

The Body in the Library

Dawn Farnham

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'Jie jie, there's a body in the library.'

Emily Zhang, her face a study in tetchy annoyance, glared at her sister.

Jie jie. In a Chinese family there was no self. You were a place, a relationship, locked irrevocably in a semantic prison of duties and expectations. *Jie jie.* It was the constant verbal reminder that she was the older sister to *mei mei*, the younger sister, forever shackled to the woman now hanging nervously at the entrance to the study.

'Of course there's a body in the library, Amy. I'm working.'

Amy shook her head, her tiny body trembling like one of the fine-boned racehorses Emily bred for the Hong Kong market, but infinitely and tiresomely more needy.

'Sorry, sorry.' Amy's voice rose slightly and took on the shrill tone that so irritated Emily. *'But it's not mother. Another body. A different body.'*

‘Not a ghost, Amy?’ Emily could not quite keep the edge of sarcasm out of her voice. Not that Amy noticed. Amy didn’t notice anything not directly connected to the constant open wounds of her emotions. She consulted mediums who spoke to the spirit of their dead father and her dead son. She saw ghosts in windows and dark corners and heard them in her head.

‘No, no.’

Emily heard the rising hysteria in her sister’s voice. In a moment she would burst into tears. Anything in this life of toil, anything, was preferable to dealing with a pathetic, hysterical, weeping, lonely, forty-year-old pain in the She shut her laptop and rose.

‘Calm yourself. Have you had your medication?’

‘I forgot. I was doing the incense for mother and’

‘Just be quiet. Let’s go.’

Amy’s mouth snapped shut. Despite the warmth of the day, Amy drew her heavy silk shawl around her shoulders and set off down the corridor.

The Zhang mansion stood in extensive grounds on a bluff overlooking Freshwater Bay. The walk along the mirrored corridor leading to the library was lengthy

and the numerous French doors, all thrown open on this spring day, revealed a sweeping vista of the Swan River.

Emily looked not at the beauty of this view but walked in aggravated silence behind her sister towards the double doors festooned with carvings of the eight immortals, clouds, bats, bamboo and dragons, symbols of wealth, longevity and power.

The shawl pulled tightly over Amy’s scrawny shoulders was emblazoned with butterflies and peonies. More symbols. Youth, love, marriage.

Emily felt oppressed by all the mumbo jumbo of her traditional upbringing which, despite their lives in western countries, no Chinese family could ever quite shake off. She blamed the Communists. Having chased millions of Chinese overseas, they had cemented Confucian traditions and values into the new world. And now, even in New China, they had started to creep back in.

The shawl was typical of her sister. Amy was an eternal and hopeless romantic, desperate for the affection her disastrous arranged marriage could never have offered her and looking for love in all the wrong places.

So far Emily had made a swimming instructor, piano teacher and golf pro rich and happy men. She couldn’t blame Amy. She hadn’t invited such horrors on herself but gradually her sister’s endless neediness grated on her.

The pathetic shuffling gait. The nervous clutching of her fingers. The quivering movement of her shoulder blades beneath her shawl. For a moment Emily envisaged a knife plunged there, between those scrawny scapulas, and smiled.

She hadn't always been pathetic. Amy had been a doctor, a career their mother had forced her to abandon upon her marriage. Without a son, the dreadful curse of the Zhang family, Emily had followed her obligations, studied business and joined her father in the modest mercantile company her grandfather had begun decades before. Within a few years New China had opened its doors and bestowed its bounty on its lost overseas sons and daughters and the Zhang family had become wealthy beyond their dreams.

Amy took a key from the pocket of her dress and unlocked the library door. Emily was momentarily startled. Amy hated locks and keys, a result, Amy claimed, from the trauma of being locked in cupboards by their mother when Emily was at boarding school. Emily had no idea what to believe.

She pushed open the heavy doors. Incense smoke enveloped her like cobwebs; the cloying odour of the old world which her mother lit every day in front of the spirit tablets of the dead ancestors they had left in the soil of the homeland. It clung to the cheap curtains in the slummy North Perth asbestos and tile house they had

lived in surrounded by other tongues, other customs, out of place, out of time, under the searing Perth sun. Their looks made them strange, this made them stranger and she hated it. She waved the smoke away and penetrated the half-gloom.

