

#justgirlythings

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For all the letters we wrote to each other, we never wrote in Chinese. Or if we did, I don't remember. Her last letter was eight pages long, wide-ruled, big bubbly handwriting in thin-point mechanical pencil. She had somehow slipped it into my backpack one afternoon when I wasn't looking. Fourteen years ago, I sat on the floor of my high school lobby, writing eight pages back, not knowing I would never get a response.

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She had always been more sure of herself, always knew more than me that every conversation was a game I couldn't win. Teenage girls rarely come into their skin, whether they choose to decorate it or not. She did, I didn't. Not that our differences were surface-level. Rather, our similarities were: we were both Chinese girls who would rather do choir than gymnastics. We lived in the same neighborhood, rode the same bus. If I took my mother's last name, our names would be identical. Our parents were friends too. In a FaceTime call last week, my mother told me that she had run into her mother during a walk in the neighborhood. I remember we saw them when I was taking the SATs; her mother said that it had been a long time since she had talked to mine. I remember the guilt in my stomach that they had to catch up because of us, and the bewilderment that it was so easy for them to talk like they were picking up where they left off. I think about how much easier it is to keep friends when you're an adult.

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I don't know why we're friends, she'd say to me, two months before we stopped talking. I'd reply, I don't know why, either. I don't say, *I don't mind it, I like it, I like you.* She'd say, every time we're asked to partner up, I just gravitate towards you. Me too, I'd say.

(I don't say, I don't mind it, I like it. I don't say, Doesn't that make it fate, then? Does that make us soulmates?)

We'd say, I love you (in a non-lesbian way.) When I was eighteen, four years after we stopped talking, I told my brother that I thought I was bisexual. When I was twenty-three, nine years after we stopped talking, I

realized I was a lesbian in a Starbucks. I don't know what it's like to be in love with a girl. Is it the same way teenage girls search for their best friend when they first walk into a room? Is it the comfort of finding another Chinese person in a sprawling farmtown? Is it seeing a stranger walk onto a cramped school bus for the first time looking small and anxious, and making room in your seat even though there's already someone next to you?

She had best friends before me. She would tell me all about them while we sat together every day on the morning ride to and from middle school. She'd invite me to hang out with them, list them as her sisters on Facebook, talk about meeting up with them at the mall when I'd never met them in person before. For her thirteenth birthday, I got her a friendship bracelet set from Claire's, thinking she'd give the other two to her other best friends. I went to her house early to help set up her party, and when she opened her presents later, she gave me one, like I was her best friend. Like she was mine.

It's so easy to talk about the way girls hate each other. Why did you have to get into gymnastics? she'd say to me, Now my mom is making me do it too. But we'd skip practices together, spending thirty minutes arguing about nonsense and talking about boys in the locker room. We both had crushes on the same boy when we were twelve. I think he looked at you, I'd say while glancing over at him during lunch. He might like you, she'd tell me when I'd recount an interaction with him from third period. Neither of us ever dated him. Someone told him that I had a crush on him and he went to her and said, Did you know? She's so weird. Isn't that gross?

She didn't like swearing, always rolling her eyes when our friends and I would to sound cool, but she replied to him: *Fuck off.*

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I didn't have an email before we became close. She told me I should get an AIM. We'd go from entire school days of classes and lunch together to instant messaging for hours afterwards, even when my mother came downstairs and asked if I was doing homework. I'd tab open the Wikipedia page for "American Civil War" on our family Win-

dows XP and tell her yes.

You should get a cellphone, she'd tell me, You should get an email address. Get a MySpace, GaiaOnline. Facebook. When I think of middle school, I think of days sitting in front of the computer, trying to find my way around a new website she told me about. When I was thirteen, I went to China in the summer of 2008 to watch the Beijing Olympics; when my dad picked me up, I asked if I could borrow his cellphone. I don't even remember why I called her then, but I remember hearing her voice for the first time in months, something from home that I had missed and didn't even know I did. She told me all about Kumon and all the people she'd met, wishing our mothers had conspired for me to join her there for the summer too. At the end, she said, I'll talk to you later on MySpace. I thought of the shitty internet back at the apartment, and I said, Me too.

