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Finalist - The Haunting of Building No. 6

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The Haunting of Building No. 6

Julia Wang

Clementine stepped out of the car and coughed. Her lungs immediately filled with the smoggy air, making her eyes water. She dragged her suitcase unceremoniously out of the cab, whose driver gave her a nod and sped off. Her alligator pumps slid a little as she entered the main gate of the apartment complex. Too bad her grandparents lived all the way at the other end of this watery path, whose excess liquid seeped through her very expensive shoes. No one had bothered to shovel the snow from the storm two days ago, and by now the road had become a grayish brown slush, though it was very possible that the snowflakes were already gray when they fell from the sky. She stopped every few steps to lift her suitcase over the small hill of icy mush that its wheels gathered like a sweeping broom.

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It was a “mandatory vacation,” as her boss had described when she took away Clementine’s badge and key card. She emphasized the “mandatory,” though she did reassure Clementine that it would be “temporary, of course.” *Five years at the firm and this is what I get*, Clementine thought bitterly, *one screw-up and they’re kicking me out. After all that I’ve done for them, staying up until 5 in the morning until the closing of the New York Stock Exchange.*

Building No. 6 was a gray monolith, with four entryways and ten stories, two apartments on each floor. The “No. 6” sign was stenciled in white above the entrance of Entryway A, surrounded by a once colorful scene of factory workers holding a banner that said “Serving the People” in red. The paint had rubbed off over the years, the workers’ joyful expressions replaced by an eerie blankness.

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Clementine walked over to Entryway C, trying to remember which floor her grandparents lived on.

“Clementine?” She swung around, startled by a soft voice. She didn’t think anyone would recognize her. She hadn’t been back in fifteen years. Besides, the plastic surgery had changed the contours of her face—her eyes now double-lidded, her cheeks now prominent, her nose now straight—making it unrecognizable sometimes even to herself.

She turned. A thin, pale-faced woman with short hair and sad, droopy eyes smiled at her.

“Fluffy?” The woman nodded. They had been childhood friends. She lived on the third floor in Entryway D. Fluffy and Clementine had spent all their summers together during elementary school. They ran around the apartment building,

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venturing into the large bike shed across the way, hiding in the shade and whispering secrets to each other while adults walked by to retrieve their vehicles.

Clementine couldn't remember why her nickname was Fluffy (was it because of the ever-present red rims around her eyes, resembling a bunny's?), or even what her real name was. The last she heard, Fluffy was working as a secretary for a subsidiary of some foreign company, living on her own. "How are you? What are you doing back at your grandparents'?"

Fluffy didn't answer the question but instead pointed up at the building. "Your grandparents live on the second floor. Remember when you used to poke your head out of that window when I called for you to come downstairs?"

Clementine smiled at the memory. Fluffy was always good at projecting her voice, even though

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she spoke softly most of the time. Sometimes, her call woke Clementine's grandparents' cranky downstairs neighbor from his nap. He'd open his window and shake his finger at Fluffy, muttering under his breath.

"Your grandparents must be waiting for you. I'll see you around the neighborhood." Clementine rang the downstairs bell to let her grandparents know she had arrived. She turned to ask Fluffy for her phone number, but Fluffy was gone.

Upstairs, Clementine settled into her temporary home. Her grandparents cleared her mother's childhood room, now filled with photographs and letters of relatives, as well as toys and knickknacks collected over the years. Grandma watched her eat at least three steamed buns, two filled with pork and chives and one stuffed with red bean, before ushering her off to an afternoon nap.

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This was not her first choice, but she had recently been evicted from her apartment because the landlord wanted to sell the property to a developer. She hadn't yet found a new place in her price range, and she'd been sleeping in her office (however little that was) and keeping her clothes in the communal locker room.

She now lay on the small bed, grateful that it was more comfortable than her office couch. Full of carbs, Clementine started to close her eyes. In the other room, she heard Grandma whisper to Grandpa: "Suspended for slapping an intern...nervous breakdown of some kind...probably hasn't been sleeping right...I'll make some soup..."