She glanced briefly towards the long shuttered windows in front of which, on a low dais, stood the coffin of their mother. The late morning sun glowed faintly, sending slivers of warm light onto the silver and gold embroidered covering cloth, a half-threadbare hundred-year old heirloom, the only object of value brought from China when their grandparents had fled.

She looked around. When the money had begun pouring in her father had built this mansion on the bluff along strict feng shui lines, the river at the front, the low hill at the back. Before his health began to fail he had created this Chinese library, decorated and furnished it entirely in a fashion which resembled, as closely as he imagined it, the study of a seventeenth century Confucian mandarin and shut Australia out of his world.

Her eyes moved over the ancestral altar with its spirit house; porcelain plates of fruit and rice; the silver censer, small spirals of incense smoke rising and hanging in the air; over the jewelled screens of the four virtuous plants and writhing dragons, the heavy mahogany desk, the jade discs and chimes, bronze bells, the Qing scrolls and Ming porcelain to the built-in cabinet which

occupied one side of the room. The upper shelves were glassed and contained the books of imperial paintings and Chinese classics that her father had spent his waning years collecting and contemplating. The lower section had doors behind which other scrolls and objects were stored. Thousands of them. His collecting mania had only ended on his sudden death two years ago, here, at this desk, of a heart attack.

Since then she had not set foot in this room until her mother's body had been carried in her coffin and placed before the window by the Buddhist bonze chanting incantations. The Chinese geomancer had told them that the most auspicious time for burial was when the moon was somewhere, on the afternoon of the equinox of something or other, as decreed by the Chinese almanac.

Mumbo jumbo. She had left the library and not come back. But Amy came every day, somehow impelled inside, dusting these artifacts and waggling incense. Just another obsessive tic that Amy could not put aside, like sharp-eyed spirit mediums and handsome gold-diggers.

Emily frowned. As far as she could see everything seemed perfectly in place. No body swung from the chandelier, lay sprawling on the carp-covered rug or had its head deep in the goldfish bowl. She felt her face grow bloodless and anger boil down in her stomach. More ghosts, more crap from her sister. It never ended. She turned. Amy was standing inside the closed doors, the gold key in her hand.

'There,' Amy said and pointed the key at the doors of the cabinet.

Emily bit back her vitriol and forced calm. She was practised in the art. She had learned such skills in the face of her mother's constant onslaught about duty. It was not enough that she had studied hard and now managed a multi-million dollar company. Since the age of eighteen first Emily then Amy had been exhorted monotonously to choose a mate amongst the array of pathetic suitors extracted from suitable Chinese families in order to marry and do their solemn and filial duty by giving birth to the desired grandson. Emily had resisted and travelled a lot, staying away. Amy had been ground down and obeyed. But nothing could stop her mother's tongue. She had actually blamed Amy for the failure of that revolting marriage. Her mother's sudden death whilst Emily had been on a business trip to China, had come as a shock but also as a guilty relief.

She walked to the cupboard with hard little steps and pulled open the doors with an abruptness which spoke of her suppressed fury, ready to round on her sister with accusations of insanity when, to her amazement, she saw the undeniable outline of a corpse, swaddled in bandages, lying on the inner shelf.

She staggered back and away from the cupboard, let out a small cry and sat abruptly on her heels.

'Told you,' Amy said, squatting next to her sister.

'How ...' began Emily.

'I found the keys to the cupboards in the desk. Thought I'd take a look and do a bit of dusting,' Amy said, a small note of triumph in her voice. 'Opened this one and there it was. Gave me a shock I can tell you.'

Something in the way she said this struck Emily as funny and she laughed. Amy caught the laughter and gave a chuckle. A small fit of giggles ensued, ending nervously with them looking at each other.

'Who knows about this?' Emily said standing up. She glanced at the double doors. 'Are they locked?'

Amy rose too. 'Yes.' She showed Emily the key. 'Just me, I think. Who else comes in here?'

That was true. As they aged their parents practically lived in this room. After their father's death, their mother took care of it. Dusting. Praying before the spirit house. Hoovering. Filling the room with choking incense. Mourning. Emerging only to lay into her daughters with accusations of betrayal.

