

When
Things
are Alive
They
Hum

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press

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For Camilla

Part One

Harper

When things are alive, they hum. You can hear it if you put your ear to the chest of an animal or if you lean close close close to a plant. My own hum goes dum dum da da dum da dum. This is the sound of my heart talking to me. I hear it best when I am in my favourite place: on the landing at the top of the stairs, where it is quiet and the wood feels smooth under my feet. My toenails sparkle with glitter nail polish, the same colour that my Marlowe used to paint on for me.

I look up and out, through the windows and over my dad's garden, which is on top of a cliff that touches the wide sea. The water is black from the night and the moon is orange and furry and full. In the glow of its strange light, I see birds flying low and slow.

The birds are fighting the wind.

Marlowe

We were naked in bed, breath still hot and fluttering, when the doorbell rang. It was only eight in the morning – no one ever rang at this hour. Before Olly even stirred, I rose, slipped on my robe and hurried down the stairs.

‘Morning, love.’ At the front door of our Battersea home, a courier was holding a bright yellow DHL package marked *Urgent*. Inside the waterproof wrapping was an all-too-familiar homemade envelope, addressed:

For my sister Marlowe 明月 Míng Yuè Eve from your sister
Harper 明华 Míng Huà Eve
Number 23 Battersea Brije Road, SW11
In the United Kingdom. My dad is from the United Kingdom.

Usually the letters arrived by standard post; why had this one been sent by courier? Shivering in the chill morning air, I tore open the envelope.

This is the 24th January in the year 2000
To Marlowe,
It has been 11 months and 2 days sinse you visited us at home
and 3 hole years sinse you left home for your bugs university.

How are you? I am not fine.

To tell you the truth I am upset rite now. Yesterday I went back to the hospital with a sore chest again. My hart is brocken. Not like in Romeo and Juliet becos I have my boyfrend Louis, do you remember him? My hart wont work properley even tho I am in love. I am not scared becos I know the doctors will fix me. They always fix me. The only thing that is strange in my hart and mind is that I do not understand why the doctors sent me home at the end of the day. Before wen I was sick I stayed overnite in the hospital until I was better. Remember?

This time, the hospital was a bit boring. I herd the nurses at the foot of my bed taking about the Down syndrome thing. Their words were stranje in my hed so I said HEY IT IS CALLED UP SYNDROME and that they were not as lucky as me to have the up syndrome but sometimes life is not fare. Then they looked at me and did not say anything so I asked them to get me a coke.

Marlowe I would like you to come home now please. 外婆Wài Pó and Dad said to wate before I call you becos we are going to speek to another doctor tomorow and he will sort me out. 外婆Wài Pó said it is good not to bother you rite now becos you are at the bugs university and that is very important. But I desided by myself to tell you to come home becos you fix things. You are very clever.

Yesterday Louis said he cod make this leter reech your hands like a speedy gonzaleez using the DHL sistem of posting mail.

If you come home to Hong Kong I promis to share my speshel things with you like my 3 mars bars and my personel

packet of malteezers given to me by Louis with love. But please do not tell stepmonster about this becos it is personel private information between you and me.

Shakespeare knows all about the love and I love you.

From your sister Harper明华Míng Huà Eve.

I reread it once, twice, the skin on my back prickling, then I shut the front door and climbed the stairs.

Inhale, exhale.

Dad had called a few days earlier to let me know Harper was sick, that her heart was playing up again, but I didn't think much of it; he called even when she had a minor cold.

Don't worry, Dad, she'll be okay. She's had this her whole life and she always pulls through.

In calming his fears, I'd reassure myself. I found his calls irritating because they tended to stoke my own anxiety. After Mum died I'd assumed the role of Harper's carer, but I had to remind myself that I *wasn't* her mother. For the first time, I had my own life.

'My own life.' I said it aloud, but with a twinge of guilt, aware that I had a healthy body and opportunities that my sister didn't have. How was it fair that things came easily to me and not to her? How was it fair that I had a strong, healthy, beating heart when hers was fragile and flawed? 'My own life,' I repeated, cringing at how selfish that sounded. And I was selfish. It had been almost a year since I'd visited home. I hadn't even returned for Christmas. But only one more month to go and my PhD would be complete. I could visit Harper then. And she would be fine in the interim. Despite her frequent trips to hospital to treat the myriad problems associated with her congenital heart disorder, she always recovered. And, I reminded myself, Harper wasn't alone – she had Dad, Wai Pó and, of course, Louis.

I folded the letter, slipped it into the pocket of my robe and headed back to bed. There was nothing to worry about.

