

# The Sunlight on the Water

## Louise Cooper

*Louise Cooper (b. 1952) was first discovered in America with The Book of Paradox (1973) - a wonderfully exotic novel drawing upon the magic of the tarot — and it was some years before she really became established in Britain, starting with her Time Master series (which began with The Initiate in 1985) and then with the long-running Indigo series, starting with Nemesis (1988). Cooper's work never draws upon sword-wielding heroes or epic battles. Her stories depict the world of individuals trapped by fate within their world of everyday magic. Such is the nature of the following story, written especially for this anthology, and the closest we come to the literary fairy tale.*

EVERYONE HAD ALWAYS SAID THAT TAIZU AND POLYENKA were the perfect couple. From the day they had first held hands in the crocodile of small children walking solemnly to learn their letters at fierce old Aunt Chanka's, the stars of their mutual fate had been set in their courses. Time passed, and dame school was soon exchanged for the hard realities of work: Taizu went as apprentice to the blacksmith, while Polyenka joined the chattering gaggle of girls labouring year-round in the fields. His gangling frame filled out, she blossomed from gawky child to slender young woman, and neither they nor anybody else in the village doubted what their future would be. Made for each other, everyone said. One more summer, perhaps two, and there would be a wedding in the village. Even the shaman and his three wise-wives nodded knowing approval and smiled as they anticipated the ceremony and the rituals and the gifts that would be heaped upon them to bring the couple good luck.

And so it had been. Taizu worked well and diligently at his trade; Polyenka learned to cook and sew and generally prepare for a change in her status. Both kept their virginity, encouraged (or intimidated) by lectures from the shaman, who promised the gods' disfavour if either should dare to experiment before the magical night of their marriage. The nuptials were to take place on the winter solstice - an auspicious date, said the shaman - and it seemed that piety was its own reward, for just one month before the appointed time the old blacksmith died and, as he had no sons to succeed him, the forge and its adjacent small cottage and garden were Taizu's to inherit.

The wedding was a wonderful excuse for drinking and dancing and general merriment, and by the time the young couple were allowed to escape to their new home half the village's adult population (and a few of the more unruly children, who would be punished for it tomorrow) were laid out in a glorious stupor on or under the tables where the feast had been served. Taizu had drunk his fair share, too, but when the door was bolted and the fire was banked up, and for the first time in their lives they lay together under the goosedown quilt that was the traditional village gift to newlyweds, the dizziness fell away from him and a new, deep emotion took its place. He cupped Polyenka's face between his hands and, in the firelight's glow, gazed with a kind of wonder at her warm grey eyes, the smiling curve of her mouth, the luxuriance of her fair hair. He wanted to speak, but his heart was so full that words would not come. Polyenka, though, found them for him. She said, "I love you, husband."

Husband. Wife. *His* wife. Always and for ever; the bond sealed and indissoluble. Taizu had not known it was possible for a man to be so happy.

"Wife," he said, trying the word for the very first time. "Dearest wife."

Her smile became still sweeter. "Promise you'll never leave me, Taizu."

"I promise, my love," he said.

For five years that promise was kept, to such a degree that a running joke grew up in the village: the shaman, people said, must have anointed Taizu and Polyenka with glue rather than holy water when he joined them in wedlock. The joke was good-spirited and Taizu and Polyenka laughed at it, just as they

laughed at everything. They were blissfully content. His business prospered, while she - when she was not helping in the forge for the sheer pleasure of being with him — discovered a natural talent for growing things, so that the flourishing fruit and vegetables in their garden were the envy of their neighbours. The only cloud that could have shadowed their happiness was the fact that there were, as yet, no children of their union. But neither minded too much. They were young and healthy, and the shaman's wise-wives assured them there was plenty of time. Better, they agreed, to enjoy their youth and their modest prosperity without the added responsibilities of a family.

Then, in the fifth summer of their marriage, the plague came.

It was an outbreak of the small plague; less deadly than its greater cousin but still capable of taking a serious toll. The previous summer's harvest had not been good, and the resulting winter shortages had been followed by a wet spring, making people more vulnerable than they might otherwise have been. The very old and the very young took it first; with nine days still to go before the midsummer solstice, six funerals had already taken place and the shaman held out little hope for several others who lay sick. Five days before the solstice, the shaman's second wise-wife died. Three days to go, and the twin sons of Taizu and Polyenka's nearest neighbour were put to bed with a high fever...

Taizu could not have forbidden his wife to do what she did, any more than he could have foreseen the consequences. Polyenka was young and robustly healthy; with their own garden to provide food, they had not been hit so hard by the crop failure of the previous year. And someone had to help the children, for their father was away working in another district and their mother had started to show the first unmistakable symptoms. Anyone with a grain of humanity would have gone into the house and nursed and cared for the sick family. Anyone.

