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MYTH

W. TSUNG-YAN KWONG

In deep slumber, Yufei dreams of her aunts, all seven of them, so many she can't keep their names straight—Auntie Huan, Auntie Tiantian, Auntie Zhongxin, Auntie...—combing one another's bone-straight hair, listening about one another's schoolgirl crushes, sharing a basket of fried peanuts. As in most dreams, there is no plot, but instead, a distinct impression is given—a sense of warmth and camaraderie displayed in a scatter of images: interlocked fingers digging within a pail of persimmons, a palm cupped to an ear to hold a secret, countless feet splashing in a water basin on a hot summer day. Even when her alarm clock pulls her away from such impressions, Yufei tries to hold onto them, jotting down in a notebook descriptions of the deep, orange hue of the persimmons, the tickling of a sister's foot mid-splash.

Still, even as she rinses her face with a handful of ice-cold water, the laughter, the chatter, the whispers between the sisters in her dream lingers with her, like an echo, slowly diminishing with volume with each passing minute, but today, the sounds are so real, she checks her radio alarm just to make sure she has turned the dial off, then checks her portable-CD-player headphones, just to be certain the delicate hum isn't emanating from the foamed speakers. Sticking her wet pinky finger deep into her ear canal, she wiggles her tiniest digit back and forth, hoping the loud vibration within her eardrum will drown out the low voices, but nope; it wouldn't be until Yufei is outside, walking amidst the crush of executives within the Pudong financial district in Shanghai, that the low-frequency whispers inside her

head would be replaced with the sounds of the city: street vendors hawking mostly counterfeit goods—DVDs, purses, Chairman Mao figurines, you name it—in loud, passionate Mandarin; personalized cell-phone ring tones, buzzing in an array of escalating electrical notes; bus engines, screeching to avoid an anxious pedestrian. At twenty-four, heading to her second job out of university, Yufei holds her satchel tightly against her waist, aware that street vagrants can sniff out Shanghai's youngest generation, especially young women, who have learned not to make eye contact, even as they hurry down crowded stairways, down to the Metro lines.

There, flooded within the electric fluorescence inside the terminal, Yufei waits for Line 2, quietly pulling from her satchel a paperback novel. Around her, this early in the morning, are mostly younger adults, the older generations choosing instead to ride the buses overhead, or to walk, skeptical of new technology, especially when the city seems to be moving forward at such an accelerated speed. Once inside Line 2, she sits on the corner of an unoccupied bench, a young gentleman taking the opposite end, not acknowledging her, although she raises her head to offer a half-smile. Yufei thinks about how quickly the uncommon can become common, how when she was a little girl, she never dreamt of riding in an underground train, how now, she rides one twice a day, even watches short programs on the LCD screens attached to the walls. Every so often, she'll sneak a peek at the other passengers, wondering what thoughts run through their heads, wondering if perhaps she recognizes them from the Communist Youth League, but she never says anything, too scared to intrude one's personal space; instead, she sits in her private silence, hoping one day someone will recognize her.

For the first time this morning—too busy chasing down errant voices earlier in the day—Yufei brushes her fingers through the knots in her hair, pulling loose the tangled bows. Then, out of nowhere, in the reflection of the Metro glass, she sees what must be her shadow, sitting directly beside her, although the figure's movements aren't an echo of hers; rather, the silhouette's head leans on Yufei's shoulder, wiping her long crooked nose against the woven fabric. Against her side, Yufei can almost feel the cold weight of someone else's frame, bearing gently on her among the fabric folds of her oversized jacket, but when Yufei turns to her side, all that is left is a single

strand of long black hair, slithered against the bench's shiny teal surface in a series of unconstrained curls. Surely it must be one of her own, Yufei thinks, nervously plucking the hair from the bench, its shape a giant question mark floating midair.

Eight A.M., the first floor of the stockbrokerage where Yufei works is already crowded with customers, wearing anxious expressions, uncertain of the status of their A-shares, some of whom have only just begun to invest in the future of China. One by one, they wait in line, each with a story about something they heard in the news, worried that the status of their stocks are in turmoil. They wear their moth-ball-scented best—embroidered silks, fine woolens, brushed cashmere—hoping to convince the brokers to work particularly hard on their individual portfolios. Looking at their wrinkled, worn faces, many of them remind Yufei of her ma, of the older generation, hesitantly clinging to their yuan, yet steadily believing in the stability of Chinese companies and the strength of capitalism. Yufei understands their hesitancy, for even though her own office is filled with brand-new furniture, the fresh coat of paint on the wall barely conceals the logo of a bankrupt government-run cement company. Lucky for Yufei, she works on one of the higher floors as a research analyst, and therefore doesn't have to complete transactions face-to-face, assuring the public that their money is safe in Chinese shares, although Yufei, too, believes it, having completed a business degree.