Blood – it tasted rusty and sweet on the tip of my tongue. Damn, I must have been biting my lip again. I detoured into the bathroom and checked it in the mirror. Sure enough, it had begun to bleed. I applied pressure to it with my sleeve and I stared at myself for a moment. Strands of hair the colour of wet soil brushed my forehead. Mum's large eyes were lit with Dad's blue irises. I ran my fingertips over my pale skin, following the angular lines of my cheekbones – also just like my mother's. Now, more than ever, I longed for her. I briefly touched the gold locket at my neck, then made my way back to the warmth of our bedroom.

Olly was standing by the window, sandy curls tumbling over his forehead as he spoke tenderly to his cupped palms. Peering over his shoulder, I saw he was holding a seven-spotted ladybird.

'What are you doing here, little one?' I asked. At this time of year, the insect should be hibernating somewhere warm, somewhere safe.

'There's an old matchbox in my bedside table,' Olly murmured.

I poked several holes in the lid of the box with the nib of an old pen, then using one of my fine make-up brushes, I watched as Olly coaxed the creature from his palm.

'Let's put him over there.' I pointed to a dark corner of my dressing table, next to a photo of Harper and me when we were small. Dressed in matching light blue dresses, we stood under a banyan tree in Dad's garden.

'Who was at the door?' Olly asked. He put the matchbox down and looked at me.

'DHL. A letter from Harper.'

He frowned. 'DHL? What's the urgency?'

My stomach did a somersault. *Urgency.*

'She's sick again.' Why was I denying it? Something wasn't right.

I made for the phone in the hallway. Using my international calling card, I dialled home. Wài Pó answered.

'Míng Yuè!' I loved my grandmother's voice; although it seemed somewhat tired, she always sounded so elegant, regal even. Her words floated in the air for a second or two after they had been spoken. 'Nǐ hǎo ma? Keeping warm in London, I hope?' Although she was born and raised in Shanghai, traces of her early British boarding school years had left their mark.

'I'm fine, Wài Pó.' As always, I replied in English. In the sixteen years since Mum died, I had refused to speak in her mother tongue. 'You okay?'

She described the weather in Hong Kong and then began to recount the latest dish she'd cooked for her mahjong ladies. In the background, I could hear sounds of the kitchen; dishes clanging in the sink, the steady drone of the exhaust fan and Wài Pó's Chinese opera on low. I pictured her sitting on a stool by the kitchen phone, the front window open allowing fresh sea air to waft in. Suddenly, I felt an unusual longing for our Clearwater Bay home.

'How's Harper *mèi mei*?'

There was a pause. Wài Pó cleared her throat. 'There's no need to worry.' I could hear the crinkle of a candy wrapper, followed by the smack of her lips as she sucked hard. 'You have an exam soon, yes?' She was trying to change the subject.

'It's not really an exam; it's called a thesis defence and it'll take place in a month. I just received a letter from Harper. She said she went to hospital.'

The sound of Wài Pó's hand smacking against what I presumed was her thigh.

Long exhale. 'She told you.'

'Dad called a few days ago to tell me she wasn't well.'

'There's no need to worry. She's just had a few issues with her heart. But she's okay.'

'Is she in the hospital again?'

The sound of hard candy cracking into pieces against a gold filling.

'Wài Pó?'

'Míng Huà is back home. She's sleeping now. No need to worry. *Jiā jiā yǒu běn nán niàn de jīng.* Each family has its own difficult scripture to recite. 'You must study hard now. Your *mèi mei* has Louis by her side, looking after her.'

She was right. It was largely thanks to Louis that I felt I could leave Harper to come study in London. She was happy, and with that came a stretch of reasonably good health.

'How is Oliver?' Wài Pó asked. 'When can we meet him?'

'Soon,' I lied.

'You'll bring him to Hong Kong when you next visit?'

'Sure.' I had no intention of taking Olly to Hong Kong yet. Although I wanted to introduce him to Harper and Wài Pó, I also liked the fact that he was separate from them all, untouched by my family and their many needs.

'I'll call again soon,' I told her.

'Look after yourself. Study hard for your exam.'

Just one month to go, I reminded myself. Just one month.

'Yes, Wài Pó, I'll study hard.' I heard the crinkle of another candy wrapper. 'I promise.'



'Hey,' Olly said, 'come back.' He was staring intently at me across the kitchen table. I had been replaying the conversation with Wai Pó in my mind, unable to shake the creeping sense of unease that tightened the muscles in my neck.

'You okay?' He reached over to take my hand. Despite the cold, his hand was always warm. 'How about I make you some eggs?'

There was still time. Olly didn't have to be in the lab until 10 am and my meeting with Professor Lipin was an hour after that. I nodded.

