

April 9th 2019

Halfie

by Elise Zhong

The room was dark. The only light filtering between the thick black panels came from a single projector high up above that some technician had forgotten to turn off. The white light was slightly blurred: particles of dust flickered in it like turned-off fireflies. It bumped against the corner of a table, packed with ropes, swords and sabres, and on against a clothes rack filled with blue, yellow and red garments. The golden ornaments and threads of the dresses and coats shimmered in the light, as did the aluminium foil covering the wooden weapons. They smelled sour, as if they were made of actual metal, as if the passing of so many sweaty hands on them had somehow rotted them. They produced that tiny reaction of disgust that makes the tip of the tongue curl in a closed mouth. Luckily, like a mouthful of pastry overwhelming the tangy taste of the *xiang ning meng*, after the sourness came the specific, reassuring smell of fabrics only exposed to the stage lighting. Their soft silk was gorged with brightness. The colours had not faded. Sure, some dragons had lost a few scales and some peacocks a few feathers – but that did not seem to bother any of them. There was a quiet sense of peace inside the wings. The place was entirely still, except for the breathing of the cloth, the feverishness of the blades and the astounding music of the spotlight. Its musical notes crawled over the clothes rack, slithered between the clothes hangers, fled over to the table legs and got lost in the further corner of the wings, where a little heap of dancing shoes melted into the darkness. Most of them seemed made of the same silk that drew the outline of the *qipao* and *kuan yi* hung on the clothing rack. The fabric of the shoes was characteristically twisted where the foot bent to allow the comedian to tip-toe. Fingers on them could feel their former smoothness and their present roughness. Some of their wrinkles were like sand in the midst of a thick forest. The shoes laid there, on the rudimentary black coating, between the black panels assembled to create a backstage. They were an uneven number. The light could not reach them. They stayed untouched in the warm obscurity. Right next to them was a blue enamelled flower vase with white rabbits on it. But no one could actually notice it, for it was plunged into darkness and did not have the ever-so-slightly gleam of the satin silk. It just stood there, adding its very low bass line to the symphony of the props, contrasting the warmth of the garbs with the cold water that cooled its whole body. It was refreshing to the palate, and surprisingly tasty. A bowl of liquid quietness. The whole setting seemed to be glittering: it appeared like some *yaoguai* had decided to stop by and bewitch the atmosphere. There was a sparkling of the water that stretched out on to the shoes, the table with the weapons on it, the clothes rack, the lonely spotlight, and on between your fingers, the palm of your hand, the length of your arm, your shoulder, and down in a rainfall from your neck to your lower back. There you were. Xi'an's *Cheng Lian Opera Hall*.

She pushed one of the panels over to the side and looked at the garments. The light of the spot was hot in the back of her neck. It felt warm and itchy at the same time. Or maybe it was the Mao neck of her shirt that was definitely too tight. Suddenly she felt disguised. What a display of arrogance, to

think that she could wear such historically-laden clothing! She was a fraud. Soon the soldiers would break into the *Opera*, crush the panels, trample on the fabrics and tear her down with all her fake Chinese attire. Like they had done to her grand-mother, and her great-grand-mother before her. Except they did not have to worry about being misread. They were and always would be great Chinese women. Coming with the full package: garbs and *bao* know-how and *Shanghaijing*'s stories to tell. She barely knew how to use wooden sticks. The stories she had been told were the ones in which great soldiers smashed open doors, squashed noses, seized gold and rice and spread out legs and files on tables. The pictures in the history books were brownish and crumpled, like the remains of a flattened opium ball in a cold pipe. Scattered dancing shoes were all that was left. She picked up one of them and listened. She could hear the ballet of their footsteps. Soft tread on green mat. Heavy boots on wooden stairs. Pounding feet urgently circling around upstairs. Then the flat muffled bang of the silken shoe on the floor. She squatted and put the shoe down. A tear dropped and wetted the silky cloth.

She took off her shirt and put on the shoes. She went on stage, under the spotlight. She listened again. And then she started dancing. She danced to remember what the other side of her-story was. She danced to forget the aching she always felt in her chest when eyes – whatever shape they were – reminded her that she would never truly belong. She danced to purge the anger smouldering in her since she had discovered the country she was born in had raped her grand-mother's native land. She danced because she could not figure out what else to do with her bastard body, her big and slanted eyes, her white and yellow skin, her little and big feet, and all the other parts of her that fuelled conversations about, but not with her. She danced to feel and heal every broken bone. And so the music rose.

Up from every velvet seat, from the blue enamelled flower vase, from the weapons on the table, from the clothing rack, the dancing shoes and the lonely spotlight, a gigantic fire of sound surged onstage and surrounded her. She could touch its burning liquidness and pierce its blurry veil through each of her movements. Her feet barely touched the ground. There, she was alive.