But the one who did was Polyenka, and capricious fate decreed that, on the eve of the solstice, as the children and their mother began to pull through the worst of the fever, Taizu's beloved wife lurched suddenly forward in her chair by the hearth and whispered, "Oh, Taizu... my head *hurts* so..."

Taizu ran for the shaman, and the shaman came. But there was nothing he could do, for even the small plague had no cure beyond hope and prayer and a few herbs that might or might not have some minor effect. The fever came quickly, and the shaman stayed in the house all through the short summer night, intoning prayers and entreaties to the gods while Taizu wiped Polyenka's sweating brow, held a bowl for her as she retched black bile and tried vainly to soothe her when she cried with pain and fear.

Two hours after dawn she seemed to rally, and Taizu dared to allow himself to hope. She was young, she was strong - surely, *surely* she would live?

But at sunset the brief remission ended. And precisely at midnight on Midsummer Day, Polyenka died.

At the shaman's decree, she was buried by the holy well at the edge of the woodland, where it was said that the goddess of the trees came to bathe. Polyenka, the shaman said, deserved the honour of a sacred resting-place, for she was pure of heart and soul and the gods themselves would weep for her passing. Taizu felt as if his own tears would never stop. Day and night he cried for his wife, and nothing and no one could console him. She had been his life, his world, the joy of his heart, and without her nothing had any meaning. When the last rites were over and the women and children of the village had all laid flowers on Polyenka's new grave, he turned away without a word to anyone, went in to his house and quietly closed the door. He wanted to die. But to take one's own life was forbidden by the gods, and those who did so were not gathered into the joyful elysium of the afterworld but must languish for ever in the outer dark. Polyenka was in the joyful elysium.; the shaman had said so, and Taizu believed him. So Taizu knew he must endure, and wait for the day when his natural term was over and he could rejoin his love again.

He remained in his shuttered home for three days and three nights, before, on a bright, warm morning with a sweet wind frisking through the village, he emerged to take up the reins of his life again. But he was a changed man. Gone was the briskly cheerful manner, the ready smile, the infectious laughter. He worked diligently in his forge through all the daylight hours, but when work was done he closed himself away in his house and was not seen again until the next morning. He rarely spoke, never

smiled, and refused all invitations to join in the life of the village once more. He existed, but he no longer lived.

The small plague faded, the summer went on, and life returned to normal. Autumn came and went, and soon it was winter again. As the winter solstice approached, Taizu was seen less about the village than usual. Everyone knew why: the day was - or would have been - the fifth anniversary of his marriage to Polyenka. But even if he had wanted their sympathy nobody could find any words that seemed adequate. Better, they thought, to let him grieve in peace.

On solstice night Taizu stood at his window and silently watched the procession winding its way out of the village towards the high hilltop 2 miles away. As the last cluster of burning torches bobbed away into the dark, he closed the shutter and moved slowly to his familiar chair by the fire. Tonight they would celebrate the rebirth of the sun: a beacon fire would be lit, toasts drunk and prayers sent flying upwards, and tomorrow a new year would begin. Last year, he and Polyenka had been at the heart of the revels. Now...

He had thought he was done with crying, but the wave of misery caught him unawares and he laid his head down on the chair arm and gave way to it. He was still its grip when, with a detached part of his mind, he became aware of a sudden increase in the room's light. Thinking that perhaps a log had fallen out of the fire, and reacting instinctively to the possible danger, he raised his head.

The light was not a burning log. A pale, glowing golden oval had appeared beside the hearth. And in the oval stood Polyenka.

The chair skidded back and crashed over as shock brought Taizu lurching to his feet. For several moments all he could do was stare, mouth working but incapable of making any sound. Polyenka smiled and held out her hands towards him... then, with a thrill that all but tore the heart out of him, Taizu saw her step out of the shining oval and fully into the room.

His voice broke from its paralysis with a harsh sound, and he croaked, "My love... oh, my love... you have come home!"

"And that is the boon we have been granted," said Polyenka. "Because of the strength of our love, and the manner in which fate took me from you, I may return to you on each solstice night, summer and winter, until your own earthly life is over." She gazed into his eyes with a look that had always melted him, and melted him still. "Dearest Taizu, I am the happiest creature in this or any other world!"

