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Jiejie

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Jiejie Connie Shen

In Chinese, her name meant bravery, courage. In English, the name changed into something sinister, taking on a new meaning each day—sometimes weirdo, sometimes chink, sometimes simply the strange silent yellow girl who sat in the back, seemingly without words. Torment came afresh each morning to greet her, lazy with eyes still crusted with morning sleep and joyful with overgrown tongues sticking from the corners of their thin red mouths. They would gather about her in a circle, forming a pink-fleshed forest.

“Fanny rhymes with ugly.” A whisper came trickling into her ear from the seat behind her like a lost ghost looking for its home. Fan knew not to turn around and look at the fat moon-faced monster who the voice belonged to. To do so only made them all the more violent. Outside of the classroom, a small bell screamed and announced the end of class. The girl pushed herself up from her desk to leave, but not fast enough. Fan bristled as the monster’s blonde-furred paw clenched her shoulder.

“Fanny means vagina. Did you know that? Maybe that’s why you smell so weird.” Fan’s mother had long ago taught her the way to tell with white ghosts just as these—do not flee and they will soon flee you. At least, that was what Ai-named-Sherry had said when she told Fan about her journey to America.

“One of them tried to cheat me of my money, but they did not succeed,” Ai-named-Sherry had said after closing, scrubbing at the pools of peanut oil that had sat collecting in the wok. The veins in her arms glowed purple underneath the florescent lights as she made soapy motions in the sink. “There were many men in navy suits, asking me for answers. ‘When did you come to this country? Where are your papers? What relatives do you have in the States? What are their addresses?’ I did not know what to say. We had come over here to raise you; my belly was so swollen I feared it would burst. I ran to the back and told your father what was happening. He has never been scared of anything (in China, he was the one they called to drive out the spirits of dead baby girls from their parents’ homes), but in that moment, I saw something like fear. ‘No English,’ he said. He passed them the \$6,000 that he had been saving inside of the cabinet for you. Believe me when I say that it hurt him to do that. The navy-suited ghosts took the money and left and never came back. If he had fought back, we would have been sent back to China. And that is what it means to be a man.” A disappointment had surged through Fan’s stomach that night after her mother finished the story. Tired after story-telling and hours of working in the restaurant, her mother turned off the lights and went wordless up the stairs. Fan listened to her parents breathing up above in their tiny room, their snores mixing with the damp, greasy scents.

To Fan, paying ghosts to leave seemed cowardly. Her mother had told her stories about witches, women who drank the blood of goats and received eternal life and spat curses at villagers who tried to approach them. Fan admired these creatures, so vibrant with their sallow skin and sullen speech.

“Some *wu* even sacrificed their own to receive favors from the gods,” her mother, Ai (whose American name was Sherry), had told her once as they rolled chickens in sauces and batter. Her father was outside, calling the crippled grandmother still in China

who Fan had never met.

“What do you mean, mother?” Fan had asked. Her small fingers made circles in the salt-and-pepper seasoning spread across the metal counter. “They would give up their happiness to receive good fortune?”

“No, *gau*, stupid girl. They killed their own families.”

A familiar thrill rose in Fan’s stomach and coated her throat with bile. By the time her father had returned from talking to *pou-pou*, slamming the back door behind him and retying his apron with strangely shaky fingers, Fan had already decided that witches were more powerful than men—they could easily overpower white ghosts and wouldn’t have even thought to pay them to go away. They would have just eaten them instead.

After that, each hair tug given, every slur thrown out by a classmate elicited a small and quiet curse. Sometimes it was written down on loose paper, sometimes muttered under her breath, but always in Chinese. Picturing the moon-faced ghost behind her, Fan paired him with a curse of a long and painful death by boils that erupted from his body and smiled at the thought. She etched out the characters in her notebook for death (死亡) as well as the ones for pimples (暗瘡) and sketched an image of his face for good measure.

