

MIRROR.

“There’s a monster in the mirror!” Yingyue sobs into her mother’s warm arms, refusing to go back into her room alone. Her parents look at each other quietly in understanding. They know better than to believe what she is spewing, perhaps she’ll be better at sleeping alone when she becomes braver.

From when a baby is born, she is not alone. She has both her parents, recording every little movement of hers for the memory to last. She has them in a constant state of unrest that she is watched all the time. They tend to feed her with reassuring words every minute of a day in hopes it'll help build some confidence in her. All this in hopes that she grows as a loved, healthy child.

When she gets her own room at the fresh age of six, she receives a full-body mirror to fill up an empty corner of her room, courtesy of her parents. She admittedly was ecstatic, “My first night alone!”, she boasted to her classmates. That very night, she lies awake on her bed at an ungodly hour of the night. The moonlight was the only source of brightness in her room. All she could hear was her own breathing, in contrast to her parent's loud snores which she had grown accustomed to.

“*Yingyue.*”, a small voice calls for her, demanding her attention. Her curiosity gets the best of her, and her eyes follow what her bedside lamp could illuminate, meeting eyes with something within her mirror. However Yingyue didn’t see her normal reflection, instead she saw a distorted figure. It was menacing, about her size, but it’s terrifying gaze made her feel smaller in comparison.

Her once heavy eyes grew wider than ever, dropping the sheets that weighed her down on the bed. Despite her panting that followed a scream, she's light on her feet, scrambling away from the monster to seek solace in her parents’ once more.

By the time Yingyue grows too big to fit in the same bed with her parents, her father coaxes her to finally get accustomed to sleeping alone. She deduces the monster only arrives at night, for precautions she simply has bedsheets to envelop her, turning her away from the mirror. She won't have to meet eyes with it, was her reasoning. It indeed helped the nights go by a lot faster, which was a godsend in her opinion.

Unfortunately, the next time she saw it was not at night.

She hears the door click shut from her room on a quiet afternoon, her mother probably leaving to get groceries. Curling up on the center of her bed, she clutches on her pillow for something to ground her. “*Yingyue.*”, the same voice calls for her, but it didn’t make her gut drop to the carpeted floor like she would expect. Yingyue sits upwards and covers her face with the pillow, slowly peeking outwards to meet eyes with the monster again. It’s been a while, maybe she’s gotten a bit braver. Maybe it was the fact that it wasn’t dark, but the monster looked more human than she thought. The pillow sits on her lap as she quietly stares. The silhouette of it mirrors her, a bit of a mess, her brain helpfully supplies. “Please leave me alone.”, she gains the courage to request, and it’s lips move at the same speed as hers. “*You are alone.*”, the voice replies, but this time it’s lips don’t move. Yingyue becomes skeptical, unsure how to respond to this revelation. The gears inside her head start to form another question, but her train of thought gets cut off when her mother arrives, calling for her. The split second she turns her head away from the mirror, the monster dissipates. She’s rather confused when she’s met with her normal reflection.

Yingyue doesn’t tell her mother this time.

When she grows old enough to hold a phone in her hand, she wishes she could control the monster a little better.

She finds it almost everywhere. In the classroom, it taunts her to speak clearer when she’s presenting to the class. In the cafeteria, it feels it’s presence beside the empty seat in front of her, staring at different tables occupied by friends. In the bathroom, it’s in the mirror, watching her pitifully eat in a stall.

Yingyue finds an alternative, she decides to spend a large amount of her time on her phone, quenching her thirst for interaction and knowledge outside school instead. She learns a little more about the world, more about herself too, in the least favourable way yet. Presenting herself like that to the unforgiving world that young, she finds herself thrown into a cage with starving animals, ready to be mauled.

Nonsensical ideals were ingrained in her mind, and she believes it nonetheless.

“*Yingyue.*”

Her eyes follow the call to meet an exaggerated version of the monster. It’s body was sickly thin, pale skin that was meant to be seen as beautiful looked like the sun no longer wanted to shine on her. It was a twisted version of what she had perceived as beautiful. The seemingly fragile monster had a bite to its words. Mean, disheartening phrases she hears on the internet recited

with her own voice, feeding her consciousness with the bait. She makes a last ditch effort to be offended, but she couldn't help but agree. "Why are you so mean to me?" she says with bitterness lacing her words, "*You're allowing it.*" it tuts.

"What do you mean, I'm allowing it?" Her voice is evidently hurt, mostly confused. "*Oh Yingyue,*" it sighs exasperatedly, Yingyue didn't know that monsters could do that. She waits for an answer she never gets, and her mother calls her name from downstairs.

She gives up asking and turns off her phone.