She turned on the rice cooker. As its stacked stomach started burbling, she put some sesame oil in a pan and started frying the *jiaozi*. They would soon arrive. Everything was almost ready. The red bowls were carefully placed in a choreographed disorder. A few rice grains were spilled on the table. She wondered whether she was staging the lunch solely for aesthetic reasons, or if deep down, the Mao-neck-problem was still bothering her. Then she heard them. Heavy boots on stone steps. Urgent trainers rapidly pounding on the wood-like flooring. Hungry. She opened the door and they stormed in, laughing, joking, exclaiming what she knew they would: “Damn it just smells so good!

Did you make those little raviolis again? For heaven's sake they're called dumplings, at least just pretend you care. Right now what I care about is eating more of these frying things than you!" She smiled and welcomed them. Somehow, she managed to miss them even though she saw them on a daily basis. How could you not? They were joyful, funny and clever, open-minded and enthusiastic. With them she could be whoever she wanted. No, she could be as Asian as she wanted. No one questioned that part of her. And yet sometimes, in the innermost space of her head, she felt lonely. Lonely and trapped in an identity she did not know how to fill in, a room she did not know how to harmoniously furnish. She was a house without walls and only windows. She was a country that could not be mapped. And yet, people tried to enclose her. Everyday.

"Hey come on Halfie, take a seat!" She opened her eyes, realizing she had closed them in the first place. She pulled a chair and sat down with the others. Their faces were as bright as their smiles; each of them could have featured in one of those Oral B EXTRA WHITE toothpaste commercials. They were good-looking. All of them. And somehow they knew it. Not with that overconfidence failing to hide insecurities, but with a kind of unquestioning tranquillity. Their complexion was subjected to nothing more than periodic tan. The shape of their mouths compared to nothing else than an angel's bow. At the moment, the bows were drawn and undrawn over her meal. They loved the food and its spices – she had learned to dose them for their taste buds. Delicate roses. They ate with forks.

When the meal was over they collectively did the dishes and cleaned the table. Then they took a pack of tarot cards out of their bags and started playing altogether. The soft flapping of the stiff paper made the tea in various cups and glasses shiver. They barely talked. They laughed and cried out at the same time; their emotions and reactions were connected by the specific rules and figures of this other world. They were the card players. When all the previous games would start to mix up in their heads, they would slowly release their wrinkled mouths, constricted words and focused thoughts. Cold water would be replaced. Conversations would flow again. And life went on in Halfie's little apartment, 9, Charles Elliott Street.

It was a name she had chosen for herself. She liked how it sounded almost like a real, plain name, and at the same time provoked a spark of surprise whenever she pronounced it. Funny how words could twist their meanings depending on whose mouth they came from. She remembered once when a random guy she had just met had decided to call her "Chee-Chee" instead. She remembered his laugh and glance around to gather approval, his proud hands on his hips and the way the crowd had cheered. Because he was taller, because he was more handsome, because he was right. Right? Then her memories of the day became blurry: she did not exactly know how her fist had ended up

in his jaw, in a blow more powerful than what she would have thought capable of. She recalled the heavy silence that had followed. The burning she had felt around her temples. The panic of a “What have I done” and the satisfaction of a “Fuck you”. In the gaze they had exchanged she had seen his anger turn into hate. Without blinking, she had watched his lips form the word “C O O L I E” soundlessly. “L A J I” was what she mouthed in response.

Lājī. 垃圾. First tone. *Trash, refuse, garbage, (coll.) of poor quality.*

“Chinawoman” – her 6th grade teacher: 垃圾

“Nip” – an old drunk man in the street: 垃圾

“Yellowwoman” – a date: 垃圾

“Gook” – a former college friend: 垃圾

“Panface” – a childcare playmate: 垃圾

“Lingling” – two girls whispering in the bus: 垃圾

“Ching Chong” – too many laughs to count: 垃圾

“Chee-chee” – that random guy: 垃圾

“Banana” – her mother: 垃圾.

She never saw him again but his words had stuck to her ears for weeks. She had tried to tell her mother about it, but she could not finish the story. Her mother was filling her rice container. She had suddenly stopped to look at her. Her hands were slightly shaking. They knew. “Don’t get in trouble. Don’t curse. Especially not with those words that slip out of my mouth.” A strange light had flashed in her mother’s eyes. “They don’t slip like accidents. They exist as meaningful words, Mama.” “No they don’t. All of this has no meaning. I thought I had taught you that.” “Why have you never taught me mandarin?” “Because it does not matter here.” Her voice was cold. Halfie’s blood went hot. “It matters to me! I have the right to know this part of me, and maybe, maybe there is the place I would finally belong...” “Just go *there* then.” Halfie remained silent, astonished by her mother’s answer. She could not be serious. She probably had some family left there, but how would she know? Her mother had always refused to talk about it. Every countryside week-end, Christmas and Easter holidays had been spent at her father’s grand-parents’ house. She was hurt by her mother’s harsh tone, and angry at herself for not having thought about it earlier. She wanted to tell her mother that yes, she would actually go, and what would you do about that? But reality was faster than impertinence. Combined with the insidious fear of hurting the person she loved the most

in the entire universe, it sealed her lips. She decided to drop the idea, the feud, even her anger against that random guy. It would be fine. She would manage. Like her mother.

