

CLOUD MOUNTAIN

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* 2019 Openbook Award

* 2020 Taipei Book Fair Award

* 2020 Golden Tripod Award

Multiple disasters – a sister’s deadly car accident and a father’s cancer – tether a middle-aged woman to her family. Her sister’s boyfriend watches dreams of love pass him by. Placid exteriors mask tortured inner lives played out in this suburban apartment complex facing a mountain.

The sudden death of Yang Chi-yung’s elder sister in a car accident nearly destroys their parents. Unfortunately, it isn’t a final blow; her father is diagnosed with cancer only a few years later. While Chi-yung initially stayed at home to provide emotional support, her service comes to include more and more physical support – first for both parents, and then (after her father’s death) for her aging mother.

Although the middle-aged Chi-yung maintains an outward calm, her inner life has become tortured and fragile. Words easily turn into omens, and accidents into catastrophes. Life with her mother goes on in a state of hidden tension, the depths of which only she and the listening reader can begin to plumb.

At its very exterior, this novel depicts a still scene of an apartment building at the outskirts of Taipei that faces a small mountain, and the limited lives of a few people who live there. Yet the expanse of psychological territory it covers is nearly limitless; like Virginia Woolf writing *To the Lighthouse* – one of the greatest novels in English – about the middle-class family experience, author Chen Shu Yao utilizes a simple setting to frame a rich tapestry of inner experience.



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By Chen Shu Yao

Translated by Michael Day

01

The moon cast the shadows of trees across the road. The wind tossed the black branches up and down, making the trees look like dancers with their arms extended. At first glance, it wasn't clear what the shadows were, and those who didn't know the area drove slowly, thinking a water pipe had burst, trying to veer around the pool of unruly shadow.

A small silver sedan advanced smoothly along the other, unshaded side of the road. It cut sharply to the right and took a nasty fall, landing with a heavy clang, like a dropped shovel. It bumped and tossed and came to a rest before a rolled-down metal security shutter. A big light blazed above the doorway, leaving the dusty old car with no place to hide. As if determined not to be outdone, the car's headlights shone feebly back at the door.

The car stayed stopped for a long moment. A leg extended from the car, then shrank back. It landed on the ground, this time with a shoe on the foot. A woman stood. A pale, slender arm extended straight out and pointed at the door as if challenging it to fight.

The door won the standoff. A flurry of footfalls. She trotted to an ornate black iron gate and slipped inside. Another flurry of footfalls, lighter this time. Her ankle twisted. She took her shoes off and dangled them in her hands, trying to continue on tiptoe, but her twisted ankle wobbled with every step. She pressed on, eyes fixed on an aluminum shed the size of a ticket booth.

In the blackened kiosk, a man sat resting his chin in his hand, face turned to the side. He might have been deep in thought or in slumber. His clothes were so rumpled, the wrinkles climbed over him like vines. She clapped her shoes together loudly, pulled her hands back abruptly, and rose onto tiptoes.

Approaching the open side door, she sized things up. The hut, which sat on a raised platform, was filled with personal items like someone's private room. On the table to the occupant's left sat a panel of grayish blue screens and buttons. She drew in a deep breath and let it out. His head moved, and his face turned toward the table. His elbows rested on the tabletop. His hand held a pen.

He scribbled furiously for well over three minutes. She watched all the while, hands on her hips.

She laid out her shoes and balanced on one leg like a bird so that she could wipe the sand from the sole of each foot before slipping it back inside a shoe. She strolled to the window at an easy pace.

He raised his face, his eyes wide like a child's, his fingers spread across the tabletop as if intent on leaving his prints there. Cheerily, he blurted, "Hi there! And you live on... which floor is it?"

"Oh, erm... fourteen." She looked him up and down. This young man with his crew cut had the air of a fresh-faced boy soldier eager to take orders.

"Oh!" He jumped to his feet, grabbed a notebook, and rifled through it hurriedly. "Sorry, it's only my fourth day here.... I'm supposed to put a star by your name when you come back late. You must be Miss Yang? Floor fourteen, hmm.... Which building? I don't see a star."

"Four whole days, is that right? Floor fourteen of the main building, last name Yang. Anything else?"

"That should be all. Was there any particular reason why you came this way?"

"The garage door wouldn't open."

"Oh, sorry." His gaze swept the screens, locking onto the car like a game warden spying a poacher's jeep in a tall meadow. "It's open, it's open!" he assured, flashing a flustered smile.

She heard the faint, low groan of the metal shutter rolling up. She turned and walked away, and he followed until she looked back and said, trying not to sound too thankful, "Thanks!"

He stopped following, and she turned back and asked, "What were you writing?"

"What was I - writing? Oh, um, nothing?" He bashfully scratched his head. "The visitor's log."

"Liar!" The word slipped out. Then she tried to explain away the outburst, waving her hands with a smile.

He returned to the security booth, keeping his eyes fixed on the footage of the garage until he spotted the lithe young woman in gray. She skipped from one screen to the next, with a break of two or three seconds in between. She vanished, and he turned to watch the empty elevator car. She stepped in and leaned against the wall, staring at the floor, standing stock still. He watched her shoulders heave with the effort of breathing.

Suddenly, she glanced up at the camera, wearing a cold look like a statue. Her forbidding yet thin gaze pushed back weakly against his.

Lips pursed, he wrote, "Liar's Log, entry: A14/last name Yang (written '木' + '易,' or '楊'), dressed in black and gray with a white scarf, slender, mysterious, long, straight hair, with the air of a widow or a recluse, must be about thirty, not bad-looking, but not beautiful, the sort of person you could easily overlook if you weren't looking hard..."