'How did it get here?'

Amy shrugged.

'Is it really a person? Dad collected all sorts of things. Is this something he collected.'

'I don't think he collected people,' Amy said without a trace of sarcasm. 'Should we look at it?'

Emily's eyes opened wide.

'Should we what? I'm not going to. We should call the police.'

Emily spoke forcefully but suddenly felt a prick of doubt. Police here, all over the house, poking and prying, and if it was a body the newspapers would have a field day.

Emily gave Amy a little shove. 'It might be a statue or something. Go look at it.'

'All right,' Amy said surprisingly and went forward. Emily followed, peering round her.

'It's covered in dust,' Emily said.

It was. As Amy pulled it from the shelf to the floor, clouds of dust flew up and it seemed to exhale a long breath.

They both leapt back. The shape collapsed a little, the bandages loosened, then the whole package settled.

They waited, Emily clutching Amy's arm.

'Not a statue,' said Amy. 'So let's see.' She went forward and Emily let go of her sister and hung back.

'There's writing,' Amy said, peering at the body. 'In Chinese. How's your written Chinese. Mine's terrible.'

'Not good enough to read a contract but I can manage a letter.'

'So come here and read.'

Emily made a face.

'Come on. Maybe it says 'souvenir of Shanghai', or 'don't open 'til Christmas'.

Amy laughed and Emily smiled. In this ridiculous situation Amy's nervousness seemed to have fallen away.

Emily went down on one knee. The characters in red were written across the bandages of the forehead, somewhat faded but visible. She mouthed the characters for a moment, then went as white as a sheet, rose and darted away.

Emily's face was a picture of uncomprehending horror. Amy took her sister's hand.

'What? For God's sake, what is it Emily?'

'It says... I can't believe it.'

'What, what? Em, tell me.'

'It says 'First daughter's husband'

The sisters stared at each other then down at the swaddled shape on the floor.

'I need a drink. Is there anything to bloody drink in here?'

Emily's eyes shot around the room.

Amy patted her sister's hand.

'There's rice wine in the cupboard by the altar. It's for the spirits but what the hell.'

Amy took a bottle of rice wine from the shelf and two libation cups and poured. They both drank.

'Well, you seem pretty cool, I must say,' Emily said.

'Yes,' Amy said, a slight expression of surprise in her voice. 'I do, don't I?'

Emily's phone went off in the distance sending *The Ride of the Valkyries* echoing along the corridor.

She looked at her watch. 'We can't stay in here all day. I have to go to the office this afternoon.'

Amy poured wine into her cup and tossed it back.

'Right,' she said and grabbing some scissors from the desk, went down on two knees next to the body. 'Let's take a look.'

'God, Amy. You're not going to open it.'

'Oh for heaven's sake,' Amy said and began cutting around the neck area and up over the cheeks.

Emily poured more wine and drank, staring, gripped with emotions at once of horror and curiosity. Gradually the bandages loosened and Amy peeled them away.

The yellow face thus revealed was taut and dry like the mummies they'd seen in the British Museum years ago.

'God it's really a person,' Emily said drawing closer. Its nose was pointed, the eyes sunken, the lips drawn taught above the bones of the chin.

Amy poured wine and raised her cup.

'Your husband. Congratulations. Good choice.'

Emily snorted. Amy put down her cup and began to cut sharply down the centre of the bandages.

'What are you doing?' Emily said.

'Checking if it's a man. Otherwise your wedding night will be a disappointment.'

They started to giggle and when they stopped, Amy had cut all the bandages away to the legs. They both stared at the shrivelled appendage and began to laugh again.

'He's better than mine,' Amy said. 'The quiet type. Not likely he'll try to murder you, eh? I'd keep him.'

Emily stopped laughing. Silence fell like a hammer as motes of dusty corpse danced in a beam of light. There it was. Emily took a deep breath.

'How could anyone know he was a psychopath?'

Amy shrugged. 'Mum did. She knew he was disturbed. She saw the bruises on me. But what the hell. Women just have to put up with anything. Even nutcases who want to kill you. That was her philosophy. Well, she lost her precious grandson didn't she? I hated her.'

