

XIN YI (Working Title)

By

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INT. ASIAN GROCERY STORE. DAY

A young Chinese woman stands in front of a shelf that holds all kinds of Asian seasoning sauces and spices. SHANSHAN(24) has a refined beauty and wears no make-up, hair loosely tied back, in a cardigan over a camisole and blue jeans.

Picking up a small package of cloves,

SHANSHAN

Mom, I can't find the Tsaoko, can we use this instead? (in Mandarin)

Shanshan turns to her MOM, a Chinese woman in her late forties, standing across the aisle. She wears subtle makeup and looks younger, or rather like she is ageing well compared to women of her age, except that you can see weariness and redness in her eyes.

Mom takes a look at the package.

MOM

That would work. But it won't be as good as what you had at home. Did you find some dumplings?

SHANSHAN

I know. Yeah, I got some.

MOM

When you come back to China after graduation this year, I'll cook for you everyday.

Shanshan smiles.

SHANSHAN

Let's go.

She takes the basket from her mom's hand and walks over to the counter. Mom stands in front of Shanshan in the line and takes out her wallet. It's full of RMB, with only a few dollars.

Shanshan smiles as she sees her mom's mild embarrassment and steps up to the card reader.

SHANSHAN

Mom, I got it.

She takes out her wallet and pays with a Bank of America credit card.

Mom looks at her daughter in a amicable smile.

(CONTINUED)

MOM

Sometimes I forget you're a grown woman.

They finish the payment and exit the store.

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EXT. LA CHINATOWN-DAY

As Mom walks out of the store and steps onto one of the main streets in Chinatown, she looks around, curiously and carefully. The buildings and streets are decorated with red lanterns, paper cuttings and door couplets. The desolation and gloominess of Chinatown in its normal days seem to be subsided by the joyous celebration. But there's still something peculiar about the scene that could make your skin crawl.

She slips her arm through Shanshan's subtly.

We can hear the noise of a big crowd approaching.

The holiday parade is passing by. Mom's eyes light up, finding it surprising and yet heart-warming. She starts taking photos with her phone. She nudges Shanshan pointing at the dancing lions passing by.

MOM

Go! I'll take a photo of you.

Shanshan resists going but gives in.

SHANSHAN

Mom!... I'm not five anymore.

Shanshan stands in front of the parade, embarrassed.

Mom takes a few and is very happy with the photos. She shares it with a family group chat on WeChat.

SHANSHAN

It's actually not that bad. I'll send it to dad.

Mom goes blank for a second. Now it's the drum troupe passing by. Her red coat seems to blend in perfectly into the festivities.

3

INT. APARTMENT. NIGHT

Chopped garlic shrivels in the sizzling oil and bok choy is tossed into the heated frying pan. Milky smoke rises into the air. CCTV's Chinese New Year Gala is playing in the background. The apartment is warm and cozy, simple but artfully decorated with some furnitures from Ikea.

(CONTINUED)

MOM  
(calls out)  
Dinner is ready. Go set the  
table!

Shanshan is folding laundry on the sofa, thoughts interrupted. She brings her mom's clothes into her room and puts them (on top of some pill bottles) in a big worn-out canvas suitcase that lies open on the ground. She searches for something in her desk but realizes that everything has been rearranged. The room is weirdly tidy.

SHANSHAN  
(calls out)  
Mom! I told you not to move my  
stuff.

Shanshan gets a text from her boyfriend JOHN (25), "Honey, have you told your mom? Sorry I couldn't be there."

MOM  
Shanshan!

Shanshan puts her phone back into her pocket without replying and goes to set the table.

SHANSHAN  
Coming!

She comes into the kitchen. Under this warm room light and in this closed space, she feels like she's back in China with her mom. She fixes her eyes on this small figure. Mom is pounding her back gently.