A

Clementine was taking her second walk of the

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day around the complex when she ran into Fluffy. She ventured to the very edge of Building No. 6, by Entryway A, where there used to be an outhouse. Now it was a shed for the retired street sweeper who guarded the parking lot for the entire neighborhood.

She needed to get out of her grandparents' small apartment frequently. Every morning starting around ten, Grandpa turned on the television, which played nonstop until nine at night, when he went to bed. Every hour, the German clock's occupant burst forth in a thunderous croak: "Cuckooooo." By eleven, Clementine was ready to wring the wooden bird's neck.

She peeked behind the former outhouse to see what looked like a large real-estate office.

"Clementine." She jumped and saw Fluffy standing next to her. "Oh hi, Fluffy, I didn't see

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you there.” “Are you looking for Shacktown?”

“Shacktown” was the name of the field behind the apartment complex, where two dozen families lived in run-down huts hastily constructed out of cardboard and flimsy metal sheets. They were migrant workers who came to the city for a better life, but most of them ended up selling vegetables on the streets. When Clementine and Fluffy were young, they dared each other to step closer and closer into Shacktown until one day, Clementine walked a little too far into the area and immediately got lost. Men sat on the dirt floor smoking cigarettes next to rotten heads of lettuce. Half-naked children ran around, ducking and dodging the makeshift fires for cooking. Grubby hands reached out for her from under the rusty roofs. Clementine stood screaming until Fluffy found her and guided her out of the labyrinth.

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“It’s a real estate office now. Buying and selling luxury apartments, like ours.” Fluffy gestured at Building No. 6. Clementine couldn’t tell if she smiled ironically or merely in her good-natured way.

Just then, an elderly woman walked out of the office with a young man in a gray suit. “Mrs. Liu, we will sell your apartment eventually. You have to be patient. The event happened very recently after all.”

The older lady nodded, holding a handkerchief to her mouth, either to suppress her emotional reaction or to protect herself from breathing in the unfiltered air. She glanced at Clementine as she walked by, pausing in recognition, but the young real estate agent ushered her toward the door of Entryway A.

“Was that...Grandma Liu?” Growing up in the

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small neighborhood, everyone over the age of sixty was “Grandma” and “Grandpa” to the younger residents. When Clementine lived here as a girl, she always saw Grandma Liu walking around carrying her infant grandson. Her son and daughter-in-law and their young child all lived with Grandma Liu, whose work unit had allotted her this apartment.

“The daughter-in-law shot herself in the bathroom a few weeks ago.” Fluffy leaned in and whispered in Clementine’s ear, in an almost childish way of telling inane secrets: “The rumor is her husband left her for his much-younger secretary, and the two of them eloped to the U.S. last month.”

Clementine remembered the woman. She had been an opera singer but quit her job after she gave her birth to her son and moved in with Grandma Liu. When Clementine was young, she

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sometimes took impromptu singing lessons from the woman during the summer. Her husband traveled a lot for work but she was always there, singing to an invisible crowd in front of Building No. 6. Under the oppressive August sun, Clementine walked around the courtyard until she found the woman standing under the biggest elm tree, eyes in concentration, back erect, mouth formed in a perfect "O" as she projected her voice from her diaphragm. A sweet melody in an alien language cut through the stillness, accompanied only by the occasional chorus of cicadas. Clementine watched her, mesmerized, until she finally took a break. She liked Brahms, she told Clementine, who nodded like she understood. Then it was Clementine's turn. Under her temporary instructor's command, she tentatively sang the arpeggios she learned the previous week. After the warm up was the main event: Schubert's Ave Maria, which Clementine learned for six summers straight until she went to

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university. "Aaaaaaveeeeeee Mariiiiiiiiiiaaaaaa."

