

UNDYING

By Zen (Richard) Wang

Undying

(Short Film)

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EXT.STORE - NIGHT

A rainy and windy night. The streets of Chinatown is devoid of people. One store still has its lights on. YANG, late 20's, average build, wearing a drenched sports jacket walks toward the store. He enters as a couple leaves. Bell sounds.

INT. STORE -NIGHT

The store is filled with buddhist statues, ceremonial items, scary paintings and offerings for the dead. Yang walks half way up the aisle. STORE OWNER, 50's, tiny man, sits at end of the aisle.

STORE OWNER (WITH AN ACCENT)
Looking for hotel? Nothing open. Unholy
hour.

YANG
Sorry for the trouble.

Yang stops in mid stride unsure of what to do. He turns to leave.

STORE OWNER
We have bed. Corner of store. Forty-
three dollar a night.

Yang turns back.

STORE OWNER (O.S.)
But be careful, don't touch anything in
here.

FADE OUT

INT. STORE -NIGHT

A pot of tea rests on a night table. A folding bed beside it.

a small cup filled with steamy tea. As the steam rises we see the young man exploring the different items in the store. He glances over a small picture frame with a black and white photograph of a Chinese couple in traditional clothing.

He plays with some silk dresses and some ancient erotic texts. He opens a cabinet and sees a painting of beautiful woman dressed in traditional Chinese clothing.

FADE OUT

INT. STORE -LATE NIGHT

Yang asleep in bed. He is awakened by sounds of a woman weeping. He gets up carefully, picks up a bamboo stick and looks for its source.

A beautiful woman (AUTUMN) mid 20's, attractive and innocent with braided black hair, dressed in red Chinese silk dress is sitting with her back to Yang. Yang touches her shoulder as-if to check if she's real. She turns her head. A beautiful pale emotionless round face crying tears of blood.

YANG
(backing away)
Ahhhh!!!

Yang almost falls. The girl turns her head back again. This time the blood is gone and her face is only covered in tears.

YANG
(collecting his senses)
What? Who are you?

WOMAN (AUTUMN)
I am nobody. Get away from me.

YANG
Well, are you in some kind of trouble?

WOMAN (AUTUMN)
No one cares about me. I am doomed. A shadow that will untimely fade.

YANG
(lays down the stick)
Tell me anyway, it may make you feel better.

WOMAN (AUTUMN)
(wiping her tears)
Thanks but I don't even know you.

YANG (GETTING CLOSER)
The name is Yang. I just arrived here looking for work. And you?

WOMAN (AUTUMN)
Unwanted useless female child. Born before winter solstice. Bad Karma life.

She swallows, glances at Yang before she continues.

WOMAN (AUTUMN) (CONTINUES)

My father was sick and my mother
couldn't pay the rent when I was 15. As
a mail bride I landed here.

Yang pulls a stool over and sits next to the woman.

WOMAN (AUTUMN) (CONTINUES)

Husband was old and impotent but he
wanted a son. His failure became my
fault. Beatings, torture and hunger
filled my days.

Yang pounds the table. Startling the woman.

WOMAN (AUTUMN) (CONTINUES)

(turning to Yang)

One day, I had enough so I ran. Some
nice ladies on the street took me in.
Their ugly boss tried to rape me. I
kicked him straight and hard and ran
again.

YANG

Good for you! Then what happens?

The woman stares down at her clean silk embroidered shoes.

WOMAN (AUTUMN)

Then nothing. I have been doing this
night cleaning job ever since. Hiding.
Lonely and scared all the time. The one
that no one sees.

YANG

Well, that's not true! I see you.

The woman shakes her head and starts to cry again.

YANG

I can help...

WOMAN (AUTUMN)

(looks at his bed and
sighs)

That's sweet, but a cup of tea cannot
save a burning house.

YANG

I know I am not much right now, but I
can be a friend.

WOMAN (AUTUMN)

Friend. Friends come and go.

YANG

(stands up)

Not me! I make good on my words. I will
be there for you always...I'll, I'll
swear in front of this Buddha...

WOMAN (AUTUMN)

(stands up and smiles)

That's all I needed. That you will be
there. Don't say another word.

The woman leans close and rest her head on Yang's shoulder. Yang catches a whiff of her scent, hesitates and carefully puts his arms around her. The two gaze into each other's eyes and share a tender kiss. Vapour from the tea rises between them.

Suddenly, the clock CHIMES three o'clock. The woman startles.