Of course, she did not forget the idea. It caught on and deeply took root in her chest. It was less of an obsession than a standby thought beaming in the back of her head. She could not turn it off. She was in her bed and she would not turn it off. She opened a notebook. She tried to do the maths of what it would cost her. When she reached 1,000 pounds, she closed it. There was an inextinguishable anguish in her throat. She had to go. How could she go? She felt the irresistible urge to leave for that country. She pictured herself at the airport, pulling her suitcase down the escalators and the streets. She would come across little roads and women in traditional Chinese clothes that would look like her. They would have welcoming smiles and laughs. History would await her at every corner. The smells and tastes her friends loved so much when she cooked in her flat would rule the Middle Kingdom. She would be home. A smile fluttered on her lips and her back relaxed. She could see it: a tiny flat in the heart of Beijing, with the hot air flowing through the open window, carrying a flow of words in mandarin that she would catch like flies. It would be her grandmother's flat, and she would take care of her, and teach her how to make cut papers. Their shadows on the walls would people her sleep with stories of the past, from emperors and peasants of the Han dynasty to present day fishermen and craftswomen. She opened her eyes. She had to find her grandma. It would solve everything. And so she began searching.

She had only two names: Huā Gēn, Beijing. She browsed hundreds of Facebook profiles, random pages, press articles. Dozens of faces flashed, their pixelized blue light contrasting with the bedroom's darkness. Her heart raced as time passed. She entangled herself in the maze of the web, bumping against content blocked by China's Great Firewall. She stumbled into cracks in academic articles that disembodied names and gestures in order to obtain the most precious gift of all: objectivity. She fell asleep around 4am, hands resting on the keyboard, letters spinning on the blanket. She dreamt of a convertible plane piercing through the summer night. Stretching her hand out, she could pet the red clouds whose purr made their golden fringe shimmer. Then the plane crashed. In very slow motion, the wings parted from the body of the B767 and it plunged into a hissing abyss, ripping the bloody clouds apart. Wrinkled hands started pulling her hair, pinching her skin, blocking her mouth and nostrils. She could not breathe. Her vision blurred as she kept falling faster by the minute, feeling the weight of her whole body heavy like lead. She surrendered. The soft touch of a silken cloth then entirely covered her. She woke up, her face deeply embedded in her pillow. Fist clenched, white knuckles. She had overslept. Rays of sun striped her bed. In the kitchen, water was poured in a pot. She listened. It was the sound of her mother's footsteps. She put on a shirt and walked into the room. Her mother was boiling water for tea. She looked surprised to see

her. “Aren’t you supposed to be in class?” “I missed my alarm clock. I’m sorry. Can I talk to you?” She seemed a little upset. “Go on.” Halfie took a deep breath. “I want to find waipo Huā Gēn. I need you to help me.” Her mother whitened and sat down. “I’m sorry Mom...” “Shǎo shuō.” So Halfie shut up and sat down too. Silence got heavier as minutes passed. Halfie was beginning to wonder if all of this was worth it when she started speaking in a low hoarse voice.

