

AS SHE BLOSSOMS IN TWILIGHT

在偏差中盛開的她

After a serious car accident leaves her in a coma, a woman on the threshold of mid-life returns to the turning point of her childhood: the cult ritual she and her now-deceased twin brother were forced to attend at age fourteen.

When their father had an affair, the mother of twin siblings Su Fang and Su Ying sought solace in a superstitious cult. Pressured by their mother, the twins attended an exorcism ceremony which traumatized Su Ying, leading to his eventual suicide. Suffering from survivor's guilt, Su Fang managed to carry on, but the wound caused by the loss of her brother never healed. Su Ying has become his sister's inner demon, an internal abyss which she can never take her eyes off of. Now an adult, Su Fang feels as if she has finally achieved normalcy, but the abyss comes back to haunt her after she gives birth to her first child. She begins to see Su Ying everywhere, always out of the corner of her eye, always demanding an answer to the same question: "You saw it, didn't you? You were there. Why didn't you save me?"

Her nerves frayed, Su Fang crashes her car. While in a coma, she is sent on a journey back to the beginning of her personal tragedy at age fourteen. There, she discovers inconsistencies in the events she recalls. Has she simply misremembered? Is it possible to know what really happened? What's more, there is always a voice in her coma-dream. Is it Su Ying speaking to her, or just another facet of herself? Or, could it be that someone else has entered her dream and is actively manipulating her memories?

When we are pushed to the limit, it is said we are forced to make choices in order to survive. Su Fang's mother chose superstition, her brother, Su Ying, chose death, and Su Fang chose to become someone else entirely...



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This astounding work of fiction is the debut novel of author Murasaki Fujiyama. Tackling family dysfunction and the dark undercurrents of society, Murasaki sculpts a haunting and unsentimental portrait of a young woman whose inner self has been shattered. No one is free of faults or internal contradictions, and it is Murasaki's precise rendering of the light and the dark in every character that grounds this sometimes surreal novel in the bedrock of reality.

Murasaki Fujiyama 藤山紫

Known for her dark subject matter, author Murasaki Fujiyama received the 2024 POPO Best Original Novel Award for *Love of God*. Her work spans multiple genres, incorporating elements of romance, fantasy, and suspense/thriller.

AS SHE BLOSSOMS IN TWILIGHT

By Murasaki Fujiyama

Translated by Jun Liu

Chapter 1 The Phantom Wardrobe

Impact, and then an abyss. After the crash her body seems to plunge through endless dark, adrift for so long her own name loosens and slips away. She is a stray ghost – perhaps of someone already dead – until a sudden gravity tugs at her feet. A heavy step on solid ground and the sensations of being human come rushing back. The floating stops. She is a phantom no more.

Su Fang starts awake in her high school at dusk, back in her sophomore Loyalty Class – the first section of her year. The car wreck was only a nightmare, thank heavens. She is alive.

“Had your nap? Come help with the classroom.”

The voice belongs to Lin I-cheng, the arts representative; the quiet girl beside her is Wu Ming-fei. The three of them – Su Fang included – make up the team for the classroom decorating contest. It’s the final push before the deadline, and for the past week, they’ve been staying after school every day to cut, paste, and improvise.

“Our mastermind takes time for a nap, huh,” I-cheng grumbles, looking at the groggy Su Fang, nudging the silver-rimmed glasses up her nose.

“I thought my part was done. Sorry.” Flushing, Su Fang smooths the creases on her track pants, slips on her glasses, and drops to the floor to sort the drifts of orange, tangerine, and red paper.

She is hopeless with crafts. Since the project began she has moved at a snail’s pace, holding the others back, so I-cheng only assigns her the trivial stuff.

The big idea – her idea, naïve as a daydream – is a tree, a maple so lifelike it may as well have rooted itself in the classroom. To pull it off, they cut leaves from colored paper and glue them one by one in layers – orange, then vermilion, then crimson. The work is a grind. Around sixty percent in, they nearly scrap the whole thing, but there isn’t time to start again, so they grit their teeth and keep at it.