The woman kept the beat by clapping the side of her thigh, enunciating the lines with a mixture of verse and metronomic counts. One-e-and-a two-e-vey-ma ri-e-and-a four-e-and-a yaaaaaa. Graa-e-and-ti ya-e-ple-a naaaaaaa. Clementine was clumsy with the rhythm but her voice found the pitch instinctively. Her favorite part was the sextuplets, which the woman taught her how to feel by chanting "straw-be-rry straw-be-rry pieeeee." A nonsensical seven syllables in English that nonetheless helped. "Gra-ah-ti ah-ah-ple-naaaaaa." "Je-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh -suuuuuuus."

Fluffy started to hum the tune under her breath. Clementine joined her, though she was now really quite shaky on the rhythm. The woman had told her that while it was important to get the rhythm right, she could take some artistic liberties. *Close your eyes and feel the music, and the rhythm will follow.* She gave Clementine her

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handheld metronome from music school when Clementine went off to university, and Clementine wound it up and listened to its ticking at night when she couldn't fall asleep in the dormitory.

"The funeral is next week, I think. Just family, but maybe you could stop by?"

Clementine hadn't noticed the tear sliding down her cheek until Fluffy wiped it away. She shook her head: "no, I barely knew her." Fluffy shrugged and walked toward the real estate office. Clementine could hear her fading voice: "benedicta tu in mulieribussss..."

B

Clementine woke up from a crashing sound outside. A stream of profanity followed. She poked her head out of the window. Fluffy waved

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from the courtyard and pointed exaggeratedly at Entryway B. Clementine quickly dressed and ran downstairs.

“What's going on?” As Fluffy opened her mouth to answer, a DVD player flew out of a fourth story window in B and shattered on the ground, where a broken TV lay next to a pile of dishes.

“Entryway B, fourth floor. Do you remember that family?” Fluffy seemed to be suppressing a mischievous smile.

“Fourth floor...” Clementine racked her brain. “It can't be...Sunny's parents?” Fluffy nodded, barely containing her glee. Before Clementine could ask more, a middle-aged woman wearing tortoise-shell glasses and clutching a small notepad approached them.

“Excuse me, do you know that family?” She

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gestured toward the open window, where a large pot flew out in a projectile motion. The woman flinched as the pot hit the ground. “I’m a reporter for the Daily Journal, and I’m doing a story on the couple that had an online affair with each other.” She gestured toward the window again. “Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“Actually, I do mind.” Clementine grabbed Fluffy’s arm and brusquely walked past the woman back to Entryway C. She surprised herself. Even after all these years, she still felt a twinge of loyalty toward Sunny.

A few days later, Grandpa was reading the newspaper after his afternoon nap when he reached page eight, the “Human Interest” section. “So this was what all the noise was about the other day.”

Clementine stood over her grandfather’s

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shoulder and skimmed the article, titled A Match Made in Heaven: “the couple had each engaged in an online relationship for years...when they finally decided to meet up...discovered it had been each other all along...led to fighting and arguing and appliances flying out of their apartment window...the couple are owners of a pet store in District H and have one son.”

One son... Clementine wondered how he was. Sunny was assigned her desk mate in seventh grade, and they studied for every exam together for the next six years. They liked to work in Clementine’s grandparents’ apartment, where there was usually peace and quiet (the cuckoo clock was a recent addition). Sunny’s parents often brought home the merchandise, which needed to be cared for constantly. The first time they studied for the high school entrance exam together, one of the kittens threw up on Clementine’s new sneakers. After that, they only

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studied at Sunny's when Clementine's grandparents had guests.

He was the first boy to tell her she was beautiful. They were studying for math, and Clementine had just finished explaining a calculus problem when he said it, out of nowhere. She had a pug nose then, and a rounded chin that looked fleshy no matter how many diets she went on. She told him to stop being silly. He shrugged and served her a bowl of mung bean soup, which helped with concentration, he said. Clementine could still remember all the cats meowing in the background, fighting over the loose beans on the floor.

He loved literature and read all the time, often sitting on top of bags of kitty litter at the store. He helped her understand poetry, how to interpret the lyricism, the rhyme, the reason. He was as good in English, helping her through

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Shakespeare as fluidly as he did Li Po or Du Fu.