One of only a handful of young women at the stockbrokerage, Yufei wants to work that much harder, knowing her male colleagues whisper behind her back, doubting the ability of a woman as young and as beautiful as Yufei. "Sunshine," her boss likes to call her, before dumping a pile of stock graphs on her desk for her to analyze, but she thanks him in a cheery, high tone, unwilling to flinch at the sight of a paper mountain. The yellow, green, blue, splintered, fractured lines of the stochastic graphs read like an irregular heartbeat on a heart-rate monitor, all peaks then valleys. Sometimes Yufei believes that indeed, the life of her country rests within these figures, and like a doctor, she must diagnose the probability of a company's longevity, almost as a fortune teller would, reading the lines on one's palm.

Once the silence sets in, her office door closed to the chaos outside, the soft murmurs formed earlier in the morning infiltrate her consciousness like an unwieldy itch, severing her from mathematical evaluations, until finally she decides to surrender to the noise. At first, the pitch of the volume comes in and out of clarity, as if atomizing, unable to unite into a single, full, round word. Pressing her head against the surface of her desk, Yufei tries to isolate the noise, the chill of dead oak pinching her cheeks, the thump of her heart accelerating. She tries to convince herself that what she's experiencing is a headache, something that can be cured with ibuprofen, but the obscure noise scratches within her cranium like a bird's claw, unremitting. Come out and play—she thinks she can make out in a child's voice, high and enthusiastic. Rubbing the back of her palm against her brow, she draws out the distant call: "We...miss...you."

Hours later, she convinces herself that what she is experiencing may in fact be dangerous to her health—melanoma, schizophrenia, the early stages of Parkinson's disease. Or, on the optimistic side, she hopes that all she needs is rest, perhaps a glass of yam wine, along with a long hot bath, full of relaxing salts. Drumming her fingers against her desk in quick succession, opening her window to let in the honks and squeals of nearby automobiles, playing an audio file low on her computer stereo, Yufei tries to fill her office with noise, knowing she has only until noon before her boss will come in to check her work process. The voices abate, temporary as it may be, and when her boss comes around, she will once again prove to be his shining sun, a star in the workplace, as reliable as they come.

"There's always the possibility that all this is simply because your ma is coming for a visit," Ping, a colleague who works in first-floor transactions, says in comforting Mandarin, once the two of them meet for lunch at a nearby bakery. "At least you don't have to deal with the loons on the first floor—" Ping begins, before dipping her finger into the winter-melon paste inside her wife cake. By Ping's account, she finds it incredibly difficult to stop herself from smacking the customers whenever they come into the brokerage with stories of how their distant relatives from the rural country have warned them about a scarlet streak tainting the morning sky,

how the cicadas have suddenly gone silent, how the sediment inside the barrels of sorghum wine have risen to the top, how all this must mean that their investments will soon go south, therefore, they will need to completely reevaluate their entire portfolio. "This old man comes in today," Ping continues with eyes as wide as golf balls, "waving an emerald rooster feather at me, claiming his chicken has never clucked his entire life, but yesterday, all clucks, clucks, clucks, from sunrise to nightfall, so surely something bad is about to happen."

"Don't be so cruel," Yufei says, holding back laughter, as she tries to convince herself Ma wouldn't be guilty of such wild prognostications if she were to ever trust a stockbrokerage. "They don't know any better."

"What about when the same man comes in next week, unwilling to admit that I was right"—Ping regards Yufei with a convincing stare—"that he shouldn't trust his chicken for financial advice?"

Yufei spins her chopsticks in her lychee tea, twirling the leaves into a minor whirlpool all the way to the skin of the liquid, before she bites into her peach-kernel cake. Watching as the soiled leaves slowly sink back to the pit of the cup, she remembers how her grandma used to read their patterns, studying the symbols in the dregs, then telling her how her future was so bright she was blinded by its glare. According to Ping, such prophecies hold no truth.