Moving slowly, with an affected, intimidating air, he scanned the windows and doors, reviewed the security screens. Nothing was amiss. He stepped out of the security booth and rounded the two squat rectangular buildings, each a perfect copy of the other. He rode the elevator to the underground garage and looked around, then went up to the fourteenth floor of Building A, poked his head out, and immediately retreated. The elevator was not filled with the odor of liquor and perfume, as he had been expecting. There was only the smell of dust.

Back outside, he rounded the building a second time, seized by a sensation of cold dread like the gloom of a dark forest. He looked up at the tropical almond tree in the courtyard, then

turned his gaze from the treetop to the walkway between the buildings. He counted the floors, stepping backward as he did, now colliding with a flower bed and falling over, now standing up and counting again. No lights shone on the fourteenth floor.

He thought he saw a pair of hands extend onto the balcony at precisely the height where his gaze had just alighted. Straightening himself, he counted the floors yet again. Yes, it was the fourteenth. There was a pair of hands there, stretched out motionlessly. The palms seemed to be facing up as if feeling for rain.

Wanting to see more, he stepped back into the road. A motorcycle whizzed by, horn blaring. The driver berated him: *You got a death wish?*

The hands pulled back. Someone seemed to be hunkered down behind the wall. He saw what he suspected to be a head of black hair and two pointy elbows, and almost called out.

He craned his neck until the sky spun. Reason told him to go ring her doorbell, but as if bewitched, he ignored it and crossed to the sidewalk on the other side, keeping watch all the while. He never expected the pair of hands to extend over the wall, or for something like a broken tree branch to plummet down. The pit of his stomach tightened, and his elbows tensed by his sides. The sensation of dread returned, stronger than ever. He reached behind him and felt the wall, finding it cool and soft. It was moss. He remembered what his boss had said: "The main building faces the mountain."

02

Once home, Yang Chi-yung replaced her shoes on the rack, peered through the peephole, and turned to look into her mother's room. The door yawned open onto blackness, exposing the private world inside. In the dark, a black and white video glowed intensely, seeming to imply some deep meaning. She thought she could hear her mother breathing.

Something small and white appeared in the living room doorway, accompanied by a dim human figure. Eyes fixed on the figure, she unfurled a white scarf from her neck and flung it onto the sofa. She jolted awake when her bare feet hit the balcony, as if dipped into icy water. She bent her head and pressed her chest hard against the balcony wall. On impulse, she lowered her hands, pressed down on her feet, and rose onto tiptoes, poised to leap like a Jaguar hood ornament.

Five lights remained on in the checkered face of the big building diagonally opposite theirs. A big TV screen shone in the nearest window. The neighbor loved watching sports – the TV camera panning across red earth and green sky: a baseball game. Two small, white figures jogging back and forth across a green ground: the Wimbledon Championships in July.

Streetlamps lit the mountain path across the way like a thread made of light. Since the storm, the mountain seemed shorter than before, the two cliff faces nearer, the trees reduced to wreckage. The visual effect had completely changed. Sweeping your eyes across the scenery, you sensed a lack, as if the mountain were an empty stage.

She crossed the road and started up the mountain. There were two trailheads on either side of the path, and they weren't far apart, but one path was broad and gentle, the other rugged, narrow, and steep. Most took the gentle path, but she chose the steeper stairs. These sets of stairs with different personalities met in the middle, so that the climbers too crossed paths before the path shot up like a long, silver zipper.

Maybe her mind was playing tricks on her. She expected to see it, but it wasn't a happy sight: a night traveler on the gentle slope. She had to grit her teeth, escort him up the stairs with her eyes. He moved with a light step, his pale shirt billowing in the lamplight, a head like a matchstick stuck on top.

She turned her gaze to the steep stairs. A fruit tree with a neat, round crown grew there. Lamplight filtered down through a canopy of leaves like an ornate lampshade over the city lights. No one stepped out from beneath the trees.

She loved the play of light and shadow among the ramshackle buildings at the mountain's base, the crude electric lamps each doing as they pleased, yet acting in concert, casting jagged shafts of light across stairways, the faces of corrugated huts, and the ridges of roofs, so that they looked like sheets of paper, musical instruments, or dim sum dishes folded from paper.

The brightest streetlamp of all stood straight and tall at the place where the stairways met, facing away from her building. In the lamplight, the stair steps looked like ransacked dresser drawers.

Beneath the streetlamp to the left, beyond the wall along the slanting stairway, where the night traveler couldn't see, a white house with a red tile roof stood among the trees. She kept trying to peer inside it as she climbed. A few scrawny saplings grew from the bare soil on either side of a narrow walkway; the area beneath the weather-beaten eaves had been paved with blue and white tile. A man who might have been a disabled old soldier would stand there watching the rain. Each day at noon, a boy in a red social services uniform would bring him his lunch.

The night traveler stepped beneath a streetlamp, giving her her clearest view of him yet. He strode straight up the mountain, leaving behind the houses and the town, bent at the waist like any other climber, bound for the whale belly of the mountain like a bit of bait on a string.

She clasped the ridge of the balcony fence in her armpit and let her head lie heavy on her arm, resting her eyes on a stretch of the gently sloping mountain path laid bare by the lamplight. At the top of the stairs, he would have to turn left and walk this length of path.

"The fourteenth floor is perfect. Look! The mountain path is right outside the window," her father had informed them joyfully.

But it was an illusion – you could see the difference in height from the mountain. Her mother had gotten used to living on the top floors of apartment buildings, and had her heart set on moving into the top floor. The patter of footsteps on the roof kept her mind off her fears. She knew her husband had put her in an apartment building because of her bum leg. Someday he would be unable to care for her, and she could take the elevator.

The four slender streetlamps across the way stood at attention against the backdrop of the mountain face, heads lowered like humble servants, keeping their distance and their secrets.

