

AI JIANG

LING HUN



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—Yi Izzy Yu, Translator of *The Shadow Book of Ji Yun*



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LINGHUN

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PRAISE FOR LINGHUN

“Ai Jiang’s *Linghun* is the ache that follows after every funeral, when the mourners are gone and nothing is left but the haunting of memories. A ruthlessly precise meditation on what grief does to the heart, *Linghun* is a must-read if you enjoy crying your way through every chapter of a book.”

—Cassandra Khaw, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Nothing But Blackened Teeth*

“A devastating parable of loss, Ai Jiang’s *Linghun* is a meditation on grief, how it changes us, makes ghost of the living, and keeps us trapped in prisons of mourning. It’s a testament to Jiang’s ferocity as a lyricist of sorrow and heartbreak that I read this book in one sitting and expect it will haunt me for a very, very long time to come. Truly remarkable.”

—Kealan Patrick Burke, Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *Kin* and *Sour Candy*

“Ai Jiang probes the very notion of ghosts to offer us something far more haunting: it is the living who we should fear the most, where the boundless parameters of our own grief lay down the blueprint for an altogether new Hill House to inhabit.”

—Clay McLeod Chapman, author of *Ghost Eaters*

“The neighborhood in *Linghun* is a twisted-neck demon, forever looking backward at the ghosts and ghosts-to-be. Ai Jiang builds an altar of the flawed living and the perfect dead with an unflinching eye for death-cloaked domestic tragedy. A haunting, brilliant debut.”

—Hailey Piper, Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *Queen of Teeth*

“A somber but beautiful story about grief and the pain of memory. The ghosts stay with us long after Ai Jiang’s *Linghun* is over, but they remind us of the gift we have that is to be alive.”

—Cynthia Pelayo, Bram Stoker Award-nominated author of *Children of Chicago*

“Mother believes the dead deserve our full attention—Linghun asks us whether that’s at the expense of the living. A dark, wise, and heartbreaking examination of grief and yearning, family and agency.”

—Premee Mohamed, Nebula Award-winning author of the *Beneath the Rise* trilogy

“Ai Jiang’s debut novella *Linghun* packs an absolute punch. A reflection on grief, the dangers of not letting go, on the terrible price of love—and why we’re so willing to pay for it. Wonderful, strange, and heartbreaking. Highly recommended.”

—Angela Slatter, award-winning author of *The Path of Thorns*

“*Linghun* will forever wander like a ghost in the halls of my reader’s heart, its message of grief and loss lingers, the beauty of Ai Jiang’s prose a treasured new voice. What a haunting debut.”

—Sadie Hartmann, Bram Stoker Award-nominated editor, and author of *101 Books to Read Before You’re Murdered*

“Eerie and palpable, with unrequited longing, *Linghun* is a quiet tour de force, a diasporic ghost story of half-life, family, and deferred dreams. Ai Jiang’s writing is fiercely evocative and resounds with meaning and clarity. *Linghun* is a tale that lingers.”

—Lee Murray, four-time Bram Stoker Award-winner and author of *Tortured Willows*

“Ai Jiang’s *Linghun* is unlike any Gothic tale I have encountered before. Jiang has written a gripping, tragic, and multifaceted story of grief as: a prison, a comfort, a burden, a struggle, a violent act, and yes, to some, a home. It is an incredibly intricate and layered study of how loss permeates our lives and who we are. Brilliant and thoughtfully realized, *Linghun* and the people of ‘HOME’ have my heart and will haunt me for years to come.”

—Suzan Palumbo, Nebula Award finalist

“... its own twenty-first century literary miracle.”

—Yi Izzy Yu, Translator of *The Shadow Book of Ji Yun*

“Jiang is a masterful storyteller, *Linghun* her stunning tapestry, thematically rich and intricately layered. It is a tale of love and loss and who gets left behind when we honor the dead over embracing the living. Like ghosts in the tale, *Linghun* lingers—promising to live on in readers’ hearts and minds for years to come.”

—Kelsea Yu, author of *Bound Feet* and *The Bones Beneath Paris*

“*Linghun* confronts the ways we dismantle and sacrifice ourselves to the dark loves that consume us. No ghost haunts like the specter of grief, and Jiang forces us to face the greater terrors we birth when we feed our fears. *Linghun* is exquisite, psychological horror in the tradition of Shirley Jackson, which fans of *The Haunting of Hill House* will find a ready home in.”

—Eliane Boey, author of *Other Minds*

“*Linghun* is the book you should pick up when you want to spend a long night having your heart broken with supernatural grace. It’s literary horror’s catharsis for grief, for feeling lost, for our terror of failing and/or being abandoned. I never doubted for a moment that I was being taken to a terrible place by a careful hand for a good reason; and everything from the prose to the structure tells you so the whole way. In the end, I’m left feeling lighter, and I expect years down the road, I’ll fully understand why.”

—Alex Woodroe, author of *Whisperwood*

CONTENT WARNINGS

Abuse, Child Abuse, Child Death, Death, Graphic Imagery, Racism, Trauma, Violence

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LINGHUN

AI JIANG



*For all the flashlights in my life who guided me to, through, and out of the
darkness—and embraced the wild chaos that drives me.*

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LINGHUN

A RAMBLE ON DI FU LING & DEATH

YǒNGSHÍ

TEETER TOTTER

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

FOREWORD

I read Ai Jiang's literary nonfiction before her speculative fiction. It was there that I fell in love with her writing. All the literary virtues I long for were strikingly present: prose so beautifully and vividly descriptive that I felt it on my skin, the articulation of feelings and thoughts I didn't know I had until I read them, diverse characters observed as finely and lovingly as gems through a jeweler's eye.

I was also deeply struck by Jiang's genuine voice, how relentlessly and artfully she risked vulnerability, whether she was exploring the liminality of diasporic identity, or childhood self-consciousness about wearing an eye patch and a tongue surgery (vision and speech, along with naming, remain pervasive themes across her body of work). In everything, Jiang "wrote from the wound" as Jack Ketchum famously advised writers to do—even while being slyly hilarious and pulling off more than a few clever puns.

But, as I read more Jiang—especially her speculative fiction—what I came to crave most was her enthusiasm for pursuing life's deepest questions. To these questions, her stories never give pat answers. Rather, they respond via fraught, dream-like atmospheres; messy human and inhuman lives, and startling metaphors in which buried dolls stand in for society's forgotten victims, or language is traded like currency.

Such a wondering impulse is frequently found in East Asian literature, with its deep roots in *zhiguai* (records of the strange), Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist philosophies, with their probing questions about right action, right seeing, and right relationships. It is found so frequently, in fact, that one doesn't bat an eye when wide-eyed children begin discussing Jungian psychology in the middle of a ghost-hunting anime, or when a grim reaper K-drama suddenly veers from a meet-cute accidental kiss to a moving discussion on fate, reincarnation, and spiritual debt. But the greatest achievement of Jiang's interstitial work is that it blends these aesthetic bents with literary realism's humanistic awareness of individual struggle, and the thriller's sure sense of tension and suspense, to be its own twenty-first century literary miracle.

Linghun is stunningly a case in point. This book's title, as readers versed in

Chinese know, means soul—either the soul of a person which survives death, or the soul of an artistic work so extraordinary in execution that it seems alive. Both uses fit *Linghun* to a tee.

The novella explores the desperate attempts of bereaved families to buy one of the haunting-prone houses in the spiritualist community of HOME, a town that is a metaphor for both the inner state of grief and the global housing crisis. But managing—via family connection, trickery, wealth, or begging—to secure a house is not the end of these grief migrants’ difficulties. Because once inside, it is no easy thing to ghost-whisper back the dead, even with collective power of ritual, occult naming, and sheer force of will. The inhabitants, particularly the novella’s three POV characters (Wenqi, Liam, and Mrs.) must survive the fracturing of the bonds of family, friendship, and their own psyches.

Jiang is no stranger to mining the trope of the ghost. Her short horror story “The Catcher in the Eye” features a girl who possesses an eye that can see ghosts, along with people’s most hidden selves, and many of her other stories includes ghosts, both literal and figurative, cultural and personal.

However, *Linghun* takes the concept to harrowing new places. Literally, in the form of HOME’s haunted houses, eerie high schools, and bloodily violent house auctions, and philosophically via powerful dramatized meditations on cultural estrangement, the limits of personal obligations to the dead and the living, and all the ways that the present can be haunted by the past, as well as by lost and hoped-for futures.

That the trope of the ghost should serve as the vehicle for such resonant material, especially in the hands of a writer with the vision of Ai Jiang, should come as no surprise. Attempts to communicate with the dead are the subjects of some of the oldest written records.

Indeed, the roots of written Chinese lie partially in the symbols that mediums carved onto turtle shells, to be cracked by flame and deciphered as messages from the dead, a practice that gave way to Ouija-like spirit boards in 500 B.C. Home and tomb shrines are still popular today, and are used for ancestor veneration and to communicate with loved ones in an Earth-like astral realm.

The manga writer-artist, Junji Ito, once famously said that his strategy for writing horror is to take something and look at it from a backward perspective. Ai Jiang does this with everything spectral in this brilliant

funhouse mirror of a novella—from ancestor veneration to the concept of hungry ghosts and haunted houses.

That said, it is the fusing of the themes of haunting and immigration that ultimately make this book such a tour de force. The juxtaposition is simply brilliant. Both ghosts and immigrants grieve lost worlds, lost futures, and lost relationships. Both attempt communication back home with great difficulty across vast differences in time and space—difficulties made all the greater because of how much their journeys change them.

This fusion moved me to tears more than once. I thought of my own recent grandmother's death in China, and how I could not be there for her final days (she was faithfully there for my first). I set up an ancestral shrine for her in our living room so that we might continue to share our lives. I also thought of my own bitter struggles with family that led me to immigrate to America, and how for so long, I felt like a ghost here—half-seen, half-heard, neither this thing nor that, caught between realms. More than anything, however, I was moved thinking of the struggles of others. Herein lies *Linghun's* greatest triumph.

Any reader can relate to the many dilemmas Jiang explores in *Linghun*. Thanks to her craft prowess, guided by a compassion so broad in scope that it welcomes everything that is human or that once was, the reader realizes that we all are diasporic, be it culturally, geographically or spiritually.

The Chinese philosopher, Confucius, was infamously agnostic when it came to ghosts, thinking it better to concentrate on the living and living rightly. How can you understand death if you don't understand life? he asked, a sentiment echoed in *Linghun* by the teenager Liam: "*This town worships the dead, but it has no respect for the living.*"

Confucius *was* a proponent of ancestor veneration. In the *Analects*, he explains that such rituals are as much (if not more) about the living than the dead. They are a way to bring about harmony within ourselves, to say the things we never said in life, to heal fractured relationships, and to tame our own grief-stricken souls as much as those of ghosts.

Reading books, as every reader knows, is a ritual, one that shamanically allows us to temporarily step into different ways of being. A writer's best version of themselves writes books, and the books, in turn, awaken the reader's best version of themselves, and help cultivate their wisdom and humanity.

Linghun is a gorgeous shrine of a book, wrought by a writer with important things to say and the showstopping talent to say them. Reading it is a ritual that will leave you breathless yet wanting more—more of this writer’s voice, more of this world, more life.

And it more than deserves the offering of your time.

—Yi Izzy Yu, Translator of *The Shadow Book of Ji Yun*

WENQI

I stumble dizzy and carsick into the kitchen to find Mother unpacking. Her eyes dart everywhere rather than focusing on the task at hand. Bowls and plates litter the island, the dining table, and the edges of the sink. Cupboards sit open, empty. Father stands next to her, rubbing a hand across his stubbled chin, running a finger along a growing shadow of a mustache. His other hand rests against the sink, twitching, not knowing where else to place it or what he should be doing with it.

“The agent said it might take a while before he appears,” Mother says in a feverish whisper, fixing her hair the way she used to right before leaving for a job interview.

Before we got the house, she worked in a travel agency downtown. But that didn’t last long. Mother said there was a new co-worker who too closely resembled what my brother would have looked like as an adult. Their names were also similar.

“In the pamphlet she gave us, it says placing their items or photos around the house might help,” Father says.

Mother flings herself over to a box by the fridge and rips it open. She takes out several framed family photos—none are recent. All the pictures, like my brother, are frozen in time. Mother hurries around the house while Father and I stare. She places one frame on the dining table and one on the coffee table in the living room. Her footsteps thunder up the stairs. Doors open, close, open, close. Footsteps pitter, patter, pitter, patter. She returns, and I imagine she has placed a similar family portrait on the desk in my room: Mother, with her hand on my shoulder, the other hand on my brother’s, Father behind her with a hand at her waist and the other on my brother’s head.

When Mother returns, she grabs a stack of unframed photos, this time of *only* my brother: ultrasounds, preschool and kindergarten pictures, him in a graduation cap, holding a certificate of excellence at the end of first grade. His photos end there. A younger me, half my brother’s age, stands in the picture, clutching his arm with a wobbly smile and missing teeth.

My brother was always the golden child, the one who carried the family's honor, the one who would have carried the family name as per tradition—unlike me, who will only carry the name of my husband *if* I marry. Mother and Father often try to convince me that they are not as traditional as their parents, yet they doted on my brother, the first-born son, and often forgot about me. They still do, even though he's gone. I'm convinced that, had they been offered the choice, my parents would have traded my life for my brother's, with little hesitation. At least, Mother would have, and probably still would, if given the chance. I grew up hearing her complain often how Father's Mother was always insisting that my parents try for another son, but Mother was—and still is—too heartbroken to think about children.

Mother disappears again. Father and I wait, listening to the ticking of a small clock—the same one Mother used for my brother's reading hours, back when we still lived in Fuzhou. I still remember the way my brother drew me closer while he read so that I could see the words, but they were always too advanced for my age. I can recall the images, but I don't recognize the Chinese characters in my memories.

After Mother sets everything up, the three of us sit in the living room waiting for something to happen—for my brother's promised appearance—but nothing does.

MRS.

The new arrivals to the neighborhood moved into the house across the street. There is only one reason anyone would trek through the guarding trees to get to HOME: not to seek new life, but to satisfy a longing for the dead.

Houses in HOME sate the unending hunger of those most vulnerable, unsuspecting. They feed on our desires, our pain. So much pain. And to wallow in such pain... It is a hideous thing.

Isn't it strange? How everyone here desires their homes to be haunted?

You wonder if the newcomers will be the same as the others. You wonder if they, too, will be unrelenting, or perhaps they will be like you... unhaunted.

WENQI

After we eat dinner in silence, I move to the living room window and look out upon our new street. Our lawn is overgrown and full of weeds, but it is also full of people. I had been too sick on the drive in to care much about these odd vagabonds, but curiosity gnawed at my mind.

“Why are there people on the lawns?” I ask.

“Don’t worry about them,” says Mother, sounding more than a bit absentminded. “The agent assured us that these people are a normal occurrence here, since everyone wants to move into this neighborhood and is more than willing to wait. What did she call them again? Oh yes, *lingerers*—that’s the word. But it matters not. We’re just grateful we got a house here. Aren’t we?”

I look out again at the trees that have grown too tall, too unruly for the narrow street. Their overgrown branches cast ominous shadows over our house and the rest, preventing any sunlight from reaching the roofs or shining through our windows. This house resembles little of our home in Scarborough, and it’s nothing like our home back in Fuzhou.

Father looks to Mother. His grip tightens against his chopsticks, and his knuckles turn white. “Yes, yes, yes,” he agrees.

Most of the neighborhood is unkempt, but directly across the street, a plain little home rests upon a neatly trimmed plot of grass. Cared-for flower beds line the house’s front facade. Above the tangles of rose and lavender, I see an old woman sitting by her front window, clutching an urn upon her lap. Instead of drawing the curtains closed like I expect her to, she continues to stare at me and my family.

I turn back to my parents, speaking again of the people on our lawn. “Can we ask them to leave?”

“No,” Father says, eying Mother through a mask of worry.

Back outside, a man leans against the large SOLD sign stuck into the grass. Below it is the neighborhood’s name in a smaller bold font: HOME—Homecoming Of Missing Entities. It sounds like a joke, but nothing about this place feels worthy of laughter. Mother has a smile on her face, but Father seems more wary about this endeavor.

The lingerers continue to stare at the house, *into* the house, with their bodies almost leaning toward the front door, as if being manipulated by an unseen puppeteer and their invisible strings. The lingerers on the other lawns hold the same position. My parents pretend to not be bothered by it, but I can see the sweat glisten on Father's forehead, and I can see Mother discreetly wringing her hands, playing with her wedding band.

A boy sitting on the lawn two houses down, across the street, has his back turned to the brown and yellow house he sits in front of. His eyes catch mine, and I can see a spark of curiosity.

I wonder how long the boy has been here. And I wonder when I will be able to leave.

• • •

The next day, Mother takes a wet rag to the framed photos of my brother and wipes the glass. She runs a feather duster over the unframed photos that have been taped to the walls; the adhesive holding them there has already begun to fail. Father follows behind, lingering by the entrance of each room with hands behind his back, watching Mother with a longing expression. I can see he's afraid to step in, as if the action would disrupt a ritual meant to remain between mother and son.

Mother isn't how she used to be, but neither is Father. I don't blame them, but sometimes I wish I am an only child. I attempt to shake the cruel thought from my mind, but a small voice prods at my consciousness despite my efforts. It reminds me that this cruelty inside me is alive, and perhaps, always will be. An evil voice whispers: *If there is to be only one child, it wouldn't be you.*

"She said it should work," Mother mutters. "It *has* to work." Her voice is becoming more feverish by the second.

Father approaches Mother, but then backs away when she throws her hands at him, exasperated.

"The agent did say it might take a day or two," Father reminds her. "Maybe even a week—"

Mother shakes her head, jaw clenched. "You don't understand how much *convincing*—"

"I know, I know—"

“How much *money*—”

“Don’t worry, we can pay—”

“I’m not even *close* with that cousin. But thank goodness for the debt they owed my late Father. I guess I should be thankful they parted with the house despite not wanting to.” Mother scrubs too furiously at one particular photograph on the wall before realizing her mistake: the water from the rag has damaged the delicate paper.

Instead of pausing to assess the damage, Mother trembles, then scrubs even harder at the smearing ink until the paper flakes apart and falls in pieces to her feet—one foot bare, the other foot wearing a slipper. She collapses with the tattered remains of my brother’s photo in her hands. We had to travel an hour away from Fuzhou and climb halfway up a mountain to take that photo. In it, my brother wears his favorite *Power Rangers* swim trunks; they were handed down to him from our cousin.

I step backward so that I can hide behind the frame of the living room doorway. Father approaches Mother slowly and with caution. When he is near enough, he reveals a slipper in his hand. While Mother tries to piece together the image she destroyed, Father kneels down beside her and gently secures the slipper over her bare foot. Mother hardly notices—even when Father places a hand on her hand and gently strokes her fingers, works carefully to loosen her grip on the soggy pieces of paper.

Mother doesn’t sob, but she lets the tears stream silently down her cheeks. Father doesn’t cry either, but he allows his eyes to redden, burn. The tears gather, but he refuses to let them escape.

I return to my room and pull out the photo printer from beneath my bed. I search my phone for the image of my brother that my Mother accidentally destroyed. I find it and reprint it. While I reprint the photo, I make note of the “airplane mode” symbol in the corner of my phone and how it’s still turned on. The agent insisted that we stay disconnected from the outside world for as long as we’re here—which might be forever—because, according to her, the dead deserve our full attention.

When Mother and Father retire to their rooms at night, disappointed that my brother didn’t show up today, I tiptoe to the living room and tape the freshly printed photo to the spot left bare by its predecessor. I hope this gesture of mine coaxes my brother to appear. I hope he sees it as a peace offering for all my prior transgressions.

• • •

In the morning, Mother and Father pick quietly at their breakfast. A single piece of burnt toast, now soggy, lays forgotten in the damp sink. I join the table and fork the glossy, veiny exterior layer of a century egg into my steaming porridge and begin to eat. Father meets my eye, then stares past me to the reprinted photo I taped to the wall the night before. He looks back to me and nods. Mother refuses to acknowledge either of us, choosing instead to stare at my brother's portrait sitting in the middle of the table. She runs a finger over the glass, her cheeks bulging, food still held in her mouth, unswallowed.

"I want to go home," I whisper.

Mother slams down her chopsticks, causing the table to quake.

"This—" Mother gestures around us. "This *is* our home."

I shake my head.

"Wenqi," she says, eyes narrowing, "you know why we're here." A pause. She chews on her lower lip. "You *know* what we *sacrificed* to come here. You —"

"You *made* me sacrifice everything! I didn't agree to this!" I say.