Taizu still knelt on the floor where he had collapsed before her as though he were a worshipper before a goddess. His face was rapturous as he drank in her words. Each solstice night. Summer and winter. His wife. His beloved. Back with him. *Home*... He wanted to shout his joy to the rafters. He wanted to run outside into the cold and the crackling frost, and dance and sing wildly among the bare trees of his garden. He wanted to race to the hilltop where the villagers were celebrating, and scream his own praises to the gods who had plucked him from the dead ashes of his life and rekindled the flame of his soul. He did neither of these things. Instead, he ran to the kitchen and brought meat and bread and apples and beer and laid them before his beloved like a sacrificial offering. No matter that ghosts did not eat or drink and thus she could not join his feast of thanksgiving; no matter, even, that he could not touch her or kiss her or hold her in his arms as he used to do. She was *here*, and that was enough, *enough*.

Through the blissfully long winter night, Taizu sat beside the fire and talked with his Polyenka. She told him of the afterworld and its beauties that were beyond mortal ability to imagine, and he told her of the harvest and the doings of the village and of all her old friends. And they laughed and they joked, just as they used to do in the old, happy times.

When the first glimmer of dawn showed in the east, she left him, with a last blown kiss and the promise that he would see her again in half a year. It was an age to wait and yet it was nothing, and Taizu went to his bed and slept a deep, peaceful sleep that was filled with contented dreams of her. When he woke at noon, some of the memories had faded; he could no longer recall, for instance, her stories of the spirit world. But that, perhaps, was only right and proper; and anyway, it did not matter. Nothing

mattered, but that his Polyenka had come back to him, and would return twice each year until his life's end.

Taizu's neighbours puzzled greatly at the change in him, but he gently and smilingly evaded all their attempts to discover what had brought it about. He wanted no one to know of his boon; not even the shaman. He wanted to keep it close and private, a precious secret to be hoarded and nurtured and savoured. At last the neighbours gave up their efforts and agreed that Taizu must simply have recovered from his bereavement. A wonderful thing, to see him return to his old self again. No one should mourn for ever, and Taizu was young and resilient and had the best of his life before him. Another year, or perhaps two, and who could say that he might not marry again?

Taizu, though, had no intention of marrying again. He lived the next half-year in a state of growing anticipation, and only as the summer solstice drew very near did he suffer pangs of terror, fearing that perhaps he had had a bout of madness and Polyenka's return had been an illusion. But it was not an illusion. As darkness fell on the solstice night, she came to him again. And again they talked and laughed, and he forgot that she could not eat, and he became a little drunk with beer and happiness and the relief that his fears were unfounded. The summer night was brief and the visit ended all too soon. But she would come again at midwinter. She would *always* come again.

Ten years passed. Taizu, mid-thirties now, was in the prime of his strength, and very handsome. A number of girls in the village still had hopes of him, but he continued to disappoint them, until even the most optimistic gossips gave up their matchmaking. All the same, Taizu had a man's natural urges, and being fundamentally honest he privately admitted to himself that he *did* sometimes yearn for a woman to share his home and his bed, and give him children to carry on his name. But his love was for Polyenka; and even though that love could never be consummated again, to go with another would be to betray her. On their wedding night she had said: "*Promise you'll never leave me.*" He had kept that promise, and he always would. The sacrifice was worth while.

So each solstice Polyenka continued to return to her husband's hearth, and Taizu continued to live for her visits. No one in the village knew, or even began to guess, what took place in the blacksmith's house on those secret nights. More years passed. The old shaman went to the gods, and his eldest son took on his role and chose three new wise-wives of his own. People died of age or sickness, children were born and most survived, crops were good or bad as the capricious elements dictated. Taizu's business thrived, for he had nothing else to distract him from his work. At fifty he was a man of considerable substance, with two apprentices and a share in one of the largest grain-barns in the district. But still he lived for nothing else except Polyenka's next return.

The winter solstice after Taizu's fiftieth birthday was also the thirtieth anniversary of his and Polyenka's marriage. To Taizu it was a very special occasion, so as dusk fell he set to tidying the cottage, sweeping it from top to bottom, and then prepared a feast (he was no cook, but it was the intention that mattered) that he considered fit for such a celebration.

Polyenka came a little later than usual. At first Taizu did not notice the slight change in her manner. But after a while it occurred to him that she seemed... *distracted* was the best word he could find for it. Her eyes kept straying towards the window or the wall, though there was nothing there worth anyone's attention. And though she made a show of listening to his talk and laughing at his stories, he could not shake off the feeling that a part of her mind was elsewhere.

At last he ventured to ask, "My love, is anything wrong?"

"Wrong?" Polyenka's head came round quickly, and she smiled her familiar smile. (Though was there something a little too ready about it? He could not be sure...) "No, beloved, of course not."