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I still remember the layout of her house, the pale blue color of the walls in her room, the placement of her family's living room TV where we watched *Mulan II* together. Or maybe her family's already changed all that in the past fifteen years. Maybe she's not the same person I knew when we were fourteen, nor the person in just the snapshots of social media I see when I think about her. Maybe the version of her in my head doesn't exist.

Maybe when she said that she didn't know who she was around me, she was right. We were always paired, always together. She couldn't separate herself from her friendship with me, she said. I need some space, she said, I want to figure out who I am. I said, Okay, because I wanted her to know who she was too, because I didn't know yet that I didn't know who I was without her. We can act like we're mad at each other, but we can still pass notes, she said to me, and my heart settled again, relieved that the ravine might not have to be as deep as I thought it would. Two weeks after we started passing notes she messaged me something that hurt, that she knew would hurt, and I said, this is convenient, now it's real. She said, yeah, and then we didn't talk for four years.

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The love language of teenage girls is passing notes, lying side-by-side at a sleepover in the dark, whispering in a room full of other people and hoping nobody hears you. In a non-lesbian way, we said, so I didn't touch her whenever we slept in the same bed. I was always careful around her, aware that I was bigger than her at 5'2 and 140lbs.

Her parents are happily together; my parents were going through a nasty divorce when we were friends. I think she knew, but never asked about it, because I never talked about it. She accepted my invitations to church retreats and potluck dinners where I wouldn't know anyone, even though she wouldn't either.

All throughout high school, we avoided each other's eyes, never speaking directly, the space between us a split in the seams of our friend group. We went to the same party once when we were fifteen, and I put on a song I was obsessed with that blasted through the basement. Oh, I love this song, she said to our friend who was hosting. He'd glanced at me and said, I wasn't the one who put it on.

During senior year, I thought constantly about how long it had been, how much I missed her, how necessary it was for us to act like we hated each other even though we didn't at all. I thought about writing her another letter; I drafted three within the year. On the last day of school, I chickened out. The day before graduation, I wrote a two-sentence note telling her to email me if she was interested in talking again, and gave it to one of our mutual friends after graduation. That afternoon, I got an email from her in my inbox.

I don't think we can be friends the same way we were before, she'd written, but we talked at our friend's post-graduation party later that week. Someone went, are you guys seeing this? Are you guys talking again? Have the planets finally aligned the right way? I haven't talked to her since then, since we left for college, but I remember laughing, how natural it felt to fall back into conversation with her, smiling so hard and bright that my mouth felt like a piano string.

I spend a lot of time these days thinking about the

different universes that would be had I made different choices. I like to think there's a universe out there where I sent her a letter earlier, or maybe she had written back after the last time, or one of us messaged the other on Facebook apologizing for upsetting and getting upset. A timeline where we'd remained friends, at least until the end of high school.

But it probably wouldn't have lasted for much longer than that. It's harder keeping friends as an adult.

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She didn't believe in my god at the time, despite the number of my church sermons she came to. But that didn't matter to me, since we didn't pay attention to them anyway, passing notes on church bulletins instead, scribbling anything down just to talk.

Maybe one day we'll run into each other in another state. Maybe we'll run into each other in China. Maybe we'll run into each other when we're in our forties. We'd exchange numbers, and she'd say, I remember when I'd always tell you that you needed a phone when we were twelve. I'd laugh and say, I remember too. Maybe one day the planets will align again and the last

thing in my inbox from her wouldn't be a half-hearted *Happy New Year!* from 2013.