Emily stared at the carpet. One day, ten years ago, the psychopath had accused Amy of cheating, shot her and their son then put the gun to his head. Only Amy had lived.

'I was away. I didn't see.'

'You didn't want to see and you were always away, even when you were here.'

Emily frowned.

'I just wanted you to recognize how it was. I lost my little boy.' Amy whispered and Emily finally saw that it was true. She had grown callous and distant, terrified of being dragged back into the family and its ceaseless impositions. She had set her eyes on so distant a horizon that she had not even truly noticed that this tragedy was still a cancer consuming every bone in her sister's body, every nerve and sinew and cell. And that she might die of it.

'I lost him too,' Emily said and the truth of that too came crashing down upon her like bricks. A nephew to watch grow, to spoil and laugh with. A boy to become a man and marry a lovely girl and have children. A happy future wiped out not just for him and Amy, but for her too. There would be no children in their lives, just the barren plain and this devastation.

'I'm sorry,' she said and the words felt devoid of meaning. But she had no others. She pulled Amy tight against her and cried. 'Oh. I am so sorry. I will never go away again. I promise.'

Amy gripped her sister and let all the thick, black, congealed stuff of misery melt and seep and weep out of

her and Emily drew it to her, soaking it up until it grew thin and light and able at least to be borne.

Amy gave a great sigh. She took her handkerchief and wiped her eyes and passed it to Emily who blew her nose with a great honking noise that made them both smile.

'All right.' Amy said. 'We're in this together. Let's figure it out. Mum killed you a man and stuck him in the cupboard. Is that what happened?'

Emily frowned. 'Mum? Really? Or Dad? No. Can't be. Maybe he just died.'

Amy rose and threw the empty wine bottle in the bin with a resounding clang. She took another from the shelf and opened it.

'You were never going to marry and mum knew it. You were too strong. So she arranged one for your afterlife. So you won't be a ghost. She believed it. Unmarried girls wander like wraiths eternally looking for husbands and wreaking revenge on their families. So she provided you with one.'

'Bloody hell.' Emily stared at the corpse. 'Who is it, do you reckon?'

Amy shook her head.

'Any suitors go missing? He's ugly enough to be Timothy Chan.'

Emily smiled. 'Where are his glasses? Although the dick looks about right, I'd guess.'

They started to giggle again. Amy sloshed wine into their cups.

'Maybe they dug him up,' Amy said. 'I hear they do that when they want a bride or groom for a ghost marriage. They go the cemetery and dig one up.'

'Shut up!'

Amy laughed. 'I'm not kidding. I read that.'

'How long's it been here.'

Amy shrugged. 'Could be ten years, twenty. Who knows?'

'Do you think mum came in here,' Emily said, 'and chatted to him. Whinged about me, what a dreadful daughter I am. Why hadn't he got me pregnant yet?'

Amy smiled.

'I do.'

They both tossed back their cups.

'Okay, we can sort of figure out the why, don't know the who. Should we try to find out?'

The Ride of the Walkyries rang out again. Emily looked at her watch.

Amy stood up.

'No. We can't find out who right now, maybe never. We have to get rid of him.'

'But how?' Emily felt panic walk all over her like little feet. The scandal of this would kill the company. New China allowed certain family traditions to rise from the dead but it drew a line. Anything reeking of superstition and Old China was shunned. As for this. Grave robbing, ghost marriages. And murder, for Christ's sake. She shuddered.

Amy went to the desk and opened a drawer. From it she took what looked like a small-handled wrench. She held it up to Emily.

'Casket key,' she said. 'Sometimes I open up the coffin and stick pins in mother.'

'Amy!' Emily was genuinely shocked but not in the least sure it wasn't true. Amy spent every day in here with their dead mother. And a casket key. It was creepy.

Amy made no reaction. She went to the coffin by the window and pulled away the embroidered covering. The coffin was heavy polished mahogany. The gold on the handles and hinges was real. Their mother had ordered it herself years ago. It was a Chinese tradition to organise all the details of your funeral. The family vault was ready, only awaiting the auspicious date.

The casket key slid into the bolt hole and she turned it four times. The lid gave a small sound like a sigh. Emily eyes widened and she stepped back.

