

She tries a hum but can't hear anything; she can only feel a resonance in her throat.



Zadie Chan dreams of Chinese dragons, jaws flapping. The dragons' scales are a sweaty red lamina, bristling with metallic hues: red and blue and gold. But the muted tocsin of drums seems softened to a cricket's rhythm. She stands miles away from the links of lights that hang from post to post lining the phantasmal wharf. The dragons, illuminated from the inside, weave back and forth. In the centre of the pandemonium, the *tangu* pounds rhythmically and the firecrackers burst in rows down their twin branches.

The trashy tone of brass cymbals. The flapping dragon mouths. The snapping firecrackers.

She stands apart from the celebration, watching the hot smoke rise.

Zadie Chan wakes to a soft knock at the apartment door. As she lies under her linsey-woolsey on the living-room couch, the doorknob begins to turn.

Another soft knock. Almost paternal, as though the knocker has made soup and is wondering if Zadie wants a bowl. A lilting voice comes through the wood: "Ba-na-na?"

No matter how he tries to disguise himself, she knows the voice of the landlord. As a rule, Zadie hides: this time between the

broadloom couch and the wall, squeezed in beside a wood-carved bear and a silver samovar.

The door shudders. “I know you’re in there!”

Without much thought, Zadie slips on the owl mask—since receiving it from her twin, she’s relied on it for asylum—and passes the time on her cellphone, keeping 911 close at hand. The day’s last rays cut through the imbricated silver blinds and strike her eyes at 300,000 kilometres per second. The carpet’s weave is red licorice. The clutter on the makeshift shelves rattles with each heavy fist strike: jars of pickled eggplant, homemade candles, a potted hibiscus. A net of linen swings from its hook in the ceiling. Leaning against the far wall is an old, paint-stripped porch door with four glass panels. An empty birdcage hangs from the ceiling. The unassembled pieces of a golden-plated bed frame lean against a wall. Atop a stack of Persian rugs sit bundles of bubble-wrapped vases and brass sculptures.

Despite the chockablock apartment, Zadie is confident that her mother isn’t a hoarder. At least, Zadie is pretty sure she isn’t; these days she is defending her mother to everyone, including herself.

=

Anna Chan returns home at 12:15 p.m., according to the blinking microwave clock, and spins across the length of the apartment, dropping her jacket and sweater and pants over the floor before flopping down on the couch in her panties and a collared shirt.

She throws a forearm over her eyes and says, “I should have kept you in my womb.”

“There’s some congee, but I ate the rest of Gong Gong’s leftovers.”

“Don’t talk to me about your grandfather,” Anna says, then shakes her fists. “These lawyers! These spineless shit-for-brains. Nothing is for justice anymore. Nothing is for good. The government is poisoning our food, our water. No one is holding them accountable ... Big business. The law. Jesus! We need alternative markets. We need to grow our own food ...”

“M.O.M.,” Zadio abbreviates with exasperation. “Please, just call Gong Gong already.”

“If only I had kept you safely tucked inside my womb. And every time the doctors told me to push, I screamed, ‘No! I will not subject her to your Machiavellian agendas!’ Her mother rubs her belly. “Don’t be angry with your mummy, Bitter Bug. She’s just had a hard day.” Anna collapses against the sofa cushions, right arm dangling to the floor like she is a regular Jean-Paul Marat.

“Pants!” Zadio yells.

Her mother sits up and stretches her legs the length of the couch; to witness those cellulite folds pierces the very framework of decency.

“You know, Bitty? We should put these ‘lawyers and politicians,’” she says with exaggerated air quotes, “in some contemporary gender studies courses and see how *they* fare. You see how fascism

begins from the deep? Come at me, Monsanto!” Her mother raises both fists to the ceiling.

“That man was here again, Mom,” Zadie says. “He banged on the door for, like, an hour.”

Her mother doesn’t answer. She lies down again with a forearm over her eyes. Then she turns abruptly to Zadie, as if she’s discovered the answer to inequality in her face. She leaps up and crosses the room in six deliberate strides. Inches away from Zadie, she sucks in her cheeks, her lips pursing, mouth sealed like a vacuum. “Do this,” she says upon her exhale.

“Mom!”

“Just do it. Let me see. Here, just like this.” She repeats the facial expression.

“I’m not—”

“Do it. Just—” as she sucks in her cheeks, her eyes bulge and her round face reddens everywhere except in the crevasse of her chins.

“Fine ...” Zadie copies her mother’s expression. “There. Happy?”

Anna touches Zadie’s cheekbones, the pinchable skin under her eyes. “You want to suck in your cheeks to build the muscles there, Bitty Bug. You wouldn’t want your cheeks to become so moon-like, like mine.”

“Ode to Joy” begins to play, followed by a loud vibration, startling her mother. “Where’s my phone? Almighty God in heaven! Where’d I put my phone?” She runs around the room, rummaging through the couch cushions, scattering papers and folders off her

makeshift desk, a converted sewing machine table with a light and a magnifying glass with flexible arms.

Zadie fishes her mother's phone out of the folds of shed denim and answers the small bright screen.

"*Allô, Zadie?*" says the woman on the other end. "How are you? Is your *maman* home?"

"It's the spineless shit-for-brains," Zadie says, still kneeling over her mother's pants.

Anna stomps across the room and grabs Zadie's arm as though she were trying to shake a bass to death. The phone pops from Zadie's grip and plunks down into her mother's free hand.

"*Stop being such a silly nut!*" she whisper-yells. "Genabelle! So, how are things on the home front?" she says, turning on her heel.