WOMAN (AUTUMN)

I have to go.

YANG

Wait! Will I see you again?

The woman runs toward the front. She accidentally bumps into a display shelf and knocks a wooden scented fan to the floor.

WOMAN (AUTUMN)

My time unpredictable. I go to the park
by the temple on the 15th.

YANG

Wait! I don't know your name.

WOMAN (AUTUMN)

(smiling)

Born Before Winter, remember?

FADE OUT

INT. STORE - MORNING

Yang opens his eyes to discover the store owner staring at him. Embarrassed, Yang sits up from a contorted position.

Store owner walks away.

YANG
Good morning sir.

Store owner continues to open shop.

YANG
Your cleaning lady. What is her name?

STORE OWNER
(picks up a broom)
Cleaning lady? I can't afford no cleaning lady. I do everything myself.

Yang looks around and notices for the first time how dusty the place is.

YANG
(scratching his head)
Strange, she said she was a night cleaning lady.

Store owner quickly walks to Yang and holds his shoulders.

STORE OWNER
I lock door and window before I go. You say you saw people last night?

YANG
Yes. As clearly as I see you now.

STORE OWNER
This is bad. Very bad.

(two beats)

Bad tea. Expired. No good for head...

Store owner takes away the teapot and walks away muttering something about his tea dealer.

Yang massages his neck, blinks hard and walks out. In haste he steps on the wooden scented fan on the floor making a cracking sound. Yang looks down in amazement.

SHOP OWNER
(without looking up from his newspaper)
Two dollar. You break you buy.

FADE OUT

SUPER: "AUGUST 15TH"

EXT. PARK NEAR THE TEMPLE - DUSK.

Yang leans against a tree smoking. Many cigarette butts around him. Two couples walk past him and exit the park.

Yang takes out the wooden scented fan from his pocket. He looks at it for a bit, unfolds it, smells it and walks away from the tree.

Yang finds a garbage bin and drops the fan into the bin. At that moment, Yang notices a flickering light in the distance. He follows it and finds an OLD MAN squatting near what looks like a small fire pit. The man is burning incense and ceremonial money while muttering.

OLD MAN

...you had a hard life. I couldn't give you mountains of gold and silver. Don't hold grudges against anyone. Be at peace...

YANG

Who are you talking to?

OLD MAN

(without turning, wipes his face)

I-Ching was my wife from back home. As soon as we got here she changed. She wanted everything we didn't have. She hated her life, so she detested me. Poor soul.

YANG

What a shame.

OLD MAN

One day she ran into the flower ladies. She thought she finally had everything: Money, jewelries, pretty white boys. They even gave her a stage name depicting one of the four seasons.

YANG

(helps to tend the fire against the wind)

What did you do?

OLD MAN

I couldn't bear it. I demanded a divorce and her family wanted her to go back home.

YANG

(shaking his head)
The old ways.

OLD MAN

Rather than going back to face a life of misery and humiliation she hung herself. Right here in this park. Every full moon I come to comfort her. Forty three years in the blink of an eye.

YANG

(surprised)
Forty three years?

OLD MAN

A ghost who died unnaturally will linger for a long time between the living and the dead.

Yang slowly stands up and walk away from the fire. He stops suddenly and turns.

YANG

What was her season?

OLD MAN

Huh?

YANG

You said they gave her a stage name. One of the four seasons. What was her season?

OLD MAN

Autumn.

Realizing that he has seen a ghost, Yang runs away through the bamboo forest like a crazy man.

AUTUMN (O.S.)

...A shadow that will untimely fade.

OLD MAN (O.S.)
...she hung herself, right here in the
park...

AUTUMN (O.S.)

...The one that no one sees.

OLD MAN (O.S.)
...forty three years and counting...

AUTUMN (O.S.)
...before winter, remember?

OLD MAN (O.S.)
...Autumn.

FADE OUT

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

The apartment is in disarray. Garbage, half eaten Chinese food, cigarettes, half empty bottles are everywhere. Yang lies in bed motionless. A towel covers his face. He coughs. Without moving other parts of his body he reaches for the rice wine bottle with his hand. He finds it and takes a big gulp. He goes back to sleep.

FADE OUT

UNKNOWN, DREAM - NIGHT

Yang's POV. The woman appears out of darkness wearing a flowing semi-transparent white gown. She floats toward Yang.

AUTUMN
I knew you would come. They were all
fakes but you are real.

