

NIGHT

When I woke, the room was so black that I had to blink a few times to make sure my eyelids were really open. I stared through the deep black at what I believed to be the ceiling, taking extended breaths, waiting for my vision to adjust. Minutes passed, and still I was unable to make out any of the objects in the room. I must gradually have fallen asleep again, until I was woken a second time by a weak, squeaking voice.

‘Excuse me, is anybody there? I would very much appreciate some help.’

I sat up and directed my attention to where the voice was coming from and saw a soft orange light near the floor. I quickly got out of bed, made my way over to it and squatted down to take a better look. A small mushroom – about the length of a hairpin – had sprouted from the boards. It had a thin stem, which supported its large, flat and slightly wrinkled cap. The top half of it was glowing, but the light hadn’t made any of its surroundings visible. I prodded its cap with my index finger.

‘I would rather not be touched,’ the mushroom said.

I was certain that this was a dream. I brought my hand up to my nose and noticed a faint, musky smell at the tip of my finger.

‘Can you please help me?’ it said again.

‘What do you need?’ I asked.

‘Well, you see, I’d like to be remembered.’

I looked around. Everything besides the mushroom was buried in darkness. This was unusual, as my mother-in-law always kept a light on in the living room for when she had to use the bathroom at night. I wasn’t in our apartment; that was for sure. Wherever I was, it must have been an old place. There were smells of smoke and cooking oil that had been absorbed into the walls.

‘It is normal that you don’t understand,’ the mushroom said, upon seeing how puzzled I was. Even though I would be mad to imagine it had eyes, I sensed it staring at me.

‘But when you leave this room,’ it said, ‘I’d like you to remember me.’

All I could think of was finding a way to wake up. The air had already been moist, but the humidity had built even more in the past few minutes. I pinched myself on the forearm.

‘I’m afraid that won’t work,’ the mushroom said. ‘You’re not in a dream. Not exactly.’

‘If this isn’t a dream,’ I said, ‘then how is it possible that I’m here, in this dark room, talking to a mushroom?’

‘I am not a mushroom. Not in the way you think I am. And I cannot perceive light and darkness, unfortunately.’

‘But you can perceive dream and reality?’

‘You could say that. But oftentimes those two things are not so different.’

I stood up. Dream or reality, I had to leave the room.

‘How do I get out of here?’ I asked.

‘I suggest you go back to bed, climb beneath the covers, make yourself comfortable and go to sleep. There is no other door out of this room.’

I wasn’t convinced, and decided to prove the mushroom wrong. I placed my hands on the wall in front of me. It was a corner. I started moving to my left. The bricks were exposed; I could feel the mortar joints. After seven steps, I reached another corner, so I turned and continued. Seven more steps until the next corner. The whole time, I kept my eye fixed on the orange light so that I wouldn’t lose my sense of direction. The third wall measured the same length, and examining the fourth, I discovered that I was in a square-shaped room, without a single door.

I had no choice but to trust the mushroom. The bed must be in the centre of the room, I reasoned, so I fumbled around for it in the dark, careful not to run my leg into its corners. I found it easily, and did as I was told.

To my surprise, it didn’t take long for me to fall asleep. The orange mushroom said nothing more.

When I woke again, I was alone on my bed, the morning sky was a washed-out blue and in the corner of the room sat nothing but my dragon tree in its pot. To make sure, I dragged the pot to the side and checked the floors. No mushroom in sight. Relieved, I looked at the clock. It was a little before seven in the morning. I decided not to linger in bed and started my usual routine: I brewed a pot of oolong tea, put on the first movement of Schubert's Piano Sonata in B-flat major and took out the sheet music to follow along.

It was not until later, after the sonata had ended and I was stepping into the shower, that I noticed the musky smell on my finger.

