

HUNGRY GHOSTS

Homing signal.

BY CASSANDRA KHAW

They keep the oldest ghosts in little diskettes, squares of ageing steel and red plastic. Except not really, of course. Human consciousness is notoriously hard to optimize. You could trim the fat in theory, Xiao Lin thinks, as she dabs carmine on the slant of her cheekbones, contouring them to knives. Delete swathes of summertime screw-ups, summarize romances, condense college to empirical scores. But then you'd lose the person in the process. You'd lose the soul.

Better to empty the diskettes and cram their corpses with solid-state drives, keep the joke and the personality. Otherwise, what's the point? Might as well skip the *getai* and head back up to the stars.

"But it's creepy, don't you think?" Her co-host this year is indistinguishable from the last: petulant, slim, hauntingly young, with pencil-stroke arms and dense, dark hair. The girl pins gold hoops to her ears and makes a moue at her reflection, earrings glittering as she tilts her chin one way and another, the light catching on silver-moted lashes. "Performing for dead people like that. We have the technology. Why don't we just schedule something for them in VR?"

Xiao Lin sighs. It's always the same. Naturalize in space and you anchor in the stars, forget what it means to be Chinese, immigrant-born and aching, your spine bent with ghosts, half-sick with longing for a place your children can call home.

"Because they can tell," she chides, not quite lying. Realistic conjecture, Xiao Lin reassures herself, smearing malachite over her eyelids. Still, who knows if the AIs can distinguish between fact and fabrication, can differentiate between polynomial renders and the jewelled sea, the saltwater breeze?

"Can they, though?"

Another layer of mascara, another coating of liner. Xiao Lin spirals her lipstick back into its casing. A resolute click.

Yes, she thinks. *Absolutely.*

But what she says is: "Do you want their families to ask for their money back?"

The invocation of money buries any counter-argument.

The two return to their preparations,

silent. Outside, the orchestra tunes its instruments, performs chords in bright arpeggios. A thrum of laughter escapes as someone reels off a joke that Xiao Lin can almost hear. And for a heartbeat, she is back



on Europa in a house teeming with relatives, the air rich with spices, a Chinese New Year comedy playing too loudly on a salvaged TV.

"I don't think they'd ask for their money back." The girl — Bao Bao or Mei Mei or something equally infantile — grumbles an interruption, timbre slightly defiant, as she secures her hair in double loops. "As long as their relatives are happy."

Xiao Lin rises, red silk frothing along the slope of her hips. She picks a *buyao* — jade peonies dangling from a filigreed twig — from the dressing table and inserts it into the girl's hair. In the dim light behind the stage, they could be sisters, features simplified into stereotype, unified by skin. "Would you be happy, though?"

"What?"

"Lying to them like that?"

"To whom? The dead people?"

"Yes."

An exasperated noise. "I mean, they're dead —"

"And at some point, they weren't. They were alive and afraid of the idea that they'd be forgotten, so afraid that they made copies of themselves. Just to live on. Just to say that a part of them will always be here." Xiao Lin

works pins into her co-host's *qipao*, moulds the dress to the girl's silhouette, smaller and slighter than that of the original owner.

"I still don't understand. What's your point? Even if we just installed them into a simulation, they wouldn't know."

"But we'd know."

Clack. The sound of teeth coming together, like a coffin pulled shut.

No more argument. Only a look reflected in the mirror, bottomless, older than the girl's kohl-framed eyes, her lineless throat. Xiao Lin pats her on the shoulder before she drifts away, weaving between production assistants and extras, gofers and camera women, heels clicking a eulogy.

At the curtains, she lounges against a pillar and tweaks apart the fabric. The audience is steeped in apparitions, holograms of varying sophistication, projected onto glass and ambient moisture. Interspaced in between are crimson-clad humans, marrow and bone, middlemen facilitating long-distance conversations.

Xiao Lin winds restless fingers around the loop of gold at her throat. Twenty thousand years and a fortune of galaxies at their fingertips and still,

all they want to do is go home. So much money poured into the restoration of Earth, salving its scars, decontaminating the waters, restoring the skyline. So much effort for something they'd never see, a halcyon dream they clutched while the skies boiled with ash.

And for what? A memory carried through generations, like a song passed down from mother to daughter. A chance to let their ghosts sit and laugh and clap at performances they'd never experience, only witness by proxy. Was it worth it?

A hand finds the crook of Xiao Lin's elbow. She turns to see her co-host, grinning, iridescent with cameras. You can go anywhere, Xiao Lin muses, if you know there's somewhere to go home to. And maybe, that was the point all along.

"Ready?"

"Ready." Xiao Lin smiles and lifts the curtain, steps out to the roar of the surf and the applause of the ancestral dead. ■

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