

miniMAG

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Entertainment

Liliane Pang

The man sitting one row ahead surprised me by watching the entire “family film”. The movie was a live-action version of a popular animated film from the nineties. As a kid, I remember loving the original animated one so much that I didn’t even bother watching this recently released, CGI-soaked remake. I tapped my dormant in-flight entertainment system’s screen. Six hours to go until our scheduled arrival at Trudeau International Airport.

After browsing the TV and movie offerings, my bloodshot gaze wandered back towards the man sitting in the row ahead. He had salt-and-pepper hair and barely moved during the whole flight. I knew he wasn’t asleep because every so often he would lift his hand to take the tiniest sip from his red wine in its plastic cup. It didn’t matter that I couldn’t see his face. I wanted to see what he was watching and the gap between the seats offered a perfect view.

Eventually, the end credits appeared for the second CGI-heavy movie he chose. Even without sound, I could tell the film was bad. If you looked closely enough, you could see it in the actors’ eyes; they knew it too but they were trapped within the confines of that awful script. (Or

they were just having a hard time acting opposite objects that weren't actually there.)

It didn't take the man long to pick a third film. We both settled into our seats, reclining as far back as Turkish Airlines' economy class design would allow us. It was one of those B-grade horror films where none of the stars were actual stars and a Vancouver suburb was used as a stand-in for somewhere in Asia or Somewhere, U.S.A. The pressure on my bladder became harder to ignore so I got up, mentally congratulating myself for scoring an aisle seat so I wouldn't have to awkwardly clamber over another passenger's legs, either facing them while avoiding eye contact or giving them a prime view of my butt.

Apart from watching what a complete stranger is watching, getting up to relieve myself is one of my favourite in-flight activities. Not because I get any kind of pleasure from using the cramped and smelly toilet. It's



because I get to see what other people look like when they're asleep while I wait in line. Even the chicest woman in her cashmere turtleneck and tasteful shade of red lipstick looks goofy with her mouth hanging open, saliva dribbling down her chin.

By the time I returned to my seat the man sitting in front had become restless. He was attempting to watch a Sofia Coppola feature but kept tapping the screen to check how much time was left. I put away the barely-touched novel I specifically brought along to read on the plane then tapped on my own screen to revive it. This was when I came across an option I had previously failed to notice.

The wellness section contained calming music, breathwork exercises, and a series of short videos by a lively man I assumed to be a well-

known media figure in Turkey. I already felt pretty calm and didn't feel like my breath needed work so I tapped on the latter video series. In clips lasting no longer than a minute, the host wore a blazer over a t-shirt and stood before a blank white background, promising to help me quit smoking once and for all. I watched a couple of these and was quickly informed that smokers know that smoking is terrible for their health. Focusing on the terrible-ness is apparently not the way to address one's bad habits. The key is to ask yourself why you're smoking in the first place.

“Start with the *why*.”

I would've finished the entire series of his videos but the seatbelt sign lit up and we were instructed to prepare for landing. Did it matter that the first and last cigarette I had was semi-inhaled with my friend Lou at the age of twelve while my parents were still at work? Deep down, I knew this advice, from the Turkish celebrity who had successfully quit smoking, would come in handy for me someday—for some bad habit other than smoking that had yet to announce itself to my consciousness. All I would have to do is remember to ask myself the right question.

The Pearl Eye

Donovan Hall

From her window she could see them, a thousand little orange flowers blooming across the city, flicking their petals in the midnight wind. With each passing moment, another bright flash blossomed somewhere new: the slaughterhouse district, the northern wall, and a particularly brilliant burst in University Square. What alchemist's chemicals were responsible for creating such an explosion, Asatrya could not recall. She was too drunk to even try to remember her alchemy lessons, but she could easily imagine all the long-bearded conspirators going up in flames. It brought a smile to her face. It served them right. After all, she never wanted this. It was their fault. She just wanted her reign to be a peaceful one.