Taizu was not entirely satisfied, and persisted. "It's just that you seem... a little apart from me tonight. As if you are not entirely happy."

"I am happy," said Polyenka. "How could I not be, when I am with you?" A pause. "Only..." Alarm filled him. "What, sweet wife? What is it?"

She shook her head and her ghost-hair shimmered, making Taizu's heart turn over with love. She was *so* beautiful... "Nothing of any importance, dearest. I was just somewhat surprised when I first saw you." Again, that smile. "You have changed a little, Taizu."

"Changed? How?"

She laughed. (Did he imagine a faintly false note in the laughter? No; it was his imagination...) "Your hair. You are going grey. And there is a bald patch on your crown."

Taizu put his hand up to his head in surprise. He only looked in a glass when shaving, and he had not noticed anything untoward. But she was right: his pate *was* thinning. Embarrassed, he, too, laughed.

"Well, perhaps you are right. But it's only natural in a man when he grows older. Beddo - you remember Beddo? - hadn't a single hair on his head by the time he was my age. And as for grey: well, they say it's distinguishing, don't they?"

"Yes," said Polyenka, not meeting his eyes. "And they are right, of course; it is most distinguishing. I simply noticed. That's all."

Taizu was reassured, and the rest of the night passed in comfortable talk. Afterwards, he did reflect for a little, wondering idly how Polyenka herself would have looked now, if she still lived a mortal life. She, of course, had not changed since the day of her death; she would always be the young and lovely girl he had married. But would *her* hair have been grey by now? Would she have stayed as slender as she was, or would she have become plump and spreading, like so many of the village women? The questions could not be answered, and so there was no point speculating. It was a curiosity. That was all.

Taizu passed his fifty-fifth birthday, and as his sixtieth approached, his friends planned a celebration party for him. The birthday would fall twelve days after the summer solstice, and though, out of neighbourliness, Taizu did his best to show enthusiasm for the occasion, he was far more preoccupied by excitement at the prospect of Polyenka's next visit. Last winter she had been very late (it had happened on a number of occasions in the past few years), and he hoped with all his heart that this time she would appear promptly.

She did not. In fact it was almost midnight when the glowing golden oval began to glimmer by the hearth, and when Polyenka stepped out of it she did not greet him with her customary loving affection, but stood in the middle of the room, staring at him with an expression that he could not interpret. Though he could not believe it possible in her, she looked *sulky*.

"My love," he began, holding out his arms to her.

"Hello, Taizu." Polyenka shifted restlessly, and seemed reluctant to look at him. Taizu felt the stirrings of a deep dread. In truth he had felt it before, but in the past he had refused to acknowledge it, pushing it away down into a part of his mind where it could not creep out and assail him. This time, though, it would not be quieted. This time, it could not be ignored.

He opened his mouth, not knowing what to say but desperate to say *something* that would turn the tide and make everything all right again. Polyenka, though, took the reins from his hands before he could utter a sound.

She said, "Taizu, I don't want to come any more."

Taizu's world crashed into shards around him. He stared at her, feeling that he was falling into a bottomless pit of bewilderment and betrayal. "Why?" he asked in a tiny, helpless whisper.

She turned away, her hair rippling. "Oh, Taizu... Don't you see? You've *changed* so. These last years... it's been growing each time, and I can't... I just can't... Taizu, you're *old!*"

Tears began to trickle down the lines on Taizu's face. "Old...?" he repeated.

"Yes, *old!* Look at yourself! Your hair's gone grey - what hair you have left - and your skin is wrinkled, and you've put on weight and are starting to stoop. You're an old man, and it makes me shudder just to look at you!"

Appalled, he tried to protest. "But I'm still Taizu!"

"No, you're not! Not the Taizu I married. He was young, like me, and handsome. But all that's gone, and it will never come back. *I* don't want to come back, Taizu, and I won't, not after tonight." At

last she did look at him, and what he saw in her eyes scattered the last ashes of Taizu's hopes. "I can't love a man as old as you. I *can't*."

Taizu pleaded with her. He begged, he wept, he reasoned, he railed and even screamed. But Polyenka was immovable, and the inevitable moment came when she gazed at him one final time - a pitying gaze, with distaste lurking behind it - and said, "I'm sorry, Taizu. But I'm going now. Goodbye... my dear."

