

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: SILK BUTTERFLIES

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The first section of this unfinished novel, titled *Silk Butterflies* is a diptych about a woman named Sarah, and her desire to acquire ancestral truth regarding her identity to negate the pain she feels from losing her unborn child. Her story, told in a guarded, first person point-of-view is paralleled with Ling's story, an unconventional, ninety-two year old Shanghainese woman who, against her desires, had her feet bound in China during the early 1920's. Ling's story is also told from a lyrical first-person perspective that focuses especially on sensory details, and delves into the sacrifices we make to attain standards of beauty, and the loss Ling has never recovered from. As this historical fiction progresses, their stories overlap in an unexpected way, as both Sarah and Ling attempt to revitalize forgotten histories, including how Sarah's grandparents fled to Shanghai in the 1930's to escape Nazi persecution during World War II.

SILK BUTTERFLIES

by

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DEDICATION

To my dad for believing in me, my mom for reading every draft, and for my *jie* and my *mei*, always.

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CHAPTER 1:

“The photo looks back at me,” –Paisley Rekdal

SARAH

I had always known my family had a secret past.

Refugees often lead duplicitous lives: their shadows informed by a dark history, a permanence of all that they’ve left behind, reflections of their reinvented selves, and who they choose to become, which often conflicts with who they are. My grandparents’ history became an accepted, unspoken understanding in my family; the same way, that as a child, you would brush your crumbs and dust bunnies underneath the Persian rug in the stairway to make the hardwood floor glossy, and superficially clean, without food and dirt spilt upon it. A history so taboo that I rarely ever contemplated it. Until today. When I accidentally uncovered a hidden photograph in my grandparent’s kitchen, which proved to be the perfect distraction from my heartache and seeming life crisis.

I knew that my grandparent’s briefly resided in China to escape the concentration camps. I knew that my mother was born in Shanghai before they settled in North Carolina. And I could tell from my grandfather’s tone, that he missed it dearly. That was all I knew, still, that’s all I know. But now, I *need* to know more.

Today is my due date. Though, today, I will not be a mother. I miscarried my baby daughter three months ago. And now, after more than half a year of planning otherwise, I need to reinvent myself. I am no longer a mom, I guess, technically, I never was one; and

I am no longer a wife; perhaps legally, but we've taken time apart, to heal separately. Stomach pangs twinge in my hollow belly, remembering the baby that seeped out of me. Remembering the pain that coincided with this loss, that just a few mere months ago, on the day I could no longer feel a heart beat, the Doctor confirmed my excruciating suspicion: my hollow womb. He said that I had lost her, as if she was a gold studded earring, or a pair of fake ray-bans that you can buy from a sidewalk street vendor in Manhattan. About four months ago, I had been summoned to bed rest, after a recent onset of preeclampsia, but I insisted to Dylan that I was going stir crazy. "A light jog can't hurt, right?" I asked him, while he stirred the garlicky marinara. I have always been a runner. "Just take it easy, Sar," he said, sternly. "You too," I retorted, "that sauce is smelling crispy." He said it wasn't my fault, but of course it was.

My hand rests on my flat stomach and I can still recall the way my former husband's palm and thumb-tip often localized there; how naked and empty it feels without them.

"At least you can have babies!" My grandmother mutters, acerbically at me. She is succumbing to an aggressive form of dementia and vacillates between various states of lucidity. "Not all of us are so lucky!" She points to herself, and shoots me a look of apathy, an attempt to put my loss into perspective. Only recently has she become so indifferent.

"What do you mean, gram?" I ask, my eyebrows scrunching together, wrinkling my forehead. "Of course you can, or you could." I am still standing in her kitchen, digressing from starting to prep for our Sunday dinner, a weekly ritual since childhood. An old yellow cutting board sitting before me on the kitchen island catches my gaze; a shiny chopping knife, and an exceptionally long carrot rest in my hands. For the past three

months, there has been one less place setting, and I always offer to chop the onions, to excuse my tears. Though today I am allowed to cry.

“Barren, barren, barren,” she whispers. “Barren as a damned desert.”

“Gram, you’re not barren! You had mom, remember?” But she’s already moved along, as if she’s sleep walking, completely unaware.

I wasn’t looking for answer, in a way they sought me out. I never wanted to create waves in our tranquility, or disrupt a truth that has been buried for decades. There’s something about my ancestral quest for knowledge that feels unnatural, eerie, the way I imagine it might feel to unearth a dusty coffin. How could my grandmother be barren? What about mom?

*

My grandparents’ house always smells like parsley, classical music plays refreshingly in the background, and tea candles are lit on the dining room table. I decide to rinse my dinner vegetables in a colander to divert my thoughts to something more trivial; to something that I can consume, an attempt to momentarily abandon the thoughts that are consuming me.

The black and white photo I discover is sleeping in a shoebox in my grandmother’s kitchen pantry. I was looking for some seasoned salt. Unknowingly, I open the lid to uncover rotted incense sticks—an aroma so astringent I succumb to a coughing fit, hunched over on the stepping ladder—a deck of flashcards with Mandarin letters matched with their English translations, and loose pebbles of Pu Erh tea remain. The first note-card I see reads *Gui* in pinyin with half of a diamond resting over the lowercase ‘i,’ almost as if it’s sprouted wings. The character reveals a meticulously drawn symbol that

resembles a tiny sailboat. Dylan has a birthmark on his left rib that is practically identical.

I flip the clue over: *gui* means *ghost*.

My grandfather, Max, has always said that he doesn't believe in ghosts: a superstition that's survived only by a paranoid society, he'll say. But, as I've aged, now entering into my mid-thirties, the self-consciousness, and skepticism of my twenties has postponed, and I've realized that I think we are haunted often; I rub the knuckle on my left hand, over my barren ring finger, and again, I am reminded of this truth.

The photo, a secret of sorts—now exposed—wilts to the marbled floor. It twirls slowly at first, like a baited fishing line. It had been stuck behind the flash cards and I wonder if it's a prophecy.

On the back, in black sharpie cursive reads: "Ling, Marie and me—1950." Max, my grandpa, is playing Mahjong with my grandma, and a chubby Chinese woman, with round cheeks and a Buddha-sized belly; sitting in a room ornamented in baked goods behind a glass counter and teapots. The woman's feet are elevated on a small stool. They are bound. So small they look as though I could wrap them in the palm of my hand, like a thimble.

I can hear my grandmother shuffling by, her slippers whispering against the tile. Now, she knows my name.

"You okay in there, Sarah honey?" her voice echoes mildly through the pantry door; in this moment, she is kind.

"Yes, thanks gram-muh, just grabbing a few spices," I say, more intrigued by the shoebox of treasures than my salt-less brussels sprouts. I sit on the footstool, and press my nose against the grainy film. My mother had always silenced my curiosity of my

grandparent's life in China, so eventually, it faded and I discarded it entirely. "It's too hard for grammy and granps," she'd say, "too painful for them to have to remember. So let it go. It's taboo, darling." Perhaps I'd never acknowledged that it may have been deluging for her. Still, Max and Marie's memories of Shanghai seeped through their stories, infused their culinary ambitions, and styled their home. And often, when it was just the three of us, they would indulge me of their Chinese voyage, sparse hints at their past.

As I further examine the photo, I *know* my grandfather is wrong. I see a ghost—*gui*—a face that feels so familiar to me, so heart-wrenching, it will sink into the rock bottom of my gut and haunt my dreams. Now, I have to find this woman. I have to hear her story, *their* story.

I glance down at the uncanny image again, and in the Chinese woman's face, the thin lips, petit nose, and dark irises, in the complexion of her pale skin, I see my mother.

CHAPTER 2:

“I suppose at one time in my life I might have had any number of stories, but now there is no other. This is the only story I will ever be able to tell,” –Donna Tartt

LING

Most nights, I fall asleep dreaming of horses. Perhaps I was one in another life. Or maybe, that’s what I will soon become. My feet are already hooves, small and scarred, as if I’m currently in transition. Horses are praised for their strength, their graceful ease galloping through the lands; wild, but free.

I hadn’t heard from Max in over a decade, so when he calls me and leaves a message on my voicemail that asks if I would meet his granddaughter, I think I must be dreaming. His voice is aged, but refreshing; although like me, he too is dying. I can tell because his request sounds scripted, impersonal and hazy, his mind is foggy.

But the familiar resonance of his voice caresses me like the gentle Shanghai breeze and carries my thoughts into a daydream, in which we are both horses in a field grazing together, the wind ruffling our manes. Just Max and me. She is a photographer, he says, of his granddaughter, an artist, heading to China for a documentary, and I am to greet her if I’m available, if I so desire, if this is even the correct Ling.

I imagine what she must be like, and I realize just how much I’ve missed him. My eyes close, and I can hear his butchered Mandarin after hours in the cafe, smell the sugar crystals baking in the oven, taste the doughy, Challah bread that I picked clean of its

raisins, as if I'm twenty years old again. I replay his message again and again.

But mostly, I dream of horses. And I think of how they are admired especially for their beauty.

CHAPTER 3:

“...the cities are falling asleep, each in its hour, and for me, now as then, it is too much.

There is too much world,” –Czeslaw Milosz

SARAH

After I find the picture, I sit on the wooly carpet in my grandparents’ living room, flipping through all of their photo albums. Mostly, they contain blacks, and whites, and grays, of my mother as a teenager, dressed for prom, or Easter Sunday. I move to the attic. Once, I was petrified of the rickety stairs that led up to the loft, as if they housed a toothless monster, but I ignore my childish apprehensions to peruse boxes, piled in layers of dust like snow, for letters or clues, anything, really that can settle my curiosity. Although, all I have discovered are some awfully gaudy, knee-length fur coats, and a rocking horse exquisitely engraved with my mothers initials: *MAS*.

About a year ago—when Dylan and I started trying to get pregnant—I confronted the stored clutter of memories. I had been searching then too, to excavate what I could: high chairs, cribs, toys. Though, now that feels like a lifetime ago. A stack of children’s books rest at my feet, and suddenly I feel as if sifting through my grandparent’s nursery-ridden attic is therapeutic, far more than I would’ve prescribed for myself.

“Grandpa!” I shout, as I climb down the battered steps of the ladder, surrendering my plight, and accepting my reliance on his memory, which is much more lucid, and reliable than his wife’s, and whose good days are frequent, and energetic. I decide to interrogate

him about the picture, about their denied past. “I need to talk to you about something.” A direct source will be more informative anyway, although still, I feel apprehensive.

“That’s fine,” he nods, and leads me into his study. “What’s on your mind, *mein schatz?*”

“Grandpa. Who is this woman in this picture? I thought you only lived in China for a year or so.”

He stares at the picture for a while, smiling. “Aw,” he says. “Where on earth did you find this?”

*

My mother’s parents, I learned, sought refuge in Shanghai in the late 1930’s, fleeing the Nazis and abandoning their home. Their memories of Frankfurt, Germany *do not* exist in glimmering pieces—the taunting reminder of their bakery window deliberately smashed, a metastasis of thousands of glass shards on the *Kristallnacht*. They would *not* remember the translucent reflection of the moon that pierced through the broken debris like the pictures reveal in history textbooks: a shimmering broken mosaic.

Instead, they will forever be haunted by the sound of their windows desecrated, permanently shattering, and the way that the nose of the Nazi soldiers’ rifles stared directly at them, salaciously, practically salivating. The indigestible smoke from the burning synagogues that burrowed deeply into their lung-graveyard, so that every time they took a full, deep breath, they were reminded of that loss, their affliction, when they were deracinated.

They remember the way their hearts stopped, and beat to a discordant rhythm, and then never beat quite the same way again. A horror, a malignant cancer really, that’s

practically fatal, that you never fully recover from. The way they counted stars that ostracized them, that weren't dangling from the sky like silver earrings, but yellow scarlet letters that were pinned to their coats, to their neighbors. The way they scurried in the bleak moonlight through alleyways, like rats, to escape their seemingly predetermined fate.

They spent nearly two decades nesting in the ghettos of Chusan Road, in Shanghai, learning to speak Mandarin, and adapting congee, and rice noodles into their cooking, bargaining at the local markets for embroideries, and vegetables, spices; following the superstitions, and traditions of the Chinese zodiac, the Chinese faith, Buddhist proverbs, and adhering to the medicinal herbal affects of boiling tea, and drinking almond soup.

“We ate lunch in soup kitchens at first, and lived in the *Heime*—a bunked refugee center, until we found our way, gained employment,” my grandfather tells me. We are comfortably seated in his informal study room, my legs curled on the scratchy, mauve loveseat cushion. But, I can tell he is hurting, especially when he rewinds to his life in Germany; his movements are twitchy, and his gaze is distanced. He asks me for a refill of coffee, “I think I could use another cup,” he says. I make an entire pot, as if it is our hourglass—every mug-full is another speck of sand—in hopes that I can uncover more of our roots, the truth; I never did finish cooking my roasted dinner, my appetite is swallowed, and the coffee feels warm, and thick in my stomach. “Look here,” he says, and opens up a pristine black box, without even the smudge of a single fingerprint. He pulls out an immaculate photo album. On the sides, red, and gold butterflies are stitched, and sheer paper is separating, and protecting the thick pages. White ink documents the dates, and places beneath each glossy picture, “1939: The Pearl City, on the bund,” the

letters are meticulously curved in an elegant cursive, my grandmother's writing, with the exception of the Mandarin characters beneath the English words, which are clearly inscribed by a local; perhaps, by Ling, the bound foot woman in the shoebox picture.

My mother interrupts his confessional.

"Let's go out to dinner," she says. "I'm famished."

"Me too," my grandfather responds, although we haven't even finished our first mug of coffee, but he stands, signifying our conversations end.

I stand too, and watch the album sitting on his desk gloriously. It is illuminated, practically glowing, like a missing key that you finally attain, but still can't find the door it opens.

*

My misery has been momentarily silenced by my decision to visit Shanghai. I am reminded of how it feels to hold on to something precious again, to be hopeful.

As I am packing, stuffing socks into my sneakers to save space, I see the box, and decide to bring it with me, perhaps, eventually, I will present it to Ling. Aside from a few pictures that my grandfather showed me, I've never fully studied the images; I still haven't quite found the confidence to open it again. I'm nervous that this woman, Ling, will even want to see me at all, that my ancestral journey will be triggering for her; it's roots, ultimately stemming from selfish motivation, and a fib my grandfather told her about a career opportunity. Truthfully, I haven't been back to work in almost three months, when my maternity leave expired. I decide to leave Dylan a voicemail—instructing him not to call me—just in case he had planned to.

In China, my grandparents opened their own European-style bakery with Asian

fusion: Café Marie, most famous for its Viennese style coffee, egg tarts, doughy, white Challah bread, Qibaogao, and Marie, my robust, outspoken grandmother. They never speak about the *backerei* they previously owned in Germany—almost as if it were a miscarriage.

“The biggest challenge was the water,” my grandma had explained, while we were sipping our dark roasted coffee, that day I discovered the photo. “We were constantly boiling water to avoid infections,” she’d said, and then continued shuffling along, popping in and out of our conversation. Her book on quilting basics was in hand; she was cradling it like a newborn, in the other she carried a white blanket with patches of navy. But that day, the day that I booked a one-way plane ticket to China for answers, for a distraction, that day, she knew my name.

“Not that we were immune to other diseases,” my grandfather had added, flipping through the black and whites. “Scarlet Fever ripped through the shelters quick as tea cools.”

I felt compelled to explore these secret roots, which interchangeably, they referred to as home. “It truly is our home,” my grandfather had whispered to me, his coffee cup was clinking against the table, signifying the finality of my questions. After all, China is my mothers’ birthplace. And sometimes, I feel foreign in America too, uprooted, almost. I wonder why they next went back? Or why my mother chose to eradicate her memories of it completely?

“Did you ever feel like outsiders though? Was it hard to be there after being removed from your home in Germany?” I’d asked.

“Not as hard as it felt to be prey.”

*

I mark the box “pleasure” on the immigration card: *purpose for your visit*. But only because there was no option entitled: *It’s Complicated*. I hail a taxi to my hotel, its doors are an awful aqua blue, with off-white seat coverings, and the seat reeks of cigarette smoke, and body odor. I muddle the street names I had practiced so perfectly on the plane, but eventually he nods, “okay, okay, okay, *wo zhi dao le*.” Dozens of Western, white faces are sipping cocktails in the bright, warm hotel lobby, while I check-in, and I have to pinch myself to remember that I’m actually in Asia. In Shanghai, China, to be exact. Ling phoned back and left a voicemail, only listing her address.

The shower water feels cool, and refreshing on my face, effectively draining the stench of plane that’s seeped into my clothes, my pores. I remember to keep my mouth closed, as the pressure of water trickles down my chin, through my long layers of hair. The condensation forms on the glass door, and I practice writing the only Chinese symbols that I know: “ai,” love, “shi,” is, and “piao liang,” beautiful. I twist the towel around my head, warmed by the plush robe, and slippers, and lie down on my bed, just for a moment. As soon as I touch the soft pillow, I fall asleep. I am nervous for tomorrow, but I have the address written down, and a telephone number in case of emergencies. I am absorbed in my dreams of a world where Sawyer, and Dylan are my family, again, and not Ling. When I wake up, a few hours later, I am completely startled. I have absolutely no idea where I am.

*

She looks almost exactly the same.

I inch through her HuTong, a local village, with a shared courtyard, and I can feel my

fingers shaking. I wonder if she'll even know the answers to my questions, or if I'm on a fruitless goose chase. I can see her from the corner of my eye, she is walking towards me, her hands are behind her back; she looks stoic and wrinkled, but kind, quiet.

"Hello, Ling?" I ask. She cups my hands, but shakes her head. My camera is reverberating against my chest.

"Please sit," she says, and points to the stools.

"Thank you so much for meeting with me. I, uh, begged my grandfather not to call you, but he insisted. I'm quite embarrassed, I hope you don't mind that I'm here," I can feel my cheeks redden. "So, can you tell me about them? My grandparents? Whatever you can tell me I would appreciate. I found this photo of the three of you in 1950. And it made me curious about our family history. I've always wanted to visit and I uh, had an opportunity for work, so. Also, I just needed an escape. I needed to get away from my life temporarily."

She taps her feet together. They are exquisite. I don't know how I hadn't noticed before, I've never seen anything quite like them.

"No," says, shaking her head again. "I cannot." She is gazing directly at my eyes, longingly, almost. Perhaps she's trying to see my grandfather in them, if my soft, pale features are how she remembers him.

"Your feet are remarkable," I gush.

"My feet?" Ling asks me—not offended, but perplexed. "Why? They are hideous to new world beauty." Her hand wags back and forth, indicating her disapproval. At ninety-eight, she is petite, a stature of only 60 inches tall, with strong hips, and seated on a wooden chair with ornate, antique carvings of flowers and insects. Her toes dangle, not

quite touching the floor.

She is exactly as my grandfather described her.

“I’m working on an article for my job. I’m a writer, for a local magazine, where I’m from.”

“Perhaps.”