She swirled the wine around in her cup. It was good to be drunk on a night like this, on the eve of victory when the greatest threat to her kingdom lay in flaming tatters. She took another sip of her sapple wine and leaned one arm on the windowsill. The sour taste on her tongue and the smoldering char in the air, she savored them both. The traitor had played a cunning game until now. When her father died suddenly, it was a shock, but no one suspected foul play. When the war on the frontier erupted, it was unfortunate, but sometimes there was no

bargaining with barbarians, and so she dispatched her armies. But when her cousins started disappearing, that was when Asatrya began to wonder. And though it took her longer than she wanted to admit connecting the dots, any remaining shroud of doubt fell when she heard the report that General Hom was marching on the capital.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

Asatrya turned to the door of her bed chamber. Heavy footsteps were rushing down the hall outside. Had they come already to tell her the good news? Was the battle done? It didn't sound like it. She took another sip of wine, larger this time, emptying the cup, letting the tart liquid roll on her tongue for a moment before swallowing. Immediately, she poured herself a refill. She wanted to drown that small worm of doubt trying burrow its way into her thoughts.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

The empress's bed chamber was cast in shadow save for the handful of candles that were still burning here and there. Her handmaidens had never shown up to replace them, so only a few still had enough wick left to burn. *They'd been in on it too...* It hadn't just been her handmaidens; half the servants in her palace had all just disappeared before dawn—before the rioting started. How far had the rot spread under her nose? Well, it didn't matter now. She brought the wine to her lips, smelling the intoxicating sting on her nose. Soon it would all be purged.

The chamber door burst open so suddenly that Asatrya jolted in her seat and dropped her cup. It rolled across the floor, spilling its drink onto the woven carpet. Standing in the doorway was a tall man dressed in the blue-enameled armor of House Gabbar, her family's house.

“Captain Bahran!” she said, catching her breath. “You forgot to knock! But I will forgive you if you have good news. Tell me of the battle. Is that rat General Hom dead already?”

“Your highness!” Bahran began. Though it was hard for Asatrya to see him clearly in the gloom, his expression did not look joyous. Quite the opposite, actually. His brown, leathery face was creased in an unsettling scowl. “We need to leave, now!”

“Leave?” Asatrya said. “But why?” She gestured out the open window. “Do you not see how our brave men are burning away the rebels?”

“Your highness, with all due respect—” The old captain stopped himself to adjust his demanding tone in the empress's presence. “The rebels are not being burned; they are the ones doing the burning. General Hom has broken through the western gate. Half the city has risen to join him, maybe more. You need to understand. The city is lost.”

The empress blinked and shook her head. The drink must have been playing games with her senses. “Nonsense. Lost? No.” She felt that worm again. It was in her guts now, making her want to vomit. “The Gabbar Dynasty does not fall to rebels. Here, have a drink—” She reached towards the silver decanter resting on the table beside her, but in her drunken clumsiness, knocked it to the floor. More wine for carpet to drink. Soon it would be more drunk than she was. She cursed at the stain growing around her feet and lifted them onto the chair to keep from getting them wet. “Oh, Ish! Have the maids clean this and bring us more wine. No, wait...” She wagged a finger and shook her head, smiling bitterly, “The maids are gone. Never mind.”

“Asatrya!” Bahran growled, foregoing formality. “We need to hurry! Your council is already being escorted to the docks. There is a rowboat waiting to—”

“No!” Asatrya barked. “I am not losing this city! Call the garrison! Call my uncle! We’ll push them out! We’ll—”

“Your uncle is dead! His army was crushed in the field when you sent him to intercept Hom! And the garrison has already fallen back to the palace’s inner walls! They’re trying to buy us time to escape! Now do them the honor of getting to your feet!”

The empress chuckled and turned back towards her window. Four more fires were burning now. Three in the moon garden and one in the royal library. And of course, there was more smoke to go with it. So much smoke. The sky was so choked with it that the full moon was nothing but a dull white smudge. And the screaming. All those voices crying out. Or was it cheering? If what Bahran said was true, her people had turned against her. *But why?* The question made her lips tremble. Was this what they really wanted? Did they really hate her that much? How could they? She’d done her best to keep the peace, to keep everyone fed and happy, and this was how they repaid her. Asatrya’s stomach convulsed, and she threw up.

Then a roar cut across the raging tumult, and she saw them on the grey horizon, the winged monsters of the general’s vanguard. They swept over the city like great, bat-like beasts towards the palace.