DELIVERIES

My mother-in-law sat on the only stool in the apartment, fanning herself in the corner of the living room. The fan emitted a sandalwood scent as she waved it with one hand, her other hand clenched into a fist, drumming the pressure points on her legs. I was mopping the floor so that we could walk around in our socks, and Bowen had just found a knife and was cutting the plastic that was wrapped over the sofa. If it had been up to me, we would have moved into the new apartment in the autumn, during cooler weather, but my mother-in-law had begun to show signs of depression after Bowen's father had passed away the month before. During the day, I was told, she would lie in bed, only having enough energy to get up to use the toilet. She would cook one large pot of congee every Monday and eat it for the rest of the week. At night, she had started taking pills to fall asleep.

Bowen was a good son, and it was only to be expected that he couldn't allow his mother to be alone back in

Yunnan, so he had sold our old apartment and quickly purchased a larger one. He then brought his mother to Beijing, and that was how we were unpacking boxes while eating watermelon on a thirty-some-degrees day, preparing to live with my mother-in-law for the rest of the time she had in this world. She was still quite young, so I'd say at least twenty more years. If we took good care of her, perhaps she could live for another thirty.

When the doorbell rang, I was feeling thirsty and had just picked up a piece of melon from the plate on the piano bench. Bowen gestured to me to get the door. It was the delivery man, who handed me a box. It felt cold on the outside.

'Be sure to put it in the fridge as soon as possible,' he said. 'It's fresh produce.'

We had not informed anyone of our new address yet, not that we wanted to keep it secret, but the past few days had been too hectic. As the delivery man rushed off to his next address, Bowen was already urging me to make the bed for his mother, so I left the box on the floor and hurried to attend to her needs.

I found her in the bedroom already, unpacking her own duvet and sheets. She was sitting on the bed, trying to pull the plastic zip tie open with her hands.

'Ma,' I said, 'you're going to hurt yourself. Let me get you a pair of scissors.'

I went to get the toolbox from Bowen. It still felt strange to me, calling somebody I hardly knew 'Ma.'

Truth be told, I wasn't all that close with my own mother any more. Even before I married, I'd visited my parents no more than two or three times a year.

'Oh, thank you. I just didn't want to bother Bowen,' my mother-in-law explained, slightly embarrassed, when I came back with the scissors. 'He seemed busy with the sofa.'

I took over and began to make her bed while she stood tensely next to the door, watching me.

'Do you think these sheets are clean?' she asked while scratching the back of her ear with the tip of the fan.

'Well, they're new, although probably not as clean as we'd want them to be. But it doesn't seem like the washing machine will be arriving today.'

'That's too bad,' she said. 'I've just always cleaned everything before use. It must be a habit I picked up from my husband. He was quite adamant about that.'

I felt uncomfortable responding to anything related to Bowen's father, as Bowen had explicitly told me not to mention him in front of his mother. I nodded without looking back at her and continued to arrange the duvet cover.

'He was a very clean person,' she continued, oblivious to my unease. 'Always washing vegetables at least three times before cooking them. Cleaning the sheets every four days. Now, tell me, what was all that for? Did it keep him healthy?'

I was desperate to finish up so that I could join my husband in the living room. I had never been particularly skilful at comforting people, or speaking about those who were gone in a way that didn't feel overly disconnected. It wasn't because I couldn't feel sympathy for those who were mourning, more that in the face of such pain and loss, I always felt unworthy to offer anything.

Perhaps, I reasoned, my mother-in-law wasn't expecting a response anyway. The way her voice sounded, she could've been talking to a plant. As long as she could still speak about Bowen's father, it didn't matter to her whether anybody was listening. So I let her continue.

'Song Yan,' she said, 'I'm afraid that I will die soon too, just like my husband. I could also have a heart attack. And I wouldn't even be able to see my grandchildren.'

'Don't say such things. We'll take good care of you.'

'Are you and Bowen planning to have children soon?' She began fidgeting with the loose wardrobe door handles.

'He's quite focused on his job right now.'