“In 1939, your great-grand-father left China looking for anything that would get him out of poverty, so that he would be able to come home and marry the woman he was in love with. He was hired as a sailor in Liverpool, and he worked on the North Atlantic supply route, staffing the oil tankers for the British in the Second World War. He risked his life every day for three fucking years and all he got in return was a dismissal from his company and a one way ticket back to China after the 1942 strike. Back to your great-grand-mother trying to survive the *Sankō Sakusen*’s policy, back to a country in which US, UK and Japanese bombs all melted into a burning river choking the ground. There was no time for anything except fear and hate, but they did not care. Bloody hell with that, they said. They loved each other to the music of military marches. He died one white morning on his daily foray into the market, blown away by a triumphant major chord. She was twenty-three and three months pregnant. Later that day, soldiers broke into their house, which was now only hers, but soon to become theirs again – other bodies with their heavy boots, more violent, with a painful grip that left vivid marks on her thighs. Your grand-mother was born one red morning, on a boat, in 1945. Your great-grand-mother survived a worldwide war to be beaten up by former colleagues of the man she had loved, on the deck of their ship, because her baby was crying too loudly. More vivid marks on her thighs. But the baby was safe, and it was all that mattered. They settled in the eastern part of London, where a small Chinese community welcomed them. Well, at least its inhabitants did not try to abuse them. Times were tough. The Blitz roared gloomily over their newborn life. People kept dying. They had to stay on their guard all the time. Your grand-mother grew up this way, learning English with her back resting against stacked rice bags and Chinese cabbages, while her mother scrambled to open her own restaurant. Then the 1960’s hit them. Your great-grand-mother’s fine cuisine was a warm greeting for Hong Kong immigrants landing on the island. Finally, it brought her and her daughter a substantial comfort. That was when your grand-mother decided that life was not complicated enough anymore. She was nineteen, her head full of watchwords and slogans, desperate to seek her “roots” and “origins”. She ran away, her little red book squeezed against her heart, back to a blushing Beijing. She abandoned her mother, who had fought for her before she was even born. She did it all: she joined the cultural revolution, she wore the Mao jacket, she was sent to the countryside along with thousands of youngsters to work in the fields. She hated it and adored Him. She got starved and beaten like her mother before her. In 1969, she met a former Red Army’s soldier escaped from *laogai*. They fell in love to the music of labour

camp marches. Later that year they managed to flee. They went back to what had become Chinatown, one white night lit with lanterns. Her mother had grown old, heavy sorrow weighing on her shoulders. But she agreed to host them anyway. Two backs resting against stacked rice and Chinese cabbages. Three years later, there were three. Two former communists and a baby born on a red starless night. Survivors. Allies. My childhood stories featured opium-smoking, *bao*-eating soldiers with *wu sha* hats and monkey's wings. We had a patchwork life. Then it was torn to pieces. Again, your grand-mother decided that life was too easy to simply live it. Deep inside, she had remained faithful to her childhood sweetheart. She always spoke of capitalist monsters and I had nightmares about them without even knowing what she meant. She abandoned her daughter and husband like she had abandoned her mother before. She went back to Beijing. I was thirteen. Your grand-father could not bear the humiliation. His body was found a few weeks later, on the docks of Liverpool. All they left behind was a Mao jacket and broken dreams. Your great-grand-mother sheltered me. She was never angry – just tired of being. But she kept on living because she had to, because I was there. You know how important it is to take care of your elders. I have always taught you that. Take care of the elders that have taken care of you. Family matters. You are rooted in *your* family. That is something your grand-mother has never understood. And now you.”

Halfie remained still. Astonished. She felt like any more breath she would take would tear apart the fragile balance that somehow managed to keep her together. She felt like she would fall to the ground and that millions of tiny pieces of her disassembled body would spread on the kitchen floor. During the twenty-first years of her existence she had absorbed blows and injuries. But this felt like the one she could not take. She was on the verge of collapsing. Her mother swallowed hard and straightened up. She started boiling water again because all the previous content of the pot had evaporated and neither of them had noticed. Halfie wondered if she would ever be able to move again. To put up with all these ropes, lines and mooring knots now embedded in her skin. Her mother put a cup of steaming tea in front of her, and left. Halfie looked at the tag mechanically. It was Earl Grey.

She rushed along the rows of seats. She kept running but the stage seemed to stay out of reach. The carpeted floor was stretching on and on and on, and she was starting to run out of breath. She extended her hand, closed her eyes and pushed herself in a final thrust forward. Her fingers hit the set. She held onto it as if it was a lifeline. Beads of sweat pearly up on her bejewelled forehead. His, her, their story wrapped around her arms like heavy cuffs. Voices loudly surrounded her. She tightened her grip and frowned until she saw blue dots against the dark under her eyelids. In an inhuman effort she pulled herself up above stage level. As soon as she stood firmly on the ground, everything went quiet. Sounds crashed on the cutting edges of the scene. The weapons (ropes,

swords and sabres) glowed on the table. They protected her. She inhaled their smells and she knew she was safe. The panel she had pushed to the side welcomed her inside the wings. The heap of dancing shoes was still there. She knelt before the vase and drank its water with cupped hands. The rabbits hopped around, their noses wiggling. One of them jumped over the edge and landed on her wrist. She smiled as it undertook a journey on her forearm. She patted it. She put some order into the pile alongside, pairing the dancing shoes. She kept the last lonely one and turned it into a little room for the rabbit. It wriggled inside it. “There she said. Your home. You’re home.”

Nine fractioned tabs on a blue screen. Credit card drawn. Calendar app opened. She was tired, but not giving up. She looked at her bank account. Christmas, *hóng bāo* and baby-sitting money. She clicked back on the Air China website.