“Oh, and he brought his dactylions too. I bet he thinks he’s so powerful with those.” Asatrya wiped her lips with the hem of her sleeve and scoffed. “Hmph! You know, my father could kill those things with a thought. If he was here...” But he wasn’t here, though, and she wasn’t nearly as gifted as he was. She rubbed a finger over the pearly opal imbedded in her forehead.

The captain stepped towards the empress, impatience writ large on his face. Snatching her arm, he yanked her roughly to her feet. “I will drag you downstairs if I must!”

In that moment, looking the old guard dead in his eyes, seeing his fear, the sobering reality of her situation started to sink in.

“No!” The empress said, pushing the man away. Her soft hands smarted as they slammed against the cobalt steel and she almost burst into tears, but she didn’t want to look weak. She *was* weak, though. Everyone knew that now, but still, she wanted to do herself the dignity of at least looking strong, “I don’t need your help!”

Small and smelling of wine, she stood, wobbling for a moment, gripping the soaking carpet with her toes. Her eyes were burning, and everything was blurry, and when she blinked, a couple tears rolled down her face. As she reached up to wipe them away, she whispered a curse under her breath.

“Your highness, let me carry you.” Bahran held out a hand, waiting. “It will be faster.”

But Asatrya smacked his hand away. “No! The last sovereign of House Gabbar will walk herself out of her own chamber.”

“I’ll let you walk, but if it pleases you, your highness, I—” Another roar cut him off and he looked to the window expectantly. The flying beasts were getting closer, “I implore you to take my hand.”

The empress, seeing the room would not stop tilting, took her captain’s gloved hand and felt herself pulled off her feet the moment his fingers gripped tight. It took all of her effort to keep from tripping as they hurried back towards the open door. As she stumbled over the threshold into the hall, she felt the icy touch of marble press against her feet, shocking some more lucidity back into her floating mind. Along one wall of the grand corridor was a series of portraits, each a former emperor or empress immortalized in pigmented oils. Ten were lined up, gazing down at Asatrya as she passed them by. Normally, the braziers were lit to give them each the glorifying illumination they deserved, but now all they had was the ambient glow of dynastic annihilation to light them in their final hours. That was enough though for Asatrya to see their eyes, dark and distant and full of disgrace. Her portrait would never hang with them. She had failed too thoroughly to deserve that honor.

Asatrya I, the Six-Month Empress. *Or maybe they’d call me the Half-Year Empress. Same number of syllables. I suppose it’ll just come down to which one sounds more pathetic. Probably the half-year one, then.* Her father reigned for twenty years, but she couldn’t finish the one. So, she ran past her regal forebears in silence, biting down the bitter shame that spoiled the taste in her mouth. Or was that just her own bile? It was hard to say.

As they neared the end of the hall, they came to her father’s portrait, proud and stoic with the pale opal resting between his thick, black

brows. Asatrya pulled back on Bahran's urgent tugging, wanting to take one last look at her father, the man who was perhaps the greatest emperor the land had ever known—the one who had mastered the pearl eye better than anyone. Under his heavy gaze, Asatrya felt his spirit compelling her to atone and beg for forgiveness. But Bahran did not give her the moment she needed, so all she could do was look at her father's image briefly as she passed him by.

"I failed you..." That was all she had time to say.

"Not yet!" Bahran said. "Not while we're both alive!"

And how much longer will that be?

The next leg of their journey was the grand staircase that spiraled from the top of the palace all the way down to the ground floor. Though the empress had hoped her guard captain would slow his pace on the many, many stairs they needed to descend, he did not. Captain Bahran was old, but he'd spent a lifetime training and was in better shape than most men half his age. Asatrya, on the other hand, was already starting to lose her breath, and in the darkness, she feared stumbling over her dress. When they came to a landing, she wrenched her arm free of Bahran's grip and collapsed to her hands and knees, panting.

"Get up!" Bahran said.

"Do they really think Hom is going to be so much better?" Asatrya asked, spacing her words between breaths.

"We can save this discussion for when we're on the boat!"

Asatrya smacked her palm on the stone. "Your empress commands you to answer me!"