Clementine thought of the last time she had seen Shakespeare. She had gone to a play with Rochester to entertain some foreign clients of the bank. His pseudonym was from the one book she managed to finish in English, *Jane Eyre*. She thought herself clever when she came up with it. The similarities were there after all: the age difference, the wife, the English connection. He worked with the firm on behalf of Barclays, and he took a liking to Clementine, who took a liking to his gifts (the nose job was particularly generous) and the promise of a promotion. Like all things at the firm, relationships with clients were “forbidden” on paper but encouraged in practice, “for business” as her boss had said approvingly.

Of course, Rochester had become distant in the last few months. She had asked him about getting

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her an apartment, and he balked. *It's too risky*, he said. *All mistresses get apartments*, she pouted. *You're not a mistress*, he responded. *Well then what am I?* He didn't answer but she knew. There were others, she knew that, though he never mentioned them—or his wife. One in Hong Kong, another in Shenzhen, maybe even one in London somewhere. And then there was that pesky intern, whom Clementine slapped with no regrets. He had not called or texted since the incident, and Clementine had little doubt that he wouldn't. *He probably got that intern an apartment. They say women after 30 sour like tofu curd. Maybe they're right.*

The day that Clementine received her entrance exam results, she ran over to Sunny's apartment. *I passed Language and Literature! I even got high marks on that essay about Xu Zhimo!* He lifted her up in a bear hug and kissed her, square on the mouth. She yelped in protest, and he jumped

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back, a hurt look on his face. Their entire lives flashed before her eyes. *This was not the plan.* She was going to study Finance, she was going to get a job trading stocks, and she was going to leave this godforsaken building in this godforsaken neighborhood and live a beautiful, perfect life with her banker husband. The poetry-loving son of two pet-store owners fit nowhere in the calculus.

She was 23 when she saw Sunny for the last time. She had just gotten a job at a venture capital firm after graduation. One night, she stumbled out of a bar with some of her officemates near the Worker's Stadium when Sunny recognized her and called her name. She stopped and hugged him, asked him how he was. He was going to France, he said, for a PhD in Lyons. He had gotten a degree in classical literature and French, probably the last university student to ever study either. *You were always so good at words,*

[Type text]

Clementine slurred. *Go read your beautiful words, professor.* She kissed him then, an angry kiss full of alcohol and a heartache she didn't understand. He stepped away from her and stroked her shoulder. *Be well.*

“They’re definitely not going to live here anymore.” Grandpa dabbed his finger with spit and turned the page. “That real estate business is really heating up these days.”

C

“You have zero new messages.” Clementine sighed disappointedly upon hearing the monotonous announcement. It had been three weeks since she began her “mandatory vacation,” and her boss had still not contacted her about returning to the firm.

The last few days were Red Alert, which meant

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Clementine was stuck inside with the cuckoo bird and the television. Today, the smog level went down to normal, and an ecstatic Clementine left the apartment.

A chicken sprinted past her on its way out of the building, but not before it cocked its head at her shins and pooped on one of her Jimmy Choo heels. Clementine sighed. She bought those shoes in Shanghai with Rochester. This building and its inhabitants seemed to have particular contempt for her footwear.

"Come back here you scoundrel!" The old man downstairs limped out of the first floor apartment, waving his cane emphatically at the bird.

The chicken had calmed down a bit and stood clucking at the patches of weeds sprouting from the concrete border of the bike shed. Clementine walked over, scooped it up, and set it down by

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the old man.

“We used to have a screen in front of the door, to stop them from flying out, but it hurts my back now to bend down and open the damn thing every day.” He looked down at the chicken, who squawked and pooped again. “Don't think I won't eat you if you keep this up.”

Even though everyone else was called Grandma this or Grandpa that, he was just "downstairs neighbor," and sometimes "crazy downstairs neighbor." He kept a backyard full of chickens, ducks, and even rabbits. When Clementine was little, she sometimes threw bits of shredded lettuce from the second floor balcony into the old man's yard. She liked to watch all the animals run after the green trail she created.

The old man started to push the chicken inside with his cane. When he got to the building

[Type text]

entrance, he turned back to Clementine. “Thank you, Ling Ling.”

