

BRUNO ZHU

YOU

No dresses shall show your back. It's hard to find a bra for them. You are afraid of showing yourself, but you want to be seen. You secretly like side slits, but house rules have prevented you from looking like anything besides an aspiring matriarch. Your matronly look is covered up; baggy wools, roomy cropped trousers, preferably all in navy. No bright colors. Your comfy sweaters brush against the stainless steel, diamond-encrusted Patek Philippe dangling on your slim wrist. You wish dad was out of the picture because he corrupts your creamy depths. He's dirty. He stinks. His body is rough, bulky. He smokes. He has sweaty feet and only recently bothered to ditch the D&G sneakers for something friendlier to his asphyxiated feet. He's a stubborn stain in your picture, a parasite you can't get rid of because he's integral to your success story. You: a dedicated spouse, a mother of two in her early forties, prosperous with high-achieving children that you don't really know, but you don't really bother because, why more problems? Why more caring when color swatches are the weekly enigma?

You tell me you can't wait for retirement so you can do workshops, learn about stock trading, consider new businesses that you can invest in from a distance because dad doesn't know the first thing about



All images by the author.



making profits. He just wants to open new shops, parade his power around town, harden the brand of "boss" that keeps oppressing you — the wife, the homemaker, his top employee. You have been feeling like this for a long time. It only resurfaces now because you are feeling the end nearing. The ending where your son finds a wife who will speak in mandarin to keep you company. The ending where your daughter is sent off to a prime specimen of a husband with traditional family values and Ivy League education. Your chronic headaches will finally expire when you pass the baton of marriage to us. You will extinguish the ghost of divorce knocking at your bedroom door all the nights that dad would leave at 3am to spend our savings in the casino. If your children see what a happy ending looks like, perhaps you will accept this life yourself and forget that once, you were an ambitious student yourself. Your understanding of hard work betrayed you. Working for some thing quickly replaced working towards some one. So your story is about a single choice that derailed you from the person you could have been. This brought you to Europe at the age of eighteen, married to a thug, and told that your prettiness was a sign

of laziness. You traded your home, a simple household, for a provincial matriarchy that despised city folk like you. You got the things you wished. Nicer clothes. You chose to build instead of being, and like the wallpaper rotations in your living room, I am another artifice in your life, one that you decided to leave behind when I was eight after a carefully planned escape that you recently shared over lunch.

I only remember fragments of the period you were absent. There's a faint sense of space, of my bed next to yours. We were living together with the employees, two cooks and two waiters, in a cluttered three-bedroom apartment by the food market. The upper side of my bed was slightly raised to cope with my sinusitis. My memory roves between two images produced not far from each other in time: the first one is of you standing tall, bent above me, wearing black tights and a mini skirt inside a loud disco, as if you were picking me up or protecting me from something behind you; the second one is of you under the yellow light of our bathroom across our bed checking the mirror, fully dressed with a light-colored sweatshirt and a pair of slim fit

jeans applying mascara. You told me to go back to sleep and I don't remember the next day, or the days after. You were on your way to Madrid to board the plane to Wenzhou. It had been a trip carefully planned a year before, when you reached a tipping point after dad came home empty-handed from the casino again. You tell me today that you were miserable then, that you were misled. Trapped. You were being given a monthly allowance to dress our home and me. Lunch and dinner were at the restaurant. Home was only a place to sleep.

You had me two months after your nineteenth birthday. The pressure was off, you told yourself. Your duty had been served, the wedding had been consummated. But soon you realized that handing your salary to dad, as he ordered you to, was always gone, spent. You felt restless and asked his mother to tell him off, but instead she told you off. How dare you complain after they gave you work, bed, and family? When I was four, we moved to a small city tucked in the valleys of Serra da Estrela. My uncle had bought a restaurant there and needed someone to manage it. You both saw this opportunity