I’ve spaced distance between us in the open courtyard—a communal living room within her Shanghainese city village—laundry is hanging to dry from pastel plastic clothespins and birds in antique cages line the corners of the square, chirping out of fear or perhaps of annoyance at the feral kittens, pawing at the wood. I can hear an argument between men, shouting in Mandarin. I translate its echo in my mind on words spilling over from an unsettled sale, a fruit vendor overcharging for berries or selling inedible, overly-ripe dragon fruit; a dispute that’s rooted in inherent hostility from generations’ prior. The nose of my camera is aimed at Ling and she absorbs the attention, laughing—a few of her teeth are cracked and I’m craving the stories she’s hiding within the layers of her wrinkled skin.

Suddenly, she unclasps the button of each tiny shoe—so small I could catch them in my palms before they fall to the ground like dandelion wings—her legs are outstretched, hands lingering at her ankles, resisting, unsure. I tell her that I am working on a story for the blog, a slight truth, though it’s more of a personal project, and my own curiosities.

“Please don’t feel obliged. I totally understand,” I say.

“Too late now,” she says.

“I’m sure they are beautiful,” I say, my desperate and pathetic attempt to assuage her trepidation. “Different.” I tuck my straggly brown hair behind my ears, my nose pressed

against the viewfinder, leaving an oily residue on its neck, my pink blouse clinging to my back and my armpits producing sweat stains from the polluted, thick Shanghai air.

“That’s because you haven’t seen them naked yet,” she says. “*He* said the same thing once.” Her words are sedate, deliberate, and her English is perfect. Inside her cotton jacket, are tiny, milky buttons embossed with silk pink dragons, and I am reminded of cotton candy clouds from the local fair. I can see my stained cutoff jean shorts, my hair in sloppy pigtails, and my father spoiling me with dyed sugar, and tawdry prizes. I was in Ms. Kinnamon’s class in the fourth grade, and my dad threw a baseball at a dozen milk jugs, knocking eleven of them off the platform, and won me a stuffed animal. It was a green dragon, with a red tongue, that I later named snake.

“Why are you so interested in them?” She asks me, dumbfounded by my curiosity, a fact I find fascinating.

“Because it’s a fading history,” I tell her. “Like my grandparents’, who are World War II survivors. They escaped the concentration camps, as I’m sure you know,” I bow my head, and stare down at my feet. “You don’t have to show me,” I say, suddenly feeling obtuse for my presence here. “I’m sorry if I offended you.” The urge to escape and taxi back to my hotel room, order room service, and succumb to jet lag is overwhelming. But I feel her palm gently pat my shoulder.

Ling scoots forward and tugs at the heel of the dyed cloth, abused from wear and tear; pink peonies with large green stems are woven flat into the beaten red slippers with gold embroidery. I notice she’s not wearing a wedding ring. Her chin-length black and grayed hair is starting to curl, forming tiny-ringlets from the humidity. Before I can ask her who *he* is, or map out my escape route, she slides off her shoes—one at a time—hauntingly

slow, but aggressive, menacing, like the act is a cough caught in her throat. The redness in her cheeks darkens as we both focus our gaze on her distorted skin. Her feet are pointed where the toes are supposed to be, instead they are conjoined, and they remind me of elf ears, smaller than I imagined, so solid they almost seem natural.

My pointer finger rests on the trigger of the Nikon, auto-focus, auto-flash, but I am completely paralyzed.

“I don’t expect you to understand,” she says. My tongue stutters on words that aren’t quite right; I don’t want her to feel my pity. Instead, I squeeze her hands in silence.

“I just...it’s just that...” I stutter. “Ling, it’s okay, I can go. Really. I’m so sorry that I bothered you. I was just really curious and I saw this picture of you, and my grandparents, and I actually came here because I wanted to learn more about our history, because they’ve never really talked about it, and, and, now I’m rambling. I’m sorry, Ling, really, I didn’t mean to offend you.”

She sighs. “You sound just like him you know, your grandfather.”

An aroma of jasmine tea wafts through the foyer. “My favorite,” she smiles, her lips pressed together in a long “mm,” as she inhales the familiar sweet scent of memory. She presses her eyelashes together. Her hands are trembling as small damp droplets form. She breathes in, she breathes out, in, out, then she grips my shoulder intimately, almost hugging me, while goose-bumps, or what Ling refers to as *lumps on chicken skin* line her arms.

“It’s okay,” she says. “But I am afraid I cannot provide you the answers you are looking for. My name is MingHua, I worked with Ling, and your grandparents at their café for a few years. Ling’s not here, anymore. I’m terribly sorry.”

CHAPTER 4:

“Everything has beauty, but not everyone sees it,” –Confucius

LING

Here’s what I remember: it’s the winter of 1921 and I, Zhang, Ling-Ling, am only four years old. An unlucky age. Shanghai is teeming with snow flurries; a frozen breeze of opium and jasmine tea instructs me of winter’s oppression. More than 25, 000 families are affected with influenza.

Baba, my father, must have been lighting red incense sticks before a miniature shrine of Buddha, as he often did between card games.

“Aiyó, *wo bu yao le*, I don’t want the CCP...and their extreme leftist policies.” I catch only every other word of his whispered skepticism referring to the inception of the Communist Party. My uncle shuffles the deck, spitting into an empty can at our strategically placed card table to improve the flow of energy in the room. Feng Shui master’s recent visit, and palm readings helped to realign our *qi*, positioning a small bronze horse statue to face north and switching a mirror from above the bed frame to hang in the kitchen. A paper cutout dragon scroll—an auspicious symbol—is draped on the wall, next to Zhang, our family name, painted in black inked characters. Our house has no carpeting, but rather a tough concrete, burning cold, and indifferent to our bare feet. Long, willowy hand-stitched, ethereal silk curtains hang down in every doorframe.

I am sitting on a maroon wooden stool that creaks with the slightest movement, it was my grandfathers, my Yé-Ye’s—once used solely for his transportable barbershop.

There's a small slit on the surface of the seat where coins for payment were dropped in. Inside of the top drawer, he kept his only pair of metal scissors that could hack even the thickest, most stubborn hair, and a meaty black-toothed comb. An oblong wooden bowl rests in the hutch between the legs of the seat, with a small emblem hiding within it, a gift from Nai-Nai, my grandmother, on their wedding day: a fish cut from semi-cheap dark green jade. "In my previous life, I must have been a fisherman," he used to tell me, during my favorite nightly bedtime stories. Remnants of shampoo still lingers whenever the drawer squeaks opened, or closed, and Yé-Ye is momentarily alive again.

My Mama clips my toenails so far back they bleed, a pink crescent around a white moon. This manicured act is done only in the morning time to avoid the *gui*. Initially, the pampering makes me feel special, a rare treat like glutinous rice cakes overly-filled with red bean, lotus paste, or my favorite: egg yolk, eaten only during the Mid-Autumn festival, called Qibaogao. A time, according to Nai-Nai, when the stars impregnate the moon, creating its swollen, round shape.

A time that reminds me of *him*.

My toes and soles have been massaged, oiled, to the extent of numbness, and are soaking in a homeopathic bath of animal blood, and remedial herbs. I am paralyzed by the provocative red tone, and the earthy, raw stench of death.

"An investment for our future," Mama explains. "No smart man wants to marry a rice farmer's daughter." My sister, Jie-Jie, and I, are an undesirable union for most. It took me a while to understand that it is because we are poor, and our skin is sun burnt; because our hands are rough, and calloused from working in the fields. But still, I am Ma's little Lotus flower—her *Lián*—just as my feet will soon be, beautiful.

An investment for you, I later reminded him.

It's not the pain that I am still haunted by, but the sound of bones cracking, like mahjong tiles on a wooden, squared glass table, or the quick snap of Nai-Nai wringing a chicken's neck for boiling.

My little toes are broken first, pressed against my soles, flat as a *Moo Shu* pancake. Then, they strain my arch, torquing my feet, one at a time. "Pretend," Jie-Jie instructs. "Pretend you are a dancer, toes pointed—*Yōuyǎ*. Graceful. Beauty is pain, Ling-Ling." She is only two years older than I am, a rabbit in the zodiac calendar, but she feels so much wiser. Tenderly, she releases my palm from hers.

I am screaming—a deep-rooted howl—louder than the piercing strain of the teapot whistling, boiling, sweltering, steaming. I am wondering: can he hear me? Can *you* hear me?

In my hands, a stuffed serpent, for the year of my birth—a fluffy cheap red cotton in the shape of an "s," with flecks of blue, green, and yellow that sliver down the curved body, two black eyes with a small tongue—is pierced by my fingernails, which are dredging into the plush fabric, leaving behind indents, tiny plateaus. Nai-Nai, bought this for me at the Dong Tai Lu market for the New Year. Tears stream from my eyes, dripping down the length of my body, the salt piercing my blistered nubs. *Bù rù hǔxuè, yāndé hǔ zǐ*, my mother reminds me. *No pain, no gain, Ling.*

My feet are bound in place and nursed with smooth silk. One bandage crushes my teeny toes underneath the ball of my foot. The other is forcing my heel to create a high arch that once never existed, defying nature. This tradition that is glorified for its beauty, looks more like a circus act to me, and feels less than graceful, but instead becomes a

torturous prison strategically timed, done between the chaos of horns on the streets, and within the rhythm of sighs among the fatigued seamstresses.

But don't you see darling? It's for your future.

Do you see, this is for him?

I know the pain was inconceivable, I know that the pain was immeasurable.

Unimaginable. I know that I received accolades because I did not faint because I am a snake and because although snakes are reticent, they are also courageous. I know that this is supposed to make me more beautiful, that this will be worth the sacrifice.

I know it.

I remember Baba watching me from the corner of my eye, dim sum steam from the bamboo basket warmly kissing at my fingertips. My mind momentarily appeased by the promise of warm jasmine tea, and an abundance of shrimp steamed dumplings.

Baba keeps repeating stories about a man named Mao. A name that I later give to our black and white kitten because once, I believed Mao to be the Founding Father of modern China, once I believed him to be a National Hero, but that of course was once when I was naïve. When I believed in whimsy, and dreams, and gallantry. Because once, he truly was my hero; when he taught the Red Army to resist the Japanese forces, or his passing of the New Marriage Law in 1950, which officially changed the future of arranged marriages and progressed the gender hierarchy. I remember his campaign so vividly, I used to have a propaganda poster in my bedroom: *“men and women are equal; everyone is worth his (or her) salt.”* That was a time when foot binding became condemned, and obsolete; when I would carry grains of salt in my pockets as a gentle reminder of my worth.

But then of course, I abandoned my loyalty to him during the *Three Bad Years*, which

officially ended my fieldwork, when Baba was accused of hoarding, when the parentheses in the poster felt hypocritical, when poor Nai-Nai became sick, when the Cultural Revolution resulted in mass purges of our people, and ended in imprisonment. When the salt dissolved seamlessly between my fingers.

“Supposedly he is some kind of revolutionary,” Baba says. His tone is acerbic, reflective of his permanent bitterness and embarrassment over his father’s loss of Hong Kong to the British in the Opium War of 1839.

“*Shi ah, dui, dui, dui,*” my uncle nods in agreement. He rolls his neck repeatedly, left to right, the bones cracking simultaneously with the swift movement and my throat closes, dizziness and nausea overwhelm, my fragile heart skimming against my chest, through my earlobes.

I remember the exact details of the executioner’s hands: Nai-Nai’s wrinkled, scarred, leathery skin loosely pinched together, lines drawn like calligraphy, her long thumbnails mutilating, shortening, my normal, child-sized limbs. That she is my grandmother, my sweet, story-telling Nai, brings no comfort whatsoever.

But I don’t remember it, to be honest. The pain.

My mother shows me petite blue shoes, pointed at the tip, and curved at the bottom with a short heel. They remind me of salt and pepper grinders, or ornamented pots to plant bulbs; pink peonies, and tiny green peacocks are seamlessly woven into the fabric. They look impossibly small, even for my dolls, dainty. I know that they are so beautiful, or that they will be. *My stunning golden lotus feet.* Ma grabs my hands, still proportionate to my body and wraps my fingers around the shoes as if I’m being awarded them.

I don’t let go.

*

When I think back now, I know that I must have struggled. *But Mama*, I must've tried to protest. *Mama, I do not want a husband!* I wish I had offered this refrain instead, when I was dictated to walk up, and down our street, *Wulumuqi Lu*, in the peony pepper grinders. Jie-Jie watching me from the kitchen window. When I was forced to contain all of my weight into ten measly centimeters, until the process was completed, until the arches were broken in, until the wrappings became tighter and my shoes became smaller, until I stopped mourning my future, for my loss, years, and years later. When instead, I became determined to improve my stamina, and walk farther than most with bound feet, and not forfeit to what bound feet implied, the way that Jie had surrendered.

I don't really remember walking or sprinting or jumping, and playing before my feet were bound. But I must have; during that time before I had to relearn how to walk on bound feet, before I became a hobbler. Perhaps, I would scurry around the *lu's*, among the traffic, catching snowflakes on my cheeks, playing hopscotch on the uneven tiles with the neighbor children in my *HuTong*, or maybe I chose to skip bare foot through the muddy fields. I just know that when I dream it is of memories, of running around wild and free—like the butterflies I pretended to be.

*

Two hours later, and still, I sit with my feet elevated, tightly wrapped, and aching. Ma has silenced me with a huge serving of watermelon juice from the owner of a street cart a few houses down; the grainy stench of opium in my nostrils. I watch my Ma through the exposed curtain; meticulously using her hands to shape clay bowls. She thrusts her right palm, cupping the muddy goo, and crafts a rounded shape. With her clean hand, she

presses a small needle into the sides of the bowl to create a criss-cross pattern, like sheets of pouring rain or rolling ocean waves, horizontal, and vertical, and overlapping. A dozen variegated clay molds are spaced apart on a cooking tray, and Mama carefully places them in a kiln to bake. The kiln frightens me. When the hatch is opened, the released air is stifling, a torturous temperature that completely depletes me of all oxygen—the heat causes the molds to crack at their core if they haven't been rolled out well enough.

Jie-Jie is crafting her bouquet of winter flowers. I watch her movements, meticulous, refined, she slowly wraps a long piece of silk ribbon around the waist of a clear vase, sifting water, and deliberately arranging the roses; she grabs a knife, and snaps off the feet of the stems in one swift motion.

“They are *hen piào liàng*,” I tell my sister, Jie. *Very beautiful, elegant, bright.* But she scolds me.

“*Piào liàng* is a term only used to describe people, Ling.”

She sets the knife on the counter, her long black hair twirled neatly in a ballerina bun, petite limbs, her skin iridescent, reflecting in the armor of the knife. Only people, I learn, can be described as this type of beautiful. She is so opposite of me—I am younger, rosy and tan, and plump, my hair short, and laced with a crooked semi-horizontal fringe; the one exception being our feet, which are both bound now. “A different kind of beautiful,” Mama will say when she compares us. I wonder for the first time, if the pain ever goes away, or if the process can ever be undone.

The bright red flowers sit in the vase at the center of the kitchen table—to make the room more beautiful.

*

It's time to sleep.

I am sobbing.

Mine and Jie's room is lit by the flickering of an oil lamp flame. Incense is burning, and I am struggling to deplete the harsh remnants of opium smoke that lingers in the house. My feet are stinging fiercely, aching, throbbing. Jie's shadow is carrying bandages, draped across her arms like a consolation prize. Her hands are freezing, and I flinch when she cups my ankles, her palms softly massaging the soles of my feet. The external silence is almost deafening against my screaming soul.

"Sh, don't cry, Ling." She gently lifts my foot, and begins to apply pressure, which momentarily silences the tenderness. Then she curls up beside me, brushing my arm with her fingers, allotting me a reprieve, just a miniscule moment of liberation from the caustic bindings that suffocate my bones. When the tears flat line, she grabs the silk cloth, yanking hard after each successful layering to emphasize the constriction. "The pain, it fades. Soon you will barely remember it."

It's the nighttime that I hate the most because the pulsing in my veins is a reflection of my loss—my autonomy—the reminder of my imperfections.

"Are we made of clay?" I ask Jie.

"Clay? Don't be silly, Ling. Of course not!" She says.

"So I won't have to bake in the kiln?" The thought terrifies me, keeping me awake.

"Ling," Jie says, her emotions wavering between annoyance and pity. "Why would you even think that?"

"Because, that's what Ma and Nai just did. They molded my feet into pointy triangles, and then used the bandages to hold the shape, just like Mama does with her clay bowls."

Jie sighs and smiles slightly.

“You just need a good night sleep, don’t think such impossible thoughts,” Jie says. “I promise, everything will be better in the morning.”

But, to sleep is another horror because when I sleep I dream. And when I awake I have to remind myself that any notion of my freedom, all of my imagined, surreal desires and ability to run away, was just that: a dream.

CHAPTER 5:

“A beautiful thing never gives so much pain as does failing and hearing to see it,” –

Michelangelo

SARAH

I am ferociously picking at my cuticles; my hands are red, and swollen from digging my nails into my skin. My eyeliner is melting, forming at the corners of my eyes like wings. Pigeons are squawking, the discordance of car horns is pulsing through my ear canals. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I just assumed, based on the address she gave my grandpa. Do you know where she is?” Still, she looks so familiar!

“Some jasmine tea?” MingHua asks, lifting the stunning, red clay teapot from the table. I wonder if it is our hourglass.

“Please,” I say, even though I’m overheating, because it’s all that is keeping me from running away. The bipolar wind relieves some of the moisture from my neck, and I can still hear the pulsating melody of beeps from the outgoing traffic. I wonder if I should stay, if this is even the story I actually want to know; if this is the story that I came to China, to Ling, specifically, to hear. Why am I doing this? What does this have to do with my photo, my family? My *gui*? A history that I’m only awarded access to in bite-sized pieces from my grandparents who, now, mostly live in the early 1930’s, pre-China. Marie, especially, idealizes their European roots, falling in love with my grandfather, and getting married on one of the cobblestone streets, in a pristine synagogue in Frankfurt, all

before the infiltration of the Nazi regime, so removed from the bittersweet truth.

But, I guess that's the harsh reality of truth. So often we seek it, cry out for it, and yet, we don't actually want to hear what it has to say. We so choose to ignore what its echo reverberates.

*

I set my small porcelain cup of jasmine tea on the stool between us, and snap a quick photo of MingHua's feet when I think she's not looking because I feel awkward. Because for some inexplicable reason, I feel guilty.

"There's no rush, if you feel so inclined to photograph them," she tells me. "It's nice, at least, to have them exposed."

I delete the photo, quickly; my fingers are wobbling.

"MingHua, if you don't mind, I am going to walk around the city for a few minutes. I think I just need to stretch my legs."

"I don't mind," she says and waves her hand at me to shoo. "Are you going to try and find Ling?"

"Would you like to join me?" I ask and laugh at my own transparency.

She stares directly at me, blinks a few times, as if I've asked her an unanswerable question.

"Hmm. I have an idea, come with me," she says, flagging me towards her. We leave the corridor and head toward the street. She hails a green cab, a stench with the same residue of nicotine, and body odor, we climb in.

"Zhoushan Lu, *qing*," she says to the driver. "This," she looks at me, "is where your grandparents used to live."

*

My grandfather, Max swears by Chinese medicine.

“Tiger balm,” he’ll prescribe to me whenever I have a sore limb, or headache, or shooting pain.

