魂魄城 (Hún Pò Chéng — City of Souls)

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17 chapters
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CHAPTER 1

DAY ONE

She wakes at five in the morning because that is what the body does when it is done pretending to sleep.

The apartment is dark. The refrigerator hums. Somewhere below, the mahjong has stopped for the night, and the silence it leaves is the kind she has learned to move through without waking anyone. She lies still for a moment and listens — not for sound, but for the absence of it. The computer fan is off. Yichen is asleep, or awake in the dark. She cannot tell the difference from here, and she has stopped trying to tell the difference from here.

She gets up. She does not turn on the kitchen light — the light would leak under his door, and the light would be a question, and he has stopped answering questions. She cooks in the dark, by feel, the way her mother cooked in the old apartment, the way the body remembers what the mind has stopped believing in. Rice. Water. Ginger. The chicken she bought yesterday, the one that cost more than it should have. She puts the soup on the stove and stands at the kitchen window and watches the alley below — the first delivery riders moving through the fog, the wet market waking three streets away.

Her hands. She looks at them, the way she has started looking at them — dry from the sanitizer at the supermarket, cracked at the knuckles, slower than they used to be. She used to paint her nails. She cannot remember when she stopped. She can remember the color — a red her mother said was too loud for a girl who would marry into a factory family — and she cannot remember the last time she bought a bottle. This is the arithmetic of her life now: she counts the things she has stopped doing the way she counts the money, and the two ledgers are the same ledger. She counts the soup bowls, the pill refills, the installments, the subscriptions, the things she has stopped doing, the red she used to wear on her nails, and the count comes out the same every morning: short.

The soup is done. She carries it down the hall in the dark, stepping carefully, the way she steps every morning, and she sets it down outside his door. The bowl

from yesterday is still there, cold, the spoon still clean. She picks it up with her free hand. She does not look at the door. She does not knock. Knocking is how you invite the answer you cannot bear, and she has learned, this year, to stop inviting it.

She leaves the new soup, takes the old bowl to the kitchen, washes it carefully, the way you wash a thing you are trying not to think about.

At six, Yinan's alarm goes off, and the apartment begins — the small, bright sound of a child who still believes that mornings are for waking. Yinan comes out in her school uniform, her hair uncombed, and Lihua pours the milk and puts the egg in front of her and says "Eat" without looking up, because looking up means seeing how small her daughter has become, and she cannot afford to see it right now, not before work.

"Mom." Yinan's mouth is full. "Mom, do you think gege will —"

"Eat," Lihua says. "You'll be late."

Yinan eats. Lihua does not look up. This is the pattern. She has been running this pattern for a year, and she knows it is wrong, and she knows she will make it up to Yinan later, and she has been telling herself this for a year.

At seven she leaves for the supermarket. The bus is full of people going to work, and she stands — because the seats are taken and because her feet already hurt — and she looks at the young men her son's age, the ones in school uniforms, the ones with backpacks, the ones talking to each other on their phones, and she thinks, the way she thinks every morning: their mothers don't know. Their mothers are lucky. Their mothers are probably just as tired as she is, and they don't know the difference, and that is the whole difference: they don't know what they've been spared. She does not know anything about these boys. She envies their mothers anyway. The envy is not fair, and she knows it is not fair, and she carries it anyway, in the ledger.

The supermarket. Eight hours. She works the register, and the register is a counter that does not talk back: scan, take the money, give the change, scan. The customers are the same customers: the old man who buys the same cigarettes, the woman who argues about the price of eggs, the girl with the baby who always smiles at her, the man who counts his change twice — and Lihua smiles back, and the smile is the only honest thing she does all day, because the girl with the

baby does not know anything about her, and that is what makes the smile possible.

Her coworker asks, at lunch, in the break room, with the rice and the pickles: "You look tired. You sick?"

"I'm fine," Lihua says. "Didn't sleep well."

She has said this a thousand times. It is a lie, and it is not a lie — she did not sleep well, and the reason is Yichen, and "didn't sleep well" is the version of the truth that fits in the break room, the version that does not require her to say 双相情感障碍, the words she says only to herself and to Dr. Chen and to the walls of the stairwell. Her coworker nods. Her coworker talks about her own son, who is in middle school, who is failing math, who "just won't study, I don't know what to do with him." Lihua nods. She does not say: your son failing math is a gift. She does not say: there are worse things than failing math. She says nothing, because saying nothing is the only way to keep the ledger balanced.

At eight in the evening she comes home. The apartment is dark except for the television — Liu Wei is home, in front of the TV, the blue light on his face, the two glasses of baijiu on the table, one empty. He does not look up when she comes in. She does not expect him to. They have stopped expecting things from each other, which is its own kind of peace — the peace of two people who have agreed, without ever agreeing, to stop being disappointed.

She goes to the kitchen. The soup bowl from this morning is outside his door — still there, still cold, the spoon still clean. She picks it up. She stands in the hallway with the cold bowl in her hands, and she listens to the computer fan through his door — the sound of a boy not sleeping, the sound of the fan that will not let him rest — and she thinks: I do not know what he is making. I do not know what he is deleting. I only know the sound.

She washes the bowl. She puts the new soup outside his door — the same soup, the same recipe, the same bowl. She does not knock.

At ten she goes to the kitchen window. This is her place — the one place in the apartment where she is not someone's wife, not someone's mother, not someone's daughter-in-law. The window looks down into the alley, and the alley is empty now, and the fog has come down with the dark, and the city is a lid. She

lights the incense — sandalwood, the cheap kind, the red packets from the temple, the kind her mother used to buy. The smoke rises and curls.

She says, to the smoke, to the window, to the dark: "Ma."

The word sits in the kitchen like a stone dropped into a pond.

"Ma. I don't know what to do with him."

The smoke curls. The refrigerator hums. There is no answer. There is never an answer. She knew there would be no answer, and she asked anyway, because asking is the only prayer she has left, and she is not sure who she is praying to.

She does not cry. She learned that, this year — how to cry without making a sound, in the kitchen, at the window, with her back to the hallway, in case he comes out for water. She stands there until the incense burns down, and then she goes to bed, and she lies in the dark, and she listens.

She listens for the fan. She listens for the door. She listens for the sound of a boy getting up in the night to delete the work he made that day, or to make the work he will delete tomorrow. She does not know which it will be. She has not known for a year. She listens anyway, because listening is the only thing she can do from here, because she has not had a full night's sleep in a year — not because of Yichen's insomnia, but because she listens for it.

In the dark, the memory comes, the way it always comes, the way it always will:

The glow of the monitor on his face. The smell of his unwashed body. The way he turned to her, four days awake, and said, with absolute calm: "Mom, I can see the building's skeleton."

She has not told anyone what he said. She has not told Liu Wei. She has not told her sister. She carries it like a stone.

She closes her eyes. She listens.

CHAPTER 2

DAY TWO

In the morning she does the arithmetic.

It is not a choice. It is what the mind does when the body is too tired to think: it counts. The hospital week — one week, twelve months ago, the bills still coming, in installments, in a drawer she keeps separate from the other bills, a drawer Liu Wei does not know about, a drawer she thinks he also has, somewhere, because they have both been hiding the same numbers from each other for a year. The medication — lithium, quetiapine, the refills, the 门特 — the government subsidy that covers most of it and does not cover the feeling of it. The subscriptions — she saw them three months ago, on his browser history, the asset library that renewed itself on her Alipay account three times before she said anything, three times at ninety-nine yuan, and she said nothing, because saying something meant admitting she was watching, and she was watching, and he knew she was watching, and neither of them had the words for it.

The arithmetic is not grief. The arithmetic is the shape grief takes when you have no poetry.

Her son does not eat her soup. Her son does not leave his room. Her son costs money, and the money is the only language she has for love, and the love is the only thing she has to give him, and he does not eat it.

She cooks anyway.

At noon she goes to his door. She does not knock. She opens it, just a crack, just enough to see — he is asleep, the quetiapine has him, twelve hours like a stone in a pond. The room smells like a room where a boy has not opened the window in days. The computer is on, the fan spinning, the screen lit — she can see the corner of it from the door, blue and gray, geometry, something being built, or something being deleted, she cannot tell. She goes in. She does not go in often — the room is his, the room is the one thing he still controls — but she goes in now, and she touches his forehead, the way she used to when he was small, checking for fever.

His skin is cool. No fever. But there is a heat under the skin that is not temperature — she cannot name it, she has never been able to name it, she only knows it the way she knows the difference between a room that is too cold and a room that is too warm, the way she knows the apartment's temperature the way other mothers know their children's moods. She touches his forehead and she feels the heat that is not a fever and she thinks: this is what I am afraid of.

She leaves. She closes the door, softly. She goes back to the kitchen and turns off the air conditioner in the living room, because the apartment is too cold, because the damp gets into everything in January, because the cold is the kind that comes from inside the walls and will not be defeated by the thermostat.

The phone rings at three. Her cousin, from her husband's side — she does not remember which cousin; they have blurred into a single bright surface of questions. "Is Yichen better? When is he going back to school? My daughter says he dropped out — is that true? You should make him go back, Lihua, a boy who doesn't study —"

"He's fine," Lihua says. "He's resting. He'll go back when he's ready."

