

## The Lantern to Home - Sarah, Year 11, NSW

*Look carefully. What do you see when the sun sinks beneath the horizon?*

I don't know, Nǎi nai.

*Spirits. Dusk is constantly dancing with spirits who search for hope that there is someone waiting. So, let us welcome them.*

But ghosts are scary.

*Yes, but soon I will join them. Will you be scared of me then too?*

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As a child, I would spend hours sitting at the foot of my grandmother's aged leather couch, listening intently to the tales she told me. Myths of *Chang'e*, how she drank the elixir of immortality and drifted up onto the moon for the rest of eternity; of the Great Race between animals for a place as one of twelve Chinese zodiacs; and, most notably, she spoke of the ghosts that would visit our world when the gates of the underworld had opened wide.

And I remember the aroma of incense as our home was decorated with burning joss sticks, the waxy candles laid on an altar created by her. Intricately. Meticulously. Streaks of blood red banners hung prominently in stark contrast on the weary walls, and laid on the wooden table that time clung so desperately onto were spreads of traditional delicacies, elaborate meals, and fresh fruit. The seventh lunar month had always represented sacrifices and prayers. A welcome for spirits who returned to our realm.

On the fifteenth day of the month, *Nǎi nai* would walk me to the riverside when brushes of ink spilled across the evening sky. Together, we would light lotus paper lanterns, and release them onto the river. They looked like stars.

"They guide spirits back to their world safely," *Nǎi nai* had told me.

"But if we can't see them, why do we do it?" I asked, an innocent, childish, sort of curiosity.

She said nothing and smiled.

As the years passed by, wrinkles creased her fragile skin. Still, we visited the riverside, watching the reflection of gold glimmer on the rippling surface.

On nights when the cold air stung my face, the scratches left behind would tint my cheeks red. Yet I pulled up my woolen scarf to envelope it outside the gaze of the ambient lantern

glow, just so I could stay even a little longer embraced in this time. Otherwise, *Nǎi nai* would tell me to head home, away from any vengeful spirits who haunt our world.

“You said that the lights would protect me,” I said to her.

She turned to look at me before gazing into the star-hazed sky, “So I did.”

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Eventually, the memory of fiery oranges and blazing reds had begun dimming and I vividly remember the moment it had completely disappeared, swallowed whole by the ravenous night. The moment that her dusk set beneath the horizon, and my dawn hid with it.

The altar she would assemble so thoroughly with offerings displayed for ghosts now hid tucked unadorned beneath the shadows of the walls, and I was afraid to disturb the drowsy dust particles that laid as remnants in her place. I packed all the decorations into a small cardboard box under my bed which overflowed. I had never learned how to cook, and so this year no feast awaited either the dead nor living.

*It wouldn't have mattered though. After all, you weren't coming home, were you?*

I opened the door and breathed in the cool dusk.

My lungs were suffocating under the weight of the house's jarring air, and the erratic beat of my heart pulsed shallowly in imitation of the flickering interior lights, and so my legs carried me away, away into the night.

The sky was swimming with stars, each dizzyingly bright as one another, dancing with the moon. Their scintillating pathway beckoned me to follow, hooking me with an illusion I couldn't break away from. Soon the soft susurrations of water flowed to my side. I focused my eyes on the ground, but as my steps quickened, the faintest streak of light glowed against the backdrop of darkness, and so, I wavered.

First it was the silver, then it was the amber.

Gentle wisps swayed mysteriously with the breeze, outlining the figure of a memory I never forgot before blurs of amber slowly trickled onto the whispering river, floating tenderly downstream from the townspeople nearby.

I already understood what the colours meant.

When she saw me, she smiled. The smile of a ghost who already knew.

*“Chang'e looks so beautiful tonight, doesn't she?”*

I averted my eyes again, the warmth and blurriness overwhelming me. My throat burned.

“Yes,” I replied, “She does.”

A silence washed in with the rippling waves. The airy brush of wind grazed my cheek before she spoke again.

“I am waiting for my granddaughter. We light lanterns together on the fifteenth.”

I looked up. I hadn’t realised the date today. In her delicate hands were oiled rice paper, string, a candle, and matches.

“I-”

*I’m here.*

“I’ll help you.”

“Thank you.”

Beneath the hushed moonlight, I softly creased folds into the paper as I had done for years, each step a careful memory, before tying the pieces together with string and placing the candle in the centre. The lotus shape bloomed lastly as I folded the petals upwards. All that remained now was the fire.

I struck the match, sparks sizzling in the air, and then the lantern shone. It radiated the warmth of home. Nostalgia.

I held the star crafted so carefully in my hands. Reaching to return it, a gust of wind flooded through the night, and as I shut my eyes, the world shook violently in my hands and beneath my feet.

When I opened them, the silver disappeared. And yet, the amber had remained illuminating resiliently.

*Nǎi nai.*

Before realising it, I crouched down, staring across the stream, the warmth swelling in my hands, and I released the lantern onto the water’s surface. It drifted through the night and into the horizon in company with the other lotuses that gave the river the image of a galaxy.

*I miss you, don’t go.*

I stood there for a while, before walking back the pathway in which I had come.

*Please.*

This time, I hope you will find your way home as I will to mine.

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*Will you be scared of me then too?*

I don't know.

But if it's *Nǎi nai*, then I'll never be afraid.