YANG
They?

AUTUMN
So now you know how I came to be. Small
details. What's important is you are
here.

YANG
(looks around)
Where is this?

AUTUMN

I rule here. He has no powers here. Are you ready to hear my plan?

YANG

Your plan?

AUTUMN

You didn't think I was going to stay like this forever do you? One season is long enough. Next full moon, the priest will perform "Songs for the Dead". You need to grab his singing bowl. Once I have it, I...

YANG

Wait a minute! What's all this about?

AUTUMN

I am sorry my love. Where are my manners.

Autumn slowly waves her right sleeve. A bamboo forest appears. She waves her other sleeve. A stone table and stool appear, complete with a steamy teapot and two cups. Autumn takes Yang over.

Birds chirping in the forest.

Cicadas buzzing on the branches.

Autumn pours the tea for both. Yang chokes on the hot tea, Autumn pats his back, wipes his lips tenderly and smiles.

She goes back to her tea, first smells it, then takes a small sip, twirls the liquid around in her mouth, finally swallowing it like an angel drinking from the fountain of youth.

AUTUMN

(sipping and watching Yang)

It could always be this way my love. Once I reincarnate we can begin anew. Everything's ready, timing is right. All we need is the singing bowl from that wretched monk.

YANG

(gingerly)

There is just one little thing. The old man at the park said you were not a

mail-in-bride and you WANTED to become
a flower girl.

AUTUMN

(becoming animated)

What! That old fool spreading lies
about me again? I can't go back, I
can't stay, I can't go forth. so I can
only cling to him in his pitiful little
world?

The bamboo forest and stone table vanishes and the setting
changes back to Yang's dreamscape. Autumn starts to pace up and
down like a caged beast.

AUTUMN

(arguing to herself
with evil voice)

I told you men cannot be trusted!

(normal voice) I had to try haven't I.
It's been too long.

(evil voice) They always get what they
want and leave you cold and bleeding on
the bathroom floor.

(normal voice) You are right, I know
you are. So what now?

(evil voice) You KNOW what has to be
done.

Autumn rises up ten feet into the air with her back to Yang. She
starts a hysterical and evil laughter. She stops suddenly and
turns around with her head looking down. A porcelain white face
crying tears of blood appears. Her black loose hair has patches
of white hair. Her tongue hanging out. She wears a faded, tat-
tered robe. She glides toward Yang threateningly.

AUTUMN

You made a promise to always be there
for me. You have to keep it or face my
wrath.

Yang retreats and falls onto the ground.

AUTUMN

Is this what you pigs want?

Autumn waves her sleeve. Three other female ghosts appears dressed in different faded gowns.

They approach and circle Yang like a pack of hungry she-wolves.

They take turns sitting and grinding on Yang's trembling body laughing like cats in heat.

AUTUMN

(sits on top of Yang
herself)

We won't stop until you are sucked dry.
A skeleton not even worth burying.

A deep sounding BELL fills Yang's dreamscape. The female ghosts scatter. Autumn backs away.

AUTUMN

We have to go now, but we'll be back if
you don't keep your promise.

Yang wakes up drenched in cold sweat. He stops his alarm clock and tries to calm his heart down. He hears Autumn's hysterical laughter from the window.

He looks and sees "September 15th, Westend Cemetery #43." written in Chinese on the window pane. He blinks and it's gone.

EXT. CEMETERY - NIGHT

A Buddhist priest performing a passage ceremony for the dead. He chants buddhist text while waving ritual instruments in one hand and holding a brass bowl in the other. Candles and offering vessels are in front of a new tombstone.

A dark figure approaches the priest. They get into inaudible arguments and the dark figure takes out a crowbar and beats the priest's head with it. The Priest falls back and the dark figure takes something from him and runs away.

The dark figure runs and is intercepted by Autumn (normal ghost appearance) before he gets too far.

AUTUMN

(handles the brass bowl
lovingly)

Perfect!

The priest suddenly gets up and shouts.

PRIEST

Now!

Autumn looks at Yang, startled, she drops the bowl. It shatters like glass.

Yang's expression is menacing. He takes a bundle of golden rope from his coat.

As if having a life of their own, the rope wraps around autumn's neck. Autumn realizes she's been tricked.

She pushes Yang away and struggles against the rope with all her might.

Yang tries his best to hold on to his end. His hands are bloodied and slipping. Just when the end of the rope is reached the sound of the Singing Bowl fills the air.