"Are you hearing the voices right now?" Ping inquires, leaning in close as if she may hear the voices, too.

Yufei raises her chin, laughs, then shakes her head.

The concrete walls inside Yufei's studio apartment—a converted iron factory—resist nails, tape, glues, and putties, and although its prior life would imply expansive rooms and high ceilings, during the conversion, little space was allocated for each individual flat. Perhaps it is indeed stress from Ma's upcoming visit that has led her mind to wander, Yufei thinks, as she cleans a mound of dehydrated-watermelon-seed shells left on the parquet floor. Judging by the checks Yufei sends her every month, most certainly Ma will expect her to be living in far more lavish surroundings than this, although Yufei is perfectly content in her current living situation—it is

close to the brokerage, the rent is affordable, a fresh-produce marketplace is within walking distance.

Night after night, Yufei goes over the answers to what she assumes will be Ma's line of questioning—Are you in a relationship? Do you want to be in relationship? How can you not want to be in a relationship?—until the voices she has heard earlier in the week are drowned out by her own concerns. Of course, part of Yufei would like to admit she suffers from occasional loneliness, but being an only child, she has endured loneliness her entire life, and admitting the slightest bit of forlornness would only give Ma impetus to contact endless matchmakers in her rural province. When Ma eventually arrives, exhausted from hours on a train, she meekly takes a corner of the room, quietly nodding her head at the surroundings, as if proud of her single daughter. Compared to the last time Yufei saw her, at her commencement ceremony from university, Ma appears far more fragile, her skin thin and transparent like parchment paper, her frame wobbly like a knurly tree branch. Such sights concern Yufei, who already feels a pinch of guilt from leaving Ma behind to pursue her own life in the city, though she knows Ma will never ask her to return to the farmlands, just as she knows she will never offer to.

On the stove, pork porridge stews alongside a pot of salted sea vegetables; this is where Yufei pays special attention, careful not to overcook Ma's favorite dish. Although she had not thought about it when she spent the afternoon in the open-air marketplace, picking an assortment of purple laver, hair seaweed, red dulse, and sea beans, Yufei now realizes this will be the first time she has ever cooked for Ma. Slowly stirring the simmering ocean, Yufei almost loses herself in the dancing vegetables that purl in a series of concentric circles, as if to a song. Ma, of course, will complain of the soggiess of the sea beans, mentioning how Yufei's fancy degree has taught her nothing about the preparation of delicate vegetables, and Yufei will nod her head, surrendering the rest of the cooking duties for the duration of Ma's stay.

"However, the pork porridge has turned out perfectly," Ma says, slurping the rice gruel between her teeth. "Neither too thick, nor too watery."

"Thank you, ma," Yufei offers, blowing on her first spoonful.

Aside from a few comments here and there in regards to the meal, Ma has been otherwise reserved, staring head down into her pork porridge, uncharacteristic of her normal behavior. Something is wrong, Yufei thinks, though she is hesitant to press the matter, fearing that it will require something from her—her time, her energy, her sacrifice. Ma is usually quick to ask for a cushion for her sore feet, a back rub to alleviate a crook in her neck, a few extra yuan to purchase under-eye cream, so the grandness of her current dilemma must be extravagant, thinks Yufei, who playfully drowns her tofu cubes deep into her porridge bowl, trying her best to avoid eye contact.

“I am an old woman, Yufei—” Ma says in her lower register. “A lonely woman.”

Yufei shakes her head and utters, “How old are you? Fifty-three? That is by no means an old woman.”

“Your father’s death has aged me,” she says, running a finger along a wrinkle that extends from her ear to her nose. “But passing time is not what bothers me; it is the loneliness, the fear that my only company will be my shadow—a slanted black line always running away from me.”

Yufei opens her mouth to speak, but is reluctant to say a word. All these years, Yufei has never wanted to admit to herself that she has taken comfort in the fact that in the rural provinces, widows who remarry are frowned upon, almost shunned; therefore, Yufei has never had to worry about the chore of Ma wanting to find a second husband. In the rural provinces, a dedicated widow who spends the rest of her life committed to the memory of her husband is respected, an example of a good woman, a good wife. Suddenly worried Ma will ask to her move home, Yufei asks, “What about the checks I send you every month? Surely you can hire a matchmaker. Find a suitable husband.”