Those last two words, "my dear", were like a viper's bite to Taizu. As the golden oval faded, taking Polyenka with it, he sank to his knees on the floor, crying like an abandoned child. The tears flowed on and on, and did not stop until dawn began to break. Then, he rose stiffly to his feet and walked slowly, dull-eyed, to his bedroom, where his little shaving-glass hung on the wall. By the trickle of early light coming in at the window he stared at his own reflection, and truly saw for the first time the old man that Polyenka could no longer love. The young and handsome Taizu of the past was still there, he knew; if he unfocused his eyes he could almost glimpse him, smiling and merry, behind the reflection. But Polyenka had chosen to look only at the surface, like a child admiring the dazzle of sunlight on water and not caring what lay beneath.

Taizu turned away from the glass, and lay for an hour on his bed, and then rose and began his work, as he always did. The birthday party took place, for it would have been churlish to spurn his neighbours' kindness. But through it all he did not smile, and rarely spoke, and though the village wondered at the change in him, no one had the courage - or the discourtesy - to probe.

Life went on as it always had, and for Taizu the sun no longer shone. Each solstice night he kept a lonely vigil, but Polyenka did not return. Ten years passed and Taizu was seventy. By an ironic joke of fate he showed no signs of failing. He had not died of overwork, or disease, or accident; indeed, he looked set to continue on for many more years yet. The winter solstice came again. If Polyenka had lived, they would have been wed fifty years, but Taizu sternly forbade himself to think of that. It was just a day, like any other.

No one paid much heed when, two days before the occasion, Taizu went down with a sneezing rheum. He was old, but he was strong; the ailment was nothing and would soon pass. But it did not pass. The morning of the solstice eve found Taizu confined to his bed; through the day he weakened rapidly, and by nightfall his neighbours were seriously concerned. They nursed him, tried to feed him, tried to rally him, but he did not rally, and shortly before midnight the shaman was sent for.

One look at Taizu told the shaman all, and he prayed by the bedside until it was over. Taizu died surrounded by his good friends and neighbours, and the last words he spoke before his eyes closed for the final time were: "Ah, my Polyenka..." He was smiling.

There were trees and fields and rivers, and a strange and wonderful golden light shone over all as Taizu gazed around him. In the distance he could hear laughter and music, and a scent of flowers and something even headier came to him on the warm breeze. It took him a little while to understand, and when he did, his spirit rejoiced. The gods judged him worthy, and he had come to elysium.

He began to walk, not with any aim in mind but simply for the delight of it. Walking was easier than it had been, and he marvelled at that, until a pool of water showed him the answer to the conundrum. The pool was deep and the water pure and shining, and when he knelt to drink from it he saw his face reflected clearly in the smooth surface. The old man with his wrinkles and white hair and stooping back was gone. From the water young Taizu was smiling back at him, and he would never be old again.

Taizu's soul bloomed with a happiness that he had never known before. He walked on, striding now with new confidence, a spring in his step. As he neared a grove of trees, more laughter came on the breeze, and a group of nymphs appeared. They ran to him, still laughing, and danced around him, playful and coquettish. They were beautiful. In fact, Taizu thought, they were the most beautiful creatures he had ever seen...

The nymphs led him in to the grove, their eyes promising delight. Taizu rejoiced in their attentions.

Was he not a man? Did he not feel as a man felt? This was what the gods promised in the afterlife; the old shaman had said so, long ago, and now Taizu knew that he had been right. He would meet the shaman again, here. He would meet old friends. He would meet—

He saw her then, as she ran towards him through the trees with the light dappling on her golden hair. Her face smiled radiantly, and she held out her arms to him and she cried, "Taizu! Oh, my beloved husband, you have come home!"

*Oh, my beloved husband.* But it had not been so, had it, ten years ago, when he was old and grey and no longer handsome. *I can't love a man as old as you*, she had told him. And she had left him, abandoned him, because all she could or would look for was the sunlight on the surface of the pool.

Old Taizu gazed wisely out of young Taizu's eyes, and with an honesty and clear-sightedness that only comes with age he thought that perhaps she was not as beautiful as he had once believed. A little too broad in the face. A little too heavy in the leg. And that sulky look, which he had seen in her face on the night of her last visit... it had always been a trait of hers, though in the old days he had been too much in love to notice. The sunlight on the water had, perhaps, dazzled him, too...

He glanced at the nymphs, who had withdrawn from him and clustered together a short way off. One of them, seeing, waved to him and blew a kiss. Taizu smiled, then turned to his wife. She had stopped, and there was sudden doubt on her face. For all that he was no longer mortal, Taizu's nature was still human, and thus imperfect. So it was surely forgivable that he should feel just a *small* sense of pleasure and justice at her chagrin. Just a *small* one.

He bowed to her, and he said with meticulous but cool courtesy, "Polyenka." Then he turned and, with the nymphs drifting like enchanter's smoke behind him, walked away into the grove.