No one really wants to be arts representative. At elections a few loud girls simply called out two names – Lin I-cheng for the post, Wu Ming-fei as her helper – and the class let it stand without even voting. Su Fang wasn’t part of the plan until I-cheng said they needed one more pair of hands. “Then get Su Fang,” one of the girls jeered. The room erupted in snickers.

They are the unwanted in this class – not outcasts, but simply surplus. The fifth rider told to take the next Ferris wheel cabin; the awkward third at a tiny Starbucks table; the extra body at a KTV karaoke “two-for-one” where singles pay full price. Naturally, the three of them end up with the thankless job of dressing the room.

I-cheng has atopic dermatitis. On her pale skin a few white plaques flake like fish scales. The condition shames her – or perhaps shame has hardened into a suit of armor that can read as pride at times. Because she relies on a cream that’s said to thin the skin as a side effect, fine capillaries show on her face and limbs, faint rose lines against snow.

Su Fang would never say it aloud, but something about it draws her: the scale-like white patches, the tender pinkness of a little mermaid’s skin, and the web of vessels like vines or winter branches. If only she could touch them without reserve, then she might finally understand I-cheng.

There are forty-three students in the class. Su Fang has no wish to know them all – only I-cheng. She wants to read her capillaries; the tilt of those silver rims; the pink petals on her hands and along her arms, like fallen rose. The bane of I-cheng captivates Su Fang. Besides, I-cheng is amazing with drawings and crafts.

Ming-fei, the only one of the three without glasses, is quiet enough to disappear. Always reading some book with a title no one remembers, she might have walked out of a Shunji Iwai film in the 90s – white shirt, pure, out of reach. Even when they work or study together she shares almost nothing; mostly she does whatever I-cheng asks.

Su Fang has hoped this project would give her an opening, but all she’s coaxed from Ming-fei so far are little starter words: “Mm”, “Oh”, “Yes”, “Okay” – as if a new AI had just been switched on.

They work until the sky sours toward night. The green digits on I-cheng’s watch jump to a glaring 20:25. “Gosh, let’s pack it in,” she calls. “A teacher will be making rounds.”

Su Fang nods, kneeling to salvage useful pieces while I-cheng sweeps up the rest. Ming-fei, still wordless, gathers the tools.

Halfway through, an unfamiliar voice breathes, “Will you come to the restroom with me?”

They both turn. It’s tight-lipped Ming-fei, speaking a full sentence. “Sure,” Su Fang says, startled and a little pleased. “Want to come along, arts representative?” I-cheng shakes her head and keeps sweeping.

“Let’s go, then.” Su Fang steps to Ming-fei’s side and takes her hand. Down the dim corridor they go, and for reasons she can’t name, Su Fang’s heart kicks hard, a small, irrepressible leap of joy. They hardly speak, but hand in hand they feel as natural as friends. She tells herself she can’t be that off-putting if Ming-fei hasn’t pulled away. If she’d minded, she would have let go already.

“School’s pretty creepy at night, isn’t it?” Su Fang says, more to herself. She just watched *The Ring* on late-night cable. Hideo Nakata’s adaptation of Kōji Suzuki’s novel truly rattled her. Still, she won’t let fear show. In her head she chants: Sailor Mars, Sailor Mars – the flame-wielding shrine maiden from *Sailor Moon*. That’s who she wants to be; that’s her spiritual backbone.

“Mm,” Ming-fei mumbles.

At the restroom door Ming-fei glances back. “You need to go too?”

“I’m fine.”

Ming-fei enters a stall. Su Fang tips her head up at the old fluorescent tube on the ceiling, which flickers like a tired eyelid. When she looks forward again, standing sentinel at the far end of the room is a wooden wardrobe.

Was *that* there a second ago? A cupboard for mops? she wonders. She edges closer. The nearer she gets, the wronger it feels. A wardrobe has no business in a restroom – and stranger still, this wardrobe looks familiar.

She lifts a hand to touch it. “Do you need to go?” Ming-fei calls from behind. Su Fang whips around, then looks back. The wardrobe is gone.