Raising the porridge bowl to her mouth, Ma takes one last sip, wiping her lips clean with the back of her palm. “Don’t think I haven’t tried,” she says, blushing. “But what you don’t understand is that in our town I am cursed. A husband who dies of a heart attack at such a young age, a daughter who leaves home never to return—these things have left me a leper, someone no one has a problem pitying,

yet no one has a problem avoiding, either.”

Hard as she may try to suppress them, Yufei feels the pinch of tears collecting within her eye crevices, but she will not let them fall. Throughout her effort to succeed in primary school, university, and the workplace, she has never allowed herself to consider the rural life she left behind; or, maybe she has, but only in a superficial manner—a story she tells herself to make herself work that much harder.

“But”—Ma finally says, after three tea sips—“whenever I talk to the matchmaker, she asks about my young, beautiful, successful daughter, until one day, she came up with a wonderful idea.” For a moment, the words linger midair like puffs of smoke from the coal factory in Yufei’s hometown. Awkwardly mumbling the rest of her thoughts, Ma prompts Yufei to ask her to repeat them, louder. “The matchmaker said,” Ma continues, “that perhaps we can be matched in a pair—you taking the young son; me, the widowed father.”

Hearing this, Yufei wants to laugh, to blow the suggestion right out of the room with a succession of full, round, loud guffaws, but the impulse is fleeting, for across from her is Ma, nervously biting her lower lip, awaiting a response. As Yufei rises from her chair to kneel by Ma’s side, she realizes it is times like this she wishes she had siblings—someone else to help keep the family afloat. She pours the rest of the tea kettle into Ma’s cup, the skin of the liquid on the brink of overflowing.

“Don’t think I haven’t thought this through,” Ma says, turning sideways to directly face her daughter. “We have the most handsome single gentleman in our town. A university graduate, too, who teaches at the Educator’s School. His father is a widow, with a high pension—”

Ma knows what her response will be, Yufei can tell, for the conviction in her tone wears thin as she continues to describe the line of women hoping to marry the young gentleman, the elation the matchmaker experiences when she believes she has found the perfect match, the number of caretakers the widowed father keeps on the land. From Ma’s cup, a cord of tea dribbles down the porcelain like a golden vein, staining the wooden table. Yufei presses her lips against the back of Ma’s hand, shaking her head back and forth, as if to say, I cannot do this, no matter how bad you may want me to, I cannot.

“Move in with me—” Yufei begins, a lump in her throat. Part of her remembers her youth in the agrarian lands, pulling twice her weight in persimmons after her father’s death, remnants of the fruit flesh underneath her fingernails, in her hair, on her breath. Part of her thinks she has already given Ma enough, but is there a limit to how much a Chinese daughter can give to her family? she considers, before opening her mouth again. “My bed is far larger than the one we shared back home, and the furnace is hotter, too,” she forces herself to continue, though really, she enjoys spreading her limbs towards her bed’s four corners.

“Don’t make a fool of me!” Ma complains, shooing Yufei off her knees. “Trust me, I have no need for the chaos that bleeds from every Shanghai corner, nor will I be any use to you, or anyone in this city, for that matter.” Ma raises her chin, defiant. “Besides, due to the Hukou system, I will need to get a temporary residence card from the security office back home before I can even think of staying here. It amuses me that you city dwellers look down on the rural migrants who feed and clothe you.”

Tempted to call her bluff, Yufei considers dropping the topic entirely, perhaps offering an increase to the monthly checks she sends her, but the mere fact Ma has looked into how one attains a temporary residence card shows Yufei that she has indeed considered a move. On the stove, the last of the sea vegetables fragment in the warm water. The autumn chill lingers midair. Picturing Ma, back home, sitting in her cold one-bedroom flat, an entire town pretending as though a dark brume follows her every step, Yufei knows she will convince her to stay, even if it means lying—telling her that she, too, needs company.

Early into the small hours, Yufei thinks she awakens from a suffocating dream, her body drenched with sweat, her throat dry like straw, as if she has been running, screaming. Ma sleeps comfortably beside her, undisturbed by the sudden vibration of Yufei’s clattered joints.

