# Mannequin

I.

Children here can spend their whole lives in the family business. As we age, it is not so momentous to take up permanent positions, and by the time we grow old, it is not so strange to pass the same shop to our children. When I graduate, the transition from part-time to full-time worker in my father's clothing shop will be nearly unnoticeable.

There are five in my family. My older brother works in the city as a foreman in a synthetic ivory factory for my uncle, who arranges his morning pick-up and drop-off in a sedan that collects him before we awaken and deposits him after we turn in. My older sister is a waitress at one of my uncle's restaurants in our village. Then, there is me, who will soon start work in the clothes shop with my mother. She is middle-aged but looks older, and has taken over the shop from my father. He has a cumbersome titanium hip and arthritic joints that freeze up and leave him bedridden.

My father embodies parsimony. There is no reason for us to own a car if he cannot press his swollen ankle to a gas pedal; no reason for us to throw parties if alcohol conflicts with his medication; no reason for us to travel if he can hardly make his way to the bathroom.

However, he will, when desperate, pivot his ethos. When my mother miscarried the child between me and my sister, he paid for a hospital visit to Hangzhou. When I had tooth rot, he paid for a dental prosthetic. I returned home with a gleaming gold tooth.

I was ten and ashamed that so much money had been spent on something so trivial when we were often wanting holidays and birthday cakes. For himself, my father had bought the cheapest titanium hip available, yet for a child's molar, he shelled out

thousands. No one in our township, let alone a small girl, wore a gold tooth. For a week after the surgery, I did not dare open my mouth or smile should my father regret the purchase. But one night, as we closed the shop together, he said, "*Kaixin xiaojin, qingbi jinjian.*" "Be happy, little goldie. You're worth more to me than gold." The latter part is a platitude often parroted in teeny-bopper love songs. For a man so serious and ascetic, I had to smile. He made me smile so broadly that light glinted off my back molar.

II.

It is June. We are sitting on a verandah by the Xixiao River at my uncle's summer house. He had his driver bring us in the black sedan that my brother rides to work. We drove an hour to the house and now sit on plastic garden furniture, eating from a seafood buffet set up by a still, grey swimming pool. My uncle told us to bring swimsuits if we wanted to jump off the pontoon into the river, but the water smells like rot and my brother once told me that the clay is so slimy at the bottom, that it feels as though a water ghost might suck you into the
silt.

We are celebrating a handful of things: the beginning of summer, Dragon Boat Festival, a cash prize our district won for maintaining zero virus cases throughout the pandemic, but mainly this is an excuse for my uncle to host a get-together. My uncle has not taken well to social distancing restrictions and actively flaunts rules by our district council.

That he is throwing a party with twenty or so people is not surprising to us; what is is that the garden party teems with township, city, and district councillors and legislators. Our district councillor is drinking a beer and laughing very close to my uncle and some of his friends. They are hunched over a mahjong table, throwing pieces down and

slapping each others' wrists as they fight over tiles. My brother is with them, also chortling. They have pocketed their masks and are howling with laughter directly at each other. I am squeamish, imagining the flecks of saliva spewing, but our district is certifably healthy — a large cardboard check for eight thousand yuan proves it — so I register my concern as paranoia. One official puts a tile up to his mouth and uses his pinky finger to flick a morsel of meat out from between two teeth before discarding a nine-bamboo.

My father and I sit eating from paper plates. He has his mask pulled under his chin to admit small spoonfuls of rice and prawn. Whenever a friend comes to tap him on the shoulder, he lifts his mask back up over his nose and chats warmly, his back a convex angle from his lap as he leans as far away from him as possible. The only person he does not recoil from is Miss Liang. She is in her forties and is much younger than my mother. She grew up in Hubei province and now works as a travelling salesperson, though she does not call herself this. My mother once heard that she was married in Hubei, but now she is widowed and lives in an apartment in the city.

When Miss Liang approaches, my father stiffens his back which I am sure must hurt given the crookedness of his spine and the painkillers he needs to hold it up. I see him wiping the glistening parts of his scalp. She is wearing coral lipstick that looks chalky. Her mask hangs from her ear. I can see her blush and foundation imprinted on the inside. My mother looks out to the river, sipping a can of cola through a straw under her mask.