Mother's mouth hangs open. She turns to Father, who has his arms crossed over his chest, but he isn't looking at either of us, only at the gloves he will need when he leaves for his construction job back in Toronto. It's the one thing he doesn't have to leave completely behind—or rather, the one thing he *can't* leave completely behind.

"See!" Mother says to Father, motioning with an open-palm in my direction. "This is why he won't show up." She whips her head back toward me, sneering. "You have to *want* him here, Wenqi!"

I would be lying if I say I do, but I would also be lying if I say I don't. As a child, my brother gave me more affection than Mother, Father, and all my relatives combined. I know I should be appreciative, but I mostly wonder if he did it simply as a way to cope with all the attention he received for the both of us. Maybe he wanted to give me something of himself unconditionally as protest to the conditional way he was often praised by the family, which meant worrying, nagging, and undue pressure.

"I do," I say, as evenly as I can.

Mother shakes her head, teeth clenched and grinding, her jaw jutting outwards. She turns her back to me.

“You’ll sleep in the room we set up for your brother tonight. You’ll share a room. Like how you used to as children.” Her voice is tight and pitched.

Both Father and I look at the back of Mother’s head in disbelief—Father more in shock, me more with anger.

“No—”

“You will!”

I look to Father for help, but he only looks away. He grabs his construction gloves from the table and makes an effort to check the time in silence—this is only for show since his body knows exactly when it needs to leave for work. Wordlessly, he heads for the front door.

Mother speaks again.

“You will.”

• • •

When night arrives, I retire to my room only to find that the door has been shut and locked with a key. But instead of making my way to my brother’s room like Mother wants, I sleep sitting upright against the wall beside my door.

Wenqi.

I drive my fingers into my ears, a futile effort.

Wenqi.

I squeeze my eyes shut so tight that the black landscape behind my eyelids speckled with white.

Kan zhe wo. Look at me.

I don’t.

I want him here, but I’m afraid.

• • •

In the morning, I wake to find myself in my brother’s bed, Mother’s face hovering over mine with anticipation. The weight of her presence is suffocating.

“Your brother? Did he appear?” Mother asks, as though it is the most normal question in the world, as though resurrecting a ghost from the dead is

as mundane as completing a homework assignment. She smiles, too wide, too bright, straining to wait patiently for my answer. She used to be more patient, but I could be misremembering. Maybe the patience I recall was reserved only for my brother.

“No, he didn’t,” I say, hoping that after enough failed attempts, she will eventually give up this morbid game. It’s a futile hope, but one I can’t help but cling to.

Mother’s smile twitches, then fades. She leans back, allowing the sun from the open window to pierce my eyes and cast her almost fully in shadow. Mother brushes the loose hairs from her forehead, then forces the smile to reappear.

“Well, we’ll try again until he does.”

She springs to her feet, brushes the wrinkles from her nightgown, and rushes toward the entrance, closing the door a little too hard on the way out.

• • •

The next evening, when Father returns home from work sometime after midnight, I’m crouched outside of my parents’ bedroom door, watching Mother sleep. Curled into the fetal position, Mother holds herself as though she is clutching a newborn baby. But when I hear Father’s footsteps move toward the stairs, I rush back to my room and jump quickly into bed (Mother had forgotten to lock the door today).

Instead of climbing the stairs, Father’s footsteps wander off again.

I stare at the ceiling and listen to his path below: down the hallway and into the living room, then into the kitchen, no doubt in search of leftovers. He knows they won’t sit well with his stomach, but I’m certain he eats them anyway.

Shortly after, he heads upstairs.

My eyes droop, but when Father doesn’t go to his and Mother’s room and instead passes it, they pop wide open. I hold my breath as he shuffles by my door, his shadow drifting past the small gap, the one I keep open out of habit, ever since I was a child. Part of me hopes he’ll pause and poke his head in like he used to, come inside, even if it’s just to tidy up the dirty laundry and stray papers scattered about the floor.

Father’s footsteps stop in front of my brother’s room. With stealth, I crawl

on all fours to my bedroom door and shove my eye against the gap, careful not to accidentally shut it with my face.

Father with his back to the wall beside my brother's door. He slowly drops to a sitting position and rests his head against the frame. He whispers just loud enough for me to hear—loud enough, perhaps, out of fear that my brother won't hear his words otherwise.

"Your mother misses you," he begins. "So does your sister, even though she doesn't say it."

I pull back into a child's pose, resting my forehead on the back on my knees, tears collecting fast, even as I will them to stop. My nose burns, and I almost choke on my own saliva when I gasp. I hold a hand over my mouth.

"I—" His voice cracks.

My body heaves. Tears fall.

Father tries again. "I—" Falters again.

A shuddering breath, but I can't tell who it's from.

"I—"

Miss you.

But the voice doesn't belong to either of us.

• • •

A screech comes from upstairs. It's a sound not of horror, but one of shock and joy. Father has an expression of nervous excitement, but I feel my stomach churn, forcing bile into my throat. My brother didn't appear last night, only his voice, but today—

Father is the first to make a move, heading toward the stairs without looking back. I follow suit only when he disappears around the corner. The stairs feel like a mountain, exhausting me both mentally and physically by the time I reach the top.

Mother is crouching down, embracing... something. I'm afraid to see what it is.

Father pauses at the doorway for only a moment before striding quickly toward Mother. Beside her stands my brother, his head resting on her shoulder, his hair tousled the same way it was when he was alive. His portrait comes to my mind, but the face of my brother's ghost—the thing standing before me—remains blurry, like static. His features waver, flitting in and out

of sight. From what the agent has told us, Mother and Father should see my brother precisely as he was before his death, with great clarity. A perfect replica.

With a glitching grin, he says to me, “Meimei.” *Little sister*. His voice warbles in and out of the correct pitch, and it crackles, flipping through radio channels quickly, from one station to the next.

Do my parents see and hear the same thing? There is an air of uncertainty in the room, but Mother and Father’s expressions hold delight. They beckon me forth. My brother raises a hand to greet me, the fingers merged as one.

I’m the elder sibling now, so why do I still feel so small? Much to my parents’ dismay, I’m hesitant to approach.

Father tries to convince Mother that I will come around eventually, but Mother looks as though she will force me to sleep in my brother’s bedroom again. Father secures her surrender once Mother realizes that my brother is here to stay, no matter how uncomfortable I may feel about it.

My brother continues to appear at the same spot in his bedroom, at the same time each day: 4:04 p.m., the precise time of his death. And he continues to return to his room every night at the same time, disappearing at 10:44 p.m., the precise time of my birth.

• • •

On my way to school the next morning, I avoid making eye contact with the lingerers as best I can, which is easier than it sounds since it’s a rather short walk, considering. The school is nestled inside the residential part of town not far from where I now live, but unlike the homes surrounding it, the school is a squat, three-story building made of red brick. Blue-green ivy, with purple-red tinged stems, crawl along the walls.

The building is half the size of my previous high school in Scarborough, so I’m convinced it will be easier to navigate. But when I enter, I find myself lost as I walk in search of the principal’s office. I look around and become confused by the concept of direction. But stranger still is the way the corners have been rounded, as if forcefully sanded down. Some are smoother, more rounded, than others. It’s as though an architect had started the ambitious work, this experimental design, and then abandoned it just prior to completion.

Every sign plastered on the walls feels aged and none of them direct to the correct rooms or areas. This must have been a very different school before. In sections where the streaky white paint on the walls has started to chip and peel, a rotting, mossy-green color peeks out from beneath.

Students roam the halls in small clusters, never more than two or three people to a group, always pressed against the walls. A few look alert, but most have spaced out. I catch bits of conversation here and there, and sometimes I find my gaze wandering to the face attached to the voice to see if I might recognize them from the neighborhood.

“That’s the new girl,” says a student to her friends.

The girl speaking is my neighbor, but I have yet to formally meet her. Dad insisted I introduce myself, but Mother said there was no need, and her opinion won out. Back in Scarborough, Mother dried flowers inside phone books and gifted them to our neighbors, but she would never do that here.

The girl’s criticizing stare lingers, then flicks away. I can feel her eyes return when I pass.

“The one who moved in across the street from the old woman?”

“Uh-huh.”

I don’t recognize any of the other students, but I notice other things about them. Some look disheveled, some well-rested, others look anxious, their eyes constantly darting. I see a girl walking barefoot, and later, a boy with a single shoe on, untied. He’s wearing a holey T-shirt and torn jeans with frayed edges.

When I arrive at the principal’s office, I see the lingerer boy—the defiant one from the day before—seated on a bench nearby. Instead of taking a seat beside him, I loiter around a nearby bulletin board and pretend to read the tacked-up announcements.

A group of girls are standing in a circle across the hall and chatting loud enough for everyone to hear. Every now and then, they glance in my direction, their eyes suspicious.

“I hear there are no ghosts in her house.”

“The new girl? Or the old lady?”

“The old lady.”

“I heard she killed her husband.”

“That’s just a dumb rumor. She’s waiting for his ghost.”

“Well, he’s not showing up.”

“Do you blame him? I wouldn’t want to see her again either.”

Giggles.

Without looking his way, I address the lingerer boy with a whisper.

“Who are they talking about?” I ask.

The boy remains immobile. He doesn’t look my way when he says, “Don’t talk to me.”

I bite the inside of my cheek and pretend to read the bulletins again. That’s when I notice they’re all out of date. Just some old tryout calls and past announcements for school dances and assemblies—all from nearly a decade ago. I search for anything posted that might be recent, but the only thing I find that fits the description is a business card that advertises the services of a local real estate agent named Tania Yemen. I quickly recognize her as the same agent who visited my parents back when they first heard about HOME from the cousin who used to own the house we live in now.

“I knew someone who used to live near that house,” says one of the girls. “I guess the old woman was always screaming weird things late at night, waking all the neighbors.”

“That’s nothing! I’ve see her walking around the streets in the middle of the night!”

“Mrs... Mrs... Mrs... What is her last name again?”

“What about the new family? Who do you think they’re here for?”

That’s when I stop listening. I feel their eyes on me as I abandon the bulletin board for the principal’s office. I pause to stare at the lingerer boy, but he pretends I’m not there.

• • •

“You are very lucky to be here,” says the principal. She hands me my schedule and returns immediately to the paperwork on her desk. I’ve never transferred schools before, so I’m not sure if such a curt welcome is normal, but I assume it’s not. No one here seems to care much for formalities.

The only thing of note is the Venus flytrap on the Principal’s desk—dead, shriveled; probably has been for awhile now.

On my way out, the secretary pays me no mind. The lingerer boy is no longer on the bench. I look out the window to see a truck pull up to the house across the street. The lingerers there all rise and trudge, with blank stares,

toward the bright yellow vehicle. Painted on the side of the truck, in bold font, are the words *Good Things Come to Those Who Wait*.

Before I can see why the lingerers are forming a line, the school bell rings. I scramble for my schedule, remembering there is only ten minutes in between periods.

First Period (8:20–9:30)—Algebra

Second Period (9:40–11:00)—Biology

Lunch (11:00–12:30)

Third Period (12:40–1:50)—World Issues

Fourth Period (2:00–3:30)—HOME

I squint at the last class on the list, wondering if my eyes are deceiving me. At my old school, home period is where students gather for morning announcements. Why is this one at the end of the day? And why is it ninety minutes long?

• • •

In World Issues class, my teacher discusses “current issues” that happened in the 1980s, decades before I was born. I wonder if he knows the world has changed, or if he’s taught the same thing since the year he first arrived in HOME.

• • •

I arrive to HOME period five minutes early, but everyone else is already present. The seats are arranged in a circle, and only one remains free. I rush to claim it while trying my best to avoid eye contact with the others, my head bowing low. The chairs have this strange, purple velvet covering, the same material as the half-drawn curtains along the windows. I immediately feel a breeze and look up to see a rusty fan hanging from the ceiling, cooling the room with its noisy rotations.

The teacher is seated on a wheelchair. Before the bell, she had been making her way around the exterior of the circle and holding court with each student in whispers, but once the bell rings, she breaks from the casual chatter and

begins the class for real. Murmurs between students die out as a gentle hush falls respectfully over the room.

“Welcome, welcome!” the teacher begins. She turns to me and smiles. “And you must be Wenqi. You may call me Mrs. Juna. Class, please welcome your new classmate, Wenqi.”

For the first time since entering the classroom, I notice that the lingerer boy from before is seated directly across from me.

“Hello, Wenqi,” everyone says. They reply in perfect unison, like a well-conditioned hive-mind. Only the lingerer boy’s mouth remains shut. A chill runs through my bones.

Mrs. Juna addresses me again. “Since it’s your first day, for this exercise, you can go last. Rather than me explaining all the little details, I ask that you observe the other students and dive right in when it’s your turn. I’ve discovered over the years that it’s better this way.” She offers a discomfiting smile. “But don’t worry. You’ll do fine.”

Mrs. Juna speaks again to the class. “Let’s help our new arrival acclimate a bit better to the neighborhood. What are the two main things to remember about HOME?”

“Interacting with the ghosts as much as possible will keep their presence in our lives strong,” the students say.

“And?”

“If we desire to move on, we must first cut ties.”

“Good, good... very good...”

“And what do we do about lingerers?” Mrs. Juna asks. “And to the lingerers in the classroom, what do we do about the residents?”

“Leave them be.”

“Now, who wants to start us off?” Mrs. Juna’s eyes wander as several hands shoot up. “Penny?”

A student rises and takes a step forward. “My grandmother’s presence is growing stronger. At first, she only appeared in the kitchen, but now she wanders into the living room. She still can’t move to any of the other rooms—or maybe she doesn’t want to; I’m not quite sure—but my grandfather...” Penny falls silent and sits back down.

“Thank you, Penny.” Mrs. Juna nods. “Yes, Bawkinu?”

The student next to me rises.

“My parents are getting anxious. My mother’s health is declining. We’re

not sure if she'll make it until the next house frees up..."

A lingerer.

A few students voice sympathy as he retakes his seat.

And it continues.

One student's grandfather remains only in his favorite rocking chair. One student's father just paces in her basement. Another student's sister moves from bedroom to bedroom, but does nothing else.

Their stories are different, but what they seek is the same. They all want to find meaning, make meaning, see patterns where none exist. I wonder how long they've been trying to make sense of death. I wonder how many have already done so, but are being kept here by parents who have not—just like my parents are doing with me.

Everyone except the lingerer boy has taken their turn.

Mrs. Juna calls on me. "Wenqi."

I panic, and my ears warm, heat crawling up my neck. I think of my brother and his glitchy appearances. I think of Mother and the robotic routine she is falling into. And I think of Father, his demanding work schedule, his many duties, but also his gentle heart and kind gestures, his attempts to keep the peace in our home.

"I want to leave," I blurt.

An intake of breaths sucks the air from the room. All eyes look to me. Some look hurt, but most look on with anger. Surely this isn't the first time someone has admitted this? Or are such disclosures taboo? Perhaps I appear spoiled, ungrateful. I know many have given a lot to find a home here, and some still wait.

I chew the inside of my cheeks until blood pools beneath my tongue.

That's when the lingerer boy catches my attention.

Once he sees me looking at him, he mouths, "*Me too.*"

The final bell rings.

• • •

On my way back home, I look into the windows of the homes I pass. People inside are embracing or talking to things that are invisible to me. One old man stands by his window, looking out at me, his arm wrapped around the invisible shoulders of who I assume is his late wife.

When I get home, Father is in his car, waiting for the slow rise of the creaking garage door to finish opening so he can move the vehicle inside. He does, and the lingerers quickly take up the space that the silver Lexus vacates. It's strange how Father pays no attention to them, as though they're not even there. He's somehow gotten used to them already—gotten used to this new normal—even though it's only been a week. When Father turns off the engine, it turns off the hope I have of going home. Most of our neighbors have cut off all connections to the outside world, but Father plans to keep commuting. Maybe one day the engine will stay running.

Across the street, the old woman is by her window again, this time staring at her rose bushes.

In the kitchen, my brother has already arrived. His wavering form is seated at the dining room table with a stack of half-eaten youtiao in front of him. He pokes and prods at the youtiao, then holds it up for me to see.

Mother caresses the top of my brother's head adoringly. "My darling boy was hungry, so I told him not to wait for you."

"Sorry I'm late," I say. "I took the long way home." I take a seat next to my brother and try not to cringe when he flops one of his youtiao onto my plate. There is no long way home. But Mother doesn't care.

"Food's cold, but dig in."

I don't have much of an appetite, but I force a smile and eat. The youtiao on my brother's plate are perfect, but mine are dry and burnt—rejects of the batch. I eat the youtiao my brother gifted me and leave the rest to rot.

• • •

The next day at lunch, I see Penny and Bawkinu sitting on the floor against the cafeteria wall rather than at a lunch table, and instead of crowding into one of the noisy tables myself, I take a seat on the floor next to them. Bawkinu is the first to break the awkward silence.

"Thank goodness for lunch," he says with a scowl. He takes a bite of his sandwich and stops, now having reached the midpoint. "I wish they'd let us take more than one of these. I'd love to take a couple home." He stares at the sandwich, likely contemplating whether to save the rest for later.

"You can have mine," Penny says, handing their half-eaten sandwich to Bawkinu. Their hand then goes to fix a stray baby hair that came loose from

their short, gelled-back, copper bob.

Bawkinu pushes their hand away, then scratches the base of his scalp where his dark buzz cut ends.

“You can have mine too,” I say. I hold up the lunch bag I brought from home. “I packed a lunch.”

Bawkinu sneers at the box lunch and snatches the ham and cheese sandwich from my hand. He pushes up his ripped sleeves, his shirt missing a few buttons.

“Why are you sitting on the floor?” I ask.

The pair shrug. “Why not?” they say at the same time, then share a smile.

I’m about to dig into my bag full of leftover stale youtiao when I remember why I approached the pair. Through the windows of the cafeteria, I see him sitting under a tree outside, staring at his hands. I point him out to Penny and Bawkinu with a discreet nod. “Who’s the boy?” I ask.

Penny’s brow furrows. “Who? Liam?”

So his name is Liam.

Between bites, Bawkinu says with a dismissive tone, “He’s older than the rest of us. A year? Maybe two? He’s been here for a while.”

“Do you ever talk to him?” I ask.

Bawkinu just shakes his head No while chomping on his next bite.

• • •

Liam is not at school the next day, or the day after that, but I continue to see him camped out on the neighbor’s lawn with his parents. I’m too afraid to approach him.

LIAM

Liam drags his fingers along the grass, digs his nails into the soil. Each finger bores into the earth until the small holes become howling mouths. Burying himself within them would be a desirable escape. He wants to go home, but at the same time, he can't recall what his old home is like. The memories feel more like a dream than a past reality.

Another lingerer, a middle-aged woman in a soiled yellow dress, sleeps beneath the shade of thorned shrubbery. The skeleton of a hand, missing two fingers, rests at her feet. How long has the woman been there before him? How long will he and his family remain? They took their place on the lawn three years ago, but it's already felt like an eternity, and also no time at all. What if the homeowner never leaves? What if Liam and his family die here in the grass, more bones to add to the pile?

"This will be our home," said Liam's mother.

Back when they lived in the city, Liam's parents were introduced to a real estate agent from HOME by a family friend with a rather nebulous past. The agent insisted that in order to find peace, Liam's parents would have to sell their comfortable house in the suburbs and move to HOME immediately, sight unseen. The agent explained to them that the wait-list for houses in HOME is long, and the only way to get a home here is to be physically present when one is put up for sale. When a homeowner vacates the property, a wild bidding war ensues.

Liam has witnessed one auction in HOME, and he hopes he will not have to see another. His parents chose not to participate. They said it was because they were still too new to the neighborhood and lacked the confidence, but Liam knows it's because they can't stomach the violence.

All of Liam's belongings now sit in a storage locker at the edge of town. Most of the other lingerers have storage lockers of their own, but some arrive with only the clothes on their backs. Liam's family has enough money to pay the shower fee at the local bathhouse, but it looks and smells like no one else on this particular lawn can afford the luxury. Either that, or they've just stopped caring about such things as hygiene. To them, getting the house is all that's important. It is slowly becoming this way for Liam's family too. At first,

they showered three times a week, then it became once a week, then once every two weeks. Now they showered once a month, if they felt up to it.

Liam hated his old high school, but he misses it now. What they teach here in HOME is outdated and likely will always be. He skips most of his classes to sit here with his parents, but they don't care or notice. The house is their only priority. The classes became repetitive, especially fourth period. The kids in HOME period do nothing but talk about the dead, as though there is nothing else in the world.

His parents' shadowy, unblinking eyes fixate on the house's front door. They never see the people inside, only the occasional hand darting through the doggie door to retrieve the overflowing crates of groceries delivered weekly to their doorstep.

