

Oracle

In three of her past lives, Ma had apparently been a jade ornament hanging off the silken clothes of a prized concubine, the muse for one of the famous classical gardens created by Ji Cheng in Suzhou, and a 1920s Shanghai *shi dai qu* songstress who, upon learning she would never sing again after an assault by a jealous ex-lover, tragically succumbed to an opium overdose.

It wasn't that she remembered any of those past lives in any kind of significant detail. It didn't even matter that she couldn't point out Suzhou on a map of China or that she hated jazz. She believed in each past life with such passion and devotion that it very nearly convinced me, but less so Ba, who tolerated Ma's superstitiousness with an air of quiet dignity. What meant even more to Ma was that in all her past lives, she had always been in close proximity to greatness, but somehow never seemed to be able to reach for it herself. In this life, she was a Mandarin teacher in one of the vernacular secondary schools in Malaysia that was big enough to have both a morning and afternoon session for two separate sets of sleepy-eyed, untalented students, but greatness had yet to reveal itself.

She had decided that I was going to be the source of this greatness, consulting her fortune-teller while I was only a mass of soupy cells in her womb. She met the fortune-teller at another pivotal moment of her life, on her way to the first day of her new job, aged twenty two. While they were hiding under the corrugated roof of a bus stop for shelter against the rain, the mystic told her two things: the secret ingredient to grandma's herbal chicken, and where to find my father.

After waiting for Ba to arrive at the foretold place, marrying him, and having me, Ma set about recreating the herbal chicken recipe from scratch. By then, enough years had passed that the fortune-teller had become a fixture in our lives. I grew up watching Ma nod wisely while on the phone to this disembodied voice, squeezing the receiver between neck and shoulder as she cooked dinner. I remember seeing parts of the curly plastic cord lying across the hot metal of the stove, growing rough and half-melted over time. This was something that happened so often that I thought someone actually lived inside the phone, and was upset when no one replied when I picked it up to complain to them

about my mother. I also knew that every major life decision I made—from which kindergarten I should attend to when I should have my first haircut—passed through this detached mouthpiece.

When I was old enough to hold a pen and write, my mother made me keep a dream diary in the hopes that memories from my past lives would cross the barrier into this one. When I dreamt I had been on a stage, bowing to an adoring crowd, piano lessons materialised in my life. The same with art classes, then new running shoes that were the envy of my classmates. But when my eight year old brain suddenly began to dream, with alarming regularity, of eating ice cream for breakfast, Ba finally caught on. After a firm discussion with Ma, she decided to only pay attention to the ones that seemed more abstract.

So when I started dreaming of robes spangled silver and a sinuous path strewn with lotuses at fifteen, Ma knew that this was probably the manifestation of a past life, and it was time to bring me to see her fortune-teller.

As we drove over to the fortune-teller's house, we were caught in a traffic jam, cars slowed to a painful limp at three in the afternoon. I was in a bad mood after a day at school, and the direction we were headed in, west, meant that the blazing sun striped our faces red. The fortune-teller lived in Cheras, a place known for its endless rows of large, failing shopping malls, and enclaves of Chinese residences which had slowly grown more gentrified after our country gained independence.

'You don't know her name?' I asked Ma skeptically, cutting her off mid-sentence as she told the story of how she and the fortune-teller met for the thousandth time. I was starting to get motion-sick from the constant starting and stopping of the car in the jam.

Ma opened and closed her mouth, but then shrugged. 'I suppose if I needed to know her name, she would have told me.'

We passed by the cause of the jam: two cars that had bumped into each other on my left, the owners arguing and gesturing violently in the sweltering heat. Some bystanders were taking videos, which would make their way around WhatsApp groups and popular Facebook pages within the hour. Ma handed me her phone: 'Take pictures of the car plates, they are lucky jackpot numbers.' It was morbid

to think of profiting off someone else's misfortune, like stepping on their heads so we could climb higher, but I obeyed.

The fortune-teller lived in a two-storey terrace house, in a neighbourhood full of identical houses. No one came to greet us at the door, but it wasn't locked. Ma knocked once and opened the door with furtive glances over her shoulder. It struck me that she was embarrassed for anyone to see us here, even though she must have visited this place countless times already.

