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## GHOST WOMAN

THE AFTERNOON TV NEWS shows a lane between the walls of a church and an old brick house. With snow piled against a chain link fence at the end it looks like just another cold place in a cold city. But Cheung sits forward on the couch to see better, trying to follow the reporter's fast flow of words. He knows this place: it's just around the corner from the apartment where he and his daughter live. The night before, long after midnight, he passed by and in it he saw a woman standing alone.

He wants to ask Lillian to translate but she's reading a fashion magazine in the armchair, walkman headphones on, even though she switched the channel from the Cantonese one. She wears a tight sleeveless t-shirt, black bra strap against her naked shoulder. "Just a style," she said when he complained it was not what her mother would have allowed. The news anchor is back on the screen, accompanied by a photo of a young blond woman. Cheung understands enough to learn she has something to do with the lane. And then he realizes that the woman was found dead.

The news moves on to a story about the world's computers, a problem about the approaching millennium that Lillian keeps mentioning but he isn't listening. His thoughts spin around the image of the woman. He gets up, wills himself to forget. Tomorrow is the first day of Chinese New Year and dark thoughts could poison his luck. He needs all the luck he can get for the coming year, their third in Canada, with the rumour now of a layoff at work.

From the kitchen he calls her. Without turning, she lifts the headphones off one ear.

"I'll make noodles for lunch," he says.

"But I'm leaving in a minute, Daddy. I'm meeting friends at the Eaton Centre."

He is pleased she's following the tradition to buy a new outfit. He already bought a shirt. New clothes for a new year. A fresh start.

“Eat first,” he says.

“I’ll grab something there. It’s okay.”

“Why will you waste money?”

“Stop bugging me.”

“Please. A small bowl before you leave.”

Lillian, jiggling her foot, keeps reading. The prospect of another meal alone bothers him. So does this recent rudeness and the tight clothing, black-rimmed eyes, painted fingernails. But she does well at school, even with her recent habit of going out evenings with friends. On those nights he watches TV just to have noise in the apartment, telling himself she is safe and behaving well, while he sits on the couch, tired from another day of hammering or painting or lifting, and watches the screen but drifts to sleep. And into dreams that take him back to Hong Kong and to May, and when the howling winter wind startles him awake and Lillian is still not home, he feels as empty as the frozen street outside the window.

Cheung half-fills the wok with water and sets it on the burner. From the cupboard he takes ramen noodles and eggs from the fridge. He doesn’t cook well, just basic meals. Lillian shows no interest at all, except to heat things in the microwave. He straightens the dishtowel, waiting for the water to boil, hoping she will change her mind and eat with him. Does she still remember the elaborate feast her mother prepared each New Year’s Eve? Tofu with minced pork, fish, three different vegetable dishes, beef, a whole steamed chicken.

His cousin, their only relative in Toronto, never invites them to their house for the big dinner. Tonight Cheung and Lillian will eat alone at Gold Fortune down the street.

Not long before May died she finally said aloud what Cheung had been thinking but could not bring himself to say aloud: she should have the photograph taken. She didn’t need to explain what photograph she meant.

Her fate was to die at thirty-nine. That was how things sometimes went. Everyone died eventually; the unlucky died young. These simple facts helped him during those first weeks of tasks and obligations. They helped again on his last day in Hong Kong as he crouched on the cemetery pavement. Her grave was one of thousands of upright granite tombstones set side by side in terraced rows up the mountain, a regiment of the dead bordered by concrete walkways that the sun turned a blinding white. On each stone was a photograph. He avoided looking at May’s as he burned the ceremonial

money and incense. He arranged the cake and barbecued pork on a plastic plate, and beside it placed a thermos and small cup that he filled with tea. He stood up and held the incense, bowing three times like his mother had taught him to do for his father years earlier. And when she died the year before, he had done it for her too. Honour the gods. Provide for your loved one in the afterlife. Your ancestors are your foundation. Be respectful and careful when dealing with the dead. He wasn't convinced there was another world to step into after this one, but these small rituals eased his mind.