Bahran scowled. "Hom is human, your highness, and a war hero. I think that comforts the small folk."

The empress coughed, still trying to catch her breath. "And I'm not human?"

"Not with your pearl eye. That makes your more."

Asatrya touched the opal imbedded in her forehead once more. It protruded out of her skin like an unblinking, shimmering eye, hence its name. Every member of her family had one given to them in childhood. It was how the blood of House Gabbar focused their psionic abilities. Unlike her father, Asatrya had never been strong in using their gift. Even compared to others in her family, she was just an ant in what she could do. There had been times, years ago, when she doubted she was her father's trueborn daughter. She'd once seen him throw a man straight over the palace walls. Another time she'd seen him blast a hole through solid stone. Both he'd done with nothing but a thought and flex of a finger. She understood why some feared him, but why her?

“I’m nothing compared to my father. I can barely make a barrier without falling over.”

“All the better to attack, then, wouldn’t you say? Hom and his like think the kingdom will be better off without any of old blood looming over them, and they’ve almost succeeded, and now they just have one left to deal with. Just you. The last of them.”

The last of them. The way he said it made her pause. The last Gabbar, weak in body and in mind, and with her safety resting on this



one man. She looked up the guard standing over her and wondered, feeling that awful wriggle in her stomach. “Do you fear me, Bahran?”

Bahran knelt down and took both of her hands and lifted her to her feet. “Do not insult me, empress. I’ve been loyal to your family all my life. The Gabbars led our kingdom to greatness with their own sweat and blood. The people of Kaythia who remember that will never betray you. *I will never betray you.*”

Asatrya was silent the rest of the way down the stairs, though in silence she heard more of the chaos outside. Flapping wings and thunderous roaring, clashing metal and people screaming. The darkness and the spiraling and the wine was all starting to catch up to her, and by the time she reached bottom of the stairs, she grabbed her knees and spewed vomit all across the marble. Before she could use her sleeve to clean herself, Bahran wiped her face with the edge of his cloak.

Asatrya shook her head when she realized what Bahran was using, “You shouldn’t.”

The old captain spared a smile, though the empress did not like it. *Is he trying to be nice now that I suspected him?*

“It’s just cloth,” he said. “I’ll get it washed once we’re out of this mess.”

Bam!

The noise echoed through the spacious corridors.

Bam!

Bahran looked towards the sound and spat a curse. “They’re trying to break down the front door! Time is short!”

Their path took them through the throne hall, a grand chamber of white marble and tall pillars reaching up to the distant ceiling. The window above it all let in the smokey light from outside, staining the white room in a shade of grim orange. On the far end of the hall, raised six feet above the ground on a carved pedestal, sat her throne of alabaster and lazurite. *No, that was never meant to be my seat.*

Then she felt Bahran’s pulling stop suddenly, and she looked ahead to see what was the matter. A cloaked figure had appeared from behind one of the great pillars, face covered with a gray cowl and mask. Asatrya didn’t need to wait for Captain Bahran to unsheathe his scimitar to realize what the cloaked figure was. If Hom wanted her dead that badly, it was only natural he’d send an assassin to come for her.

“Back to the frozen abyss with you!” Bahran roared, and he lunged at the stranger; sword raised high over his head.

The shadowy stranger pulled a weapon of his own out from under his cloak. A crescent blade, short in reach, but perfect for catching the old guard’s scimitar. With a screech of metal, the two swords met, and Bahran’s strike was caught and swept off to one side. But the old man was quick to recover, and he used the momentum of his diverted strike to boldly step into another strike. But again, it was caught and cast aside. However, this time, before Bahran could riposte, a cry of steel sounded as the enemy’s sickle clawed across the old man’s breastplate, just under his neck, as punishment his hubris.

Asatrya watched the two fighters duel until she felt a chill run down her spine. She spun around to see another cloaked figure, crouched low, stalking up behind her. He too had a gleaming crescent blade, its curved tip pointed straight at her. Asatrya looked back towards her protector, but he was too embroiled to notice the tiger about to pounce. And as the gray shadow leapt, she cried out, raising her arms in futile defense. But it didn’t need to be futile. There was more she could do. A trained reflex, something honed in childhood, sprang up from the sloshing depths of her mind, taking hold of her, summoning her focus, telling her to make her will manifest. And then her mind blazed with a silvery hot light. Then the assassin fell with a hard grunt as if he’d just slammed into an invisible wall mid leap.

