**GHOST CITIES**

A young man has haunted dreams on the eve of the Chinese Hungry Ghost Festival.

As the Hungry Ghost Festival approached, Shiyan’s night terrors became more frequent.

He would find himself inside an empty building, walking alone down an unlit corridor. It was one of the apartment blocks at the edge of the city, he knew, because he had explored them many times with his cousins. There were dozens of the structures, all identical, all lined up like rocket ships waiting to blast into a glorious communist future. But they had never been finished, the tens of thousands of workers who had been expected to flood to the region never eventuating. Now the tower cranes sat silent, only shadows and cobwebs calling the concrete behemoths home.

In his dreams, Shiyan couldn’t tell if he was walking down the corridor, or floating, or drowning. There was little light to see by, just stray moonbeams coming in through the doorless openings either side of him. He was being pulled by a current, it felt, drawn forward toward the pit of darkness that teemed at the end of the passage. It was as though he was sinking into a deep pool, slowly losing the light, feeling the cold and pressure building around his chest and ears.

Then he would hear it.

It would sound like machinery at first, as though the builders and engineers had finally returned, lending their grinders and buzz saws to the exposed concrete and bent metal. But as he neared the pit of darkness he realised it wasn’t mechanical, couldn’t be. It was something altogether more unnerving, more ancient, more guttural. A resonating groan that unsettled the dust on the floor, that caused the exposed wires to sway in their empty sockets. It rumbled through him, throbbed in his bladder. And it grew, gradually at first, before swelling and reaching out from the end of the corridor, bringing the darkness with it, swarming towards him with gathering intensity, building to a crescendo that threatened to crash over him like a terrifying ocean wave.

The moment before it struck, Shiyan would wake. He would be shivering with cold sweat, his breathing ragged and asthmatic, his heartbeat more thunderous than a racehorse’s hooves.

And every time he would find his knotted bedclothes soaked in urine.

Shiyan’s mother was in the kitchen. It was a crowded little space, and though she was only one woman it always seemed a hive of activity. When Shiyan entered he found her standing at the kitchen bench, pressing glutinous pink dough into peach-shaped *fanguo* for the Hungry Ghost Festival. Behind her a large pot simmered on the stove, sending steam out an open window to mingle with the bicycle bells and bickering voices in the street outside.

Shiyan avoided his mother’s gaze and slumped on a stool at far side of the bench. It was covered in all manner of preparations for the feast: plates of unpeeled fruit; small pots of various herbs, spices and sauces; trays lined with strips of marinated tofu.

“Washed your bedclothes again, did you?”

Fanyu was a jovial woman and she said it with only the tiniest sting of teasing. Shiyan hid behind his fringe, idly swirling the dark contents of a small bowl of soy sauce glaze. His mother laughed. She was a cherubic woman with seemingly endless mirth in her round belly.

“Why don’t you make yourself useful and roll me some rice balls,” she said.

Shiyan reluctantly took the bowl handed to him, avoided eye contact. He dipped his fingers into mass of sticky rice, shallots, peanuts and garlic and looked at it on his fingers. His mother chuckled and returned to her pressing.

“Why do you make these for the dead?” Shiyan asked, barely more than a mumble.

“Because they like them.” Fanyu kept on pressing and shaping.

“But what makes them so hungry?”

“All ghosts are hungry,” Fanyu said. “Some just more so. The hungriest ghosts are the ones who cannot find peace in the afterlife. The ones who were too greedy in life and can never eat enough to satisfy themselves. The one’s whose ancestors have forgotten them. And the ones who died a tragic death. This is why we prepare a meal for the dead. There are a lot of empty bellies in the afterlife.”

“What happens if a ghost doesn’t eat?” There was a tremor in Shiyan’s voice.

Fanyu stopped kneading and spread her chubby arms wide. “Is this not enough food for you?” She laughed so heartily her neck wobbled. “But this is just superstition! We prepare food to celebrate with the family we have and remember the family we have lost. The dead are dead! But we remember them.”

Shiyan swallowed. His throat was as dry as joss paper. “But what if…we forgot someone?”