When the candles on Yingyue's cake increases to fifteen, she's learnt it's best not to question the monster's existence. She pointedly decides that learning to live with the monster is her only option, and that she'll have to just live with it. In retrospect, she has found a way to spite the monster in it's games. On good days, she used the ruthless criticism to push herself in order to become something untouchable to the monster. However, it could be outright suffocating on bad days, an enhanced version of the encounter she had a few years ago. The insults that sounded like it came from herself would hurt deeper, and she felt like it's arms that were eerily similar hers could reach out and grab ahold of her neck.

She eventually figures out it prefers to appear when she's alone, so she solves this by surrounding herself with people. Nights of calling to tell her mother that she'd be sleeping over at a friend's house, or that she can't be bothered to go home. She hasn't interacted with the monster since, and she preferred it to stay that way. Yingyue liked to stay busy with people, inviting herself into their parties, picking up habits of theirs to fit in so that she could stay. She was convinced they'd catch her when she falls.

She finds out the truth about them the hard way, however.

Yingyue believes it's her fault, that she's back to square one in her bedroom. She squeezes her pillow tighter like she would've done with a friend, her salty tears seep into the cotton. "*Yingyue.*", there it goes again, she doesn't want to acknowledge it. "*Yingyue.*" It repeats itself, again and again. It rings in her ears, the monster wrapping itself around her like a snake choking its prey. It's an overwhelming sensation, the only evident thought in her head was hoping someone would come in so it could go away. She eventually gives up and looks straight at the mirror. She's met with someone that doesn't look like her anymore, the only resemblance left is the heavy eyebags that come from restless nights. "Who are you?", her eyes quiver. This time, she wished it didn't answer her.

“I’m a part of you, Yingyue.”

And as if it wasn’t clear enough, it specified itself, *“Your anxiety.”*

The next day, she’s forced to face the same people that betrayed her.

She comes early to avoid the captious gazes inflicted upon her, but the squeaky clean floors has her looking at her reflection with a newfound disgust. Yingyue manages to avoid interaction, right until lunchtime.

She was playing with her food until a classmate, who she’s rarely talked to, takes a seat in front of her in the cafeteria. “Hey there, can I ask for a little favor?” He asks with a hint of hopefulness in those eyes, and she forces herself to say yes. *“Might as well try to be useful.”*, she hears it whisper.

When it’s time for Yingyue to pack her things into boxes, she feels a little hesitant to clear out her room. All the nostalgic memories come back to her as she goes through her things, already rusting and piling up with dust. Pictures of her taking her first few steps stuck to the wall, the desk her father bought her as a surprise. University comes by faster than Yingyue had expected.

The same classmate she talked to in that cafeteria eventually was the one to be giving her friendship bracelets, then it turned into red roses. He held her hands one night, looking into her eyes so she’d know he was sincere. “I wish you’d have more confidence in yourself as much as I have in you.” She promised him she’ll have a go at it, and he promises to stay by her side through it.

For the last three years Yingyue has gotten a hold of herself a little, having a heart to heart talk with her mother after that night, exploring how and why she is the way she is with professionals recommended by her mother’s friends. After some suggestions and prescribed pills, she learns not to be afraid of ‘it’ anymore. She spent a few nights alone with herself, and it felt like she could breathe normally. Of course there are times that it gets out of control, but she’s learnt how to get back on track when things don’t go her way, and she’s content with that.

She folds the last of her clothes and gently places it inside her suitcase. *“Yingyue.”* Again she meets the full-body mirror, ready to face it head on. This time she sees something more—human. More like her, like it wasn’t some cursed anomaly anymore, it had all her features in all the right places. Her brown eyes were in place of what was supposed to be pitch black.

For the first time, she smiles at it, and it returns the same expression.

When it's the day she wears a white dress, Yingyue is no longer afraid of being alone.

The man she loved soon would be waiting at the altar to exchange golden bands. Her mother comes along to help her put on the veil, happy tears streaking across the wrinkles on her face. "Your father would be astounded by how beautiful you look, darling." She whispers, engulfed in the same warm hug she has given the night Yingyue ran to their room, devastated. They remained quiet for a moment, before her mother pulled away. "I'll head out, you can have some time for yourself." She cheekily bids goodbye before leaving the room.

"Yingyue."

She turns around to meet it beside her reflection, enjoying the way she holds her head a little higher with her face decorated in happiness. Her eyes, filled with pride, sees that same silhouette slowly alter itself. It felt different from all the encounters she's had, it felt like anxiety was replaced with something... better, like anticipation.

"Do you think I'll be okay?" She asks the woman in the mirror.

She doesn't need an answer for her to know.