The empress immediately let go of her concentration and clutched her head in her hands. Just that quick moment of summoning her power was enough to make it feel like someone had pressed a hot cooking pan against her brain.

Surprised, but not dead, the assassin was already starting to pick himself up, pawing at the ground for the sword he'd dropped in the collision. Asatrya turned to Bahran once more to see him finish off his assailant with a brutal slash from shoulder to hip. Without wasting a breath, he turned to rush back to her, stained sword raised and ready. Before Asatrya's assassin could get a hold of his sickle, the royal guard impaled him through the back, ramming his sword through to the marble floor. Then, with a boot on the assassin's corpse, pulled his weapon free.

"Are you hurt?" Bahran was quick to ask.

"I'm fine," Asatrya said. "But you..." The gray scratch across the guard's cobalt breast plate was an ugly scar.

"Don't worry about me, your highness." He made one more fretful scan around the throne hall and again grabbed Asatrya by the hand. "Come on. We're clear."

They hurried across to the other side of the throne hall, listening to the thunderous booms of battle continue outside, drowning out their desperate footsteps. Asatrya wanted to tell Bahran to stop pulling so hard, that her arm hurt, that her head hurt, her feet hurt, her throat hurt, her chest hurt, but it was pointless. She had to keep going. Any moment she expected another cloaked assassin to come at them from the shadows. It was only once they were in the narrow darkness of the basement corridors did they slow their pace, and Asatrya felt some modicum of safety. There was no space for someone to sneak up on them down here. So, she put her hand up against the wall to lean and take the weight off for a moment. As much as she wanted to keep running, she simply hurt too much.

"Don't stop!" Bahran said.

"Just one second..." Asatrya panted. "Please!"

There was a heart-shattering crash from somewhere above them, clear and resonant, followed by the sound of brittle rain and a chorus of mad shouting. A glimmer of fear flashed across old Bahran's face just then, and Asatrya knew all too keenly what had happened. The great double doors of the palace's front entrance, the forty-foot-tall edifices of ancient pine and barred with six iron rods each as thick as an elephant's leg, those doors had just been destroyed. Nothing was left between them and that horrible storm but a few precious minutes. And so, with what little strength remained, Asatrya pushed herself off the wall and forced herself to continue.

Asatrya was surprised to see that someone had actually left a torch in a sconce down here, and Bahran took it and used it to lead them the rest of the way. She heard the water before she saw it, that lazy, wet, lapping sound against the stone. Then she saw her salvation.

Moored to the dock was a rowboat with a grey-bearded oarsman sitting inside. His face was sullen and though he seemed relieved to see Bahran and Asatrya, his voice gave away his impatience.

“I heard the explosion,” he said, already reaching for the oars. “Get in.”

“Where is the rest of the council?” Bahran asked, eyeing the empty space on the boat.

The boatman shrugged. “They never came.”

Asatrya bit her lip. Were they lying dead with their throats slit, or had they conveniently disappeared just like her handmaidens? Her head hurt too much to think on it, so she didn't. She climbed into the



boat, feeling the floor of the vessel dip and sway under her weight, but the oarsmen reached out to keep her balanced as she took her seat. Bahran undid the mooring, climbed aboard, and grabbed an oar for himself. Together, the two men rowed out from the shadowed dock and down the river.

Either side of the river was flanked by high stone dikes that guided the deep water on its final stretch through the city and out to the ocean. Behind her, the great spires of her home began to glow with bursts of dreaded orange as new fires erupted within. They were ransacking the place. Her family portraits, her bed chamber, everything was going up in flames. It hurt to think of it as her home now. Now, it was just a fiery shell. A ruin in the making.

Then it suddenly occurred to Asatrya that she didn't know where the boat was taking her, and that worm of doubt wriggled in guts once more. “Where are we going?”

“There's a ship waiting for us in the bay,” Bahran said. “We'll take it to Batawan. We'll find shelter from this madness there. Then we'll make our next move.”