In the distance, the sky was inlaid with tiny jewels of lamplight. The nearer lamps blazed brazenly, with cross-shaped feet longer than their necks; they lowered a net of soft light over the sturdy mountain and the road, lighting them like a huge living room, inviting visitors to let down their guard.

The Z-shaped path meandered through the woods, where the streetlamps shone sporadically. Why they'd been placed where they had, it was impossible to know. Near the mountain peak stood a row of streetlamps interspersed with the crowns of trees. The light and the trees threw one another into sharp relief like a fine engraving. From a distance, the points of light were invisible, their luminance fragmented and displaced, giving the place an otherworldly glow. One night, she noticed one streetlamp drew the outline of a branch shaped like an ox horn, and called her mother over to look. Her mother was watching TV in the living room, and for a long moment there was no sound of movement, but finally her mother did come, and listened patiently as she reported the latest news of the building to repay her for always doing the same. During the day, her mother's attention remained fixed on one of two things: the TV screen, or the loft of the building across from theirs. The ox horn-shaped shadow had alighted there for just an instant.

Midway up the long stairs there was a flat, terrace-like area with houses on both sides, three in all. The biggest of these was a Japanese-style mountain villa with a flower garden on the left. On weekend afternoons, the distinctive twang of the *koto* and the warbling of song rose from the narrow, black-brown log cabin. Between spring and summer, the big tree in the courtyard was festooned with what looked like flowers. Up close you could see that they weren't flowers but fruits – wax apples. By the rear wall of the house stood a cherry tree. When the news reported that cars were backed up for blocks to see the cherry blossoms in the parks, the residents would sit upstairs gloating: *We've got a cherry tree right out there!* At twilight, the light bulbs glowed faintly in the yard like cats' eyes gleaming in the bushes, and on rainy evenings they blazed like a party boat. The roof of the cabin had recently been replaced. In the lamplight, it looked slick even on sunny days, and the wet sheen shone still brighter in the rain. But her romantic daydreams of the mountain recluse collapsed when one day, on the steps, she saw him viciously kick a dog for chewing up his shoes. She had once watched enviously as the little dog trotted down the steps in the evening to welcome its owner home. The stern-faced man with the big bald head had a bookish air, so she and her mother called him "the professor".

There was nothing extraordinary about the one-story house to the right of the steps, which only counted as a mountain villa thanks to the setting. Occasionally, an old man in blue and white striped pajama pants would open the door and dutifully sweep the yellow leaves from the courtyard. Passersby would gaze at the purple autumn blossoms that climbed the gate and the walls, gushing over their beauty and debating their names as the old man listened, unmoved.

To the left of the old man's place, a little further up, stood a blue metal shed that looked like a pigeon coop. One evening, an ambulance with flashing lights arrived at the base of the mountain. She had stood on the balcony and watched for more than half an hour, thinking that the rescue effort seemed all the more dignified for moving so slowly. The paramedics had pulled someone from the shed, some obese recluse too fat to get through the door, or some paranoid

nutcase who refused to seek medical help, she guessed, the kind they talked about on the news. The thought made her smile.

The night traveler walked with a spring in his step, hands in his pockets, humming a tune. As expected, he moved on past the shed and made a beeline for the top, like a deep sea diver swimming for the surface. At the top of the long stairs, a row of streetlamps and a large white notice board awaited. Workers were always coming there to mend the mountain after landslides. He pressed on, made a left, and disappeared into the mountain.

She watched him closely, knowing she would soon lose him. Maybe it was her imagination, but she thought she saw him turn and look her way, his expression showing the cool, furtive joy of a solitary mountaineer, his eyes shining with the shadowy, mysterious luster of eggshells.

The black mountain swallowed him. He vanished as suddenly as the setting sun beneath the horizon.

03

She stealthily made her way home. She wanted to write down the story of the nighttime traveler right away. She had to pee, but thought she could hold it a little longer. More than likely, her mother only drifted to sleep once she slipped in. One of her old coworkers had been a mom, and she had said, when your kids are rebellious teens, at the sound of the key in the lock, you're finally out like a light. Parents and their adult children lived in peace thanks to an unspoken agreement. There were times when they were just like hostel proprietors and their backpacker guests.

A white page floated above the desk. Her mother's message made her nervous. The page was pinned down by several objects that belonged elsewhere: an hourglass that ordinarily sat on the bookshelf, a pair of sunglasses, and the pen she'd used to write the note.

She flipped the switch. The tube bulb made two small sparking sounds as power coursed through the filament, *chk chk*, followed by a low, continuous hum like an electric bug beating its wings. After all these years, the bulb in her father's student desk lamp still worked.

Yung, dearie:

Someone called again and again into the evening, more than ten times, maybe twenty!

They kept calling until ten and finally gave up!

Goodnight. 10:48 PM

An oversized colon, shocked exclamation points, no signature. The characters were smaller than her mother's handwriting normally was, and seemed to have been written very slowly. A phone number appeared beneath in fierce, mean-spirited Arabic numerals that looped and bent like a length of chain. The gist of the note seemed to be to remind her of the passage of time, "again and again into the evening" – it had been nearly eleven, late at night. She thought she'd made a late lunch and gone out in the afternoon. On Saturdays, the art museum kept evening

hours, closing at eight-thirty. By that time, traffic had long since died down, and her mother knew that no matter how slowly she drove, it would take at most forty minutes for her to make her way home and park.

In the museum, she had waited until the final moment when the announcement of the museum's closing descended, polite and gentle, from the ceiling. The other patrons took a parting look at the pieces around them. Whether old favorites or fresh discoveries, the works of art seemed to hold a special appeal in that moment. One after another, the patrons arose from the corners or wherever they had been holed up and headed for the door. She lingered, enjoying the lively scene of people bustling about, the resonance of heels of different textures and heights hitting the floor, the smooth flow of the crowd down the escalator, like robots receiving some command and setting into motion together. She stood on the lead-gray conveyer belt, eyes fixed on the moving metal ridges, wanting to keep moving and never stop. Emptiness was the transparent goal of the museum and everyone in it. She rode the surging stream of people toward the exit, neither pushing ahead nor falling behind. Near the front, the exit doors pulled powerfully like a tub drain, emptying the gallery abruptly, leaving only a few straggling staff members run aground like forlorn rubber duckies.

