

This, she thought, was a mistake.

From the moment she stepped foot outside the apartment, Ting felt uneasy about her trip to the South Railway Station. Even in its emptiness, her unit was a haven from the rest of Beijing. What it lacked in glamor, it made up for in familiarity. Gleaming linoleum, glistening white kitchen appliances, a lamp on every table and the ficus in the corner - all abundantly familiar, and comforting.

But Beijing?

There is nothing familiar about Beijing, Ting thought, pausing at the landing to fasten a face mask. At least there wasn't for a while.

As she descended through the stairwell, she remembered first arriving in the city when she was nineteen. Decades later, she could hardly untangle those memories from reality. During those darker years, she remembered wondering: was the city always so quiet? When she first stepped off the train herself, the roar was deafening. But for several years, the city seemed as quiet as a morgue. Ting stepped outside.

That quiet wasn't from an absence of people. No, thought Ting when a sidewalk bicyclist clipped her purse - there were certainly enough people in Beijing. She didn't feel that way, though, during those dark years. If the city's population had tripled, how did its streets feel so lonely?

Another bicyclist clipped her elbow. Stop. Breathe. She searched around and saw the signpost for the school. One block too far. She turned back around.

Ting's journey was a tug-of-war between her reverie and the navigational demands of a veiled city. She remembered, in her own schooldays, learning about nomads who found their way with the position of the sun. Those nomads, she scoffed, had never lived in modern-day Beijing.

Another wrong turn. Ting stopped, closed her eyes, and breathed. She couldn't be late. She just had to find her way through the fog, to greet her daughter at the station.

As she stood, a golden warmth spread behind her closed eyelids. She opened them to find herself drenched in a pool of light. Far above, directly over her head, floated a bright, shining orb. Its glow rained down onto Ting's face, dissipating the obscuring fog that pressed in on her. She could now spot the far streetcorner. Just beyond it, another glowing orb suspended in the sky.

She knew where she was.

Steeling herself, Ting hurried forward, guided along the way by the soft light of these orbs. They shone, like a thousand little suns, washing away the grime to reveal Beijing, the city she knew and loved. She arrived at the gaping mouth of the South Entrance with ten minutes to spare.

Safely at the platform, Ting allowed herself to reminisce about the introduction of those orbs. These one thousand suns, benevolently watching over a cloaked city, were the latest addition to Beijing's cityscape. At first, they seemed like little more than a fairytale, a metropolitan ideal imagined by some whimsical artist. Yet, Ting remembered, they had never felt absurd.

More absurd than the idea of a thousand floating orbs was the surreal condition of the city at that time. Its quiet, dirty, desolate landscape had grown entirely unrecognizable. By then, natural sunlight was unable to penetrate the smog that suppressed the city. Its millions of inhabitants were left to grapple through the darkness of a new, unfamiliar city. The people and government of Beijing grew aware of this existential threat, though, and measures were taken. Factory emissions were curbed. Private cars were consolidated into shared transportation. And a thousand tiny suns were suspended into the sky.

Those suns, Ting reflected, were the most powerful measure Beijingers took that year. After decades of gradual disorientation, they found a way to reclaim the city. They found a pride in the sun, and a pride in its light. They remembered their pride in the Beijing they knew.

A handsome teenager interrupted her daydream to offer a seat. Ting accepted, though her back remained rigid with anticipation. She wondered if, perhaps, Mingxia had met a young man like that while in Shanghai.

The blaring ping of the intercom sliced through the haze, making Ting jump as a mechanical voice announced an arrival. Just then, train at the opposite platform lurched forward with a piercing screech. Suddenly panicked, Ting turned to ask the polite teenager, "What city for the arriving train?"

As she found his eyes, a puff of exhaust enveloped the two strangers, and suddenly he was lost. Ting turned, searching. The muffled quiet of the city was amplified at full volume, her ears pulsed with a cacophony of pings, announcement, dialects, howling trains.

It was then that she thought to herself: this was a mistake.

A train arrived at the platform where she stood, where she was supposed to be waiting, ready to greet her Mingxia. As the doors opened, the entire station became enveloped in the city's signature smoke, as if to welcome the newcomers to the city of darkness.

Somebody bumped into her elbow, the same place she had been clipped by the second bicyclist. Why was it so dark?

"Mingxia!"

She ripped off the face mask and inhaled a bitter, acrid breath. The footsteps were already quieting. The train's engine revved back into life.

"Mingxia!"

Even the skylights were not enough to diffuse the shadows around Ting. Closing her eyes, Ting saw the fog of the old Beijing pressing in, cloaking the scene around her. If only she had another little sun, another gentle, glowing orb to help her find her way around the platform.

The haze thinned just enough to reveal a dozen girls marching purposefully past, any of whom could be her Mingxia. Ting called out again, but choked. Squinting, she willed the air to clear enough that she might make out those protruding ears, or a familiar hair tie.

Furrowing her brow against the haze, she followed the girls outside, where an orb was poised above their heads, waiting to melt away the smog and reveal:

"Mingxia!"