Fanyu paused her preparations. “Who would we forget?” She propped one hand on her wide hips and fixed him with a stare. “Tradition says that if the ghosts don’t eat they get hungrier and hungrier. Eventually they die a second death. There is no afterlife beyond that. What is with these questions?”

“It’s nothing,” Shiyan said.

Fanyu leaned forward, squinting at her boy as though she could discern which mah-jong tiles he held just by scrutinising him. “What has gotten into you recently? This is not the boy I know. I spoke to your teacher. She said your grades are slipping. Don’t you want to get a scholarship like your cousin, Zhangwei? He is in America now, you know. Very fine university. He’ll be a doctor one day. Look after his mother when she is old. You are not too young to be thinking about these things.”

“I am doing ok.”

Fanyu exhaled smartly through her nose. “Maybe ok is good enough for some, but it doesn’t get you scholarships. You should spend less time washing your sheets and caring about your appearance and more time with your face in those textbooks.”

“I know, mama.”

“It better not be girls,” Fanyu added, tutting. “Plenty of time for girls when you are older. You wait till you are thirty. Now: study. No, actually, now you remake those balls. What is this mess? Are you paying attention? No hungry ghost wants to eat that!”

Fanyu belly laughed in that carefree way of hers. Shiyan didn’t understand how she could be so light-hearted: the world was a constant weight of expectations.

He looked down at the balls he had been rolling. His mother hadn’t been exaggerating. He was meant to shape glistening, round balls, but here were lumpy, fragmented chunks. Rice and peanut everywhere.

Shiyan lowered his hands beneath the kitchen bench and looked at them. He hadn’t realised how much they were trembling.

Shiyan couldn’t sleep that evening. The cold from the previous night’s dream still lingered under his skin and each time he was about to drift off he would hear that groan, that guttural rumbling, as though it was waiting for him behind his stuttering eyelids.

His mother was asleep, he knew, because he could hear her peaceful snoring in the room next to his. She seemed to lack the ability to worry. She was so unlike her sister, Zhangwei’s mother, Shiyan’s aunt. They may have looked similar—both stout and puffy, like human dumplings—but his aunt’s world weariness, her superstitious ways, her anxiety had etched lines on her face his own mother didn’t have.

Shiyan felt ashamed thinking about his aunt in such a negative way. *He* was the one with the secret, he was the one who should be ashamed. He took a deep breath to stave off the shame that was curdling his heart. There was only one thing to do and he should have done it a long time ago.

It took him an hour on his bike to reach the ghost city on the outskirts of town. Shiyan hadn’t been to the empty apartment blocks for weeks. Not since that night with Zhangwei.

It had been his cousin’s last day in China before he was to return to the United States to continue his studies. Shiyan had watched his cousin kiss his mother goodbye and climb into a cab for the airport. It had all seemed so normal. It had been a surprise, then, when Shiyan had come across him again later that night, sobbing in the ghost city.

As the apartment blocks slowly revealed themselves from the dark horizon, Shiyan noticed they had changed over the last few weeks. Glass had been fitted in the apartment windows and they no longer looked like concrete beehives. At the far end of the ghost city a single tower crane moved across the night sky, brilliantly lit by massive lamps from below. Shiyan could hear the sound of shouting voices and diesel generators on the dark night air. When he arrived at the apartment building he and his cousins preferred to play in, he saw dozens of pallets stacked high with shiny white tiles and sheets of plasterboard, crates full of plastic-wrapped tubes of construction adhesive.

The ghost city was rousing.

Shiyan dumped his bike and took to the fire stairs. Ten stories he climbed, barely noticing the burn in his thighs. Other sensations crowded out the pain. The coldness in his skin. The pressing darkness around him. There was no moon. Just his ragged breathing and the faint illumination from the tower crane lamps far outside.

Shiyan reached the top step and paused. He had reached his destination. This was where it had all happened, and fear bogged his footsteps.

He gritted his teeth and stepped out into the long, dark corridor that had haunted his dreams.

It was exactly as he remembered it. Nothing had changed. Exposed wires hung from the ceiling, dried leaves and other detritus accumulated at the edges of the walls. He could see footprints in the concrete dust ahead of him. His own footprints. Zhangwei’s footprints.

It was the last place he had seen Zhangwei alive.