She says the words the way she has said them a thousand times. She does not say the words 双相情感障碍 — bipolar disorder, the name of the thing that moved into her son. She does not say: he was top ten in his year, he was the class monitor, he was the boy teachers held up as an example, and now he costs ninety-nine yuan a month on an asset library he does not use. She says "He's fine" and she hangs up, and she stands at the kitchen window, and she thinks about her sister — the one person who would understand, the one person she has not told the full truth — because telling the full truth to her sister would mean saying it out loud, and saying it out loud is the thing she can only do in the stairwell, in the dark, to Dr. Chen, to the walls.

At seven, dinner. Liu Wei comes home, eats fast, says nothing. Yichen comes out — he comes out, which is something, which is more than some days — and he sits at the table, and he does not eat the rice, and Lihua watches his hands, and the hands are shaking. The tremor. She saw it three months ago, the tremor in his right hand, and she did not say anything, because saying something meant admitting she was watching, and she was watching, and he knew she was watching, and neither of them had the words for it.

"Did you eat the soup?" she asks.

"Yes," Yichen says.

He did not eat the soup. She knows he did not eat the soup. She counted the bowls. She always counts the bowls.

She does not say anything. She clears the plates. Liu Wei goes to the television. Yichen goes back to his room. Yinan does her homework at the dining table, talking to herself, because no one answers, and Lihua stands at the kitchen window, and she listens to the fan through the wall, and she thinks: I am the only one in this house who says the words out loud, and saying them has made me lonely.

At eleven, Liu Wei comes into the kitchen. This is their hour. The only hour. The refrigerator hums, the incense has burned out, and they whisper — not because the children could hear; Yichen is wearing headphones, he would not hear a shout — but because whispering is the only volume left to them.

"He came out," Liu Wei says. It is not a question.

"Yes."

"He didn't eat."

"No."

"He's never going to go back to school." Liu Wei says it flat, the way he speaks to machines, the way he speaks to everything now. "He's never going to get a job. He's going to sit in that room until he's thirty, and we're going to pay for it."

"He is sick, Liu Wei. Not lazy."

"He's not sick. He's weak. There's a difference."

She wants to say the words. She wants to say 双相情感障碍, the words that are supposed to explain everything, the words that explain nothing. She wants to say: I found him at three in the morning, four days awake, talking to the monitor, and he said he could see the building's skeleton, and you were asleep — you slept through it, you always sleep through it. She wants to say: your son is not weak. Your son stayed up until one in the morning finishing homework because merely good was not enough for him, because you taught him that being merely good was failure, because you never told him you were proud — you only ever told him to eat his rice.

She says: "He takes his medicine. He goes to Huaxi. He's trying."

"He's hiding."

The word lands. Hiding. She stands at the window with her back to him, and she does not turn around, because if she turns around she will see his face, and if she sees his face she will see the fear underneath the anger — and she knows it is there, she has always known it is there, the fear of a man who does not know how to mourn a living son — but she cannot afford to see it tonight, not on top of everything else.

"He is sick," she says again. "That is all. He is sick."

Liu Wei leaves the kitchen. She hears the baijiu bottle. She hears the television. She stands at the window, and she listens to the fan through the wall, and she thinks about her mother, and she thinks: Ma, you would have known what to say to him. You always knew what to say to him. You said the test was stupid when he failed it, and you said he had heaven's eyes, and you never once told him to be better, and I told him to be better, and look where being better got him.

She does not know if her mother's way would have saved him. She knows her mother's way did not save her. She knows the guilt has two sides — the guilt of pushing him too hard, and the guilt of not pushing back hard enough — and she carries both, and the ledger does not balance, and it never will.

She goes to bed. She lies in the dark. She listens.

CHAPTER 3

DAY THREE

The money leaves her account in the morning.

She checks her Alipay the way she checks the weather: daily, without thinking, a reflex of the hand. The balance is lower than it should be. She taps the transaction list, and there they are, three of them, all from this morning — the plugin pack, the render-farm credits, the asset-library renewal — two hundred and ninety-eight, one hundred and fifty, ninety-nine. She reads the names of the companies and does not understand them. She does not need to understand them. She understands the number, and the number is the love made countable, and the love is being spent on things she cannot see, in a room she cannot enter, by a son who does not eat her soup.

She puts the phone face-down on the table.

She does not say anything. She has been watching the subscriptions renew for three months — three times at ninety-nine yuan before she said anything, and then she said nothing again, and then this — and she knows that saying something now means admitting she has been watching all along, and she has been watching all along, and he knows she has been watching all along, and neither of them has the words for it. So she puts the phone face-down, and she goes to work, and she works the register, and the register is a counter that does not talk back, and the arithmetic runs underneath it like a current: two hundred and ninety-eight, one hundred and fifty, ninety-nine. The soup. The medicine. The hospital week. The ledger does not balance. The ledger has not balanced in a year.

At seven her alarm goes off. She moves through the apartment, and she pauses outside his door — the door of the room where the fan has been running all night, all day — and she listens to the fan, and she does not knock. Knocking is how you invite the answer you cannot bear. She goes to work, and all day she hears the fan in her head, and the fan is the only thing he gives her, the only thing that comes through the wall.

At seven in the evening she comes home and the apartment is wrong.

She knows it before she opens the door — she knows it from the hallway, from the quality of the silence, from the way the fan is running and the way the fan has been running all night, all day, the sound of the fan that will not let him rest. She opens the door. Liu Wei is in the living room, but he is not watching the television. He is sitting with his hands folded on the table, and the hands are white at the knuckles, and she knows that posture — she knows it the way she knows the apartment's temperature. She looks at Yichen's door. The door is open. Yichen is standing in the living room.

He is talking. He is talking the way he talked that night, twelve months ago — too much, too fast, with too much eye contact — and she hears the words without hearing them at first, because the sight of him is enough: the brightness, the wrong brightness, the brightness she has learned to fear, the brightness that means the heat is back, the heat that put him in the hospital.

"Dad. I'm going to show you something. I've been working on a project — the fog. The whole city's fog. It's going to change how people see Chengdu. I'm going to sell it to the government. I'm going to make this family —"

She puts down her bag. She puts down her chopsticks — no, the chopsticks are not on the table yet. She is still standing in the doorway with her bag, and she watches, and she cannot move, because moving would mean the moment is real, and the moment is real, it is happening again, it is always happening again.

"You're seventeen," Liu Wei says. "Eat your rice."

"I'm not hungry."

"Eat your rice."

Yichen sits. Yichen eats. The rice goes in, and nothing comes back, and she cannot tell if he tastes it, and she does not ask. And Lihua stands in the doorway, and she watches her son eat the way you pour into a pot that never fills, and she watches her husband's jaw, tight as a fist, and she watches Yinan at the dining table, her pencil stopped, her eyes wide — excited, then confused, then tired, then afraid. She knows that sequence. She has watched that sequence on her daughter's face for a year.

The table is silent. The fan runs. The city breathes below the window.

That night she does not sleep. She lies in the dark and she listens, and the fan never stops, and at three in the morning she gets up for water and she stands in the hallway, outside his door, and she listens to the fan, and she thinks: I do not know what he is making. I do not know what he is deleting. I only know the sound. I only know that sound.

She does not knock. She has not knocked in a year. Knocking is how you invite the answer you cannot bear.

CHAPTER 4

DAY FOUR

At 8:47 in the morning the notification lands on her phone. ¥298. The plugin pack. The push notification sits on the lock screen, bright and small, and she looks at it, and she does not open it — she has already seen the number, she has already done the arithmetic, and the notification is just the number wearing a different face — and she puts the phone face-down, and she does not say anything, and she goes to get Yichen ready for Huaxi.

Huaxi. The appointment. She takes him, because she is the only one who will, because she is the one who found him that night, because she is the one who says the words 双相情感障碍 out loud, the only one in the house who has not stopped saying them.

They take the bus. He sits beside her and he does not speak, and she does not speak, and she watches the city slide past the window — the wet markets with their awnings, the old men playing xiàngqí under the trees, the fog softening everything into the same gray watercolor — and she thinks, the way she thinks every time: this city is full of boys his age, going to school, going to work, going somewhere. She imagines their mothers. She envies them without knowing anything about them. She has been envying strangers for a year, and the envy is a muscle now, and the muscle is tired.

The hospital is a queue that never stops counting. She knows the route the way you memorize a wound — the entrance, the fluorescent light, the smell of disinfectant and dust, the queue number machine, the numbers that crawl across the screen like a slow river. She has walked this route once a month for a year. She hates it. She is grateful it exists. The two things are true at once, the way two ledgers can both be true at once. They take a number: 147. They sit. The light hums. The waiting room is full of people who do not make eye contact, because making eye contact would mean acknowledging that they are all here for the same reason. Across from them, an old woman is crying, silently, tears running down a face that has stopped trying. Lihua looks at her, and she thinks: that

could be me. I am not crying, but that could be me. The only difference is the shape of the face. A young man in a hoodie sits with his hands between his knees, staring at the floor. Lihua looks at him, and she thinks: that could be my son in three years, if he stops taking his medicine. She looks away. She holds the queue slip like a talisman, and she does not know what she is praying to.

