

The Fledgling

By

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Crimson Lotus' feet hurt so much she cried. Yesterday her mother had tightened the bandages, compressing her toes hard down against her soles.

'You are going to look so beautiful,' her mother, Dancing Crane, had said. 'Already your feet are smaller than mine at your age.'

Dancing Crane kissed her daughter on the forehead and hobbled out of the room on her high, wooden shoes in a series of tiny steps.

That night Dancing Crane lay beside her husband.

'How is our daughter progressing?' he asked.

'These are the most painful years. As she grows older and understands her purpose, she will become grateful.'

'I beat a disrespectful servant today.'

Dancing Crane's heart beat faster and she grew very still. 'I apologise for the behaviour of some of the people in this house.'

'It is not your fault.' Pressing her down onto the mat, her husband ran his hand over her tiny feet and sighed. 'The servants have given our daughter a nickname. They call her Miserable Lotus.'

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Crimson Lotus looked at the yellow and white feathered songbird in its cage. Her mother had bought it for her to keep her company. We are the same, Crimson Lotus thought. You cannot fly, and I will never be able to run and play like the servants' children.

Suddenly rage filled her, and fumbling the cage latch open she scabbled inside for the bird, grasping it.

Spitefully she looked down at the small creature, tight in her grip. Seizing a wing, she stretched it out, splaying the flight feathers.

Spending your life in a cage, you do not need wings, she thought. Yet you will still be able to sing.

There were scissors on the table.

The happy screams and laughter of other children came to her from the lawns and woodlands beyond the open window. Clutched in her fist, beak gaping, Crimson Lotus felt the frantic beating of the songbird's tiny heart. With a sob Crimson Lotus flung the bird through the window, where it fell to the lawn before fluttering weakly into the undergrowth.

Later that day Dancing Crane came into Crimson Lotus' room.

'Where is my songbird?' Dancing Crane demanded when she saw the empty cage, the open door.

Crimson Lotus matched her mother's angry gaze. 'It escaped,' she said, and turned back to her book.

The End

I wrote this at one of the annual weekend workshop my writing group runs. Being told what to write about is a good exercise for the imagination.

I've been known to say other people have better ideas, by which I mean that they have different ideas, ones that I might not necessarily have. This is one reason a critique group can be so useful. There are lots of other reasons too, including mutual support, learning, contacts – all benefits that come from your primary obligation, the reason these sorts of groups exist – that first of all you help other people become better writers. Then they help you. That's the way it works. Pay it forwards.