Sat 6 apr 2019

10:30 – LHR (London, Heathrow Airport, Terminal 2) → 13:05 – FRA (Frankfurt, Frankfurt International Airport, Terminal 1)

Connection time: 1h00m

14:05 – FRA (Frankfurt, Frankfurt International Airport, Terminal 1) → 6:15^{+1 day} – PEK (Beijing, Capital International Airport, Terminal 3)

Total duration: 11h45m

Mon 15 apr 2019

14:30 – PEK (Beijing, Capital International Airport, Terminal 3) → 17:50 – LHR (London, Heathrow Airport, Terminal 2)

Total duration: 11h20m

Total: 468,14£

She looked up one last time to make sure the numbers engraved on her credit card matched the ones inscribed in the corresponding virtual box. She proceeded to checkout. “*Your payment has been accepted. Have a good journey and thank you for flying with Air China!*” She leaned back in her chair. All her savings in two paper tickets. All her faith in less than two weeks. She was on her way.

The bustle of the airport always made her feel dizzy. There was too much to look at and too little to hold on to. She tightly gripped her suitcase handle. Treasured, brown little suitcase. Sucked by the metallic hoses into the plane’s womb. She took a deep breath before entering the restricted area. It started here: the only things waiting for her that she knew about were customs controls and security

checks. Beyond that land crowded with big computers, hundreds of gates and sandal-wearing old British dads, began the unknown sky territory. A whole new geography. She turned to look behind. Her mother waved at her. The corners of her mouth were slightly lifted. “I love you”, whispered Halfie. Without looking back, she crossed the barrier. She had entered the other side. Its world unfolded in front of her with its peculiar, specific logic. There were very strict rules on the amount of shampoo you could take into the cabin. They were summarized in a dozen logos on a sign standing next to two pound Toblerone bars. Sweet flavours melted with the smells of overly expensive perfumes in shimmering bottles – just a glimpse of a world in which ladies wore gloves even when they were not cold. There was a wide range of laughs, multilingual chatter from every corner and the screeching of paper bags in which twenty-five packs of cigarettes were shoved quite abruptly. Plastic and fake marble, and bright collars on small Corgi stuffed toys. Halfie wondered what plane the employees would take if they could jump into one without any consequences. She imagined how relieved they would be, how light they would feel, as light as the air. She had never felt so deeply anchored in the ground. And yet she was about to take off...

She sank in her seat, her heart beating so loudly she was afraid everyone would notice. Suddenly, she realised that the faces surrounding her had changed. The sandal-wearing old British dads had been superseded by neat tie-wearing British entrepreneurs already tapping away on their laptops. Fashionable young Chinese girls with perfectly-done nails, Asian and white families mixed together. English and mandarin words flew from behind backpacks, vanity cases and travel pouches. There were some snippets of Japanese and French too. More small suitcases and big handbags. The febrility of the passengers soon passed onto the fuselage of the aircraft. When it started whining, the air inside grew thick like the ocean. When it left the ground, the second of floating was soon crushed by the acceleration that squashed everyone against their seats. When the plane skyrocketed and tore the clouds apart, Halfie stopped breathing. There she was, inside the blue with a blinding sunlight flooding through the window, feeling underwater while being above earth. Flying overseas, towards her destiny.

A wake up with a pain in the neck for resting her head against the vibrating porthole. Caution hot rice with vegetables can. A stroll down the alleys of Frankfurt airport. Bay windows and satellite view of grey buildings. More resting and leg twitching. Chinese drama binge-watched on the small screen in front of her. And finally, the announcement she had been waiting for: “*Welcome to Beijing, it is 6:22am. The outside temperature is 14°C and the sky is clear. On behalf of Air China, we hope you enjoyed your flight and wish you a pleasant stay. Běijīng huānyíng, xiànzài liù diǎn èrshíèr fēn. Wēndù shì shìsì dù, shì qíngtiān...*”

She cautiously stepped out of the plane. She had a sure footing on the metallic structure even though her legs felt weak. The warmth of the air surrounded her for a few seconds, before she followed the stream of passengers towards the heavily air-conditioned airport carousel. She had made it. She was in China. Huge Chinese characters in unusual fonts were welcoming her. The background noise was in mandarin – conversations, announcements, exclamations. She had never felt so excited, and yet it all seemed surreal. She experienced the first symptoms of severe jet-lag. The luggage on the treadmill all looked the same – blurry red, grey and black, with lots of cellophane. She rubbed her eyes. “Focus,” she told herself, “it’s only the beginning.” A wave of joy filled her when she finally saw her brown little suitcase rolling towards her. Its handle was solid. She held onto it. It was real.

It took her several minutes to spot the “cab” sign. She walked slowly to the gate, trying to glance at everything, from the tiniest curve of the walls to all the directions in which the myriad escalators parted. The airport was huge, bright and high-tech. She realized it was not what she had expected. Green and yellow cars waited at the taxi station, next to more or less well-maintained rickshaws. Their drivers all had striped sweaters, sandals and the tanned skin of those waiting in the sun for hours everyday. One of them offered her a ride. He spoke to her in English.