The woman invites us to drive back with her. Her car is spacious and she sits up front with my father. My mother and brother ride in the middle row; my sister and

I sit in the back. My brother spends the whole journey with his head between the two front seats, laughing and joking with Miss Liang and my father. I wonder if his back hurts from hovering in between them for the whole journey. The rest of us are silent. My mother looks out the window at the fields and estuaries.

III.

I am two weeks into my full-time position at the shop. My mother has handed over the book-keeping to me and now spends most of her time upstairs. She is concerned for my father. He will not come down to the shop. He heard on the radio that virus cases are rising in neighbouring cities. We do not see many unfamiliar faces in the shop, but he knows that it is only a matter of time before a worker in the factory brings something in from his village, coughs on my brother, and sends the virus our way. I think about how Miss Liang also comes in, far too frequently.

She does not shop here. She is too classy and wears brand-name clothes. I have seen her examine our handbags and belts for fake leather or poor stitching. She comes for work. She calls herself a "B2B retailer" and supplies us with the things people don't realise shops need. For instance, the tissue paper that envelopes new clothes or the sand that anchors our mannequins.

Our two mannequins are lonely things that stand in the window. Their breasts are large and pointy. Their hair is short, slicked back, and the same white colour as the rest of their bodies. Their lips are painted red and they have blue eyes with thick black eyelashes drawn on. We change their clothes regularly. When I was younger and they towered over me, my sister would change them in the evenings. I thought it was because she had graduated from our small dolls to larger ones. When I grew older though, around age sixteen, the task was delegated to me. I learned we were constantly undressing and dressing them for maintenance.

To anchor them, they are filled with a coarse sand that arrives in industrial powder bags. The bags are heavy, as wide as my forearm, and stand tall up to my hip. First, we undress the mannequins. Then, we unscrew their heads at the neck. My sister prepares trash bags and we tilt the sand out of the mannequins until they are empty. We then take a toy green spade and refill the hollow statues, scoop by scoop, until they are weighted down again and will not tip from the door opening or slamming too suddenly. Finally, before it gets dark, we carry the trash bags on our backs out to the nearest estuaries around the back of the village and tip the sand into the water.

It is a nice cycle, I think to myself. The sand is industrial waste from the city. It comes in from the river, serves its purpose, and goes back to the water. It reminds me of the water cycle we learned about in school, about reincarnation, about our family passing on the shop to one another for generations. It is a taxing task and one that makes me dread the end of the week, especially now that I do it on my own, but it is a task that reminds me how I fit into it all. I pick out new clothes for the mannequins. Sometimes I spend more time thinking about how I will dress them than how I will dress myself. On Sunday, they gleam in the shop window, lonely but dignified and grounded.

IV.

I am not always working. I have time on Sundays to see friends. I often ride with my sister to the restaurant and eat lunch with them. My sister sneaks us larger portions of noodles or an extra dumpling so we do not have to divide three between four people. We sit under a white and green awning at round tables, drinking tea and spinning a

rickety wooden lazy susan. The restaurant caters to many — there are fathers and brothers drinking and hollering at football over a portable radio; there are old women drinking tea and sipping congee through their gumless mouths; there are young people like us, taking advantage of cheap lunch specials and attempting to maintain some semblance of the sociability we found so readily available at school. My mother does not come out, though sometimes I see her old friends eating without her. She is taking care of our father now and is afraid to leave him. He insists that he is fine, that he has other friends that can watch over him if she goes out. She does not want anyone else as his caretaker.

This is why she takes such responsibility and refuses sympathy when my uncle sends an ambulance to take him to a hospital in the city. One Sunday two weeks before, my sister and I returned home from the restaurant on our bicycles. We went upstairs to our apartment above the shop and heard voices. My mother was in the shop. Miss Liang and my father spoke softly in his room. They did not laugh or joke, but their intimacy and friendship for one another was apparent. We could not hear their conversation, but caught snippets. He expressed regret at one point, fear at another. We even heard him whimper, which we had never heard before. Miss Liang cooed and comforted him. We heard our mother begin to ascend the stairs so retreated to our room.

