

Gallop

A pool of congealed blood, now hard and cracking, had dried on my kitchen floor for two days. As the sponge in my hands made contact, the foam turned pink and the bloody liquid spread.

Why didn't I wear gloves?

Water watched TV in the living room. She'd woken from her nap because of a nightmare. Neither of us had slept much since the police dragged her father away with blood streaming out of his mouth.

I heard the sound of someone pounding at the door and shouting, "What the fuck is going on?"

My first reaction was fear, thinking the police had returned, but then I recognized the voice.

Shit, why was my husband home early?

I washed my hands quickly. When I opened the door, he stood there, suitcase by his side, looking at me suspiciously.

"What the fuck happened to the door?" he asked. "Why is it different?"

James only spoke English despite his mother being from Hong Kong.

Not wanting to tell him the police broke it down, I remained silent as he looked around our home.

"Who is this child in the living room?" he asked, carefully.

In front of us sat a four-year-old girl by a giant doll house and a wide assortment of toys I had bought in the hope they would distract her from having been left with me.

"It's Water," I said, not knowing if James would remember who she was.

"Eason's daughter?" James asked. I saw a worried recognition cross his face.

"Yes," I replied, averting his gaze.

James switched to a sharp seriousness. "Where is Eason?"

"In jail," I sighed. James would find out the truth whether I lied to him or not.

“When is he coming out?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know when he’s coming out of jail,” James repeated. If James’ pupils could glow red with anger, I knew they would.

“No one knows how long anyone is going to spend in jail these days.”

Before he could reply, a piercing scream came from the living room.

“Baba, Baba, Baba!”

We both turned and in front of us stood Water, reaching towards the television with a nearly life-size image of her father.

“As the leader of a separatist movement that threatens the peace and prosperity of our great motherland,” Eason’s voice droned from all sides on the surround sound speakers. “I see my mistake now as being misguided and influenced by the hands of foreign governments.”

I gasped. This wasn’t the Eason I knew: flaking skin covered his downturned mouth. His eyes unfocused, as if he could only see inside his head and no further. His jowl sunken and sagged. They must have tortured him to get this false confession. It was obvious that’s what it was.

Water continued to scream. Tears and snot streamed down her face, her mouth twisted, showing the gap from her missing baby teeth. “Baba! Baba! Baba! Fan lei! Fan lei! Pou pou! Sui yiu baba! Fan lei! Pou pou!” Stomping on the ground, she shouted for her father, wanting him to carry her. When she realized Eason couldn’t be reached, her little fingers touched a hard screen instead of her dad. Water kicked over her doll house, and all the furniture and dolls came crashing down, sliding underneath the real life furniture.

“Shit,” James said, as I ran towards her.

Water launched herself on the floor in her frilly yellow pajamas, writhing and hollering, pulling at our grey carpet and biting into the yarn. I tried to pick her up. She turned around and kicked me in my face.

“Fuck,” I swore, stepping backwards.

James, finding the remote, paused the image. Water, seeing her father frozen, stopped moving. I ran to her again and held her as she cried.

James threw me another angry look. I knew he thought me responsible. If I didn’t bring this little girl into our home, none of this would be happening.

I wanted to shout back at him, “THIS IS NOT ME! Blame the Chinese government! If only they left Hong Kong alone!”

“She can’t stay here,” he said, eyes boring down at me.

“She has no one else!” I shouted over Water’s crying, then lowered my voice because I didn’t know how much she understood. “You know what happened, James. You know there is only Eason and her left.”

“The police broke down our door!” he hissed.

“I got it fixed.”

“What’s stopping them from coming in again?”

“To come after a four-year-old?”

“To come after you!” he snapped.

Not wanting to believe that was possible, but also knowing it was, a few quiet tears ran down my cheeks. I wiped them off on Water’s shoulders. Without carrying on, James turned his back from me and took a deep breath.

“We don’t know what will happen if the government finds her in an orphanage. You know they don’t spare anyone.” I knew he could still hear. “Probably not even children.”

Without replying or looking at me, James walked away.

After a while, Water began to play with her toys again. She appeared content, which seemed strange to me, but maybe little children did that. They cried, then they played. I had seen her do that multiple times in the last two days.

I sat near her, watching but not participating. I heard James turn on the shower.

My mind raced, what would I do? *What would happen to her?* James could simply refuse to keep her, and then I would have to hand her over to strangers. Tears kept streaming down until it occurred to me that I would leave James. I loved my husband but I couldn’t leave a child behind. I owed it to Eason. I owed it to the Resistance. Unless the police took me, I wouldn’t give her up.

The shower stopped and James remained in our room. I figured he fell asleep. The sun set and the room darkened. It didn’t seem to bother Water, so I did nothing. I didn’t want to walk away from her. I wanted to protect her, and walking away meant maybe I couldn’t.

Then a click. The light in the living room went on. With everything illuminated, I

wondered how it would feel to move out of our modernist home which I decorated so carefully. I could tell James hadn't slept at all because he looked exhausted. Still avoiding looking at me, he walked towards Water. My first reaction was to jump between her and James but reminded myself that this was my husband, not the police, and he was not a man who would hurt a child.

He stood for a moment over her and seemed to be inspecting the toys. He bent over and picked up a horse with a silver mane. I swallowed. He was cleaning up already, not liking the mess in our previously childless home. He was preparing to be rid of her, right there and then. I had never regretted marrying James. I knew he could be cold and logical, but I hadn't realized he was heartless.

Then he sat down in front of Water, who stared at him.

"Hello," he said.

She didn't respond but watched him, unsure.

James squared his shoulders and looked lost. He glanced at me, but before I could catch his eye or say anything, he began to move the horse up and down, making it sprint in place. He concentrated on the toy as if trying to figure out how to play.

"It's a horse," James said softly, brows knotted, then carried on moving it up and down.

Water stared at him, afraid and curious. James simply continued repeating, "This is a horse."

Then he smiled at her, and reacting to that, Water said, "Horse," thoughtfully.

She picked up a black horse with a brown mane with her little fingers. She followed his example and moved her toy up and down as well.

Then I watched my husband and Water gallop their horses side by side.