“Before we deployed, and headed West, I’d been tired, achy, something just wasn’t right, I had no energy, *kein boch*.” He told me this once when I was kid, and begged to hear his stories of China: a land which felt exotic, and compelling, utterly unimaginable to me. Rarely did he oblige in my ultimatums, or requests to hear his fables, but I had fallen off my new training-wheel-less bike, and bits of gravel driveway were embedded in my kneecap, blood filtering down my leg like red tears. My wound was still burning, beneath the Big Bird band-aid from the sting of hydrogen peroxide.

“I had been telling him to go to the damn doctor for months,” my grandmother would interrupt, usually breaking from stitching a quilted blanket, or baking apple streusel cinnamon bread. “I’m just saying, my dear,” she’d shrug, and continue working.

“Finally, from the suggestion of one of our pastry chef’s, I went to see a Feng Shui master, who redecorated our Café Marie—moved around some carpets, changed the furniture to face north...that sort of thing. Anyway, he read my palm, ‘mostly good fortune,’ he’d said, ‘but small sickness, check your Shèn.’ Or ‘Kidney,’ our chef translated.”

Two years later, my grandpa’s kidney cancer was gone completely. Doctors said he was so lucky to have caught it before it metastasized. To this day, their pantry is filled with ancient herbal remedies, and healing teas, organic ingredients, some of which they imported from when they moved. Expired and rotting, yet they refuse to dispose of them.

On the sixteen-hour plane ride to China, I remembered this story, and I studied my hand, memorizing the curvature of the lines, and the thick, purple veins. I saw a butterfly. Or a capital “M.” I wondered what it all meant. My focus lingered longingly on the white skin of my ring tan, its emptiness. I wondered what Feng Shui master would rearrange in my life; if having my palm read would help me find all that I’ve lost.

*

I never loved the name Sawyer the way Dylan did. It was his suggestion: stemming from his mother’s maiden name. My first choice was Hannah. But I found it romantic, and beautiful, to preserve our family history. Grandpa advised me to choose a name that my daughter would wear with pride; warning me of how he once tried to avoid even uttering his surname aloud in public, or would consciously condense it, to conceal its Jewishness and the shame that carried.

But once she started kicking, her personality distinct, she quickly became the name.

“But do you really want the baby to be named after someone she can never meet?” My mother asked me in the checkout aisle of Bed, Bath & Beyond.

“Why do you say that? A lot of people are named after parents, or grandparents.” I said, annoyed, my eyebrows scrunched, and the diaper genie weighing heavily on my shoulders.

“I’m sorry, honey, ultimately it’s your choice, and Dylan’s, I just think there’s a haunting quality to that. A desire that can never be realized.” And then she smiled. “But Sawyer is a beautiful name.”

I can’t say I wasn’t warned; that after all, my mother was right. The name Sawyer will haunt me ceaselessly.

CHAPTER 6:

“A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots,” –Marcus Garvey

LING

“Get to bed,” Mama warns us. But Nai lets us stay awake. “The fresh air is good for them,” she tells her own daughter, carrying a pot of tea.

It’s been a few weeks since my feet were bound, and Jie has been helping me with the daily wrappings. The stars are blinking in the hushed night sky, an occasional hunger pain of thunder beating in the distance.

“Let’s make it a game,” she’ll say. “Imagine you’re a dancer, a gymnast, or an acrobat, or something, and I am wrapping your feet as if I am lacing your point shoes.” She is trying to be helpful.

“But I am not a dancer,” I say. “I can never be a dancer now. I don’t want to play.” I argue, but she’ll continue wrapping my feet, gracefully, playing along anyway. She loves her small shoes, though I cannot stand the sight of my deformity. My toes have fashioned claws. I feel like a flightless bird. I’m forced to spend most of my days sitting, like Jie, because my weight is exhausted on my teensy ten centimeters.

We step outside, and though it hurts to stand, my legs are grateful to not be sitting. Nai-Nai pours us each a cup of chamomile tea from her favorite maroon teapot that is decorated in images of cranes. “To help you sleep,” she says, while we sip in silence. Nai

explains that chamomile is an herb, stemming from the daisy family—those pretty flowers with the white petals and round, yellow center—and its active ingredient, bisabolol, has calming, healing qualities.

“According to ancient legend,” Nai-Nai claims, “if you hear a dog howling through the night, nose tilted upwards toward the stars, it means someone, somewhere has died.” After Ye-Ye died of the flu—his lungs poisoned by the enchanting scent of an opium pipe to alleviate his suffering—she spent hours studying the moon. Searching for traces of him in the sky, maybe. She was convinced she had heard the howling, a consistent ringing in her ears, a chronic migraine. And almost every time she reads her tea leaves, the twisted sticks of her preferred jasmine clinging to the sides of her porcelain cup, she argues she sees a wolf or beast or canine—as if somehow she could change his fate.

The road is empty, the fields are yellowing, tall grass is lightly swaying back and forth. Warmer weather is coming. I have asked Mama for permission to continue working in the rice paddies.

“Ma, I really need the sunshine, the outdoors, the fresh air,” I pleaded. Unlike Jie, who sews yarn, and cleans the house, and cooks dinner, and processes tea. Most days, she sings songs, and pretends she is a princess, she envisions her wedding day, and lists through potential names for babies with Nai. And she always protects her skin from freckling. She feels so lucky to have been awarded bound feet; she knows how this makes her more desirable, more beautiful, more lucrative.

But Baba was pleased with my decision; he made me a special bench, and coverings for my silk butterfly shoes, so that I can continue to help him with the field labor as requested. I can get my skin dirty.

“Ah! It’s a new moon,” Jie says, pointing to the crescent glued in the sky—a lucky sign, a compass. We sit outside of our home in the grass, my feet still ablaze, silently howling. Perhaps I am the dog Nai hears.

“A new moon,” I repeat, picking shards of grass, and plucking them from their roots, wondering if it’s a coincidence that the shape of the night sun so obviously resembles my new feet. “I hope Buddha allows me a dreamless sleep.”

“The clouds are swarming, look! So fast!” Jie shouts. “A storm must be coming.” My stomach growls with hunger, and I pick at the thick skin of my cuticles—because I can, because I can mutilate them by choice—warming my fingers with the sides of the teacup until they too feel numb.

“I see a woman,” Jie says, connecting the stars, her finger tracing the image. “Beautiful, do you see?”

“Mm hmm.” I nod. “Why do you need to be beautiful?”

“Someday. When it’s time to marry. You will be grateful, Ling. You will be chosen for your small feet, and you will understand Mama’s sacrifice.”

“But, do I have to be beautiful? Must I get married?” I ask her.

She laughs at my naivety, and we return to the stars.

“I see a warrior,” I say, regarding the mosaic of burning blobs resting above us.

“What do you see Nai-Nai?”

But she is quiet.

After my feet were bound, I heard my Mama sobbing into her pillow, crying herself to sleep night after night.

*

The next day, my foot was broken again, to prevent the bone growth. Ma and Nai had to strap my torso to the table with silk shawls. A grueling howl vacated the oval shape of my mouth; it was so loud that according to Ma, even the earth shivered. Jie fainted upon remembering the pain, Baba had to leave, and instead sought comfort in his work, among the growth in the fields. My ankle was inflamed, and swollen, it cracked like a tortoise shell. The stymied bones were severed to an unidentifiable degree, quivering with every spasm. The fragmenting of previously broken bones felt barbaric to me, unnecessarily vindictive, and agonizing; as did my humiliating, abortive pleas for the fomented torture to cease.

“Did you know I heard you screaming?” Baba admitted to me once, several years later, when the intentional foot breaking was finally terminated. In a rare moment, when we were alone and Baba was nostalgic and gentle. “All the way in the fields, I heard you bellow; like a dying cat, almost. It was unexpected, not my Ling, I thought. For she is too tough, she is too brave. Snakes do not grovel.” I winced, horrified by my ineptitude, my vulnerability. “And then I heard the wind,” he continued. “Parroting your cry, the clouds dark as opium coagulating above me, and I knew, my Ling is hurting, but she will be okay—nature was on your side that day.” I smiled slightly, but my insides were beaming.

Ultimately, it took two whole years for my feet to die. And become something else entirely. Two years to be feetless like a wingless bird.

Ah, my feet: a yearning I’ve only recently surrendered mourning for. The bones became so stunted, so shattered, that they stopped budding completely. Eventually, the re-breaking’s had become so routine that I developed an immunity to the fierce pain. But, I’ll never forget the details of the first time. No one forgets when their dreams are striped

from them. The day I dreamt of a different life.

Less than a year later Mei-Mei, our younger sister was born.

*

Ye-Ye died just months before my feet were bound. I remember him only in pieces, in stories that Nai-Nai tells me, and in dreams that I can't distinguish between reverie and reality. But, I do remember our last interaction. I remember the way the morning smelled like burnt rubber and fish. I remember the muffled low pitch of his voice when he woke me. And I remember how the soft, gooey dough from the steamed buns dissipated onto my tongue. Mostly I remember complaining that my legs, and my feet were tired, though, now, I crave to feel that kind of aching again.

“*Jiaozi*,” he said. He always called me his *sweet dumpling*. “Come fishing with me, little one.” The sky was still wearing the nights’ quilt, the sun disguised as crescent moon, like a piece of sleep dust in its eye. I was so tired; I wanted to continue dreaming, to instead awake by the greeting of warmth that will eventually peek through the silk curtains. “Nai-Nai has already made shrimp *baozi*,” he said, tempting me.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s go fish.” I was so entranced by the promising steam rising from the homemade buns that I decided to sit up in my bed, hypnotized almost, and press my feet against the cool floor; agreeing to join him. “Time to wake up.”

We walked for miles; I don’t remember what we talked about, just the monotonous refrain of me insisting that my muscles were fatigued. “They are so short compared to yours, Ye-Ye!” And he just laughed, baiting me along. Finally, we stopped, and sat in a grassy overlook, the sky formed a rainbow, and its reflection was printed in the lake. “Ye, aren’t we going to fish?” I asked him.

“Just breathe, *jiaozi*. Observe how beautiful nature is.” We sat in silence for a while; I plucked weeds from beneath my feet. “Look, Ling! See those fisherman over there?” He pointed, his arm stretched out toward the horizon.

“Yes,” I said. I place my fingers on each of my thumbs, creating two zero’s, and hold them to my eyes, like binoculars.

“They are casting those nets to catch shrimp.” We inched closer toward them, and I noticed the abandoned prawns that had fallen from their trappings, buried in the sand. He proceeded to teach me how to finagle the worm onto a hook. A slimy brown goo residue clung to my fingertips. I positioned my rod in the mud, and ran to the water to wash off my hand. I remember how the cool morning temperatures of the lake stung at first touch, but I splashed my hand around, playing until it felt warmer, and slightly refreshing; until I could see bubbles forming from beneath.

“Sh! You’ll scare the fish!” Ye-Ye warned me.

“But, Ye, I don’t want to hurt the worm,” I protested.

“And I don’t want to hurt the fish,” he said. “But, sometimes, in life, you have to hurt to survive. You must always be brave, *jiaozi*.”

I stared at the long fishing reel, and watched Ye flawlessly cast his line, a pipe of opium placed in his mouth as if it belonged there. Somehow, in all of the chaos, I completely missed the sunrise.

CHAPTER 7:

“Beauty is not caused. It is,” –Emily Dickinson

SARAH

“Is Mei-Mei her name?” I ask MingHua, flipping through her petite album of labeled black and white photos that she carries in her purse. It is pronounced like May, the season. My heart is racing, my words trembling; I feel dizzy, so cold, and too hot at the same time. We are seated at a local bakery on my grandparents’ old street. She buys me red bean crushed ice, and a bubble tea with tapioca pearls that look like eyeballs floating at the bottom. She refuses my payment of *renminbi*. I’m not even hungry.

Their café no longer exists, it has been replaced by a seamstress, selling beautiful silk.

“Mei-Mei, in the fourth tone, means younger sister,” she says. “Often in Chinese, we live by our titles, or our surnames. Jie-Jie is in the third tone. That means older sister.”

I process this, reminding myself to take deep breaths. My understanding of the language is basic. I know that there are four tones in Mandarin, but that in Shanghai locals also speak Shanghainese, a native dialect that makes me envious—as if they are all part of a secret.

When my grandfather was more lucid, I would make him teach me the fundamentals. Although, filtered through his German accent, it never did sound like he was speaking Chinese, more like Jabberwocky or a cartoon villain. He always used to try and tell me an anecdote –a *witz*, he called it—about the Mandarin word “ma,” and its four translations

based on inflection.

“Poor ol’ Joe Schmo, tried to meet his girlfriend’s parents, and accidentally scolded his ol’ lady’s mother by asking if she was a horse!” He would cackle, a coarse laugh, rough against his throat, while I would force myself to giggle at his failed humor attempt.

“Her name,” she begins softly, “was YuLi. But to me—to all of us really—though especially to Ling, she was always Mei.”

I bow my head and MingHua draws the character for me. It is composed of nine strokes and glorified for its symmetry. I take a spoon full of the shaved ice, it tastes almost like a snow-cone, and I let it effervesce onto my tongue; the sugary glazed syrup, and chunks of kidney bean taste delicious, melting into a savory and sweet glaze.

“Did you know, in the third tone,” she pauses, pushing her lips together. “Mei means beauty.”

*

“Thank you for showing me their old street.” I cup her hands between mine. They feel smooth, warm. “And for telling me about Ling. She was so brave to have returned to work in the fields. I just wish that I could’ve met her myself.”

Our tea has gotten cold. It tastes rotten in my mouth, reminding me of one of my last exchanges with Dylan.

I remember our conversation, like it occurred just minutes ago. We were sitting on the kitchen tile, so brazen against my skin, holding onto the stems of coffee mugs that had turned cold. When Sawyer had decided to become a distant memory. “Stop saying her name like she ever belonged to us, Sarah,” he snapped at me, the bitterness from his brewed roast transcending his tongue, and forming cruel words. “I loved her, Dylan. I felt

like I knew her, my sweet baby,” I cried. “But that’s ridiculous! She never even existed,” he laughed—a mimicking, malevolent sound that rather eloquently formed a cry. “I loved her, too,” he offers. “I know, Dill, I know,” his head in my lap.

“No,” MingHua sighs at my compliment, and she shakes her head, looking hard at the floor. “She was not brave, Sarah. Just human. And she knew it was what she had to do to survive, to feel alive, and exist with bound feet.”

I understand, I think.

*

I check my iPhone, incessantly almost, to verify that it’s connected to WiFi. What if Dylan needs me? I had hoped that this kind of space is perhaps all we’d need to rekindle our marriage, that distance would provide clarity. Although, aside from a few “missing you, please let me know you’re alive,” emails from my mother, it remains silent.

Shanghai itself is rather loud—the constant clamor of the car horn, the clutter of pedestrians traipsing along the uneven sidewalk bricks, and the random chime of a bike bell, or chirping of a chicken. I prefer the noise.

Still, it feels lonely, or maybe it’s just me, feeling empty in a city filled with mothers and crying babies. I never got to hear Sawyer cry. And in spite of the discordant, contrapuntal rhythms and cacophonies, that silence is resounding.

CHAPTER 8:

“Perhaps women were once so dangerous they had to have their feet bound,”

-Maxine Hong Kingston

LING

It is 1922, and the day before Mei is born. While Mama, and Baba are off in the city, Nai-Nai is explaining the qualities possessed by a child born in the year of the dog. “They are always happy, loyal, and willing to help others,” she says. “Red, green, purple, *san, si, jiu*, 3, 4, 9, are all lucky components of the year of the dog.”

She reads the number four in her tealeaves. “The baby is a girl,” she predicts. Jie, and I are steaming brown rice while Nai-Nai boils another pot of jasmine. Our house is cluttered in stools, and double happiness candles to welcome the newborn, and produce good spirits. I feel perturbed that I have to share my room, now.

“Baba will be upset, he thinks we might be gender cursed,” I say. I’d heard stories that families would leave their baby girls roadside, or drop them in front of abandoned buildings, or even hospitals, to rid of them. Once, Jie told me that a family completely ignored that they even had a daughter, never fed, or acknowledged her, that she existed like a feral dog—an undesirable beast, easy to ignore, and neglect.

“Don’t be silly Ling, babies are blessings,” Nai says, in a hushed tone; so gentle that I don’t believe her.

“Then why is he always asking Buddha ‘three girls? What have I done to deserve this

fate? Is this written on my palms?’’

Sometimes I ask the exact same questions.

*

My most vivid memory of the day I return to the fields, is of the way it felt when the tall grass shards tickled my legs. The usual details that once irritated me now made me feel wild, practically euphoric. My feet are altered, sore, but numb to the external world. My hat is thick, comprised of bamboo spears to cover my face from the sun's burning rays, a circular hole at the top. Nothing else has changed, except I am now forced to sit, and I can only husk corn or dig holes, and salvage piles of produce. The breeze is still cool, but quenching. Baba checks on me every other hour, more often than he visits baby Mei. For a while I don't do anything productive, I just sit on my bench, and absorb the nature surrounding me; in my mind, I imagine that nothing has changed; that my amputated nubs are not weeping, or skinned raw. The wind invites my long hair to crawl onto my face, and I am annoyed at the way it disrupts my fantasy, my tranquility. Baba brings me lunch, a plethora of rice, and vegetables blended into one of Ma's clay bowls, at the warmest hour of the day. "Eat up, Ling," he says. "You're working hard. You need your strength."

Before the workday was over, I watched as the sky bled into the earth, deep oranges, and reds, like it was on fire. I was not ready for it to end; I stared into the burning horizon, and imagined a new fate. Slowly, I brought my feet to my chest, and loosened the silk ribbons that were gnawing against my buckled skin, a wretched odor of sweat trapped within the folds of my newly abridged bones oozed into the stagnant air. Never had I smelled anything so vile, so unnatural before, like death, really. My recently

digested lunch forced its way up my throat, and I purged until I was dry heaving.

In spite of the tenderness of my lotus feet, in spite of the pain, and the stench, for the briefest of moments I feel normal again. I feel happy.

*

I am sixteen years old, it is the spring of 1933, the year of the rooster, and Jie-Jie is soon to be wed. Shanghai, our city of the sea, is blooming with art, and style. The streets are exhausted with people, men selling paintings, portable cobblers, and steam exhaling from bowls of noodles, women in ornate dresses carrying colorful parasols, their gazes lingering at strangers, staring overtly, salaciously, hungrily.

Does Max still remember Shanghai like this?

“Look Jie, American words,” I point from the rickshaw, a Japanese invention, to the billboards littering the Bund, advertising Oatmeal, and cigarettes from the West. Our trip from Pudong into the cityscape took nearly an hour, but I am grateful to break from husking corn, to avoid battling the sun that settles on my face, and the top of my head with such stringent will, while I hibernate on a stool in the rice fields. My hands are instead resting in my lap, a silenced luxury, within the folds of a dress I normally only wear during New Year celebrations. We are perusing designs of potential QiPao’s, and textiles that Nai-Nai can sew for Jie’s marriage ceremony. Elegant gold meticulously stitched into red silk—flowers, birds, fish, waves, dragon tails, and curls—a red so brilliant it makes me shiver, so familiar. Mei’s hands, and feet are barely contained in the rickshaw, as she clumsily tries to catch the air in her palms, her toes swinging back and forth on top of Nai’s lap.

I wince.

