

Tracking Shadows

By Caroline Gao

It all began the night I lost my shadow.

I slammed the door of my beat-up red Toyota Camry. It had taken me five tries to pass my driver's license test, but in the end, it was all worth it. In front of me was a shop with faded red lettering *Bite Size Bakery*, the bakery that my family had owned for two generations. I pulled open the door, stumbling through the doorway as the tiny cluster of golden bells hanging from the ceiling chimed.

"There you are!" my mother said as she walked out of the storage room carrying a sack of flour in each hand. "I need you to take out the trash in the kitchen."

I groaned. "Mom, you called me just for that?"

"Nope, you gotta wash the dishes, clean the whole entire shop, put up the Lunar New Year decorations, and, if you can, help Dad with glutinous flour for the Osmanthus Nian Gao."

"But where's Josh?" I asked grumpily, crossing my arms. He was the one who helped out every year when the demand for Nian Gao became too overwhelming for our parents to handle. I attempted to tie my tangled hair into a ponytail with a rainbow-colored scrunchie I found in my pocket.

"Your brother went back home to pack," my mother said as she pushed the swinging doors aside to enter the kitchen.

I rolled my eyes, drifting along behind her. "Oh please, he's always going on and on about how smart he is because he got into Johns Hopkins. He's already gone over his list of supplies like a hundred times. He just needs to put stuff in a bag. How hard can that be?"

She sighed. "Kat, Johns Hopkins *is* a good school. Your brother is smart, but he's not that smart. He can be really forgetful. Besides, he is just excited because he got into a good college, so leave him be

and work for once. You should be more like him. Becoming a doctor will make it so much easier to live a stable life. Fashion designers are either really successful or extremely poor.”

“But—”

“Stop arguing and empty the trash can. And where’s your sister?” my mother asked as she hauled the contents of both sacks into a giant metal mixer right below the overused motivational quote that read *Never Give Up* in bold black on a yellow background. The color, although faded, still hurt my eyes.

“I don’t know,” I replied while yawning. I rubbed my eyes, still sleepy although I had lazed around at home for half a day. “I thought she’d be here by now so I didn’t bother looking for her.”

“Could you go and find her? I hate to say this, but you need to be supervised.”

“Mom, I’m sixteen! Why would I need a thirteen-year-old kid watching my every move? And besides, Angie’s been acting really weird lately.”

“Just text her. *Please.*” Her patience was wearing thin, so I whipped my phone out of my pocket and sent Angie a message.

Mom’s asking for your help in the shop. Get over here right now, Angelina Yushang Lin.

After placing my phone on a table, I grabbed hold of the garbage bag inside the trash can, trying my best to lug it out the doorway. A trail of translucent slime inched behind it on the ground, as if it were a snail. Opening the door was a struggle, and I accidentally ripped a hole in the plastic, but thirteen minutes later I ended up back in the shop, sweat glistening on my forehead.

I reached for my phone. No text message yet.

I’m serious, Angie. Where are you?

My head throbbed as the sunlight beat through the window, directly at my eyes. The boxes of red-colored decorations sat on the table right next to me. I was itching to open the box so that I could hide some of the tacky decorations in the shop, although for only a week. Years ago, my parents had painted the walls throw-up green with dull yellow stripes, put a bouquet of fake flowers on each table, and placed a welcome sign banner above the cash register that had faded from black to gray.

One minute. Still nothing. The sound of a knife striking wood came from the kitchen. My parents shouted at each other in a language that I could barely understand.

I stood up and walked toward the table next to me. Decorating by myself couldn't be so hard. My parents did it every year.

An hour later, I had only managed to place a variety of good luck charms all around the bakery. They were smiling cat statues with one paw waving back and forth wearing red collars. A rickety gray stool stood by the window at the front of the shop, the lower part of one of its legs missing. There was no way that I would use that to help with my decorating. Most of the banners and hanging lanterns were still on the table although some had fallen onto the floor, lolling around idly.