SHANSHAN  
We could've just eaten in a  
restaurant in Chinatown. You  
don't need to make all these.  
We're gonna waste it anyway.  
(serving the bok choy)

MOM  
We need to have a proper holiday  
meal. It's New Year. Besides,  
who'll cook for you when I go  
back home? You can't eat raw  
vegetables all the time. It's not  
good for your stomach. Try to  
cook some simple meal yourself...  
Congee or some noodle soup...

Shanshan doesn't seem very excited at whatever her mom is proposing.

Mom is still bringing dishes to the dining table.

MOM

The frying pan is too shallow.

They sit down.

SHANSHAN

I'm glad that you came with a group. I'm sorry I couldn't take you around much. How come you suddenly decided you wanted to come here for Chinese New Year? Dad was okay with it?

MOM

I just thought you haven't come home for the holiday in five or six years. I don't have anything to do. So might as well spent some time with you. Your dad is fine with your uncles.

Shanshan senses her mom's feigned casual tone.

MOM(CONT'D)

There's lots of parents in the group who are here to see their kids. So I get to spend few days with you.

Shanshan is just listening.

Mom puts down the bowl and stares into it, with her head lowered.

MOM(CONT'D)

To be honest, I'm a little bit afraid coming here at the beginning. Remember last time, when your uncle visited your cousin in Texas...

Mom shakes her head and decides not to continue.

MOM(CONT'D)

Let's not talk about it now...  
(smiles)  
It's supposed to be happy day.

Shanshan looks at her mom and suddenly finds her vulnerability heart-breaking.

Shanshan wants to hold her mom's hand but takes it back.

Beat.

SHANSHAN

Mom...

Shanshan puts her chopstick down.

SHANSHAN

Remember John? Last time, we Skyped together. The relationship has been stable. I'm graduating next year. So we both think...

Shanshan looks at her mom in searching for positive reaction.

SHANSHAN

It's the right time to get married. So he proposed.

Mom breaks into smile, and simultaneously her eyes watered. She chokes with joy but also an excessive sadness.

SHANSHAN

Mom, what's wrong?

MOM

Nothing... (taming her emotions)  
I'm just happy for you. Really.

Mom holds Shanshan's hands in hers. They look at each other.

SHANSHAN

When you go back, we'll skype with dad and tell him the good news, okay?

Mom doesn't say anything, lowering her head.

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INT. APARTMENT. NIGHT

They each stand in front of a sink, in silence. Shanshan passes rinsed dishes to her mom. Mom is very contemplative. They finish their last dish and put them in the cupboard.

MOM

Shanshan, give me a footbath will you?

Shanshan is surprised and doesn't know what to do for a moment. She wants to say no out of instinct and turns away but she takes a second look into her mom's eyes.

SHANSHAN

Okay. (smiles)

(CONTINUED)

Shanshan takes out a washbasin from her bathroom and fills it with warm water. She sits a step stool next to her mom who's sitting on the sofa.

This is the first time that Shanshan has initiated such an intimate act. Shanshan takes off the socks that her mom is wearing and put her feet into the washbasin. She holds her mom's feet in her hand. They are so small. She touches gently the instep, she can feel the callus on the bottom of the feet with her other hand. Mom just stares at her daughter watching her every move.

5 INT. APARTMENT. NIGHT

Mom has just fallen asleep. The lamp on the bedside table is on. Shanshan is lying right next to her mom. She takes a look at her mom, who's sleeping back-to-back with her. She turns off the light.

6 INT. IN-N-OUT. NIGHT

In front of the counter, Shanshan is waiting for her order. She looks around. It's not very busy. A family with kids, a loving couple, some college students chatting at high volume. Mom is sitting on the other side of the room, also looking around but almost not knowing where to look. She seems kind of out-of-place in this all-American eatery.

The waiter hands her two signature In-n-Out cheese burgers, an animal fries and two large sodas.

SHANSHAN  
(smiles)  
Thank you!

She walks toward where the Chinese woman is sitting. It's her MOM.

MOM  
What's this?  
(pointing at the soda cup)

SHANSHAN  
Coke.  
(when handing the cup over)  
Oh, there's ice in it. I'll go  
get you another one.