“I’m good. Let’s go,” she says, following Ming-fei out.

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There are still several days until the project ends. She won’t admit out loud that going home late night after night is wearing her thin.

The nearest station to her house is a flag stop – no staff, local trains only. In daylight that’s fine; after dark the place turns eerie. Each time she gets off the train she sprints for home. Running has one other benefit: mosquitoes can’t catch you.

Tonight, on the usually empty platform, stands a boy about her age. He looks up from his book as she steps off and gives her a small, polite smile.

She nods and quickens her pace, across the broad quilt of rice paddies; under streetlamps humming with insects; past the last few Vietnamese eateries still open among the shuttered ones. The lamps give little light to the dusky lane; the neon signs blaze more fiercely instead.

At the door she kicks off her shoes. “Mom, I’m home – sorry I’m late!”

Her mother’s name could have been lifted from any 8 p.m. soap opera on one of the “Big Three” television channels: Hsu Chiu-yueh – Chiu-yueh meaning “Autumn Moon” – a classic tragic character. The Taiwanese pronunciation for Hsu, *khóo*, doesn’t help, it’s a near-homophone for the word “bitter.” This is why Su Fang has her mother’s name saved in her phone as “Bitter Autumn Moon.”

“Come eat,” Chiu-yueh says mildly. She knows why her daughter has been late and doesn’t fuss.

The expected storm didn’t break, Su Fang’s shoulders loosen in relief. She pulls out a chair and eats. Mid-meal her gaze snags on the wall calendar – tomorrow’s the weekend. “Is Su Fen coming back?”

“No.”

Of course. In the first year after her elder sister left for university, Su Fang kept asking and asking, hoping for a date. By the second year she asked only now and then. Now it’s the third year, and she’s gone back to asking every week. Surely Su Fen won’t be so cruel as to stay away a full three years?

Coming home late is scary; being alone in this house with her mother scares her even more.

There is no father at home. He has been gone a long time – with another woman, or so she is told. The divorce should have happened years ago, but the marriage remains: what she can’t have, no one else will, is how Chiu-yueh puts it. In truth, Su Fang knows, her mother mainly thinks

divorce is shameful – an admission of failure: failure at judging people, failure at marriage, failure with money. She treats Su Ying, her youngest child, the same way.

Having seen too much already, Su Fang just hopes her mother won't do the same to her. If she keeps playing the good girl, surely she'll be spared? Be obedient, ordinary, doll-like; better yet, be Sailor Mercury – the gentle, brainy one who lives with her mother after a divorce – most likely her mom's ideal of a "normal daughter."

Before she can finish eating, Auntie Chen – an all-too-frequent visitor – sweeps in. Su Fang shoots to her feet to clear the table, anything to avoid conversation. The topics Auntie Chen shares with her mother are precisely the ones she can't bear.

Schoolbag in hand, she turns toward the stairs. Right then Auntie Chen comes out of the bathroom and they nearly collide. "Su Fang, sweetheart," Auntie Chen says warmly, "I brought a watermelon. Come have some."

Politeness, her great school survival skill, kicks in. "I'm fine, thank you – I just ate." She slips into the bedroom she once shared with her twin brother. With Su Ying gone, it's hers alone now. It felt strange at first, but three years take the edge off most things.

Voices drift up from the first floor. Half listening against her will, she thumbs her sturdy little Nokia and texts Su Fen: "*Sis, Auntie Chen is at it again – pressing Mom to invite the Master to perform a ritual and call your soul back.*"

A long beat. Then: "*I don't feel my soul being called anywhere. How can she show her face again? After what happened, and Mom still won't shut the door on her – unbelievable.*"

Su Fang smiles and types, "*I want to go to university in Taipei too. You're right not to come back. I hope you never have to.*"

She truly hopes never to hear her mother announce that her sister is coming home. It's a knot she can't unkink: she misses her sister fiercely, yet she doesn't want her back in this house.

She, too, once she steps out of this door, will probably never return. No, not probably. Certainly.

Staring up at the ceiling, she thinks of the boy at the station. Must have seen him somewhere before.