to take ownership of your young lives, a promise to start over away from his urban vices, and two years later you had borrowed enough money to buy it from my uncle. You thought of possibilities, renewed power, a happy family. But five years passed, and you were living in a crammed apartment with our cooks and waiters, having sex while I slept next to you. Two intertwined bodies under the bright yellow light half blocked by your taller mattress next to mine. Intimacy had been reduced to silent groans, only to be released and vibrate in the afternoons spent with you at Mango. Intimacy was sitting in the changing room as I watched you glow, handling frilly tops, satin fabrics, push-up denim jeans, asking me what I thought and slowly discovering the "matchy-matchy" economy together. Intimacy was having to be with you in the public restroom, because I was too little to be left alone and watched you excreting liquid poo with brown spots after you ate a kiwi. Intimacy was to be left alone in our bedroom, killing time by imitating several voices, including yours, in an argument between different people. An employee who was looking after me opened the door scared and stunned. She

wondered if you were back. What was "coming back?" Where were you, were you coming back? You didn't know either.

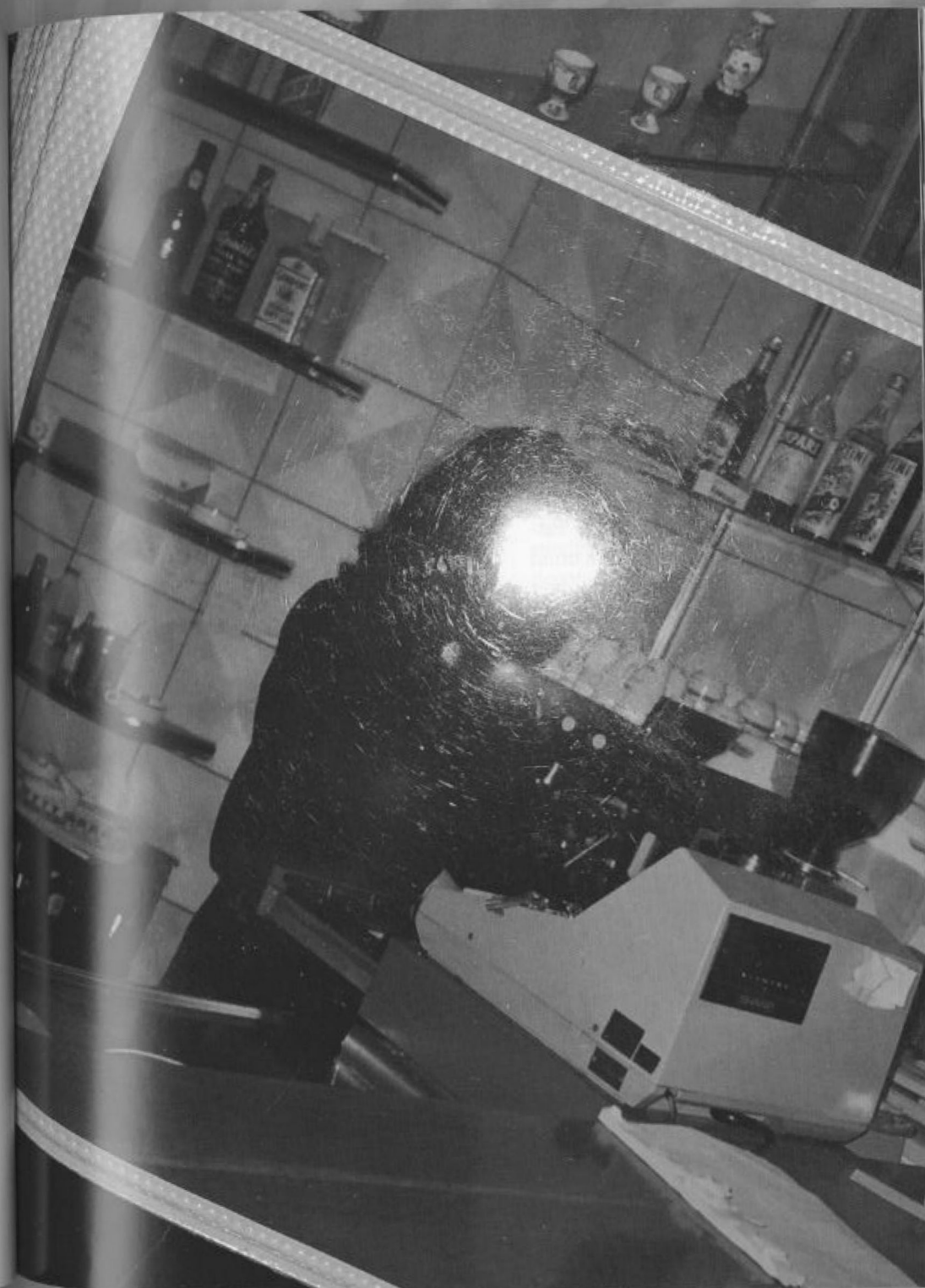
The months prior to your departure you had asked your closest friend, who was married to a gambling addict, for advice, and she told you to do it, to free yourself. But you didn't want to set fire to your marriage, so you asked someone else, a friend of your mom, who had become a surrogate mother figure to you. Perhaps you hoped she would whisper some sense into you. Preserve and protect. But she told you to leave by yourself, to leave me with him, because a single-parent life as a woman would be hard on both of us. You wouldn't earn enough to take care of me, and I'd grow resentful of you. Dad had the support of his entire family abroad. He would be able to give me nicer things and a nicer life. You leaving us would be irrelevant to dad's financial prospects. Mouths will always be fed in a Chinese household, and a divorced man is never too old to remarry. After the wiser female confidante revealed that only women age, and fail, you decided a better future for me would be one without you. The plan covered all the possibilities: you couldn't be seen in major transportation hubs, you couldn't contact local Chinese travel agencies, you couldn't ask him for money.