Each year, I would see decorations like these around me as my family and I ate from a table piled with food, the number of platters always even numbered. Mom said it meant unity while Josh told me that it was because the First Emperor of China said so. The older relatives would hand the younger ones red envelopes with cash inside. Then, they would lecture us about working hard because only then will you get good luck. To me, it was silly back then. Luck was only probability, the chance that something may or may not happen. Now luck meant everything. Maybe this was a sign that I was growing up. I finally had a belief I was attached to that I wanted to keep alive as long as possible.

I reached for my phone again and pressed *Angie* on my contacts. The line rang twice before she answered.

“Angie, why haven't you responded? Mom's asking you to help with the bakery today because Josh decided that packing for Johns Hopkins is more important than the family business.”

“I don’t need you to be sticking your nose in my business. You usually don’t care about what I’m doing, so why are you bugging me now?” she whispered, as the loud sound of a video game theme song played in the background.

“Ang, who’re you calling?” came a voice followed by raucous laughter.

“Angie, is that—?”

“Hey, it’s me, Gia!” the same voice said, but much louder this time. *“You’re Katherine, right? Ang’s sister? I can’t believe someone who’s this cool is the sister of a loser.”*

Gia was the type of person that didn’t have a filter. She was blunt with her words and never showed up on test days. This year she dyed her hair a metallic blue and got four piercings in her right ear. Four.

Some rustling followed by a loud thump at the other end of the phone. *“Gia, give me my phone back. Even though she is boring, I gotta talk to her. My mom will get upset if I don’t.”*

I blinked back the tears that welled up in my eyes. When did my sister become so rude? Just a week ago, she spent half of her Saturday with me because I wanted to go to the zoo. We spent hours watching as penguins were fed shiny silver herring out of Home Depot buckets as they swam around in the pool.

I inhaled sharply, my patience wearing thin. “Listen, I need you to come to the shop right now. Josh is busy and Mom and Dad have to do the baking, which means we have to hang up the Lunar New Year decorations and clean the front of the shop.”

“No you listen, Kat. I’m done doing the things that you don’t want to do. I’ve been babysitting you my entire life although I am a whole three years younger. I want—no, I need a break. I just want to relax this year instead of following you around everywhere like a servant.” She sighed. *“Just—tell Mom I can’t come today, okay?”*

My stomach twisted with anxiety. I couldn't do it all by myself. But my sister had done me so many favors in the past. Once, she didn't study for her history finals because I was struggling on a science project about air density. Too many times I'd forgotten my lunch at home, so she would bring extra money to school to buy me something.

"Fine."

There was a faint click.

I placed the phone back on the table and went inside the storage room to find a step stool, grabbing a can filled with tacks on the way. One by one, I hung the lanterns on the ceiling, filtering the cheap bright lights into a pattern on the tiles below. I placed a money tree in the corner farthest away from the cash register, red tassels hanging off most of the branches, then tacked Fu posters on every available space on the wall, covering a major part of the tacky wallpaper.

The door swung open right after my phone lit up. 5:51 along with a Gmail notification popped up onto the screen. Gia walked in through the door, dragging a clearly upset Angelina behind her.

"She's here at your service, Kat!" A smile spread across Gia's face as soon as she saw the giant red fabric dragon I had just pulled out of a box.

My eyes widened a fraction as Angie was shoved right in front of me.

She opened her mouth to speak but hesitated for a moment. "I'm . . . sorry," she finally choked out.

I cracked a small smile. "Why are you sorry, Angie? I've been the one not doing anything except piling all the work on you. I think I should be the one handling things for a change."

"You're right, you're lazy, but you're a great sister and have always been there for me when I was upset. I shouldn't have burst out at you like that."

"I'm sorry too, but if we don't finish cleaning up the store by six, Mom said no Nian Gao for us."

Angie laughed, picking up a handful of tacks. “Gia, help me out here. I can’t possibly hang this all by myself.”

The dragon went up on the right wall. I watched as Angie whispered something into Gia’s ear and they both giggled. It wasn’t possible for my sister and me to be inseparable all the time. I would have to learn how to stop myself from depending on others too much.

My shadow was gone, but she had become a person of her own.