Dr. Chen has fifteen minutes and fifty patients. Dr. Chen is a small man with a precise beard and tired eyes, and he asks the questions — sleep, appetite, energy, thoughts of self-harm — and Yichen answers them, and the answers are flat, and the flatness is the lithium, and the lithium is working, and Lihua listens to her son lie to the doctor, the way he has lied to her for a year, the same gentle, careful, terrible lies: that he is fine, that he is sleeping, that he is taking his medicine, that he is working on his art. She does not correct him. She does not know how. Correcting him means opening her mouth, and opening her mouth means the ledger spills out — the subscriptions, the untouched soup, the tremor in his hands, the fan running all night — and the doctor has fifteen minutes and fifty patients, and her son has already closed his face like a door.

Then Dr. Chen says the thing.

"Yichen. You turn eighteen in two months. After eighteen, you transfer to adult services. The registration follows you — the disability registration, the one filed after your diagnosis. It's already in the system. It affects certain things. A driver's license, if you ever apply for one. Certain jobs — civil service, public institutions, some private employers with background checks. Housing, in some cases. I'm not telling you this to frighten you. I'm telling you because you need to begin preparing for reintegration."

Her hands go still in her lap. She stops holding the queue slip. She watches her son's face, and the face does not change — the flatness, the lithium, the door — and she thinks: he is hearing this. He is hearing that his life has a ceiling, and the ceiling is made of paper, and the paper is already filed. She thinks: I should have told him. I should have told him before we came, in the kitchen, at the window, with the incense, so he would have time to be angry at me instead of hearing it here, in the fluorescent light, in front of the old woman crying.

"Reintegration," Yichen says. The word sits in the air like a stone.

"Reintegration," Dr. Chen repeats. He looks at Yichen, and his tired eyes are not tired for a moment. "You're not the first boy who's sat in this chair. And you won't be the last. The system is not your enemy, Yichen. The registration protects you — free physicals, drug subsidies, 门特 reimbursement, so your mother doesn't have to pay for your lithium out of pocket. What it costs is on the other side of the ledger. I want you to know what's on both sides before you decide what to do with the next five years."

The ledger. Lihua hears the word and it lands like a tile on a table. The doctor knows about ledgers. The doctor has been keeping ledgers for twenty years. She wants to ask him: how do you balance a ledger where one side is your son's future and the other side is his life? She does not ask. The fifteen minutes are up. The number on the screen has moved. The queue is waiting.

On the bus home, Yichen sits beside her and does not speak. She sits beside him and does not speak. She watches her reflection in the dark window — a woman with cracked hands and tired eyes, a woman she does not recognize, a woman she has become in a year — and she practices, silently, the sentence she will say to Liu Wei: *The doctor says when he turns eighteen, he transfers to adult services. The registration means he can't get a driver's license. It means certain jobs will not take him. It means —*

She practices it four times. The sentence does not get easier. It gets heavier.

She decides not to tell him.

She does not know if the decision is mercy or cowardice. She knows it is the same decision she has been making for a year — the decision to carry the weight alone, because Liu Wei already carries his own weight, because telling him would mean asking him to carry hers, because he has stopped carrying anything but the bills. She files the sentence in the drawer with the hospital bills — the drawer he does not know about, the drawer she thinks he also has.

The envelope is in her bag. The paperwork — the transfer forms, the registration, the appointment summary — the nurse handed it to her at the desk, and she took it, and she has been carrying it the way she has been carrying the sentence. Now she is home, and the sentence is decided, and the paper still has to go somewhere. She sets it on the table, next to the rice bowl. She means to put it

away. She is too tired to put it away. The envelope sits on the table, and the envelope does not know it is a secret yet, and she is too tired to teach it.

At home, Yichen does not go to his room. He walks past his door, down the stairs, out the gate — she watches him go from the kitchen window, watches him walk past the security guard, watches him turn toward the river — and she lets him go. She does not call after him. She stands at the window, and she watches until the fog eats him, and then she sends the text: 回来吃饭. Come home and eat. He does not answer.

She burns the incense. She stands at the window, and the smoke rises and curls, and the smell — sandalwood, the cheap kind, the red packets from the temple, her mother's smell — fills the kitchen, and she says, to the smoke:

"Ma. He went to the hospital today. The doctor told him about the registration, about the license, about the jobs. He didn't say anything. He never says anything anymore. I don't know if he heard it. I don't know if he's afraid."

The smoke curls. The refrigerator hums.

"Ma. You said he had heaven's eyes. You said never let anyone close them. I don't know if I've closed them. I don't know if I'm the one who closed them. I told him to study. I told him to sleep — I saw the dark circles, I saw them, Ma, I saw them for years, and I told him to sleep, and I bragged about his scores to the relatives, I bragged about the boy who stayed up until one in the morning, I bragged about the evidence that he existed and mattered, and I didn't see —"

She stops. The smoke curls. There is no answer. There is never an answer.

She stands at the window until the incense burns down, and then she goes to the kitchen, and she takes out the pork, and she begins to make the hóngshāo ròu, because it is the only thing she knows how to do with the grief, because the grief is her mother's recipe and her mother's kitchen and the last language they share, and because her son will probably not eat it, and she will make it anyway — the way she makes the soup, the way she makes everything: with the body, by feel, in the dark.

He comes home at nine. She hears the door. She does not turn around from the stove. She does not ask where he went. She lets the meat brown and she waits for the sugar to caramelize, and she listens to his footsteps go down the hall, and the door close, and the fan start.

Later, after the apartment has gone quiet, she goes back to the table. The envelope is still there. She picks it up. She carries it to the bedroom, and she opens the drawer — the drawer with the bills, the drawer Liu Wei does not know about, the drawer she thinks he also has — and she files the paper, the way you file a thing you have decided not to say out loud. The drawer closes. The paper is where she can find it and he cannot.

She does not know he saw it. She does not know he read the words, and put the envelope back exactly where it was, the way you put back a thing you are not supposed to have seen. She does not know that by morning he will have noticed it is gone.

She does not sleep that night. She listens.

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PART II — THE CRACK

CHAPTER 5

DAY FIVE

The crack comes at dinner, the way cracks do — after the food, when the plates are nearly empty and there is nothing left to do with the hands.

She is at the sink when it starts. She is washing the dishes, her back to the table, the way she always washes the dishes — the way the water and the movement and the arithmetic of the suds keep her from having to see the table. She hears Liu Wei's voice, and she does not turn around at first, because the voice is flat — the warehouse voice, the voice he uses when he is about to say something he has been holding for a year — and she knows that voice, and she has been dreading that voice.

"Yichen. You are seventeen. I was working at sixteen. Your grandfather was working at fourteen. You are a man. Act like one."

She turns. She turns with the bowl still in her hands, and she watches, and what she sees is this: her husband, sitting at the table, his hands folded, his knuckles white, not shouting, never shouting. Her son, standing in the doorway of his room, the light behind him, the fan whirring. Her daughter, at the dining table, her pencil stopped mid-stroke. And she understands, in the second before the next sentence, that this has been coming for a year, that this is the bill coming due, that the ledger is being called.

"Return to school," Liu Wei says. "The vocational track. They have programs. You learn a trade. You come out at nineteen with a certificate, and you work, and you pay your own way, and this family —" He stops. He does not look at Yichen. He looks at the wall, at the peeling paint. "Or you get a job. Any job. Delivery. Warehouse. Your mother's supermarket. Or you leave."

The word hangs in the air. Leave. She watches her son's face, and the face changes — the flatness cracks, and something rises, the brightness, the wrong brightness, the heat — and she thinks: no. Not now. Not like this. Please not like this.

"I'm not going back to school," Yichen says. His voice is too loud. "I'm building something. The fog — I told you about the fog. I'm going to render the whole city. I'm going to sell it to the municipal government. I'm going to —"

"You bought a three-hundred-yuan plugin," Liu Wei says. "On your mother's account. For a project you will delete."

The words land. She sees her son's face close, the way a door closes. She sees the brightness flicker.

"I won't delete this one."

"You deleted the last one. And the one before that. And the one before that. I've watched you for a year, and I have not said anything, because your mother said you were sick, and I believed her, because I wanted to believe her. But this is not sickness. This is giving up."

She wants to move. She wants to stand between them. She cannot move. The bowl is in her hands. The bowl is the only thing holding her up.

"A boy who was top ten in his year does not spend a year staring at a screen unless he has decided to throw it away," Liu Wei says. "You have decided. I am telling you: decide something else."

And Yichen — her son, the boy who stayed up until one in the morning rewriting essays because merely good was not enough, the boy who volunteered for the labor committee because responsibility was proof of worth, the boy who once brought home a perfect score and waited at the door for her to notice — her son says, in the prophet's voice, the voice from the night of the monitor:

"You don't understand. None of you understand. The city is a lung and I am the breath —"

Liu Wei stands up. The chair scrapes. He walks to the door, and at the door he stops, and he does not turn around, and he says: "I'll be back in an hour. Decide something."

The door closes.

The apartment is very quiet. The fan whirs. Yinan is watching, her pencil stopped, her eyes wide. Yichen stands in the doorway of his room, and the heat is gone from his face — she watches it drain out of him, all at once, the way a light goes out when the switch is thrown — and he turns, and he goes into his room, and the door closes.

She stands at the sink. She does not move. The bowl is in her hands. The water runs. The bowl is clean. She has been washing the same bowl for a long time.