Out of the corner of her eye a man in black drifts in at the window and glides out through the closed door. She jerks upright, a hand to her chest, trying to decide whether she truly saw it.

At the same instant something clings to the back of her left hand, and a strange numbness tightens the tip of one finger.

Before she can puzzle it out, a text from Su Fen pulls her mind back: "*How are you? Taking your meds? If you want to talk, tell me.*"

She sets the phone down. There's no time to reply; she's a one-woman Ghostbuster now, she tells herself, and has to focus on the investigation. She remembers classmates crowding around a "pen spirit" game – two people hold a pen together and wait for answers to pull it across the page. If she tries it here, could she talk to whatever's in the house?

No – don't say "ghost". If Auntie Chen hears that, she'll come running with that "Master". Su Fang believes in science; hallucinations aren't hauntings.

In Japanese the term for a supernatural event is written *shinrei genshō* – literally, “mind-spirit phenomenon”. It suggests these things arise from the mind, not from the wandering dead. Her mother and Auntie Chen’s beliefs aren’t reality. Even *The Ring* isn’t real.

No shadow crossed her room. The tacky feeling on her hand isn’t a spirit’s touch; the tingling at her fingertip isn’t some magnetic field; no cursed girl climbs out of the television to kill someone on the seventh day. It’s all in the mind.

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On Saturday she’s back at school. Like the day before, the three of them kneel or crouch to keep cutting and pasting. After last night’s exchange with Ming-fei, Su Fang imagined the distance between them has shrunk, that they might talk more. The silence persists.

Why haven’t we thought to be friends, we three extras the class never needs? If lonely people lean on one another, then each gets a shoulder, right?

I-cheng has her skin. Ming-fei is too ethereal, too unlike the rest. Su Fang is an introvert. Each has her reason to be solitary; they share, at least, the ache of it.

She thinks herself odd, and because of it, alone. Never mind. Now she has company. Apart from family – apart from her twin, Su Ying – this is the first time she has felt it.

“Got a university in mind?” she asks, breaking the hush.

“Up north,” I-cheng answers first.

“Me too,” whispers Ming-fei.

“Same,” says Su Fang, smiling. “Why? My reason’s simple: I don’t want to stay at home. Is it the same for you?”

“I want National Taiwan University. Chinese literature,” says Ming-fei resolutely.

There are reasons like that, Su Fang thinks – become a better self, build a better life – not only escape.

“I want to be a dermatologist,” I-cheng says. “So NTU as well – or Yang-Ming. I want to help people who suffer the way I do.” As she speaks, her eyes take on a far-off glitter – Milky Way, or northern lights over Iceland.

Su Fang’s own wish feels paltry beside theirs. Shame creeps in.

“For medicine ... what about Cheng Kung?” Ming-fei asks. Back home, National Cheng Kung’s med school is one of the best; she can’t see why I-cheng would leave Tainan and go all the way to Taipei.

“Nothing wrong with Cheng Kung,” I-cheng says. “But I want to leave. There are other people at my place; I don’t worry about my mom being lonely.” She turns to Su Fang. “Your dad isn’t home, right? Your mom would be alone. Can you live with that?”

“If you go north, your mother will be by herself?” Ming-fei asks, suddenly earnest.

A twist of pain. How does everyone know what should be private? Su Fang rewinds her memory, then figures the neighbors told the neighbors who told the neighbors.

Since they know, there's no point in hedging. "Yeah. My dad's been gone a long time," she says – so long she can barely remember his face.

Pity softens both their eyes – the look children from ordinary homes give when they imagine losing a parent. They've been doted on since day one; the loss of even one parent is a tearing grief.

Their eyes might as well be saying, This girl has no father – or no mother – how pitiful. They don't look at other people that way. They give her that look because she comes from an abnormal family.

After school she drags herself home and finds Auntie Chen circling the rooms with a smoking bundle of incense.

"What's the matter, Mom? Hello, Auntie." She bows, because manners are the rule here, slips off her canvas shoes, and changes into house slippers.

"Su Fang, don't you feel something off about the energy in this house?" Chiu-yueh asks.