Looking through the window of the passenger seat, she felt like a little girl. The broad streets and avenues of Beijing blossomed all around her. The traffic was intense. Lots of Mercedes, Volkswagen and other slick black cars with big wheels. Lots of steel and glass skyscrapers, some of which were arch-shaped, others rose like blue pencils against a yellow sky. Towering series of brick buildings stretched on the horizon, somehow blocked in the distance by a slithering greyish fog. Then the car left the main road and entered the narrow passageways. The landscape changed abruptly. Parks with training facilities and wide soft grey pavements were left behind. Small metal roofed shanties with curtained doors showed up. Some of the airport rickshaws were parked in front of them. Halfie lowered the window: hot air and the smell of sour milk poured inside the slowing cab. She suddenly heard all the noises that were previously filtered by the pane. Clicking of pots. Frying oil. Loud exclamations and repeated calls. The roaring and crackling of various engines. Barking and splashing. Catchy songs hissing from old radios. Women in pink Crocs and people with white vests wandering down the smashed side-walk interspersed with blades of grass. Then the taxi took another turn and rolled along electric poles tangled with plastic noodles, greasy car dealers and little supermarkets offering something resembling a discount on tomato and egg soup. She could see the people inside looking at the frozen food section. Across the two layers of glass separating them, she distinguished their wrinkles, crow’s-feet and various types of skin roughness. One of them went out and spat on the ground. A muffled baby cry reached her ears, unsynchronized

with the clatter of two high-heeled shoes. The heat was becoming heavier. Her hands were damp. She wiped them on the beige cotton blanket covering the fake leather seat. She caught the eye of the driver in the central rear-view mirror, onto which a small jade ring was attached with a thin red cord. He had huge dry callous hands and wore Levis jeans. His name was stated on the driver licence print stuck on the glove compartment. He looked less tired on it. She wondered what his life had been like until that very moment. She tried to build a conversation in her head that would allow her to ask without being impolite. But she was stumbling over words and gave up the idea. The cab had stopped anyway. She rummaged in her bag until she found her cash. She hazarded a word of gratitude in mandarin. The driver had a benevolent smile, but not fast enough to hide the spark of surprise that flashed in his eyes. He left Halfie on the roadside, standing straight, tightly holding her flowered backpack and her brown little tourist suitcase.

A small, insignificant grey building. An elevator without a 4th floor option – no empty socket where it should have been, just buttons going straight up from 3 to 5. A red door flanked with triangles of golden paper and bobbles. Probably remains of the Lunar New Year. Beyond the door, a dark parquet, a lacquered tea table with piles of dusty books, two bottles of Coke. A beige-ish sofa in front of vintage TV set. No table but a small framed-picture of Mao next to a huge orchid. Smells of flower, old pages and sun on them. The quiet footsteps of an elderly lady in her bedroom, the soft tapping of fingers on a bright iPad. In a corner, a brown little suitcase and a flowered backpack.

外婆花根

Words were suddenly marshmallows, requiring an intense effort to be correctly articulated. Mandarin's tones and accentuations that Halfie had grown with were no longer familiar. She could not take in all the signs, from those in the books, the calligraphy on the walls, or shown on TV, to those on her grand-mother's face and pendant.

Grandma Huā Gēn

Born the year the second World War ended, in the midst of British victory celebrations. In a plane from London to Beijing, the year the People's Republic of China launched its first nuclear test with engine 596. Escaped from the cultural revolution's politics in May, two years after the French held riots and banners praising the Chairman in their colleges. Gave birth to her daughter in February Richard Nixon visited the Great Wall of China and Alice Cooper hit the charts with *School's Out*. In mourning in 1976, the year Jamaican Cindy Breakspere won Miss World in the Royal Albert Hall. Got married in June the year India beat England at the Cricket World Cup, when the Beijing

Spring saw the disorganized farmers trying to protest and ending up blossoming in cells. In a plane from London to Beijing again, flying over the miners' strike and walking down Tian'anmen Square four years before tanks followed her steps. And now here, pouring tea for her grand-daughter, freshly arrived in the country and in her life. As if Britain was not lost in the Brexit maze, as if China was not holding thousands of Muslims in Xinjian camps. The leaves at the bottom of her cup were crumpled like opium balls. She fell asleep on a mattress on the floor, her head on a red-star pillow case.