Tired of not receiving a response, the fat boy-monster took a black fluffy piece from Fan’s ponytail and pulled. A small scream emerged from Fan’s mouth despite her will to stop it. The monster delighted in how brittle her voice sounded, so breakable and small. The sound that made him stop from doing so again was the clearing of the teacher’s throat. Putting on a face of guilt, the boy pulled back his hand and placed it underneath the desk. Together, Fan and the monster looked up, expecting to see the teacher marching toward their desks, referral in hand. Instead, they were surprised to see the teacher beaming, hand curved around the shoulder of a small girl who stood behind her.

“Class, I’d like you to meet Mei.”

Mei looked up and saw Fan sitting in the back row. Their eyes spoke to each other in Cantonese. “*Jiejie*,” Fan’s eyes glinted. “*Jiejie*,” Mei’s eyes returned softly back. Sister.

Together, they endured the torment, their arms intertwined as they walked through the school building, one tall with sharp elbows, the other round with puffy cheeks. Fan had taught Mei how to be a witch on the first day she came, sitting in science class surrounded by plastic skeletons and anatomical hearts.

“Here is how you perform a curse.” Fan pointed her pencil toward her target, a girl with brown hair who enjoyed tripping her in gym class, and waved. “Ni kan. Watch.” She drew the characters for “sickness” and “stomach” on a sheet of paper, carving out a circle around them. “Now turn it three times and ask the gods for it to happen.” A fast learner, Mei performed the curse quickly, muttering a small request under her breath. Eagerly, they watched to see if the girl would fall onto the floor vomiting, but nothing happened.

“Sometimes, it takes a while for it to work.

“I see.”

Mei was the one who convinced Fan that they should begin wearing capes. Her mother, a seamstress, fashioned long black cloaks made out of curtain fabric. The velvety warmth felt heavy upon their skin as they surged across the tiled floors.

“Look, look,” they laughed, peeping out from around bathroom corners and hallways sticky with prepubescent sweat, “the Chinese think that they are witches.” The bravest of the bunch cut off a piece of Fan’s cloak with a pair of sharp red scissors. He was a braggart with fat red lips and stunk of his parents’ cigarette addiction.

“What are you going to do now?” He bragged, brandishing the square of black fabric in front of their faces. “What are you going to do now, weirdos?”

Fan and Mei continued to scrape the bottoms of their Tubberware, quiet as the stagnant leaves outside. He watched Mei slurp a noodle and saw a vampire draining a man of his blood. Fan shoved a clementine in her mouth and ate it whole, bright orange flashes of rind and seed caught between her cavernous teeth. Their twin capes rippled with their motions as if enchanted. The boy swore he felt his feet tingle.

“Freaks,” he muttered, tossing his stolen token to the floor. The boy decided to stay away from them, witches after all. Underneath the table, Fan felt her friend’s small hand clasp her own in victory and smiled.

On their walk home, they went over the day’s accomplishments with one another.

“Remember how scary his face looked when he ran away.”

“His ugly face. His ugly red face.”

“And when I whispered in Chinese to you and Marsha screamed.”

“Yes, yes. She sounded like a donkey!”

The girls laughed until their lungs were void of laughter. Mei drew a bag of candies from her backpack and offered one to Fan. They sucked on sweets until their mouths felt raw, falling into sugared silence, happy with their day’s work.

When they came to the part, Fan departed first. Stretching out a pink-gloved hand, she waved goodbye with all her might. They yelled their secret names loudly from a safe distance so that the gods would not suspect them of evil.

“*Zigian, wu jeje.*”

“*Ziajian.*”

That night, as Ai-Called-Sherry washed the dishes in the sink, Fan grabbed her mother’s wrist and whispered low.

“I want a story about sisters.” Fan’s eyes glistened black as beetles in the shadows of the lamplight. “Tell me about two Chinese sisters who love each other.”

Ai frowned. “I don’t know any happy stories. Only sad ones.”

“What about a medium-happy one?”

“What about medium-sad?”

“A quarter-sad.”

“Okay.”