Any of these would raise suspicion, get the community talking, and you would be caught and beaten up. You were helpless, but you noticed your fashion wasn't. Your mom had been sending you monthly packages the size of a sleeping pillow. Plushy, and manically, taped together. They would bring you natural medicine, dried foods, handwritten letters on fragile rice paper, and clothes. You would carefully read them while biting into dried pulled pork, chewing with gusto. Opening these packages were moments of bliss as you encountered home in these sweets. You brightened up browsing your mom's words in the quietness of afternoon breaks after lunch service. Your lips moved innocently, mouthing her words, happy. You'd smile like in a photograph of you holding me when I was two. This smile was matched with your eyes wide open, a vulnerable optimism made even more hopeless next to the other photographs of you in those early years. They showed a young woman grieving, her eyes empty, letting a faint smile, watching the camera lens capturing her — you — a captive in pre-adult clothing, a bit of Mango jeans, a bit of Morgan de toi seventies-inspired knitted tops. Full frontal, standing in front of parks, of houses that weren't ours; in front of a shopping mall called "Ice Palace." These were the Eiffel towers in your life, shown

to your family. Aromas of western exceptionalism sampled from your idealized leisure class.

You had done well according to the world you left behind. You became a conversation subject: her daughter is in Portugal, she is twenty-six, she is married, she has a seven-year-old, owns a restaurant, so young, so blessed, so industrious. You were glamorous. You became a reference for other families in your old neighborhood. They marveled at the Lacoste polos you sent over to dress your dad, then your brother, then your uncles, and then your cousins. They also packed their bags and left their homes after tasting the mayonnaise your mother received. Grandma would be sending you these updates in her pillow packages with natural medicine and smelly herbal recipes to keep you thin, elegant. To guarantee your plum cheekbones were staying virginal, supported by your elongated neck. The clothes you received would be set aside. They were smaller versions of what your mom wore: psychedelic florals on chiffon dresses, skimpy polyester tops with animal prints, an occasional decent pair of trousers. Winter wear didn't escape a

garish concatenation either. Her world was, and still is, structured around shine. Picture a spotlight following her waltzing from karaoke stints to the weekly gatherings of her ladies club where she breaks out in dance. Stardom and glitz are the only way out, or into herself. She is Pucci, she is Cavalli, she is Galiano. She is a Peter Dundas by way of Chinese opera flair, and you wanted none of that. You would set aside most of these clothes, but a plain silky white blouse caught the attention of some customers when you wore it for work. Your uniform was a black poly-wool blend waistcoat, black trousers, and a white blouse. Customers asked if your blouse was a traditional garment from your homeland and you said it was quintessential Chinese. In the months that followed, the pillow packages with herbal niceties turned into a mini cargo for your enterprise. You were selling quintessential Chinese blouses under the table to customers who thought the number two in our menu—shark fin soup—was made from actual shark meat when it was, in fact, chopped crab-sticks. Dad knew about this, but to him it was a joke, a scrappy way to earn extra money since he didn't give you enough. But to you, it was the



only option. Over those months, you made up illnesses that needed care in the bigger city. You went alone to visit your friend to gain confidence and look for ways out, but it didn't take you long to realize that flying from Portugal was impossible. The travel agency might snitch, the bus ticket office might snitch, the taxi driver might snitch, so leaving from another place had to be considered. Madrid became that exit.