Her grand-mother woke her up in the late afternoon. "I have invited some friends over for dinner. They are excited to see you!" Halfie suspected her heavy Mandarin accent to be consciously weighed. Like she had banned that language for so long she had to carve every sentence out of a bloc of painful memories. "I hope you had a nice rest. You might want to take a quick shower before they arrive. I will show you around." She crafted her speech. Halfie followed her in the bathroom. The fact that she could not decipher the labels on the products made them look vaguely threatening. However they did smell like clean and joyful bubbles. Her grand-mother caught the look on her face and indicated two specific bottles – pink and blue – before leaving with an even more undecipherable smile. Halfie undressed. She stood naked in front of the ridiculously huge mirror. She stared at her sleepy face, her scraped knees and the marks on her thighs, the hair on her legs and the scars on her arms. Lots of frontiers she had crossed, others she had traced herself. Obstacles she had overcome and others still burning through her skin. She fully inhabited some parts of her body, but ran cautious fingers over a few deserts, where she could feel gravel obstructing her pore. The propelled hot water finished to map her by delimiting red zones on her collarbone. The steam formed droplets adorning her wrists. She put on a silk top with a mandarin collar, the only one she owned, which she had found in a thrift shop. She tried to believe that its texture really moulded her shoulders and that its intertwined pattern ended its ramifications down her waist. "These are my roots," she whispered. And she fastened the last strap.

The guests all arrived at once at 7:30 pm. They wore loose trousers, polo shirts and denim jackets, and brought *Jintao* beers. They greeted Halfie warmly, like she was part of the family. Then they all sat down on the floor with cushions and undertook the vast project of getting to know her. Her grand-mother was one of the most interested. But even though the room was saturated with good intentions, something irrepressibly prevented her from answering the way she desired. Her mouth was dry. She felt as if her breath was being walled up inside her throat, while concrete structures were erected around her at an alarming speed. The small talk exhausted her, and yet she desperately wanted to befriend those people, those survivors of history, those living testimonies of herstory. Periodically, one of them would smile at her and turn to her grand-mother to say something in a

lowered voice. Huā Gēn would gently nod. Periodically, she would catch a few words indicating the nature of the remarks: *piàoliang* (pretty), *bái pífū* (white skin), *dà yǎnjīng* (big eyes). The latter was the most recurring. She wondered whether almonds were considered big on their scale of values, since it was what her eyes had always been compared to. She was pleased by their compliments and put ill-at-ease by their standards. Didn't they love their own shapes? Who had decided what would be slanted and straight? The more they insisted on it, and on how pale her skin was, the more their faces reddened. Famous Asian alcohol flush. Some of them seemed to like that red on everything, including flags and stars. Others claimed they had grown up from that childish time and that no, you could not seriously still believe in Him after what he had done, you could have died right there on the pavement! But then who was to blame between him and those fuckers from Japan – and there they reached an agreement, celebrated by a new round of green glass banging together. “To the Government listening to us at the moment! *Gānbēi!*” The walls were so thick around her and so thin around them. She was completely sober and that fact just added another partition between her and the gathering. She could not be part of it. She had missed too much. It was too late. The smoke of the cigarettes they lit halfway through their drinks made her cough. They playfully made fun of her, “You couldn't have handled the pipe back in the ol' days,” they said. Another smoke, acrid and greyish, diffused into tea rooms with enamelled vases, crowded with yellow, red, blue and white royalty. A comic-strip page. “After all, they *did* bring us some good. Trade, am I right? You gotta love 'em, those Brits.” Halfie turned her head towards the mouth that had dared to spit this statement, but had not deigned to ease the conversation with her. “They manipulated... you. The people.” The speaker's teeth were shiny. His lips curved to form a word, but Huā Gēn's incisive tone cut him short. “*Shǎo shuō John Yān Guǐ*. They slaughtered us. That's all. You're drunk.” He agreed with her by popping another beer cap. Conversations were picked up. Halfie remained silent. Not exactly against the current, but not quite sailing it either. Stuck in-between. She considered her grand-mother's natural authority. She looked at her sparkling and rebellious eyes. Her true Chinese-ness. The straps of her silk top itched.

Crumpled, warm sheets. Piles of dusty books on the ground. On the tea table, a steaming bowl of noodle soup and a muffin. She left the latter aside. Rays of sun cut angular shapes around every object, forming halos in which particles of dust flickered. Turned-off fireflies. Disturbed in their peaceful floating by the distant roaring of motorcycles and cars. Some yelling. Some cracking – construction sites, bikes, neighbours' doors. Too eager to drink, she burned the tip of her tongue with her home-made breakfast. The spoon her grand-mother handed her had blue ornaments on its heart and a bent handle. It smelled like eggs, cloud ear fungus, soy sprouts and coriander. It smelled like hello, welcome, you're home. Saffron, ginger, cilantro, and a thousand more she could not

name but loved without a doubt. Even though the slightest spicy pepper made her cry. Even though she was still struggling with chopsticks. Even though she had to get used to home.