“Sit still, Mei-Mei.” I scold her, my arms folded, lips soured, the river raging breathlessly beside us.

*

Our slippers glide slowly along the sidewalk, almost as if we are dancing. Men passing by snicker at Jie, her dominant beauty—black eyes, narrow frame, pale skin from domestic captivity, feet bound. Mei is running in between people, her large feet carelessly waltzing through the traffic. Sometimes I wish she had been a boy, the way Baba does. My long hair sticks to my neck in the heat, hanging heavily, like a noose, so I pull it to form a long braid, and drape it down my chest.

Nai-Nai’s movements, like mine, are also small, slow, and structured. She scolds Jie for making eye contact with the naysayers. “Pay attention, girls. If we finish early, maybe we can stop in one of these cafés for some jasmine tea and a bowl of rice noodles.” I stare directly at the Westerners, studying them the way we analyze the stars, the way they glare at my *chánzú*— feet.

They stare back.

“Jie, Ling, Mei, don't interact with the white faces—they are not to be trusted. They are hiding here,” Baba warned us before the trip, referencing a spider flag. “Ack, Jewish refugees,” he spits at my uncle. “They are different than us, no good, *bu hao le*. Taking over our city,” he announced, intentionally, to be heard by the entire room; a warning to us. 25,000 Jewish immigrants sought refuge in our Ghettos from Nazi persecution, their fair skin, so soft, and big eyes, so different than anyone I’d ever seen before. They wore strange hats, and engrossing trench coats, blouses tucked into their long skirts, and shoes with buckles, their limbs taller, and thicker, and whiter than ours.

“Ah, I don’t know. I don’t mind them to be honest, I think they are harmless. Besides we have a common enemy,” my uncle suggested. “The Japanese.”

Baba released his shoulders, and shrugged. “Perhaps. We do have a mutual opponent.”

"At least they can escape," I whispered, under my breath.

In the city, Nai-Nai is gazing adoringly at Mei who is trying to bargain with the street vendor for some warm chestnuts roasting in a black cauldron. She has so much energy, or what Nai calls *wanqiang*: tenacity.

“Girls, look!” Jie points to a fabric through the windowsill. We all, even Mei, stop completely, and pause to admire its beauty.

CHAPTER 9:

“Under all this dirt the floor is really very clean,” –Lydia Davis

SARAH

“Your feet, they really are beautiful, you know.” I tell MingHua. “Like a flower.” She places her tiny ankle in my palm, and I am amazed at how soft they feel. I realize that I expected them to be calloused, and harsh, worn. They are in the exact shape of a Barbie’s high-heeled shoe.

My grandfather described the Shanghainese women—the blurry visions in the background of his black and white photographs— inching along the city: as a delicate dance. “Their feet were always covered up with wrapped silk, and embroidered shoes, and there truly was something stunning about watching them, an unquestioned elegance. But, that was back when beauty had more power: blonde hair, blue eyes, small feet,” he’d said.

My favorite of his memories is when he told me about one of his employees, who he loved dearly. “So happy and persistent. We taught her proper English, and she taught us how to bake with poached eggs, cook with shrimp paste, and the delicate design of red bean cakes.” She was twenty-two years old when they first met, the same age as my grandparents, and she knew where to find the best produce, who harvested the best crops. “We hired her to purchase all the ingredients we needed for the café,” he explained to me. “Her name is Ling.”

The Ling that I'd hoped to have just met, the one who I am imagined would so graciously offer me her story, and into her home. The one who has disappeared, despite providing her home address. I am trying to investigate why, but she feels like family to me, like I've known her all my life. But she's ephemeral; merely a presence in pictures, and stories; almost like a ghost.

"The best thing Ling taught me," my grandmother admitted, "was how to make *XiaoLongBao*, or what she referred to as *the king of the dumplings*. The skin is delicate, thin, and tender, but once it is altered, stuffed with pork, and after the gel substance that the locals use cools, and melts when it's steamed, then an explosion of spice forms in your mouth, and a refreshing juice seeps to your tongue, instantly, the moment when you take a big bite." She brought her fingers to her lips, and kissed them, and made an "mmm" sound. On Saturdays, grandma Marie, and my grandfather would make me these, instructing me every step of the way, so that some day I could pass the tradition down to my own children. Then, they would teach me how to play mahjong, and we'd all watch a movie together. I cherish these reminiscences with them.

"Yes," MingHua finally responds, and I've forgotten we're mid-conversation, entranced by memories. "Perhaps my feet were beautiful once to some. But, sadly, even flowers wilt, die. Their beauty is temporary. One by one their petals droop, and they are no longer considered beautiful."

"Will you show me where I can find the best *XiaoLongBao*?" I ask her, an attempt at a diversion, hoping not to sound bossy, and imposing, but I need to change the subject. I also know I need to taste the dumplings that my grandparents have venerated for so long.

"Ah, no. They won't be fresh now. Typically, dumplings are only served for

breakfast,” she tells me. I watch a kitten skip across the courtyard, and notice MingHua is mobilizing.

“Pork or shrimp?” She asks, and heads to the kitchen.

*

I am an only child. So is my mother. She, and my father live in a small North Carolina town made up of cookie cutter families. I never understood why they didn’t want another baby.

“You, my darling, are a handful,” my father would say, and kiss my forehead.

“It would be unfair. No child could compare to you,” my mother would add, with a wink. I used to make her play house with me as a child, and I would award her with the role of older sister. I always had to imagine what it would feel like to have siblings, while my father was allowed to maintain as the patriarch. As I aged, our play dates changed into cooking lessons, and then eventually coffee breaks, and now happy hour.

When I met Dylan, it was a slow transition, accepting that we were four, instead of three; creating a dissonance in the melody we had been composing. I remind myself to call them later, tell them how much I miss them, especially mom, and that I will try to make it back home for Sunday dinner at grandma, and grandpa’s. I contemplate calling Dylan, too. I think of how much I miss him, and it makes me cringe.

As Minghua describes Ling’s story, her sisters, her Jie, and her Mei, I am envious of the quotidian banalities, and behaviors that seem so normal, and intimate to her family, but bizarre to the external world. Even of the moments when they resent each other. I always wanted another person who would understand our roots, where we came from, in a way that only siblings, or children can.

CHAPTER 10:

“The foot feels the foot when it feels the ground,” –Buddha

LING

And yet, Ye-Ye, if we, if Jie, and Mei, and me, all of us, are feminine flowers from the same growing garden, then why do we simply smell, and admire those with the strongest scent, and continually weed out, pick and pluck the daintiest, darkest, bruised petals?

I ask Ye this one day when I walk to the water, eating a pork dumpling, and looking up to the clouds.

I never got an answer back.

Instead, I just sat by the shore catching discarded fish heads, and abandoned shrimp, and rested against the damp grass for a while with my feet unbound from their silk shackles.

I could breathe.

*

The Jewish people—*you tai ren*—were centrally located in the heart of the metropolis. I never saw them in the fields. The occasional white face would wander through on a moped or bicycle, usually lost, but mostly, they were an enigma to me.

The rain is bleeding into the ground like dye into silk, which means blisters will start to form around the soles of my feet, the wet material will rub against my skin until I chaff. I find myself daydreaming about the new Western people living in our city, our home.

“Ling,” my Baba runs toward me. “Let’s seek shelter in the shed, until the clouds are less angry.” He looks at my shoes, and notices the way I am rubbing my ankles against my calves. He pities me, which makes my cheeks red and hot. “Here,” he says, and points to his back. “Get on.” I hesitate, but jump, crossing my legs around his waist, and I secure my arms around his neck; what Americans call “piggyback.” He jogs through the field toward the shed with a plastic roof. I wonder why I have been preoccupied about the white people.

“Do you hate them?” I ask Baba, when we are settled in the narrow concrete room, my voice is shivering. We both sit on the dirt floor, and look out the small window that’s providing a reprieve of grey light.

“Hate who?” He asks, and scrunches his eyebrows together.

“The Jews.”

“Oh, that *them*,” he responds. “No, I don’t. I thought that I did. I thought I would be envious.” He says this softly; he won’t look me in the eye. I understand that he is ashamed of this. “But I don’t feel jealous, or hatred, mostly just pity.” I am grateful for his honesty. Usually, Baba does not engage in meaningful dialogue beyond the lecture of avoiding enemies, or approving of Mao, or when the rice is overcooked, or disapproving of Mao, or how to be safe walking through the city, and how to properly shuck corn.

“Sometimes I hate Mei,” I tell him, words I’ve never spoken aloud before. They feel liberated off my tongue, floating into the world like pollen.

Baba grabs my face, authoritatively, forcing me to look at him. I can already feel my bones bruising. “Never hate your family,” he scolds me, his teeth are savagely gritted together. “Mei is a good soul.” Tauntingly, he releases my chin from his grip, and I am

forced to engage directly with his tempered eyes, I feel as if I am staring into the face of a wolf, his anger resting at his jowls.

‘I am too stubborn to cry in front of Baba, I am too stubborn to cry in front of Baba,’ I repeat in my mind, and bite my lip so fiercely that the taste of iron rusts the inside of my cheeks, my vision blurs as the tears begin to swell. We sit in silence for a while and I can’t breathe through my clogged nose; my sniffles echoing through the friction. The skin near my chin feels raw, dry. From the corner of my eye, I can see my uncle running toward the shed, he is soaking wet, his clothes are browned from the mud puddles.

“It’s rough out there!” he says.

My Baba and I don’t respond to my uncle, instead we sit in silence, sulking in the thick steam of irony.

*

I wake up at four AM, before the sun can peek through the silk curtains. Baba has helped me learn how to ride a manual tricycle cart, it hurts my feet, but most things do. I ride to the river, just a few miles away. Men are shouting, creating clamor, and polluting the stream, but there is no traffic, only fisherman tossing the *yu* around effortlessly the way I pull weeds from the garden. I watch them as they cast their nets; reeling in nets of shrimp, and I sit on the shore, hoping for their carelessness.

It smells like salt.

I think of Ye.

When they finally set sail on their diminutive boats, merging with the sunset on quest for unscathed waters, I gather the abandoned shrimp in a bamboo basket that I tie to my cart, to later sell for paste. I should ride back, to utilize the rest of my day wading in the

fields, but I wait for as long as possible, submerging my toes in the cool, still water; they feel hollow, but revitalized. In the biting pool beneath me, the burning sensation, and constant tingling are silenced, numbed by the chilly water.

I watch the sun rise, rise, rise to the sky, as if it was drowning, and rescued by the clouds, as if it needed to be freed.

As if it could only move in short, abbreviated breaths.

*

After a grueling day in the fields, adjusting to just putting stress on my feet, I am craving some jasmine tea, and a hint of lavender on my sleeping pillow. I am gradually growing more accustomed to the smell, and the pressure.

“Jie, will you make a pot of jasmine?” I ask, and she nods, gliding to the kitchen. As I walk into my room, I witness Mei trying on my blue silk shoes. She looks ridiculous, barely capable of squeezing two toes into the opening. I can hear the teapot boiling, and wonder if it’s my internal organs; Mei jumps, completely frightened, when she sees my shadow towering over hers.

“Oh, hi Ling, I didn’t see you.”

“What are you doing, Mei?”

“I was just...I wanted to see, I just wanted to see if they would fit.”

“Have you been smoking opium?” I spit at her bitterly, completely disgusted at the sight. “Of course they won’t fit, you fool.” The shoes rest on the floor like a pile of ashes from my cremation.

CHAPTER 11:

“It’s over me like a ton of water, the things I don’t know,” -Gina Berriault

SARAH

The Shanghai Ghetto was an area in the city that became controlled by the Japanese, and occupied by Jewish refugees. Eventually, Japanese authorities forced all Jewish exiles to filter in the *Hongkew: The Designated Area for Stateless Refugees*. The idea behind this, was that it would cultivate an atmosphere similar to a concentration camp: a message from the Nazi’s to Jewish people, an inescapable fate. My grandparents were briefly included in the 18,000 Jews who resettled in the group home; they tried to avoid being inmates at the *Heime*, or what local Chinese referred to as *Little Vienna*.

“It wasn’t like the way they corralled the Jews in Europe though, ” My grandpa told me when I pressed him on this before my trip to China, my attempt to learn as much as possible about this seemingly forgotten history. “It was much less stressful, we weren’t afraid for our lives,” my grandpa added. “But of course, we didn’t fully understand the intent. Either that, or we just never allowed ourselves to think about it,” he said.

Luckily, out of grave fear, the Japanese were never able to execute the original tactics constructed by the Nazi party known as “The Final Solution,” or “The Meisinger Plan.” The term *Final Solution* created a sinking feeling in my gut, I felt physically ill, dizzy, and nauseated when I went to the local branch library, and looked it up, later. As if my grandparents, and their friends, all Jewish people, or in other words, *simply humans*, were

a problem that needed a solution. Even more so, a problem whose only conceivable resolution was via methods of species abolition, elimination, or in other words: extinction.

Ultimately, the Japanese were too preoccupied with their Russian alliance to pursue what the European forces intended. Indisputably, they would upset the Soviet Union if they were to actually implement the operation, as it would also apply to the Russian Jewish immigrants. The Final Solution plan of Colonel Josef Albert Meisinger, who during World War Two, was referred to as “The Butcher of Warsaw,” was an attempt to eliminate all Jews from the safe, open arms, and consolation of Shanghai’s city veins.

“Why Shanghai?” I asked my grandpa. And I vividly remember his response. He cleared his throat, and explained: “it was one of the few places in the world that didn’t require a visa. For us it was simple, Shanghai made for an easy escape.”

“We like to think Shanghai chose us, though,” my grandmother told me. “We are so lucky to have lived there. To the local Jewish community, Shanghai, which actually translates to *city by the sea*, became synonymous with ‘haven.’”

“We even started looking into Confucianism, which actually doesn’t differ much from our own beliefs.”

“Harmony, respect, after life,” my grandmother said, listing the values both religions have in common.

“Great Britain and The United States of America started issuing restrictions, limiting the entrance of Jewish immigrants... a strategy that they had called *The White Paper*.”

I picture my grandparents escaping their roots, and sailing off to a foreign land, and I admire their bravery.

Nearly all the Shanghai Jews survived the war.

*

My ring is looped on a gold chain, hanging down my neck; I can feel MingHua scrutinizing it.

“Closer to my heart,” I told my grandmother, lying, when she asked why my finger was naked. At her age, I just know she won’t understand our decision. Instead, she will fill my ear with advice on how to make a marriage work: “compromise,” she’ll say, “never have a headache, make him my schnitzel recipe, communicate.” She would also forget this new development between Dylan and me, and I would have to re-break her heart at every reunion, every Sunday dinner. So, I fib. “He’s away on business, travelling for work, but he sends his love, gram.”

When I was a little girl, I never played bride. I was an anomaly, much more inclined to save the worms from melting into the boiling cement, feed the starving ants that frequented my closet, and create grass mansions for the roly-poly’s in my bug catcher.

“I will never get married!” I used to claim to my mom, and she would sigh, giggling.

“But, what if you fall in love?” She would always ask me.

“Yuck!”

“But, what about a wedding cake?”

“Well, maybe. If it’s German chocolate with *lots* of brown sprinkles!”

My college roommate, Erin, recited this dialogue in her maid of honor speech the day I vowed to love Dylan forever. But vows don’t always calculate risk, vows don’t cradle the difficulty of marriage, or acknowledge the things you can’t get back; more specifically, that which you can’t escape or recover from.

I never planned to be a mother. But after losing Sawyer six months into my pregnancy, I will always be one. Dylan could never get past this; I guess I never have either. In many ways, this loss made us closer, but ultimately, it changed us as a couple, changed our very core.

To be a mother to a baby who died before it was even born can sprout internal monsters that you never even knew existed.

*

I am constantly reminded of Dylan, in spite of the distance. He used to say that I saved him—from the aggressive girl at the dive bar the night we met in college, from failing his Sociology midterms, from accepting an awful internship in Tulsa, Oklahoma. “You saved me, bub,” he would whisper sweetly against my ear. Now, it has become a taunting lyric, mocking me in its irony: considering the reason that we’re in the mist of a separation, which eventually will lead to getting divorced, is because of all that I could not salvage.

CHAPTER 12:

“Only three things cannot be long hidden: the sun, the moon, and the truth,” –Buddha

LING

“You know he has a brother,” Jie tells me, she dusts her face in powder, blushing her cheeks, and drawing black liner around her eyes, like a cat. “His name is Chin.” I just watch her while Mei naps, exhausted from running on her feet all day. My cheeks are flushed, hot, and I’m fanning my skin to cool after my long walk in the city.

“No thanks,” I say, as if she’s just offered me a beverage, or snack. I pick at the dirt on my hands from working in the mulch. “Jie, I love the *qipao* you selected.”

“Wasn’t it beautiful?”

I nod.

“And oh, wouldn’t that be wonderful? Sisters married to brothers!” she says.

“I told you, I don’t want to get married,” I remind her, crossing my arms.

“What, you’d rather work with Baba the rest of your life? Sitting on a bench in a field husking corn, and getting tan?” She laughs. “Besides, you have such beautiful long hair! Chin would be so lucky to marry you.

What did you think of those Western women? The Jewish ones, aren’t they interesting?” She asks when I don’t respond.

“So tall! And they wore buckles on their shoes!” I say.

“A different kind of beautiful,” she says.

“Did you hear them speaking? Such an exotic accent.”

“Yes, it was so...romantic.” Jie says.

“I wish we could spend more time in the city. The bund was so dynamic, and colorful,” I say.

“Can you imagine what it would be like to live there?” She asks me, breathlessly.

“What if we were city girls, instead? What would life be like?”

“Me, you, and Mei could start a business! A restaurant, or something,” she says.

“Jie, why is Ma choosing not to bind Mei’s feet?” I ask her, a decision I’ve contemplating for nearly eight years.

“Because it’s illegal, Ling.”

“It’s been illegal since 1911!” I rebut. “My feet were still bound.”

“Yes, Ling, and it’s still a privilege. Never forget that. Ma did you a favor. Our feet are exquisite. Mei will never have that; she begged Nai-Nai! But it was too late; she’s too old, now. Society is changing, with the collapse of feudalism, even with the changing fashion trends. Some women are trying to unbind their feet, can you believe that? *Unbind!* Reverse the process, and make their feet larger like a clown! You saw the women downtown, the older girls, their feet were bound, too, Ling. It’s still beautiful, and it will continue to be praised because soon it will be rare.”

I am silent. She starts to continue on, but I interrupt her, I don’t want to hear it anymore. I can’t.

“I’m still hungry, are there any noodles leftover?” I ask her, my attempt at digression, though really my appetite has disappeared. I am so irrationally jealous of Mei, I clench my fists together until my fingers are numb.

“Ah, you’re always hungry, Ling. Rather masculine, don’t you think? I’m going to set up a date between you, and Chin! Oh, this will be fabulous.”

I ignore her, irritated at her exuberance, and her ability to spin every conversation into one about romance, or aesthetics. She is a rabbit. Rabbits, and snakes are an incompatible union. They will be suppressed in married life. I know that we are not a couple, but I consider this fact while she is prattling. Rabbits are tender, graceful, and romantic; they enjoy housework, and are usually elegant. Jie is undoubtedly a rabbit. Instead of responding to her, I walk towards the kitchen. The antiquated barbershop stool of Ye-Ye’s catches my gaze, and I open the top drawer, thumbing his jade fish, like I would rub Buddha’s belly, for luck, my hand catches on the sharp end of his metal scissors. I snatch them in my grip.

