

Desperate

She grew up in the colour of bruises. It was the deep amber of the rice stalks her family harvested, the faded green of the pickled vegetables they ate for every meal; and the blood red of the sun that grew spots on her browned skin. The mountain she lived on was beautiful; with a gradual incline of rice paddies separated by a thin mud ledge and untouched air that burned with cleanness. Yet a life where all you had was the vegetables you grew, the hut you built, and siblings to share the burden was so, so hard.

She loathed each winter that passed. The sky opened up to hail and frost. The ground hardened and so went their source of food. She remembered her frostbitten hands grasping for the only patch of grass in the numbing snow. She remembered shoving it into her mouth until she vomited it all out. She heaved, back then; and as she saw the misshapen clumps of dead green in clear bile, she sobbed.

And it was at that moment; her stomach and her heart feeling emptier than ever; that Aiyun knew she would do anything to not feel this humiliating desperation ever again.

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Now twenty-five, and two lifetimes away from the starving eight-year-old girl she once was; the same desperation keeps her working long after midnight. It aches, even as Aiyun heaves herself up the narrow staircase to her apartment. Her lungs burned and her eyes ached so much that she could barely keep them open. She hadn't been able to feel her legs since she first stood up from her 18-hour shift.

One of her legs gave in with a sharp cry— *Thump*. She caught herself on the wooden door. Her mouth was dry. In place of the usual silence so late at night; her hysteric breathing filled the air.

Haa...haa...

Aiyun slowly stood up on shaking legs and steadied herself. She wiped the sweat off her forehead and began to pat herself down.

What would her daughter think, if she woke up to see her mother looking like this?

She pushed open the front door and closed it quietly behind her. Aiyun could barely suppress her anticipation as she hurried to the only bedroom in the apartment. Her low-skill job required her to leave the house before dawn, and she would often arrive home after midnight. She could only see her daughter when she prepared to go to work, and now as she returned; yet—

The bedroom door was wide open.

Aiyun's heart dropped. Further inside, the bed covers were crumpled and folded back crudely—

“Mummy?” a soft voice sounded from behind. Aiyun could cry from relief.

She gathered her daughter in her trembling arms.

“Baby,” Aiyun breathed out shakily, “why aren't you in bed?”

Aiyun couldn't stop the thoughts running through her head. What if she lost her daughter? What if there had been a robber who took advantage of the broken lock on the front door— If Aiyun works a little harder then Yiran could live in a better house and she would never have to be scared of thieves and—

The little girl huffed, breaking Aiyun's spiral.

“I just wanted to see you, mummy. You're never here...” she declared

Yiran looked up at her mother's devastated face and hurriedly hugged Aiyun tighter.

“But it's okay now! I just haven't seen you in a long time! I'll forgive you if I can see you again soon... and if... you give me more hugs too...”

Aiyun didn't respond. Yiran nervously looked at her unmoving mother. She didn't want Mum to be angry. Holding back tears in her eyes, Yiran mumbled an inaudible apology and fled to the bedroom.

“Yiran—”

Aiyun reached out for her daughter soundlessly. Her throat constricted around the meaningless apology on her tongue. All of a sudden, she imagines her daughter waiting at the gate for a parent who'll never come on time. She sees her daughter crying, afraid, *all alone*. Where was *she* through it all?

Aiyun unconsciously walked into the bedroom. She sees her daughter lying alone on a queen-sized bed. It was a stab to the gut. The desperation of her childhood is nothing in the face of heartbreak.

Maybe in her uphill struggle to prevent the past from repeating; she's losing sight of what's in front of her. Of what really matters in the end.

What is gone is gone. She can only change what happens from now on.

