

This Is Blood
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The girl from the village grew up away from water. I tell her it's ironic because her name rearranged would sound like crocodile. Six brothers and sisters yet she is the first one to go to school. When she graduates, she meets a boy in the sky. He flies planes and has skin deep from the sun, and when he takes her hand, they become two, then three. She gives birth to a little princess with her face and his temper, raising her up on breast milk. *You can always tell when a child suckles from man or cow*, she tells me. It's a poor town, but the princess feels rich in her suede strap-up flats. At dinner she drinks salted broth with both pork *and* beef. The princess goes to college and writes back a boy from a few cities away. One day they pack their bags and fly across an ocean or two to a golden land. The language wanders her mouth like a stranger, stuck against her teeth. The crocodile flies across an ocean to join her and soon the princess swells. She paws through books of baby names and decides on one that means wisdom in that language still foreign to her tongue. The princess says the name under her breath every night and by the time she goes into labor it feels a bit more familiar. The girl comes out not wise but warm, shrieking like a baby bird. The crocodile holds her gently and cries.

I grew up right along the lake. On breast milk, of course. The crocodile swears by it, as if she was funneling her own blood through me. Mother to daughter to mother to daughter. She raises me on old Chinese writings, unrelenting in her teachings. I recite like clockwork, about swans and emperors, water spirits and moon goddesses. Without a green card, she comes and leaves for half a year each half year. I don't realize I can't speak English until I start preschool. And I don't realize I'm forgetting Mandarin until my grandmother returns. She takes me on a stroll and we spot a flock of geese but for a split second I can't remember the word for bird. She just snorts.

I don't drink anything above room temperature but she hands me cup after cup of hot water. *There's no ice in China*, she says, *It's bad for your gut*. I wince and down it to please her. Throughout the years we revel in this shared language, the cultural politics of drink. I pour two glasses of milk, fill one with ice and put the other in the microwave. When I catch a cold, she goes outside and yanks dandelion straight from the root. *Silly Americans*, she laughs giddily, rough hands caked with dirt, *Can't even see the gold in their own backyard*. She dries the root and steeps it for tea, spooning in brown sugar she swears is red. Then forces it down my throat. I teach her basic English words, vocabulary at her request. *Tomato juice*, she learns to tell the flight attendant pushing the drink cart. *No ice, please*. When we land, I am bombarded with abundance. She buys me Old Beijing yogurt drinks at the store, juices with lychee jelly for the three-wheeler taxi, milk tea with herbal jelly to wash it all down. She digs through dusty appliances at her old apartment. In the mornings, she grinds soybeans and makes me fresh milk. At restaurants I learn to rinse my silverware with hot tea before eating. The first time she orders us sour plum juice, I spit it out. I tell her it tastes like tobacco but she just tuts her head. We fly back and I get her hooked on Sunny D and apple cider. They both come chilled from the fridge

and she doesn't even care.

At some point I attend a boarding camp in Shanghai. We take classes on Chinese history and customs. We brandish swords and pens. Kung fu in the morning, calligraphy in the afternoon. One evening we spend three hours learning the way of tea. A traditional ceremony with ancient significance and painful execution. They give us fancy china, swirled with magpies and chrysanthemum in royal blue. It's a cold, delicate beauty, one we don't dare touch. So for a moment, we just look. The regal curve of the pot's stout. The melodious clink of the cup against the table. We boil, strain, pour, wash, boil, brew, strain, pour. There's a careful rhythm to it, like a song in your head. *Tea is at the heart of Chinese culture*, they tell us. It is a drink, but so much more. A cultural legacy, an art symbolic of filial respect and gratitude.

But there is no art in the way my grandmother palms a motley fistful of leaves, chucks them into a scaled kettle. No musicality in the clunk, clunk, of ceramic mug on the counter. What legacy scalds my tongue and burns my belly. Yet we find a rhythm between us through this drink, and every other one we share. We make a symbol of ice and steam. When I am so sick the world blurs, she is there with some new old concoction. She asks if I remember the stories she used to tell, and begins another tale. But this time there is no grandiose folklore of deities or rulers. Just a crocodile and a princess. And a wisening bird feverishly lapping up dandelion root. She speaks hushedly, massaging her fingertips into my pressure points. *This is family*, she says, tracing along a vein. Vapor wisps from the cup into the air before my eyes, into the whites across her hair. I can feel the tea trickling down my throat. *This is blood*.