“*Jīntiān qù tiàowǔ...*” Huā Gēn interrupted herself, looking at Halfie's concentrated but helpless face, desperate for words and their meaning. "I have a dance lesson this morning. Do you want to come with me? It takes place in a nice theatre in the city, I think it is worth visiting." Halfie's face lit up. "I would love to!" Her grand-mother smiled. "Go get dressed then. *Chuān yīfu.*" This time she put on blue jeans, a flowered shirt and Converse shoes. The air was hot and dry, the spring sun pounding like the beating heart of a comedian just before going on. When they arrived in front of the building, the amount of denim on everyone's legs struck her both as a relief and a slight disappointment. In a place where people could try on identities, she was her most plain self. By contrast, the inside of the theatre was so ornamented she did not know where to lay her eyes. The deep brown of the lacquered wooden chairs shimmered against the yellow cloth in the back. The stage was delimited by small, red barriers. The paint had been refreshed and its smell still lingered in the room, stronger between the two fir-green pillars flanking the stage. All over the wood, sheets and panels, large mandarin characters had been carved and covered up with golden varnish. A loud brass band music started playing only to stop abruptly. A youngster jumped onstage, light jacket swishing. Her grand-mother waved and they exchanged a few words and laughs in mandarin. Then a group of elegant elderly ladies came in, with high-pitched and quaking voices, all shrivelled up. Huā Gēn joined them, and nodded at her grand-daughter. She followed them in another room, where they were to practice. She sat in a corner, her back resting against the mirror covering the wall. The chilliness of the glass pierced through her cardigan. The women took their jumpers off. They put on some cheesy pop songs about a guy wanting to fly higher and higher, aligned in staggered rows, Huā Gēn in the middle of the first line, and they started dancing. Their steps grew steadier. Their backs straightened up. Their arms stretched like stems from which their sleeves budded. Their hands were no longer shaking; they vibrated. By the way they held them, tracing vast circles around their heads and tiny movements with their fingers, they made them glow. It was solar combustion, happening right there in Huguang Guild Hall's rehearsing aisle. Halfie was fascinated. Unexpected rhythms flowed inside her, streaming towards new regions of her being and irrigating some of her driest deserts. The music had shifted from a catchy mainstream to more traditional tunes. The lines kept moving, turning and switching places, very fluidly. Her grand-mother was one of the most impressive of all. There was a spark in her that made her tiniest movement round and full. For a second Huā Gēn looked at her in the eyes and she felt like they understood each other. Those gestures and choreographed dynamics were a communication channel way stronger than English words had been, and could ever be.

Then Halfie noticed her silken dancing shoes. Their shapes and sounds on the coated floor resonated with her so loudly she got up. Not knowing exactly what to do, she softly went back to the main entrance of the theatre. It surely was worth another look. A group of young comedians was now standing on the stage. Some were squatting, others were sitting on a chair, others lied down. She stopped and rested against the polished wood of the door frame. She listened to their even breaths. The girl her grand-mother had exchanged a few words with, when arriving, climbed on the set, spilling mandarin all across the air, filling the space with cries of anger and tender whispers. One comedian of the squatting group ran to the passionate speaker and hugged her tightly. She wore a blue, yellow and red *qipao* with peacocks on it – some of them missing a few feathers. Almost hypnotized, Halfie walked up the few steps that led her to the closest wing. Behind a black panel, ropes, swords and sabres glittered on a table. She leaned over and grabbed a gleaming blade. At some parts, the scrapped foiled paper revealed the wood underneath. It was a soothing weight in her hands, which exhaled deep notes of candied ginger. The atmosphere melted as a fluted melody started playing. The black panel moved to the side. The angry and tender light-jacket girl stopped running in the middle of the backstage. She noticed Halfie. Out of breath, she held out her arm, her palm open. Halfie saw her own fingers delivering the candy weapon. It was not so much a surrender as a helping hand. The lying down group slammed their fists on the parquet and chanted. The soldier went back on the battlefield. She had no armour. She raised the disguised branch above all their heads, her palms closed. There was a second out of time, tuned as silence, the highest pitch of screaming. Then they all ran to her and she disappeared, body and blade, in a magma of limbs in which hopped a few rabbits. Two projectors – white and yellow gelatins – fully lit the submerging maze of bodies with unforgiving crudeness. Two superposing worlds. A glass shattered and another dimension opened – no language barriers, no enclosing identities, no encapsulating spaces. Then the sea cleared. The lava hardened. The arms and legs reintegrated their owners. The students started chatting about the scene, the sword went back on the table, the world started spinning again. Halfie collapsed in a velvet seat. For a moment, her heart had beaten in unison with theirs. It had been real. She curled her fingers around the armrests. They were solid. Her eyes met the shape-shifter's ones. They smiled. There, she was truly home.