The food the lingerers eat is delivered by a man wearing a gas mask and yellow rubber gloves. He hands out containers of gray sludge that the rest of the lingerers line up eagerly to take. They shovel the sludge into their mouths, return the container to the truck, and then wait until the next meal when the truck makes its rounds again. Liam scoops the sludge with his fingers and gulps it down until the container is empty. He wipes clean the plastic interior with his index finger and then sucks the last of what remains from the tip.

The real estate agent—with her snake skin briefcase, her leopard-fur bucket hat, her oversized sunglasses that are too big for her face, the horrendous red painted lips—visits every week and whispers empty promises into the ears of her homeless clients. “Soon,” she lies. “Don’t worry. Soon.”

But Liam refuses to let the agent near him. He despises the way her venomous words poison the minds of his parents.

Sometimes, at night, he hears his mother whisper the same empty words: *Soon, soon, soon*. All he thinks is *Never*. That is, until the strange girl who says all the wrong things moved in across the street.

• • •

When Wenqi walks home at the end of her first week at school, Liam sees his parents pry their eyes away from the house for the first time in a long time just to stare at the unfamiliar face heading home across the street.

Mother surprises Liam by getting up and wandering over to him. Her legs are weak and bit wobbly from total lack of use.

Before speaking, she looks around to make sure none of the other lingerers are listening. “I hear that girl over there is same age as you,” she whispers. “Maybe you can make friends.”

Liam’s dad comes up behind her, nodding as he leans toward Liam. “Yes, yes. That’s a very good idea,” he whispers. “Such a very good idea. Why don’t you try making friends?”

Liam’s parents have never before taken an interest in his life, but Liam knows the reason for their sudden change of heart. He doesn’t want to aid them in their plan, doesn’t want to play their game, but if it will help them get a house, he’s more than willing to try, because once they get a house, he can leave HOME forever and not feel guilty when he doesn’t look back.

His parents keep staring, keep begging him with their eyes.

“Yes. Okay. I’ll try,” Liam says.

Liam’s mother claps her hands together with excitement. It’s the most enthusiastic Liam has seen her since before they first moved to HOME. “I have a good feeling about this.”

Liam’s dad nods happily in agreement. “I do too. We move tomorrow.”

• • •

The next day, much to the entire neighborhood’s surprise, Liam and his parents move from the only yard they’ve known to a vacant spot beneath one of the oak trees on Wenqi’s front lawn.

Now it’s Liam’s turn to act, but he has to be patient. He can’t approach Wenqi just yet. The plan will fail if he rushes things. He has to first earn her friendship, and then gain her trust. He still feels uneasy about having to lie to the girl, having to manufacture a fake relationship, manipulate her feelings, use her, but he promised his parents he would try, and he never breaks a promise.

He thinks about his plan. He already knows that Wenqi wants desperately to leave this place, and this knowledge will give him an edge. For now, though, he will sit with his parents on this new lawn, looking not at the house and the girl inside, but elsewhere.

WENQI

On the last day of my first month at school, rather than going home early, I go to the library. HOME period seems like a group therapy session that raises more questions about the neighborhood than it tries to answer.

There are more people in the library than I expected, but not as many as there were at my old school. A few tables are taken, though most are occupied by only one person, two at the most. Some I recognize, but none are people I have spoken to.

Candle holders sit in the middle of tables, some lit, some extinguished, with the wax dried and collected on the copper platter resting below. I run my finger along the books in the history section and skim through each title, though I'm not quite sure if this is the place to look. A chandelier dangles between each bookcase, offering dim light that flickers occasionally, and there is matted carpet with Victorian designs that seem to fade with each step.

On the shelves sit books with old, broken spines, worn covers, and marked-up pages that have been dog-eared, creased, or ripped out all together. The new books have glossy covers, tight binding, and clean, crisp pages, but none are more contemporary than the old beaten-up versions. Every new book is just the latest edition of a famous work from the past—publications that are decades, even centuries old.

There must be a book about HOME somewhere.

I search up and down the shelves, but much to my disappointment, no titles suggest they hold the secrets and histories of the neighborhood. Perhaps HOME used to have a different name, one I'm not aware of, and I'm looking in the wrong place.

I snap my head up at the sound of books meeting the surface of a nearby table. I crane around the shelf to find Liam settling down with a stack of three heavy texts. He takes the top book and opens it to the beginning, eyes flicking across the pages until—

He looks up.

I duck behind the shelf. When I look back again, he's already returned his attention to the book. Squinting, I read the title—*Persuasion: The Art of Convincing and Insisting*. Highly unlikely to be required class reading.

I chew the inside of my cheek in contemplation. Should I approach him? If he's been here for as long as Bawkinu suggests, he could have the answers I'm looking for. I sidestep from behind the shelf and make my way toward Liam. Even as I approach, he doesn't look up.

"Can I sit, maybe?" I ask.

A brief glance. A nod.

I take a seat on the opposite side of the table. I sit on the edge of the chair, but keep the chair a good distance from the table to make Liam feel less like I'm trying to spy.

"I was wondering..." I whisper.

Page flip.

"But if you're busy..."

Liam closes his book. He raises his arms, fingers interlocked, and stretches. His long dark hair falls into his eyes.

"What do you know about the neighborhood?"

Liam looks around as if attempting to discover who in the library has put me up to this, who has dared me into talking to him. Some students are peeking at us from behind their books, others are peering side-eyed, pretending not to notice, and others are just openly staring. It must not be common for other students to speak to Liam. Or maybe it's me they're surprised by. The fact that I'm trying to make friends at all. I am quite new, and it's no secret I don't like it here.

"*Not here,*" he mouths before getting up and leaving.

I've yet to hear his voice.

• • •

Liam doesn't show up at school the next day, but he still sits on my lawn, mostly looking elsewhere. By the end of the week, even though he returns to school, I forget he's even there.

• • •

A fire crackles in the hearth. It's been three months since we moved to HOME, and every day so far, Mother has kept the fireplace lit, just like she did every day in our house back in Scarborough, and even in our home back in Fuzhou.

I retrieve a family portrait from the fireplace mantle to study it. The old picture serves as a reminder of what my brother used to look like... or, what he does look like... or maybe, just what he *should* look like. It's hard trying to remember someone who died when you were only four. Sometimes I imagine the fire licking the edge of the dark brasswood frame the photo is encased within.

"Wenqi!" Mother's enthusiasm attacks me from the kitchen. Though she's calling my name, her joy isn't for me. Her phone alarm goes off—the ringtone a famous Chinese opera.

A thud sounds from upstairs. There is knocking, then the click of a door opening, and the slow drag of steps.

I open the window in the living room, but only a crack so that no lingerers notice, and suck in a quick breath to calm my beating heart. The crisp air rattles down my throat, stabs at my lungs.

"He's here!" Mother sings.

I smell eggs, and Mother's morning coffee, and the herbal medication she rubs against her temples for migraines. The smell has found its way into the fabric of every piece of furniture and all the throw pillows, which no longer have the same fluff as when we first moved in.

In this house, it's easy to lose track of time. But for my mother, time doesn't matter. But not moving on emotionally doesn't stop the body from aging. A streak of silver tucked in Mother's loose bun catches in the light. These years took a greater toll on her than she likes to admit. Even so, her bright eyes never dim when my brother makes his appearance at 4:04 p.m. She's changed her body clock, her living schedule, so that the time my brother appears is morning for her rather than afternoon. All the youtiao make more sense this way, even if the rest of it doesn't.

"Why don't you go bring him to the kitchen?"

This is her tactic to bring my brother and me closer together. If anything, it's only making us more distant.

Before I leave the kitchen, Mother's voice halts me. "Did you get your brother a gift?"

My eyes fall shut, a pounding headache prods from the inside, causing the veins in my temple to throb. I'd forgotten. A mistake. It's better to lie than disappoint Mother. She might make me sleep in my brother's room again, and this time, his almost formless presence might very well be there.

It's been more than a decade since his death, but we still celebrate my brother's sixth birthday every year. It's been more than a decade, and I still manage to forget.

Mother tenses for a moment when she realizes my hesitation. Without taking another breath, I face her with my features rearranged in an expression of confidence, reassurance—or so I hope.

“Yes.”

Mother stares. Nods—slow. A wide smile stretches across her face. There is a wild glint to her glassy stare. “I’ll get started on the youtiao. You know those are his favorite.”

She never makes *my* favorite. She never remembers *my* birthday. My first birthday was perhaps the only time she remembered, and even then, Grandmother used to joke that Mother scrambled for the cake and balloons because she forgot to order them beforehand. Even though it was free to write names on the cake with icing, Mother said no. She thought it was a hassle and she wanted to save time. She even forgot the candle. And the mistake only occurred to her after she brought out a lighter and realized there was nothing to light.

I don’t release my breath until I’m long gone from the kitchen and out of Mother’s sight. I climb the spiral staircase and head straight for my room. But before I enter, I glance at my brother’s room down the hall. The shadows of his feet are two gray smudges under the closed door, waiting. They shuffle back and forth to the sound of my movement—a somber, lifeless dance.

“I’m coming,” I whisper. He can’t hear me, but he knows I’m on my way. This has become our daily ritual, an unending loop. I don’t know when Mother might let go of her futile efforts to bring me and my brother together. What she doesn’t know is that I can no longer see his face. Maybe if I tell her... The thought is too cruel, even when considering how cold she has been to me all these years.

In my room, I pull out a sheet of blue paper, my brother’s favorite color, from the organizer Mother purchased for me, and I scribble a drawing of Pac-Man and the four ghosts. I then fold the drawing into a paper airplane and hide the gift in my pocket. Mother will not be happy with my humble gift, but it will have to do. Mother used to say that thoughtful gifts are better than extravagant ones, but it’s only an excuse she gives when she forgets my birthday. My birthday gift from her is usually a reluctant hug and a half-

hearted attempt at my favorite meal: sweet and sour pork that is either too sweet or too sour. She stopped attempting once I turned six.

I knock on my brother's door. A click. The door swings open. The shadow in the shape of my brother steps out and reaches a blurred hand toward me. I feel my own hand engulf his, like Pac-Man swallowing a ghost. It's cold.

Mother is already waiting with youtiao in the kitchen—a towering stack, with oil dripping down the sides. Six candles have been stuck into the middle, and my eyes trace the shape of a star in the spaces between them. As Mother begins lighting the six candles with an old cigarette lighter, the sound of the front door opening comes from down the hall.

Father, having just returned home from work, enters the kitchen with a large box in his arms. A velvet blue ribbon is tied around the red and white polka dot wrapping paper. His unruly hair, and the stubble on his chin and upper lip signals his weariness, but his smile is bright. It's seldom we see Mother so happy, and the gentle way he stares at her joy makes me ache. It's a true happiness she never would have found outside of HOME.

“Perfect timing!” Mother shouts, throwing her hands into the air. She helps settle my brother into his seat and takes the seat beside him. She then looks at me, expectant. “Wenqi?”

I produce the paper airplane from my pocket. It's a replica of the plastic one from my brother's childhood—the same one that's now hidden in the back of my closet. I smooth it out with trembling fingers and fly it toward my brother who is holding his hand out to receive it. He reaches clumsily for the paper plane, laughing. I imagine his laugh sounds like a childish giggle, too high-pitched. I then imagine the lower register he would be laughing in if he were still alive. The two sounds create a discordant melody in my head. My brother catches the plane and unfolds it.

Mother and Father's smiles collapse into blank expressions. Mother's face contorts, her age lines deepening with anger.

Mother tsks. “Pac-Man? Why would you draw Pac-Man? He's moved on from Pac-Man. He doesn't like that game anymore. You *know* this.”

But I don't. I can no longer hear my brother's voice. Haven't been able to hear it for awhile now.

Mother's fingers clench. She braces herself with one hand on the table while keeping tender the touch of her other hand that is wrapped around my brother's shoulder. The flickering candles cast an eerie light upon her face as

her eyes narrow into slits.

She lets go of my brother and stands, takes me by the elbow, and drags me out of the kitchen. In the hallway, she lowers her voice, and brings her face close—too close. She has forgotten to brush her teeth again, or wash her face. Flakes of dead skin have already begun to tear themselves from her face. A sour stench drifts from her lips.

She tightens her grip on my arm. “You could at least try.”

I wince in pain.

I’m trying, I want to say.

But why are we moving backward? I want to ask.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

But I don’t mean it. Not as much as I want to.

Mother shakes her head, places a smile back on her face, and heads back to the kitchen. I wait a moment before following her. At the table, my brother is holding a small robot. The youtiao stack is half-finished and what remains is growing cold.

With a stern expression, Mother waves me over and directs me to take the seat next to my brother.

“Why don’t you feed your brother a bite of his youtiao?” Mother forces a youtiao into my hand, and I know what I’m supposed to do.

I turn to my brother, look at where his eyes should be, where his nose should be, where his mouth should be. I squint, willing myself to see the mouth that isn’t there. With a fake smile, I fly the youtiao like an airplane toward where I think my brother’s mouth is. Mother makes accompanying engine noises.

“Look at your sister and how much she loves you. Now open up!”

I miss my target and shudder. The youtiao drops from my hand.

Mother just looks away, hands shaking and teeth clenched. She doesn’t meet my eyes again.

I attempt to clean the mess I made, but Father’s hand stops me from picking up the youtiao, and I couldn’t be more grateful. I retreat to the living room, eyes stinging, to be alone. I take a seat at the window and lean against the frame, trying to lengthen my shallow breaths. To my surprise, Liam is looking inside our house for the first time since his family first staked their claim beneath our tree.

And then, he stares at *me*.

I don't even react.

I just sit in silence and stare back.

LIAM

When Liam's family first moved to HOME, his parents worked hard to befriend a homeowner. It is common for homeowners to gift their house to a long-term lingerer who has spent years on their lawn, or to sell it to them at a low price. They tried to befriend Penny's family, but they quickly abandoned the plan when they noticed how close Bawkinu's family already is with them.

It is, however, uncommon for homeowners to invite anyone—even their friends—into their house. And it is especially uncommon to invite lingerers. But after school one day, Penny corners Liam for exactly that reason.

"My parents want to invite you to dinner," they say.

Liam freezes.

"And they want to invite your parents to come too."

"Why?" Liam asks, suspicious. The last time Liam and his family had been invited to Penny's house was a few months after they had started living on the lawns in HOME. It was a welcome dinner. The dinners aren't common, but they do occur on occasion—mostly between fellow homeowners, though. Not between homeowners and lingerers.

Penny bites their lip, contemplates whether or not to answer. They lower their voice.

"We're... *leaving soon.*"

Liam ducks his head as if trying to hide in plain sight. He can feel the eyes of the passing students. They are wondering why Penny is talking to him.

"An auc—"

Penny pinches Liam's arm and shakes their head, a signal to stay quiet. They nod in response to his unfinished question.

"Is Bawkinu going to participate...?" Liam asks, cautious.

Penny nods.

"This is to say goodbye," Liam says.

Penny looks away. "This isn't a place for friends, but ..."

They don't need to finish their thought. Liam understands. HOME truly is no place for friends, but as strange as it might be, Liam, Penny, and Bawkinu had become just that, even if they rarely speak to one another. Their relationship is nothing like the rowdy crowd Liam used to hang out with, the

ones who always went for food and karaoke, or escape rooms and obstacle courses around downtown Toronto. Here, friendship is more of a quiet understanding that everyone is stuck, whether they chose it or not, in a place not meant for the present, but the past.

“We’ll be there,” Liam says.

• • •

“When will you be leaving?”

Liam’s mother is the first to break the silence when the three families gather by the dinner table.

She used to be a quiet woman, but HOME has changed her, and now she speaks everything that comes to mind, as if the thoughts will disappear if she doesn’t.

Liam tries not to squirm when his eyes meet the golden baked chicken and unwilted greens, unaccustomed to such food after being a lingerer for so long. His fingers twitch at the sight of food in such quantity, such wholeness. He questions if the meal is real, with its glossy sheen of butter and oil that resembles the varnish used to seal an oil painting.

Penny’s mother replies, “As soon as the deal for our new home near Harborfront closes.”

Liam’s mother ducks her head, but Liam can see the excitement she is trying to hide with the reaction. Next to her, his father fidgets with the collar of his shirt, which is buttoned up too tight for the man’s liking—usually his father wears his collars open and loose, showing unruly chest hair that hasn’t seen a razor in a while.

“We were contemplating a private sale,” Penny’s mother continues, “but with the way the Toronto housing market is right now, we can’t afford to anymore.”

Liam understands that this explanation is more for Bawkinu’s family than his own. It’s both an apology and a heads up. He assumes that his family was invited as a means to keep the peace. Bawkinu’s family wouldn’t want to make a scene in front of them.

A question hangs in the silence.

“So, it’s going to auction then?” Bawkinu’s mother asks. She clears her throat after speaking and rubs at the purple bruising on her neck. She’s been

known to tug at the skin there in an attempt to relieve her nagging cough.

Penny's mother nods solemnly.

No one speaks.

Liam watches Bawkinu's parents, whose expressions have soured. His own parents knew to expect such news, but still they look offended. But next to Liam, Bawkinu and his sister appear eager. Knowing Bawkinu, he's already plotting to join the auction somehow, hopefully even win it, even though Liam knows that like his own family, Bawkinu's family barely has any wealth left from living so long in HOME without employment.

Suddenly, the heads of everyone in Penny's family jerk up with such abruptness that both Liam's and Bawkinu's families are startled. Liam wonders if it might be the ghost of Penny's grandmother. Or perhaps their grandfather has finally made his first appearance.

Moments later, Penny's family breaks from their suspended animation and they return to their plates to begin the meal. Their eyes occasionally glance up at the ceiling for the remainder of the dinner.

Outside, the lingerers at Penny's house have gathered near the windows to watch the dinner with envy. Liam can't help but wonder if the intention for this dinner was pure, or if it is simply a ruse to attract more bidders under the guise of hospitality.

Liam eats in silence while his parents look loathingly at the food. He tastes nothing. His brain is too busy calculating how he too will attend the auction, though as a watcher and not a participant, and how he will do so to convince Wenqi to finally leave HOME.

• • •

At school the following morning, Liam corners Penny in the hall the same way they had done to him the day prior.

"Do you know the date of the auction?"

Penny looks uncertain while picking at a scab on their palm. They also know that Liam's parents don't have the money to participate in the auction. They can't compete financially with families that have recently arrived with their savings still intact.

"You know how long my parents have been waiting," Liam pleads.

"You heard what my parents said."

“Please.”

Penny sighs. “Wednesday,” they say. “One month from today.”

• • •

“We should attend the auction,” Liam’s mother says.

His parents’ eyes are alight, their expressions almost delirious, with dreams of winning the auction and finally getting a house.”

Liam knows his parents are unlikely to be victorious at auction, or come out unharmed. “No,” he says. “I have a plan.”

His parents study Liam with their eyes. Like leeches, they cling to him with their parasitic gaze.

His parents can’t be present at the auction when he tries to convince Wenqi to leave HOME forever. They will only get in his way, become too forceful, too fervent in their desire for the house, and scare her away.

Liam wonders if he might be able to leave with Wenqi, with or without getting his parents a home first. The thought has been playing inside his head since their first encounter in the library.

WENQI

For months now, I have watched from the window the familiar lingerers sitting on our lawns, picking at the shrubbery, leaning against the trunk of trees, or huddled against one another at night, shivering.

Today, Liam is looking at me again—he's been doing so more often now—and I wonder if today is the day he'll finally speak to me again when we see each other at school.

But I don't have to wait that long.

Liam stands and weaves his way through the seated crowd upon my lawn. He approaches the window. As he nears, our eyes lock and remain locked. Now only a few feet and a pane of glass between us, Liam raises a fist and raps his knuckles on the window.

The sound of his rapping is expected, yet it still makes me jump.

"Hey," he says, his voice muffled by the glass.

I unlock the window and lift it open, eager to hear what he might have to say—maybe secrets about the neighborhood.

"Can I get something to eat?" he asks. "Or drink?" He gestures back at his fellow lingerers, who are all shoveling handfuls of gruel into their mouths from little plastic containers. I try not to watch them eat, but sometimes it's hard not to. "The food they give us isn't exactly great," he says.

I try to speak, but the words stick in my throat, so I just nod and head to the kitchen.

I stop at the kitchen entrance and snake my head around the corner to see if Mother is there. We've been successfully avoiding each other for awhile now, and I want that success to continue.

The kitchen is empty.

I hurry to grab a mug and fill it with the water Mother must have just finished boiling, then I stir in some hot chocolate mix. It's chilly outside, and I think the warm drink will help. There isn't much variety in the fridge, so I grab the leftover youtiao from the day before, Mother's most recent batch, and reheat them in the microwave.