“Ah, I suppose that makes sense...” The island kingdom was ruled by House Mansulda, an old ally of the Gabbars. Much like her

own family, they too had old, arcane blood that granted them a gift, though their powers were different from that of her family. What it was exactly, she did not remember, though she could recall some aspects of the island itself. She had only visited the place once as a small child, and all she remembered were the pink beaches and pointy cypress trees. It would be a decent enough place to live, she figured, but while she thought of what was to be her new home, she looked back towards what had been her old one. Majestic even in its destruction, the fire would destroy everything inside by morning, but not the building itself. If they wanted to destroy it, they would need to blow it up with alchemist fire, and even then, the granite foundation would remain as reminder of what had once been.

Then she heard that familiar, savage roar from above the palace's spires. Asatrya looked and saw a great shadow appear in the smoke-stained sky, growing larger until it burst out from the haze into clear view. As big as a warhorse but with the body of a lion and the wings of giant bat, a dactylion descended upon them.

"Ish!" Bahran cursed. "Here!" He shoved his oar back to the oarsman and stood up, shaking the boat with his sudden movement. He drew the short bow from his back notched it with an arrow. But the boat was still rocking, the sky was dark, and the creature was swooping in fast. Still, Bahran let his arrow fly with a *thrum*, only to watch it miss its target.

"Bahran?" Asatrya said, unable to hide her panic.

Bahran let another arrow fly and cursed again as it missed a second time. Asatrya knew that her guard captain was a master with the sword, but no one claimed he was a master of the bow. All she could do was pray his third shot would count, or at least that was what she tried to tell herself. In reality, she knew what she had to do.

But it hurts! I can't! I'm too weak!

A third time the bowstring thrummed, shooting its arrow through the webbed membrane of the creature's wing. But it did nothing to stop the creature or deter it from its course. By now, Asatrya could see the infernal bloodlust in the dactylion's glinting eyes and the sheen of the rider's black helmet. Another arrow, another miss.

The beast flared its russet mane and roared one final time as it reached out with its talon-like hind claws.

Asatrya glanced at Bahran's quiver. No more arrows.

Growling, the old man threw his bow down and drew his sword. If he could not shoot the damn beast down, he'd cut it down. But not even he could slay such a thing. *He's going to die. We're all going to die.*

Asatrya stood up, balancing herself on the unsteady boat, and stared down the swooping predator. Behind her, she heard the old men screaming at her to get down, but she didn't listen. The dactylion was moments from seizing them both, reaching out to shred her to bloody ribbons. She took a deep breath and readied herself. "I am Asatrya I, last of the arcane blood of Gabbar, and I will not die like this!" Then she unleashed it. All of it. She screamed as her mind went white with molten hot pain.

Her skull was a crucible, filling up with flaming silvery light, and from her pearl eye, a brilliant glow erupted. Almost immediately she fell to her hands and knees, but she did not let go of her concentration. With the heat of the sun exploding behind her forehead, she clung to consciousness by edge of her bleeding fingernails, forcing herself to hang on, because she knew it was either this murderous agony or cold death. So, with the curling of her hands into sweating fists, she focused her terrible will on her target.

In mid-flight, the dactylion crumpled into a ball, its leathery wings crunching against its side like broken kites. Despite this, it did not fall from the air but remained suspended, uncannily hovering just above the water. The beast tried to struggle—wailing as it gnashed its fangs—but its head was pressed down into its chest while its lower back curled up at a dangerous angle. Bone and sinew bent and snapped like wet twigs, and the creature's form took on a more grotesque, ball-like shape as the invisible force crushed flesh into itself. The rider also screamed until he too fell silent from having his body pressed and smeared like a sliver of clay beneath a potter's thumb.

Then, with a swing of her arm, Asatrya flung the creature into a nearby dike, smashing it against the stone so hard that the flesh ball burst as a tomato would if dashed against a wall. Finally, Asatrya let go of her concentration as her mind reached its limit and gave up. The broken beast fell into the river, staining the dark waters red as it sank. And Asatrya collapsed, melting into a silken puddle on the damp floor of the rowboat, holding her head in her hands, shrieking and kicking.