She opened a desk drawer and pulled out the notebook her father had bought at the museum. The cover showed a beautiful summer flower garden filled with red flowers and green leaves. The flowers were all depicted in exactly the same style, but there were three kinds of leaves, dark green ones, light green ones, and ones with veiny blades hemmed by gray ink edges. A black butterfly alighted on a flower to the lower left. Looking closely, she saw that its orange rear wings were shot through with veins made of purple-blue dots, and it had two tails like purple petals. The painting crossed the spine of the notebook, covering a third of the back cover. Eyeing the tiny thumbnail imprinted on the empty area, she saw clearly that the blank apricot-colored spaces were made up of small saffron-like flowers. Beneath the thumbnail, this text appeared in characters the size of ants:

Kinoshita Seigai (1887-1988), "Early Summer in a Southern Country," Gouache on Silk
Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 214.7 x 87.3 cm, 1920-30

The night was heavy, and so was her head. She hesitated a moment, and it struck her that unless the dates were misprinted, this artist of indeterminate gender had lived an awfully long time.

Her father had once visited the museum at night. Standing by the sickbed, she had informed him the gallery was open in the evening, and watched his face light up with joy. But first, she had made him guess. In a tone that implied she had great news to share, she urged, "It's about the museum."

Now she realized how naive she'd been. What news was good news to a man with a terminal disease? Could the museum cure him?

"Picasso will be there!" Her father smiled too. He meant the man himself, not his paintings.

“There’s life after death, like we always said, like we always hoped!”

Her mother spoke up from the kitchen, “Didn’t you say you wanted to be a museum director when you grew up?”

She looked to the side, lips pursed tightly, nostrils flared, teasingly wearing the look of an angry young girl for her father's sake. As if in response to the act, her father coughed.

“What is it then? They're moving in next door?” He continued making outlandish guesses.

“They're opening up in the evenings!” She said it in a low enough tone that her mother asked her to repeat it.

“They've finally realized what a great idea it is to put on an art show beneath the stars,” said her father.

It was her father who drove to the gallery that day. It was a smooth, steady drive, a green light greeting them at each intersection. She even wished they'd hit a red or two. In the parking lot, they watched a low-flying plane whiz by just above their heads, on its way to land somewhere. Fearing her father would grow tired, she made him agree that they'd look at just one exhibit, so that their mother (waiting at home for them to bring back grilled eel on rice) wouldn't go hungry. They rode the escalator to the familiar second-floor exhibition space where the classical works were displayed. Together they strolled through two exhibits. She went off on her own for a while, then returned to find her father. Her eyeballs grew warm, darting all around in search of him.

From outside, the museum looked like a pile of white boxes. Whenever she strolled through its interior, she thought, *so all these boxes really are connected*. She followed her father, keeping a distance of no more than a box between them. Sometimes, she would be at the front of one box, and her father would be at the back of the next as they looked at landscapes. Though her father had grown thin, his pant legs now billowing around stick legs, his shoulders were as sturdy as ever, and when he stopped and stood in place, he had a staunch poise, like a trekker fresh from the mountains, elegant yet humble. Standing at opposite corners of one box before separate works of art, they exchanged a glance, and he gave her a little wave, like a dad dragged to a nightclub by his daughter, as if to say, *don't you worry about me, go along and have a good time*. From an early age, her father had taught them to split up and look at the works of art they liked. Turning to a new painting, she glanced at her father again, and he made the same gesture twice more, bigger this time and with a devious grin, as if he had his mind set on some secret purpose and didn't want a kid getting in the way.

The gallery space furthest from the entrance terminated in a square wall with a concave nook that intuition told her extended out into the parking area. At night, colorful fluorescent lights shone through the square frame; the dimly lit nook was the size of a single painting, suited to solitary viewing. People would stop before it, seeming not to see the painting or the wall, standing brave and alone like swimmers on a diving board. She watched her father stroll up and stand there for a while. She hoped the nook was still there now.

Lightly clasping her father's hand in hers, she said as they stepped onto the escalator, “I've got a friend who's never been on an escalator, he's afraid of them!” Back on level ground at the

bottom of the escalator, she said, “I heard when they first got escalators in Vietnam, attendants would stand on either side, helping people down, boosting them up.”

They sat slumped on a long wooden bench in the main hall on the first floor, facing a sheet of glass that stretched to the ceiling like a big blank canvas. Behind the glass was an untitled night view of the city. You could stand at different angles and observe the outside world, the roads, the cars, the trees, the people... they both silently swooned. She got up, went to the bathroom, and returned to find her father standing at the gift stand near the bench, holding the newly bought little notebook with the red flowers and green leaves. Burning to see the impasse resolved, she hadn't tarried in the restroom. She saw that her father had wasted no time buying the notebook. The classical beauty of the cover illustration had drawn him in, and when he read the tiny characters that explained its origins, learning the artist had been a centenarian, he had determined that was something to celebrate, and purchased it right away.

“It's your favorite place to while away a day,” said her father softly. “Why not take home a souvenir?”

When she had visited the art museum as a girl with her father, she always made a beeline for the gift shop, like a student who can hardly wait to finish class and head straight for the school store. Her mother scolded her father for getting her into the habit of buying souvenirs. She would pick out a few things and let her mother sort through them. Sometimes she was forced to leave behind all her treasures. Later on, she would whittle down the haul to a single item herself, so her mother didn't dare refuse. Her mother claimed to have standards, but actually she made up her mind based on her mood at the moment. Sometimes her mother would pick out something a little more expensive and buy it for her, knowing she wanted it but was too timid to ask.