After burning the offerings, he swept the ashes, and packed the food away. In the bay below, the water looked green and still. He lit a cigarette and let his thoughts float. He was not the type to make detailed plans or put things on paper, but lately that's all he'd been doing. He'd completed May's government and insurance documents, then revised his and Lillian's Canadian immigration applications. He'd spent hours waiting to talk to various officials through slots in glass barriers. It was 1995, two years before the communist takeover of Hong Kong, and everyone was nervous, wanting to leave. Many were going to Canada. At the market and in the restaurants he overheard discussions about the best Chinatowns, about which cities had tolerable winters, everyone pretending to have unique insight. It was agreed that wherever you ended up would be dull compared to Hong Kong. Older people bought bags of rice and dried mushrooms to bring along, not trusting the stores in those distant cities. Finally Cheung's application was approved. For Lillian's sake he was relieved but it came too late for May, whose remains he was reluctant to leave. Only now did he realize he would be the first in his family to leave the region of his ancestors. But he found comfort in the congratulations from his friends and neighbours. When he shared his good news the pity left their eyes.

He turned again towards May's grave, finally ready to look at her photograph. With hair pulled back, mouth closed, eyes cold, she confronted the camera that forced her to acknowledge what was going to happen. But now she looked at Cheung too and something about her eyes appeared to soften. From wherever she was, she looked out at him, alive and about to leave her. He saw her eyes soften. She was both pleased and sad. He said his goodbye to this black-and-white image of May, taken instead of the passport photo they'd hoped for.

At first Cheung and Lillian stayed with his cousin in Markham. But living there required a car, something he couldn't afford. When he learned

there was a Chinatown in the east end of Toronto, near to streetcars and subway, he rented a second-floor flat above a bakery. On this strip of Gerard Street, and at the nearby mall, he could buy what he needed and speak Cantonese. The food wasn't as good as in Hong Kong and the pace of life was slow but they were safe now from the Chinese government.

He called his cousin's friend and got a job with a small construction company. He would no longer be a taxi driver, at least not until his English improved and he'd saved enough money. At forty-five, he would start again, learn what he could about drywall and paint, work as many hours as he could get.

As the months passed, Lillian made friends and talked less often about her mother, even as she grew to resemble her more. The shopkeepers gave her sweet bean buns and watched over her. Especially Cecelia Wu in the stationery shop, who laughed gamely at Cheung's awkward attempts to get to know her. He felt disloyal to May while checking Cecelia's figure as she tidied the shelves and asked him about life back home. One evening he saw a fashionable man waiting for her to lock up and felt foolish for believing she would ever take him seriously.

By late August Toronto was as hot as Hong Kong but the many trees and gardens sweetened the air. He asked the bakery owner where to enroll Lillian in school. When they found the building, he handed the secretary a piece of paper with their address and phone number. Lillian did all the talking. He watched her small face, a near likeness of May's, as she concentrated on the secretary's questions. She would improve her English inside that building. Then she could teach him, just like May had made her promise. At least he had Lillian, as clever as her mother, a good daughter who understood and even liked this strange new place.

He first saw May in his Tai Koo neighbourhood. She was a waitress in a small noodle restaurant where she handled the heat and pressure of the busy lunch hours with grace, whisking between tables, heavy platters balanced on slim arms. She didn't respond to the teasing comments about her long swinging braid or the compliments offered by the other men who were just as delighted as Cheung to find her in that hovel. But if asked about the food she would eagerly recommend the freshest dishes. Her serious expression made her seem mature and wise. She studied business part-time at the university, she revealed to him one lunch when she returned his smile and paused at his table. She supported herself and the aunt she lived with. Here

was a woman who valued hard work. Cheung worked hard himself, driving his taxi every day. He lived with his parents but was saving for an apartment, barely concerned about the Chinese takeover, then still over a dozen years away. Though people were already applying to emigrate, few wanted to leave Hong Kong with its mountain parks and streets alive at all hours with people, where you didn't feel alone. He and May strolled one of the crowded side-walks on that first afternoon together, when she agreed to join him for tea.