"She needs to quiet down lest she bring more of those damned beast riders our way!" the boatsman said, barely audible over the sound the screaming empress.

Bahran put his arms around the wrecked woman, holding her as tears poured from her eyes. "You're fine," he repeated over and over again. "You're fine."

"It hurts!" Asatrya screamed. "Make it stop!"

Rocking her gently, Bahran continued to whisper in her ear. "Your father would be proud. Picture this. We'll train you in Batawan. You'll get stronger, and then when you're older, we will sail to take back what's yours!"

Asatrya sucked in a lungful of cold night air, her screams turning into muffled cries. Her mind was starting to cool off now, slowly. The immolating heat was now just a cookfire charring the underside of her consciousness—still awful, but infinitely more bearable in comparison to what she'd just suffered. She hugged Bahran, sobbing into his armored shoulder. "I hate this! Why did it have to be this way?"

The oarsman took out his wineskin from under his tunic and passed it to the empress.

"Here, this'll help."

The smell of alcohol was enough to make the empress snatch the pouch from the oarsman's hands and drink. Like her life depended on it, she squeezed out every last drop. It wasn't her sweet and sour sapple wine, but it didn't matter. It was strong, and the dulling sensation it gave her was a much-needed mercy. When she finished, she laid over the side of the boat, watching the obsidian waves of the yawning ocean crest and ebb. On the dark horizon she thought she saw the great galley that would ferry to safety, but it was hard to say for sure. She was tired and drunk.

As her eyes started to close, and her thoughts swam with visions. She saw herself sailing back across the sea with a fleet of a hundred Batawan ships, purple sails swollen with wind and vengeance, and there she was, standing on the prow of the most forward ship, all three eyes aglow with white light on her dark face. Anger and pain and sorrow all burning together, overflowing, ready to be shared with all the traitors who had given it to her. Bahran had said the people feared House Gabbar, and now she understood why. It wasn't simply the power they could wield that unsettled them—it was the amount pain they could endure.



My Funeral

Diana Chen

My funeral will be on a sunny day, when the scorching sun will blast my coffin, almost hot enough to set the heavy wooden lid ablaze. But that won't matter, I will already be a pile of dust by the time I'm settled in the square box. When I was alive, I was permitted to do everything. My mother never stopped me from exploring my territories in a possessive manner. The world is my oyster, she said. But I knew it was a lie. It was not walls that blinded us from a greater world; but our minds, forced into a square box. I won't be free, not until all that's left of me is finally put into a square box and sealed underground.

People will cry, but not too much; they've already spent their tears on their way to the crematory. My parents will be standing at the front of the crowd. I don't know if my father will lose his strength, but I am certain my mother will have to support herself upon the coffin.

My mother was always an intimate friend, though I deserve more credit for that utter honesty. If rebellion is the medal of adolescence, I was never in that contest. My body stretched fast. I was taller than my mother by the time I turned twelve; I have longer arms, wide enough to

circle her shoulders. But my skeleton was smaller than hers. I once compared our pelvises; mine was obviously narrower. She said it was because of pregnancy, it was a gift from me.

We once explored the forgotten wooden drawers at my grandma's house, of her girlhood bedroom. There were pictures from her adolescence. We looked so identical, the same nose, same lips. Yet she had double-folded eyelids, which I unfortunately did not inherit. People have frequently suggested that I acquire them through cosmetic surgery. But I refuse to let blades slide across my eyelids, my face is natural. My mother never wears makeup, while I always waste my time on appeasing beauty labor. My face was always pale, already corpse-like before my heart actually stopped beating. My body, despite its fragmentation, will still retain the lachrymal mole I specifically paint on. My mother disapproves of that mole; she thought I had too many taints to afford any additions.

I will hear her teardrops on my coffin, but she won't moan or sneeze her nose loudly, for she was educated with good manners. She never curses or misbehaves even in private. She forbids me from cursing as well. The first ever slap on the face I received was for calling a classmate 'bitch.' She gave up defending this iron rule on the day I left for boarding school; maybe she realized that growing my own fangs was necessary for survival. But she still doesn't know how to curse.