When I return, Liam is resting his head against the window, his black hair plastered against his forehead. It leaves oil stains on the glass when he lifts his

head to greet me.

I hand him the steaming mug and plate.

“What are those?” He flashes a smile to reveal a pair of dimples.

I consider the English translation. “Fried dough sticks, I suppose.” I shrug. My eyes are fixated on the little indents at the ends of his smile. “My brother’s favorite.” I don’t say he’s dead.

Liam accepts the mug and plate and takes an eager sip of the hot chocolate. His eyes roll to the back of his head. “I’d almost forgotten how good this tastes.”

I slide a nearby coffee table over to the window’s opening so Liam can set down his mug down, and he starts working on the youtiao with an intrigued expression. I glance up to see the old woman across the street, sitting in her window and staring at us. The lingerers also stare, but they don’t protest. They just sit silent and resentful.

“Who is that?” I ask, nodding up at the old lady across the street. “And why is she always staring out her window like that?”

Liam takes a bit of youtiao and turns around to look. He swallows the bite and returns to the plate for more. “Who? Mrs.?” He shrugs. “I don’t know. Because she wants to?”

“Mrs.?”

Liam just nods as he takes another bite.

“Mrs. what?”

“Just Mrs.”

“No last name? Why not?”

“You’ll drive yourself wild trying to figure that one out. Many have tried, none have succeeded. Rumor has it that she was here before the spirits first started showing up, maybe even the cause for why they did. Some say she killed someone and now lives with her victim’s ghost. And once that gateway was opened, the rest followed. Others say she stole a ghost from the underworld just to keep her company and a new way to conjure the dead was born. But no matter what you believe about her past, everyone agrees that presently, her mind is... well...” He points to his temple and then flutters his fingers into the sky to signal that her mind has left her, now just dust in the wind. “But living in HOME for that long will do that to you.”

I think of Mother.

Liam runs a finger across the now-empty ceramic plate to gather the

leftover crumbs and puts the finger in his mouth to eat them.

“How long do people usually stay in HOME for?”

Liam shrugs and drains the remainder of the mug’s contents before answering. “As long as it takes for them to move on, I guess. So... sometimes never. My family has been here for years.”

“Have you... ever wanted to leave?” I ask.

Liam pauses, then answers matter-of-factly. “All the time.”

“Then why haven’t you?”

“Weeen-qiii!” Mother’s voice sings from the kitchen. “He’s herrre!”

Despite our efforts to avoid each other throughout the day, Mother still demands I join the family for youtiao dinner each night.

I sigh, shake my head, and turn to take my leave.

“See ya later,” says Liam.

I don’t look back or respond, but I find myself wondering more about him on my slow walk to the kitchen. Who died in his life? Who are his parents trying to bring back? Was it someone he doesn’t know, perhaps? A relative? A family friend? And that’s why he doesn’t care to stay?

Mother has abandoned her station at the stove, but the burner is still on. Eggs burn in the frying pan. No youtiao? I guess my brother’s tastes have changed. Is that good? Or worrisome?

Smoke is filling the room, but somehow, Mother remains unaware. Without alerting her, I remove eggs from the burner, turn off the stove, and flip the switch on the exhaust fan to the highest setting. Its loud whirring rattles my eardrums.

“Come, come,” Mother sings.

I plate the burned eggs and bring them to the table. Without being told to do so, I whisper a polite greeting to the translucent shape that is supposedly my older brother.

“Hi there,” I say. I find it uncomfortable to stare for too long at the faceless shadow, so I set the plates down and search for something else in the room to look at.

I take my seat, and Mother starts to laugh. It becomes obvious that she is laughing along with my brother’s ghost when she leans in, smiling, to stroke where his nose should be.

My eyes wander to a nearby portrait of my brother to remind myself of his features. I was half his age, half his height, with half his memories—which are

now just faded recollections of life at that time, and of him.

I eat as quickly as I can and then leave Mother to the one-sided conversation I'm not invited to. In the living room, I stand in front of the warm fireplace, alive with flame and heat, and stare at our family portrait upon the mantle. From behind me, Mother's laughter returns.

"Who died?" I hear someone ask. It's Liam. He's still sitting beside the open window I forgot to close.

"None of your business," I reply.

"Your brother?" he asks.

"I don't know. Who died in *your* family?"

"My sister."

"Oh," I say. It's strangely comforting that he's so willing to share.

"My brother," I admit. "Yeah."

But something tells me he's known that all along.

• • •

Sometimes Liam visits during the night rather than during the day. It's like in the movies when the boy stands on the front lawn of the girl's house and throws rocks at her window. But Liam does this his own way. He approaches slow, hesitant. Two steps forward, one step back. Then he raps his knuckles against the glass—once, twice—and waits. I creep from my room and approach the window just as slow, just as hesitant, if not more so. I lift the window open while Liam watches from a respectful distance. He gives me the space and patience and understanding I didn't know I needed. Only once the living room window is open does he meet my eyes and wait for my signal to approach.

I never remember what we talk about, but just talking to him like this makes me feel as though I'm back home in Scarborough. It makes me feel normal. His references are a few years outdated, but I still recognize them.

When it's time for him to go, I close the window behind him and lock it, and with the click of the lock, the magic of the previous moment winks out, and we become strangers once more. But I know we'll be a little closer the next time we meet. I find myself hoping that he feels the same way.

On my way back to bed, I sometimes see Dad asleep on the floor, his body slumped against the wall beside my brother's door. Sometimes his sleep apnea

causes him to jolt awake, but he quickly settles back in. And sometimes, his hand creeps subconsciously toward the small crack beneath the door, reaching for something that hasn't yet returned.

• • •

It becomes routine for me to bring leftover food to Liam, which he eats with me at the window. Sometimes we look at the lingerers, sometimes we look at nothing at all. But almost always, we sit in silence. Talking is for the night. The other lingerers respect the rules of HOME and keep their distance from our house, but I can tell they wish to be more rebellious like Liam.

But one afternoon, Liam breaks his daytime silence.

"How did your parents get this place? I've always wondered. I can't remember the last time a house here was sold at private sale before yours."

I don't think it's wise to disclose the situation with my Mother's cousin, so I just shrug. "I dunno. My parents don't tell me much. How are houses normally sold here?"

"Auction. When a family moves out, the lingerers are invited to bid. Highest bid wins, of course."

We sit for a moment in silence.

"There's an auction in three days," he says.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. It's been in the works for about a month now. Gonna be a big one."

"Which house?" I ask.

"Penny's."

"How do you know about this? I haven't heard anything about Penny moving."

"All the lingerers in town have been buzzing about it." He pauses. "Bawkinu lives on their lawn."

I think about Bawkinu's mother and her declining health. They could really use a lucky break.

"Do you think they'll bid?"

Liam shrugs. "I'd assume so."

My eyes naturally find their way to Liam's parents, who are sitting out on the lawn beneath our tree. "Are your parents going?"

Liam raises a finger to his lips, signaling for me to hush. He just shakes his

head and mouths the word, *No*.

LIAM

Liam ignores Wenqi for the next two days. No visits for food. No midnight meetings. But on the third day, he catches her by the elbow as she's leaving her house for school. The lingerers that witness this action gasp. Liam has violated a major rule.

"Ouch!" Wenqi blurts.

Liam's grip relaxes. "Sorry," he mutters. "The auction."

"Auction. Who cares about the auction? Where have you been the past two days? I waited for you."

"I—" Liam evades the question. "Will you come with me? It's going to start any minute now, and I don't want to go alone."

"Right now? I have school."

"So? You hate school. Besides, tons of kids miss school on auction days. So do a lot of teachers."

"But I'm not a lingerer." She looks like she wants to take back her words as soon as she says them, but Liam dismisses her guilt with a wave of his hand.

"Doesn't matter. C'mon."

Wenqi barely has time to react before Liam grabs her hand and leads her down the block to Penny's house. She looks confused, eager to ask questions, but Liam walks quick and determined so it's more difficult for Wenqi to protest.

There is no mistaking which one is Penny's house in the distance. A massive crowd has gathered on the lawn. All the lingerers are up front, standing at attention.

Tania Yemen is standing on a dais, behind a podium, and chatting casually with one of the many security guards hired to control the crowd. Her sunglasses are atop her head, and Wenqi can see the real estate agent's eyes for the first time. They are lined with hot pink eyeliner, and she wears too-thick-to-be-real lashes that extend a full inch from lids caked with eyeshadow. Tania has a wide smile stretched across her face, which pulls her pale skin taut. Her penciled-in eyebrows are drawn in their unusually high arch—far too high to look natural—and you can see where the real eyebrows sit on her natural brow, shaved and covered by makeup. There is a giant hourglass filled

with crimson-colored sand on the dais behind her.

Between the stage and where the lingerers wait on their toes is an invisible line that they know not to cross. Lingerers from other lawns wander over, and position themselves at the edge of the crowd, careful not to disturb or irritate the security guards that line the lawn's perimeter.

Penny and their family stand in the house's front window, facing the crowd, each with a loving hand placed on the invisible entity in front of them. Tears stream down their faces, but Penny's tears have already dried. A numb expression sits on their face, eyes distant and wondering, as though they can't believe the auction is actually going to take place.

A few days prior, Penny had shared with Liam and Bawkinu the shocking auction instruction packet, the many legal waivers bidders had to sign, and a graphic video of a previous auction gone wrong to deter him and Bawkinu from attending. In the video, attendees attempted various strategies to place a bid, some strategies more devious than others. Some families simply spread out to cover more ground, but others would group together and plow their way through to the podium, injuring many along the way, and some even used hidden weapons to hack their way through, but that method ended badly for the few that tried it. Security was not kind.

Liam had shrank away from the footage, but felt comfort knowing that he would play no part in the bloodshed. Bawkinu's eyes, however, gleamed as he took in the recorded violence. Liam and Penny noticed his eagerness, his readiness, and exchanged a look of concern, now worried for their friend's life.

Liam spots Bawkinu and his older sister in the crowd, but their mother is not with them. Liam finds her at the edge of the crowd, standing back at a distance. Good choice. Safe choice.

Tania taps the podium's microphone to test it. The feedback causes everyone to groan and cover their ears. "Now, now, settle down everyone," Tania demands. "Quiet, please!" Her smile is too bleached to be natural. "I assume everyone here has read the auction instructions and signed the required waivers? I don't want any winning bidders to leave empty handed because they forgot to waive medical and legal liability!"

Wenqi turns to Liam. "Waivers? Medical liability? What's about to happen here, Liam?"

Liam's expression is solemn. "It can get... well... you'll see." Liam scratches

the back of his head, then crosses his arms.

Wenqi points to the lingerers at the edge of the lawn. “Why—”

“Lingerers of other homes have to wait until the ten-minute mark before they can join in the auction. The lingerers who have chosen not to participate sit over there, on the lawns across the street.”

“Is ten minutes a long time to wait?”

“The auction usually ends in fifteen.”

Wenqi shudders, and Liam takes a step closer to her.

Tania begins. “Thank you to all you lovely people for gathering here today for the auction of this *gorgeous* house. Due to some... unfortunate circumstances, though *very* fortunate for *you* all,”—she laughs at her own poor taste in humor—“the homeowners here have decided to move out of the neighborhood forever.” Tania’s smile beams.

The crowd is getting antsy. The air is thick with nervous breaths.

Tania throws up a hand in a flourish of excitement, her neon green nail polish with sparkle glistening in the afternoon sun, and with the other hand, hammers a wooden gavel onto the podium. “I hold the first of nine tokens here in my hand, good for one bid at any amount of your choosing! Who will be the lucky holder after round one?”

The crowd erupts. There is no order, no civilized raising of a paddle, no waiting for another to make their bid first. Just wild shrieking and panic.

Tania raises the token into the air. It’s black like the color of midnight and the words “GOOD FOR ONE BID” are etched in gold lettering upon its surface. Tania motions for two large security guards to lift the giant hourglass and flip it over, which they do, as she tosses the token into the crowd. The sand from the hourglass starts to pour through the neck and fall to the lower bulb’s floor right as the token hits the ground. When the sand runs out, the first round will be over.

Out in the crowd, elbows meet faces, knees meet guts. It’s like a game of hot potato, except everyone here wants to be burned. The rule is to have full possession of the coin when time expires—this is how a bid is earned. It’s common knowledge that those who fight too hard in the beginning will be at a disadvantage by the end, but some still try. The smart ones win a coin and bow out. The greedy ones try to win multiple rounds to decrease the total number of bidders. It’s how they lower the chances of being outbid. This is part of Bawkinu’s plan. But greed like this does have a cost, and more often

than not, it comes to collect.

Liam watches, stunned. He knows he should be horrified by the sight, but he only feels pity for those participating. This town worships the dead, but it has no respect for the living.

On the lawn, a tall man holds the black token with the gold lettering high in the air while a woman much shorter than him claws at his neck to bring him down. The rest of the lingerers pull and drag at the man's body, ripping his jeans, tearing his shirt, until he finally falls with a yelp as someone kicks his knee.

Tania cackles with amusement.

A young boy with a knife is disarmed and dragged away by the security. An elderly woman, however, hides her weapon, a fountain pen, well enough to keep it—the pen is now refilled, but not with ink. The smart bidders prowl the edges of the crowd, grabbing unsuspecting opponents and shoving them off the lawn. To step off the lawn means to surrender, to retire from the auction, even if forcefully made to do so by another participant.

Liam hears Bawkinu's voice rise above the chaos. He seems to be coordinating with specific lingerers, warning them of incoming attacks and ambushes. This is the second part of Bawkinu's plan. If he can't win multiple coins, he will assist the lingerers with the least amount of wealth to win in his place. Bawkinu's family is poor, but they still have more money than some.

Bawkinu had explained this all to Liam the day before. Liam could tell the boy was proud of his cunning. He wanted to admonish his friend's ambition, his willingness to step over others for personal gain, but he couldn't. How could he, when he is using Wenqi the same way?

Wenqi drops to her knees and sobs. She is covering her face with her hands, but Liam knows she won't be able to hide forever. No one can. And sure enough, Wenqi peeks between her fingers to watch more.

The sand runs out, and the first round ends. A beast of a man raises the "GOOD FOR ONE BID" token in triumph.

Each subsequent round of the auction is filled with the same violent sounds as the first—the screams of the participants, the wet smack of skin on skin, the crack of joints, the snap of bones, the crunch of teeth, the howl of victory at the end.

At the end of the second round, a woman in ripped yoga pants holds high the token. At the end of the third round, an elder with a cane that doubled

well as a riot baton hoists his token to the sky. At the end of the fourth round, a young boy, who darted between the legs of the remaining participants and snatched the dropped token right as time expired, is deemed the winner. Unfortunately, he tries to extend his luck the next round, and to no one's surprise, is fatally dispatched.

Tania makes an announcement between rounds four and five, as the boy's lifeless body is carried away.

"I want to remind everyone of something very important." She pauses for dramatic effect. "We have low-interest financing and affordable payment plans available, so please don't be discouraged from joining in. One of the five remaining tokens could be yours!"

During the ninth round, a man in his sixties fights his way into the crowd and snatches the token right as time runs out.

"Excellent! Excellent!" Tania exclaims. "And what is your name?" The agent holds the microphone out to the old man who has come to the podium to rest.

"Hiun Mulier," he says, wheezing. His tired voice echoes in the speakers upon the stage.

Bawkinu discretely pumps his fist since Hiun Mulier has less money than his family and is one of the lingerers Bawkinu was secretly helping win.

Hiun Mulier returns to the crowd of potential bidders in an effort to win more.

Tania tosses the next token to the sky.

Encouraged by his previous win, Hiun Mulier quickly moves in to catch the tumbling coin, but someone from the perimeter, someone who had been prowling the sidelines just waiting for their time to strike, rushes in to meet him.

Crack!

Wenqi covers her mouth and retches into her hand. Liam, too, swallows the bile rising up from his stomach. He refuses to cover his eyes, though. He makes himself watch with clenched fists. *This* is why his family moved here? *This* is the system they enable? His thoughts are interrupted by an unexpected sight.

Mrs.?

Liam can't believe his eyes, but it's definitely her. She's fighting for the token that Hiun Mulier dropped. She almost gets it, too, but a young girl

knocks her on the head with a shoe, causing Mrs. to fall. Another identical girl then grabs the token and wins the round.

Liam looks for any sign of Mrs. as the pile of defeated bodies disperses, but she seems to have disappeared into the watching crowd.

Round ten begins.

Bodies drop, one after the other, the yellow grass drinking up the blood as it spills into the soil. A woman in a green jumper, large glasses, and leggings, crawls bleeding toward the tenth-round token, but someone with more strength gets to it first.

Liam watches Bawkinu and his sister become more aggressive. Despite their success with Hiun Mulier, they have yet to win a token themselves. Bawkinu's mother, meanwhile, has willingly stepped off the lawn and eliminated herself from contention.

Smart, Liam thinks. She'd only be a liability.

And then, as if by fate...

Bawkinu wins round ten.

And his sister wins round eleven.

Bawkinu's sister is breathing hard, hands on knees, and is showing signs of heavy fatigue, but Bawkinu is still looking energized and spry. They both have several wounds to show for their efforts. Liam is begging in his mind for them to take their wins and exit, begging them not to push their luck, and it appears Bawkinu's sister is about to do just that. But before she can leave the lawn, Bawkinu grabs her and pulls her back into the fray.

The final token is released to the crowd, and within moments, Bawkinu's sister falls. She is wounded, but not gravely. Bawkinu thinks about helping her, but chooses instead to whirl around and tackle the man who won round one and now holds the final token in his hand. The man has more money than Bawkinu's family and can't be allowed to bid twice.

The two wrestle on the ground until Bawkinu is able to free an arm and slap the token from the man's giant grasp. Giving chase to the token, he scrambles to his feet. He scoops the token while in a dead sprint, but is immediately shoved hard to the ground by a man who had approached from the opposite direction. Bawkinu writhes in pain, his left arm now bent at an impossible angle, the broken bone threatening to break the skin in two spots. But in his right hand, he still holds the token. There is less than ten seconds remaining in the round.

A roar rips through air as the beast of a man now charges toward Bawkinu. He holds a fallen tree branch in his hand that has splintered in a way that makes the end sharp. He is almost upon the boy when, to everyone's surprise, Penny leaps atop Bawkinu to save him. They had fled the house at the first sign of his injury.

Unable to stop his momentum, the beast of a man plunges the sharp end of the branch into Penny's neck and then crumples in horror. Blood immediately begins pouring from the open wound.

Bawkinu can only hold Penny's body and cry out in pain as the final round ends.

Penny's parents rush in to aid their child, but Penny is already dead when they arrive.

"Oh... oh my," says Tania, now moving in closer to assess the situation. "Well, that wasn't supposed to happen." She chuckles nervously into the microphone.

The crowd scatters as security swarms the murderer and pins him to the ground. Even the lingerers who have won bid tokens drop them and flee. They want nothing to do with a home that will likely be haunted by the ghost of the previous owner.

Tania looks confused about what to do next. She plasters on a fake smile.

"Looks like it's your lucky day," she says to Bawkinu, who is still lying on the ground, covered in Penny's blood. "What's your name?" She holds the microphone to Bawkinu's lips.

Still in shock, Bawkinu finds himself answering Tania's question without protest or emotion. "Bawkinu," he says. "Bawkinu Joyhouse."

• • •

Liam's parents wait a few days before pestering their son about his progress with Wenqi. The events at the auction were traumatic for him—for the entire town, really—and they agreed to let him recover some before pushing forward with their plan.

"Well?" his mother asks. "Did you convince the girl to leave? I *need* to get my hands on that house."

Liam is appalled by his mother's tone.

"If your plan doesn't work..." Liam's father adds.

“We should have tried our luck at the auction,” his mother says.

Liam thinks back to the senseless bloodshed of that day, and of his parents’ callous attitude to those who died, and he becomes sick to his stomach.

“Liam. Do you think Wenqi will leave now? After seeing the horrors of this place? That was your plan, wasn’t it?”

Liam shrugs.

“Answer your mother,” says Liam’s father.

“You owe us a response,” says his mother.

Owe.

“Please, Liam. Don’t you want to see your sister?”

It’s hard giving up your life for someone you’ve never met, someone who never made it out of his mother’s womb, someone who only his parents feel a connection to—

“No. I don’t.”

• • •

Later that night at the window, Wenqi confronts Liam.

“So you’ve just been using me this entire time? Trying to manipulate me to leave? So you can what? Have the house?”

Liam is stunned. How does she know?

“I heard you talking to your parents this morning. You were so busy scheming, you didn’t even notice I was close by.”