It was the largest home Cheung had ever been in. At the end of a curved road lined with wide driveways but no visible cars or people sat a tall brick house with white columns and double front doors. Inside, Jimmy Cho, the foreman, led the crew up the curved staircase to a bedroom that was bigger than Cheung and Lillian's apartment. They'd be enlarging the bathroom, Jimmy said, before taking a call on his cell. Cheung and Mak looked around while they waited for instructions. The matching furniture, patterned fabrics, and dark walls made the room feel heavy and inevitable, as if their tools could not possibly alter it. The tall windows had silvery curtains that skimmed the polished wood floor. He wondered how this Canadian family had made their money. People from Hong Kong prospered in Canada too but were either educated or rich already, or still young, like the guys he worked with, who talked about starting their own business one day and buying a house. Cheung was barely covering his expenses. He was determined not to touch the modest savings he'd brought, money to help with Lillian's education and some left for his old age.

Jimmy finished his call and told them to start shifting furniture away from the wall they would be removing.

"Careful, careful," he kept saying. They shuffled lamps and a small table to the other side of the room. Mak pointed to a large wood dresser. He and Cheung positioned themselves at either end but it wouldn't budge. They shifted to the front and started removing drawers. The first one Cheung slid out held colourful bras and panties, a garden of purples, pinks, and reds.

Mak whistled. "She's hot, this rich *Gweipo*." He dipped his finger in and lifted a scarlet bra. With his other hand he clutched his crotch in mock ecstasy.

Cheung smiled, more at the Cantonese slang. Ghost woman. That and *Gweilo*, ghost man, what everyone called the white foreigners in Hong Kong, whom they'd see occasionally in the clamour of a neighbourhood market looking lost.

“Hey!” Jimmy shouted. “Leave the owner’s stuff alone. You want to get me in trouble?”

“Wish my wife wore things like that,” Mak said and slid a different drawer out, this one with folded sweaters. He carried it over to where they were stacking everything.

Cheung moved the drawer of lingerie without touching any of it. May hadn’t worn this sort of thing either but he hadn’t cared. Her naked skin was enough for him. Especially during those first months of warm evenings in his bed. When they found out she was pregnant the decision to marry had been easy. They would build a stable life together.

Cheung carried the last drawer over to the others and noticed a photo on the bedside table. A family portrait: the woman who lived here smiling confidently, surrounded by her husband and children. Cheung imagined her sleeping peacefully at night in this perfect room and a wave of bitterness overcame him. When no one was looking he put the picture face down.

The night Cheung saw the woman in the lane was the coldest that winter. Walking south on Broadview from the subway, the icy wind lashed his face. His coat was thick and heavy but still not enough to keep him warm. He regretted not waiting inside the station for the streetcar. It was already past midnight and his mind felt hazy from too much beer as he headed home from a full day’s work followed by the company’s New Year dinner. The food had been good but there’d been a few hints of a possible layoff. Being the oldest and less skilled of the crew, he’d be the first to go.

Through the long meal, his glass had been continually refilled. Jimmy and Mak, downing cognac as well, shouted and poked fun at each other. Cheung enjoyed the chance to relax and the reminder of New Years in Hong Kong where for ten days everyone stopped working to celebrate and the city was festive with displays of flowers and cherry blossom branches, with red and gold decorations and strings of lights. By day people visited friends and family, then filled the streets at night to shop and stroll and watch the fireworks.

He reached the stretch of Broadview that curved along the top of the valley, its view of the downtown skyline offering a bit of cheer in the forbidding night. The wide swath of sky made him think about how huge the world is. How strange for him to walk here alone in darkness while at this very moment Hong Kong was sunny and deep into the next busy day. And somewhere in it lingered the spirit of his old life, what he and May had done and said and felt—still there, but fading. He remembered speeding

home at the end of his shifts, energized by the sidewalk markets and crowds and the scent of frying meat, by radio voices spilling from open windows, a salty breeze from the South China Sea. Along this part of Broadview the wind swept unchecked and cold across the valley towards him. He crossed to the east side with its large brick homes, the yellow light in their windows suggesting warmth out of reach.