Liu Wei comes back in an hour. She hears the door. She hears his footsteps stop outside Yichen's room. She hears the pause. She hears the footsteps continue, past the door, to the living room, to the television, to the baijiu. She stands at the kitchen window. The incense has burned down to a gray thread.

At eleven, she goes to the kitchen, and he is there, waiting for her, the way he has been waiting for her every night this year. The refrigerator hums. The incense is out. They whisper.

"He's never going to decide," Liu Wei says. "He'll sit in there until he starves, and then it will be your fault, and it will be my fault, and —"

"He is sick," she says. "Not lazy."

"He's not sick. He's weak."

"He was top ten in his year. He was the class monitor —"

"A weak boy breaks," Liu Wei says. "Your son broke. My son broke. And you —" He stops. The word hangs. She watches his hands, the hands folded on the table, the knuckles white. "You and your mother. You made him soft. You told him he had heaven's eyes. You told him the test was stupid when he failed it. You told him the world would always take his side. And now the world has stopped taking his side, and he doesn't know what to do, because you never taught him that the world doesn't take anyone's side."

The words land. She stands in the dark kitchen, and the words land, and she feels them the way you feel a blow you have been expecting for years. Her mother. Her mother's stories. Her mother's heaven's eyes. Her mother's unconditional love — the love that undermined her, the love that made her rules a joke, the love that may have made her son fragile, or may have been the only thing that kept him whole. She will never know. Her mother is dead. She will never know. And her husband is saying the thing she has been afraid of saying to herself in the dark.

She does not shout. She does not shout because shouting is not her language. She says, quietly, precisely, the way you put a needle in the exact place:

"You have not touched your son in a year, Liu Wei. You have not asked him a single question. You have not told him you were proud of him — not once, not ever, not even when he was top ten, not even when he brought home the certificate, not even when the teachers praised him in front of you. You think I made him soft. You think my mother made him soft. But the only thing you ever gave him was silence, and he spent seventeen years trying to earn a word from you, and he wore himself out trying, and now you stand in my kitchen and tell me he is weak."

The silence after is worse than shouting. It is the kind of silence that has weight. She stands at the window. He sits at the table. The refrigerator hums. Somewhere below, the mahjong starts up again, and the sound is the only sound, and neither of them moves.

He leaves the kitchen first. She hears the television. She hears the baijiu bottle. She stands at the window, and she does not cry, because crying is a luxury, and she has not been able to afford it since the hospital week.

In the middle of the night she hears the shower.

She is not asleep — she is listening, she is always listening — and she hears the bathroom door, and the water, and the water running for a long time, longer than any shower, and the pipes groaning in the wall. She lies in the dark, and she thinks: he is washing it off. Whatever he said, whatever he saw, he is washing it off. She knows that shower. She has seen the red skin the morning after, the scrubbed forearms, the way he holds his arms like they hurt. She has never asked. She does not ask now.

She listens to the water run until it stops. She listens to the door close. She listens to the fan start.

She does not sleep. She listens.

CHAPTER 6

DAY SIX

In the morning she finds the pills in the bathroom sink.

White specks. A thin film on the porcelain, the way soap leaves a film, but this is not soap. She knows what it is. She has been counting the pills in the boxes for a year — not because she does not trust him, but because she is his mother, because counting is the only way to know — and she knows the shape of the lithium, the small white rounds, and she knows what happens when you put them under your tongue and drink the water and spit them into the sink.

She stands in the bathroom and she looks at the white specks and she thinks: he is not taking his medicine. He is not taking his medicine and he has been not taking it, and I have been counting the boxes and I have not said anything, because saying something means admitting I was watching, and I was watching, and he knows I was watching, and neither of us has the words for it.

She wipes the sink. She does it carefully, the way you clean up a thing you are trying not to think about. She goes to the kitchen and she makes the soup, and she carries it down the hall, and the bowls are there — she counts them: three, four, the cold ones, the spoons still clean — and she stacks them, and she leaves the new one, and she does not knock.

Yinan comes home from school at four. Lihua is in the kitchen folding the laundry — the towels, the same towels — and she hears her daughter go down the hall, and she hears the knock. Two knocks. A pause. One more. She knows the pattern — Yinan's knock, the careful knock, the knock of a child walking on a frozen lake.

The door does not open.

Yinan knocks again. The door does not open.

Lihua stands in the kitchen with a towel in her hands, and she listens, and she hears her daughter's voice, small and careful, through the wall: "Gege, I drew you a picture." A pause. "I'll put it under the door."

She hears the paper slide. She hears her daughter stand there. She hears the silence — the long silence, the silence of a nine-year-old waiting for a door that will not open. She hears her daughter's footsteps come back down the hall.

Yinan passes the kitchen. She does not look in. Lihua watches her pass, and she sees the small shoulders, and she thinks: she is learning the knock. She is learning the silence. She is nine years old and she is learning the silence, and it is my job to teach her the other things, and I am teaching her nothing, I am teaching her that love is a bowl of cold soup.

She does not go to Yinan. She tells herself she will make it up to her later. She has been telling herself this for a year.

That night, in the dark, she listens. The fan is off. The computer is off. The silence from his room is the loudest thing in the apartment. She listens to the silence, and she thinks: he is not taking his medicine. He is in there, in the dark, and he is not taking his medicine, and I am out here, in the dark, listening, and I do not know what to do, because I have done everything I know how to do, and everything I know how to do is soup.

She listens.

CHAPTER 7

DAY SEVEN

The night shift. The supermarket at night is a different country.

The lights are lower. The music is softer — the same songs, but they sound different at two in the morning, like songs from a radio in a room where someone has died. The customers are different — the delivery riders, the shift workers, the people who cannot sleep, the people who are stocking their own shelves of insomnia. Lihua works the register, and the register is a counter that does not talk back, and the night is a counter that counts everything she is not thinking about.

At two in the morning she is on the register, and between customers she restocks the instant noodles, and her hands move, and her back aches, and her feet hurt, and the pain is the kind of pain that is almost restful, because it is real, because it belongs to her, because it is not his.

A coworker comes by — the night supervisor, a young man with a shaved head and tired eyes, her son's age, maybe a few years older. He says, "Auntie, you should go home. You've been here since eight."

"I'm fine," she says. "The overtime helps."

The overtime helps. It is true, and it is a lie. The overtime helps the ledger — the hospital bills, the medicine, the subscriptions, the soup that costs more than it should — and the overtime helps her, because the supermarket is exhausting but predictable, and the apartment is exhausting and chaotic, and she would rather scrub a stranger's floor than sit in the living room listening to her son's computer fan and not knowing if he is creating or destroying.

She imagines telling the night supervisor about Yichen. She rehearses the words: *My son is seventeen. He has bipolar disorder. He hasn't left his room in a week. He doesn't eat my soup. He hides his medicine. I found white specks in the sink.* She rehearses them the way she practiced the sentence on the bus, and they do not get easier, and she cannot imagine saying them out loud — to this young man, in this bright place, surrounded by instant noodles and normal problems.

The night supervisor talks about his own life — his mother is sick, his father left when he was small, he is saving to buy a scooter. Normal problems. Real problems. Lihua nods, and she thinks: he is telling me his problems because he thinks I am a safe person to tell, and I am a safe person to tell because I am nobody, because I am just the auntie on the register, because if I told him about Yichen he would not know what to do with it, and neither would I.

She feels invisible. It is not a bad feeling. Invisible is restful. Invisible is the register, the scanner, the beep, the change. She works until the shift ends, and she takes the bus home in the dark, and she stares at her reflection in the window — the woman with the cracked hands, the tired eyes — and she practices the sentence she will not say to anyone.

At dawn she comes home. The apartment is quiet. She goes to the bathroom, and she looks at the sink, and the sink is clean — she cleaned it yesterday, she cleaned it carefully, and it is still clean, and the cleanliness is a small wound, because clean means he has not been in here, means he has not taken his medicine, means he is still in there, in the dark.

She makes the soup. She leaves it. She does not knock.

CHAPTER 8

DAY EIGHT

The hospital calls at ten in the morning.

She is home between shifts, folding the laundry — the same towels — and the phone rings, and the number is the hospital number, and she answers it the way she answers everything: carefully, in the stairwell, with the door closed, in case he can hear.

It is the office. The adult-services transfer. The paperwork. The confirmation that when Yichen turns eighteen, in two months, his file will move to the adult system, and there are forms to sign, and a meeting to schedule, and the voice on the phone is kind and flat — the voice of a woman explaining a process — and Lihua says "好" — good — three times, and she hangs up, and she stands in the stairwell, and she thinks about the sentence she practiced on the bus: *The doctor says when he turns eighteen, he transfers to adult services.*

She decides, again, not to tell Liu Wei.

She does not know if the decision is mercy or cowardice. She knows it is the same decision. She files the call in the drawer with the bills, and she goes back to the laundry, and the laundry is the same laundry, and the towels are the same towels, and the apartment is the same apartment, and nothing has changed, and everything has changed, and she is the only one who knows it, and she is the only one who will carry it.

That afternoon she finds the tablet.