I walk outside, fast paced, an almost run, I am panting, my feet are pulverizing against my ankle, grinding my bones, like a blender. It is only a slight relief to sit on top of my workbench, located in the heart of the fields, the driest part. The tall grass is itchy, and the setting sun casts a chilled spell on the air. I weave my long hair into a braid, tugging it towards my right shoulder, plaiting it into a perfectly symmetrical design.

Chop, chop, chop, thousands of black strands spiral to the grass without resistance, the pile of hair almost resembles a burial mound.

Ye-Ye would be so proud, I think.

*

The breeze kidnaps my loose, liberated strands of hair, violently abducting them from the fielded floor. They looked like an army of wingless butterflies, or rigid ballerinas, collapsing into the wind. Snip, snip, snip, and I have awarded them their freedom,

mutilating them from their roots like the thwarting of bones, or the shucking of a cornhusk from its skin. I watch them fly, fly, fly away, higher, and higher into the bruised night sky: a palette of purple creeping toward the moon.

“Ling! Are you out here?” I recognize my Baba’s voice, shouting from the east corner of the fields.

“Yes, Baba!” I say, and wave. “I’m over here, near my bench!”

I can see him approaching. “What have you been doing outside in the cold?” He asks. “You’re going to get sick.”

“I’m coming back, now, don’t worry. I just needed some fresh air.”

The darkness blended quickly, scaring the clouds away. The sky started its hockey game with the stars, shooting them like pucks across the night; the moon refereeing. Baba grabs my arms, and escorts me home, a gentle anxiety that I admire about him. As we approach the entrance, I acknowledge the doorstep in the entryway, lifting my pants slightly, and steadying my balance by grabbing the doorframe; it’s considered bad luck to tread on it directly. I notice the elegant complexion of our living room, lit by candles, and hot oil lamps. Mei is already asleep; I hadn’t even realized how much time had passed; the obfuscating day moon, and scarred violet sky transformed to evening precipitously. Nai, and Jie are finishing the dishes, and clearing the kitchen, discussing the wedding, while Mama is emptying her kiln. I eye Baba, as I can feel his gaze, a weight drops to my stomach. The uneven angles of my hair have started to curl tickling my chin. Baba’s gaze is directed precisely at my ears, exactly where my hairline ends. His teeth are jutting forward causing friction in his jaw, I start to turn away; the candle is flickering, creating ghostly shadows on the wall. Deluged by the smoke from a dwindling incense stick, the

figures floating against the grey wall are hauntingly uncanny. Unexpectedly, Baba tugs on my arm, his thumbnails are puncturing my skin, I can literally feel his grip compressing on my bones.

“Ling!” He shouts, louder than a rooster’s cry. “What have you done? As far as I know, I do not have a son!”

He looks at me for clarification, I nod.

“So! Then why do you look like a young boy?” He pulls the remnants of my hair, tugging the short, jagged strands in his palm. My scalp follows, burning, and tingling at his unyielding grasp. Nai, and Jie surrender their conversation, perhaps it’s the excessive makeup, but Jie appears paler than ever. The dish that Nai holds between her hands suicides, and clamors against the concrete floor, resulting in shards of a million specked pieces.

I don’t answer Baba. I didn’t know whether or not he expected a response, I assume that the sound of my voice will pique him even more. Baba, I want to say, I cut my hair, I want to scream it! My lungs have a desire to secrete a deafening scream, that my hair was too substantial of a weight on my shoulders; too dense a burden to carry. Never have I seen him so angry, like a rabid beast, wild, untamed. He shoves me against the coffee table, and I fall to the floor, my palms resisting the contours of broken glass. Baba is heaving, his mouth is forming an oval, until he clenches his teeth together, and growls, his fingers are constricting like fangs, while his fist beats into my face; almost like he has no control of his arms. A layer of blood paints the floor, and I’m unsure of its source. It’s almost as if he has morphed into one of the beastly shadows inhabiting the walls.

“Baba!” Jie screams, as his fist prepares to pummel me again. “Enough! Please, stop!”

Have you gone insane?"

One of my eyes is completely swollen, forced shut. From the other, I catch glimpses of Mei with a mask of sheer terror, and empathy. She rushes to my defense, and plucks the glass that has burrowed into my palms; she strokes my head, like I am a newborn, and holds me close, pulling me deep into her chest, I can feel her heartbeat thumping. Nai-Nai stands motionless, in utter shock at her sons' aggression, and Mama's mouth is dropped, she doesn't know what to do, what to say. I can feel bruises already deepening on my back.

When Baba sprints outside, fleeing the scene, Nai, Ma, and Jie rush toward me. For a while we all just sit together, huddled on the floor, cloaked in my blood. Nai begins to bathe me with a damp rag, tending to my exposed wounds, while Ma cleans the mess; the blood, like spilled ink, threatening permanence. Mei will not move from beneath my shoulder, palming me. Jie combs her fingers through my hair, and grabs a pair of old cooking scissors to even it out. None of us speak. We have nothing to say.

Oddly enough, it is a small relief. Because for once, since I can remember, the pain I feel is not stemming from my feet.

*

Our neighbor, Sheng Ming is an artist. His house, secluded—a foraging trek for my halved feet. Past the orderly rowed rice fields that Mei weaves in and out of, past the orchard of yellow flowers, past the small pond where I catch leftover shrimp, lies his petite white house with a thatched roof, and brown shutters. The smoke of burning incense nestles my face, momentarily masking the raw sensation prickling my toes, as if I've angered a ferocious dragon, and it has scorched my shoes with its breath. My bruises

are an ugly purpled-yellow now, and Nai puts some of Jie's makeup powder on my face to blend it. Luckily, I have vision from both eyes again. Baba has not spoken to me since the incident, to any of us, really. I am grateful, what would we say?

Sheng's brush strokes, black ink against the grainy canvas, are magnificent: perfected, exact, quick. His walls are lined with his masterpieces; scrolls that are chipping at the edges, displaying ink that has grayed over the years, the squared red stamp sealed at the bottom right corner of each.

Nai-Nai told us, as legend has it: that anything and *everything*, he paints turns to life. How his swift strokes replicating local topography dissolve into the surrounding landscape, or how his paintings birth birds and trees, winds, and sunsets.

"He doesn't make mistakes," she says. "You girls, you are young. You roll your eyes, and don't believe the stories of our being, our creation. But Sheng Ming, he is an artist. He has true powers. Good karma."

Jie wanted her name written with double happiness—good luck before the wedding, Mei hoped to be relieved of chores, but I came with Nai because I do believe in her stories. They provide escape, like my shrimp paste, like my fieldwork, like my sleeping dreams.

This I know is my one and only chance.

I am startled when I first meet Sheng, he can't stand up straight, his back is hunched forward—which is not apparent when he sits—but as he walks he is practically as flat as a river. He is missing a front tooth, and one large mole is plastered on his right cheek, almost, ironically, like a splotch of ink.

"Will you paint my feet?" I ask, instructing him by pointing to my shoes.

He is silent. I can feel my cheeks darken. Nai, and Mei are drinking tea in the foyer, while Jie studies her calligraphy—a bright red, the color for good luck—while the intricate strokes are woven together like a dance.

I steady myself, practicing stillness; though my face itches, and I'm worried I could sneeze. My botched hair cut, the uneven layers, have resulted in loose strands falling out of my rubber band pulled behind my head, they are tickling my forehead, and the sides of my face. Silently, my prayer to Buddha evaporates into thin air, floating to the sky like smoke, just hoping, and willing Sheng's powers to work. Finally, I decide to take a quick glance at the painting. My eyes are squeezed shut. As I open them, slowly, one at a time, I realize that Sheng is mute, and I feel ignorant for not knowing this sooner. I peek at his talents, at the most beautiful painting I have ever seen. It is absolutely stunning. But, I acknowledge that ultimately, it is not what I had asked for, not what I truly want.

In tones of black and gold I see that he is forming a butterfly, surrounded by the petals of a pink peony. Almost the exact design on my silly scuffed shoe.

*

Its wings are spread open, outlined in black, but infiltrated in the bluest blue. Bluer than painted skies I've seen, bluer than ocean water I've felt between my toes; a calming, brilliant tone of cerulean that makes me want my vision filtered, to always see the world through its shades. At the tips of the wings outer margins, rounded specks of white form lunules—tiny moons. My gaze is caught on the butterfly, and its audacity; how fruitlessly it oscillates between branches, how boldly it brags, showing off its ability to fly. I hate that butterfly for taking my reincarnation from Sheng.

Why can it possess both beauty, and freedom?

Mei comes spritzing through the field, hiding in the dips of the rice paddies, and effectively frightening the butterfly. With every small movement, ooh, and ahh, I watch my freedom twirl away.

“Ling!” She says, jumping towards me. “I have a treat for you!”

“I’m working Mei,” I say, shucking a cornhusk.

“Don’t you want to know what it is?” Her feet are sloshing in the mud; her face is covered in crumbs, and flour dust—one moment she is beside me, the next she is chasing mosquitoes, running endlessly around the field, her hair is pulled into pigtails, and sweat is starting to trickle down her forehead.

I look at my shoes, shucking the ears of corn so hard that I can feel blood seeping through my fingernail beds. My teeth are grinding together. Poking out from the cupped palms of her hands, I notice she is holding *mantou* bread.

“It’s from Jie! She made it from scratch this morning, she said that you, and Baba have been working too hard.” The way the food is placed before me in her open palms reminds me of a peace offering; I accept, though silently, I am boiling, overwrought with a sudden desire to pull her hair, or whack the underside of her nose.

“You can go now, Mei.” My voice is cold, flat. I demolish the bread in two huge bites. I hadn’t realized how hungry I felt.

“Don’t you want to play?”

“I can’t. I have work to do,” I pick up my corn again. “Go.”

“But, Ling, you are always working.”

“Yeah, well, some of us have to, Mei.”

“I know that, Ling. I know. Jie works in the kitchen with Nai because she is the

domestic sister, soon she will be a wife, and a mother, and she must protect her beautiful skin. Ling she is tenacious, she works hard for Baba, she will be prosperous in her lifetime. But Mei, she is a silly child. Silly, silly, silly.” Mei says, repeating phrases she’s overheard from Mama, and Baba’s private conversations.

“You’re not silly, Mei,” I sigh, feeling guilty for always giving her a hard time, for allowing my jealousy to dominate my feelings towards her.

“Yes I am. You, you work so hard to prove to everyone that you’re not beautiful—you cut your hair off, you allow your hands to get callused, and your skin to get burnt, and you are stubborn, but you are successful. I do not see you as beautiful. But I, I will always be silly: *tai sha le*.” The translation always makes me laugh: ‘your preference is different, but lovely.’ Until that moment, I had never stopped to think that perhaps I wasn’t the only one who felt different. Never once had it crossed my mind to consider that Mei felt different, too

I smile at her perception of me. Perhaps Mei, our little curse, is not credited enough. I am not beautiful.

“But Mei,” I say, and grab her hands to steady her, to make her focus her attention on my words. “You are free.”

CHAPTER 13:

“The world was beginning to flower into wounds,” –J.G. Ballard

SARAH

I painted pink and yellow butterflies on the sky-blue walls of the nursery. And a giraffe wearing a top-hat, who Dylan referred to as Barney. Though, recently, in a fit of despair, I crossed them out with black X's, to nullify what they had once represented. Dark paint dripped down the walls forming a plethora of droplets, like smudges of oil, or mascara, or black ants. My mother was horrified at the macabre canvas, and paid for the room to be professionally done. It's a shade of off-white now, cream colored, I guess, but to me it will always be pink and yellow, the butterfly room.

It will permanently haunt me: images of empty cradles and rocking chairs that were never used.

*

My exit from MingHua is abrupt. But I am drained. I leave MingHua alone to her thoughts, and wonder if I will ever see her again. I wonder where my grandparents fit into her story, or where she fits into mine. Where is Ling? I decide to walk back to the hotel, to stretch my legs, and inhale the city. I pass the tiny shops selling century-old junk, the food vendors with skinned, strangled chickens, and ducks dangling from clothes pins, and flower shops that smell of oolong tea, and lavender, which helps diminish the constant odor of stale urine, mud, and gasoline. The stems from freshly chopped flowers litter the

street, forming mulch with the bruised petals, and leftover ribbons. Local shop owners squat on the pavement, begging for a sale, chain-smoking cigarettes, laughing, and staring at me, the awkward tourist while I buy a cold Coke Light for 8 RMB from one of the stores. I contemplate stopping to have my name translated into Mandarin, and then carved into a bamboo stamp, or to bargain for a gold paperweight in the form of a laughing Buddha, or buy an illegally made DVD. The sidewalk is crooked; every stone is a different height, and covered in spit, or feces. I think to ask some of the locals if they know this mysterious Ling, but I refrain for now.

Wash the bottom of your shoes later, I remind myself.

“Hey! Wait!” I hear a familiar voice yelling, in English. I turn around, and see MingHua, who is walking, as fast as she possibly can, chasing me, and flagging me down, her arm waving.

“Tomorrow,” she says, breathlessly. She folds her feet inward to relieve some of the pressure. “Meet me at 1221: *Yanan Xi Lu*. They have the best Shanghainese noodles, and banana rice pudding. You will love.”

“MingHua, it’s okay,” I say. “You don’t have to keep entertaining me. I so appreciate you sharing your story. Truly, I can’t thank you enough for today, but I don’t want to overstay my welcome.”

“No,” she says. “No, you don’t understand. Maybe I didn’t want to tell you my story, but when your grandfather called me, I knew that I had to; I knew it was time. And now you need to hear the rest of it.”

“When my grandfather called you? So you are Ling! But, then, why would you lie?”

“I wasn’t so sure I was ready to meet you,” she says, staring at her feet.

“So then what’s changed now? Are you sure you want to get lunch tomorrow? Really it’s okay.” I tell her, I can feel my eyebrows furrowing together. I wonder what else she has to say; what she’s left unspoken.

“Did you know,” she begins to ask me, pausing often to catch her breath, her hand gently braising her heart. “Did you know I had a daughter once?” When I turn around, MingHua, or Ling, whoever she is, has disappeared, completely submerged into the crowded streets, almost as if she was never really there at all.

*

A miniature shrine to Buddha is embedded in the brick wall, smudged between stores just a block away from my hotel, where green roots are growing through the bricks. If you don’t look closely enough, you might miss the stone statue. I position myself directly in front of it, captivated by its pettiness, and power. Thin, red incense sticks are burning beneath it, and Buddha’s hands are facing palm to palm, as if it’s in prayer. I see a mound of silver, and gold engraved spoons beneath its feet, and I wonder about the symbolic significance.

My grandfather used to bury spoons. Whenever he contaminated the silver with *fleish*, and cheese, or dairy variations, he would dig a hole in his backyard, and create a grave for it. He was supposed to uncover them the next day, to revive them as pure, but he always forgot where they were buried.

I wasn’t raised Jewish, my mother didn’t feel compelled to abide by her parents beliefs, so I’ve never been particularly spiritual. But, I always admired my grandpa’s traditions.

“It was hard to keep Kosher in Shanghai,” he told me once, when he was teaching me

to make stew. “There were so many odd ingredients; plus we couldn’t read the labels written in Mandarin characters, only *pinyin*, so we weren’t always sure what was in all of the products we ate. We actually tried to avoid them when we could. Of course, too, we sold a lot of non-kosher items in the bakery.” I remember the way he stirred the broth with the giant soup ladle. One year, for his birthday, I got him a spoon, engraved with his initials; specialty cutlery without a functional purpose, merely decoration. Though, it too, faced a similar fate, and inevitably succumbed to a dirt burial. It rests somewhere in a dirt plot, buried near a thousand other spoons, and my grandmother’s cat, Kitty. I was always worried that by attempting to recover his spoons, he would accidentally unearth Kitty’s corpse. I stare at Buddha, and his memorial of sacrificial objects, I decide to donate my spare, foreign coins, and hope that they bring me luck of some sort.

Later, while I am eating tomato soup in my hotel room, I am again reminded of my grandpa Max’s graveyard of spoons because this particular spoon looks like a miniature cauldron, curved at the bottom. As a child, I used to wonder if they would sprout roots, and if, one day, a spoon tree would appear in the grass, flowered in silverware. I decide to call my parents, though it’s an inappropriate hour, so I dial their voicemail. “Mom, I miss you, dad, too. Soon, I’ll be home.” And I like way the word home tastes on my tongue.

*

The restaurant is located down an old alleyway, in what looks to be a carport, illuminated by a pattern of round red lanterns with gold tassels. On a white door, written in metallic gold, are the letters one, two, two, one, swinging together in cursive, like vines. I push the door open; inside there is a cramped group of wooden round tables with Lazy Susan’s at

the center and huge brown chairs. A viscous haze of condensation from the boiling tea forms a smoky setting. Ling's back is towards me; she turns around at the sound of the clicking door, and waves me over. Her hair is pulled into a short ponytail, and she has on a black jacket with red stitching, sipping from a white porcelain lidded cup, floating red, and green leaves surface at the rim.

"Here, sit!" She says. "I ordered already, hope you're hungry."

"I am starving," I tell her. In my mind, her refrain from yesterday is playing over and over.

"Well I'm glad you agreed to lunch. I was worried that you might not show up."

"I wouldn't miss this, Ling," I say, lying, considering I contemplated playing hooky.

"Thanks for inviting me."

"There's still much to be discussed."

I start to ask her about her cryptic words to me that I can't unhear. That she is Ling and that *once*, Ling had a daughter. *She'll get there*, I think. *Please, don't rush her; she's being gracious enough by telling you her story. Be patient.*

Ling had a daughter, once. Once, Ling had a daughter.

I start to tell her that once, I did too.

CHAPTER 14:

“How can one take delight in the world unless one flees it for refuge?” –Franz Kafka

LING

A few days before Jie’s wedding, I wake Mei up early—before the sun—the only time that Nai-Nai claims we can see *gui*. She means Ye-Ye. Mei clings to her sheets, her head beneath her pillow in protest.

“Come Mei. I am going to show you my secret.” She perked up at the word secret, a *mi-mi* that she, and I could share. She pulls her long hair into a quick bun, grabs a light sweater, and slips on some shoes.

We can still see our breath in the early morning air. Every so often, I stop, and ask if we can take a moment to connect the stars, to talk to Ye-Ye, to play a game, but really it is because my toes feel like they are biting my feet. I cannot bring myself to admit this defeat, to show Mei my weakness. Surprisingly, though, she does not ask me where we are going, she prattles, and invents new forms of amusement. A frog is hopping on the black pavement, and Mei chases it in circles.

“Ribbit, ribbit,” she mocks him, and laughs, looking to me for approval.

“Ribbit, ribbit,” I parrot back to her.

“This is fun,” Mei shouts. “Hey Ling?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry I tried on your shoes. I just wanted to see.”

“I understand,” I tell her. “Maybe when we get home later I can try on yours.” She smiles.