After waving goodbye to his cousin, Shiyan had eaten his dinner, grabbed his bike and headed for the apartment blocks. He liked to throw concrete rubble from the top floor, watch it shatter on the pavement far below. But when he reached the top of the fire stairs he was surprised to find Zhangwei there, stalking around in the darkness at the far end of corridor. His cousin was crying. It was a wretched, broken sound that wracked his body, that made him shake and babble and pace around like a caged animal.

At some point Shiyan must have accidentally scuffled some debris because Zhangwei suddenly swung around and looked right at him. He was a ghastly sight. The moonlight caught the slickness of Zhangwei’s face, the contorted, agonised expression that was locked there.

In that moment he looked exactly like his mother.

A moment passed between them. The slightest shake of Zhangwei’s head. The tightening of his jaw.

“I don’t want to go back,” Zhangwei had said, barely audible, and then he had stepped backwards and disappeared into the blackness of the elevator shaft at the end of corridor.

Shiyan didn’t hear him land, so loud was the thudding in his chest. He had run to the edge of the elevator shaft and looked into the abyss below. He couldn’t see a thing.

But there had been a sound. Coming from the shaft.

A groaning.

Shiyan had turned and run.

Shiyan stared at the darkness at the end of the corridor. He could hear it again now, that groaning. It crystalised the cold inside him, turned his heart to a nub of ice.

Then fear tore through him when the saw the darkness move.

A shape began to take form, detaching itself from the darkness. It was human sized, but it moved strangely. And it was coming straight for him.

The figure passed a doorway and was momentarily lit by crane’s dull lighting. Shiyan saw a ghastly sight. It looked like an emaciated human, grey-skinned, ragged, hobbling forward on atrophied limbs as though its muscles could no longer bear it. Its neck was wastrel thin and grotesquely elongated, causing the head to dangle to one side.

The groan rumbled forth again, but it wasn’t coming from the shrivelled black husk where the thing’s mouth should have been. It seemed to come directly from the thing’s belly, slow and slurred, but with a growing sense of insistence and desperation.

Shiyan finally understood. It wasn’t a groan at all. The ghost was trying to speak. And only as it drew closer, the thing’s skeletal arms outstretched and clawing desperately toward him, the cold closing around Shiyan like a vice, did it finally make sense.

*Chhhrrrrrrr*.

Shiyan knew the word, of course. He felt it in every tingling nerve of his body. Slurred, guttural, but now understandable.

*Chi.*

The thing wanted to eat.

This time Shiyan did not run away.

The Hungry Ghost Festival was a sombre affair.

Shiyan’s extended family sat around his living room, no-one touching the expansive feast that Fanyu had laid out for her guests. To one side was the shrine to the dead, incense sticks filling the room with a sickly-sweet perfume.

The police had just left. Workers had found Zhangwei’s body at the bottom of an elevator shaft in one of the new apartment buildings at the edge of town. He had been there for some weeks, police believed. A tragic accident. They only came across his body because someone had drawn arrows in construction adhesive that led to his body. They still didn’t know who it was.

Everyone huddled around Zhangwei’s mother as she keened like only a grieving parent can. *A terrible tragedy*, one of Shiyan’s uncles consoled. Everyone agreed.

Shiyan approached his aunt through the crowd. In her grief, her tight skin seemed even more stretched, her lines even more finely etched.

Shiyan bowed his head. “I bought this for Zhangwei.” He lifted up a paper boat and held it out to his aunt. “With your permission, I will float it on the lake tonight.”

Zhangwei’s mother stopped crying and looked at the gift. It was shaped like a lotus flower and had a tea light candle at its centre. It would light Zhangwei’s way to the underworld.

“I have set him a place at the table, too,” Shiyan added, looking over at the shrine, at the many bowls and plates of food in front of it. “I made the *fanguo* myself. He will not go hungry.”

Zhangwei’s mother reached out and touched the paper lotus boat. Her face creased into the rarest of smiles.

At that moment she didn’t seem to care how Shiyan had known to buy a lotus boat for her departed son before even she had known that he had died.

She didn’t seem to care how he knew to set a place at the shrine for her precious lost child, before the police had even told her he was gone.

All she wanted to know was that her hungry ghost had been fed.