It is Yinan's tablet — the family tablet, the one they share, the one Yinan uses for homework, the one she left on the dining table this morning. Lihua picks it up to put it away, and the screen lights up, and the browser is open, and the search history is there, and she reads it without meaning to, and she cannot stop reading it:

bipolar disorder famous artists

how to know if you're cured

She stands at the dining table with her daughter's tablet in her hands, and she reads the searches again, and the searches are a knife, and the knife finds the exact place. Bipolar disorder. Famous artists. Cured. He has been asking the tablet the questions he cannot ask her, the questions she cannot answer, the questions that have no answers: will I ever be more than this? Is there a way out? Does it end?

She puts the tablet down. She puts it down the way you put down something hot. She stands at the dining table, and she does not cry — crying is a luxury — and she thinks: I have been asking the same questions, in the kitchen, at the window, to the smoke. We have been asking the same questions, in the same apartment, and neither of us can hear the other.

She goes to the kitchen window. She lights the incense. She says, to the smoke: "Ma. He's asking if he can be cured. I don't know the answer. You would have said something. You would have said something that made him feel seen, even if it wasn't true. I don't have your words. I only have the soup."

The smoke curls. The refrigerator hums. There is no answer. There is never an answer.

That night she hears the fan. It has been off for three days — the silence from his room has been the loudest thing in the apartment — and now the fan is on, and the sound is the sound of the fan waking, and she lies in the dark and listens, and she thinks: he is back at the computer. He is making something, or deleting something. I do not know which. I only know the sound.

She listens.

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PART III — THE PENDULUM

CHAPTER 9

DAY NINE

She takes him to the market.

It is not a decision. It is a reflex — the reflex of a body that has been doing one thing for a year and has run out of other things. She appears at his door at eight in the morning with the shopping bags, and she says, "You're coming with me," and she does not make it a question, because if it is a question he will say no, and if he says no she will have to decide whether to accept it, and she is too tired to decide.

He comes. He comes out of the room — he has been in there for four days, the fan off, the silence loud — and he follows her, and she does not look at him, because looking at him means seeing the state of him, and she knows the state of him: the pale skin, the dark circles, the clothes that have been worn for days, the smell of a room where a boy has not opened the window.

The market is a bowl overflowing with sound and color and life. The vendors shout. The fish gasp. The steam rises from the dumpling stalls. The old men play xiàngqí under the awnings, moving pieces with the unhurried precision of men who have all the time in the world. The vendors know her — they give her extra scallions, they ask about her husband, they ask about the children, and she says the children are fine, the children are fine, the same words, the same lie, and the lie fits in the market the way it fits in the break room, the way it fits everywhere except the stairwell.

She buys the scallions. She argues over two mao, the way she always argues over two mao, because arguing over two mao is a ritual, and the ritual is the only normal thing left. She buys the ginger. She buys the pork — the good pork, the belly, the fat, the cut her mother used for the hóngshāo ròu, the cut that costs more, the cut she buys anyway, the cut she has been buying for a year and cooking for a son who does not eat it.

He is carrying the bags. She notices because she has to notice — his hands are full, and the hands are shaking, the tremor, and he holds the bags with both

hands to hide it, and she sees him hide it, and she does not say anything, because saying something means admitting she was watching, and she was watching, and he knows she was watching, and neither of them has the words for it.

Then he stops walking.

She is three steps ahead, and she turns, and he is stopped in the middle of the market, in front of the stall with the woman with the wok — the hóngshāo ròu stall, the red-braised pork, the dark lacquer of the sauce, the sweetness of the caramelized sugar rising into the January air — and he is standing there, and his face is doing something she has not seen him do in a year: it is open. The door is open. The flatness is gone, and something else is there, something raw, something she cannot name, and she knows what it is even before she knows what it is, because it is her mother's smell, her mother's kitchen, her mother's wok, her mother's voice, and it has stopped her son in the middle of the wet market.

"Yichen?" she says.

"Nothing," he says. "The smell. It reminded me of —"

He stops. He does not finish. He does not say the word. He does not say *Grandma*. She watches him not say it, and she understands: he is carrying the word like a stone, the way she carries it, the way they have both been carrying it for seven years, separately, in the same apartment, and the smell has opened the door for a second, and he has closed it again, and she does not know if she should have left it open.

She looks at the stall. The woman with the wok. The red lacquer. She says nothing. She buys the pork — she was going to buy the pork anyway, the good pork, the belly — and she buys it, and they walk home, and neither of them speaks, and the smell of the hóngshāo ròu follows them for three blocks.

At home, she cooks.

She puts the sugar in the wok. She waits for it to caramelize, the way her mother taught her, the way you wait for the color, the way you wait for the moment when the sugar turns — and the waiting is the whole recipe, the waiting is the whole of her mother's kitchen. She stands at the stove, and she does not look at the doorway, and she knows he is there — she can feel him there, the way she feels the apartment's temperature — and he stands in the doorway, and he

watches her cook her mother's recipe in her mother's wok, and neither of them says anything, and the steam rises, and the sugar turns, and the smell fills the small apartment, and she thinks: this is the only conversation we have left, and it is a recipe.

At night, she makes the call.

She goes to the stairwell, because the stairwell is the only place in the apartment where the walls do not carry sound. She calls her sister. She has not told her sister the full truth — she has not told anyone the full truth — and the phone rings, and her sister answers, and the voice is her sister's voice, the voice of the only person who knew their mother the way she knew their mother, and Lihua says:

"姐姐" — big sister, the word she has not used out loud in months. "The neighbor — Wang Ayi, the old auntie from downstairs — she said there's a temple. In Qingchéng Shān. They do a ritual. 安魂. Settle the wandering soul."

The words come out, and she hears herself say them, and the words are her mother's words, her mother's cosmology, the framework she does not believe in, the framework she half-remembers, the framework that is slightly embarrassing, and she says them anyway, because she is desperate, because the white specks in the sink are still in her head, because the ledger is unbalanced, because she has done everything the doctors told her to do and her son still does not eat her soup.

Her sister says something practical. She does not hear it. She says: "I know he's on medicine. I know the doctor said —" She stops. The stairwell is dark. The concrete is cold. She says: "I just want to do something. I can't just sit here and watch him —"

Her voice breaks. It is the first time in a year, and it breaks in the stairwell, in the dark, on the phone to her sister, and she does not want it to break — she has been holding it for a year — and it breaks anyway, and she says the thing she has been holding for seven years:

"My mother would know what to do. My mother would —"

She stops. The stairwell is quiet. Her sister says something. She does not hear it. She says "好" and she hangs up, and she stands in the dark stairwell, and she does not cry, because crying is a luxury, and she goes back into the apartment, and she does not know that her son is standing in the dark hallway with a glass of

water, and she does not know he heard her say the word 安魂, and she does not know that the word — her mother's word, her mother's language, the language she does not believe in and cannot stop reaching for — has just been heard by the only person in the house who still believes in it.

She goes to the kitchen window. She lights the incense. The smoke rises and curls, and she says, to the smoke:

"Ma. I called 姐姐 today. I asked her about a temple. A temple, Ma. To settle his soul. I don't believe in it. I don't know if I believe in it. But I don't know what else to do. I've done everything the doctors said. He still doesn't eat my soup. He hides his medicine. He's in there, in the dark, and I'm out here, and the only thing I have left is the thing you left me, and I don't know how to use it."

The smoke curls. The refrigerator hums. There is no answer. There is never an answer.

She stands at the window until the incense burns down. She does not sleep. She listens.

CHAPTER 10

DAY TEN

She comes home at six in the evening and the apartment is wrong.

She knows it from the hallway — she knows it the way she knows the apartment's temperature, the way she knows the difference between a room that is too cold and a room that is too warm — and she opens the door, and she sees it: the tablet on the dining table, the editing software open, the living room a different kind of wrong. Yinan is standing in the middle of the living room, and her face is the frozen face, the face of a child who has been standing in one place for a long time, and Yichen is in the living room, and his face is the bright face, the wrong brightness, the heat — the heat she has learned to fear — and the heat has been in the room for hours — she can feel it, in the way he stands, in the way his hands move when he talks.

He has been talking. That is what she understands, in the first seconds: he has been talking, for a long time, and the room is full of the talking, and Yinan has been standing in the middle of it, holding the tablet, and her eyes are wide, and the wide eyes are not wonder — they are fear, the fear of a child who has seen this before.

She looks at Yichen. He looks at her. And she gives him the look — she does not mean to give him the look, but the look is there, it has been waiting for this moment for a year, the look she has been saving, the look that says: this is the night before the hospital. This is the face you made when you talked about the building's skeleton. This is the face I found at three in the morning, and I cannot do it again, I cannot watch you burn again.

The heat goes out of his face. She watches it go out. He turns, and he goes to his room, and the door closes, and the fan starts, and she stands in the living room, and she looks at her daughter, and she says:

"What happened?"

Yinan's voice is small. "He said he was going to make me a star. He said he was going to make a documentary about our family. He made me film him." She

holds up the tablet. “He talked for three hours. He talked about the fog. About the — the breathing of the city. He made me film him talking, and he wouldn’t stop, and I —“ Her voice wavers. “I didn’t know what to do, Mom. I was scared.”

Lihua takes the tablet. She looks at the screen. The video is there — her son, standing in front of the peeling wall, the fog visible through the window behind him, his face too bright, too fast, wrong, the face she knows, the face she has been dreading for a year. She watches three seconds of it. She cannot watch more. She closes the app. She does not delete the video — she does not know why she does not delete it, she will think about it later, she does not delete it — she puts the tablet down.

