

Portrait of a Sister on Fire - Feiyang, Year 9, NSW

I am squatting on my stool in Chinatown, barely halfway through my first portrait of the day, when the Ministry of Lost Souls calls me about you.

“It’s about your sister Stacy,” the gruff voice crackles, “she’s been unable to make it to the afterlife. There is a strong force tying her to the mortal realm, and we believe it’s you.”

I haven’t said your name in four years. Barely remember what you sound like. Yet you still make my heart ache like a pinched nerve.

“You have until midnight today to burn a photo of her.” The line clicks.

Of course, there is something special about today; the fourth tomb sweeping festival since you died. It’s less of a festival now. More of a throbbing reminder of your absence like a bruise that never seems to fade. The air thickens as I prod at my phone, desperate to find some forgotten photo of you to burn. Hoping the pain of my bruises subside. No luck.

So I pull out a new canvas and the gouache reserved only for special occasions, letting the brushes breathe to life in the crystal waters. Under the sun’s incandescent rays and Chinatown’s static hum of afternoon heat, my memories of you begin to resurface in trickles of golden ichor.

I start with your face Stacy, because that’s what I remember most. The roundness of your cheeks that didn’t disappear even after you reached your adolescent years, the moles that only seemed to grow more noticeable and the ant-like blemishes on your porcelain skin. My brush smears the hues of peaches and lemon across the alabaster void, and suddenly I’m cross-legged on the cold ceramic floor of the cramped kitchen, swallowed by my fluorescent *Minions* shirt. Your fingers greedily scoop up strands of your charcoal hair, knotting them together in what mum would call 鸡窝 (bird’s nest) fashion, whilst the remnants of her expensive makeup cake your face in streaks of tan and gold.

“Don’t I look amazing?” you announce to the roll of my eyes.

I wish I could go back and say *yes, you do*.

Instead, gossamer strokes of charcoal paint fill your forehead with the jagged product of a furious mother and a pair of scissors. It was that devious grin cemented between your pinched cheeks as your bird’s nest was trimmed down that burned through the five year age gap stacked like logs between us. I gravitated towards the warmth.

I knew I would grow to miss the flame before it burned, so I start on your eyes. They brimmed with tears that day, when we were packed like sardines into the back of a taxi that reeked of cigarettes and the promise of a better future. The oscillating of the Doraemon

keychain hanging on the rearview mirror was the last thing I remembered as we took our last reckless turns on the Chinese streets, watching as monochrome apartment complexes were breathed to life in the form of suburban houses and vibrant trees.

“I’m scared, Stacy,” I whisper in perfect Mandarin, though I wasn’t sure of what.

“Don’t be. To love is to let go,” you reply like some esoteric philosopher, and your brown eyes bore into mine like the roots of a great oak, holding me steady as fiery tears set mine ablaze.

Your mouth is next. I see your lips contorting into grotesque shapes, teeth glinting under the harsh light of the living room, hurling a mix of broken Chinese and perfect English that mum and dad didn’t understand and on the canvas your mouth is sharp and triangular and *blood red and—*

A drop of water ripples through my stagnant pool of memories. I’m seven again, and your mouth is mellow. It contorts to foreign syllables as your finger traces the English glossary from school, dissecting each word into an amalgamation of *oos* and *ahs*.

“I’m hopeless at this...” you mutter, reverting back to native tongue.

To love is to let go. Did that mean leaving our old selves behind? To scrape the remnants of Mandarin off our tongues and meld English into hot iron, branding it on instead?

You slammed the textbook shut when I asked that and pried open your laptop. Chinese films danced across our faces that night, English subtitles skimming the screen in ghosts of a language yet to be loved.

I smooth the harsh edges of your mouth. Crimson turns into baby pink. You’re smiling again.

The sun is dipping under the Chinatown skyline now, sealing the sky with a waxy swirl of burnt sienna. Neon signs flicker on in succession, siphoning life into arteries in the form of Chinatown’s alleyways now teeming with expensive shoes thrusting onto cobblestone paths and the crisp sizzle of pan fried dumplings against rustic griddles.

So I start on the small details. Your long eyelashes, the mole above your left brow, the planes of shadows intersecting with the imagined sunlight that illuminates you, but my brush gravitates to your earrings.

I’m twelve again, and my fingers stumble over each other trying to nudge the hook into the tiny cut of flesh in your lobe.

“Are you sure this isn’t hurting?” I murmur, barely keeping a hold of the slippery pearl. I begin to miss the acrylic rainbows and cheap clay cherries.

“Yes I’m sure, just hurry up...” you grumble, coating your lashes in black gloops of mascara and rimming your lips in hot, sticky red until a stranger in a foreign school uniform stares back at you in the mirror.

I watched those girls hack you apart Stacy, their spiteful comments delivered like a chainsaw to a trunk, sawing off your branches until you were just a piece of their furniture and no longer the oak tree that shaded me from their glares in the hallway. The sting of their stares were eviscerating.

So I smear the glimmering pearl out of sight. A narrow brush paints the arches of your old rainbow earrings. You look like yourself again.

To love is to let go, but why did I find myself hanging onto who you once were, Stacy?

Why did *you let go?*

Nighttime’s navy cloak is unravelling over the sky now, embroidered with star sequins that blink in unison. My mouth is ash dry. My hands ache with the kind of pain that permeates and settles between flesh and bone.

So I paint yours instead. I’m five, and my hands traced along yours, following the parabolic cavities of your palms, the linear creases of each finger and the waves of your knuckles. They’re smooth as pebbles. Warm as the embers of a campfire.

I’m ten, and one of your hands squeezes mine as sobs rack your body. The other scrunches a test paper slashed with red crosses; a failed testament to your future medical career. I feel the callouses leeching on like infectious parasites, the writer’s bump on your index finger a tumour. They’re lukewarm, like the ghost of a fire that once burned bright.

Then I’m fifteen, and my hands shake as I hold yours one last time. I trace the cavities that you bore through fat and flesh. I see where you slashed those crosses, where test paper turned to skin. They are piercingly frigid like broken obsidian. And for the first time in six years, you whisper to me in perfect Mandarin.

“I’m scared. Don’t let go of me.”

But the machines simultaneously flatline.

You let go first.

My paintbrush erases the hands that never held on.

It's midnight now, and Chinatown's heartbeat slows to a steady *tump tump* as I leave the neon lights behind and venture to the lines of fracturing stone crosses that seem to stretch to the distant horizon. Cremated paper offerings flit across jagged cobblestone, dissolving in rippling pools of rainwater. The paint is barely dry before it is streaked with rivulets of the sky's tears trying to wash you away.

The lighter sparks, then dies.

Hiss. Again.

The stench of gas fills the air.

And you're
on
fire.

The flame is hesitant at first, gently gnawing the canvas edges. Then it illuminates your face, licking in brilliant crimson and marigold until embers shoot across your cheeks like dying stars and I thank the blaze for being able to capture what I couldn't with brushes and paint- a soul made of flame, kindled as fast as it was extinguished.

The canvas crumbles into dust. Regurgitated cinder is swallowed by rain. I see you in the ghost of the heat, Stacy. I see you in the flames. I see you in the dying embers.

I see you mouthing something, and this time I don't ask questions. I scoop every speck of ash off your grave until it cakes my fingernails in black grime. The wind streams through the trees, splaying my hair into an inky firework.

I open my palms, and you disappear.

I love you Stacy.

So this time, I let go first.