After finding Miss Liang in the master bedroom, my mother refused my father any visitors. She brought him all his meals and administered all his medication. We missed him greatly but were assured that when he was better, we could see him. I asked her if he was contagious. She said no, that if he was, wouldn't she be, wouldn't we all be? Miss Liang dropped by with her weekly deliveries but was also denied access upstairs. We had to tell her that my father was too weak to see anyone.

My sister and I are in the stockroom when an ambulance parks outside the shop window. The paramedic informs us that they have come to take my father to hospital for proper care. My sister and I expect a fight from our mother but she lets him go. Three men with a portable gurney climb the stairs and bring him down. His body is shrivelled. His lips, his skin, his hair — all pallid. His eyes are taking in the world but he is not showing any sign of recognition. At least he is not showing signs of panic or pain either. My mother makes a point to prepare dinner early. We ask about our father, but she only expresses gratitude that he will now receive more competent care at a hospital. I wait for my brother to come home.

He already knows about our father.

V.

My father's departure has knocked our world off-balance, as if our existences relied on him ticking away in his bedroom. A week after the ambulance, my sister came home with her arm red-raw. A customer had scalded her with a bowl of congee, complaining that it was more gruel than anything else. He accused her of watering down the food. He accused her of taking him for a fool. When she protested and apologised, he hurled the bowl at her. She raised her arm instinctively and the porridge scorched her flesh. The manager did not fire her, but sent her home without pay for the remainder of the week.

This is why we are both waiting for Miss Liang's delivery today. She always arrives in the morning, climbing from the passenger seat of her van and greeting my sister and me cordially. We ask if she has visited our father in the hospital. She looks

confused, almost affronted. Of course she has not, she says. Why would she? I can think of many reasons why she would, but know best not to say. Her driver follows her inside and places two boxes of tissue paper on the counter. He returns to the car. Normally, he needs a few journeys to bring in the tissue paper boxes, the sandbags, the blank receipt rolls. However, I see him sit in the car after his first journey. He just waits.

Miss Liang sees my line of vision extend through the shoulders of our mannequins, out to the van. “We’ll deliver the rest next week.” It has never crossed my mind to question why we have so diligently refilled our mannequins every week if we could wait two. Could we wait a month in this case? A year? Does sand decompose? I don’t ask Miss Liang. I am not even sure if she is the right person to ask. The mannequins have guarded the windows for longer than I have worked in the shop or lived upstairs. My father would know.

We finish the day and prepare for dinner. Our mother is sullen, which is expected. My brother is present, which is not. “It is nice to have you home for dinner,” my sister says to him while my mother busies herself with something over the stove. He looks tired. His eyes cling to their sockets over bruised rings. When I look closer at them, they are red, almost as if he has been crying.

“It’s good to be home,” he replies. He has had a long day. Someone jammed one of the factory generators this week. There are a bunch of raw materials that go into the generators, he explains, calcium, sulfites, but an idiot put metal in a silo and the generator jammed and broke. No fixing it until July. Production would stagnate. Luckily he had money to tide us over, but we would need to rely on the shop’s revenue for the month. My mother joins us at the table and we speak of lighter things. No one mentions money or our father or the watery stew.

VI.

I am having a lonely summer. My friends stop coming out on Sundays; some even leave to find work in cities. I do not hear from them. Fewer customers buy summer clothes than any year I can remember. Usually families will indulge in swimsuits while it is warm or schoolchildren will spend pocket money earned from summer jobs. No one comes in now. I spend whole days without making a sale. One late afternoon, I grow so bored that I decide to re-outfit the mannequins. They have not been changed in weeks. I pick out sundresses from the back and climb into the window, standing between the glass storefront and the cardboard backdrop.