As he passed the lane beside a church, something moved at the far end. He slowed and saw a *gweipo* standing there, her skin pale and blue under the sky's dim light. Her breath rose in clouds through frigid air. Her coat only half-covered legs that were bare above her boots. The way she stood was odd, knees slightly bent, hands out, as if steadying herself. He hesitated. He tried to concentrate despite fatigue and the blur from drinking. She stared towards him and was still. Her voice, a loud whisper, was a surprise. He didn't catch the words. "You are okay?" he called back. She looked over her shoulder into the shadows. Was someone else there? She seemed to be waiting—but for what? Was it some kind of joke? She could be smiling. It was too dark. Fear propelled him along the sidewalk, quickly now, almost at a run, straining to listen above the pounding of blood in his head for the sound of footsteps.

He reached Gerrard before daring to look back. No one. Turning the corner, he rushed past Wong's closed grocery store, past empty crates and folded cardboard out for recycling, past the stationery shop's red decorations with their wishes for good luck in the New Year. Finally, his door. By the time he was climbing the steps to the apartment he began to believe he'd imagined the woman's voice and even the woman herself.

The disease hid in May during months of appointments and tests. He'd wake early each morning, seized by a mixture of dread and fascination as he watched her sleep. Nothing could be wrong with this body he loved to hold. He stared at her smooth shoulder and long neck, and at the faint sunspots on her face—the only hint of approaching middle age. Soon enough she lost weight and her skin turned sallow, the disease openly mocking their plans for the future, even the chance to see Lillian through to adulthood. May refused to discuss it. "Stop behaving like I'm made of glass," she said. "Treat me normally. Please." Each morning, his eyes flashed open before she woke so he could look at her while he still could.

May got sicker while Lillian slipped from childhood, dancing across the apartment to pop music. May fixated on tracking the status of their immigration application and planned what they would ship to Canada. They

would hear soon. Their chances were good with her years of bookkeeping experience. She'd never finished university after Lillian was born, but her English was excellent. She talked about the plane ride that would carry them to a new life as if cancer was something they could simply leave behind.

The water is coming to a boil when Cheung hears Lillian, still sprawled in the chair, laugh at something on the television. The volume is turned up. English words shout from the living room.

That woman in the lane did not call for help: she had whispered something. She may have been frightened but he was frightened too, of trouble. Another thing he couldn't manage. If he'd gone closer and found out what she wanted, he would have only made things worse, unable to understand. Or he could have been the one attacked and then what would happen to Lillian? He did the right thing. That woman's troubles had nothing to do with him. He has troubles of his own.

The water in the wok is boiling. Urgent and violent. He stares at the surface, churning and rolling to the rhythm of the television's shouting words. What is Lillian becoming? She doesn't listen to him. May should still be alive. Here to guide their daughter. Here to help him in this freezing place she convinced him to come to. How could she let this happen? He strikes the cupboard with one fist and cries out her name. He shouts it again, only louder.

The living room goes quiet. Then comes Lillian's voice: "Daddy?"

Cheung hits the cupboard as if to push away anger and guilt. As if to rid his mind of that pale ghostly face. A woman in a lane. A criminal, a drug addict, a prostitute he had every reason to get away from. His arm, strong now from four years of physical work, swings again through the air and this time strikes the wok. The wok skids off the stove, crashing to the floor, but the boiling water flies up, splashing the calendar on the fridge, splashing the cupboards, splashing into the doorway where she appears, this strange and unknowable version of May, this woman in a tight shirt, black bra straps rude against bare skin, speaking English to everyone but him. This stranger's face with black-rimmed eyes now wide with horror as the water burns her arms and hands, this stranger's scream, shrill and unending, that makes him scream along with her at the cruelty of the unexpected.