Through the black outline of the trees, I spot glimpses of the lake; its reflection of the sunrise, oranges, and pinks, that provide a stark contrast framed between the bolded branch limbs. Locusts are fluttering against the leaves, the quick tap, tap, tap of their wings.

“Wow!” Mei says. “The lake, the sunrise, they are so pretty.”

“Ye-Ye used to take me here,” I tell her, my tone is nostalgic of a man she has never met. “He taught me how to bait a hook.” We walk toward the hilly bank; I squat, and skip a rock across the static water, and watch its ripples puncture the surface. *One skip, two skip, three skip, four skip*, four skips, Mei counts each one out loud. I think of how Ye-Ye would have loved Mei, and her persistence.

“It smells like fish,” she says, plugging her nostrils together with her fingers.

“That’s what Ye-Ye loved about it,” I tell her. “But I like coming here because of the way the sun chugs from the lake water, and the moon uses its surface as a mirror. Sometimes, I come here just to get away, to think, pause.”

Mei listens to me, her mouth is open wide like she’d never thought of escaping before. She stands up, suddenly, and runs toward the water, diving in with her arms above her head. The residue splashes the shore, wetting the sand, and I watch her bobbing head, up, and down, and up, and down, like she’s pretending to be a bird, attempting to catch a fish in her mouth. I am in awe.

The entire trip back she squeaks as she walks, sopping wet, and I just laugh. Never once does she complain that she’s cold or uncomfortable.

“Don’t tell Ma I got these clothes filthy in lake water,” she pleads. “I just love to swim! That was so fun, Ling.”

“Of course not, Mei. Our *mi-mi*, remember?”

“Right.”

“You are so much more than silly, Mei,” I tell her, swallowing my pride, accepting my vulnerability instead, and she smiles at me. “Perhaps in another life, you were a dolphin, maybe a fish.”

“And perhaps, in another life, you, Ling, were a horse.”

“I would have loved to be a horse. Though, I’ve been thinking a lot, and I would rather be a bird,” I tell her. “They can fly away!”

She nods, and I imagine that we are both imagining, what it would be like to have wings.

“Plus, then I could eat you,” I say, and giggle, and she smiles at me, the happiest of grins, one I’ve never seen before. Or perhaps, I’ve never taken the time to notice.

*

It is August 8th, 1934, the year of the dog, and Jie’s wedding day. She chose the date specifically for the consecutive eight’s. *Ba* is the luckiest, most prosperous of numbers. Her husband, Ke Qiang, whose name means *conquer the strong*, was chosen to be her husband by my parents, for his wealth, and his size. But Jie was picked only for her beauty.

“Isn’t he so handsome?” Jie asked me once. I was grateful she thought his dark husky features were compelling, instead I just nodded, unsure of how exactly to respond.

“She is lucky she’s so beautiful,” I heard Mama tell Baba before the ceremony.

“Women with bound feet are no longer so desirable.”

“Well, we will have no trouble finding a husband for Mei,” Baba replied.

I felt my blood rise, adding flush to my cheeks, angry that my peg feet are no longer a fashionable trend, nor are they a welcomed tradition. Today, for Jie’s wedding, I wear red silk lace shoes that tie around my leg; the needlework is a simple silver design that looks like a dragon tail. My hair has grown back longer, and more evenly—I am forbidden to cut it myself again—and it is pinned up on my head like ears. Paired with my hooves, I actually believe that I look like an animal.

Before the ceremony, Ke Qiang pulls me aside. “Ling,” he says. “There’s someone I’d like you to meet.” He drags me by my elbow into a room filled with his family, and I find myself staring directly at his mustache.

“Chin, this is Ling, Jie’s sister, Ling, this is my brother, Chin,” he nods toward me.

“Hello,” he says. He is more handsome than I expected. His skin is smooth, and perfect, his dark eyes are staring into mine, his features are not as harsh as Ke Qiang’s, lighter, and softer, but still I decide to hate him already, on principle.

“*Ni hao*, Chin. It’s nice to finally meet you,” I say, with a small courtesy. The jade jewels around my neck touch my collarbone, and dip back, and forth as I move; I love the rustling sound of the clinking beads. My face, and limbs have slimmed a bit from my work in the fields, but my skin is tan, I have dark freckles on my nose, that also line my arms, my hands, like an army of ants.

Jie is married in a hall with high ceilings, and wooden panels; red double happiness candles outline the floor, forming an aisle, and a lyric-less harmony repeats in the background, all I can hear is the beating of a drum. She cut her hair for today, so that it

shapes her shoulders, and then permmed it, like a poodle, or like ruffled clouds after a rainstorm that need to be ironed. It is so voluminous that it must be pinned back by pearl clips to mildly tame it. Her eye shadow is hauntingly black, and her lips are drawn in a deep maroon. She wanted to wear a silky white gown, like the Jewish women, who veil their faces with lace, and wear elegant white heels. “That is not our tradition, Jie,” Baba said angrily, not that we could have afforded it anyway. Instead, she wears the red *qipao* that Nai-Nai stitched with gold embroidery, an exact replica of the one we loved in Shanghai. There is a collar cupping her neck, and a red scarf around her head; the gown fits to form, and is snug at her hips, with long slits down both legs; she holds a bouquet of flowers.

He wore all black, as if in mourning.

Chin asks me to dance after the ceremony, and I oblige. My cheeks are burning, redder than Jie’s *qipao*, and my body is overheated from drinking too much wine. We awkwardly sway back and forth, in what I call the ‘bound foot dance,’ and my arms are placed around his neck. I can feel my legs tremble, my pulse punching at his skin; I’ve never been so intimate with anyone before, my heart is screaming beneath my chest. His breath is hot dissolving into my neck, and I stare at his lips because I am too embarrassed to look into his eyes. I hear Jie laughing, collapsing into Ke Qiang as they dance beside us, as husband, and wife. Mama, and Baba are also dancing; we are stunned at their display of affection. Baba is making Mama giggle, and he strokes the curve of her back with his free hand; he even kisses her forehead as the song nears its end. I cannot hear any music, but I know there must be some elegant melody playing in the background.

“Do you like to dance, Ling?” He asks me.

I stare at my feet. “This is the first time I’ve ever danced. But, so far, yes, very much.”

“Well you’re doing a great job,” he nods.

“Thank you,” I say.

“Jie tells me you work with your Baba, in the fields,” he says.

“Yes,” I say, my hands are sweating; my thick, calloused palm resting in his. “And what is it that you do?”

“Well, I am still working on entering the army,” he says. “But, right now, I am operating a business with Ke Qiang, downtown Shanghai.”

I smile, and nod slightly.

“Your smile is really lovely,” he says.

“That’s kind of you,” I say, my nerves are pulsing, and I’m worried that I might faint. The music provides a reprieve from conversation, and I hum the tune in my head.

“Who *is* that?” Chin asks me, and I find the courage to look up.

Dancing wildly, vivaciously, with her unruly hair, and made up face, wearing her loose *qipao*, is Mei. Little Mei, who’s not so young anymore, a teenager now, tall, and curvy, and ever so different than I am.

“That’s Mei,” I say. “Our youngest sister.”

When the song is over, he hugs me, and kisses my hand, thanking me relentlessly for dancing with him. I sit, and enjoy another glass of wine, another plate of feast, and process the dance, the way my body is still wobbly, and overheated; my heart hurts, and it is beating so fast. I am elated, glowing, and smiling as I think of Chin, the way his hands touched my body, the sound of my name on his tongue.

Then I watch, with my feet propped, and resting, while Chin asks Mei to dance.

*

813. That's what everyone called it the day the earth hiccupped, and then swallowed people whole. August 13th 1937: the year of the ox. I am twenty years old. The fields are vibrating beneath my feet, and for a sliver of a moment, as fleeting as a wink, I believe my feet are reverting back to their original size. I think that just maybe the universe has heard my cry, and accepted my plight; it is as if, once upon a time, I had been a butterfly who was forced inside the shell of a cocoon, moving completely backwards in growth, but finally, *finally*, I could be a butterfly again. The bombing makes the grass seize, the gunshots confuse the birds, and I watch them shift rapidly from tree to tree; the sky transforms into a poof of grey smoke. The earth releases a boisterous, thunderous growl.

But my fantasy is soon abandoned; as I realize that my butterflies are made only of silk. And the reality, the inception of war, was much more brutal, and cataclysmic than my own internal demons, and selfish vanities.

"It looks like Buddha is smoking opium, too," Baba jokes, as we sit down for breakfast hours later. But no one laughs.

The Battle of Shanghai was unexpected, and lasted nearly three months. But it is a war that I will always remember as something different. China's state of political unrest lingered like a relentless hangover that made everyone live in constant paranoia, and fear. Baba would duck at the sound of a spoon that Nai-Nai had accidentally dropped to the floor. Mama stayed within a mile, or two of the house at all times. Our uncles' visit dwindled significantly. Even Ke Qiang seemed unnerved.

On August 13th 1937, during the initial bomb blast, I am in the fields. But, Jie, and Mei, are downtown Shanghai. They are eating a late breakfast with Chin, and Ke Qiang

during one of their monthly, weekend outings: a ritual since the wedding. The restaurant is located only a few blocks away from Jie, and Ke Qiang's apartment. Jie has now projected her fantasy of me marrying Chin onto Mei, and it seems promising. Mei was reluctant at first, but I gave her my blessing. "I am so happy to see you so happy my Mei."

"We were startled by the deafening sound of the explosion," Jie explained later, her entire body still trembling. "It was terrifying. After the blast, we were surrounded by dozens of soldiers who evaded the outdoor kitchen..."

The four of them were seated on plastic stools, and ate their meals in their laps. The outdoor kitchen was a community place where the Western faces would never venture to. Bowls of broth, and noodles with prawns; or chicken feet with toenails still attached, and fish heads with eyeballs are all local specialties; slurped with copious amounts of pale rose tea.

"Chin had just announced that he would be entering the army," Jie told us. "Mei looked kind of disappointed, but told him she was incredibly proud, and rubbed his knuckles, approvingly. And, on that note, I decided to continue the thread of good news. I told everyone that Ke Qiang, and I are expecting a baby in a few months! At that, we heard the bombing. All of our food went flying into our laps or faces, and the city disrupted into complete chaos. Everyone was yelping, and sprinting, sobbing." Jie lost her breath. Her words started to mumble into one giant sentence, and her voice became shaky, mascara tears drip onto her dress like pellets of ink or remnants of gunpowder.

It was unfair that we kept asking her to relive it. But the rest of us, we needed to

comprehend what happened, we needed to see it. We needed to hear her say that our Mei, wild, crazy, boundless, silly Mei would never be coming back to us.

CHAPTER 15:

“Now more than ever do I realize that I will never be content with a sedentary life, that I will always be haunted by thoughts of a sun-drenched elsewhere,” –Isabelle Eberhardt

SARAH

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, before taking a sip of tea; because that is what people say when imploded with one’s tragedy, an instinctual response. But also because I can feel her grief, I can feel how alive this loss still is to her.

“It’s okay. It’s been a long time, now. Still, I miss her. Still, it hurts as though it happened minutes ago.” She clicks her fingers. “More tea, please,” she informs the waiter. He brings over a gold teapot with a 12-inch mouth where the boiling hot tea spews. I am completely amazed, and find myself having to actively focus on Ling, instead of the contraption. “She was shot by one of the Japanese soldiers. Jie is convinced that Mei was protecting her belly, which sounds heroic, like something our Mei would have done.”

We sip in extended silence for a while.

“I’m actually kind of figuring out how to recover from that kind of loss,” I say, as I inhale the thick steam from the peculiar pot; I am thinking of my soon-to-be-ex-husband, Dylan, of our Sawyer, even of my grandmother who practically, solely, lives in yesterday, and my mother who is only concerned with the future.

“You never recover. Not really. I loved Mei, but after she died, what haunted me most

was all of the guilt. I was always so envious of who she was, and her potential, too concerned with what I didn't, or couldn't have."

"I'm sure she wouldn't want you to feel that way," I say. "Do you believe in ghosts?"

"I believe in spirits, yes. Both good and evil. And I think that if you believe it, it will be. Evil spirits are afraid of light, so, often, my family, and I lit fires to ward them away. The contentious spirits are also incapable of transportation in straight lines, so we built curvy roads, and pathways. Mei is a good spirit, I think, in spite of her tragic, untimely death. My Nai-Nai believed that after one dies they should be honored by offerings, to appease their spirits. She said that an unhappy spirit becomes a ghost. I needed to believe that Mei was still there in some capacity, whether or not I'm fully committed to that belief as truth."

"I understand," I say. "Perhaps, what's more haunting than, say ghosts, is the idea that there are no ghosts. But instead, the prospect of death as permanence." I move my chair slightly, and it screeches against the tile, so loud that even Ling covers her ears. But I'm tuned out, all I can see, all I can hear, and think about is the ghost I saw in the picture of Ling and my grandparents. My *Gui*.

CHAPTER 16:

“Beauty is terror. Whatever we call beauty, we quiver before it,” –Donna Tartt

LING

I used to think there were worse sounds than silence: the high-pitched scream of a teapot boiling, the harsh snap of a bone cracking, and the consecutive click, click, clicking when it's re-broken, the drum roll of bombs exploding into the horizon, the relentless, incurable sobs of a mother who has just been informed that she's forever lost her child, and the eerie scratching of metal against the concrete floor. But then, Mei died. Whenever the leaves rustle in the fields, I search for her face amongst the corn, every time a book smacks to the floor, I listen for Mei's clunking, large feet, and I fall asleep dreaming of her grizzly snores that once taunted my ears at night, I wait for her to whisper to me—asking if we can go walk to the lake, or share a *mi-mi*. I miss the noise. Nai-Nai swears she can feel Mei's ghost, that her presence is still lingering, Mama barely eats—an apple maybe, and bite or two of white rice, and Baba started focusing on his work in the fields, his company in the house is minimal, practically nonexistent. I only see him in shadows. It's lonely. Jie moved to the city with her husband and my darling nephew, Wei, a rooster, and they only come to dinner once a month.

“Li Li,” is what Wei tries to call me, his *ayi*. He has fat hands, and chubby cheeks, and my family says he resembles me. His birth was distracted by the loss of Mei, perhaps Jie feels a little resentful of this, though it's an unspoken loathing. Interestingly, we both

begrudged Mei at one point, me in her birth, and Jie in her death. Every night before bed, I inscribe letters addressed to Mei, they are bound in a spiral notebook, like a diary, and I hope that somehow she can read them.

Dear Mei,

I journeyed to our lake today. The air was rotting in musky fish, and I thought of you, (not because you smelled, but because you always commented on the unpleasant aroma. I've actually grown to appreciate the retched odor, isn't that strange?). I even made a stone skip six times today—it happened quickly, but I counted aloud, I was hoping to reach ten! Can you imagine the ripples? You would have been proud. Sometimes, I can still see you swimming in that lake, forming bubbles beneath the water, your head bobbing up, and down, with all of the ducks, and fish, whenever I go at sunrise, I watch the moon floating above the water, transforming from silver to orange, and red, and more round, and I expect to see your face in its reflection. Honestly, sometimes I believe that I do.

Thinking of you.

Love, Ling.

PS. You would like Wei—he's loud, and fussy, but oh so cute.

I easily have thousands of these; I write to Mei still, and keep my notes addressed to her beneath my pillow, just in case she visits me at nighttime, or transcends into my dreams. It's cathartic really. But it also makes me hopeful, especially during this time that feels as though nothing else could be lost.

*

1937, the year of the ox, concludes disastrously. Japanese forces have infiltrated

Shanghai, and we all feel defeated, though mostly indifferent after losing Mei. Word of Nanking, and what they call “the rape,” travelled from Chin’s experience in the army, whispered through the potent breeze between cities; horror stories of women being violently mutilated, violated, and abused seeped into my dreams, lingered in the wind when I worked in the fields. Nearly 300,000 Chinese were murdered. I am always trying to listen for the threat of bombs or gunshots in the horizon; it is hard to ignore the monstrosities surrounding us; the abyss of shadows that are salted in the absence of Mei.

I am sitting on my bench in the December cold, when I feel a tap on the shoulder.

“Wah!” I scream, lifting my feet from the ground.

“Ling, it’s me, Chin,” I hear his familiar voice, his scratchy throat.

“Chin, you frightened me. How are you? What are you doing here?” He is dressed in a green, and black camouflage coat, with tall black-laced boots. The clouds are a thick maroon, and threatening to sweat.

“I’m in town for a few weeks. Your Baba said I could stay with all of you,” he says, “since Ke Qiang, and Jie have the baby.” But my heart sinks, knowing he will sleep in mine, and Mei’s old room.

“It’s nice to see you,” I say; refusing to approach what’s unspoken, my hands are pressed together tightly under mittens stitched by Nai-Nai, the wet air makes me eyes water, and forms tiny ovals that cling to my cheekbones; the stench of mud seeping through the snow enveloping us.

“Ling,” he says, and I can hear the buzzing of a snowplow, the ice crunching against his feet, the sparrows speaking cantankerously as they zip by. “Do you remember when we danced, at Ke Qiang’s wedding, all those years ago?”

“Of course,” I say. “I will never forget.” My face is angled slightly toward the wet ground; my whole body feels hot, even though the temperature is almost freezing. I can see each breath forming circles in the air, changing shapes like clouds before they dissolve into the wrath of the blizzard.

Winter in China is exquisite. The pacing of city arteries slow down, the aroma in the air is laced with steaming teas—roses and lavender petals—and the snow piles in an unmanicured, organic way that looks natural, and feels inviting. Fieldwork is pampered by thick parkas, and comfortable, manly shoes, less taxing, and shucking, and more sorting, and sitting, and soup broth is used medicinally. The sunsets reveal burnt oranges, yellows, and golds, instead of the bruised pinks, and purples of summer heat. The naked trees look unrefined, like limbs, and their branches become fragile, prone to breaking, the tiniest sticks forming icicles, or what Mei called wands. Skin becomes exceptionally pale, and cheeks are a constant dark red, equivocating the difference between the act of blushing, or determining if one is just frigid. Nai layers all of our beds with dense quilts she has knitted over the years, with intricate designs of fish, or snowflakes, and teacups. All of Ma’s meals are boiling hot, and filling, and my hands become less calloused in my cozy gloves. The world looks slightly barren, and desolate, but justified by its quiet tranquility.

But not this winter.

The season is overwrought with the constant fear of death, and war, or illness, and disease. No one is immune. Every footprint in the snow is worthy of inspection, and analysis. All of the hushed stillness that once delicately prevailed, now invites the invasive threat of potential danger, and creates the illusion of false sounds. The chilled air

generates an atmosphere more susceptible to fatalities, and diseases. And resources are more burdened, less frequent, and not as readily available. Food, especially, seems much more scarce. The emptiness becomes uncanny; literally bone-chilling, and dreams become haunted by evil spirits. Life seems more delicate, and sinister, and brimming with omens.

“Why do you ask?” I question him, after my thought digression, when I realize he hasn’t responded.

“Because I’ve never forgotten it either,” he says.

And I smile, full of disgrace, and inundated with guilt. I stroke his cheek as he sits beside me because I’m so grateful that he doesn’t ever mention Mei.