It is hot in this antechamber and a smell of wet rot stings my nostrils. I gag, audibly and to my surprise. The stench is overwhelming and I stumble back behind the backdrop. I retrieve the green spade from behind the counter and search for a dead mouse or even a stray cat, but I find nothing. I heave for air. My mask is futile in dulling the stench. I wonder if this is why nobody has been coming inside. I replace the green spade in the drawer under the counter and spray the area with air freshener.

I think of my father as a I squat to organise the spade, the spray, the stationery. When I first started working in the shop, he talked me through his system. He keeps a calendar in the drawer. He tracks daily sales in each square with a thick black permanent marker. The chain of zeroes this month is shameful. I am so aware of my uselessness, my helplessness, my loneliness. It makes me resent my mother for letting my father go, my brother for not visiting him in the city, Miss Liang, for making us refill the mannequins when we may not have ever needed to. I want to ask my father why we do it. I want to find him and see him and have him comfort me and tell me, " *Kaixin xiaojin, qingbi jinjian*." There are too many hospitals, clinics, and sick bays in

the city to know where to begin calling. There is a Chinese idiom that means “to fish a needle from the sea.”

Tonight my brother came home early again. He has barely worked in weeks. They are still repairing the generator. Piece by piece, the workers at the plant have had to fish shards of metal out of the machinery. They are implementing a filtration system to avoid further blockages. My brother is sour when he gives us these status reports, even when they are good. The generator is running once more and the plant will resume production tomorrow. My sister and I are happy. Money has grown tight and neighbours have been reluctant to lend. Food is short, money is short. Even though we have remained safe from the virus, we can feel its effects when deliveries never arrive and payments are not made. My sister has noted that the water congee at the restaurant is now the norm. We are all thinner, my mother especially.

“Our uncle has taken a great financial hit from the disruption,” my brother explains. My sister follows up with questions, but my mind fixates on our uncle. I had not considered him when I thought about reaching my father. He is so distant that I sometimes forget he holds strings and carries keys to all sorts of places. He is a bizarre, absent-minded man, but one who is earnest to please and help. He gave my sister her job at the restaurant; he gave my brother his job at the factory. I have not asked anything of him. He cannot refuse me if I beg him to see my father.

My sister and I clear the crockery away and go to bed. Usually we chat as we lie in bed, but tonight my mind is elsewhere. I am planning a way to leave our bed without her noticing. My heart pounds hard into the mattress as I lie on my left side, my back to her. There is vitriol and resentment as I consider all possible outcomes. What if I find my father in a beautiful apartment with Miss Liang? What if they have a child? I remember the gold tooth. My father, who would deny himself the smallest of luxuries, would sometimes become so blind that he would spend thousands of *yuan* on a gold

tooth for a little girl. My throat swells as I wondered if, in his blindness, he has cast us away for someone else.

VIII.

It is late but not past midnight. The driver goes around to the trunk and my brother steps out and meets him. My brother hoists his backpack over his shoulder and shakes the driver's hand. In this brief interim, I emerge from my hiding place and squat by the backseat door. I can feel the four blue eyes from the shop window burning into me, signalling to my sister that I am not asleep, to my mother than I am not in bed, to my brother that I am not inside. I pull at the door handle and it pops open. The driver and my brother exchange farewells. I climb into the back and squat behind the driver's seat. When the trunk door slams shut, I pull the door towards me. They close synchronously and I pant, desperate to slow my breathing by the time I am no longer alone in the sedan.

The drive takes around eighty minutes. We ride in silence, my knees pressed up tightly to my chest, my arms holding them close to me. I duck my head and breathe in slowly and deliberately through my nose. For all my plotting to get into the car, I have not given much thought to my plan once I climb out of it. Though I cannot see much from the floor, I can tell that we have reached the city by the skyscrapers and streetlights peering through the car windows. We pull in sharply to a garage and the driver gets out, locking the car with his remote control key behind him. I wait for his footsteps to vanish, for a door to shut, then I wait some more. I count to one hundred, breathing slowly. I have an evening to navigate the city and find my uncle's office.

Then, in the morning, when he arrives, I will have a lay of the land and an opportunity to implore him to bring me to my father.