She says: “He’s sick, Yinan. He didn’t mean to scare you. He’s sick, and sometimes sick looks like this.”

Yinan looks at her. The frozen-lake face. The careful face. She says, in the careful voice: “Is he going to be okay?”

Lihua does not know the answer. She says: “Eat your dinner. I’ll make you noodles.”

She makes the noodles. She watches her daughter eat. She listens to the fan through the wall.

At nine, she hears his door open.

She is in the kitchen, at the window, and she hears it — the door, the footsteps down the hall, the footsteps stop — and she stands very still, and she listens, and she hears her son’s voice, the other voice, the small voice he has not used in a year, the words she will hear again, the words that are always the same — *I’m sorry, forget everything, it’s not real* — and then her daughter’s voice, small through the wall:

“Are you still my brother?”

A pause. The pause is long. She holds her breath in the kitchen, at the window, the way she has held her breath for a year.

“I don’t know,” he says.

The words land. She stands at the window, and the words land, and she feels them the way you feel a blow you have been expecting: *I don’t know.* Her son does not know if he is still her daughter’s brother. He does not know if he is still her son. She wants to go to him. She wants to open the door and say: you are.

You are my son, you are her brother, you have always been, you will always be. She does not move. She stands at the window, and she listens, and she lets them have the moment, because the moment is theirs, because she has spent a year standing between them and the world, and she does not know how to stand between them and each other.

She hears his footsteps come back down the hall. The door closes. The fan starts.

Later, the shower runs long, the pipes groaning, and she does not need to hear it twice to know what it is washing off. She listens until the water stops, and then she listens to the silence, and the silence is the worst part, and she does not sleep.

She listens.

CHAPTER 11

DAY ELEVEN

Yinan cries that night.

Lihua is not asleep — she is listening; she is always listening — and she hears it through the wall: the quiet crying, the muffled kind, the kind pressed into a pillow, the kind a child cries when she does not want anyone to know. She gets up. She goes down the hall. She opens Yinan's door without knocking, because you do not knock on your own daughter's door when she is crying into her pillow, and she sits on the edge of the bed, and she puts her hand on her daughter's back, and Yinan rolls over, and her face is wet, and she says, in the small voice:

"Gege promised. He said he'd help with my project. He said he'd make me a star. And then he said forget everything. He said it wasn't real. Mom, was any of it real? Was he ever going to help me?"

Lihua does not know the answer. She says: "He wants to help you, Yinan. He wants to so much. He just — his sickness gets in the way. It's not his fault. It's not your fault." She stops. It is not like a cold. She has been telling her daughter it is like a cold for a year, and it is not like a cold, and Yinan is nine years old and she deserves better than the lie, and Lihua does not have the better words — she has never had the better words, she has only the soup.

"It's not like a cold," she says. "It's harder than a cold. But he loves you. He loves you so much, Yinan. He just can't always —" She stops. "He can't always be the brother he wants to be. But he's trying. He's in there, and he's trying, and I don't know how to help him either, and I'm sorry, I'm sorry I don't have better words."

Yinan cries into her mother's shoulder. Lihua holds her — the way she has not held her in a year, the way she used to hold her when she was small — and she feels the small body shake, and she thinks: this is the third grief. The first is my mother. The second is my son. The third is my daughter, and I have no room

for it, and it is here anyway, and I am holding it, and it is the heaviest thing I have ever held.

And holding her, she remembers the other child — the one at ten, the year her mother died. He became perfect overnight. He stopped crying. He started doing the dishes without being asked. He brought home perfect scores and waited at the door for her to notice, and she was so grateful — so relieved that one child was not falling apart — that she did not ask why. She accepted his perfection like a gift. She did not recognize it as a distress signal. She was his mother, and she did not see it, and now she holds his sister and tries to see everything, and she is still too late — always too late, the way she was too late with her mother, the way she was too late with him.

When Yinan is asleep, Lihua goes back to the kitchen. She stands at the window. She does not light the incense — she is too tired, and the smoke would be a question, and she cannot answer questions tonight. She stands in the dark, and she listens to the fan through the wall, and she thinks about the search history on the tablet, and she thinks: we are all asking the same questions, in the same apartment, and none of us can hear the others, and the only thing I know how to do is make soup.

She does not make soup. She stands at the window until the city below goes quiet, and then she goes to bed, and she lies in the dark, and she listens.

CHAPTER 12

DAY TWELVE

She is folding the laundry in the afternoon when she sees him at the trash.

The towels are the same towels. The laundry is the same laundry. The afternoon light comes through the kitchen window the way it comes every day, gray through the fog, and she folds, and the folding is a rhythm her hands know the way her hands know the soup, the way her hands know the knotted string bag, the way her hands know everything in this apartment except the door at the end of the hallway.

He comes out of his room — the first time today, the first time in two days — and he goes to the kitchen, and she is in the kitchen, folding the towels, and he does not see her, or he does not care, and he opens the trash, and he throws the notebooks in. The sketchbooks. The ones with the half-finished cities, the ones she has seen him draw in at the dining table, years ago, before — the cities, the buildings, the geometry of light. He throws them in the trash, one after another, and the pages flutter, and the half-finished cities fall onto the eggshells and the vegetable peelings, and she stands with the towel in her hands, and she does not say anything, and he does not look at her, and the trash is full of his attempts, and the attempts are ash.

She thinks: he is deleting himself. Piece by piece. First the files. Now the notebooks. He is deleting himself, and I am standing here with a towel, and I do not know how to stop him, because the only thing I have ever known how to do is make soup.

He leaves the kitchen. The door closes. The fan starts.

Later, she goes back to the kitchen to throw away the vegetable trimmings, and she looks at the trash — and she sees that something is missing. The sketchbooks are still there, the half-finished cities, the pages pressing against the eggshells and the peelings. But the drawing is gone. The drawing that was under his door — the drawing Yinan slid under the door, days ago, the drawing that lay on the hallway floor for three days, the drawing she swept up herself, the drawing

she put in the trash, because she could not bear to see it lying on the floor of the dark hallway, waiting for a door that would not open.

It is gone.

She stands at the trash, and she looks, and the drawing is gone, and she understands: he came back for it. While she was at the stove, or in the hall, or at the window, he came back, and he took it out of the trash, and he smoothed it, and he put it in his pocket, and he left. He fished his sister's drawing out of the trash.

She stands at the stove — no, she stands at the trash — and the tears come, the first tears in a year, the first tears she has not been able to stop, and she cries without making a sound, because he is in the next room, and she does not want him to hear. She cries into the vegetable trimmings, the way she has cried at this window a hundred times, silently.

She thinks: he kept it. He kept her drawing. He fished it out of the trash. He is in there, in the dark, and he kept his sister's drawing, and that is not nothing. That is not nothing at all.

She wipes her face. She serves the soup. She leaves it outside his door. She does not knock.

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PART IV — THE HINGE

CHAPTER 13

DAY THIRTEEN

In the afternoon she hears Yinan on the phone with her friend.

She is in the kitchen, and Yinan is in her room, the door half-open, and the voice carries — the voice of a nine-year-old, casual, devastatingly casual, the voice of a child talking to a friend about ordinary things:

"...my brother is sick, so my mom doesn't have time. She's always at work, or she's making soup for him, or she's listening at his door. She doesn't have time for anything else."

The words land like a physical blow. Lihua stands in the kitchen with the ladle in her hand, and the words land, and she feels them the way you feel a blow — in the body, in the stomach, in the place where the guilt lives. Her daughter is telling her friend, in a casual voice, that her mother doesn't have time for her. Her daughter has learned to say it without crying. Her daughter has learned to say it the way you say the weather.

She does not go to Yinan. She stands in the kitchen, and she tells herself she will make it up to her later. She has been telling herself this for a year.

At dinner, she stands at Yichen's door. She says, "You're coming to the table." She does not make it a question. She waits. The door opens — it opens, he comes out, he comes to the table — and she does not look at him, because looking at him means seeing the state of him, and she knows the state of him.

The table is set. Liu Wei is not there — the overtime, the walk, the baijiu, the night shift; she does not ask which. She serves the rice. She made the hóngshāo ròu this morning — the good pork, her mother's recipe, the sugar that turned, the dark lacquer — and she put it on the table, and she does not know if she made it for him, or for her mother, or for the ghost of a kitchen in an old apartment, and she does not ask herself, because asking herself is a luxury.

Yinan finishes her homework. She looks at Yichen — the careful look, the frozen-lake look — and she says: "Gege, I made something. Do you want to see?"

She can see on his face that he does not want to see — the flatness, the door — but Yinan is already getting up, already coming back with the tablet, already showing him: a video, thirty seconds, a gray cube spinning slowly in a void — the cube her daughter made, the program she found, the thing she figured out by herself — and Yinan is laughing. Real laughter. The laugh of a child who made something and is showing it to her brother.

And Lihua watches, from the kitchen doorway, and she watches her son look at the cube, and she watches his face — the flatness, the door — and then something moves behind the door, and he takes his sister's hand, and he says: "Show me how you made it."