At this point, you pause your story and stare at the half-empty plate of grilled chicken salad you were eating. You move your lips into a timid smirk. We are sitting at the counter of the cafe you usually go to for lunch next to our shop. It's a blue-collar establishment, populated by old gentlemen sipping homemade wine, killing their idle hours by staring at the TV or the empty glass. Time seems slower in places like this, where we gather around empty dishes searching for answers to fundamental questions that we can't verbalize. You hesitate and look at me with your mouth ajar. I sense embarrassment, but I'm wrong. You are playing coy; your eyes are mischievous. You tell me a regular customer came to know your story and offered to take you to Madrid overnight. You insist you won't tell me who this person was. I wondered if you had a lover, so I ask if he or she is still in touch with you, and you said

yes. I am stunned, not by you, but by my vixen mind imagining you cuddling up with anything else but your wall paint samples. How did you do it? What did this cost you? Did you promise free dinners? Infinite supply of Chinese clothing? My mind spiraled into one selling one's body, the perversion, the flesh, the debased rawness that for a long while I've considered my truth, or any truth to be frank, but I forget that this is not my journey.

A few months later you had sold enough blouses under the table to cover your trip and slipped away at dawn. The flight from Madrid to Wenzhou had a layover in Shanghai, but your connecting flight was cancelled. A tropical rainstorm had seized the skies and you called your mom, afraid, and running out of money. You explained to her your plan, your sadness, your dishonor, and then your loneliness; torn from the families you've known, calling off the contract that emancipated you. Spending the night in the gargantuan halls brought you to a group of Chinese women that were stuck like you: stuck in the storm and stuck in life. You listened to their stories and you told yours. One woman was coming back from Italy after quitting her job in a construction site, where she slept in a room with ten Chinese male workers. She was not able to sleep for months afraid they would

jump on her at night. Eventually, she left. Another woman was promised a job in Europe and she came, ready to embrace the old world. The job turned out to be marrying an older man she had never met. She ran away. Your gaze lingers on the empty plate and you shook your head. Many other women told stories of deceit and precarity that made yours sound like whining. You seemed to have more agency than them. You did choose to leave at eighteen. You did choose to marry an asshole. You did choose to stay quiet when you were told you were lucky to be married and give birth so young.

For two months while you were in China, dad had been calling and leaving messages telling you how sick I was. You didn't believe him. You knew he barely remembered my age. Chinese men don't do childcare. The man who introduced dad to you heard your new whereabouts and tried to convince you to come back, but you didn't flinch. Successively, each member of your family came to reason with you. The uncles and aunties acted on their duty to straighten what had strayed. I gradually became the currency of their negotiation: a token that would make him commit to you, and you to the broken marriage.

Nobody wanted to listen to your demands. To them you were the inexperienced one, the naive girl who believed in respect. Your independence was pejorative, a threat to your family's reputation. What would become of a loose woman, a pretty one like you, divorced? You'd be impure. You'd be a slut. His mother came to lecture you about family values. You're bad, bad, bad. Bad. Bad mother. Bad housewife. Bad woman. She told you how unforgivable it was to leave me behind, your only child, but your survival instincts kicked in. You negotiated your return. You would only come back if you had full control over finances and she agreed. She is still mourning this loss of property you put her through. You returned quiet and he was quiet too. Not long after, I told you that I saw dad kissing the waitress' sister during a blackout while you were away, and you thanked me today. You told him you knew about it, and that you would like to be in charge of things. No arguments added, no fighting. From then onwards, you guarded our money and you gave an allowance to him.