She recalled that, as they headed toward the revolving door, she had pulled out a postcard with a painting by Kuo Pai-chuan – a mountain drawn in a few simple brush strokes – and asked her father, “Why don't they make Liao Chi-chun's paintings into postcards?”

She opened up the booklet and pressed down firmly on the page, thought of the scribbling security guard, and turned to look out the window. With the tip of her nose against the cool glass, she saw a photographic negative of a mountain ringed by a yellow-green halo of streetlamps. In search of a few brief words to describe the night traveler, she randomly wrote down the words that appeared along the mountain path:

Aliens from outer space

Aliens from overseas

People from other provinces

Six strokes: 男 (“man”)

Six strokes: 刑 (“penalty”)

Six strokes: 死 (“death”)

“What’s this? You’ve got skulls on your scarf. I thought it was an ink landscape painting, but it’s an ink painting of skulls!”

Her mother slowly settled into her seat, reached to pick up a corner of the white scarf that lay across the sofa, and slowly spread it out.

Chi-yung stayed silent.

Her mother laid the tail end of the scarf across her knee, glanced at the pattern and said, “Some of the skulls are cute, and some are scary. It used to be skulls were edgy, but these days they’re no big deal!”

She had started awake to the sound of her mother’s footfalls, which dragged as if she had stepped on a sticky mousetrap. Her mother had had a foot operation. The day her father died, she had taken a tumble and spent a year in recovery, but had never fully recovered. “At least I’m still here to hobble around!” her mother liked to say.

Chi-yung was in the habit of waking, setting brown rice to soak, and going back to bed for a while before putting the congee on. Once the brown rice was boiling, she would add the white rice and sweet potato. Her father had insisted on adding white rice, saying it made the congee thicker and more heartwarming. I’m still a country boy deep down, as you can see, he would say. She had overslept that day, so she’d made the rice in a single step. Pale yellow light poured through the window in the corner of the kitchen, wiring her with disordered energy.

The pot of hot congee boiled over, and scalding spume overflowed onto the stove. Just yesterday she had wiped the stovetop clean with a soapy sponge, and the mocking hiss of the froth annoyed her. She let slip a profanity: “Shit!” She kept her voice down so as not to further jangle her mother’s nerves.

Cooking congee was simple, but not easy. In fact, as the saying went, it was as difficult as pinching a grain of rice between two curved sticks. To ease digestion, or when she lost her appetite, she would drink a little watery congee and feel like a kid again. Near the end of her father’s illness, they kept a pot of congee on standby on the stove. When he had an appetite for something else, or when he was in the mood to eat out, she would happily heave the pot of white slop into the waste pail like a callous nurse. Once, instead of pouring it out, she tipped the pot high enough to cover her face and slurped hungrily, sensing a presence in the corner of her left eye as the lumpy gruel poured down her front, soaking her. Grasping what was happening, she forced a smile. “They say it’s good for your appetite, and your skin too.” Accepting that the two of them thought differently about things, her mother said, as she often did, “Whatever floats your boat!” Her mother wasn’t a fan of congee; she had always been more the coffee and croissant type. Chi-yung would have quit making it after her father passed, but her mother still wanted some sometimes, so she would respond with a simple, “Whatever floats your boat!” She had to admit: congee cleared your mind in a way no other food could.

A toothbrush dotted with a blob of toothpaste sat on the side of the table. Chi-yung perused the paper spread out across the breakfast table beside her. After reporting the stories

that suited her mother's fancy, she picked several others that jabbed like fish bones in the throat: murders, suicides, mysterious events, alien encounters, and so on. Sometimes she would read the health section, and sometimes she wouldn't. What she didn't already know about diseases, she didn't need to know.

She made her one official weekly outing on Saturday, the day she would buy the paper, until she fell for the pitch of a silver-tongued young telemarketer and signed up for a subscription. He had gone on and on all the benefits of being a subscriber, asking after detailing each perk, "Sister, now do you understand? Do you see now what an incredible offer this is? You could even win a bicycle!"

In a furtive whisper, he explained he could offer her the bonus for a year-long subscription – a discount voucher for Shangri-La Hotel – if she signed up for just six months, and she broke in, "Do you even know what Shangri-La is?"

"It's heaven, *el paraíso*, utopia. Stay a night and it'll change your life!"

Tiring of his unctuous salesmanship, she said, "It's a pain to go downstairs and pick the paper up. You're not going to register with the guards, and I don't want to deal with them, either."

"So I'll have to smuggle it in?" he asked in the same suggestive tone.

"I don't care how you get it inside. I want the paper delivered to my doorstep!"

She heard something hit the door, not soft, but not too hard. Through the peephole, she saw a cleaning lady with a shiny forehead and a yellow vest mopping the floor. Mama Yü, the old woman across the hall, opened the door. The cleaning lady set the mop aside, went in and started cleaning. Mama Yü had been educated by the Japanese, and she passed the tip to the cleaning lady in such a subtle, dainty way that it looked like a mother clasping her daughter's hand.

She guessed the cleaning lady was the one who brought the paper up, but had never seen it with her own eyes.

She lived by routine. Get out of bed, put the congee on. When it came to a boil, tiptoe to the door and press her sleepy eye to the cold, greasy peephole, to glance out at the outside world. The metal mesh of the security door crisscrossed the peephole like latitude and longitude lines, enclosing her vision inside a sealed crystal ball, within with countless duplicate snowflakes fluttered.