She shows him. He teaches her. The shortcut keys. The dining table. The cube spinning on the tablet. The hóngshāo ròu cooling on the table. And Lihua stands in the kitchen doorway, and she watches her children at the table, and the apartment is quiet, and the quiet is not the charged quiet, not for a moment — it is the other quiet, the quiet of a family in the same room, doing an ordinary thing.

The moment ends. It always ends. But it was there. She saw it. She will keep it, the way her son kept the drawing, in the place where she keeps the things that are not nothing.

That night, in the dark, she listens. The fan runs. He is at the computer, and she does not know if he is creating or deleting, and she listens, and she thinks: he kept her drawing. He taught her the shortcut keys. He is in there, and he is trying, and I do not know if it is enough, but it is not nothing.

She does not sleep. She listens.

CHAPTER 14

DAY FOURTEEN

She has a day off, and the day off is a different kind of torture.

She wakes at six anyway — the body does not know the difference between a work day and a day off; the body only knows the listening — and she moves through the apartment, and the apartment is quiet, and she turns on the washing machine, and she opens the kitchen window, and she lights the incense, and she does the ordinary things, and the ordinary things are the same ordinary things, and the difference is that she is here, in the middle of them, instead of at the register.

At ten in the morning, he comes out of his room.

She is at the table, folding the laundry — the same towels, the towels are always the same towels — and he comes out, and he sits down across from her, and his hands are in his lap, and she looks at him, and she sees the state of him, and then she sees the pills in his hand.

He puts them in his mouth. He drinks the water. He swallows.

In front of her. He takes the lithium and the quetiapine, and he swallows them, in front of her, where she can see. She has not seen him do this in a year — she has seen the boxes, she has counted the boxes, she has found the white specks in the sink — but she has not seen him do it, in the light, at the table, like a person taking medicine the way people take medicine.

Her hands are still on the table. She says, after a long moment: "好."

Good.

The word is small. The word is a stone dropped into a pond. She does not know what to do with it, so she says nothing, and he says nothing, and the silence is not a wall — it is a container, and for a moment they are both inside it.

Then he says: "I deleted the video. The one people were sharing. It wasn't —" He stops. The words are hard. "It wasn't me. The person in that video. That's not who I am."

She looks at him. The video. The manifesto. The bright face. She watched three seconds of it, and she could not watch more, and she has not deleted it — she has not known what to do with it — and he is telling her he deleted it, and the words land, and she says:

"I know. I've known for a year. I just —" She stops. "I didn't know how to tell you I knew."

The sentence sits between them. She has known for a year. She has known that the person in the bright face is not her son, and she has known that her son is in there, somewhere, behind the door and the flatness and the white specks in the sink, and she has not known how to tell him she knew, because telling him would mean admitting she was watching, and she was watching, and he knew she was watching, and neither of them had the words for it.

They have some of the words now. Not all of them. Some of them.

The fan runs behind the closed door through all of it, the sound she knows better than his voice now, and she thinks: this morning there was a bowl of soup outside that door with the spoon still clean, and tonight there will be another, and between the two bowls a day has happened that she did not think would happen.

That afternoon, Yinan finds him at the dining table. Lihua is in the kitchen, at the window, and she hears her daughter's careful voice: "Gege. Will you tell me the story again? The one about the souls?"

And she hears him say: "Sit down."

She stands at the kitchen window. She does not turn around. She listens, and she hears him tell the story — her mother's story, the story she heard as a child, the story she half-remembers, the story she has been reaching for in the stairwell, in the incense, in the dark: everyone has three souls that fly and seven souls that stay, and the trick to being human is keeping them all in one body.

She hears Yinan ask: "Which animal is the sleep one?" She hears him answer: "The dog. Shīgǒu." She hears the names — the names her mother made her repeat as a child, the names she has not said out loud in thirty years, the names she hears now in her son's voice, in her mother's kitchen, in her mother's language, and the language is foreign to her, half-remembered, slightly

embarrassing, and it is the last language she shares with a dead woman, and her son is speaking it to her daughter at the dining table.

She hears Yinan ask if the flying souls can get lost. She hears the pause — the long pause, the pause she knows — and she hears him answer: yes, they wander, and they always came back.

She hears Yinan ask: "What happens if all the animals run away?"

The question lands in the kitchen. She stands at the window, and the question lands, and she holds her breath, and she hears her son say, slowly, the way her mother would have said it:

"Then you have to call them back. You call them by name. You stand in the place where you belong, and you say their names, one by one, out loud, and you wait. They hear you. They come home."

The words are her mother's words. She knows them the way you know a song you heard as a child and forgot you knew — they come back whole, and they come back with the kitchen, the wok, the steam, the old apartment, her mother's voice — and she stands at the window, and she does not turn around, because if she turns around they will see her face, and the face is doing the thing it does.

She hears him teach Yinan the names, and she hears her daughter repeat them like a poem — Tāiguāng. Shuǎnglíng. Yōujīng. — the names she has not said in thirty years, in her daughter's voice, in her kitchen.

Then she hears him teach her the dumpling pinch. The way the edges have to be pressed just so. The way a dumpling that is not pinched properly will open in the water and leak its filling. Her mother's hands. Her mother's voice: *the pinch is the most important part.* She taught the pinch to her son at this table — no, at the old table, in the old apartment, when he was small, when her mother was still alive, when the world was small and warm — and he has remembered it, and he is teaching it to her daughter, with an imaginary dumpling, and Yinan laughs, and the laugh is real.

She stands at the window, and she does not turn around, and she cries without making a sound, the way she has cried at this window for a year, and the tears are not the same tears. She does not know what the tears are. She only knows they are not the same.

That night she lights the incense. She stands at the window, and the smoke rises, and she says, to the smoke:

"Ma. He told your stories today. He taught Yinan the names. He taught her the pinch. He remembered everything. I didn't know he remembered everything. I thought — I thought he had lost it, the way I lost it, the way I forgot the names, the way I forgot the pinch, the way I forgot everything except the soup. But he kept it. He kept all of it. He's been keeping it for you."

The smoke curls. The refrigerator hums.

"Ma. Would you recognize him? Would you know what to do with a grandson who keeps your stories and deletes his own work? Who takes his medicine in front of me now, who teaches his sister the names, who is still — who is still —"

She stops. The smoke curls. There is no answer. There is never an answer.

She stands at the window until the incense burns down. She goes to bed. She listens.

CHAPTER 15

DAY FIFTEEN

He goes for a walk in the evening, and she goes into his room.

It is not a decision. It is the opposite of a decision — it is what the body does when the mind has stopped deciding. She watched him go — she was at the window, and she watched him walk out the gate, past the security guard, turn toward the river, the way he turned on the night of the Huaxi appointment — and she is standing in the hallway, and the door is open, the door that has been closed for a year, and she stands in the doorway, and she goes in.

The room. She has been in this room a hundred times, and she has not been in this room in a year. The smell. The stale air. The window that has not been opened. The RGB keyboard cycling through colors. The monitor with the dead pixel — he told her about the dead pixel once, months ago, or she saw it, she does not remember, she sees it now, the black point in the lower right quadrant, and she thinks: he named it. He told her he named it, and she forgot the name, and she stands here, and the forgetting is a small wound.

The desk. The invoices — the subscriptions, the plugin pack, the render-farm credits, the paper version of the numbers she saw on her phone, the ledger made visible. The certificate under the invoices — she sees the corner of it, the red plastic folder, and she does not touch it, because touching it means looking at it, and looking at it means looking at the boy who earned it, the boy who was top ten, the boy who waited at the door for her to notice. She noticed. She noticed. She was so grateful for his stability that she did not ask why.

The computer is on. The screen is lit. A project is open — Blender — and she sees the file name in the corner: *fog_study_001_yichen.* His name. His name in a file name. She does not understand the file, and she understands the name, and the name is the thing.

The cracked hands. The refrigerator hum. The same towels in her arms. She stands in her son's room the way she stands at the kitchen window: present, useless, listening to a machine she cannot fix.

She looks under the bed. She does not know why she looks under the bed — the body knows, the body has been looking for something for a year — and she sees them: the pills. A small pile of them, in the dust, by the baseboard. The lithium. The white rounds. Some of them. Not all of them. Enough.

She sits on the edge of his bed, and she looks at the pills under the bed, and she thinks about the white specks in the sink, and she thinks about the boxes she counts, and she understands, with a clarity that is worse than grief, that the arithmetic has been wrong. She has been counting the boxes. He has been hiding the pills. She has been balancing a ledger that was never balanced.

She does not touch them. She does not take them. She leaves them exactly where they are, in the dust, by the baseboard, and she closes the door, and she goes to the kitchen, and she stands at the window, and she thinks: I know now. I know what he is doing. He is taking some of them and hiding some of them, and I know now, and I do not know what to do with the knowing, because taking them away would be taking his choice, and leaving them is leaving his sickness, and I have spent a year learning to hold both at once, and I am holding them now, and they are heavy.

He comes home at eight. She is in the kitchen. She hears the door. She hears his footsteps go down the hall, and then stop — and then she hears him come back, and she hears his voice, from the living room doorway, and the voice is quiet, careful, the voice he used with Yinan:

"Dad. I took my medicine today. I've been taking it. I reinstalled Blender. I'm working on —" He stops. "I'm not giving up."