Olly sang when he cooked and it was the same song every time he made eggs: Van Morrison's 'Into the Mystic'. Hand in pocket, I touched the letter again, reminding myself yet again that Harper was hospitalised every few months. This time was no different.

I was distracted by a tickle on my leg. One of our little phasmids had escaped from its cage by the pantry. I leaned down, picked it up by the thorax and placed it back in its manmade home. I vowed not to think about Harper for the rest of the morning and instead focused on Olly, who was snipping leaves of basil, parsley and thyme from the pots under the kitchen windows. He was better at caring for nature than me. Everything he touched seemed to bloom.

He transferred the herbs to the chopping board, guiding his knife over them with the same precision he applied to his work in the lab, where he was studying the reproductive cycle of the large blue butterfly, *Maculinea arion*.

Crack, whisk, the splatter of eggs in an oiled pan, and then, with a kiss on my forehead, the omelette was on the table in front of me.

As I picked up my fork, he said, 'I have something for you.' He went to his backpack by the door.

My heart raced, scared he was going to remove a ring box. In the three years we had been together, he'd told me many times he

wanted to marry me. When he produced a piece of paper instead of a ring, I felt relief wash over me.

'Read this.' He handed me an information sheet about the Royal Zoological Award. 'You'd make an excellent candidate.'

I swallowed a large mouthful of egg in one go, trying to quell the shiver in my belly. No. No. No. I could feel heat rise to my cheeks, my breath uneven. I resisted the urge to spring from my seat.

'Why are you showing me this?' I asked.

'A while back, a few of us decided to recommend you. The application has been sent.'

'What?' I clenched my sweaty palms into fists. How could he do this behind my back? 'Why didn't you ask me first?' I slid the paper back across the table.

He sighed and shook his head. Even when I knew he was irritated, he looked calm. If he were a tree, he would be an old pine, with a tall, sturdy trunk and roots that reached deep into the ground.

'Marls, you're one of the most promising PhD candidates the university has. Your research on the symbiotic relationship between the *arion* larvae and the populations of the *sabuleti* will significantly aid the conservation practices of the butterfly.' He gripped the side of the table and took a breath. 'You've got everything you need to win. You've done the hard work, your research is solid. You've got the brains, the dedication. You know as well as I do what winning this award could do for your career. Think of all the doors it could open for you.'

'You're right.' Still, I could feel heat intensifying in my cheeks at the thought of it. Attention made me uncomfortable, whether it was my supervisor praising me or socialising with a room full of people. I felt most at ease alone in the lab, looking down the lens of a microscope, observing rather than being observed.

My fidgeting hands refused to still. 'I know.'

'You know?'

I hadn't meant to sound arrogant. 'I didn't mean –'

'It's okay,' he interrupted. 'I just realised...' He rubbed his face with his hands. 'I've had this all wrong,' he said, more to himself than to me. 'You're not scared you won't win, are you? You're scared that you will.'

I wanted to crawl out of my skin.

'You don't want the attention, do you?'

To avoid answering, I swallowed the last of the omelette. 'Don't you have to leave soon?'

'I'm sorry.' He squeezed my arm as I brushed past him, carrying my plate to the sink. 'Forget I said anything. I'll go get ready.'

Suddenly I was alone in the kitchen, listening to the sound of water shuddering through the creaky pipes in our walls. For a rare moment, there were no eyes on me, no demands, no expectations. It was just me and a few dirty dishes in a warm room that smelled like basil. I washed our plates, put the eggshells into the compost, watered the plants and refilled the bird feeder outside the window. Then I looked around for another task, something to occupy my mind, dispel the unease that lingered in me.

I wandered over to peer into the phasmids' leafy cage. Anxiety was such a useless emotion. The fight-and-flight response had value if one was facing danger, but in that moment there was no danger. Everything was under control. Yet still I had this craving to be held, soothed. I wanted to run upstairs and fling myself into Olly's arms. How pathetic, I scolded myself. I wasn't the dependent type. I could handle things alone, just as I had been doing since Mum died. And then I saw our oldest *Carausius morosus*, affectionately named Lesley when we'd brought her home two years ago. She was on a

twig on the right-hand side of the cage. I moved closer and gasped. Half her skin had shed but the rest was stuck, abdomen fixed to a branch. Her tarsi were dry and shrivelled. How could I have let this happen? With a toothpick, I gently tried to pry her free, but it was too late. She was limp, lifeless. I stroked her thorax to make sure she wasn't playing dead. She remained motionless. Those damn heaters; it must have been too dry for her. A careless, careless mistake.

Dropping the toothpick to the ground, I ran up the stairs, calling Olly's name. He was in the bathroom, towelling himself. Lacing my arms around his bare chest, I breathed him in. His scent reminded me of grass and fresh air. And, for a moment, I was at peace.