A lingering blue fog, so thick Yufei has trouble seeing her hands before her, fills the room like smoke. Had she left the stove on? Is the sound she hears a fire’s empty crackle? Faster than a reckless projector, her mind zips through a reel of images—a

plastic unicorn barrette used to clasp the end of a braid, the blur of a girl's face during an underwater breathing contest, a muddy handprint on the skirt of a cheongsam—but to who do these memories belong? Disorientated and dizzy, she stretches out her hands in order to touch her way towards the kitchen, but suddenly, her fingers catch snippets of hair, long and black, as if there are other people in the room. Closing her eyes, she pretends that her hands are catching cobweb traces, not hair, that she and Ma are in the room, alone; but a susurrus sound, like a submarine's muffled audio transmission, fractured and skipping, whispers into her ear, unmistakable.

“Who's there?” she demands, recognizing a girl's voice in the din.

All of a sudden, blindly reaching for anything to grasp, she finds her palm pressed against a hollow mass that feels like bruised skin, tender and mushy. As she moves her hands along the silhouette, its temperature increases, its frame taking on heavier volume, until she almost feels life underneath its skin. A familiar life. Steadily, she hears the amplified scratch of a first breath of air, then an inner rumbling, pulsing through the shape; finally, the warmth of its breath kisses the surface of Yufei's cheek.

A strange tremble overtakes Yufei's body, growing stronger with each passing second, until suddenly, she feels the whip of her cheeks slapping against her pillow, side to side, her eyes now open, Ma's hands firmly shaking her awake.

Ma asks, “What's wrong with you?” Suddenly, the first signs of sunlight bleed through the window blinds in translucent yellow rays, and Yufei struggles to find her footing, leaning her forehead against the cool concrete wall.

“This can't be happening,” she says, pounding her head against the rough exterior, “not again.” Her fingers tremble, unable to hold the weight of a water glass, so she drinks straight from the faucet. “Just a nightmare, that's all,” Yufei says in response to Ma's hanging mouth. But was it, really? she wonders, recalling how she recognized the girl's voice, her touch, her silhouette. Pacing the length of her studio, back and forth, she tries to recall the events in her dream, but finds the task arduous, like trying to catch dragonflies in a jar.

Ma hurries to her suitcase, retrieves a plastic bag of parched roots, an herb no doubt, and adds it to the kettle of water she puts on the stove.

“That won’t help,” Yufei utters, rubbing her temples with her knuckles. Then, without warning, her nose starts to bleed, pellets of blood falling onto the parquet floor like ruby arils, splashing upon impact. “Don’t worry, this has been happening a lot lately,” Yufei lies, trying to calmly lean her head back to stop the bleeding.

“No, no,” Ma says, taking hold of Yufei’s neck. “Lean forward, let it bleed out.”

Without prompting, Ma pinches her daughter’s nose with a ball of tissue until it’s saturated, a paper heart, dripping into the sink. Against the white granite, the blood runs in a single long whorl, expanding like a bud into a blossom. Yufei realizes that the girl in her dreams, in the windows, in her head, must be dead, but how? she asks herself. Raising her head, the last of the blood trickling down her chin, she tries to steady her breath, but cannot stop herself from choking for air intermittently. “Did any of the aunts die as a girl?” she finally asks, coughing.

Ma sneers. “What are you talking about?”

“Conditions were incredibly difficult back then, almost impossible,” Yufei responds in a gentle tone, trying to ease Ma into openness, although she suspects the girl in her head did not die from harsh conditions. “Grandma had so many children, surely it must have been problematic to feed all of those mouths.”

“Listen,” Ma begins, unblinking. “Your grandmother was considered a hero in her time, a mother hero who bore eleven healthy children under Chairman Mao, for the population of her communist country. Not a single one of her children had a cold, let alone died from ‘difficult’ conditions. Understand?”

Throughout her youth, Yufei heard stories about how her grandma would sit in the center of the town square like a round, healthy Buddha, with supposedly every townsman as a servant, feeding her dried apricots and fresh watermelon wedges, all to keep her golden womb strong, healthy, productive. All of the aunts and uncles preach the same song—a portrait of woman with no faults, no illnesses, no dead children, but then who is the girl in her dreams? Who does she belong to? “Ma,” Yufei whispers, raising the blinds to let the safety of sunlight in. “Did I have any sisters?”

“What do you mean to ask?” Ma snaps, regarding her with a pair of squinted

eyes. "Do you mean to ask if I had other baby girls, and killed them hoping for a baby boy? *Sheesh*, your whole generation thinks your parents killed their baby girls left and right, as if killing your own blood would be as easy as killing a chicken."