Clementine had heard her mother's nickname only once before, when she was in elementary school. Her mother had come to the apartment to pack up some things. She met someone, she said, and she wanted Clementine to move in with her and her new husband. In her typical flurry of motions, Clementine's mother cleared out her old bedroom, which she and Clementine shared, sleeping on the same bed unless she had a night shift at the hospital. She left a stack of old photographs that didn't make the cut outside the bedroom door. The top one was of a girl, maybe 12 or 13, holding a bunny while a younger boy stroked the animal. The back of the photograph bore the handwritten inscription “Ling Ling and Bo Bo, 1973.”

Who's Ling Ling, Clementine asked. It's me, my

[Type text]

nickname when I was a girl. Her mother paused from her shirt-folding to look at the photo. *And who's Bo Bo?* She didn't answer and instead told Clementine to take her toys and books if she wanted them in her new home.

Clementine stayed with her mother and her new husband, who told Clementine to call him Uncle, for exactly 5 months and 7 days. She didn't dislike the new place. She had her own room, a big shelf for her new books and a bed with pink sheets. Uncle even bought her a Barbie doll. Clementine knew it was a grand gesture, since only the kids in her class with wealthy parents who drove cars and took trips out of town had the real Barbies, not just the knockoff kind Grandma got from a peddler on the street. Clementine thought Uncle might be rich like that. He also had a car, but Clementine never got to ride in it, because her mother said the car belonged to the Boss, and Uncle only drove it for

[Type text]

him.

She was sure now that she never got to go in Uncle's car, because she had heard them fight about it. The day Clementine got dropped off at her new school, her mom called a taxi. She threw up twice in the car, though Clementine didn't know it was morning sickness at the time.

As it turned out, Clementine didn't get to enjoy her new room for long. The school was the boarding kind, for when parents didn't have time or didn't want to take care of their children, and she stayed there during the week. On the weekends, Clementine took the bus back to her mother and Uncle's apartment, but they didn't have much time for her, always rushing around to buy things for the new baby. The school itself was terrible, with mean teachers who yelled and meaner classmates who pinched her and called her "piggy." After a few months, Clementine

[Type text]

called her grandparents, crying. Grandma took three buses to pick her up, and Clementine moved back into her old room in Building No. 6.

The chicken finally made its way back into the old man's apartment. He turned to Clementine before closing the door. "If you want to see the rabbits, Ling Ling, just knock on the door."

"Who's Bo Bo?" Clementine asked when she returned upstairs. Grandpa, about to take a second bite of his mid-afternoon red-bean bun, looked at her like she was crazy. "Your half-brother, you mean?"

"No, I saw a picture of my mom when she was young. She was with someone named Bo Bo. Who is he?"

Grandpa put down the bun, mildly annoyed at the interruption. "Bo Bo was the son of the

[Type text]

downstairs neighbor. Your mom used to watch him and take care of the animals when his parents weren't there.”

“The downstairs neighbor had a wife?”

“She died a long time ago. During the Cultural Revolution. His son died too, a few years before you were born, I think. He had some sort of mental illness, and the animals calmed him.”

“What happened?” “No one really knows. He had these terrible fits, and after his mother died, there was no one to take care of him.” “What about his father?”

Grandpa sighed. The prospect of finishing his snack looked dim. He poured himself some tea and cleared his throat. “It's complicated. The downstairs neighbor was a very renowned calligrapher before then, but it was not a good

[Type text]

time to be an artist. He was imprisoned for a lot of that time.”

“And my mom?” “She pitied Bo Bo, motherless and practically fatherless, so she took care of him. She was always a very empathetic person.”

Clementine clenched her jaw. *So she of all people should have known what a terrible thing it is to abandon her own child.*

“It was a brave thing to do. There are many people in this building who did nothing, or even worse. Even his own brother disavowed their relationship and ignored him when they passed each other in the neighborhood.”

“His brother lived here too?” “Lives. He lives in D on the third floor. In fact, he’s your childhood friend Fluffy’s grandfather.”

