

As the empire imported desperation and despotism, so too did the prayers turn to wishes, faithless yet full of fear and hope.

Prayers may be light, anchored only by the sticks and stones they are tied to, but *wishes* are heavy things. You carry them in your heart and they weigh you down with longing. Each bitterness you swallow only adds to that knot of lead upon your heart.

This all was heavy on the branches of our tree, but it did not break.

The challenger to the god-emperor's throne, and breaker of his idol, fled here, hounded by the superstitious, and it was here that he was reborn. Here that he learnt his art, turned his pen to banditry and gave himself a new name, born with each dawning day. He, too, died in exile

on that Jewelled Isle. But this is not his story, for all that our tree bore his wishes too. They were heavy beyond measure and the tree of wishes thrice threw them down.

War came with the rising sun, and a third empire claimed this harbour for its own; and the village that is not one village along with it. They fought under the banner of a rising sun, a round drop of blood, red against an expanse of white. They too wished for an empire that stretched from horizon to horizon.

Wars crush wishes, for all that you may want, there is not enough hope to wish. The desperate become secretive about their souls and the new empire cast out all our idols. They brought with them a new pantheon and dressed us in the costumes of their culture. This, they told us, was civilisation.

So as the branches of the wishing tree became light of wishes, its roots became crowded with incense. If only one could bribe Old Man Uncle that way.

But it was not so.

The offerings burnt down the hollow tree.

Yes, that does make Old Man Uncle homeless. But only for a little while. A new tree was brought after the close of the war. With it came ever more people, fearful of the civil war that would soon tear the north apart. Each war brought new faces, over land and over sea.

We are a harbour, after all.

The couple who planted again the tree of wishes made the village that is not one village promise that for one day in every ten years, they would refrain from felling any trees.

And with peace our wishes flourished again, each day bringing a heavier harvest.

We became better at wishing, for no longer was page written by hand; the blessings and beseechings were printed. Each perfectly-produced page was identical in its promises of good fortune and granted wishes. Foiled paper was wrapped around increasingly elaborate bundles, to be thrown into the tree.

We had so much, but we wanted ever more. Riches flowed through our harbour and paved our streets with gold and glass. Few things are truly sacred, and old stone gave way to new. We built ever higher, our buildings clawing from the earth.

But that is the harbour, best beloved. Here in the village that is not one village, old laws kept our houses short and squat, for all that we have covered them in white plaster and thin marble.

From the crucible of the war was that first empire remade. The Emperor of the North is no more, and instead a new council presides. Everything and nothing has changed.

Deals were cut and hands were shook. We were promised again to our motherland.

And with that promise we grew restless. The rich bought themselves new roots on foreign soil, even as they lingered, hearts heavy with hope.

The wishes upon the tree grew ever heavier. Where first it held aloft wishes for a safe home here, a new beginning, it now held farewells of those about to leave. The branches bowed toward the ground, bending under the weight of our wishes.

Written examinations now no longer won you honour in the civil service, but people wish for that still. They believe that recitation of knowledge should grant power. You scoff, Best Beloved, but look to the printed paper. Those wishes are the same four-word platitudes that we uttered to each other for far longer than there have been wishes, or trees to wish upon. We still wish to be young, to be beautiful, to realise our ambitions in war and word.

As we were given back to a new country that we never really belonged to, so the weight of our wishes became too much. We were promised a homecoming and half a century of frozen time. We belong and do not belong; we are our own people until we wish to be our own people. We shall together be one country with two systems, one body with two minds. With that paradox of wishes, we assailed the tree, a monsoon of oranges tangled in its branches, and our red papers choked back its leaves.

And so it broke.

The branches cracked and the tree of wishes bled a sap as gold as greed.

And so the Board of Tourism—because we had one of those by then—hatched a plan: they would simply make a new tree of wishes.

They designed a better tree, one that could better wear the weight of wishes. One that did not mind if red papers were to outnumber its own leaves, or if its branches stooped with fruit that it did not bear. One whose roots would not break the perfectly-poured cement of the courtyard and adjacent car park.

And what did it matter, if the tree were living or dead? It was not the *tree* that was sacred. It was the temple, the idols, the spirit of Old Man Uncle.

So they cast one out of plastic, shiny and new, with a hollow trunk and a canopy of crinkly leaves. The branches were low, and a reasonable height to throw to.

And because the Board remembered all too well the fetid carcass of oranges that they had untied from the branches of the previous tree, the oranges were now standardised, and also made of plastic. It also did away with the chaos of the orange sellers.

It was also brought closer to the temple. They've surrounded it with a boulevard of saplings, also named for wishing; but their roots are shallow and their branches festooned with LEDs.

The previous tree, mournful as it was for having failed in its task, it lives still. It has been hacked to a stump even as it is propped up by bamboo struts. What branches it does have left are still wide and lean low. It is protected by a barricade of signs.

And at its roots, still, idols are orphaned. You can never throw away a statue of a god, after all, after you've invited them into your home. So they must be abandoned like foundlings upon the doorsteps of nunneries. They huddle still by the roots. They are mostly of the goddess of mercy, perhaps because we feel she will be merciful in the face of the faithless.

But this old tree matters not.

It is this hollow wishing tree that you should be thinking on. The one with carapace of plastic. It is sturdier by far than the last.

Of course this is the true tree, Best Beloved. Did I not say at the start that the temple is still the ancient temple, despite its bright bricks and shiny shingles?

Ah, it has tangled.

Oh, don't be silly, the tree doesn't *grant* wishes. Why would you think that?

It simply carries them so you don't have to.