*

It is the summer of 1943, the year of the sheep, and the year I meet Max, and Marie, all of us are twenty-six years old. I never write to Mei about Chin, but I tell her all about my latest accomplishments: I can walk nearly eleven street blocks downtown Shanghai without pausing for a reprieve. I have moved into a city apartment. On weekends, I still visit the lake, and sleep at home.

White faces clutter the metropolis, their assimilation has become almost normal, less unnerving, they wear neutral tones, and dresses for everyday occasions, long trenced coats. They attempt simple Mandarin, like “hello,” and “thank you,” but the way they pronounce *ni hao* makes me laugh, monotone, and harsh—knee how. Chin has been teaching me the English he learned from being in the military, we can now have full conversations, though I know mine are not as fluid as I want them to be. I wave at the English faces sometimes, in spite of Baba’s warning, mostly out of curiosity, and not an

act of rebellion, though they smile back; “hello,” I say, and “knee how,” they will return. Their pale faces seem hollowed, and reveal defeat, and anxiety. Sometimes, their eyes are glazed over with pity as they stare down at my bound feet as if they understand its relation to my culture, as if they can empathize with my disability. I project similarly onto them, though, people forced into exile, as they walk around our streets as if they are amphibians, and don’t know how to swim on dry land. The country is riled with desire for vengeance, and learning to accept tragedy.

Chin, and I are perusing the vegetable, and meat markets. Horsetails, alongside horse testicles, and chicken necks, and thick slabs of steak, hang from clothespins on delicate strings nearby glassed cages of fish, and lobsters. Containers of crushed ice, and bloody organs cause an unnatural stench under tented vendors. Stacks of stem-less pumpkins, squash, and potatoes are layered between shops selling gummy candy, and peanuts in bamboo baskets. We pass the bird market; an entire street block lined with intricate wooden cages, and exotic neon birds, a maze of fish bowls filled with baby checkered tortoises line tables with varied price tags. Pebbles of birdseed litter the sidewalk, and miniature blue, and white porcelain water dishes for each pen are stacked in vases. It smells ripe, and earthy, like the decomposing crickets that are tethered in bags used as feed.

“You want to buy a bird?” One shop-owner catches me staring, and asks.

“Maybe,” I say, not realizing that I was contemplating a bird purchase. My fingertips trace the cracked wooden designs. “I mostly love the detailed carvings on these antique cages. So elaborate!”

“This cage is over a century old,” he says. His breath reeks of smoke from his pipe.

He is barefoot, wearing a charcoal stained white tank top, and thin shorts, and his glasses are fogged from the humidity. “Let me show you,” he grabs the item I am examining with his long thumbnail, and flips it over, digging his fingers into the inscription. On the bottom I see the adorned date: 1808. “See? 1808!” His exuberance makes me doubt the authenticity of the cage, but still, I am intrigued.

“She’s not interested,” Chin interrupts, as if he can read my thoughts, and is saving me.

“No, I am interested!” I say. “How much?” Chin frowns, sulking in the corner for being disproved, but I don’t care. “Please, show me more.” He points out the variety of birds I can pick from to fill the old-fashioned cage; a rainbow of tiny feathered animals fly from fake branch to floor, sweetly chirping.

“Take your pick!”

“Hmm.” It’s difficult to examine the entirety of squabbling creatures. My eyes swing back and forth, gazing between the vines, and layers of chirping birds. “I’ll take that one,” I eventually say, pointing. The bird I want is midnight blue with cheerless eyes, and eerily quiet amongst the inharmonious choir springing from its siblings. As I pay the storeowner, Chin holds the miasmic bagged insects, and I have my cage in hand, pairing two of the charming ceramic water-bowls for the corners of the cage.

“I didn’t know you wanted to buy a bird,” he whispers to me, patting my back, as I try to ignore the stench of the bugs.

“I didn’t either.”

When we turn the corner, and I am positive the shop owner cannot see us, I open the cage door, unclasping the wood.

“Go little birdie! You’re free,” I shout. “Go on!” But my macabre blue bird stays perched in its cage, domesticated, and content. Perhaps it doesn’t want to leave the only home it’s ever known. Perhaps it knows that once in the wild, it will become prey; perhaps it’s afraid on not having any place to go.

Perhaps, when you’ve never known or tasted freedom before, you don’t crave it the way that I do.

*

Four blocks down from the bird market, I notice a new bakery window. The words are etched in English, a named bakery; Chin translates for me, as reading is still rather difficult. I see a young couple in the window, angling the lettering. In the corner ledge, scribbled on a piece of scrap paper, and hung only by a thin slice of tape reads: HELP WANTED, in red bold, block letters. I knock on the window, and the couple stares at me.

“I can help you?” I ask them, and point inside, handing Chin my blue bird.

“Hello,” the man says, approaching me with a crooked smile. Chin steps in front of me, in defense, but I shoo him away, even the bird squawks. The man is not particularly handsome; he has rough features: dark, and deep-set. “My name’s Max, and this is my wife, Marie.” I catch myself giggling at his voice, the way his w’s sound like v’s and all of his vowels are extenuated. She is rather beautiful, and looks kind.

“Hi there. We are looking for a pastry chef to help out with zee bakery. Can you cook?” Marie asks, in a tone of forced enthusiasm.

“Yes,” I lie, a little; I can cook a few things, *xiaolongbao*, noodles, dumplings, and rice paper. “My name is Ling and this is my friend, Chin.”

“Nice to meet you. Would you be interested in working with us, Ling?” Marie asks.

“It’s not easy to find a local who can communicate with us! We learned English in high school, but haven’t spoken much of it since.” Her face defaults into a frown position, and she looks as if she hasn’t sleep in years.

“When would you like me to start?” I ask. Chin is in such shock, and dismay that he drops the cage, and the bird finally flies free. *It will be back soon*, I think to myself.

Though I really hope not.

*

Candles and incense sticks create sinewy smog in Chin’s apartment. Faint hints of vanilla trace my nostrils, alongside the bold smoke

“Tea?” he asks me, but I barely hear him from the mind numbing pain. My feet are barking after such an abundance of physical activity around the city today; I am horrified to even contemplate removing my shoes in front of Chin, but the pressure is tightening, gripping, awakening a very real fear, like a noose around my neck.

“Please,” I say. “Tea would be lovely.” My feet are propped onto a wooden stool.

“I hate my feet, they are so hideous,” I finally say aloud. “They are so sore, and stinging right now.”

“Well, I think they are beautiful, Ling” Chin says, rushing over, and massaging my worn-silk, though it provides no comfort, *I don’t need them to be beautiful, Chin, just functional and pain-free*. Our black cat, Mao, meows, and rubs its tail around my legs.

We sip our tea for a while in silence, with the occasional sweet reminder of the kitten, and noiselessly, I swallow the tart pain.

“Ling, I have to ask you a question,” he asks, the words trail his mouth hesitantly, aged, and slow, but deliberate. I don’t respond, but give him a puzzled look, a hybrid of

confusion, annoyance, and agonizing inflammation.

“Why did you take that job with the white couple today?”

“Why are you asking me this again, Chin? I don’t understand why this is so fascinating to you?”

“Because it makes me feel like you don’t need me. I can take care of you,” he says. “I *want* to take care of you, Ling!”

I stroke his shoulders; my palm caresses his face.

“Seriously, Ling. I need a verbal response. I need to understand because right now, honestly, I just don’t.” He sighs.

“Because, Chin, I could use a break from working in the fields with Baba,” I tell him. “I’m so tired, my feet hurt.”

“But that’s what I’m saying, Ling. You don’t need to work at all. I will support us.”

“We can’t afford that!” I try to justify.

“Ling, stop making excuses!” he stands, abruptly, and grabs my teacup, draining the used tealeaves, and he rinses the dishes. He turns to me again, but this time, the words get wedged, and don’t egress from his mouth. His back looks sturdy, and broad from my view as he turns away, choosing instead to not to say anything at all.

I choose not to say anything, too.

Because if I did it would sound something like this: unfortunately, Chin, that’s not enough for me. Because perhaps if I did, the inevitable would reveal, and the loneliness of the halved night sun would seep into our dreams, and our thoughts like *gui*.

CHAPTER 17:

“None but the wind should warn of your returning,” –Townes Van Zandt

SARAH

“What did my grandmother look like back then?” I ask Ling, fascinated, although she looks completely exhausted, as if, just remembering, and reciting the pain, her, orally drained her of all energy.

“She was pretty: very bubbly with clean skin, and long dark, wavy hair. Always composed. Light eyes, and high cheekbones. Later, I would learn of her temper, her opinionated ego that ran the kitchen, but even still, in all of her domineering bossiness, she was quite kind.” I offer a faint smile of nostalgia, imagining my sassy grandmother in her youth. With age, she’s lost her rugged, obstinate self. When I was little, she would pick me up from school every Monday, at 3:00 PM sharp, I would see her car waiting for me in the lot, and run in excitement. We would go on adventures that always began with miniature golf, or a movie, or a trip the mall, and *always* ended in waffle cone ice cream, and sprinkles. I used to crave our time together; the way Monday’s belonged to us.

“Dessert?” I ask.

Ling orders something in Shanghainese. *This must be how it feels to be deaf or blind*, I think. “It’s fried glutinous banana rice,” she tells me. And within seconds, they deliver us a flattened plate of brown goo. Dark kernels that look more like decayed pumpkin seeds or food for my dog, Tilly, instead of edible rice, are paired with black hockey pucks of

crisped bananas, and I am skeptical. Ling asks the server to deliver me a fork, for my embarrassingly pitiful, and unsteady-chopstick-yielding hands, and then she scoops some of the slop onto my plate.

“Don’t worry, it’s actually very sweet, I think you will like it,” Ling tells me. “It is called gluttonous because it is sticky, and paste-like, not because it is so fattening, and full of glutton.” She laughs, and nudges me to take a bite, so I do, shoveling a spoonful into my mouth, my lips protesting, and attempting, yet failing to avoid the chunks of moldy banana. To my surprise, it is delicious against my tongue, warm, and sweet, and the fried fruit provides a nice contrast to the saccharine overtones. Ling is right. The taste is impossible to compare to anything I’ve eaten before, the closest being a banana crepe, but exceedingly superior.

“Mmm, this is *actually* delicious!” I tell her, inhaling bite after bite, the sugar dissolves on the tip of my tongue, and the banana melts against the slight crunch of sticky rice.

“We should get some more tea, it will help clean our stomachs.” She says. “What kind do you like best so far?”

“I love the clear, lighter teas—green, jasmynes, chamomile.”

“Aiyō, you eat too fast, Sarah! Please, you must slow down.” She says, slapping my hand away from my fork. “You should savor each bite; let it thaw on your tongue. Otherwise, it’s hard to digest.”

And suddenly I wonder if she’s referring to my eating habits or her story.

CHAPTER 18:

“These days I live in three worlds: my dreams, and the experiences of my new life, which trigger memories from the past,” –Ishmael Beah

LING

Nai-Nai invites me to tea. I carry the teapot, and walk with her to a secluded spot I discovered after all of my years working in the fields. The grass is bald as if it's unable to grow, and I set down a blue, cushioned quilt.

“Here, Nai, please sit,” I say, evening the edges, smoothing the blanket to the surface.

“Your absence is felt around here, Ling,” Nai tells me, pouring tea into saucers. “But you look good. Doing well?”

“Sometimes, I miss living here,” I offer her.

As I picnic with my grandmother, among the rows of corn, I am reminded of my childhood. The warm bursts of mint gliding in between my teeth, from the silver buds of tea, coincides with the loud flailing wind, rubbing against my shoulders, like a sweater. I watch the horizon, and wait for the impending threat of Mei's footsteps, menacingly disrupting the harmony. At night, the stars, remind me of Jie, and how we would fish for constellations, forming patterns with the burning blobs, connecting them, like freckles; drinking chamomile tea as if it was a sleep potion. But the afternoons, when the sun is breaching through the barrier of billowing fog, and the stench of manure is burrowing the ground of the trees, of the mulch, I think of Mei. Mei, who would allow me to live

vicariously through her dance with the crops, or how I would burden my dreams with the fantasy of metamorphosis, willing that they transcend into reality.

“I can hear her sometimes, still,” I say. “Mei.”

“It’s time to move on,” Nai-Nai tells me, bitterly. I don’t expect that. She is typically warm, and empathetic. I want to comment on her hypocrisy. *But what about Ye-Ye? What about the consistent ringing in yours ears of a dog howling?*

“I have, Nai. I just miss her, that’s all.”

She nods, and sips her tea. “Of course.”

“That’s why I needed Max,” I tell her.

She looks at me dumbfounded, eyebrows raised.

“It’s not like that, Nai,” I tell her. “He’s a married man! But he is my friend.

Whenever we talk, he makes me forget Mei-Mei.” He makes me forget the crippling rigidity of my toes compressed together; he silences her ghost, and distracts from the loneliness.

“Are you happy though?” Nai asks. “Are you making decisions for yourself? Using your brain?”

“Yes,” I say, honestly. “I don’t really know where I’m headed, but I am grateful for my job at the café. I love living downtown.”

“*Jiaozi*,” she says, referring to me the way Ye used to, a term of endearment I hadn’t thought of since he was alive. “A bird does not sing because it has an answer, it sings because it has a song,” she tells me, reciting a proverb. The sky is cloudless, and birdless, but the tea tastes warm, and fresh. Nai pats my hand. The cornfields are rustling, though there is no wind, and I think of Mei.

*

1944, the year of the monkey. I have been working at the café for nearly six months.

Chin, and I exist in waves, like the plateaus, and plains of a dragons tail: in moments our ambitions parallel, he laughs at my jokes, and my hand fits precisely in his palm; yet in others, he is too controlling, and antiquated, complaining about the café, or Max and Marie; and ultimately, at the source of all of our problems, is the unvoiced reality that I am not Mei.

My white couple has been exceptional—they teach me how to make pastry dough, and *schnitzel*, and I show them how to cook with red bean paste, how to properly mold *xiaolongbao*, and how to tell when egg tarts are fully cooked. I explain to them the importance of boiling hot tea, to avoid drinking cold water while eating because it gels, and hardens in your stomach the way that grease does. They speak to me about God, and Judaism, the tradition of burying contaminated spoons, keeping Kosher, and more on the phonetics of the English language. Per request, I attempt to teach them Mandarin, and some common words from the Shanghainese dialect. They hardly speak about their past, only slight references regarding what they have escaped from, what they left behind. Just as I avoid my losses: my Mei, and my feet. They never ask, to which I am grateful. I am introduced to my first cup of black, Viennese coffee, bitter, and harsh burning at my throat, while I make them try bubble tea, light, and refreshing, with condensed milk, and dense tapioca balls. They tell me about their arrival in Shanghai in 1939, how afraid they were, and what it was like to live in the *Heime*, how grateful they are to have finally been allowed the capability to open up their own business.

I have become keeper of all the crops. Some days, I still work the fields with Baba, to

which Nai-Nai, and Mama are appreciative, and I harvest the produce, and transport them into the store; I venture through the local markets, and scavenge the cheapest fruits, and vegetables, searching for skins that are ripe, and tender. Much of my time I spend perusing grocery store aisles for spices, and extracts that the English speakers can't read the labels of. They inquire about Buddha, popular Mandarin phrases, and ask me to explain the Chinese zodiac, particularly regarding their animal signs, and translating what they mean, what their strengths are, advice for their future; how to read tealeaves. I introduce them to a Feng Shui master to realign the energy in the café, and explain how to bargain better. And they tell me about Western cinema, and books, and everything they know about American life. Sometimes, I would hear Marie profusely sobbing in the pantry, sitting on sacks of rice flour, her head between her palms, her tears would collect in a puddle on the floor, the pile fusing together as if it was magnetic. "Damn leaky roof," she would say, if she caught me staring at the wet floor.

Most nights, though, it's just Max and me, sweeping the floor, washing the dishes, organizing the kitchen, the fridge, and compiling the leftover baked goods. Marie leaves early to run errands before the businesses close. I've become accustomed to this routine. Sometimes, he sings, most days, I whistle, or we break for a quick lesson of Mahjong, but every day, we converse. The first real dialogue we had I was hungry, and tired, Chin and I had been fighting again, and at the time, Max still frightened me, but the conversations continued, my nerves calmed and I considered him a true friend, *pengyou*.

"What happened to you guys, Max?" I ask him, one day when the story is empty, and the street seems noiseless. The *gui* that are haunting them are too present to not inquire—the way they cringe at thunderous noises, Marie's persistent crying schedule that looms

over the bakery. One day, MingHua accidentally dropped a glass-measuring cup, resulting in tiny glass shards, peppering the floor, like sugar crystals. Marie fainted, and even Max, stoic Max, had a panic attack.

He looks at me, surprised, and stares directly into my eyes. I think perhaps he won't respond, I start to apologize, for overextending our boundaries. "Max, I'm so sorry, I'm really tired and wasn't thinking, I didn't, I just..." but he interrupts me.

"...what was it like to have your feet bound, Ling?" He asks.

"What does that have to do with this?" *Why does that have to be the source of everything in my life?* A buttery wheat bread, that's baking in the oven, wafts through the café, suspending the tension. "I think the bread is done. Why are you baking at the end of the day?"

"Thanks. I'll go check on it. It's Marie's favorite, I thought she could use a reason to smile."

As he walks away, I'm hoping he'll forget our interaction entirely.

"So," he says, on his return, I can practically smell the oat wheat that has infused into his pores. "What was it like?"

"Ai yo, I was hoping you'd forgotten that question. I should never have asked you something so...vulnerable. Why do you need to know?"

"Because I think it's the only way you'll be able to understand."

"Okay, fine," I say. I close my eyes, and remember that day, that often I've fruitlessly tried so hard to forget. "I had no control, like an animal on display, people watching me, violating me, torturing me. As if my screams were silent. Mutilated by my own mother, my grandmother, my freedom forever taken from me, all for what, beauty? I was young,

but still, I don't think my feet will ever stop suffocating my toes, like a noose, they are always tingling or burning, in some capacity, in pain."

"A pain so great it consumes you, right? A horror that can't be unseen, or unfelt; an indelible, enduring barbarity, and a forced, harrowing departure; an inexplicable, unjustifiable maltreatment," he says, his eyes are closed. The words take a while to depart from his mouth, married with a long pause between each sentence. Some of his diction I haven't learned yet, so I have him translate. It's as if he searched his brain for the only words he could find that could possibly describe his experience.

For a while, silence hovers between us, and I think that perhaps we won't speak again. What is there to say, now?

"Do you want children, Ling?" Max asks, nearly fifteen minutes later, when the majority of the cleaning is done, and I am rather anxious to go home. Though, for this interruption, I am grateful.

"No," I tell him, bluntly. "I have a nephew. That is enough for me."

"Marie and I are trying to have a baby," he says. "Now that we feel more settled here, she thinks it's time to grow our family."

"Congratulations," I say, grateful that he doesn't question my answer, or ridicule it.

"Do you want a boy or a girl?"

"Oh, no preference...at least that's what I am supposed to say right?" he laughs, and I continue working through the final details of closing shop.

"Have you ever thought about leaving China, Ling?" Max asks me.

"Why would I leave? China is my home," I snap, perplexed. *Where would I even go?* I will always be Shanghai.

“Yes, *home*,” he says, lingering on the word, smiling; a word that now has an altered meaning for him. “Of course, I understand.”