Maybe I'll scribble a note on a bridge, a pen-sampling paper, a tree, with *I was here* or *I like girls* or 我愛你. Maybe I'll come back to it and see her handwriting again, not as bubbly, or perhaps just the same. Maybe, one day, she'll write back. ©

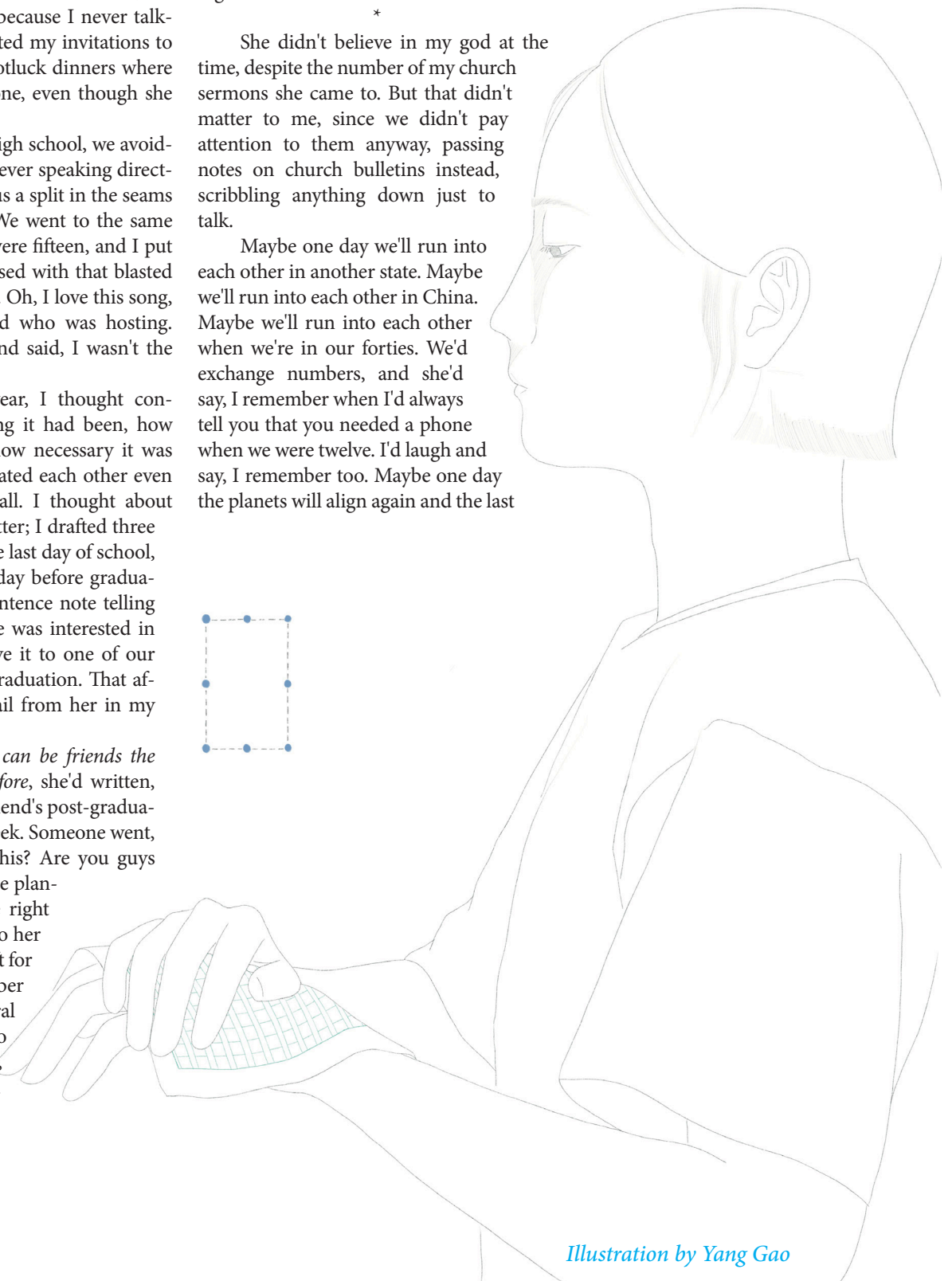


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