"That's not what I meant," Yufei tries to say convincingly, although she addresses her exact suspicion, even if she does not offer a precise answer.

"The answer is no," Ma says, a mind reader. "You never had any siblings, never were allowed to." She tapped Yufei's forehead with her index finger. "You, like everyone in your generation, were born under the one-child policy. Why do you ask questions you already know the answers to?"

Of course, Yufei remembers her parents having conversations, late into the night, about whether or not they should have signed the one-child certificate, especially since both of them were born into such large families. Perhaps they could have hid, had children in secret, and moved from town to town, claiming their offspring were of sickly friends, or found abandoned on the roadside. The thought of a single child, carrying the burden of such a large ancestry seemed unfathomable, her father argued, but Yufei's parents agreed to the contract because it meant that their daughter would receive a better education than she would have otherwise, that the family, too, would receive economical incentives from the government. And yes, in many ways, the one-child policy worked because Yufei was able to receive the best education that anyone from her rural town had ever before, and she also had the unwavering support of her family, something that wouldn't have happened if she were one of ten siblings like Ma, especially if any of those siblings were boys. A brotherless daughter, something so rare, one of her female instructors had told Yufei when she was just a little girl. "Lucky you," the instructor smiled. "Never having to compete for attention with brothers, never having to sacrifice. You'll be among the first of a generation of many, creating a path to be walked on for years to come."

Yufei recalls how she blushed, uncertain of the significance of her instructor's words.

"Chairman Mao knew that the history of a Chinese family couldn't be hoisted on the shoulders of one child," Ma continues. "But what does the new government

do? Less than three years after his death, in 1979, they introduce the one-child policy, so by the time my siblings reach old age, there will be no one left to take care of us.”

“Don’t be so critical, Ma. It will only be for one generation. If I marry a man born of the one-child policy, we can choose to have two children, according to new policy.”

“But will you ever marry?” Ma asks, shaking her head. “Your generation knows only how to look out for one’s self. None of you understand how to rely on one another for support because all of you have grown up as single children. Am I right?”

“That’s not true—” Yufei insists, unable to come up with a convincing argument.

“Or, perhaps, you can invent a husband, like you used to do as a girl,” Ma laughs, throwing her hands into the air.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you remember?” Ma asks, pouring herself a cup of tea. “Every day, you used to walk around town, cupping your hand to the air, as if you were holding the hand of a sibling. I assumed it was because you were jealous of the kids a few years older than you, born before the one-child policy, who had numerous sisters and brothers, whereas you were always alone. ‘Can you see them, Ma?’ you would ask me every day, and I’d always say ‘no,’ until one day you drew me pictures of them.” Ma shook her head, surprised Yufei cannot remember. “One of them had a long crooked nose that reached down to her chin, and black stick-straight hair that fell to her waist. I said, ‘Why did you invent such an ugly sister?’ and you started crying, refusing to speak to me for a week.”

Yufei sits silently, a tiny fit of electricity running through her, as the vague details of Ma’s story kindle forgotten memories—those instances when spectators pointed at her while she braided the hair of, read aloud to, and swam in the reservoir with imaginary sisters, no one else was privileged to see.

Ma says, “we called you the Little Girl with Secret Sisters, based upon the legend of the Caretaker’s Secret Family.”

Passed down from Yufei's great-grandmother, Ma explained, was the saga of a middle-aged spinster, who, for as long as she could remember, dreamt of having a family large enough to maintain a paddy farm without the help of a single laborer, yet, year by year, she watched as each of her siblings married and filled their homes with hungry mouths, her hair growing grayer, her only company the burping coals in her furnace. Born dryer than desert sands, she had been the caretaker for most of the village population, passed from house to house, generation to generation, instructed to never get too close to the children she watched, for as soon as they could care for themselves, off to another family she was! One day, though, overwhelmed by the sadness that came from being let go by another family whose children had outgrown her, the caretaker went to the marketplace to purchase a variety of scarves, mittens, and socks. "I suppose you're visiting your nieces and nephews," the merchant said, shaking his head in sympathy. "No," she replied, "my children will need warm clothing for the upcoming winter. They'll be coming soon. I can hear them in my head."