Clementine felt sick. Fluffy’s grandfather had been nothing but friendly to her throughout her

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childhood. He always made sure Clementine had plenty of candy and fruit when she came over to play with Fluffy. Fluffy's grandmother was much more stern, and she never seemed to approve of Clementine. Even when they played outside, Fluffy's grandmother always kept an eye on them, sitting by the window and smoking a cigarette. When Clementine was in their apartment, she stood over the girls with a pursed lip, telling Clementine not to sit there or touch that. Fluffy's grandfather often stepped in and told Clementine to ignore the "old woman" and play with whatever she liked.

"How could he do that? To his own brother?"

Grandpa, startled by her sudden outburst, spilled his tea and got up to grab a towel from the kitchen.

Grandma poked her head out of her bedroom, where she was reading the news on the

[Type text]

computer. While Grandpa preferred old-fashioned print media, Grandma had evolved with the times. She liked to keep everyone informed about the goings on by reading the biggest stories of the day, often out loud and during Grandpa's nap.

“It's self-preservation. That's how you survived back then. Your mother didn't think enough about that, none of these younger generations do.”

Clementine wasn't so sure about that. She had begged her mother to stay, to move back in with her grandparents. When she came back to Building No. 6 to return Clementine's stuff, Clementine asked over and over but she refused.

Can you at least visit me once a week?

I don't know. There are a lot of things with the new baby, and Uncle needs me to stay home. This trip is too inconvenient as it is.

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Clementine told her how much she missed her, how she wanted her to come back, to their room and their bed.

*There are things that I need, that I don't have here.
Grandma and Grandpa will take care of you, and I'll
send you things when I can.*

“We all learn it eventually.” Clementine must have looked upset, because Grandma immediately announced that she was going to make braised eggplant for dinner, which always comforted Clementine as a child. She ate it for a whole week after her mother dropped off her things. Her mother even brought back the Barbie doll, which Clementine threw out of the window.

D

The package arrived a week after Clementine witnessed the first chicken escape. She visited the

[Type text]

downstairs neighbor the next day to double-check the measurements of his door. Then she ordered the electronic sensor system online. As an after thought, she added a pair of cheap tennis shoes to her shopping cart so that she didn't have to ruin any more of her heels, even if she might never need to wear them again. Her landlord left a voicemail a few days earlier about a unit that opened up near her office in one of his other properties, but Clementine had not bothered to respond.

The installation didn't take long, and the downstairs neighbor watched closely as Clementine demonstrated how to open and shut the screen door with the press of a button, which she affixed at his chest level on the wall near the doorframe.

"So I just press this button?" "Yes, it's easy. Try it." The old man gingerly poked the button and

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followed the swinging screen across the threshold.

"And it's the same with the backyard?" "Yes, you can open it to let the animals out into the yard, and close it so they don't come back in until you want them to."

The old man's face crinkled into a smile, revealing a large gap between his two front teeth. He laughed heartily as he ushered the chickens back outside. "It's like herding sheep! This is great, Ling Ling."

Clementine hesitated, and then she decided to tell him. "I'm actually not Ling Ling." The old man looked confused. "Where is she?"

"Ling Ling moved away. She got married and moved away twenty years ago. I'm her daughter."

[Type text]

“Oh.” The old man peered at her. “That was you the other day?” Clementine nodded.

“Well you look like her. You sound like her too. I heard your voice last week in the courtyard and could have sworn that it was Ling Ling.” He limped into the small kitchen and returned with a bag. “She was always kind to my son, when no one else was. Nice to the animals too, even though everyone thought they were a nuisance.”

He handed the bag to Clementine. "Here, she always loved clementines. I hope you do too."

Fluffy was waiting in the hallway on the first floor of C. “Jeez you scared me!” Clementine untied the bag and took out a clementine, extending it toward Fluffy. She shook her head. Clementine peeled the fruit and put a section in her mouth, the sweetness immediately hitting her tongue.