So Ai constructed her own story, woven from myth and modern legend. “Once there were two sisters who shared a common father, the Dragon King. The older one was beautiful beyond words; the other, smarter than all scholars. They saw a people caught

in drought and sorrowed. Each had the power to channel water from their fingertips or steal them from mountainsides: because of their kindness, water flowed freely and in abundance." Ai's voice drifted, brow furrowed in thought as she tried to think of something to change the coming sadness. "The sisters were quiet about their powers, always acting out of humility and patience." Fan walked over to a table and rested her head upon it, hearing the sound of the story echoing in the wood. "They did not ask for anything except for peace. But once, and only once, the second daughter made a mistake. Upon listening to human praise, she fell in love with them. The first daughter, pining for her sister's love, waited for her to fall asleep one night and crept inside her room." Fan's eyes began to flutter. "The first daughter raised a sword above the bed and aimed..." Ai turned to see her daughter sleeping and thought it best to not finish, instead returning to the washing of dishes, preparing for what the next day would bring.

Mei was sitting with Sandra when Fan came into class the next day. There was no cape around her shoulders so that they laid bare underneath of her tank top, pieces of pale skin glinting as she moved. Fan marched up to their desks and spoke to Mei in Chinese, ignoring the white ghost beside her.

"What are you doing?"

"Sandra is nice. She's not mean like the others."

"Where is your cape?"

"It got too hot."

Furious, Fan whipped off her own cape and threw it in Mei's face. The children ogled at her white-hot rage that sizzled as she ran past them to the bathroom, tendrils of black hair and tears sticking to her cheeks. Once inside of a stall, she sat on a toilet seat and seethed. Was there a curse strong enough for sisters who betrayed their sisters? Ripping off a piece of toilet paper, Fan blew her nose and thought about what to do.

Fan ignored Mei's anxious glances throughout the entire class period. As the class lined up to go to recess, Mei ran up to Fan and offered her the cape.

"I forgot mine. I promise I'll wear it tomorrow."

Unfeeling, Fan ignored Mei's pleas and stared straight ahead. The other girl shook her head slowly, returning to her place next to Sandra in line.

Once outside, the children ran off to form groups. Some collected by the monkey bars, some in the sandbox; others played marbles on the cool black asphalt. Fan watched as Sandra pushed Mei on the swing set, her small legs pumping the air. Fan ripped pieces of grass from the ground and watched ants make hills to pass the time.

A crunching sound rang through the air, followed by a number of screams cutting across Fan's clouded mind. With a jolt, she saw Mei's body laid out flat along the dirt, ten feet from where the swingset stood. Her leg was draped loosely at her side. Fan felt a sharp thud inside of her stomach when she saw a single bone sticking strangely from Mei's knee. Fan thought about the time her father had rescued a baby bird that had

fallen from its nest, its legs pointing upwards toward the sky. It had died a day later. A gurgle from Fan's stomach alerted her that she was about to puke.

As the teachers arrived to carry Mei into the nurse's office, Fan wiped the vomit from her mouth and watched from a distance. They lifted her fragile body with a collective heave. Mei's cry cracked through the atmosphere. They began to advance toward Fan, but it was too late to escape. They would know that she was the culprit, the jealous one who had cursed her only friend out of spite. She watched stark-eyed with fear as Mei's limp body was hurried past her, carried toward the door. Looking up, Fan saw the monsters gathered around too, some with shovels and jumpropes still in their dirt-cruste hands. In Fan's mind, their plastic toys looked like pitchforks and torches, glinting in the mid-afternoon sun.

"It's their fault," Fan thought to herself, "They were the ones who made me hurt Mei." And yet, Fan knew this was not true—that maybe, in the midst of her make-believe, the magic had begun working after all, making Fan pay for her lies, her anger, her need to keep Mei as hers and hers alone.

As Mei passed by her, carried by many white hands, their eyes spoke to one another once more.

"Are we still sisters? Do you forgive me?" Fan asked. She felt her face bloat with feeling, struggling to withhold the tears.

Mei did not respond.