Soon enough, the entire town had learned that the caretaker had finally lost control of her senses, yet they pitied her requests for extra portions of rice porridge, bamboo shoots, and salty duck eggs, even going as far to nod their heads when she said her children's tummies were especially hungry from playing outside all day in the spring heat. "But why don't you ever bring your children to the market?" a merchant finally asked her one day, to which she replied: "They'd be far too tempted by the array of sweets, kind merchant." The more the caretaker catered to the needs of her invented children—purchasing them bicycles, adding an additional room to her flat—the more the town questioned her, until one day, she brought her secret children with her to the marketplace, their rosy cheeks, chubby fingers, hungry mouths, just as real as the summer sun that warmed the entire village from above.

Her arms crossed, her face blank, Yufei responds, "You don't actually believe that, do you? Most certainly, one cannot make children by simply purchasing food and clothes for them."

"Yufei," Ma says, "you've missed the whole point. It was the caretaker's intense desire that allowed her secret children to come to life."

Opposite from her, Yufei leans against the foot of her bed, reminding herself that she has an appointment with a doctor, an M.D. who will diagnose her symptoms based on science, not folktales. She taps her pen against her portable calendar, circling her appointment in red ink to punctuate her thought. "It's just a myth, Ma," she says, a sad laugh escaping her mouth. "Nothing more, nothing less."

Ma inhales a long breath through her nose, the oxygen fluttering from her nostrils to her belly, before purring from her mouth in quiet hum. "All I know," she begins, "is that this great country is built on myth, and that one day you and I, too, will be a part of it."

Nearly ten o'clock at night, Yufei decides to take a walk in the Bund along Huangpu river, the surrounding architecture, with their slopes, orbs, and lines, reminding her of logic, practicality. Above her, the Shanghai skyline appears as a series of burning candles, their wax—luminous yellows, oranges, reds, blues—melting into the river in parallel lengths. When Yufei was a little girl, on holiday to the big city, she stood on this exact same spot, asking Ma's permission to climb over the railing, so she could touch the skyscrapers' colorful reflection on the river surface, to see for herself whether or not the reflection's color would stick to her fingers like putty. "Instead of ruining the mystery, why not embrace it?" her ma whispered into her ear. Back then, the older kids had the same idea as me, swarms of brothers and sisters tugging at their parents' shirt sleeves, their loud, brassy voices filling the air with requests to be allowed to lean over the railing, feel the reflection's texture, but Ma held Yufei back for as long as she could.

Now the crowd of children's utterances are long gone, replaced with the quiet whispers of couples walking hand in hand, their echoes so weak, the sound of running water swallows them. At the railing, a married couple pushes along a single baby carriage, the shadows of toddler fingers reaching past the cushioned seat, but as far as sounds are concerned, only the squeal of plastic wheels persists.

Overhead, clouds heavy with rain linger, sending tiny divers down to disrupt the cold asphalt and river skin, arcs of water bouncing in all directions, catching the city fluorescence like opal fireworks, low to the ground. Nearby, a jacketed

gentleman pulls open the fabric flap of his coat, then draws his girlfriend near, covering her from the rain, as if carrying her under his wing; the married couple launches a nylon umbrella to protect their baby from an autumn cold, yet Yufei takes a seat on a wooden bench, open to the falling rain. Soon enough, all of the pedestrians will wisely find shelter underneath a canopy or within one of the shops, but Yufei will sit still, the red lights from a high-rise antennae blinking on and off in the distance, each of its blips separated by invisible seconds. One, two, three, Yufei will count aloud, just to hear a voice, even if it's her own.

When she closes her eyes, she finds herself in a strange state of mind, uncertain if she almost misses the company the frequent murmurs in her head provided. No, don't be silly, she laughs. Opening her eyes, she sees in the distance a layer of rain, appearing to fall around a slim silhouette, revealing the cast of a body. Lurching forward, Yufei's wet clothes cling to her legs, hips, waist, chest, hugging her body tightly, like a series of arms, drawing her close. This feeling—a warm embrace in an autumn downpour—reminds Yufei of her youth, of the images that have haunted her the past couple of weeks, of a time when she could surrender to the slightest fancy. She isn't that child any longer, and hasn't been for many years. Raising her hand, she is tempted to reach out and try to touch the dry form in the distance; however, she decides to linger in the myth a bit longer, for in her ear, she can hear Ma's words from years ago, "Instead of ruining the mystery, why not embrace it?"