Mama Yü was the first person she saw. Chi-yung remembered it very vividly. The week after they moved in, as she was still fumbling around this new space and new life, the squawk of the intercom jolted her awake in the middle of the night. She hit an iceberg on her journey through dreamland and had to make her way through two layers of fog to return to reality. A black-clad messenger flashed into her mind, summoning her, irritable and half-asleep, to the threshold. Lacking the courage to meet anyone face to face, she peered through the hole in the door and saw a squat old woman in a white robe at the lower arc of the portal. At first glance, she looked like a snowy owl. Chi-yung blinked, and saw exactly that: wizened face ensconced in silver hair, chin raised to gaze up, face ringed by wrinkles, the bags beneath her eyes layered like feathers, a pair of beady eyes, no neck. The old woman murmured languidly to herself; Chi-yung listened hard, but couldn't make out the words. First her mother, then her father came to find out what the

ruckus was about. Though annoyed, they opened the door for the old woman, remaining suspicious that the unexpected guest enmeshed in the latticework could be a caged beast hiding its fangs. The old woman again described her dilemma, calmer apparently than Chi-yung. “The alarm went off. The announcement said there was a fire. I asked my husband if he would go with me, and he said no, so I came to ask, since we can’t use the elevator, should we run upstairs or down?” At her mother’s suggestion, Chi-yung buzzed the guard room on the intercom, but no one answered. Back before the door, she doled out a few comforting platitudes, and the old woman obediently said goodnight and went back to bed.

Early the following morning, her mother had a word with the guards and confirmed that someone had pulled the alarm by mistake. It had been a false alarm.

“She reads the news too much, watches too much TV. They’re always showing buildings burning down and dozens of people dying,” said her mother.

“Didn’t you see? She had a wet towel ready. What kind of husband doesn’t go with his wife to check things out?” Chi-yung demanded.

“Married couples are like birds in the woods. When trouble strikes, they take flight, going their separate ways!” Her father guffawed.

Several days later, Chi-yung raised the topic again. “She must have been sleepwalking that night. I ran into her when I was taking out the trash, and she acted like we’d never met. She was cold and aloof, wouldn’t make small talk at all.”

“She must be quite a bit older than me, but she’s certainly sprightly, dressing up the way she does.”

Listening with a grin as his wife and daughter gabbed about the new neighbor, her father reminded them again, “When there’s a fire, smoke rises, so it’s better to take the stairs and go down. Strange that none of us heard the alarm. Having a jumpy neighbor isn’t all bad!”

“When we’re awake, we’re all awake, and when we’re asleep, we’re all asleep. It’s no good. Mrs. Chiang says, before you buy a house, you should find out all you can about the neighbors. That way, you make your own luck.”

*

Her mother had been gone for a long time. Chi-yung put down the paper and rushed for the bathroom. She flung the door open to see a shocked look on her mother’s pallid face.

“What is it?”

Turning her head, Chi-yung said, “Nothing!” Her mother thought she’d been rushing to the ringing phone when the caller had hung up. She was about to ask if Chi-yung was going to call back, but before she could get the words out, the doorbell broke in.

Chi-yung raised a finger in a gesture of silence, then motioned for her mother to sit on the sofa. She stepped gingerly onto the doormat, taking up her post at the peephole. The square at the center of the latticework was vacant, but a piece of a man hovered at the leftward arc. She pressed her eye still closer to the peephole, until her brow touched. Now she saw two men at the wall on

the left, their faces like withered vines climbing up a window. A gigantic palm rose before the fiendish, oversized face in front, splitting it into halves. It was a look that seemed to say, *I'll wait as long as it takes for you to open up*. His gaze had pierced the door, and he surely knew that someone was peering out at him, hiding like an ostrich with its head buried in the sand.

Chi-yung knew men like this couldn't be looking for her, but she was still flustered. Stepping back from the door, she called out, "Who is it?"

A man's voice answered gruffly from outside: "I live on the fourth floor. I think a piece of your garden fell down on my balcony."

Chi-yung started at the phrase "a piece of your garden." She would never have referred to the plants that way. She responded, "Hang on. I'll take a look." She ran to the living room, pacified her mother, who was on the verge of getting involved, and glanced out at the balcony. Knitting her brow, she exclaimed, "Tsk! Must have been the one Mrs. Chiang gave us. Shouldn't have been hanging up there." She glanced over the edge of the balcony, trotted back dispiritedly and said, "Yeah, but it's okay, we don't need it back." To her surprise, he burst out, "Then get down there and clean it up!"

Chi-yung dusted herself off, glanced toward the sofa, waved, and opened the door, wearing a face as expressionless as a mask. She headed directly for the elevator, and the instant the door opened, she planted herself at the controls without so much as a glance at her fellow riders. Holding her right arm across her chest and her clenched left fist before her mouth, clasping the crook of her left arm in her right, she raised her head high and fixed the floor number with a death stare. From behind, she heard the voice of the man with the balloon head: "We checked each floor one by one. There used to be a flower rack on the thirteenth floor, it hung out over the edge, and the water dripped down on us. I went to have a talk with them, asked them to bring it in, and they did it right away."

Laying eyes on this bookish young lady, the man softened his tone, to the point that he almost sounded defensive. But Chi-yung stayed silent and did not soften. She knew she'd lost face, and she started to think honesty wasn't the best policy. Fortunately, no other residents joined them on their journey down, and she darted out as soon as the door opened. The last of the three men to leave the elevator was a young man in a black T-shirt and baggy jeans, clutching a sandwich in his hand.

The units on the lower floors were laid out differently, boasting a sense of spaciousness the upper floors lacked. The big French doors framed a green mountain landscape, and the balcony beyond extended far further than those upstairs. The burly man with the round head stepped out onto the balcony with a red plastic broom and stood there, apparently waiting for her to take it. Her eyes took in the strange yet familiar mountain landscape across the way, and her face lit with joy. The man's gaze turned to the mountain too.

Only when he leaned the broom on the wall and disappeared along with his two henchmen did she step out onto the balcony.