I climb out, aching from crouching. There is a door against the far wall of the garage that opens into a dim elevator lobby. When the garage door slams behind me, I find that I can only reenter by keycard. There are six elevator doors. I can only see by the light of their radial buttons and LED screens counting down to the basement. I hear the inner mechanics quieten once the nearest screen reads B. I wait for the elevator to open. It waits for me to call it. I press the orange button on the wall and the doors slide apart. The marble chamber consumes me and I scan the directory.

Basement: *Logistics and Waste Management*. Ground floor: *Reception*. First floor: *Peace Luck Ivory Manufacturing Co. Ltd.* Second floor: *Jiangxi Flour and Cornmeal Mills*

*Co. Ltd.* Third floor: *Desiccation Station - Peace Luck Ivory / Jiangxi Flour and Cornmeal.*

Fourth floor: *Refinery Station - Peace Luck Ivory / Jiangxi Flour and Cornmeal.* Fifth floor:

*Prosperity Medical Engineering Co. Ltd.* Sixth floor: *Accounts Department*. I stand so long, reading the mish-mash of company names, ruminating over where I am that the lift begins carrying me up on its own accord, releasing me onto the fourth floor.

My stomach drops, as if the elevator's wires have suddenly snapped and sent me plummeting. The elevator lobby is bustling with activity and I cannot recede into a crevice to hide. Hurried figures in turquoise scrubs and plastic pinafores, plastic caps and blue rubber gloves, N-95 masks and laboratory goggles rush across the marble between two doors to my left and right. No one takes notice of me as I emerge. There

is a door to a changing room to my left and another to an industrial factory zone to my right.

"Hurry," a foreman snaps at me, thrusting a plastic-wrapped bundle of the turquoise uniform into my arms. Afraid to ask for my uncle, I revert to autopilot, like a school-child following teacher's orders, and take myself to a changing bench. There are three other women — older and harried — pulling their hair into nets and gossiping.

"She thinks she is better than us all of a sudden," a raspy woman hisses; "Apparently she has been to bed with the brothers *and* the son."

"Well, we know the son has had her," another one added. "He moved her to the day shift just to see her."

"No, I heard she's not even on the floor anymore. She now does waste disposal."

"That's not a promotion. She sells waste to villagers and has them dump it."

"How does that work? Do the villagers know what it is?"

The foreman interrupts their chatter, bellowing at all of us to move. I scurry after the women. We cross the lobby and enter the factory zone. I smell burning, a horrible kind of burning. It reminds me of dank river water or dead mice or the rot in my tooth before it was cleaned out. The room is clean though, pristine and clinical. There are eight rows of conveyor belts, each beginning at a floor-to-ceiling silo and trickling down into a chute that falls through the floor. We are lined up in rows. I fall into formation with the gossiping women as the foreman speaks over a megaphone. "Night shift," he crackles, "we are introducing new protocols to avoid further

obstructions in the generators." I think of my brother. "Please ensure that all input has been vetted for prosthetics; these include copper coils, piercings, and so forth."

The raspy woman whispers to her friend, "I wonder if they let *laoban* keep his brother's ivory mahjong set?"

The friend giggled. "I'd be surprised if that geriatric's bones even made it into a loaf of bread let alone into the ivory refinery. Apparently all his bones were titanium; that's why we had such a clog."

The third friend, who had been timid thus far, chirped, "I wonder if his kids eat at one of *laoban*'s restaurants."

"That's disgusting," the raspy one snaps.

The foreman pulls out his phone and begins to read names and sums of money. The raspy woman appears to hear her name and allows herself a self-satisfied guffaw. Her friend turns to her. "Who did you report?" she asks.

The woman is grinning so wide I can see malice through her mask. "My daughter's mother-in-law got her whole village infected. This is repayment for her dowry."

The foreman's attendants section us into groups and I drift with mine to a belt. I am stationed near the beginning, about four people down from our generator. Three harsh tones ring. I glance up at the worker opposite me, straining to ascertain our task. My hands shake. I should not be here, I keep thinking to myself, but I cannot even shuffle my thoughts into order let alone extricate myself from my roots in the assembly line. If I get through this night shift, I can hide in the changing room until my uncle arrives in the morning.