I arranged the duvet and pillows and went for the door. My mother-in-law didn't say anything, but I heard her sigh when I walked out of the room. I hadn't met her many times before she moved to Beijing, but in the past few days I'd begun to piece together her personality. She had an air of sullenness, often sighing, never requesting anything outright, but making demands nonetheless. When she ran into an acquaintance on the street, she

would give a smile that wouldn't linger beyond the moment she turned her head away. The way she asked for things often left others without room to say no: take, for instance, her move to Beijing. Although it was Bowen who had insisted, it was, certainly, her idea at first. She had refused to hire a caretaker, but continued to call her son every night to remind him of her inability to look after herself.

She was a polite lady, that much I did recognise. But the more well mannered she was, the more I sensed her disregard for my will.

Bowen and I had been married for three years. I'd wanted a child at first, but he'd been working to get a promotion at his company, so I had put off raising it with him. As time went by, I'd convinced myself that I could always afford to wait a few more years. As long as I had a child before I turned thirty-three, I was fine. But now that his mother had brought it up with me, I thought I could try and approach the topic.

'We've been married for three years,' I said that night, while combing my hair in the bathroom.

'Has it been three years already?' Bowen was sitting on the bed in his white undershirt, leaning against the headboard and reading printed PowerPoint slides.

He looked tired. He'd just gotten a fresh haircut and the barber had trimmed it to be unnaturally sharp and tidy, which didn't match his face at all. It sat stiffly on top of his head like a wig.

‘I know that you’re busy,’ I said. ‘But now that your mother is here, you know, we can probably start thinking about having a child.’

‘She’s your mother now too, Song Yan.’ He sleeved the slides and sighed. He sighed in the same way as his mother, I noticed. A long inhale, followed by a short exhale.

‘I’m still not used to that.’ I turned off the bathroom light and sat on the bed, facing him. ‘But Ma can help us take care of a child.’

‘Did she say something to you?’

I nodded. ‘She mentioned it. I also thought of it the other day, when I was teaching Yuyu. Her mother is pregnant again. With a boy, this time.’

He leaned towards me and picked an eyelash off my cheek. ‘You just took on a new pupil, didn’t you? And I, well, I hardly even have any time for you these days.’

Then he smiled and paused for a moment, just long enough for his words to sound sincere, and turned off the lamp.

The following day, I didn’t have a lesson until the afternoon. I spent the morning chatting with my mother-in-law while scrubbing the kitchen sink.

‘I finally slept well last night, without any medication,’ my mother-in-law said through a yawn. ‘In fact, I could barely wake up this morning. It must be because of all the oxygen here.’

‘The oxygen?’

‘The oxygen, for sure. Reverse altitude sickness is what they call it. I’ve spent my whole life in the highlands. There’s too much oxygen here for me.’

‘Now that you mention it, last time Bowen and I returned from Yunnan, I felt drowsy for days. I thought I was just tired from the travel.’

I rinsed the sponge and took off my rubber gloves.

‘I heard that the temperatures are so comfortable there, it always feels like spring,’ I said. ‘When Bowen has more time, I want to do a road trip around Yunnan. We could fly into Kunming and drive up all the way to Shangri-La. What do you think?’

‘Where are the cups?’ My mother-in-law stood up from her stool. ‘I want some water. It’s so dry here, I’ll never get used to it.’

I washed my hands and poured her a cup of warm water. I wondered if she knew that it was the wettest it ever gets in Beijing, with frequent summer rains and high levels of humidity in the air.

It was then that I remembered the package we’d received the day before. I found it still there by the door, where I had left it.

‘What’s that?’ my mother-in-law asked when I brought the box over.

‘I think it was delivered to the wrong address. We didn’t order anything. Must be for the previous tenants.’

‘Let’s see what’s inside.’

She took the box from me and began running a scissor blade through the tape, even though it was clear that she wasn’t the one who had ordered it either. She’d finally expressed interest in something and I didn’t want to overstep by telling her what not to do, so I let her open the package.

Inside the box were bags of mushrooms, a type I had never seen before. The ice packs had melted overnight.

‘Ji zong mushrooms!’ my mother-in-law cried out.