‘Come on,’ Amy said. ‘Say bye bye to mummy. You didn’t see her did you before they put her in here?’

‘I don’t want to.’ Emily looked at Amy. She looked weird, a cold light in her eyes. She’d always had a nagging suspicion about their mother’s death. She had been healthy, remarkably so for an eighty-year-old. Her death had been very sudden. But the doctor had declared a stroke and the matter had been closed. Still, there was something odd.

Amy lifted the coffin lid and threw it back. Emily stared at the yawning hole, transfixed.

‘Amy,’ Emily said turning her eyes to her sister. ‘Did you ...? Did you ...?’

‘What Em? Did I take a syringe and inject air into a vein in mother’s neck and cause a stroke? Did I do that?’

For all the dark cupboards and cruelty. For the violent husband and the murdered son. Did I?’

Emily stared at her sister.

‘And if I did?’ Amy said.

Emily felt sweat break out on her forehead. Amy darted forward and clutched her sister’s hand. Before Emily could react, she was dragged beside the coffin and found herself staring at her mother’s dead face. She let out a piercing cry, expecting to find the body stuck with pins, mutilated perhaps, but the sight before her was one of calm, the expression on the embalmed face peaceful, the face of her mother but somehow youthful.

Amy laughed lightly.

‘See. There she is. Old bitch. Gone. I’m not nuts you know. Actually I feel better today than I have for a long time.’

Amy took off her shawl and went to the mummified body.

‘Come on. It’s a day for discarding things. Help me wrap up your beloved in the wedding shawl.’

Emily obeyed. She had no desire to ever ask Amy that question again. Some things it was better not to know.

They wrapped the butterflies and peonies around the corpse and lifted it. It weighed nothing, light as air.

They deposited the body alongside their mother and stood looking down.

Amy took the rice wine and sprinkled drops over the two bodies.

‘It’s purifying. The rice wine. Want to say anything?’

Emily shook her head.

‘Shall we put it all away?’ Amy said. ‘Bury the past with them? I think I’d like to.’

‘Yes,’ Emily said, so relieved she felt lightheaded.

Emily shut the lid and Amy locked it down. They replaced the cover, locked the casket key into the desk drawer. Amy took out the small vacuum cleaner and hoovered the dusty shelf and the carp rug. Emily put it away, the electric cord slithering into its slot like a snake.

‘The snake is one of the five poisons,’ Amy said. ‘It chases away evil spirits.’

Emily looked warily at her sister. ‘No more mumbo jumbo, Amy.’

Amy laughed. It was youthful, carefree. ‘No,’ she said. ‘Promise.’

They looked around the library. Nothing was out of place.

Emily unlocked the doors and swung them open. Before her stretched the long, silent corridor, the mirrors reflecting the empty sky. Amy came to her side and for a moment neither moved.

‘Do you think, Amy, we might foster a child? Do you think that’s possible? Will they let us? Two old bags.’

Amy put her hand on her sister’s arm. ‘Not so old. And with stacks of money. Don’t forget that. I reckon they might. Maybe two.’

‘You know, you seem right at home with bodies. You might take up medicine again, *mei mei*.’

‘Anything is possible, *jie jie*.’

Together they closed the library doors.

Dawn's bio/July 2017

Dawn lives in Perth, Western Australia, but her writing career began during the twelve years she lived in Singapore with her journalist husband, working as a volunteer docent at the city's museums and writing articles on local history and heritage. Between 2007 and 2013, the books of *The Straits Quartet* set in 19th century colonial Singapore were published. Her short stories have featured in various anthologies in Southeast Asia and Singapore.

She entered the Sisters in Crime 'Body in the Library' category with the idea of challenging the accepted 'English' idea of a library and using

her acquired knowledge of Chinese culture to craft a story cut from a different cloth. Not for a minute did she imagine she would win and the prize was a wonderful surprise and an enormous encouragement to keep thinking outside the box.

She will speak at the 2017 Singapore Writers' Festival where she will be relaunching her updated fifth historical novel, a mystery called *Finding Maria*. Dawn is currently a creative writing PhD student at Edith Cowan University in Perth working on a novel about the struggles of local women during the Japanese occupation of Singapore and crime of another kind—war crime.