I look to the top of the line and see workers begin to handle clumps of puce clay, moulding them into fists. Further down, workers roll them out into sheets. I watch the worker opposite me pick gristle and coarse stones from the dough. As my untouched

ball passes me, the worker next in line glowers at me. She performs my extraction task, then rolls the dough into a fist again. This continues until the pink-grey balls sink down the chute.

A meaty palm strikes my shoulder. I turn, my arms, my knees, my mouth trembling. “You,” the foreman says. “You missed a task.” I cannot meet his gaze but can tell that his eyes are locked on my pinafore. He demands, “Where is your ID?”

IX.

It is dark and I am trying to stabilise myself on radio static. There are barriers around me. I can feel them. But they are malleable, giving way like silk to my throttles and fists. I grow tired from the strain of navigating the darkness so let myself lie still and breathe. This is when I hear my brother. “Anything from the night shift?” he asks. There is another man in the room. I recognise his tone. “I’ve written up a report,” he says. “We had an obstruction,” he adds, “but minor. A gold tooth.”

I move to run my tongue along the line where gums meet teeth but can hardly feel anything. All my teeth are soft. I sense them, but in a way that part of their existence relies on me believing that they are still there. If I push too hard on them, my tongue would only push right through them. My brother is quiet. I try to listen harder. I cannot see him but I imagine that he is rolling the small nugget over in his fingers. He mutters that he has to make a phone call and I hear his steps grow distant.

I am lifted, rolling and tumbling over myself in my cloth coffin. But I feel no pain. I feel no crashing and aching as an elbow meets an eye socket or a knee wallops a chin. I feel fluid — still heavy as I burden my porter with dead weight — but

nonetheless fluid. My weight rings in my ears and bones as I crash down onto a metallic surface with a bellowing resonance, like I am now sitting on an aluminum floor with reverberating hollowness underneath. There is a slam of a metal door, another door, a latch clicks. I can hear the rev of a car engine and realise that I am being taken further. I am not in the sedan. I toss and feel myself thrown up in the air as this cart rumbles over city speed bumps, expressway potholes, rural dirt tracks.

When we come to a final stop, I am disoriented from the tossing. I feel like I have flown into the air, fallen into new positions each time, reshuffling myself. Reshuffled to discombobulation. I hear a woman's voice. I recognise this one too. Then there is light. It is white-cold and far from what I had imagined when I wished myself back into a realm outside of my crucible. I hear two familiar voices. There is my mother and there is Miss Liang. Miss Liang is icy. My mother is hysterical; she is yelling over her shoulder as she cuts away an opening at the top of my prison. I see her profile first. Her ear, her jowls, her brow.

Without looking at me, I see her raise the green spade and plunge it into my gut. I scream out to her. *Mama!* I cry. I am crying now. Crying but not feeling any burn in my eyes or coolness on my cheeks. I brace for the cut. She cuts into me. I cannot tell if the sting is inside me or real. There is an idiom: *tong ding si tong*. It means that you learn from past pain, but it can also describe pain re-visiting you after it has passed. I have never been stabbed so I do not know exactly how it would feel, yet I recognise the agony as she shivs me. The pain is visceral, like I have felt it before. She sinks the spade in. I crunch. I drop. I settle and fill to the shape of a new receptacle. This one is not cloth but plastic. I slide down the neck and into the base of a mannequin. From inside its void, I feel myself embody it. I fill up the feet, climb the shins, reach the knees, scale the thighs, fatten the belly, flow into the bosom, spray down the arms into the fingertips. My mother screws the head back on.

I float in my corpse, trapped in a sarcophagus but also miles away. My entrails are being spooned out of a vat into a cheap bowl and slurped up by the purple-lipped leviathan who struck my sister. I feel fingers all over me as I ricochet off of heavy tiles in a smoky gaming salon, old men running their fingers over my bones as they shuffle me, face-down, among ivory mahjong tiles. I watch the street outside through blue eyes. My lips are closed and I cannot scream.