The priest approaches slowly with the real singing bowl. He rotates a stick around the outside of the bowl and makes an eerie sound that resonates with one's skull.

Autumn (evil ghost, black loose hair with patches of white hair, faded, tattered robe.) struggles against the rope while trying to block out the sound.

She rises and falls like a broken kite tattering in a storm. Her neck appears to be broken and her head lays on the left or the right shoulder.

She flies toward Yang and crawls at his feet.

AUTUMN

How can you do this to me? Remember the
smell of our tea and the taste of my
lips?

Yang freezes and unknowingly loosens his grip.

Autumn grabs his end of the rope and backs away.

MONTAGE:

People having sex,

baby,

little girl,

ghost guardians,
bamboo windows
hanging corpse.

AUTUMN

Haaaa! Hardened men are no match for
the soft blade.

Using the rope as a whip, Autumn knocks the singing bowl away
from the priest's hands.

She wraps the other end around the priest's neck and begins to
pull him in towards her.

Yang helps the priest unravel from the rope.

Autumn starts to shoot lightning bolts at them. The two men re-
treat behind a tombstone.

AUTUMN

As if I will let a man hold my reins
ever again! Neverrrrrr!

Autumn conjures up the mother of all lightning bolts. A voice
comes out of nowhere.

OLD MAN (O.S.)

NOOOO! This ends NOW!

AUTUMN

(Undeterred)

This has nothing to do with you. Stay
back.

OLD MAN (O.S.)

This has everything to do with me. YOU
go back.

The figure walks into the light and it is the Old man from the
park.

OLD MAN

I-Ching, don't you think you have done
enough? When will you stop?

AUTUMN

I will stop when I get what I want. The singing bowl will allow me to live again.

PRIEST

Undead spirit. If you reincarnate in a newborn. She will have two souls. She will end up in an asylum.

AUTUMN

(turns the priest)

Lies, lies. Poison and lies. Now die!!!

Autumn directs the huge lightning bolt toward the priest just as the old man darts in front of it saving the priest.

He gets hit straight in the heart. Autumn stops and rushes over.

AUTUMN

You stupid old fool!

OLD MAN

(Lying down with his hand on his chest)

No one else should be hurt because of me. (a beat) I want to show you something I-Ching.

Old man turns and points at the tombstone behind them.

It is the tombstone for I-Ching. The characters of her name is offset from the centre column, leaving room for another person on the same tombstone.

OLD MAN

One day of marriage, a hundred days of kindness to repay.

Old man coughs up blood on to this chest.

OLD MAN (CONTINUES)

Have you wondered why I never remarried? I wanted to be buried with you. I owe you from this world and I hope to settle my debt in the next one.

Autumn kneels down. Blood drops on the old man's hand. Gradually the drops become clear tear drops. Tears wash away the blood.

Autumn lies beside the old man on the ground. She is now an old woman wearing the same clothing.

She caresses his grey hair, his bearded chin and finally closes his eyelids. She rests her head on his chest near his stopped heart. Her hand covering the burn mark from the lightning.

AUTUMN

(closing her eyes, taking a deep
breath)

Lao Gong.

FADE OUT

EXT. BEACH - DAWN

A set of foot prints in the sand. The buddhist priest walks along the beach toward the horizon. His outline is barely visible in the morning fog.

Yang is bundled up against the cold morning breeze. He looks at the horizon, turns and walks away from the lake.

An old black and white wedding photograph of I-Ching and her husband wearing traditional clothing is washed back and forth by the gentle waves on the beach. They appear to be reserved but happy. They sit by a traditional Chinese garden table with a pot and two cups. Bamboo forest decorates the background.

The End

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The word undying is multilayered. It can mean long lasting as in undying love and also mean something that refuses to go away. In other words the opposite of dying. I wrote it in Vancouver on the edge of Chinatown. After talking to my barber I got this incredible sense of sadness. All the immigrants were uprooted from their homeland, and like a water lily they can never put their root down again anywhere else.

I wrote 'Undying' in the template of LiaoZaiZhiYi, a collection of Chinese ghost stories from the Ming dynasty. The setting and era have changed, but the people stay the same. The people always stay the same.

BIO: *Apart from being a filmmaker, an engineer, a teacher, a director Richard is also an editor at Fleas on the Dog. He lives with his wife Toby and baby daughter in Waterloo Region, Ontario. (Eds.)*