A long silence hangs between them.

“I thought I could trust you,” she whispers.

Liam doesn’t move, doesn’t breathe. He just watches as Wenqi shuts the window, possibly for the last time, and melts into the shadows of her home.

WENQI

It's been a week since the auction, and Liam and I haven't spoken since. I still catch myself looking out the window at him, but look away as soon as our eyes meet. He seems to will a silent apology through his constant stare, but it isn't one I'm willing to accept yet. I don't trust him—not anymore. To show me such a scene is cruel, especially since he knew exactly what would happen at the auction. All that it showed me is the rotten core of this place and what it does to the people who stay—the loss of morals and ethics, even when they might think their reason is sound, that their love and grief is enough to justify their horrific actions.

It isn't.

Liam isn't so different after all. He wants the house, like his parents, like all the other lingerers here, and he is willing to do anything to get it. Maybe I would be the same if I were him. After all, he wants to see his sister. And can I blame him for that?

• • •

“We don't *need* a gardener.” Mother huffs, her arms wrapped tight across her chest.

Father rests a hand on her elbow. “Look out back. We do. But if you insist on not having one, what about tending to the garden yourself? You used to love it when we lived back in Scarborough. The lavenders? The blackberry tree? I can bring some back after work—”

“I don't have time for it,” she says.

I can tell Father wants to ask *how* she doesn't have time for it. Mother isn't working anymore, and I know she spends most of the day simply waiting for my brother to appear. But gardening isn't the only thing she no longer does—singing, too, except for my brother's favorite childhood song: the theme from the cartoon *Da Tou Er Zi He Xiao Tou Ba Ba*.

Father picks up and smooths out the handwritten “Gardener Wanted” sign that Mother crumpled only moments ago.

Mother has always known how to choose her battles, and she knows this one's not worth it. “At least make sure you hire someone who owns one of the

houses here,” she says. “*Not* a lingerer.”

“Yes, yes.” Even when Mother surrenders, Father still sounds exhausted. On his way out of the house, he pats me on the head. “Take care of her while I’m gone, alright?”

He doesn’t say “them.” He doesn’t feel comfortable enough yet to include my brother among the living.

How much of my brother does Father see?

MRS.

The keys in your shaking fingers rattle like the bones beneath the taut translucent skin barely pulled over them, joints grinding every time you flex. The keyhole is barely visible to your swollen eyes. It takes a few tries, but you finally stab the metal in. Turn. Click. You pull open the antique door with Victorian-style engravings in the oak, the stained glass transom looking like something stolen from a church.

You peel your husband's coat off your sore limbs, drop the cracking cane you picked up at the auction last week. What did you think was going to happen? An old woman like you winning the auction? Impossible. But you still had to try. Maybe you shouldn't have wasted your youth grieving your late husband's death. Maybe you should have moved on. What is the point of youth if you spend it hiding in the dark, waiting alone for something that never comes?

Perhaps you just wanted to see Tania, the woman your husband seemed to love so much more than you back when he was still alive.

You hang your husband's coat onto the wooden hook that's shaped like a raven's head. In the kitchen, you fill the kettle and boil your husband's favorite tea. You add sugar, but it still tastes bitter.

From your pocket, you fetch the flyer you grabbed from the lamppost across the street, now folded into a neat triangle—the way your husband used to do it. On the table, you smooth it out. *Gardener Wanted*. You know how to garden. And better yet, it is the house across from you who wants a gardener. The newcomers are still so naive. Don't they know it's foolish for the residents of HOME to hire someone to tend to their houses? If you're allowed into the home, you can call to your loved one's ghost.

What if you are the one they hire? What if, once inside their home, you call to your husband's ghost? Would he appear? It can't hurt to try. Your husband never allowed anything to get in the way of what he desired. You can be the same.

Next week you will go over to the house and offer your services. You touch the tender spots on your face. After this heals, of course. You can't be looking like you just got back from a war, even if it's somewhat true.

• • •

It is a Monday afternoon when you decide to head across the street and apply. The neighbor's child will not be home from school yet, and this will make things easier if any mishaps occur.

You stand in front of the full body mirror in your room.

Wear this dress, your curves look best in it. This lipstick color is marvelous on you. No, don't say that—remember, elegance is the key.

You comb your hair into a neat low bun, the way your husband always liked it. But now, the bun is gray, no longer the lovely black he used to run his fingers through. The more you stare at your reflection, willing the time to turn back, hoping youth will return, the more the image shifts until it's your husband standing in your double's place. You press a hand against the mirror. You wish he would climb out from the spirit world and grab you by your waist just a little too tight. You wish he would brush his stubble against your collarbone in the way you hated but should have loved. He looks down on you. And you know this isn't only because of your height difference.

It takes you several minutes to realize your reflection has not actually changed, and that it isn't your husband's ghost haunting the mirror. He's not there. Never has been. Probably never will be.

You grab your husband's coat and the bag of gardening tools you prepared. You double-check the coat to make sure you have washed all of the blood from the wool before putting it on.

Remember! Be pleasant and confident, but don't take no for an answer. Be the perfect woman your husband wanted you to be when going outside the house, and hopefully, he won't keep you waiting any longer.

Even with the cane, it's hard to move quickly, especially now that it's gotten too long (you're only getting more stooped with age). You must find the time to whittle the wood down soon, take a few inches off.

The auction seems to have done something terrible to your knees. You've rested them, iced them, but still they throb.

When you get to the neighbor's driveway, the lingerers on the lawn there turn and look. You stare back at the boy who you always see by the front window, eating and flirting with the girl. He's stopped visiting her as of late, and you wonder why. It is difficult to make any friends in a place like this, much less keep them, and you hope they can reconcile soon.

At the door, you take a moment to catch your breath, not because you're nervous, but because you're not as limber as when you used to help your parents back on their farm in Fuzhou.

You knock.

The door opens slowly. A skeptical eye peeks through the crack. It's the eye of the woman you almost never see except for when she retrieves her grocery delivery from the step.

"Hel-lo," you say, voice rusty from lack of use.

You clear it and try again. "Hello."

"Who are you?" the woman asks in English. "Why are you here?"

You don't speak English, but you know enough to understand what she's asking.

You answer in Mandarin, "I live across the street. I am here about the job." You pull the "Gardener Wanted" sign from your pocket and show her.

The woman responds in Mandarin. "Oh, I see," she says. She struggles to shift languages, as though speaking in her mother tongue is painful, inconvenient. She opens the door a little wider, but it's clear she's still hesitant. You hold up the poster, and she takes it. "Do you *know* how to garden?" she asks.

You nod. "Back in China, I used to work on a farm. I can start today."

The woman takes a step back, then forward, then disappears behind the door, then reappears. She takes a weary step out the door and closes it behind her, locking it. "This way," she says.

You follow the woman around to the back of the house where she struggles to open the gate. The fence is rotting and overgrown weeds are everywhere.

"I don't remember it being this—" She does not finish her sentence. Instead, she looks at you, at the dress you're wearing. It doesn't look fit for gardening. "Are you sure—"

"Don't worry. I know what I'm doing," you reassure her. You hold up your bag of tools as evidence.

"Ah, yes. Of course." The woman still looks uncertain. "Well then, I'll leave you to it. If you need me—"

I nod. "Yes, thank you."

You get to work hacking away at the weeds, but in your mind, you're formulating a way to get inside the house.

• • •

At around 3:45 p.m., the woman's child returns home from school. You hear her approach, but there is a halt in her steps.

"Hello?"

You pause mid-hack and turn to her voice. The weed would survive, for now.

"Hello," you say, wiping sweat from your forehead with the heel of your gloved hand. After working the weeds, you feel much younger, even if your joints still groan.

She stares first at your face, then your hands, then at the dead weeds around you. She clears her throat and asks, "Are you the new gardener?"

You nod and answer in Mandarin. "I am."

The girl pauses for a moment, lips twitching before switching to a shaky Mandarin. "You look tired. Would you like to come in for some tea?"

Your heart begins to pound, but you manage to keep your composure. Your head wants nothing more than to bob up and down, and your brain wants to grab the young girl's hand and yell, *Yes, yes, yes!*

"That would be quite nice," you say, offering a small grin. Warm, civil, trustworthy.

You follow the girl inside. The house looks different than how you had imagined it, from what you think you saw from the window of your own house. Rather than being filled with modern furniture and art, it's old like yours, antique. A fire snaps in the hearth, and you notice a family portrait up on the mantle. The young boy, you have not seen him around. Maybe he is the one they're here for. Oh, to lose a child. Much more tragic than the loss of a husband.

"What kind of tea would you like?" the girl asks. "We have jasmine, rose, chrysanthemum..."

"Rose would be nice," you say. Your husband always gifted you white roses on special occasions, and sometimes on regular days, too. Taboo maybe, but you loved them. "What is your name?"

"Wenqi."

Such a gentle girl. She reminds you of yourself as a child. Your mind recalls the boy by the window and the pair's forbidden interactions. You look out the window to find the boy has moved closer to the house than when you first

saw him outside.

You point him out to Wenqi. “You two are friends? No?”

“Who? Liam?” Wenqi’s brow furrows. “Not anymore. Turns out he’s just a jerk like the rest of them.” She heads into the kitchen.

Liam! Your head swims with the name of your late husband, and you marvel at the coincidence that the two share a name.

You are about to take a seat when, suddenly, your head dizzies and a shadow darts across your line of sight. You shake your head. Shake it again. But the shadow returns.

A man.

You start screaming your husband’s name. Your eyes flutter closed, and you drop to your knees, oblivious to the pain in your bones as they strike the hard ground.

The house is indeed haunted! Unlike your own home, ghosts do reside here! If your husband is to appear anywhere, this would be the place.

You wail your husband’s name over and over again—summoning cries.

“Wenqi!” A male voice comes from the window. It’s the boy. *Liam*.

An alarm goes off. It’s a horrible, discordant noise meant to disorient and terrify.

A stampede of steps thunder down the stairs, but you ignore them. You must keep going. Your husband is certainly here. You can feel it. The shared names must have been a sign.

“Stop! Stop! Stop!”

Hands shake your shoulders, and a hand covers your mouth. Your eyes pop open to see the woman, her hair a wild mess, her eyes scared and frantic. She reaches out to something. “Tianqi!” She grabs for whatever it is, but appears to miss. A few moments later, a door slams upstairs, followed by the loud click of a lock.

The woman removes her hand from your mouth. “Get out!” she cries.

You don’t move.

Wenqi has retreated to the window to stand beside Liam. The two appear stunned.

“GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT!” the woman shrieks. Her voice has become so shrill, so filled with primal emotion, that your only instinct is to cover your ears and squeeze your eyes shut in response.

You scramble to your feet and make for the nearest escape. You search for

your husband's ghost as you stumble to the door, but you find nothing.

"I'm sorry," you babble. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm—" You fall out the front door, and it slams shut behind you.

"... sorry."

WENQI

My brother's name is Tianqi, *weather*—irregular, unstable, temperamental. The name suits him.

I sit on the floor beside my brother's door and wait. I check my watch. It's almost time, so my eyes stay fixed on the timepiece and follow the seconds hand's tick until it strikes the twelve. 4:04 p.m.

I hear the swish of the curtains being pulled back, and light escapes from the crack beneath the door. A gentle breeze tickles the hand I rest on the ground. I relax my head and let it knock against the door.

"Tianqi," I whisper. Then louder: "Tianqi!"

I hear the shuffle of feet nearing the door. Then silence.

"C'mon, Tianqi," I say. "You can come out now. It's okay."

Tianqi's shadow looms beneath the door.

"Can you please come out? For me? So Mother will stop being angry?" I close my eyes and imagine the park nearby our old home in Scarborough. The one where Tianqi and I would sit on the swings while Mother watched from a bench.

I wonder if he's responding, and I just can't hear him anymore.

"If you said something, knock once on the door. If you didn't, knock twice."

Knock.

I pray to hear a second knock, but it never comes. My breath stutters.

"Mrs. is gone now, and she's not coming back. You don't need to be afraid."

I wonder if Tianqi can hear the insincerity in my voice, and that's why he's not coming out.

"Please?" I ask.

Knock.

On the other side of the door, footsteps retreat. The breeze halts. The sliver of light wanes.

I check my watch.

4:05 p.m.

• • •

In the kitchen, Mother has dinner ready: sweet and sour pork with bok choy on the side, and three bowls heaped with steaming rice. I wonder if she remembers that it's my favorite meal, and if she made it just to make me feel guilty.

Father's not here. He's working late again, as he always does, since someone around here has to earn some money, lest we lose the house.

Mother is standing at the dinner table, holding a plate of steamed fish, looking for the best place to put it. Her hair is in a mess of a bun atop her head, and her foot is tapping a manic beat, the heel of her slipper slapping repeatedly against the ceramic tile. It's a tick I used to exhibit as a child, but one I stopped because it irked Mother so much.

Mother hears my approach and whirls around with a smile, plate still in her hands. "Tianqi?" Her smile falls into a blank stare when she discovers I'm alone. "Where's your brother?" she says, quiet. Her claws dig into the towel around the plate.

I refuse to meet her accusatory glare. I choose instead to stare into the eyes of the dead fish. "I'll try again later," I say.

"Later?!"

Mother slams the plate onto the table, causing the silverware to jump and the plated soup to slosh from its bowls.

"You will get your brother *now*."

I turn, take my leave, stomp up the stairs, and bang against my brother's door.

"Tianqi!" *Bang, bang.*

Knock.

"TIANQI!" *Bang, bang, bang.*

Knock.

Knock.

Knock.

"TIAN—"

A hand grabs my elbow from behind and rips me away from the door. Mother brings her face, twisted with anger, right up against mine. I can feel her heated breath on my face, wafting up my nose. I break out in a cold sweat, but I refuse to cede any ground.

“YOU’RE SCARING HIM!” Mother’s ear-piercing shriek takes my breath away. She grabs my arms and digs her nails deep into my skin until I start to bleed. First I feel pain. Then I feel numb. But now I boil with rage.

“I DON’T CARE! I DON’T CARE! I DON’T CARE!”

I press my forehead hard against hers and pry her wretched fingers from my skin. Once free from her grip, I kick Tianqi’s door as hard as I can.

The lights in the hallway begin to flicker.

“Don’t do that!” she demands.

Kick.

Knock.

“Wenqi!”

Kick.

Knock.

“Stop!”

Kick

Knock.

“Please!”

I kick the door one last time and then rush down the stairs.

Mother screams after me. “He’s crying! Can’t you hear him crying?”

“No!”

I stomp into the living room, the fireplace raging in kind, rip the framed family portrait from the mantle and throw it down onto the floor. I stomp the glass with my bare foot and shatter it.

Mother’s footsteps pound down the stairs after me. I pick up the frame and the photo without minding the sharp pieces of glass that slice my fingers to ribbons, and I toss the broken heap into the crackling flames of the fire.

Your brother loves to watch the fire.

“What are you doing?” Mother pushes me aside to watch the photo burn. Without thinking, she reaches into the fire and fishes the paper out. She wails as the fire singes her fingers, but it’s now safe in her soot-stained hands.

Mother says the only word she can manage. “Why?”

Tears stream down my face.

“Because I’m alive.”

Knock.

MRS.

It was the child, wasn't it? The boy. The one from the portrait. You couldn't see him, but judging by the woman's expression and the way her arms attempted to wrap around something invisible to you, it was him. The way she wailed was the same way you wailed at your husband's funeral, though only on the inside, of course. On the outside, you had to look prim, proper, elegant in front of all his friends. You were only allowed to dab at your eyes on occasion, with the same black silk handkerchief your husband would carry to funerals he attended.

Breathe. It will be all right. Surely the ghost of the boy will settle down. You never had children, but you've been told they forget easily, *forgive* easily. Or so you hope.

You chew your fingernails until the skin there is raw and throbbing. The red nail polish you refresh weekly has been ruined by the garden work. Your husband would not have approved. Getting your nails dirty like that, working, looking anything less than perfect. These things were not allowed.

The mail slot opens, the metal squeaking at the hinges, and a bank statement slips through. Then a brochure. And finally a letter. They are all addressed to your husband. You do not have to look at them to know.

You check your husband's pocket watch to confirm your suspicions. The mailman is twenty minutes late today. How odd. That hasn't happened for at least a decade. You wonder if it's because your husband's death anniversary is approaching—strange things always occur around this time. Last year on the day of your husband's death, your house was the only one on the block to lose power. You went without electricity for two days, but you didn't care. You were excited, even hopeful during this time. At the end of the two days, your electricity was restored, but your husband was not.

You shuffle to the front door, bend down, and gingerly retrieve the three pieces of mail from the floor. The first is a statement from the bank your husband used to frequent. The second is a brochure for a pizza place in the next town over. And the third...

You pause.

The third is a letter addressed to you.

It's a small note, folded over and sealed with a robot sticker. You open it to reveal handwriting in Chinese, hastily scrawled. You can't tell if it's been written by an adult or a child. The note is one sentence long. There is no signature.

Stay away from our home.

Your fingers tremble as you rip up the flimsy piece of paper and cast it out the same way it came in: through the mail slot. It catches the wind and scatters across the porch.

This never would have happened if your husband had shown up decades ago like he was supposed to.

Quick steps take you to the kitchen. You slam the other two pieces of mail onto the countertop and rip open the drawer where the knives and scissors are. You retrieve the scissors and get right to cutting your husband's name from all the places it exists. With his name now in your hands, you head into the living room and march to the fireplace where he collapsed dead years ago, the fire poker still firmly in his grip.

You intend to adhere the paper to the wall, but you realize you have nothing to secure it with.

You read somewhere that this helps, putting these things up. That they help call to the dead. You never tried because you thought your patience was enough. You thought he would arrive when he wanted to arrive. Anything else would disappoint him. You remember his voice, and the way it told you how to look, how to think, and how to act. You need his voice to guide you, but the memory is running out.

You whimper, then phone the next-day delivery service to order five bottles of instant glue. While you have them on the phone, you decide to also order three buckets of paint and a small variety of paint brushes.

You hang up the phone and head upstairs. You need to collect more papers with your husband's name on them. You need to collect all of his photos, all of his favorite items.

In the bedroom, you stare at the rumpled indent on your side of the bed. It is the place where you sleep. The other side lies untouched.

In the makeup table's mirror, you glimpse an image of you back when you were a newlywed. You with the shining eyes. You with the lush hair he made you straighten daily. You with the summer dress above the knees that he said was too scandalous...

The box in the closet is heavier than you remember it to be. It takes a few strong heaves to haul it out from its hiding place, and you hope you don't pull your back while doing so.

You pull the box to the middle of the room, kneel down beside it, and shove open the lid. Inside the box are stacks of old photos and negatives—Polaroids, photos developed the old-fashioned way in a dark room, photos printed digitally at a photo kiosk at the local pharmacy, photos you requested from his mother, his aunts, his uncles, some for the funeral, some just because. The box also includes illustrated portraits you drew of him because drawing is elegant, lady-like, and a worthy hobby, he said, and he a worthy subject. He never let you draw anything other than him. Among his photos lay the small sketches of flowers, trees, and houses that you drew when he wasn't home. He never discovered them because he never bothered to look. The closet was yours to maintain. It was you, not him, that picked his clothes for the day, pressed his suits, his ties, his shirts, and sometimes even his socks.

You grab the first photo you see, one of you and him by the sea. He wore black swim trunks and you a matching black one-piece, though others could barely see it because he insisted on hiding your figure beneath a shawl. You take the scissors and use them to cut around his body with care. You know your work is done when both the image of a younger you and the sea you remember so fondly fall lifeless to the carpet at your knees. For the first time in years, you hold your husband in your hands, but you don't let sentiment derail you. You simply set the image of him aside and repeat the process with all the photos that remain—cut, drop, lay, cut, drop, lay, cut—

You pause on a photo of you and he with his family who had come to visit shortly after your wedding. You remember how they phoned your parents that day to reassure them their daughter was in "capable hands." In truth, he was only capable at generating wealth, but at the time, wealth was the only thing that really mattered to your family. They knew what it was like to live with no money and many mouths to feed.

When you get to the bottom of the box, all that remains are your sketches. You leave them there and bury them beneath a pile of discarded photo scraps that you move from the carpet to the box. You put the lid back on and take the box downstairs to the fireplace. You light the wood inside the hearth and wait for the flames to grow hot. You then open the box and, one by one, toss each piece of you into the fire and watch it curl, crack, and melt.

Once nothing of you remains, you head back upstairs to the bedroom and refill the box with the meticulous cut-outs of your husband. You bring the box back downstairs, take a seat by the fire, and wait.