'Here,' we heard the fortune-teller say in Cantonese. It was a tone I knew well. I looked around at the walls of the living room that we were in, which were covered in altars to local deities. Tua Pek Kong stared impassively down at us, his white beard frizzing slightly in the heat. Rows and rows of candle flames multiplied endlessly in the reflecting wet-slick of their oil, making Guan Yin's face glow softly, as if she held the flame of life within her. I reached out to run my fingers over the irresistibly rough innards of an agate crystal geode that was half as tall as me, but Ma swatted my hand away. Pale-white jade beads trickled down the entrance of an inner chamber, which we swept aside into a room that matched the pulsing red of my eyelids.

Besides the violent red of the room, it was surprisingly bare. A large ba gua mirror—eight sided—hung to the side, reflecting the walls back to us. The fortune-teller was dressed from head to toe in interlocking Gs that screamed tacky, the kind of cheap knockoff you could get at any market. Her photochromic lenses were as dark as they could go, even in a room with no natural light, so I couldn't make out her eyes clearly, except during their sudden, darting motions. Incense filled the air, as thick as haze in July.

After she waved us wordlessly into seats around a circular table, Ma gave her a gift of Korean pears and a red packet full of money while introducing me. I was mesmerised by the hypnotic trails that the golden nail-guards she wore left behind, each one connected to an anchoring bracelet by a fine-linked chain.

'It seems like you didn't drink the last few drops in Meng-po's cup,' she smiled at me after Ma had described my dreams. I squirmed awkwardly in my high-backed chair, parts of the character for

fortune making dents in my back. ‘You were an astronomer in one of the royal courts, and divined for the emperor through numbers.’

To my mother: ‘That’s the reason for her troubled dreams. If you make some ginger tea for her before bed, that should boost her spirits and get rid of any bad energy.’

‘She will have great luck with numbers,’ she continued thoughtfully, staring at the oracle bones she had made me throw haphazardly into the centre of the table. ‘There will be good news within the next six months.’

My mother was on the edge of her seat. ‘Does that mean I should enrol her in Olympiad Maths classes?’

The fortune-teller shook her head and snapped her gold talons against the table in a string of satisfying clicks. ‘Not necessarily. Just be open to all possibilities.’

A week later, Ma was triumphant. The lottery ticket she bought with the car-plate numbers I had jotted down were just a digit off from the real number. Ma became convinced that this was merely a warm-up, a sign. It wasn’t quite greatness, but it meant we might have the chance to move up in the world, out of our house, away from neighbours that never cleaned their houses properly and invited vermin into the local area. She believed that I would be able to predict one of the jackpot numbers within the next six months through my dreams.

Each morning, before I awoke, Ma was there, pencil at the ready. ‘Quickly, quickly! Before you forget!’ She said anxiously. Sometimes she would wake me up mid-dream, as if she hoped to catch the numbers off-guard. They never came to me clearly—dreams in three acts, five faces I had been able to recognise and name, a clock stuck peculiarly between eleven and twelve—all dragged out of my subconsciousness and scribbled down in a worn notebook that would be brought to the local Toto shop and checked once, twice, thrice.

But the longer the promised fortune took to arrive, the angrier Ma got with the fortune-teller. I didn’t understand why, given that her advice had been so vague in the first place. The numbers were printed each week in the newspapers, of which Ma had dozens of permutations of ticket numbers to compare against, her mood steadily declining as the numbers dwindled.

As the months went by, Ma and her fortune-teller were going through what Ba called a cold war, and Ma was no longer calling her. I knew that Ma was waiting to be called. As if the first to succumb meant an admission that they had been friends all along—proof that this wasn't just a cheap scam.

I was taking a shower when I heard a shriek and then soft laughter which slowly rose in pitch. Dashing out so quickly I almost slipped, I saw Ma standing in the living room, the day's newspapers scattered around her feet. She was doubled over, laughing so hard that she had to take in huge, rasping breaths that almost choked her, threads of saliva spilling out onto the ground. I shouted frantically for Ba, wondering if she was having a stroke, trying to bring her over to the sofa and calm her.

She would not speak a single word, and lay in bed staring blankly at the ceiling. A fever began to burn in the hollow of her forehead. Ba said we should let her rest, so we cast the room in shadow, and tried not to make too much noise.

When I picked up the newspapers one by one, trying to arrange them into their intended order, I saw it. A picture of the fortune-teller gazing out at me in blurred colour, without her glasses on, and a grin that was the brightest thing on the page. Her real name was Shirley Lim, and she had just won a record-breaking sum of money in the jackpot this week.

The winning numbers—a combination of Ma's birthday date, interlaced with mine.