“Will you stay here forever?” I ask him, feeling compunction for my attitude. He stares at me, broom in hand, he purses his lips together, and stops sweeping, resting his sole on the brooms shoulders.

“Hmm, I’ve never really thought about it,” he says. “Truthfully, the baby is the most progressive step I’ve taken envisioning our future since we left Germany. I was too afraid I’d get caught up on a picture that doesn’t exist. It’s the first time in a while that I haven’t been consumed by threats of my impending death.”

“I never used to think about dying,” I tell him. Until one day, death sucker punches you cold in the gut, as proof of its existence, and power, it tempers with your sense of security, and merciless strikes at exactly where it hurts the most.

“I never used to think about living,” he says, and continues sweeping, piling the dust in the center of the floor, from the intricate hiding spaces of nooks and corners. We watch as the mound grows bigger and bigger.

*

It is a rainy day, at the end of December, which means a school of umbrellas are swarming the streets, almost like a synchronized dance. The most deplorable of winter days, when the condensed wintry clouds are incapable of producing flurries, and sleet with droplets of rain instead. I must take small steps, even smaller than usual, to avoid slipping on the soggy cloud water that’s sweating off our customers, browned from the dirty slush of sidewalk puddles, and melted snow. Marie is at the doctor I recommended, a few miles away, with another pastry chef, MingHua.

For now, it's just Max and me.

"The test results take weeks," Max tells me, although I didn't inquire or precipitate a conversation. His face is wrinkled, and filled with anguish as he lifts a sack of flour to the back of the store.

"If you have a problem that cannot be fixed, then there is no use in worrying," I tell him, reciting a Buddhist proverb. He offers a half smile. "Besides, you're face is looking old today, you must stop."

"Thanks, Ling. I know, I'm just so anxious. For her, mostly."

"Worried already? See even now, you're father, and you didn't even realize it!" I joke; perhaps too soon.

"And we've just been fighting incessantly. Mostly from the stress of being here, you know? But, also, the impending threat of barrenness. I feel like we've grown apart, and I don't know how to fix it. I'm just exhausted, Ling, I don't even remember the last time I had a good night sleep that didn't involve nightmares, or bombings, or fear, or the shattering of glass. The past is so haunting, you know?"

"I'm sorry," I tell him, unsure of how else to respond. I can feel him staring at me, my lips, my chin. "It's inescapable." I, of course, am thinking of Mei.

He touches my hand. At the cold tingling of his skin against mine, I shiver, and look up, directly into his spectacularly green eyes. He is vulnerable, I can tell. Without saying a word, he hugs me, and I wrap my arms around his waist. I can feel the wet salt nesting on my collarbone. I lift my head, loosening my grip from his back, and he kisses me, slowly at first, then aggressively. Max, my married, white, boss kisses me, though of course, I'm not thinking of this. He can feel my heartbeat vibrating against his sweater, I

spread my arms out to catch my balance, my body is hot, and my cheeks are cherry. He kisses me again, and again.

And when Max kisses me, I don't stop him. I don't want to.

*

The year is 1950, that of the tiger. I wake up next to Chin, the warm sun acting as a kaleidoscope through the silk curtain. Chin is an ox. Oxen and goats are the least compatible with dragons, but I pretend I don't believe in the zodiac, and its superstitions, its truths. I am fortunate that I don't have to work in the fields, or the café today and Chin has decided to take the day off, and venture downtown with me.

He weaves my long hair into a sloppy braid, and it feels warm against my skin. Along the curve of my back, I can feel his fingertips drawing spirals; I am curled against his chest: smooth, and strong, and I am left wondering if this is a dream, and if I am happy.

My feet are bound in an elegant white fabric, and I feel like a swan, my skin is clean, naked and pink. I can feel sweat forming as my left hand is blanketed in his; my right palm lies flat against his arm, plucking at his hair. We have never declared love, but I imagine that this is how you show it. The bed smells like soap, sex, and sweat, and my floral perfume.

“Your heart, it is thumping against me, so fast,” he says. I smile, inhaling the morning, unsure of the source of my anxiety. I lie awake reminiscing from the night before; the red wine, the slow dancing, and romantic words, the plethora of flower petals that led to our first intimate act as a couple. Everything happened slowly. A kiss on the forehead, a peck on my chin, a tongue on each nipple, his fingers tracing my belly button, sinking slowly, but forcefully; my hands combing through his short hair, my lips sucking on his earlobes,

my mouth opening to him; the way he cradled me into his lap, tugging on my hair; the urgency of desire pacified by the sensual, sweet lust of Chin's advanced experience.

"Are you okay? You don't regret last night, do you?" He asks me, mid-thought; recollecting the way my body ached, and moaned at the same time; the way that I felt both fulfilled, and empty; how even now I feel riddled with both ecstasy, and shame, like a calm storm, completely nonsensical. What you call an oxy-moron: a *mao dun*.

"Of course not," I say. "I'm just thinking."

"Of Mei?"

"Actually, no, Chin," I say. "Not of Mei." At her name, I envision my younger sister tramping through the rice paddies; her uncannily large feet stomping on the flowers, her loud voice scaring the birds, and the squeal of her enthusiasm begging me to play. A slight smile creeps across my cheeks. And I miss her.

"You're always thinking of Mei," his tone heightens; he moves my body caustically off of his, like I am diseased with Leprosy. My cheeks feel flushed, burning, reddening. I stare at the way his face sours.

"Oh Chin. Stop. You're being silly. I was just remembering last night. *You* are the one who is always referencing Mei."

He glares at me angrily, his eyes closing together. We both know that I would give him up without hesitating, just to have her back, but moreover, that I wouldn't have to because his heart belonged to her first anyway. Chin, the ox, and Mei, the dog; which makes much more sense than Ling, the snake.

I wrap the linen sheets around my chest, and untie my hair from the crossed pattern that Chin created. The early sun, that, merely moments ago, was peeking tenderly

through the blinds, has now been obscured by grayed clouds, and forceful winds. And the tranquil silence has been masked by the incessant honking of car horns. Now, the morning is fading, and the breeze has gotten cold.

*

“Ling, you’re late!” Marie says, as I prance into work, staring at the watch adorned to her wrist. My feet are already fatigued, and the workday has yet to begin. It is the first time in months that they have tightened with such compression, and anguish, fiercely resisting the caged silk, and swelling, almost to the point of extinction.

“Pardon me, Marie. I am not feeling much like myself, today.” I can hear the gurgling tide of my stomach twisting in knots, threatening to tycoon my breakfast up the tunnel in my throat, wedging a sharp pain near my belly button. My eyelids are weighted, heavy against my face, and I can’t tell if I am famished or nauseated. The most pressing concern though is that of fatigue, and my desire to curl into a ball, and swim underneath my haven of sheets for days. *The laundry is dirty.* My breasts, and nipples are heavy, and swollen, tingling at the faintest touch. I am dehydrated, thirsty, and my head is pounding

“Well, here,” she says, throwing a peach apron at my face, “we could use some help in the kitchen.” Max looks at me apologetically for his wife’s mood, his hands massaging bread dough, and clothed in a grainy film of white flour.

I crack a few eggs against the rim of a metal bowl, the loud splicing of the shell, like crumbled bones, makes me dizzy, so I focus on a decoy, the wallpaper instead; a light blue, like a newborn baby boy, with tiny yellow polka dots spiraling down each of the vertical paneled stripes. At this, I am reminded of my nephew, Wei. Ke Qiang, and Jie moved North to Beijing nearly a year ago, and now, we rarely ever see them. Before they

left, I bought Wei a small plastic sailboat, sold at the Dong Tai Lu market that he would bring out to the lake with me, and we would watch it float, battling the deluging ripples from the pseudo storms I created by skipping rocks. Together, we would wave goodbye, and watch the boat glide toward the pink horizon, borrowing fisherman's nets to rescue it back. Thinking of Wei, my eyes begin to water, leaving damp trails down my cheeks.

On the glass display case, I notice an army green, topiary in the form of a petite bonsai tree—an ancient peace offering frequently delivered by monks—and wonder what kind of karma Max, and Marie are attempting to obscure, or amend. I whisk the egg yolks with a European utensil—they call a fork—and sprinkle a dash of salt in the mix; it looks like snowflakes, or pillow lint pressed firmly against a waking sun.

“We got some bad news yesterday,” Max whispers to me, molding the kneaded dough into the loaf pan. “I hope you're feeling better. Let me know if you need a break. Marie will just have to deal with it.” He smiles, winks, and caresses my hand, his palm against the small of my back, leaving trails, and clouds of white dust. She is shouting in the background about a misplaced wok, the dusty floors, and spotty glass. She begins to complain about the quality of my egg tarts, but rescinds her statement. My concoctions are never rare or well done.

“I'm fine,” I say. “I hope you are as well.” And nod my head toward Marie.

In a separate bowl, I measure out a generous portion of confectionary sugar; marrying it with a ratio of doubled flour. I add a calculated slice of softened butter, and a dash of vanilla extract, and whip the mixture until beige crumbles appear against the white fluff, like snowcapped mountains. As the concoction forms, I forget how ill I felt just hours ago, I tune out the torture of my murderous feet, the quarreling of Marie's high-pitched

complaints, and instead inhale the sweet sensation of dusty powdered sugar combined with the dominant scent of vanilla alcohol that's infusing my nostrils. Sips of rounded black, oolong tea, warmly coat my throat, to help ease my stomach pangs.

I line one dozen round ring molds on the table, and evenly distributed my dough, delicately shaping each plate with the soft structure. While the oven, a relatively new, convenient, contraption warms—the heat releasing from its door eerily reminds me of my mother's kiln—I create the interior of the tarts. First, I boil the granulated sugar with water, until the grainy tiles are completely dissolved. Next, I strain the eggs through a sieve and beat them into the balmy sugar water. Finally, I add the evaporated canned milk, and more vanilla extract, sifting the filling before stuffing the tarts. I don't need a timer to bake them, I can just tell when they are finished, the edges slightly golden, and puffy, the egg center is perfectly crisp, flat, a flaky smell of crisp crust infusing the kitchen.

“Ling, are you okay?” Max asks me. The café is spinning, my eyes roll into my brain, and I am suddenly blind, I feel clammy, and pale, and heavy. The next thing I remember is waking up on the cool marble tile, covered in powder, to Max's soothing voice. I attempt to stand, but wobble, and fall back to the floor.

“Whoa, whoa, easy there,” he says. “You need to sit for a minute.”

“Ling, I'm so sorry. How do you feel?” Marie asks, her tone is laced with concern.

“Like I could vomit,” I say. Marie cools my skin with a wet towel, pressing it gently against my forehead, my reddened cheeks. Her other hand is stroking my long, black hair, petting me almost.

I don't say it aloud.

I don't need to.

I am pregnant.

Marie starts to cry, holding her head in her hands, and I embrace her while she dry heaves, and sobs. She can't, and I can, and suddenly I am overcome with sadness, too.

"I'm sorry, Marie," I finally say, cutting through the uncomfortable silence that hangs over us like a mobile. If only she knew just how sorry I am.

"Don't be silly, Ling! I am happy for you. Truly, I am. The doctor said my chances..." She stops, and smiles at me—a smile that resembles a frown, a lie really, intentionally deceptive, but failed in execution.

"I didn't think I wanted to be a mother."

"You will be a wonderful mother, Ling. Oh, and Chin will make an excellent father. He will be so delighted."

I smile at her, and cup her hands with mine, accidentally covering her in egg tart goop, I am embarrassed, and at that we both laugh. My heart is racing with anxiety. I don't think about Chin, and what I will tell him. For some reason, all I can think about is December 5th, 1921, the day my feet were bound, and all I can see is more of my freedom being chipped away, my caged bird that never did come back, the butterfly who stole my wings.

The broken brown eggshells, with tiny crumbs of their armor, are still cloistered on the counter, and from the oven I can smell my precisely puffy, thick, yellow egg tarts have completely burned.

*

It is 1951, the year of the rabbit, the year my baby daughter is born. She has the same

zodiac sign as Jie, which means she will be tender, polite, and *beautiful*. If only I could tell Jie and Wei about her. Chin returned to the army a few weeks after my fainting incident, and I never had the courage to tell him about the baby growing inside of my womb.

“I’ll miss you,” he whispered to my naked back, one morning; the sheets forming a barrier between us. I had nudged my body toward him in response, to indicate the mutuality in his statement, but then I wondered if I would actually ever see him again, and why, if perhaps not, that I didn’t seem to care.

I haven’t been to the fields in almost six months. This is my choice, my desire to avoid seeing Mama, and Baba for fear that they will disown me; their pregnant, unwed daughter. I am tempted to tell Nai-Nai, but I know she will be hurt, too. She has grown even more fragile, and rarefied in her age. I write them letters, as often as I write to Mei, indicating that I’m okay, just busy with work at the café, and moving into a new apartment with one of the *sous* chef’s since Chin has gone away. They never write back. Mostly I miss Jie, and wish more than ever that we were children again; that Mei was alive.

My appetite is ceaseless; though food is argumentative with my body. And my belly is growing, rounder, and rounder, swollen like the water moon. Often, I crave some wine or a cigarette, but I refrain. Perhaps, this baby is rebellious already. I feel most nauseated at night. It hurts to sleep solely on my back. And also, I am lonely.

The pregnancy insists upon reminding me that my feet are bound, most days, the pressure is unbearable.

CHAPTER 19:

“I’m restless. Things are calling me away. My hair is being pulled by the stars again,” –

Anais Nin

SARAH

I hadn’t realized that I was clutching the edge of the tablecloth, like a security blanket, against my chest, spotted oil stains from the Shanghainese noodles, and specks of red chili pepper are splattered across it. Tears are streaming from my eyes, forming mascara debris along my cheekbones, like black freckles. The restaurant is swarming with people; a variety of tongues—local, foreign, familiar, are all chirping in my ears. The humming of the teapot pouring, the sizzling of the pork pancakes on hot plates, and the cackling of the waitress repeating endless orders of sweet banana rice-goo, are the noises swirling around my head; steam creating an excessively thick fog, a slightly romantic ambience.

But all I really see, all that I allow myself to hear, is Ling. She is calculating me, pacing the story around my level of comfort, around the pattern of my breathing, the production of my tears.

“Ling,” I say, breathlessly. I’m not sure if I can even continue speaking, if I want to. I repeat her name again to command her attention; to make sure I’m speaking aloud, and not just mimicking the voice in my head; to make sure this time, she’s listening to me. It hadn’t just occurred to me, but perhaps I’ve been in denial, I think I just needed proof, to hear her say the truth.

She stares at me, without even blinking. Her head nods forward slightly. It is clear she heard me.

“My mother, my beautiful, sweet, caring mother, with her high cheekbones, and fair skin, her long black hair, and small nose, petite frame...who passes *completely* as white...”

Ling is still staring up at me, her gaze, unwavering; and her face is completely expressionless.

“Ling. My mother’s name is May.”

CHAPTER 20:

“Storytelling is the essential human activity. The harder the situation, the more essential it is,” –Tim O’Brien

LING

I didn’t know who the father was until I met her.

And immediately, I saw Max. Max and my Nai-Nai.

Throughout the duration of my pregnancy, the entire nine months, he never asked me; it had only happened that once. But six months in, early morning, before the store opened, when Marie was home sick, he caught me staring across the café. He walked toward me, my hands immersed in wet batter, and then tenderly wrapped his arms around me, pulling me close to him, staining his shirt with the dough; my fat belly creating an awkward space between us. We stood that way until the pressure on my feet was bursting up my legs, bursting like the sunrise that was peeking through the window slates.

Perhaps, we both knew all along.

The day of her birth, I am in the hospital, and I am alone. In my arms, I am cradling a baby, the kin to the absent man I love, our silenced secret, who will not stop crying. Her inception into the world is swathed in denial, and deception. Mostly, I feel ashamed. Some days I blamed Marie, some days I pitied her.

At the time, I had not realized, that the baby was my only chance at having wings.

The nurses award her to me. “Mama,” they call me. Mom.

I don't let go.

*

For a long while, I just stare at her, and she finds solace in my arms. Her skin is freckled in rashes, and it is peony pink. Our feet are almost exactly the same size, but unlike mine, her toes can wiggle, and stretch. I cradle her against my chest, staring directly into her gorgeous, almost tauntingly hazel eyes. They are round, and do not resemble diamond almonds, like mine. She is cuddled in a light pink blanket, and her baldhead feels warm against my skin. I recognize my nose, and lips though: petite, teeming red with high cheekbones that we both inherited from Nai-Nai.

She is mine.

So badly, I want to keep her.

CHAPTER 21:

“No one leaves home, unless home is the mouth of a shark,” –Warsan Shire

SARAH

When I was a little girl, I remember my mother, and my father sitting in the dark, at the burnt-wooded dining room table. We only ever sat in there for special occasions: Easter Sunday, or Thanksgiving Day, and once after my paternal grandfather passed away. My mother was wary of me even playing *near* the dining room, stemming from a grave fear that I would knock over her fancy China cabinet, effectively disfiguring all ten of her blue and white plates.

But that night, I was sitting in my fuzzy PJ's, along the railing of the staircase, pushing my toes into the plush carpet, and waiting for my father to tuck me in, clandestinely hiding behind the slates of the rail. I practiced breathing noiselessly. My mother's voice was elevated, which was rare, and my father's hands rested on hers, joined together like a prayer.

“I don't want to meet her, again,” she said, her voice was confident, and had gained stability.

“You don't have to, sweetie,” my father responded, stroking her hair, tucking it behind her ears.

“Did you know that I remember her? She was always working in the café. Reticent. I only learned the truth from dad a few years ago, when mom's symptoms of dementia first began.”

I don't remember anything else. I stopped paying attention once I discovered that I wasn't the "her" they were referring to. Between my fingers, I rubbed the strands of carpet until they unbraided.

I wonder now the extent to which my mother is included in the secret. Does she know that Max is still her biological father, or does she believe that they fully adopted her from her birth mother, Ling? Ling: the bound foot woman in the black and white photograph, who was in no place to raise a child, alone, who was madly in love with my married, white, Jewish grandfather. What does my grandmother, Marie, know?

"Ling, I have so many questions, still. Perhaps more than when I first got here."

"And what makes you think I have the answers?"

I sighed; inhaled deeply, cupped her hands, and brought them to my lips, kissing them softly, as a quiet way to say goodbye. She places her palms against my cheeks and squeezes them.

It was then that I realized it hadn't been Ling's story that I needed to hear, but my own.

*

The black and white photo is hidden in the empty pages of my passport. I study it again, and discern that Ling is not fat, but pregnant. Her left hand is shuffling the Mahjong tiles, while her right is pressed against her swollen belly. Among the caption: "Ling, Marie, and me—1950," I notice what's missing. With a red pen I add: "and May," referring to my mother. Technically, Ling is my biological grandmother, my mother's mother, though physically, no one would ever know.

I think of my family—of Sawyer, of Dylan, my parents, and grandparents: Max and

Marie. I crave them; their voices. I feel unsettled by Ling's story; unhinged, and overwrought; but also, in the strangest of facets, slightly relieved, oddly hopeful.

I dissect the photo again, in the upper right hand corner, if you are meticulous and analyze closely enough, there's a round, circular orb, an artifact believed by many to be a ghost, a *gui*.

*

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