• • •

The following morning, the delivery man drops the package outside your front door and knocks. The fire has long since been extinguished, but you have yet to move, transfixed on the mound of ash.

Seemingly of its own accord, your body finally gets up and drags itself to the door, drags the box inside. A cool breeze chills your exposed ankles, crawls up your silk nightgown—not a cheap fabric, by the way. He would never allow that. You open the box and wonder if five bottles of instant glue will be enough. Next to the glue sit three large tubs of paint—two black, one white—and five paint brushes. Paint rollers would have been more convenient, but he would not have approved. Only a hands-on approach would serve to draw him out.

Along the red brick of the fireplace, you paste the different photos of your husband while gently whispering his name. *Liam, Liam, Liam*. You focus only on your love and expel any vision of Wenqi's friend—the other Liam—when thoughts of him randomly enter your mind.

Some pieces contain his whole body, some only show him from the waist up. Some are from a distance or at odd angles or fuzzy, some are close up and clear. One of the pieces makes him look decapitated.

Pick up. Apply glue. Paste.

You continue this process until the wall behind the fireplace becomes Liam, until you can't remember what the wall looks like without him. Until Liam is the only thing you remember.

And yet, you still don't feel his presence. The house is empty, silent, save for you.

You thought this might be the case, so you retrieve one of the two black buckets of paint. You don't bother laying out newspapers to protect the floor. You grab Liam's old screwdriver from the kitchen and use it to pry the bucket open. You dip the brush, smear a streak of black over a section of peeling wallpaper. It's a maroon floral pattern, with brown and gold accents. It's antique. Your husband loved it, but you hate it.

No... wait. You love it too. Don't you?

Yes, yes, yes... No.

You cover the rest of the wall with black.

The paint says quick dry, less than two hours, so you take a seat and again you wait. It's okay, though. You have nothing but time.

When the base layer of black paint is finally dry, you pick up a new brush, open the can of white paint, and begin again.

You try outlining his body the way it looked when he would wait for you in the driveway, leaning confidently against his car. But it doesn't look right. The figure is too stooped, too disproportionate. Black paint brush raised, you brush over the figure.

After another two-hour wait, you try painting him squatting over the lawn to inspect the grass. Your attempt resembles a hunched-over blob with undefined limbs. Angry now, you paint the wall black.

For the third attempt, you try painting him the way he looked while shaving his stubble. But the razor doesn't look like a razor and your husband doesn't look like your husband. *Everything* is wrong with this one.

He used to tell you how accurate your portraits were, almost as though they were living, as though they might hop out of the frame and take his place. Now, you wish they would.

You paint over the third figure, but you don't wait for the wall to dry before taking another attempt with the white. You paint a swirl of white, black, and gray until it forms the unnatural shape he was found in when he died: legs splayed as though he had been running but fell, arms reaching out as though he desired to caress the flames. For the final touch, you swipe a single white stroke across his hand to symbolize the fire poker he held, though here, it looks more like he's holding a beam of light.

Then, for the first time since being alone in this house, *his* house, you say his name out loud: "Liam."

You press your body against his wet outline, repeating his name to the wall, praying he can hear you. The shadows of previous attempts to paint him bleed through and surround you.

Liam.

You jump back from the wall and fall to the floor. You swear the wall just whispered his name.

Liam.

Or perhaps it whispered, *Leave him.*

• • •

There comes a knock on the front door, and you know immediately that it's her.

You graciously allow her into your home even though you know her presence defiles it.

She doesn't wait to be invited in, just marches straight to the living room and takes a seat on your husband's favorite couch. She sets that nauseating snake skin briefcase of hers onto the coffee table and looks around. She shakes her head in disapproval, but doesn't comment on the disastrous state of your home.

She may be rude, but she's still a guest, so you do the respectable thing and head to the kitchen to prepare your husband's favorite tea.

When you return with the steaming cup, you notice a small spot of blood on her briefcase. You find this to be odd since she is usually so meticulous.

She breathes in the pleasant aroma of the tea and hums a sound of deep satisfaction. It's the sound you used to hear coming from your husband's bedroom whenever she used to visit (you'd started sleeping in separate beds by then). Your husband always looked so much happier after her visits. The last time you saw him so happy with you was on your wedding day.

You set the cup down in front of the woman you once desired to be and take a seat on the chair beside her.

She picks up the cup and gives the liquid a gentle, elegant blow, with the grace of a woman accustomed to expensive European teahouses. She's nothing like the farm girl you are. She pulls out a small device you recognize all too well—one that now sits abandoned in a box in the basement. You still bring it out on occasion to whisper into its microphone and hear your words spoken back to you in English. You hope that your husband might answer if he hears words he can understand.

Your husband had purchased the translation device for you as a wedding gift, but you very seldom used it. He didn't like the coldness of the robotic voice, and he didn't like the garble that was your language either. The novelty of you had worn off by then. Your *foreign-ness*, your *Asian-ness*, first thought to be a precious flower, had now become a weed.

“You were at the auction the other day,” she says into a translator. The device translates her English into a Mandarin that is stiff. The tone is sometimes off, placing emphasis in the wrong places. She brings the tea up to the red-painted lips and chalky white face, caked thick with foundation. She isn’t as beautiful as you remember her to be.

You simply nod yes.

“Lovely, wasn’t it? Well... except for that unfortunate bit at the end with the previous homeowner’s child. It made for great theater, though.”

You reply with a scowl.

She sighs. She speaks the next words without bothering to bring the translator to her lips. “I know you don’t like me, and you have every reason not to, but I have to defend myself here. You think he stopped loving you just because you didn’t understand his language. I know. He told me. But that’s not true. He stopped loving you because you didn’t understand him as a person.”

You clench your fists and bite your tongue... hard.

“Business. Finance. *Success*. I shared his passions. I talked to him about his work, his goals, his aspirations. We made plans. And you? What did you talk to him about?”

I told him about my family. About my home.

“Did you even try and take an interest in the things he enjoyed?”

You did, but they were things you were never taught to enjoy: sports, alcohol, loud restaurants, boisterous conversation.

“Do you know what he called you?” she asks.

In this moment, you only wish to return home, return to a place where you are treated like a person, even if very few of your family still remain.

“Why are you here?” you ask in English.

The woman raises an intrigued eyebrow. “A little late to be learning the language, don’t you think?” She removes a large envelope from her briefcase and sets it on the table next to her half-finished cup of tea. Without saying another word, she shows herself out.

You envy how easy she leaves the house behind. You wish you had the courage to follow her out that door, but if you did, you’d be betraying your husband, and your family would be dishonored.

It’s easier to remain here and pretend he’s still alive, pretend you’re both still happy. It’s the lie you told your family thousands of times, until one day,

they had all passed on.

You pick up the envelope and read what's been written in English. The only words you recognize are *will* and a name: Linghun.

WENQI

When Mother goes to sleep, I find myself waking, getting out of bed, and heading to Tianqi's room even though I know he won't be there. I sit next to the door with my legs stretched out in front of me, counting my toes, recounting them, not quite sure what I'm waiting for. To live in the shadow of someone half my size? To feel smaller than a six-year-old?

"Gege." *Brother.*

The word feels foreign coming from my mouth. I test it, again and again, until my voice no longer sounds like me but a strange recording. It doesn't feel any more natural even after saying it a hundred times.

"I'm sorry," I say.

And after a moment:

"I miss you."

I fall asleep against the wall and wake to a strange knocking. My watch tells me it's only 10:44 a.m., but there's a shadow beneath the door of Tianqi's room.

"Gege?" I ask.

Click.

Tianqi opens the door, hides behind it for a moment, then steps out holding his favorite robot toy. His features are still blurry today, but I do find that my memories are growing stronger.

I clamber to my feet and squat down so I can move in close. I search his featureless face for answers, for words I can't hear, but I come up empty. But just as my hopes begin to fade, Tianqi holds up the robot and presses the button on its back.

"It's okay, meimei," the speaker inside the robot says.

I almost break down in tears. It's the first time since his death that I hear my brother's voice. *Really* hear his voice.

I wrap my arms around him and squeeze him tight, bury my face in his gray translucent shoulder.

With one hand, he pats me on the back.

He feels warm.

LIAM

There's only an hour left before school lets out, but Liam heads over anyways. Wenqi doesn't want to see him, but he wants to see her, and she can't avoid him if they're both stuck in class.

He arrives to fourth period early, and Bawkinu is the only student present, his broken arm in a sling. He usually sits next to Penny, but today he sits as far from their old seat as possible.

Liam was aware of the secret relationship between Bawkinu and Penny. At first, he just noticed the hints: fleeting glances between them, the slight brush of their hands whenever they passed one another in the hall. But after catching them locked in an intimate embrace in the library, he knew for sure. He never told them what he saw that day—they had decided to keep their relationship hidden, and he would honor that decision. But he knew the moment was special. It made him feel like there was still some life left in HOME.

Liam passes Bawkinu on the way to his seat, and the two exchange a silent greeting, but that's all. Students begin to trickle in a short time later.

Wenqi doesn't enter the classroom until right before the bell rings. Her hair is a wild but beautiful mess, a tangled cascade down her back.

At the sight of Liam, Wenqi's eyes widen. She freezes for a moment and then rushes to her seat.

Liam winces when Wenqi angles her chair away so that he is out of her line of sight. He notices one of her shoelaces is undone, and he resists the urge to walk over and tie it for her.

The room is abuzz with whispers about Penny's parents. Their father wants to stay as a lingerer, but their mother wants to leave. The rumor is they're getting divorced.

Bawkinu raises his non-broken hand before Mrs. Juna has the chance to quiet the room down.

"Yes, Bawkinu?"

Bawkinu clears his throat. "My mom passed the other day in her sleep. She died with a smile on her face."

Mrs. Juna grins, but the expression is vacant. The students murmur words

not of sympathy, but of congratulations, which seems to startle Wenqi. Some are quite genuine in their well-wishes, but most are bitter or envious. They quickly go back to their gossip about Penny's parents.

Then, without another word, Bawkinu stands up and leaves.

Mrs. Juna looks confused.

"Bawkinu?"

Liam clenches his hands into fists and stands with such force his chair topples backward, causing the room to fall silent. No one dares to make another move. It's not an effect Liam wants to have on others, but HOME has made him unfriendly. He didn't used to lose his temper like this.

His eyes wander to Wenqi. She is looking at him, her eyes wet with sadness. He wonders what she sees when she looks at him, but he doesn't wait around to find out. Before another breath is taken, he follows Bawkinu out the door.

• • •

He apologizes to Wenqi the next day. Walked right up to the window, rapped his knuckles against the glass like he used to, and extended a mumbling apology. And even though she didn't open the window right away, she did fetch him a mug of hot chocolate, her way of accepting his olive branch.

Liam swirls the mug to mix the chocolate that has settled at the bottom. "I want to leave," he says. "As soon as possible."

"Leave?" Her eyes widen once she realizes what he's trying to say. "You mean leave HOME?"

Liam nods.

"But where will you go?" she asks.

"Anywhere but here," he says.

Liam takes a deep breath and reaches for Wenqi's hand. Her fingers twitch before the tips settle on his palm. Then with a single finger, she traces circles on his skin before interlocking their hands. Her touch is the most human thing he's felt in a very long time. He knows he will never forget it.

WENQI

For the next month, Liam and I plan our escape—by the window at night, during lunch, at the library. We decide it will be best to leave after graduation, which is now only a week away. I have savings from when I worked part-time before moving to HOME, and Liam has a bank account he hides from his parents. It isn't much, but it's enough to buy us time once we get back to Toronto. Penny's mom is leaving soon too, and Liam suggests we hitch a ride with her, maybe stay with her cousin a few days until we find a place of our own. I'm still wary of Liam, but my desire to leave this place outweighs all other concerns.

I spend the nights packing, unpacking, repacking in silence. Before exhaustion overtakes me, I shove the half-packed suitcase under my bed. When the sun wakes me on the Sunday before graduation day, I unearth my savings from the closet. I remove the stack of envelopes from the box and count the bills. It'll be enough for now—it has to be.

When graduation day arrives, Father dresses in the same suit he wore for Tianqi's funeral. Mother, not in black but a deep blue, wears the same gloves she wore whenever she wished to touch Tianqi's tombstone back in Fuzhou.

We have only just left the house when Mother suddenly blurts, "I'm sorry! I can't!" and runs back inside. The sound of the door slamming shut constricts my heart, unsteadies my breath, but my expression remains even.

The lingerers look on in shock.

"She's just anxious about leaving the house unattended," Father says, but I know he doesn't mean it. "Please understand."

I do, and yet—

Liam catches my eye and gives me a reassuring look that settles me. His look seems to say, *It's alright. By tomorrow, we'll be gone.*

I can't tell if Father notices the exchange, but he doesn't say anything as we continue our walk to the school. The sidewalks are filled with more people today than I've ever seen here in HOME, and for once, the town kind of feels alive.

• • •

It appears Mother isn't the only one afraid to leave the house today. Though there are more than enough seats for family and friends, most of the students arrive alone. Some students don't show up at all. When a student's name is read, there is no applause. Just complete silence as they step up onto the stage, receive their diploma, shake the principal's hand, and then exit stage left. When I head up to the stage to collect my diploma, only Father claps, and he continues to clap even though no one joins in.

We skip the banquet that follows the ceremony and head straight home, because Father says he's too tired to stay out. I don't complain, though. At least he showed up.

• • •

We agreed it would be best to leave in the middle of the night when everyone is asleep. So that night after graduation, I repack my luggage for the last time and head down the stairs.

Knock.

I turn to see Tianqi at the top of the stairs. He is a translucent shimmer now, barely there, but the robot he clutches in his hands remains unchanged. My phone shows 4:04 a.m. He hops down the steps, noiseless, until he stands only a step above me. Tianqi holds out the robot.

"For me?" I ask, quiet.

Tianqi nods, then reaches toward the banister. *Knock.*

I take the robot and press the button. Tianqi must have wiped the old message because a new recording plays:

"Thank you, jiejie."

• • •

Liam is waiting by the front door when I open it.

We lift the garage door open ourselves so as to not make too much noise.

"Ready?" he asks.

At least he was smart enough to get his license before his family moved here. I had always been too afraid to try.

"Ready."

We load our belongings into the trunk, but it's mostly just my stuff, since Liam doesn't own much. I know his parents are asleep on the lawn, but the

way their bodies face us makes me think they're watching. A shiver runs through me, and I hurry to the passenger seat.

When Liam turns the engine on, I ask, "Did they say anything? Your parents?"

He backs out of the driveway as quietly as possible, but a few lingerers still wake, looking like reanimated corpses.

"No," Liam replies. "We haven't spoken since the auction."

I wring my hands at the memory of piling bodies, clawing hands, snapping bones, tearing skin, Tania Yemen's smiling face, all the horrible images that refuse to leave my mind.

Tianqi stands by the living room window and tugs at the curtains as a gesture of farewell. I know he can't leave the house even if he wanted to.

I wave back.

Liam's parents wake up just in time to watch us leave. I wonder if Liam will say goodbye to them, but he doesn't. I guess there's no point. *Goodbye. Hello.* What's the difference to those who are suspended in time? I watch them from the rearview mirror until we round the corner at the end of the street.

Liam tosses a map onto my lap. I haven't seen a paper map for a long time. Liam rolls to a stop at the edge of town and pulls an old iPhone from his pocket. It's an iPhone 8, two generations behind mine. He has an old phone charger that still uses an adapter for the cigarette lighter, and he plugs it into the car. HOME is a place where all times meet, intersect, disconnect from those for whom time still marches on.

Once we get a few miles outside of HOME, Liam's phone screen lights up, and we smile at each other. It's as though our lives have finally been unpaused.

LINGHUN

You sit in the rocking chair by the living room window, with your fingers buried in the remainder of your husband's ashes. The urn on your lap is warm from your body's heat. Cold air slips through the slight crack in the glass panel in front of you, but the frigid air cannot make cold what is already dead and hollow.

The living room floor is covered in the ashen powder. Your husband is now everywhere and nowhere. You can almost hear the echoes of his gurgling tongue, the foreign tones that leave his mouth, with every half-hearted attempt to learn your language—and the echoes of your fumbling attempts to learn his. He preferred you not to speak at all, but you kept trying anyway. Now there is no one to try for.

You desire a man who doesn't want you. You shackle yourself to a house he refuses to haunt. You don't want to be here. You want to be home.

This is your home now, your mother had said over the phone, back when you first arrived. She needed you to be strong—you both did—because you had no other prospects in life. She could not afford to keep you any longer. And no man in your home village could give you a better life than the one across the ocean.

You gather the last pinch of ashes from the urn and toss the dust into the air. It's not meant as a sign of disrespect, but rather, a final attempt to summon his ghost.

Why, after all these years, can you still not let him go? You resent him, but you also need him. Maybe you resent yourself, resent the person your husband created before he died.

Why is your house the only one unhaunted?

Out of the chair you leap, more nimble than you have felt in a very long time. In the middle of the room, you lean back upon your heels until gravity takes over and you fall backward onto the floor of ash. You watch as the floating dust is brought into focus by the sunlight, listen as another piece of crumbling plaster falls from the wall to the floor, hum to the drip of the leaks from the ceiling.

WENQI

We live with Penny's mom and cousin for only a week before we find a place for ourselves, a tiny condo unit in the city. When we move in, we find a single sapphire earring and a dirty thong in the cabinet beneath the bathroom sink.

Life here is noisy. The traffic outside, the hum of the refrigerator, the footsteps from the room above, the murmurs of people in the halls—all sounds I'd forgotten during my year living in HOME. Yet, for as easily as I allowed them to leave my mind, they quickly become normal to my ears once more. Even after a month, the wailing sirens, honking horns, booming club music all still irritate me, but at least they feel alive. And that is all Liam and I really want.

Liam is smoking a cigarette on the balcony. I can see the half-finished smoke between his fingers and the empty pack squished into the back pocket of his jeans. HOME had forced him to quit the habit, but the city brought it back with no effort.

• • •

The rent here is much lower than mortgage payments in HOME, but Liam still needs to pick up a second part-time job to afford it. I work full-time, waiting tables at a local family restaurant. Maybe when we become more financially stable, I'll apply to a university in the city. Maybe I can convince Liam to apply to one too.

When I return home late one night, I find Liam slouched over on the couch, one hand on his cheek, one hand in his hair. I feel a sudden sense of concern, but I don't know why.

He looks over at me and flashes a bashful smile. He asks me a question that feels completely random. "If you knew you were going to die soon, what would you do?"

I settle down next to him and criss-cross my legs. "What do you mean by 'soon?'"

"I don't know. Tomorrow. What would you do?"

I've always wanted to become a librarian, to live in a place of timelessness and immortality, where the past, present, and future exist all in one place

through words and within books. But twenty-four hours is not nearly enough time to accomplish that.

“I would wait.”

“Wait for what? Death?”

“Yes.”

Liam laughs. “Then I guess we’ll wait together. For death.”

I ignore the eerie thoughtfulness in his voice, focus instead on the gentle way he untangles my legs. We wrap each other in an awkward embrace until neither of us can tell what limb belongs to whom. I breathe in the scent of stale cigarette smoke and try not to cough. In HOME, Liam was a dream. Here, he’s a flawed but beautiful reality. Whispers of our future together lull us both into a dreamless sleep. It’s the first time we find such emptiness comforting.

LINGHUN

When your husband died, you slid the wedding ring from your finger and hid it away with the rest of his photos, along with the name he gave you.

When you first arrived, your husband had the translator with him, and he stayed with you the entire day. Soon it became only half the day, and sometimes without the translator. Then just two hours a day. Then one hour, no translator. Until one day, they both disappeared forever. It's true that you never had much to say, but with the translator gone, you felt more voiceless than ever.

After he left, you began hiding inside the house. You had already grown accustomed to staying inside since he almost never let you go out. Besides, you still had plenty of pre-paid phone cards to call your family back home and stave off the loneliness for a bit longer. You missed them so much.

It was hard work, toiling in the fields, but your parents chastised you whenever you tried to help. They feared that your hands would become too wrinkled, too rough for the liking of any potential suitors. You didn't know that they were planning to ship you off to a man across the ocean. You didn't know that they had posted a photo of you in a newspaper ad for mail-order brides. But they had no choice, and therefore, neither did you.

WENQI

A month after our return to Toronto, I find myself in a hospital exam room, staring at an x-ray that shows an ominous mass growing inside Liam's lung.

It won't stop growing, either. Stage IV. There's nothing the doctors can do.

"How much time?" I surprise myself by asking.

The doctor looks to Liam, who nods.

"Ten to twelve months."

• • •

As we leave the hospital, I chew on the thought of death, of being alone again, of my parents, of Tianqi. Once outside, my legs suddenly weaken, and I wobble as we descend a set of steps.

