

Lantern

By Christina Li

On the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, my little brother steps off the plane and onto Canadian soil for the first time. He's taller than I remember — in seven years, the baby brother I once knew has given way to a teenage boy with a lanky frame and tousled brown hair long overdue for a haircut.

He stands for a moment, his head tilted upwards towards the winter sky, as the disembarking passengers walk past him like water around a rock. My baby brother sticks his tongue out to catch the swirling flakes and I try not to laugh, but mostly not to cry.

“Lin Qiu!” I call, and he turns, his face splitting into a grin that lights up his eyes in a look so familiar I feel as if my breath is knocked out of me. My little brother is the splitting image of our father, and the thought sends a pang straight to my heart. People always said Lin Qiu took after our father, and I, our mother. *Lin Qiu and Lin Yu*, they said, *yī mú yī yàng* — like two peas in a pod. Our names together quite literally meant autumn rain — the poetry of it split between the both of us.

My breath is then literally knocked out of me as he careens into me, his arms tight around my waist in embrace.

“Lin Yu! Happy *Yuanxiao*.”

Yuanxiao. I smile wistfully, remembering how we used to celebrate in China, when it was Baba, Mama, Lin Qiu and I. I remember the red lanterns that dotted the sky, marking the end of the lunar festivities, the salty taste of chives and pork dumplings, and the light of fireworks against my eyelids when we tried to sleep. I tousle his hair as my mind drifts to the sound of firecrackers, the sweet tang of candied plums. . .

Almost shyly, he adds, “Thanks for letting me stay with you.”

I can hear the strain in my voice when I reply simply, “Of course.” There's a silence that stretches between us, brimming with all the words we do not say as we walk to the airport terminal — after all, how can words make up for the missing seven years stretching between us? I have loved words all my life, yet at this moment, there were none that could bridge the gaping hole between us. He was six when I left, and now, he was thirteen. Half a lifetime gone by.

As we wait for his luggage in the airport terminal, I ruffle through my purse, faking nonchalance. “How is Mama?”

He shrugs, his eyes trained on the rotating carousel of luggage. “The same. The doctors say the new medicine will work better for her. We put red pockets above you and Baba’s room for the new year. For good luck. That made her happier.” He pauses, as if considering his words. “She misses you.”

A fist clenches my heart and squeezes. “I meant to visit last Lunar New Year, but with my book releasing...”

After Baba’s death, Mama has never been the same. She spoke less, ate less. Her footsteps were always soft on the ground, and some days, I felt like she had become a ghost, translucent and drifting. Sometimes, I felt as if my hand could pass right through her. When the college gave me a chance to study abroad, in Canada, Mama had insisted I go. I had hugged little Lin Qiu goodbye, boarded the flight, and sent a letter with some money home each month. It was through Lin Qiu’s return letters that I’d learned Mama was sick — she had more headaches and slept more. Aunt Yue had consulted a doctor, who described her condition as the ailment of getting old.

He nods, though he doesn’t say anything. He turns away, grabbing his red suitcase, before I can read his expression.

The cab ride back to my apartment is silent; we drive past Chinatown streets filled with vendors selling their wares, of red rice paper and delicate paper lanterns hung from every building crevice. I sigh, my breath fogging up the windows until all I can see are shapeless hues of brilliant red and yellow. I lean my head against the window and dream.

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In this dream, I am thirteen. Lin Qiu, only six, is watching as I fold paper cranes with Mama, decorating their delicate plumages with bits of red and yellow paper. Baba hums as he folds dumplings, his hands dusted with white flour. Outside, there is the cackle of firecrackers and the shrieks of laughter as everyone in the village counts down to the Lunar New Year.

Mama prints our names using an ink brush— 林雨 and 林秋 on the underside of the paper cranes’ wings. *For good luck*, she says, her eyes glittering. She hangs the paper cranes from the

ceiling, and a hundred paper cranes with plumages the colors of fire sways softly above our heads.

“Have I ever told you the meaning behind your names?” Baba asks, looking up. Lin Qiu and I both shake our heads, meeting each other’s gaze in a secret smile. Baba tells us this story every Lunar New Year, and yet, we always shake our heads to indulge him.

“Well,” he says, his voice booming in his Reading Aloud voice. And he would make the most outlandish stories – of dragons who visited our family the night we were born, giving us our names. Of red pockets sent from Gods, our names neatly printed inside. But the ending was always the same, no matter the story.

“You must remember,” he says. “Your name, autumn rain, is shared between the two of you. One of you cannot be without the other.”

This much is memory.

In my dream, after he says this, a dark shadow passes over our heads, engulfing the cranes above our heads in a cloud of black. Baba opens his mouth, but there is no sound, only a wisp of smoke that curls from his mouth, until I can’t see him anymore — until he and Mama become only vague silhouettes in the distance. I hold Lin Qiu’s hand, and I scream and I scream, until Lin Qiu’s hand slips from my grasp, and I am suddenly far away. Alone.

I jolt awake when the cab stops. Beside me, Lin Qiu peers up at my apartment building — dark gray and imposing underneath the setting sun. I muster a smile.

“Welcome home.”

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The dream lingers in my mind, like a persistence ghost biding its time in the crevice of my mind, as I help Lin Qiu unpack his luggage into my guest room.

“I saw this in the street vendor near our house,” he tells me as he pulls out two delicate paper lanterns. One has koi fish the color of autumn leaves imprinted in thin brush strokes, and the other, a tiger with bold black stripes. He unfurls them on the edge of the bed, and I run my hand against the thin rice paper.

“I know you don’t have lantern festivals here, but. . .” He shrugs, and for a split second, I see the

hesitant, little boy I once knew. “I thought you might like it.”

“It’s beautiful.” And it is. I feel the sting of tears against my eyes, and I think of the nights in China, when we lit our own paper lanterns and pushed them towards the sky. Lin Qiu and I would always clasp our hands, close our eyes, and make a wish. Perhaps it’s this memory, or more simply, the weight of missing my little brother that makes me speak.

“I’m sorry I left,” I say, softly. “I’m sorry I ran and never came back.”

I feel Lin Qiu stiffen beside me, and then, his voice barely above a whisper, he asks, “Why? Why did you leave?”

“Because I was scared after Baba died,” I tell him. I press a hand against my eyes, stifling the tears that run down my cheeks. “I was afraid of everything. Of losing you and Mama. I thought ... I thought if I ran away, I wouldn’t be scared anymore.”

And then, more softly, I whisper, “I thought I was being brave.”

As tears stream down my cheeks, it’s my baby brother who wraps his arms around me. My strong, little brother who hugs me. For a minute, we do not say anything. We don’t have to. Finally, against the last traces of daylight of *Yuanxiao* day, he asks, “do you remember the stories Baba used to tell about our names?”

I laugh, and listen as he recounts the tales of fierce dragons and cunning gods with red pockets filled with money and luck. As he speaks, I silently make a wish for things to remain this way — suspended in this moment of candescence, of hope. After all, *Yuanxiao* is a day of wishes.

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That night, after calling home to Mama and Aunt Yue, Lin Qiu and I make our way to the park adjacent to my apartment. Fireworks bloom against the night sky, and a fresh layer of glittering snow coats the ground we walk upon. In my hand, I hold two paper lanterns and some matches. As the clock ticks down the last seconds of *Yuanxiao*, I strike a match, hold the wavering flame and light the lanterns. We watch as they slowly drift into the night sky — two slips of light against the pitch-black darkness.

“Make a wish!” Lin Qiu yells, laughing as he clasps his hands together and closes his eyes.

And I do.