As her sadness overwhelms the picture, my father will step forward to pry her up from the coffin lid. There will be no pastors or lamas standing next to my grave, as I am, and I will be an atheist. I haven't decided on what *hors-d'œuvre* to serve, but I will put champagne out. Subliminally, it should feel like a celebration.

My father, I haven't written much about him yet, probably because he was absent from most of my childhood. I do love him; we have a tacit alliance that springs into effect every time the family breaks into an argument. He is good tempered, and I probably evolved this trait into the hobby of embracing nothingness. I am careless in so many ways, as I always reflect on during fatal midnights where I can't figure a meaning for life, "surviving itself is a privilege." I had to spend my summer with him when my mother was away taking care of my grandfather. He did not cook, he claimed he could cook but I was never bold enough to try any of his dishes. My mother and I enjoyed bossing him around, and he never complained. We would tease about his big belly and wonder why my good-looking mother had chosen such a man

as her husband. They showed me their wedding photos, fashionable dress from the early millennium that now seems horribly outdated, but my mother's figure was timelessly astonishing. My father didn't look half-bad; I guess my mother's words were true: he became the person he is today for the family. We never had much to talk about, the dining table was silent the weeks my mother wasn't home. I never noticed the gap when we were together though; my mother was the bridge, the glue that held the family together.

Love, a topic never forgotten by humans even when waiting for dawn to break the night before a battle. When we are young, we were given too much love from our family, that's when we pray for tenderness from strangers, have fantasies about summer camp love, hope we would bounce into true love when crossing the afternoon street haloed by sunburn. We had so many expectations which seduce us into crushes on people over a glance, or accidental touch. But what about the ones who loved and cared for us? We never learned to be grateful for the love that came as our birthright.

They will start playing the mourning music, probably an innovative playlist full of rock and Lana Del Rey. The enthusiastic drums will make the soil oscillate, the amplified beat thrumming straight into my coffin. I haven't decided on who should I invite to speak on behalf of my best friends; I had a list, but the names recently vanished. I was standing in the middle of a crossroads, vehicles passing from all directions. The wind brushed against my shoulder, klaxon beeps occupied my ears, I couldn't hear the bells from the church anymore. Then the traffic light turned red, suddenly everything was still. I was left alone in the center of the pavement. I'm not sure if the speech will be deeply moving, formal, or simply a demonstration of formalism. If there is an option, I would write it myself. My friends love to replace intimacy with insults; I guess they'll be cheerfully discussing how I miscalculated primary school math problems in their 'we miss her very much' speech. Introverted people probably shouldn't have a funeral at all. All kinds of gatherings, no matter celebration or mourning, are excuses for the parties of the extroverted.

The formalities will be over soon. After my beloved friends and relatives have made their blessings, no matter short or long, they will find their inner peace, which is the only reason they came to someone else's funeral. I might never meet some of them again if I were still alive; dying young seems to overcome inconvenient fallings-out. It's funny how the grim reaper also manages to whisk away grudges. Our

ethical principles stop us from gossiping about the dead but fail to protect the living from dying in trials of public opinion.

Death is a compulsory lesson for everyone. It always felt so distant when I was young, but now I see it waving and welcoming me with both arms. The scenery switches quickly, in the blink of an eye my past dies before me. I bury it carefully along with my first photo, my first diary and my first love letter, which was never sent out. It is time to move on, to stop lingering by those stories that no longer represent me.

My testament will not be a simple statement of inheritance or famous last words, they would speak not for myself, but for the career which I contributed my life to without any hesitation.

The setting sun will shelter my gravestone. The funeral will end hours before this epic picture, clearing up the mountaintop where I rest in peace, undisturbed by the echoes of the pain from stereotypes, doubts, and gossips.





happy ghost

airport

don't you
ever get enough
theres ghosts and theres concrete
and theres bus stops
shes got
a mixue sweet tea
theres a-million burgers a-million smiles
all getting on a train
the water monitor
flicks its tongue
swims away
float on



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Insta: @donnyman777

“My Funeral” by Diana Chen
Insta: @dianachen226

ISSUE123 edited and ai art by Alex Prestia
(happy ghost, fun bat, sleepy unc, goldie brat, and jelly gecko tm)