‘What?’ I asked, rather startled. She was the most excited I had ever seen her.

‘Ji zong mushrooms. They’re wild, grown in Yunnan. Did Bowen buy these?’

I examined the mushrooms. They looked appalling – a dirty brown, with long, overly thick stems and small, flaccid caps.

‘I’ll put them in the fridge for now and tell the delivery man to come get them,’ I said.

‘They’ll spoil before then!’ She shielded the box with her body. ‘Why didn’t you put these in the fridge last night? Thankfully, they still look really fresh. Bowen loved these when he was a child. Don’t you know that Yunnan’s mushrooms are famous around the country? It’s not easy to get them outside of the province, especially ones that are fresh like these. We could make a soup for dinner tonight.’

Honestly, I couldn't agree with my mother-in-law on how fresh they looked. I had seen very few things in my life that looked less appetising. I still wanted to send them back, but my mother-in-law had begun to take them out of the box, feeling no guilt, it seemed, at keeping somebody else's package and already overly attached to this boxed-up reminder of her home. The sight of the mushrooms had woken her from her doldrums.

'I'll teach you how to cook these,' she said with a proud smile, rolling up her sleeves. 'Bowen will be so happy.'

'Ma, I have to go out. I have a lesson. I'll be back before dinner.'

'Don't come home too late. Can you buy a chicken while you're out?'

I agreed, because I didn't want to argue with her. I changed my clothes and left the apartment.

This was my first lesson with little Shaobo, and it took me almost an hour to find where he lived, though it was not far from us, in an old brick building. As far as I knew, little Shaobo did not have a mother; perhaps his parents were divorced, or something had happened to her, but it was not my place to ask. His father's apartment was crowded with furniture and all kinds of objects: toys, bowls, newspapers, snacks, a Go board, paintbrushes and all sorts of other things. They even had a red and black war bonnet, which little Shaobo

put on his head and wore for the entire lesson. The air conditioning was off and though the windows were open, the air was still and stale.

Little Shaobo was six years old, and his father had decided that he wanted his son to learn an instrument, reasoning that once little Shaobo was old enough for university, skill at the piano would give him a better chance at being admitted to a top-tier school. I thought about telling him that it was not so simple, that most children would find it impossible to achieve the level of expertise required. If he wanted little Shaobo to go to a top-tier university, using the extra time to study would probably be more effective. Many of my students' parents had similar aspirations, and each time I heard about them, I felt grateful that my own father never saw the piano as a means for me to achieve something else. As a concert pianist himself, the piano is the beginning, middle and end for my father. University, relationships, even his career – they are simply there as support for his artistic pursuit. He is a pure and simple man. I admire him for it. I know how difficult it is; after all, I've failed to live like that.

I fished out *John Thompson's Easiest Piano Course* books from my tote. Little Shaobo had such small hands that he had to stretch to place his fingers on five adjacent keys. The war bonnet was too big and kept falling over his eyes. It also made him sweat, but when

I asked him whether he wanted to take it off, he held it in place and wouldn't let go.

Before we began, I told little Shaobo what I told all my students: 'The one thing more important than playing the piano is listening to yourself play.'

Though he nodded, he did not understand what I was trying to say, and I didn't blame him. Still, they were words that I wish my teacher had said to me at the beginning, when I was a child touching those black and white keys for the first time. It was not until I was at university that someone pointed out that I had not been listening to myself.

'What do you mean?' I had asked Dong Mo, the older student, at the time.

'You're not listening,' she'd said. 'So how do you know what you're playing?'

I realised then how much more difficult it is to change behaviour developed through the years than it is to adopt an entirely new one. Perhaps that was why I never became a concert pianist and settled for being a teacher instead.

Little Shaobo expressed a strong level of interest for the first fifteen minutes or so, but then, abruptly, as if possessed by a spirit, he jumped up from his seat and started putting on his quad skates. No matter what his father said, he would not touch the piano again, so I ended the lesson early, assuring his father that this was