From upstairs, it had looked like a blotch of betel chaw spat into the grass. A pot of ivy had fallen, its leaves tattered, the hair-like roots exposed, mud splashed across the ground like sticky

blood. The white plastic pot lay to one side with the hook, completely empty of soil, clean and apparently unharmed. This common household plant had met a dramatic end, like a revolutionary hero cut down in battle. She could hardly believe it had fallen from the balcony of their cozy home. Amid the scattered clods of earth she spied a pebble like a fallen meteor.

Chi-yung was pouting dejectedly when suddenly the sun shone through the clouds. She thought she saw the stupefied, dying plant twitch in the light. She immediately gathered the remains, taking a fistful of vines, to which nearly no dust clung, and stuffing them back into the white pot.

*

Though her daughter had been gone for no more than five minutes, Mrs. Yang was restless. She began pacing between the door and the intercom. She seemed to be doing her daily therapy exercises, but the truth was she was watching the second hand on the clock. She sensed her daughter had left against her will, and the urge to contact the guards repeatedly surged and ebbed. At last she pressed the intercom, which emitted a piercing squawk, then hurriedly hung up the phone. What would she say? "Have you seen my daughter?" Or, "If a potted plant fell, which floor would it fall on?"

The door had been open the entire time. When she heard the elevator door open, she strolled back to the sofa, trying to look calm. The TV had been on the entire time, too. Chi-yung returned with the plant, wearing a smile.

Thinking of the plant kept Chi-yung smiling until she went to bed that evening. When she left the fourth floor, she crossed paths with the boy in baggy pants, who stood by the door fiddling with his phone. She accidentally met his gaze, noticing his eyes were as big and bright as a baby cow's. The eyes were set in a caramel-colored baby face, the colors of the mouth curled down innocently, the ears sticking out like a fawn's. She couldn't help turning and asking, "What are you doing here?"

He said something she couldn't make out as language, but only as a sound. "Petting zoo?" she asked. That was how it had sounded.

He said it again. He seemed to be saying, "Pressuring you."

It took her a moment to understand. She made a beeline for the elevator, drew in a breath as she faced the doors, and just then heard the sound of a head being smacked with a hand. "Watch your mouth!" She didn't need to look to know the hand had extended from the door and slapped the boy upside the head.

Then she realized she'd been sent under threat of force to clean up the mess. As she lay in bed, she couldn't stop thinking, they were thugs collecting a debt, armed in all likelihood with gleaming knives and guns, which meant that when a potted plant fell ten stories, smashing on the balcony in the wee hours, the man must have woken with a start, thinking he'd heard a gunshot, covered in cold sweat, frozen in bed, unable to move, as if he'd taken a bullet, and a bugle call of a

revenge had played over and over in his head like a broken record – no wonder he'd gone to such lengths to hunt down the plant's owner. At that thought, she grinned.

05

After her father passed, Chi-yung started sleeping longer, and she stopped waking up in the middle of the night, but her dreams became more intense. She experienced every kind of dream, both short and long, but one particularly long dream overshadowed all the short, sweet ones. The long ones often dragged on interminably and to no apparent purpose, and gradually she seemed to get used to the sense of being controlled. Some of the long dreams left her mentally tired, but others were like drifting to sleep on a long bus ride. In some of the longer dreams she journeyed to strange lands, some of which were named for actual places, but she would wake up with the name still flashing through her mind and realize it wasn't a real place after all. She had dreamed recently of a frozen wintry land that seemed to be Russia, or maybe northern Europe. A long line of people – men, women, old, and young – stretched across the wild land as far as she could see, passing through the countryside, cutting through the long grass, crossing the water, as if placed there by some mystical decree. A new arrival in this land, she wondered silently how she was supposed to survive the cold.

Her mother said, "Other people may have visited more countries than they can count, but you've been to all of them already in your dreams."

The dreams gave her and her mother a readymade conversation topic. She stood at the kitchen sink while her mother sat on the sofa, and though they couldn't see each other, she earnestly recounted the dreams as her mother listened intently and massaged her leg. When Chi-yung was finished, her mother said (as she often did), "Whenever I dream of someone, they're exactly the same as real in life. My dreams are boring, not like that one about the wolf you had a while back— that was so cute."

"What dream of a wolf?" Chi-yung asked as she turned off the faucet.

"You were living in a village, and it was a holiday. You were having a dinner party at your house – a loud, lively one – when you went into the backyard, and a wolf saw you and came bounding to your side. The wolf was a pet, you said, but we'd forgotten to feed it, and it was hungry. You were so scared you got goosebumps all over as the wolf nipped at you. Fortunately, you had a piece of chocolate to give it. That was the only thing that saved you. Did I remember right?"

"Ha ha, I'd forgotten that one! But what's so cute about it? Always have chocolate on you, that's the moral of the story!"

A while back, she'd told her mother of a dream she'd had, then regretted it. It was the weekend. Although they often let holidays go by without celebrating, they were as sensitive to weekly cycles as musicians are to pitch; on days off they took it easy, and weren't at all strict on themselves. They never went mountain-climbing, and mostly ate out or ate junk food. They had gotten up late that day, as always. As she flushed out the water that had collected in the pipes

overnight (which, she had heard, you shouldn't drink), she told her mother over the sound of the water of the dream she'd just had. In the dream, it had been morning, and she'd woken in a bed as tall as the window and looked at the mountain across the road.

"It was that mountain, you know the one. It was covered in trees, I couldn't see what kind, but it was closer than in real life, as if the mountain with its winding stairs had taken a step toward us." She explained how she had watched wide-eyed as two boulders rolled down the mountain. The previous evening, she and a friend (whom she didn't know) had spied the two boulders at a mountain picnic. The low hut at the foot of the mountain had been smashed, but no one had come running out. Realizing a landslide could pose a threat to their building too, in the dream it had occurred to her to move.

