

A Small Jump

I propped myself up to sit on the edge by the bathroom window—one leg inside, the other dangling in the air. I was sixteen and living in Beijing. The window looked down four floors, thirty feet. Duxie, my classmate, was the first person who came to mind when I imagined who would feel guilty when they heard the news of my death.

I remembered the September when I was thirteen, about to begin eighth grade in Manchuria. Outside the Central Locomotive Arena, I waited for the start-of-the-school-year ceremony. In the old northeastern Chinese industrial capital, the vestiges of a punishingly hot summer were charged in the air. Two thousand boys and girls had on their autumn uniforms—long-sleeved, white, puffy cotton jackets hemmed with dark navy stripes on the creases, despite the weather. The dress code was mandated by the *Book of School Rules and Disciplines*, and outlined on a piece of paper titled “Opening Ceremony Invitation.” I let my body sweat, and eventually, soak. A few daring school mates rolled up their sleeves and pulled up their pants.

The lighting inside the Central Locomotive Arena was minimal. We found our way to our seats with lighting that came from the center stage, which was a basketball court. The white center circle was covered by a black rectangular box, and on it was stacked a black podium. Amid the rumble of two thousand humming bees, Ms. You, my homeroom teacher, approached my section and said it was time we silenced ourselves for the school anthem.

After the anthem ended I felt the back of my hand being caressed. I looked to my left, and sketched out a grin on Duxie’s face, who sat next to me. His knuckles were shuffling over the hairs and pores of my skin. Seeing me looking at his direction, he moved my hand over his uniform pants.

My hand first felt the contours of his limp penis. I tried to retrieve my hand by pulling back, but Duxie gripped my wrist, and pressed his thumb hard into my wrist bone. “Ouch,” I shrieked, but quickly hushed myself. I glanced around gingerly, hoping nobody noticed, my chest tightened.

Most of my classmates had experienced a voice change at age 13, yet my vocal folds didn't extend me membership to the Exclusive Club of Boys with Masculine Voices. Whenever I spoke during recess, boys sat in front of me made sure to turn their heads back, furrow their brows, and bawl at my face, "hey, are you the new girl in our class?" Another would follow up, "I bet he/she doesn't have hair down there yet." The gender pronouns in Mandarin were all pronounced 'ta', just written in different characters. I longed for the days when I'd catch a cold, so a congestion would force my voice to be nasal and deep, putting me on par with the bullies. To breathe unobstructed was to give them leverage against me. Even the air seemed complicit in elevating their masculinity against mine. To breathe normally meant to suffer.

"It'd be much better if you were a girl," Duxie whispered into my ear, and he stretched open the front of his pants and shoveled my hand in.

Sweat started to gather on my palms and below my hairline. My heart was pulsating in my palms. I looked down at my green Nike sneakers. I should take these off and leave them in the bathroom, I thought, instead of ruining them with me. They were brand new. My mother could bring them back to the store for a refund. The shoe box was still in my room, the receipt lying inside on top of crumpled wrapping paper. The money would be worth one night at the Grand Hyatt Hotel, just one subway stop away from the Forbidden City. I'd always wanted to know what it would be like to stay there.

After going through a list of classmates who had harassed me, along with a few men at the public bath house, I began to think about my mother, and I was suddenly overwhelmed with fear. I would be destroying her future, her piece of artwork, her leverage against an old world that offered her no exit.

"When I was six or seven," she would say to me, "I shoveled raw cotton inside a patchwork of cloth to wrap around my legs during the winter, those were my winter pants." To recreate the scene, she unzipped the upper half of her jacket, pushed her palm in and pulled it out of the opening repeatedly as if she were stuffing cotton. "The pants were so thick and

heavy, I walked outside with the legs of an elephant. But it was still cold,” she said, giving me a strenuous look. I felt a wave of heat flowing through my Adidas joggers.

“There was no such thing called meat when we grew up,” she would say, picking up a slice of chili oil sautéed pork with chopsticks, “a drop of lard in a watery cabbage soup was the best you could expect.” She placed the pork on a bowl of rice for her childhood girl friend who would come for dinner with us, “children today could understand none of it.” They nodded at each other with relief, their shared past offered them solace they couldn’t find in their children.

Growing up in the 1970s in northern China, my mother received food coupons worth three ounces of meat per month. Her family redeemed them once a year around the Lunar New Year, so they had enough to celebrate. *You were meant to eat just enough so you don’t die. Imagining eating meat again 12 months later kept you alive.* Her brother and father took priority in the feast, carrying the food into the mining pit for lunch, where they spent hours upon hours in a dimly-lit darkness that resembled nothing else she saw on earth. “Since I was six, I kneeled on the ground every day to scoop ash from burning coal with my hands, to keep the kitchen fire going,” she told me, curling her fingers together and mimic the moves in the air. “I had to make sure they had food when they came back from the pit.”

“You don’t know what it’s like to *peel* your socks off from your ankle every night in the winter, to find them tainted with specks of blood and pieces of skin. The mucus on my feet had hardened, and I pricked it off to ease the chaffing. It only revealed more blood. You don’t know what it’s like to suffer. They bully you? It can be worse. You queer? Nonsense.”

Her endless days of dusty labor, coarse garments, and a meat fest that came once a year were over. My queerness was just a bug in the kitchen next to burning coal that she could decimate by stepping on and twisting under the balls of her foot.

I was still sitting by the window. The asphalt road below usually accommodated lots of foot traffic on campus. But since it was class time, it was quiet. I sighed in relief. I didn’t want anyone to notice my body there, at least not right away. If they were to cast judgment about my

choices, it should be well after the deed was done. I wanted Duxie and the other men to remember this day, with guilt.

Downstairs from the bathroom I perched in, petals of winter jasmine that were tightly packed against each other escaped the constraints, blossomed like yellow tassels covering a barren patch of soil in the chilly Beijing air. Small sprouts emerged. I eyed a few specks of the faintest green.

I then slid off of the window frame and jumped onto the bathroom tiles. I couldn't die yet. I had to defend her dignity, even if she had no interest in defending mine.