[Type text]

“I haven't seen you in a while. How have you been?” Fluffy smiled and shrugged. “I've been here and there. You?”

Clementine told her about the old man downstairs. “Oh yeah. We were always so scared of him, never once asked him to see the rabbits.” “Well, he doesn't have rabbits anymore. Just chickens.” They sat down on the bench by the bike shed.

Clementine's phone, which had been silent for the past month, buzzed. “Hello?”

Her supervisor's voice drilled into her ear. "We need you back, by the end of this week. There are some new Japanese investors and we need you on this project." She then went into details about what Clementine was expected to do next week, which clients she was expected to woo, and how to get her key card and badge from the security office the next day.

[Type text]

“You *are* ready to come back, aren't you?”

Clementine hesitated. The question hadn't been whether she wanted to. “Yes, I think.”

“Good. You'll just be on this account for now. We'll see how things go.”

The supervisor hung up. “Everything okay?”

Fluffy looked curiously at Clementine, who was now texting her landlord. “Yeah...just a call from the service provider about upgrading my contract. I said yes. More data per month.” She shook her phone for emphasis.

Fluffy nodded but seemed unconvinced. She pointed toward A, whose entrance was blocked by a moving van. “The Liu unit has been sold. At a severe discount, it seems. Grandma Liu is going to stay with her niece for a while.”

“Do you know who's moving in?” “A young family I think. The schools in this neighborhood

[Type text]

are very good. Quite a few people have gotten into top universities, if you recall.” She winked at Clementine, who stared at the men loading a brown couch onto the back of the van.

“Sunny's parents put their unit up for sale last week. The rumor is that two parties are locked in a bidding war over it. I expect that more units will be sold over the next few months. There's even talk at the neighborhood association of painting the building with a fresh coat, according to Grandma Qi. The real estate office suggested that it would please potential buyers.”

Clementine wondered why her grandma, who was vice chair of the association, hadn't said anything.

She watched as Grandma Liu, handkerchief to mouth, came out of A to remind the movers about being gentle with her vases. “I hope these new kids will have a better time in this damned

[Type text]

building than we did. So much heartbreak in one place, it's hard to think about sometimes.”

“Do you think she'll haunt this building? Like all those ghosts that haunted us when we were little?”

Clementine didn't know what Fluffy was talking about. “I wouldn't stay here even if I were a ghost. *Especially* if I were a ghost.”

Fluffy smiled but didn't say anything.

Clementine's phone dinged. The apartment was available. She texted the landlord to ask about the earliest move-in date.

“Clementine, I'm going away for a while. It might be a long time before you see me, but I'll be around the neighborhood occasionally.”

Clementine looked up from her phone. “Oh, are

[Type text]

you going back to your own place? I'm actually leaving my grandparents' today or tomorrow. Can I get your number so that we can stay in touch?"

Fluffy shook her head. "I don't think that's a good idea, Clementine." She got up from the bench and started to walk away but paused. "I'm not sure ghosts have much choice in the location." She smiled, and Clementine couldn't tell if it was ironic or just good-natured.

Clementine's phone buzzed again. The landlord called to set up a time for her to sign the lease and get the keys. By the time she hung up, Fluffy had disappeared.

Upstairs, Clementine rapidly gathered her things. A cab was coming in thirty minutes. The landlord wanted to finalize the lease in an hour, and she could move in immediately afterward. When she

[Type text]

finished packing, Grandma greeted her with a basket of buns and apples for the trip. “Grandma, do you have contact information for Fluffy? I’ve been talking to her, and it’d be nice to see her again.” Despite Fluffy’s refusal, Clementine thought she might try and reach out anyway.

Grandma gave Clementine a blank stare. “What are you talking about?”

“You know, my childhood friend from D? Do you have a phone number or an office address or something?”

“Of course I know who that is, but didn't you hear? I thought you knew.” Grandma's face blanched.

“There was a car accident, not far from here.” Grandma peered at Clementine to check for signs of fever or other reasons for delirium. “They had

[Type text]

the funeral the day you came back. Fluffy died
two months ago.”

[Type text]