Sitting on the uncomfortable bead-covered chair, Zadie watches her grandfather in a white butcher's apron chop through a large beef flank. Gong Gong is a terracotta Buddha, wielding a weapon from the Qin dynasty, movements infused with the calligraphy of Wang Xizhi. He brandishes this historicity with flair because, as he says, the Chinese no longer care about their heritage: "Once-great palaces drowned for dams! Temples now fish castles for scuba divers. The country? A heap of relics. The faces of warriors stare at us from the dirt and cry, 'Was this why I die! For our history to be sold for pretty pennies?' No, no, no."

He says that, during maturation, there is a point when people turn away from themselves. Just as children grow into adults, civilizations go through these same stages.

“But the lengths to which the Chinese have gone to escape themselves should terrify us,” he says. “Chinese culture is too old for a mid-life crisis! Same with your mother, dah! Too old to become a lawyer all sudden, too old to do it all over again.”

“Gong Gong, please. You should talk to her ...” Zadié offers. “You know how the law is.”

Lately, Zadié’s relationship between her grandfather and mother has become that of mediator. Zadié has been visiting her grandfather alone, her mother refusing to come. Her mother and grandfather have always gotten into heated debates, about communism, about baby formula, about America, about Kiana. But the rift has never been so severe, not since Anna quit her job to fight for Kiana’s estate.

Her grandfather just harrumphs.

“You don’t know the courts, Zadié,” he says. “Neither does your mother. This ill-fated life she lives, aiyah ...”

Cracked open on the table is Pei Mei’s cookbook filled with pictures of bird’s nests, fried duck and pancake, eight-jewelled stuffing, and lotus leaves.

Gong Gong continues to rant about the grand illusion: how everyone believes that they are owed love. He insists it creates a short-sightedness that turns into nostalgia, replaced by larger and larger myths.

“See how people love superheroes!” he says. “Everyone is crazy for superheroes! But when we abandon our roots for fantasies, we become ghosts. We need to think about our traces. It is the main problem with your mother, Zadie. Always been. She imagines herself some kind of hero, but she is just a single person.”

Although Zadie is taller than her grandfather by an inch, he probably weighs four times more; his belly is a cauldron-sized, wrought-iron wok. He is mostly bald, with a few bands of greasy hair across his pate. His suburban home is newly renovated, with granite counters and shiny appliances. On the alabaster mantel, incense releases a slow rise of smoke before a foxed photo of Zadie’s grandmother when she was young. Her hair is tied back in a bun and she wears bright yellow ceremonial robes. Zadie never met her grandmother, and other than her clothes—the vestiges of any life—Zadie knows very little about who she was.

Her grandfather keeps VHS tapes (*Tron*, *When Harry Met Sally ...*) in an ebony chest decorated with cormorants standing in an ivory stream. In the living room, he has an enormous painting of a three-legged messenger bird. With her notebook in front of her, Zadie imagines cranes dictating Chinese script over her page. She enjoys speaking poetry to her grandfather. For him, poetry and writing are respectable occupations that bring one closer to an elucidation of the universe—the highest purpose of the greatest calligraphers and Chinese emperors. The smell of star anise, ginger, and the emperors of old infuse every fabric of his home.

Zadie worries that she can't hide forever at her grandfather's, with its jade statues of horses and warriors, pictures of Mao ("hung in spite"), and cabinets filled with fine china. She loves when he plays "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" on the erhu, the delicate two-string violin that seems ready to snap in his thick hands. But Zadie can't abandon her mother to the loud knocker who ghosts around their apartment building, marking his territory with little piles of pistachio shells.

Her grandfather spoons a mixture of shrimp and pork onto a small square wrap, then dips his fingers into egg white and smears each corner of the square before neatly folding it into a wonton.

He reaches out and touches her brow with his flour-caked fingers, leaving a trace that feels like wet plaster. "You frown too much, dah," he says. "You'll get wrinkles."

She tries to reset her expression, rubbing the texture from her forehead.

Gong Gong quickly turns to the kitchen window, cocking his head so he can look at the grey winter sky. "You should be more like the pelican. No one tells a pelican it *can't*." He winks. It's his favourite joke, and she's heard it more than a few times.

The grandfather who feeds her candies, more chalky than sweet, and pudding made from red beans—it is hard to reconcile the man who gives her lucky money in ornate red envelopes with the one who grew up in mainland China and swam to Hong Kong because he may or may not have been wanted by the Chinese government.



Before Zadie leaves, her grandfather shoves two fifty-dollar bills into her pocket. “Make sure there’s food in the fridge, dah. And don’t tell your mother.”

Had her writing given her the power to communicate with adults? Did her grandfather see her as an equal in her ability to deftly articulate the world? As she listens to her grandfather talk about how he wished people remembered Tiananmen Square, she thinks about how the Little Red Book was the first book she owned. To this day, it is a story about paper tigers.



Post-it Note quotes cover the bathroom mirror, colourful tabs with her mother’s looping scrawl. Some are bent or a little crumpled from times when Zadie, frustrated or suffocated by their relentless aspirational impulses, would tear them from the mirror, only for her mother to rescue and repost them: “A ruffled mind makes a restless pillow,” “Definitions belong to the definers not the defined,” “Fail, fail again, fail better.” Notes to Zadie are scattered among the quotes: “You’re the best bug of all the bitter bugs,” “Mommy loves you.” Sometimes, after a shower, Zadie will emerge and find a square swatch without condensation and feel an inexplicable terror as she tallies the Post-its, as though the mirror were a catalogue of her mother’s feelings and the missing note represented a sudden insouciance.