Liam grabs onto my elbow to help steady me. "You okay?"

I wave him off.

"I'm sorry," he says. "For not telling you sooner."

I want to say, *There's nothing you have to be sorry for*, but I don't. I want to stay angry. He's betrayed me again. Ripped me from my family only to quickly leave me behind.

• • •

On the drive back home, I see a shadow walking alongside the road. It's tall, lanky, and walks with a slight stoop. *Liam*. Walking next to him is a blurry figure half his size—a small child. The shape of the small child clutches a toy—a robot.

"Stop the car!" I shout. "Stop the car now!"

Liam slams his foot on the brake and swerves onto the side of the road. The traffic behind us blares their horns as they fly pass. I stumble out of the car and onto the gravel shoulder, then sprint down the road toward shadowy figures of Liam and Tianqi.

I arrive at the pair out of breath, but it's not Liam and Tianqi. It's just two normal strangers, very much alive, now startled by my feverish expression. I let out a single sob and then immediately drop to my knees.

LIAM

Liam wakes from the dream of his dead sister to find himself in tears. He holds back a violent cough. The sound would wake Wenqi, remind her that he's dying. He knows he needs to leave her alone, to give her space, but how much space does she need? How much time apart does she need? He doesn't have that much time left. He stares at her sleeping face through the open bedroom door and draws the blanket closer to his chin. He's in bed, but Wenqi is sleeping out on the couch. The leather squeaks whenever she tosses or turns, which is constantly.

WENQI

My brother had died in another city, in another country, somewhere far across the world. It's easier to leave a place of pain rather than stay and mourn. At least that's what I told myself when Mother rushed Father and I onto the plane.

I couldn't remember his face while living at the house in HOME, but I remember it now. There's one memory in particular that's the most clear: I'm sitting on top of Father's shoulders and looking back at Mother, who is walking behind us, and trailing her is Tianqi. He is holding a toy airplane in his hand and running around with his arms spread wide, as if they too are wings.

"Stay close!" Mother calls as we near a busy intersection.

But Tianqi doesn't hear. He just runs right past her, arms still spread wide, out into oncoming traffic.

Father dropped me down from his shoulders and quickly covered my eyes, but I had already seen the look on Tianqi's face, and how it no longer looked like his face, and the blue airplane splattered with blood.

I still have that airplane.

• • •

Liam is cremated, so there's no coffin at the funeral. There are no mourners either, except for me and Penny's mom and her cousin. Liam didn't want anyone from his old life to know, and none of them ever bothered to ask. At the cemetery, I hold Liam's urn in my hands. It's sunny out. No clouds. I want to hold him like this forever, but a storm is coming and the groundskeeper wishes to leave.

LINGHUN

When you first arrived, your husband was enamored by your beauty, your docility, your virtue. He showered you with praise through the lips of the translator. The words sounded exaggerated, cliché, but they made you happy anyhow. They made you feel a little less alone.

He never called you by your name. He didn't like it. Liam said he would give you a new name, and give the house one, too. It would be the same name, because you both belonged to him. You wondered if this also came with a new identity. Can names be bought? It was such a strange notion to you back then, so you respectfully declined, but he insisted he give you this "gift." He consulted the translator, and within a week—

Linghun.

You didn't ask, but he told you his reasoning anyway.

It has to be Linghun, my lovely wife! For you remind me of a spirit, wandering in my home, beautiful but silent, much like the home itself. I felt the need to choose a name in your mother tongue. It would be a grave injustice, should I not.

Linghun means soul, not spirit. You never corrected him.

He had asked you once, near the end, if you could give him a Chinese name. You said, *Shan*. He never asked you what the name meant, but you whispered its meaning to his unhearing ears as the paramedics wheeled him away.

You are the mountain I cannot climb and the wound that refuses to heal.

WENQI

I walk into the living room. Liam's belongings are everywhere still. I stare, stunned, at the letter in front of me.

I slowly shuffle over to Liam's favorite spot on the couch and sit down with my knees drawn to my chest.

The letter is a will.

The return address on the envelope is from HOME.

The will is for a Mrs.—or Ms.—Ling Huijia, and according to the document, she has left her remaining possessions to me. Among the items listed is a house, and according to the will, the house has a name: *Linghun*. I didn't know houses could have names, but there it is, notarized and everything.

Also included in the envelope is a letter written in a beautiful, but shaky, slanted Chinese script.

Dear Wenqi Zhao,

There is a suitcase in the basement of the house—maroon, with a tag. Please send that to the following address. That is my only wish. I did not have the courage to do so when I was alive, and still I do not, even though I will soon pass.

You remind me of me... sometimes.

—Ling Huijia

I look the address up on Google. It's located in a village that no longer exists... near Fuzhou.

HUIJIA

Before I took my last breath in your house, in Linghun, I whispered the meaning of my name, knowing that you could not hear it. *Huijia. To return home.*

WENQI

I ended up taking the bus rather than trying to drive the car Liam and I stole from my parents. I think about going to see my father when I return, but I decide against it.

It's strange returning to the neighborhood. The lingerers on my parents' lawn turn to stare at me as I walk up to the house across the street. Penny's father is among the watchful faces. I don't look into my old home. That would feel as though I'm moving backward in time.

Linghun stares with a strange allure. Beckoning, are the window eyes. Promising secrets, are the closed doors. The normally meticulous lawn is now overgrown, but the house still has that magical, fluorescent light.

With Liam's urn in hand, I enter through the front door.

The house is cold. A window has been left open, and a chill breeze is billowing the curtains.

I explore the house with my eyes, but I dare not step foot into the living room. The walls there are painted black. The floor is covered in some kind of dust. The fireplace is filled with burnt photographs, and a collage of one man is pasted on the red brick. There is a name pasted repeatedly, cut from old mailing labels, some written in shaky cursive, others in angry bold print: *Liam Winstoncroft*.

I stand for a long while, not quite knowing what to do, until I remember the letter's only wish and the luggage I've come to retrieve. I head downstairs to the basement, where in a corner sits what I'm looking for. The plastic maroon body is covered in dust. I blow the dust from the paper tag and read what's written beneath.

Fuzhou, Fujian. 1950.

The adhesive that holds the tag together is still intact, but the paper has yellowed over the years, and the ink has become fuzzy.

I unzip the luggage and open it up. Immediately, a pile of letters spills out onto the ground, along with many photographs taken across a number of decades, some black and white, others in color. I assume the photos are of Huijia and her late husband, sometimes together, sometimes separate. There are also photos of people who I assume are Huijia's parents, or close relatives

of some kind. I also find a pile of scratched-off long-distance phone cards.

I spend the rest of the day looking at the photos and reading Huijia's letters. Some were written before she moved to HOME, and some were written after. The letters are addressed to different people. Some are to her family, some are to her husband, and others are to herself. By the time night falls, I find myself weeping for this woman, this stranger, not simply because I sympathize, but because I understand.

• • •

After reading Huijia's letters, I decide to take my place in the living room. Once there, I dig my fingers into the urn, scoop out Liam's ashes, and then sprinkle them onto the floor with the rest. Once the urn is empty, I lay down upon the dust and whisper my beloved's name. *Liam, Liam, Liam*. And from the walls, a whisper comes: *Leave him*. But I ignore it.

• • •

I leave the house without closing the door behind me. This way, Huijia can leave if she wants, if her ghost is even there. I wander down the driveway and across the road, and my eyes land on Liam's parents. They, too, look as though they're nearing the end of their lives. I take the empty place next to them, the one beneath the tree with the bare branches, and huddle up close to their sleeping bodies.

Inside the house, my parents laugh, their arms hugging something invisible. Mother's laugh is natural, but Father's laugh is strained.

That night, after my parents have gone to bed, the faint outline of Tianqi appears by the living room window.

And someone else appears beside him.

I gasp and clutch Liam's empty urn tight. I turn to Liam's parents to see if they're seeing the same thing, but both are still asleep. When I look back to the window, both spirits are gone.

While caressing the urn, I notice a small sprout pushing through the dead leaves at my feet, and I stare at it. I keep staring until most of the lingerers have gone, until most of the houses become vacant, waiting to fill up again. It's not until then, after all around me is gone, that I look back to the window of my old house—waiting to enter, *wanting* to enter, but too afraid to face

what's inside.

A RAMBLE ON DI FU LING & DEATH

Di fu ling are earthbound spirits, usually ghosts who remain on Earth because they cannot let go, have unfinished matters, and more often than not, are malicious spirits. Though based on these spirits, the ghosts that remain in HOME, that appear in the houses, are not bound by their own thoughts, desires, or regrets, but by the living that keep them there—the living who are unable to let go of the dead.

Di fu ling have a connection to the places in which they have passed in, the land that holds their memory, and the people that influenced them most during their lives.

When we think about grief and spirits, we mostly think about people and the dead. But I think grief can be tied not only to people but to places, memories, cultures, languages, and identity.

Memories often work to confuse us, showing us the most glorious idealization of images or the most traumatizing instances of our pain, and sometimes, everything is repressed, and so we see nothing at all.

My uncle passed when I was in elementary school, when I was in fourth grade, if I remember correctly (though it's likely I'm wrong about the year). He was taken to the spirit world by lung cancer after several months of fighting death in its final stages—bedridden, an expectant passenger aboard the ferryman's ship, with my relatives acting as anchor, refusing to let the ship go. He didn't smoke, he barely drank, and I can honestly say he was the most saintly person I have ever met in my life—even now.

My mother became almost like a living ghost after my uncle's death, a floating entity that went about her routine, without her mind or heart being truly there. It was as though her spirit had been whisked away, leaving her body behind as a shell. Nearing his death, my mother rushed back to China to accompany him in his last moments. As a child, I understood, but I also didn't understand at all. To me at such a young age, I couldn't comprehend the concept of spending your own living breaths hoping and praying for more sand to be added to a dying person's hourglass.

But thinking back on it now, I would have done the same.

When my uncle passed, I caught word of it on the phone, halfway across the world. I couldn't express my sadness in words, so I drew an owl shedding tears, perched atop a tree of falling leaves, the limbs almost completely barren.

My uncle was one of my favorite relatives, and one of the closest. But when I immigrated to Canada, his memory of me stalled at four years old. What I think I grieve most is not his death, but how we drifted apart over the years. He gifted me barbie dolls every year when I was still in China, and he gifted me Barbie dolls each time I visited, even after I no longer played with them. It was an unwilling separation between us, but such things often happen with growing up. And in a way, I guess I also grieve my childhood—the simplicity, the carelessness, the recklessness, the innocence, a life without death.

We are often unable to speak about the dead, but at the same time, unable to let them go. Perhaps it is only through talking about them, acknowledging death, that we may be able to truly move on. I feel the same way about immigration, how some of my relatives in North America are unable and unwilling to let go of their birth homes, even though it the place they remember has likely changed drastically in the years they have been absent.

We may not want to admit it, but I think immigration is the death of a part of us. (But more on this another time, as I'm working on a cyberpunk novel that will explore this idea further.)

The health of my grandparents has been shaky in recent years, and this Christmas, my mother might be flying off again to accompany them, just in case. Death is a thought none of us want to have, but one we secretly harbor. We fight the dragging pull of the world of spirits. No one wants to fight, but we do and always will.

There are many things we lose in our lives: friends, family, direction, careers, wealth, drive, passion. We may even lose ourselves.

We worry about a lot of things, but I think death is one of those things that follows like a shadow, waiting, watching, striking when we least expect it to. And when its knife pierces our lives, it scars.

They say that when we are born, we are born already dying, already on the path to death. I'm not a pessimistic person, so I often think that when we are born, we are simply walking the land of the living, waiting to be reunited with those who have been waiting for us on the other side—a family, a community, unlike the ones we have or will have here on Earth, but one that will be

equally welcoming. It's a community that I imagine, hopefully, will feel a lot like home.

With this novella, I want to mourn the dead, the living, the mother tongue that has become my second language, the village that no longer exists in Shanghu, and my birthplace in Changle that has become a familiar stranger.

Feelings, emotions, experiences, are all part of humanity's shared language, and in *Linghun*, that shared language is grief. Grief is a language that tears us apart, but it is also what brings us together.

Remember, you are never alone.

SHORT FICTION

YǒNGSHÍ

Originally published in *The Dark Magazine*

We go by many names. But our most common name is Time Giver—though this is only half true.

It has been fifty years since I finished his huà—*painting*—and fifty years since the village burnt down. With the survivors, I slaved to restore what I had ruined and vowed never to offer time or love again.

We're still rebuilding.

• • •

With my máobǐ—*ink brush*—in one hand, I hover above the aged scroll while my other hand rests at my lower back. The paper, brittle and dry, crinkles when the máobǐ meets its surface, dampening it with black ink. The liquid dries as soon as the stroke is complete. With every stroke, time is taken away. In what form? It is always hard to tell. Usually there is sudden illness.

Time taken is sometimes a blessing. My huà is close to completion. A hacking cough escapes me.

You must be precise. My grandmother's voice rings in my head. *You can't remove strokes after completing a huà. You will no longer be able to erase the ink.*

When my past lover left me amid the flames, couched on all fours, my blood boiled in my veins. With my máobǐ and scroll, he fled. I found him nestled among shrubbery, whispering the name, “Yǒngshí.” I would not hear his excuses for why he had set the village aflame to steal the scroll, or for why he had hidden this “Yǒngshí” from me, no doubt a secret lover. Humans, I remembered, were driven by greed and desire.

I had finished his huà out of spite, as revenge for the village, but mostly because of the pain he had caused me. My eyes fixated on his spirit as it left his body, sealed for eternity inside the scroll.

I later discovered that “Yǒngshí” was his daughter.

You will no longer be able to erase the ink.

I run my hand over the scroll and whisper my name. The paper unravels

until it curls and spools around my feet, stopping at my unfinished spirit huà. Above it, is the huà of my grandmother. She is smiling. Our faces are both ageless. *Join me when you've found your successor.* I want to join her now. There is nothing left for me in the mortal world. My grandmother had served the king when she was still alive. I serve no one. Not anymore.

It only takes a few strokes to complete the missing features on my huà. The only missing elements are my two irises. My eyes offer a blank stare, my mouth a straight line. Time means nothing to me now, but many humans would grovel for a few extra minutes, even seconds. Such strange creatures. I loved one of them once, but I should have understood that betrayal is a common occurrence among them—it always will be. To think that I could change my lover...

I dip the máobǐ into my jar of ink once more. The hairs lap up the dark liquid and grow thick. I sip my tea before I continue. My huà beckons me. The scroll always desires more spirits. And a successor, if I can find one. The successor would have to be a human, even though I do not believe humans worthy of the scroll and its magic. I have no children and do not plan on having any.

A drop of darkness falls from the tip of the máobǐ, creating a contained dot of black on the translucent brown parchment. The ink does not splatter, but it sinks and becomes a part of the scroll, filling in my right iris. Only my left iris remains. My signature will then complete the blood oath. It will either transfer the scroll as my grandmother had done, or seal it forever.

Not everyone is worthy of extra time, or even time itself.

Before my grandmother had passed the scroll to me, before sealing her spirit within, she had told me to only give more time to those who deserve it—those with a worthy cause, or those who would give their life for noble sacrifices. This did not include the king. He wanted only immortality, and he let his kingdom suffer.

My grandmother had saved many who would later win wars and allow for the return of peace—people who stopped floods from reaching villages, people who became skilled doctors and saved thousands of lives. They were the ones who changed her mind about humans, though not entirely. Doubt will always be attached to humanity and its failures, often overshadowing its merits.

Unlike my grandmother, my judgment of character is not as sound. I still cannot tell the good humans from the bad. The first person I saved after my grandmother completed her huà was *him*. Like many others, my lover sought time, immortality, something I refused to give. When he set fire to the hut we shared, I knew he never understood time and never would.

Mere men cannot take my life. My life belongs to the scroll. I healed my charred skin by removing strokes from my huà—strokes that had been added by the fire.

The tears that traveled down my face, triggered by betrayal, later morphed into shame for my naivety. When I finished my lover's huà, I had intended to finish mine immediately after. There would be no successor. I would only end up choosing a fool.

It is not yet time.

My eyes land on my grandmother's signature—a bloody fingerprint.

I rinse the máobǐ in water, smooth out its hairs with my fingers, and lay it next to the scroll. The máobǐ rolls toward the end of the table and a small hand catches it before I do. A young girl, perhaps twelve, holds out the máobǐ toward me and smiles. My lips remain still. Months had passed without visitors at my stall. How did she find me?

Trust humans sparingly, but that doesn't mean don't trust them at all.

There is one difference between my grandmother and I. She was a stranger to betrayal because she could read the masks of humans easily. The king did not betray her. He was transparent with his wishes. But my grandmother betrayed him when she could no longer stand his horrific reign. She never had hope for the mortals who traded their spirits for time, but she often gambled regardless. I am too easily swayed by seemingly kind faces and warm smiles.

"I heard you give time," the young girl says, peering up at me from a cowed bow of the head.

"Not anymore." I look away and pay her no further mind.

"Please... my mother is sick."

I pause. "You would like time for your mother?"

"No, I would like more time for myself."

"Yourself?"

A selfish request. I should have known better than to hope for something

more.

I notice the rings of rotting flesh that dot her body. I recognize it as the disease they call Wormrot. It is not contagious, but it's deadly for its hosts. I sip my tea. The cup is almost empty.

"I do not want my mother to suffer more than she has to, but she wishes for a natural death. But me, I only have a few days remaining. I would like more time to work so that I can pay for my mother's grave."

I stare at the tea leaves at the bottom of my cup. How curious.

Even though I have no intention to give any more time to humans, I ask, "How much time would you like?"

"One month. The doctor said my mother has one month left."

I look at the máobǐ, resting beside my hand. My fingers drum against the table's wooden surface.

You have such a weakness for humans. I do not understand. My grandmother's chuckle echoes in my head. Do you not see malice? Can you not tell who is cunning and who is pure?

"What is your name?"

I dip the máobǐ in water. *And if she is like him?*

"Yǒngshí"

My máobǐ hovers over the scroll. I take a second look at the young girl. Like him, her eyes shine green. But her curly red hair is the color of heated iron, while his was the color of lifeless clay. Her frame is birdlike, delicate, fragile; his was clumsy. But both of them are beautiful. I wonder if her mother is beautiful, too.

My heart quickens as my lover's daughter waits with a quiet patience. It is the same patience *he* offered me when I tried to explain the concept of time—a concept even I have trouble understanding. He feigned patience. *Why do you hold onto your life so dearly when you are only living on borrowed time?*

"I will give you the time if you report back to me what you do with it."

How could you be so sure when you have already been mistaken once before?

I can no longer tell my grandmother's words from my own thoughts.

Yǒngshí nods.

A deep breath escapes my lips. I whisper her name and the scroll searches for her huà. The huà of myself and my grandmother disappear, and in their place is Yǒngshí. One eye remains incomplete, much like my own.

My breath holds still as I press the máobǐ onto the scroll's surface.

I let the water from it run over Yǒngshí's completed right eye, looking up at me with a certain determination. I saw determination in *his* eyes when he ripped the scroll from my hand and dropped the torch beside me. The determination here is similar. They don't want to save themselves. They only want to save another.

The ink bleeds before evaporating.

Yǒngshí's wounds improve. The Wormrot rings, moss-like, become a faded pink, but remain like scars upon the skin.

• • •

The next day, Yǒngshí runs to my stall in the middle of the market, an apple in her hand.

"I helped the farmer today." Her voice is as crisp as the sound of slicing into fresh fruit.

"Oh?" I cannot help but allow curiosity to slip into my voice.

"They taught me how to grow crops."

I imagine Yǒngshí running through the fields, the sun shining upon unblemished skin. Her smile would have been so luminescent, a summer evening of fireflies would pale in comparison. She would only have to worry about the farm and its creatures. Creatures that would have surrounded her with life rather than looming death. Creatures that would offer her warmth and comfort. It is a childhood she should have, but does not.

• • •

The following day, Yǒngshí runs to my table with papers in her hand.

"I helped at the local school today."

"Oh?"

"The teacher allowed me to learn with the other children."

There is such excitement, such life, in her voice.

I imagine Yǒngshí walking to school every day, with a small bag filled with papers that are always falling out and being carried away by the wind. She would have finished at the top of her class and had many friends, with whom she would spend quality time. She would occasionally arrive home late

because of them, but her mother, in good health, would not mind as long as she completed her school work.

But Yǒngshí does not go to school. Instead, she stays home and cares for her mother. Does she have siblings? Has her mother found a new husband? Does she know who I am?

The rings of infected skin, though pink the previous day, now have hints of weed-like green.