MOM  
(assuring)  
No, no, it's fine.

Mom picks up a burger.

MOM(CONT'D)

You don't eat this all the time,  
do you? Junk food is not good for  
your health.

SHANSHAN

Of course not. It's very popular  
in California. You have to try it  
when you visit.

They start to eat their burgers.

Beat.

MOM

It's still a little bit cool in  
the evening...It's still over 25  
degrees back home. Wear warm  
clothes. Remember to bring a  
sweater or jacket...

Mom realizes her nagging is no longer necessary.

SHANSHAN

I got it... Don't worry about it,  
mom. It's not like my first year  
here.

MOM

Just take care of yourself okay?  
(a beat) What time is it?

SHANSHAN

Six o'clock. We still have- three  
hours before boarding. We'll be  
fine.

MOM

When's the car picking us up?  
Does the driver know when to pick  
us up?

SHANSHAN

Yes, I talked to him already.  
There's nothing you need to worry  
about. I've got everything  
settled. When we get there, I'll  
go get you your boarding pass and  
check-in bags. The security check  
is a little bit complicated. You  
need to take off your shoes, put  
them in a basket and push it in.  
Oh, and you have to raise your  
hand above your head.

Shanshan demonstrates.

Mom just keeps nodding, listening carefully like a student.

SHANSHAN (CONT'D)

When you land, text me. And let dad know too. He's picking you up right?

Mom stutters.

MOM

...Your...your uncle is picking me up.

Shanshan puts down her cheeseburger, confused.

SHANSHAN

Why?

MOM

He's just very occupied.

SHANSHAN

Well, he can't do this is even if he's too busy! You're going back home all the way from here.

Mom stays silent awkwardly.

Shanshan looks at her mom in total confusion.

They fall silent.

MOM

Shanshan... I want to tell you something...

Shanshan is suddenly alerted. This is the last sentence she want to hear from her mom. She wants to run away.

Mom takes a sip of lemonade from the straw. The cold liquid sends a shiver from her teeth down to her spine. Shanshan takes away soda cup from her mom and gave her a bottle of room-temperature water.

MOM

I've been wanting to tell you this for a long time. I didn't know how to. You're busy with preparing your thesis. We didn't want to distract you. But I thought here I am, in front of you so I have to let you know.

This is nerve-wracking.

MOM

Your dad... and I ... are divorced.

She lets the words slowly walk out of her mouth.

That one word leaves Shanshan flabbergasted. For a second, Shanshan thinks that her mom might be joking.

SHANSHAN

What...? This is too sudden...What are you saying...? But why...?

There's no way that Shanshan can wrap her head around this revelation right now.

SHANSHAN

Did he cheat on you? No... My dad is not that kind of person.

MOM

No, no, no...It's not that complicated. We're just not right together. (deep breath)We've actually--

SHANSHAN

Do you mean that you've been wanting to divorce since I was a kid?

MOM

We didn't want you to have a broken home...

Shanshan couldn't believe it.

SHANSHAN

I've always thought that getting married is very serious. It's a decision you make when you're ready to devote your whole life to one another... How can I believe in my own marriage?

Shanshan finally bursts into tears.

Mom holds Shanshan in her arms.

Two heart-broken women in an all-American eatery.

7 EXT. HIGHWAY-NIGHT

The moon is almost full and it's rather dark outside. Not much city lights either. A desolate landscape.

8 INT. CAR-NIGHT

In the back seat, Shanshan leans back, with her eyes closed, letting the darkness in the car absorbs her. Mom is looking ahead.

JUMP CUT:

Shanshan glances at her mom. The red car headlights and green traffic lights cast on her pensive face. Mom seems so small and sad and lonely against the dark landscape that's roaring past the car window.

JUMP CUT:

Shanshan is now leaning her head on the her mom's shoulder. The tears on her face are dried up. Their eyes meet occasionally. None of them speaks.

THE END.