The strange part was that there had been a landslide on the edge of town that afternoon. It had been a warm and sunny day with no wind or rain when the silent mountain had turned suddenly to a flowing river, washing out the main transportation line from the base of the mountain to the next town. It had buried the road under a giant mud pile that the TV news broadcasts unanimously agreed was the size of two football fields. A day later, it was confirmed that three cars were buried in the landslide. Machines converged on the rubble, giant shovels flailing in a frantic effort to save the precious lives of the four people in the cars.

"Look, another dream of yours came true!" her mother exclaimed joylessly, watching a mantis-like mechanical arm clawing at the ground. "Like they say, you can move mountains if you have the will. But do you think they'll make it in time?"

Chi-yung went silent for a moment, the topic of the landslide suddenly flash-frozen at the word "another". Though years had passed, cracks could always form in that glacier, sending it drifting out to sea again – that was what her mother meant. When her father was around, he would come to her rescue at times like these, saying with a stiff smile, "She was only a kid back then!" Her mother fixed her with a fierce stare, restraining the urge to slap her. What had she said to bring this on? She had said, *Don't let my sister take that trip, something bad will happen*. As a girl, she watched plenty of programs with titles like "Escape from the Gates of Hell" featuring reenactments of miraculous escapes from dangerous situations. She didn't know if the TV programs had influenced her, or if she'd truly had a premonition.

Her heart sank. She shook the water droplets from her hands and went silently to her room, where she leaned against the window, arms folded across her chest, and stared woodenly at the overgrowth in the undeveloped lot by the stairs at the mountain's base. With no one to bother them, the trees there grew wildly. Ivy climbed over them from top to bottom, covering even the treetops. The trees within writhed and danced like green goblins. She never noticed any change in them either individually or as a group, but sometimes as the seasons turned a silky yellow plant slowly threaded in among the others like sunshine tinting the evening clouds. Right before her eyes, in a sunny spot, a different climbing vine burst with riotous purple petals, draping the trees like a wedding gown.

She spent a long while staring silently at this wooded grove the size of a basketball court. Ivy covered every tree, except a single survivor exposed amid the pale green maelstrom like the

propeller of a sunken ship. Either this lone tree had escaped by dumb luck, or the trees had joined forces to open a gap. Or maybe it was all some sort of show.

Her mother was talking to the TV again, doling out advice. When she emerged into the living room, her mother painstakingly restated her views, even though as far as she could tell, they were exactly the same as before.

There was a sudden change, but it was only a change in mood. Art came from practice, and like the survival strategy of a plant, a smile blossomed on her face. She sat down beside her mother and went back to discussing the reports of the landslide.

Trapped in the vehicles were a single mother who drove a taxi, a middle-aged man who worked regular overtime at his company, and a boyfriend and girlfriend on a holiday trip in the girlfriend's car. Of course, they were most concerned for the girl. The broadcasts described her as a successful young professional, flashing a picture of her on vacation in Japan, wearing a kimono. She had the type of face that seemed born to smile, with pudgy baby cheeks, the sort of face her mother said stayed young forever, holding up as age scarred everyone else's looks. She was a charmer, attracting both women and men, but now, the more they said everybody loved her, the more they seemed to be mourning her loss.

Daylight turned to twilight, and the golden forty-eight hour rescue window closed. Dust blotted out the sky, and the wreckage of the mountain strewn the ground. Every so often, a gossamer cloud shimmered in the gray mist. A cold, sorrowful rain threatened to pour down at any time. Popular opinion on the work of moving the mountain turned darker, and people began to think the rescue effort might not succeed.

"The one in the dark brown jacket and baseball cap is her old man."

Her mother often used the word "old man" for "father," with a sense of forced casualness. The next time she mentioned the man, she called him "her old dad." Put off by her tone, Chi-yung was struck by the urge to say something back. She also remembered another word her mother never used: "beloved daughter."

Her father watched over the rescue, shoulders hunched, hands in his pockets like a father-to-be waiting helplessly by the delivery room door. He twisted his pockets until they split. From life experience, he knew this was taking too long. There were labor complications. He had nothing to say about the speed of the rescue effort. He didn't pitch a fit. From time to time, a journalist would badger him for a comment, and he would say a few words. He said she called him the night before the accident, explained that she wouldn't be seeing him this week. Most weeks, she drove an hour and a half to get home, or a little faster if she took the Xueshan Tunnel through the mountain.

"No, don't look!" her mother blurted.

All three cars were pulled from the rubble. It seemed the girl's father had long since faced facts, and wanted to remember his daughter the way she was, so he decided not to have a last look. The lovebirds had gone together to the next life. The meddling media and the public wanted the couple posthumously wed, but didn't get their way.

“No, no, don't do that either!” Her mother again praised the father's decision. “If they were married, the girl's parents couldn't see her when they wanted. After all, she'd be part of his family!” As she talked, she opened the screen door and stepped out onto the balcony, declining Chi-yung's help before she could offer it. “No, I'm slow but I'll make it. Those bamboo stalks or whatever they were growing, the wind knocked them all down, and now they're out there planting new ones!”

On the roof of the tall building diagonally opposite theirs, a gray-haired couple bustled about, heads bowed. Her mother leaned on the wall, seeming to want to say hello. But when they looked toward her, she turned her face away.

Chi-yung went to the doorway to have a look at “those two”, as her mother called them, this couple whittled down by time and married life.

“The overtime guy, his wife says when he went out that day, he promised to have the washing machine cleaned.”

“Who?” Her mother turned, looking perplexed, then suddenly remembered the landslide she'd been so concerned about just moments ago, and replied softly in the affirmative.

“We should get our washing machine cleaned, too!” said Chi-yung.