• • •

Yǒngshí does not visit for two weeks. I wait and wait and wait, with my tea untouched. I do not see her shadow.

• • •

Today, Yǒngshí's face is devoid of the light it once held. Her lips are pressed into a thin line, like mine are in my huà.

"Who did you help today?"

"I helped in the cemetery."

She says nothing else and leaves me. Her eyes look distant, searching for something that is not there.

• • •

A day later, Yǒngshí returns. Her spirit looks refreshed, but her wounds continue to fester. She only has two weeks left.

Before she arrives at my table, I look at my scroll. The right eye I had erased is reappearing on the paper.

Will you extend it?

"I would like to return the time I have left." Her voice is firm, resolute.

I look up.

"Why?" I ask. "What did you learn in the cemetery?"

"It was never mine."

Time does not belong to anyone. It continues to move on without us. Forward or backward—it matters not.

The young child already understands the lesson of time, something that no

one else could ever hope to understand—not me, not her father.

When she leaves my table, I dip my máobǐ in ink, whisper my name, and fill in the left iris of my spirit huà after it reappears. Then I bite the tip of my finger and complete my blood oath.

There will be no successor.

TEETER TOTTER

Xixi's calloused bare feet grab the sides of an immense tooth that towers out of a depthless abyss—an endless cavern, an unknown mouth, silenced. The bone has been sharpened, and it cuts like a razor. The grimy sandpaper texture and the powdered scent is almost comforting against Xixi's leathery skin. The soles of her feet whiten as her toes grip the tooth tighter. She readies herself, pressure building at the balls of her feet, warming the cold white surface.

Then she jumps.

She must. She chose this endless penance in exchange for more life—to live like everyone else, to be with her husband, perhaps even birth a child. But by doing so, she now lives in Underworld, with Death always watching.

Xixi propels herself forward onto the next bone, with labored breaths. Her knees bend and creak until her toes find the groove her feet had dug over the years. Attached to her wrist is a chain, which prevents her from using her power. It's connected to a silver ball that hangs and swings like a pendulum near her feet, and threatens to drag her into the abyss below.

Sweat breaks out on Xixi's forehead, her long raven hair already drenched from her journey across these wretched towers that make the bridge.

She tried to pull the ball up when she first arrived in the underworld, but the chain—enchanted by dark magic—resisted her efforts. When she tries to draw on her own spells, she feels no power within, only an empty void.

A voice whispers in her head: "Tired?"

Booming laughter echoes, rattling the tower and Xixi along with it.

Her toenails dig harder into the tooth, bone against bone.

"No."

Aige's weary face and gentle smile comes to her mind, and it gives her strength.

She feels Death's eyeless stare. It fills the darkness all around her. Death is nowhere, but also everywhere—within her and outside of her. A furious gust of wind slams into her body. She teeters, and the ball, now acting as a pendulum drags her to the right. She steadies herself and jumps onto the next tooth.

“Do you not want to be with your husband?”

Death’s mocking tone irritates Xixi, but she refuses to allow him the satisfaction. Her husband is no doubt resting in the Elysian Fields. She longs for him still. Even after bargaining away her own life for more time with him.

Aige.

Two hundred and forty-four more jumps left to reach the other end of the bridge. Tomorrow, it will return to four hundred and forty-four jumps, and continue to reset like this every day thereafter.

Xixi spits into the darkness beneath her feet. She watches it fall parallel to the long, unending body of the tooth, both disappearing a few hundred meters down, shrouded in fog.

• • •

Xixi lays out fake jade-beaded bracelets, necklaces, and rings made of cheap dyed stones and elastics that would lose their elasticity in a matter of weeks, onto a foldable plastic table with uneven legs. With a whiteboard marker, she writes “3 for \$10” ... “Authentic” ... “Good fortune” in Chinese, and then displays the board in front of the table. In order to make her half of the rent, she has to sell at least forty items today... unless a few customers take interest in her more expensive items—the ones with gems that are two times the price.

Xixi plucks a pinwheel among the dozen that stick out from a long can next to the shop’s entrance. The owner, Mishi, raises the metal shutters to her shop. The two women share a warm smile before Mishi disappears into the back, reemerging again with a mug of hot tea for Xixi. In her mind, Xixi thanks Mishi for allowing her to set up her stand out front. Their goods don’t overlap. Mishi sells children’s toys, workbooks, and kitchenware.

Though Xixi long ago forgot what her mother was like, Mishi has taken the shadowy woman’s place. They are business partners, but they are also friends, and now, unspoken family. Xixi holds the toy in the air in hopes of catching a potential customer’s attention.

A mortal life, you must live a mortal life—at least for your sweet Aige, you must try.

Xixi whispers these words to herself, while staring defiantly at the pinwheel. She is allowed a sliver of her magic. It makes its way down to her fingertips

and causes the pinwheel to spin rapidly on a windless day.

A small child approaches Xixi, eyes glued to the magical pinwheel. The boy's pupils quiver, as if hypnotized by the swirling colors, the spinning rainbow a dark reflection in his eyes.

Many children stop by Xixi's stand, but none take interest like this boy. This child is her favorite. She wishes she could raise one like him.

Most of the children have lost looks on their faces. They watch a trio of pigeons peck at the ground near a fire hydrant, while their mothers pretend to be uninterested in Xixi's fake jewelry (they will buy a few pieces anyhow and lie to their friends about their collective worth the next time they meet for morning tea).

"Mama, mama! Can we buy it?"

The boy's chubby finger stabs in the direction of the pinwheel's spinning petals. He wrenches his hand from his mother's grip and moves his face so close to the pinwheel that the blades nearly slice his nose. The breeze the pinwheel creates blows the child's bangs from his face to reveal two eager eyes.

Xixi smiles, wondering if her own child would be like this boy. She holds the pinwheel out to him. She and Aige have never discussed having children since they barely make enough money to cover rent and groceries. But her business has picked up a bit the past few weeks, and her husband should be receiving a pay raise soon. She wonders if she has the capacity, or the ability, to be a parent. She wonders if it's risky to birth a child with magic.

Xixi's smile wanes when the mother, her eyes skeptical, closes her own hand over her son's pointing finger and pulls his arm back down to his side.

She knows.

The pinwheel's motion comes to an abrupt stop. A breeze drifts past, but still, the colorful petals remain frozen in place.

The woman's eyes narrow. "Witch," she says, accusingly. She stomps off, tugging her son behind her. They hurry down the street.

Though she is used to such comments, Xixi can't help but flinch at the word being used in such a dirty way. She has done nothing to deserve it, but her mere existence irks some humans to no end. The boy had looked at Xixi as though there was nothing different about her, and for that, she was grateful. She releases her magic hold on the pinwheel's motion and watches the petals spin.

“I’d like to make a purchase,” says a cold, hollow voice. The words sound as though they are originating from somewhere deep inside Xixi’s mind, rather than floating through the air and into her ears.

She looks up to see a faceless being.

• • •

One hundred and forty-four steps more.

Below Xixi’s feet, an old film flickers into existence, replacing the boundless dark. Crackling static frames the picture with jagged edges, like lightning. She doesn’t want to look down, but she can’t help herself.

In the film, child-Xixi runs through the forest near her village. She is barefoot. Splinters prick her feet, but she does not slow down. Shouts from her relatives follow her, but they are nothing compared to the sound of Xixi’s gasping breath and thumping heartbeat.

“Xixi!” they call.

Before fleeing the house, Xixi’s parents had sat silently across from her at the kitchen table, eyes cast downward, hands interlocked in front of them. It was in that moment that Xixi understood it would better if she just left. She would be safer on her own.

Without stopping, Xixi motions to the woods behind her, and with magic, draws the hedges and trees together so as to create a barrier and slow her pursuing relatives down. She makes the mistake of looking back right as the forest swallows them. The glint of a knife is the last she sees of them. They believe that cutting off her hands will stop the dark magic, the witchcraft, make her human, but nobody is sure if it will work, and Xixi doesn’t want to stay to find out.

Fog forms like curtains over the crackling memory below.

Xixi propels herself forward once more, tooth after tooth, her face dripping with sweat.

• • •

Featherless skeletal wings unfurl from Death’s back like long fingers that open slowly after being clenched shut for too long. Once stretched, they reach out to Xixi as if wanting to caress her.

Xixi stands her ground.

Death clutches a scythe in their skeletal fingers, translucent skin pulled tight at the nail-less points of each digit. It is a comb-like blade, the teeth of which are made of bones and amputated limbs.

“A purchase?” Xixi is proud at how composed she remains. “We have a variety. Take your pick.”

Death drags their skeletal fingers across the fake jade beads, bones scrapping against the polished stones. The hand stops, then raises a pointing finger to Xixi’s heart.

Unwilling to remain calm any longer, Xixi upends the table of jewelry and conjures a strong wind to knock Death back. The wind nearly uproots a tree from the soil, but Death is unfazed. Xixi can feel the spirit’s rage. The air around her suddenly becomes suffocating.

“What is going—”

Mishi freezes, her words now lodged inside her throat. Her eyes grow wide, and she grabs at her neck, mouth gaping like a breathless fish.

Xixi whispers a charm to convince the old woman to return to her shop, close the entrance, lock the door, and scribble a note to give to Aige. Xixi will protect Mishi no matter what it takes, just like she would do for her parents, if they were still alive.

Mishi fights the magic, stays by the door, watches with the fear of a mother. The door closes, and she bangs her fists against the glass.

The bucket of pinwheels start spinning wildly to create a hypnotic kaleidoscope effect. Xixi’s mind spins with them. Still, she keeps her eyes on the swirling image of Mishi.

“You dare—”

Xixi does not hear the rest of Death’s words. She has already fallen into darkness.

• • •

Eighty-four more steps.

Beneath her, the fog rises. Another scene presents itself in the same static quality as the one from the memory before. This time, Xixi does not look down. To look within herself and to see herself from the outside is far more frightening than Death.

But invisible hands reach out from the darkness and pry her eyes open,

then force her head to look down. Booming laughter echoes in the void. Xixi's head spins, and black spots start to appear in her vision, but somehow, she sees the memory with glaring clarity. And even though she has seen this memory a thousand times, the viewing never gets easier.

• • •

Mishi pins back the loose white hairs from the side of her face and blows out a shuddering breath. She has always known that there is something different about Xixi, but she never could have imagined. *A witch*. She has never seen a real witch before. She is a bit hurt that Xixi has hidden the truth from her, but in the end, it doesn't matter. To Mishi, Xixi will always be the lost little girl who wandered into her shop, and she will love her, always.

Following the supernatural disturbance, Mishi quickly phones both the police and Aige. She knows Xixi's husband will arrive first, and he does.

Aige is overcome with grief. He stands beside his dead wife and hovers his hand over her head, as if to stroke it. He wants to touch her, but is not allowed.

Mishi speaks to the police in a dreamlike state. She knows what she can and cannot say. Aige is too shocked to cry, but Mishi knows his heart is broken.

"What happened?" the officers ask.

"I don't know. A heart attack or stroke, perhaps?"

"That's not possible," Aige interjects.

Mishi attempts to catch the grieving man's eye, signal to him in hopes he will understand and agree to her lie.

He does.

He quickly backs off his statement, with mouth tense and fist clenched.

• • •

Aige clutches the note that Xixi compelled Mishi to write. Two words sear into his eyes.

Burn me.

Xixi always wanted to be cremated. She told him many times. She also instructed him to sell her wedding ring should she die, joking that it would help Aige pay the rent.

Burn me.

What choice does he have, if this is her wish? Besides, a funeral and proper burial rites would cost more than he can afford, and his wife is without life insurance. But to rob her of a respectful ceremony is cruel.

Burn me.

Aige will have to do just that. He thinks of his wife's unmarked body, how the flames will soon eat away at her skin—the same skin pressed against his only the night before, forehead to forehead, hand to heart—and nearly falls apart. He calls the necessary professionals and schedules the cremation for the following week—the crematorium needs time to obtain a permit from the state.

"Can I come?" Mishi asks. "To the funeral?"

"Yes."

Later in the evening, after the police have all left, Mishi asks Aige about the magic.

• • •

Aige holds an empty urn in one hand and a small velvet box in the other. The box holds Xixi's diamond wedding ring. It took him years to save up for it, even though it was one of the cheapest options. His wife didn't want it, but he insisted, saying it had to be special.

He stares at the pawn shop across the street, the one he was told would give him a decent price. Mishi recommended the place, because their offers are always much better than the competition.

But instead of heading to the pawn shop, he pockets the ring and walks to his delivery truck down the street. After making his usual deliveries to all the restaurants around Chinatown, he falls asleep in the back of his truck, his body curled around the urn in an embrace. He imagines Xixi in his arms.

In the morning, he reaches for the ring in his pocket, but it's gone.

• • •

When Xixi first arrived in the underworld, there were no teeth towers in sight. Her feet had landed on black volcanic rock, the black and orange landscape alive with molten lava. Volcanoes erupted in the distance.

"You must leave," says a voice.

Death is nowhere to be seen, but their voice vibrates in the ground beneath Xixi's feet. "Your husband has not performed the proper burial rights. You must return and correct his insult."

The ground beneath Xixi disappears, and she is plunged into darkness once more.

The ring.

She wonders if her husband did what she asked, if he went against tradition for her. She couldn't tell him that her request was a magical one, that it would help bring her back to life.

Xixi fears what Aige will think once she returns from the dead. Will he even remember that she died? Or will Death make him forget?

Xixi opens her eyes. She is laying on a cold metal table. Her husband stands beside her. His eyes widen at the sight, and he screams.

"H-how?" he whispers.

"You didn't bury me," Xixi says plainly, but her tone is grateful. She falls into her husband's arms.

Aige isn't sure what to think, but it doesn't matter much at the moment. He only wants to hold her.

"Mishi told me what she saw before you died," he says.

Xixi wants to lie, deny Mishi's confession, but she knows it's no use considering the resurrection that just transpired before him.

"So, you're... a witch?"

Xixi nods.

A single tear escapes from the corner of Aige's eye. Xixi has never seen her husband cry. Her anger dissipates within seconds as she gently holds his head to her chest and allows him to quietly sob. This moment reminds her of a time before they were married, back when he told her about the death of his parents, and she shared with him her story of escape.

• • •

Forty-five more steps.

Xixi knows what will happen on the forty-fourth step, the penultimate one. She will slip and fall into another memory. It's a memory she dreads the most. It's the one where she sees the disappointment in her husband's eyes, the skepticism. It mirrors the looks her family gave her before they abandoned

her and forced her to run away.

When she reaches the fated step, she holds her breath and leaps. Her foot hits the forty-fourth step, but quickly loses its grip. Before she can recover, she falls.

• • •

Xixi has the day off today.

“It’s about time you took a break!” Mishi mutters in Cantonese. “I thought you didn’t know how.”

Xixi smiles. She’s spent the past two years working without a single day off. But it wasn’t too bad, not really.

Aige works a lot, too, and this way they can save money faster. Xixi agreed. To buy a house of their own is the dream—to escape the small apartment they share with two other couples, one in the main bedroom, and one in the den (Xixi and Aige occupy the living room, with a curtain as a wall). Perhaps they can even go on a nice vacation in another country—the honeymoon they never had...

She pauses in front of a familiar shop. Maternity dresses in vibrant floral patterns and colors are on display. Matching sets of baby clothes sit beneath the rack in boxes. The clothing ripples in the breeze.

“Last week.”

Xixi turns to see the shop owner, an elderly man, bent over with a back brace wrapped around his waist.

“Everything’s on sale.” He gestures to the “Close Out Sale!” sign, English letters and Chinese characters scribbled in sharpie on a neon yellow oval.

Xixi looks to the sign, but says nothing in return.

“So... are you in the market to buy? I’ll give you an additional discount if you purchase three or more sets.”

By the time Xixi leaves the shop, she is carrying a bag of three maternity dresses and three matching sets of baby clothes, and she is five dollars lighter in the pocket. She probably won’t ever wear the dresses, but the prospect of motherhood brings her momentary joy and hope for a future she knows she can’t have.

Aige has also taken the day off and upon hearing Xixi return to the

apartment, he pulls back the curtain to reveal his lounging form on their bed in the living room.

"I went to a restaurant today," Aige says. He looks at the bag hanging from Xixi's elbow. "The food was good, but it wasn't worth the price."

Xixi is just relieved to know she isn't the only one who spent money today.

Aige scratches the back of his neck, rises from his position on the bed, and quickly swipes the bag from Xixi as she approaches.

Aige looks into the bag and frowns. "Why did you buy these?"

Xixi snatches the red maternity dress from her husband's hand. The matching baby set falls to the floor.

"I was thinking..." Xixi says.

Aige is solemn.

"I... don't think we should..." he replies.

Xixi's knuckles turn white as she grips the red fabric. "But why?" Her voice is barely above a whisper.

"Your... *magic*." Aige says the word like it's a curse. "We shouldn't. It wouldn't be right."

"But what if the child doesn't have magic?"

"We can't take the risk."

She thinks about the evil witches of legend, of the monsters and demons from folklore. Is this how Aige sees her?

"Do you still love me?" she asks.

"I... don't know."

"I can teach them to control it," Xixi pleads.

Aige remains stoic.

Xixi can only nod her understanding. She gathers the shopping bag and all its contents, and then tosses it all into the trash on her way out of the house.

• • •

Fourteen more steps.

The memory spits Xixi out, propels her back onto the teeth towers. She dry heaves into the void. The same cold sweat that drenched her skin in the memory now follows her into the Underworld. The pain, the sorrow, the loss of something she never had, freeze the sweat and cause her to shiver.

Her feet, cramping, blistering, calluses ripping, refuse to let go of the bone beneath them. Xixi cannot risk falling into this memory again—at least not

today. The chain swings as she struggles to regain her balance. It is a feeling she should be familiar with by now, but her mind dizzies every time she enters or exits the memories.

Forward.

She must keep moving.

• • •

Xixi always wondered what would happen if her husband died before her. Would she return to the living world again if there was no one there to bury her, or would it not matter? She was surprised Death didn't come after her again, force her to leave, threaten her husband to perform the correct burial rites. Perhaps that wasn't allowed.

That was more than thirty years ago now.

Aige has since retired from his job, returned his truck, cashed out his savings at sixty-five. Xixi did the same, and hid a portion of the cash in the back of their closet, tucked beneath the green and blue maternity dresses and matching baby sets that she had secretly retrieved from the trash those many years ago and kept hidden in the closet.

The retired couple sits in a rental car parked in their driveway.

"Where do you want to go?" Aige asks.

"The sea," says Xixi.

There nearest coastline is hours from their home, but there is a lake nearby, and that will have to do.

• • •

"It's beautiful," Aige says, leaning against an old tree.

It isn't beautiful. Broken bits of glass and other debris litter the landscape.

"Let's go back to the car," Xixi says.

Xixi drives home. She misses every gas station on the way home and barely makes it into the driveway with what remains in the tank. They never fill anything more than halfway.

Aige is more a ghost than a man when they exit the car. Xixi uses the little magic that remains inside her to guide Aige's feet, one in front of the other, up the steps and into their unit. Her own knees groan, and the joints crackle and pop.

Safe in bed, Aige looks at peace. To Xixi's surprise, he takes his last breath. Death's booming laughter thunders.

Xixi grabs the phone from her bedside table and drops down to the floor. She dials a number and someone answers.

"Mishi," Xixi whispers. "I have one last request."

Xixi crawls to the closet and unearths the hidden cash. Once the coast is clear, she gets dressed and treks to the nearest funeral home on foot. She waits outside the building until morning and then requests a proper burial for her husband.

The funeral director and his assistant drive Xixi home. Once there, the practiced morticians place the dead body of Aige into a body bag and wheel him out to the hearse on a stretcher.

"It's my turn soon," Xixi whispers.

Her final request to Mishi was to die unburied.

At Aige's funeral, Mishi clutches Xixi's elbow, placing more weight on her younger friend than she does her walker. Even though Mishi is nearly one hundred years old, both women know in their hearts that Xixi will pass first.

"Was it worth it?" Mishi asks. "Was it worth it to come back?"

Xixi hums. "Yes."

The two women watch as Aige's coffin is lowered into the ground.

Death stands beside Xixi, but only she can see them.

"I'm ready," she says.

Confused and a bit worried, Mishi holds Xixi tighter.

• • •

Xixi lands on the other side of the bridge after breaking free from the final memory, which is always the most vivid. Exhausted, she collapses to the ground.

But before she has time to rest, the teeth rise once again from the mist below, along with the crackling lightning of her looping memories. Invisible hands hover above, waiting to lash out. Death's laughter booms.

Xixi looks back across the bridge she just traversed, the bridge she's crossed countless time before, and she takes the first step again.

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