She stands in the kitchen with the dishes in her hands, and she does not turn around, and she hears the silence, the long silence, and then she hears Liu Wei's voice, flat, to the television: "Good."

The word lands. One word. She has been waiting for that word for a year. She has been waiting for her husband to say one word that was not a wound, and he said it, to the television, to the wall, and she stands in the kitchen, and she knows about the pills under the bed, and she hears her son say "I'm going to walk Yinan to the store this weekend. She wants ice cream," and she hears the silence that follows, and the silence is not a wall — it is a container — and she is in it, in the

kitchen, holding the dishes, holding the knowing, holding the word *good*, and she does not know if the word is enough, and she knows it is not nothing.

She does not turn around. She lets the container hold.

CHAPTER 16

DAY SIXTEEN

Yinan asks for her phone.

"Mom, can I borrow your phone? I need the recorder. For the interview." The careful voice. The ceremony — her daughter has been setting up the interview all morning, the notebook, the glasses of water, the way she has seen reporters do it on television. "Gege said he'd do it. He said he'd do it for real this time."

Lihua gives her the phone. She does not ask questions. She watches her daughter set up the interview at the dining table — two glasses of water, the notebook, the phone on the table, the recorder app open — and she watches her son come out of his room, and sit down across from her daughter, and she stands in the kitchen doorway, and she listens.

"Gege. What is your job?"

The question is the simplest question in the world. She stands in the doorway, and she holds her breath, and she hears her son say:

"I'm trying to make art. I'm not very good at it yet. And I'm sick — I have a sickness in my mind, and it makes the art hard. But I'm trying."

The words land. *I'm sick.* She has heard those words in the stairwell, in the dark, to Dr. Chen, to the walls — but she has never heard her son say them out loud, in the light, at the table, to his nine-year-old sister. He has never said them to her. He has never said them to anyone. And he is saying them now, to Yinan, into the recorder, and the words are the truest words she has heard him say in a year.

She listens to the rest. "What kind of art?" — "Digital art... pictures of the city. Of Chengdu. The fog, and the buildings, and the river." "Why do you stay in your room?" — "Because I'm afraid... I'm not going anywhere, and it hurts. So I stay in my room, where it hurts less... sometimes I delete it, because I'm afraid it's not good enough, and I'm afraid I'll never be good enough."

She stands in the doorway, and she listens to her son tell his sister the truth, and she thinks: he has never told me the truth. He has never had the words for me, or I have never had the words for him, or we have both been speaking different languages in the same apartment — the way I speak the language of soup and he speaks the language of whatever he speaks, the language his grandmother gave him, the language I half-remember, the language I have been reaching for in the stairwell. And Yinan — nine years old, the frozen-lake child — has asked him the questions I have been afraid to ask, and he has answered them, and the answers are breaking my heart, and the breaking is the truest thing I have felt in a year.

She hears Yinan ask: "Can I see your art?" She hears the chair move. She hears the laptop open. She hears Yinan say: "It's good, gege."

The fan runs. The soup waits outside a door that has been open all afternoon, and the incense on the windowsill has burned down to a gray thread, and none of it is nothing. She hears the last question, saved for last, the way a child saves the important thing for last:

"Gege. If the animals ran away — all seven — how do you call them back?"

And she hears him answer, and the answer is her mother's answer, her mother's language, the language she does not believe in and cannot stop reaching for:

"You say their names. You say them out loud, one by one, and you wait. They hear you. They come home... Sometimes they come home one at a time, and you have to keep saying the names, even when you're tired of saying them. Especially when you're tired of saying them."

She stands in the doorway, and she hears Yinan stop the recording, and she hears her daughter say, small and warm: "Gege. I'm glad you're my brother."

And she hears her son say nothing.

She turns away from the doorway. She goes to the kitchen window. She stands there, and she cries without making a sound, the way she has cried at this window for a year, and the tears are not the same tears — she does not know what they are, she only knows they are not the same — and she thinks: he is still in there. Behind the door and the flatness and the pills under the bed, he is still in

there, and he is teaching his sister the names, and he is telling her the truth, and he is trying, and I do not know if it is enough, but it is not nothing.

CHAPTER 17

DAY SEVENTEEN

She watches them go to the store from the kitchen window.

It is a Sunday. The fog has thinned, and the sky is the color of a bruise healing, and her son walks out the gate with his sister, and Yinan is skipping the cracks in the pavement, and she is talking — Lihua can see her mouth moving, can almost hear the chatter through the window — and her son is listening. He is walking beside her, and he is listening, and the listening is the thing. She watches them go, the two of them, down the street, past the xiàngqí players, toward the corner store, and she stands at the window — her place, her private place — and she watches her children walk to the store together, and she thinks: he is taking her for ice cream. He is doing the thing he promised. He is walking his sister to the store.

She watches them come back. Two ice creams. Strawberry. Yinan is eating hers, and she is laughing at something, and her son is eating his, and they are walking, and the city is doing what the city does — breathing, slow and comfortable — and for one hour the apartment is not a pressure chamber. It is a place two children are walking away from and back to, and the walking is ordinary, and the ordinary is the thing she has been praying for, in the stairwell, at the window, to the smoke.

She turns from the window. She sets the table. She makes the rice. The hóngshāo ròu — the good pork, her mother's recipe, the sugar that turned — she puts it on the table, and Liu Wei comes home, and the children come in, and they eat, and Yinan talks about the interview, about how she is going to tell her teacher everything on Monday, about how it is going to be the most interesting report in the whole class, and Liu Wei eats fast, the way he always eats fast, and then he does the thing — the small thing, the gruff thing — he asks, to the table, to the rice, to the wall:

"Did you eat?"

And her son looks at him, and she watches the look — the long look, the look between two people who have not looked at each other in a year — and he says: "Yes. I ate."

And Liu Wei nods. He leaves the table. He stops at the doorway, and he does not turn around, and he says: "Tomorrow. Eat with us."

And her son says: "Okay."

She stands at the stove with the ladle in her hand, and she watches the exchange, and she does not say anything, because saying anything would break the container, and the container is holding, and the holding is the thing. She serves the soup. She leaves it outside his door, the way she has left it every morning for a year. She does not knock.

That night, she stands at the kitchen window. The incense is burning — she lit it without thinking, the way she does everything now, by feel, in the dark — and the smoke rises, and the city breathes below, the mahjong, the traffic, the fog, and she says, to the smoke:

"Ma. He walked Yinan to the store today. He bought her strawberry. He taught her the names. He told her he was sick, and he said he was trying. His father told him to eat with us tomorrow. He said okay. And I — I found the pills under his bed. I found them, Ma. He's hiding some of them. I don't know what to do with that. I don't know if I should have taken them. I don't know if he'll take his medicine tomorrow, or hide it, or spit it out. I don't know if the good days will hold. I don't know —"

The smoke curls. The refrigerator hums. There is no answer. There is never an answer.

She stands at the window until the incense burns down. She goes to bed. She lies in the dark, and she listens — for the fan, for the door, for the sound of a boy taking his medicine or hiding it, she cannot tell which from here — and the listening is the whole of what she has, the listening and the soup and the arithmetic, and she thinks, in the dark, the way she thinks every night:

I do not know if he will take his medicine tomorrow. I do not know if my husband's word will survive the week. I do not know if my daughter will forgive me for the year I spent not seeing her. I do not know if my mother would

recognize any of us. I do not know any of the things a mother is supposed to know.

I know the soup will be on the stove at five in the morning. I know I will leave it outside his door. I know I will listen. I know I am still holding up the roof with my bare hands, and the roof is still holding — one more day, in the dark, by the window, in the smoke.

And in the dark, when the city has gone quiet, she practices the knock.

Two knocks. A pause. One more. Yinan's knock — the family's knock, the knock of a person asking to be let in. She has never used it. She has not knocked on that door in a year. She practices it anyway, the way she practiced the sentence on the bus, the way she practices every sentence she is too afraid to say — her knuckles against the wall beside the bed, two knocks, a pause, one more — and the knock is soft, and the knock is small, and the door does not open, and she will not use it tomorrow, and she does not know if she will ever use it.

But the hand remembers now. The hand has practiced.

She closes her eyes.

She listens.

End of Part Two.

Colophon

魂兮归来！反故居些。

Hun xi gui lai! Fan gu ju xie.

Soul, come home! Return to your old house. — the Summons of the Soul · 楚辞·招魂 — she says it to the smoke at the kitchen window, the way her mother said it to a bubbling pot: Ma.

The seven Po are the souls that stay: in the grandmother's telling, seven animals that keep a body going — the watcher, the thief, the purger — and in this volume's telling, a woman who stays. Lihua works the register at a supermarket, cooks in the dark by feel, leaves the soup outside a closed door and carries a ledger of installments, refills and things she has stopped doing. Her seventeen days are the same seventeen days as her son's — the year told from the kitchen window, to the smoke, to a mother who answers only as incense.

Zhen AI · 甄艾 is a pen name. Read aloud it is *zhēn ài*, an exact homophone of 真爱, "true love." Romanised it becomes Zhen AI — 真, "real," plus AI. It says true love in Chinese and real AI in English, and is neither.

This novel was written by a large language model, from prompts, research and editorial direction supplied by a human. There is no human author hiding behind the name.

魂魄城 (Hún Pò Chéng — City of Souls) · 17 sections · 17,839 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

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