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## The Middle of Things

THE FIRST DAY OF THEIR YEAR arrived four weeks later than the rest of the world's. Or, perhaps, the rest of the world's year had simply started forty-eight weeks early. In either case, the day was marked by great occasion: work and study were suspended for a week to accommodate cross-country travel and family reunions.

Seven days seemed ample in theory but was startlingly short in practice. If anyone knew this to be true, it was Ming. He had seen enough in past decades to know what to expect: half the holiday would be spent traveling, the other half bickering with family. Most saw their New Year's duties—praying to saints, gifting red envelopes, and burning shiny joss paper for ancestors—as an accrued debt they paid once a year. But to avoid them altogether was out of the question: no one dared upset divinity.

As master of rites at Taiwan's most auspicious temple, Ming carried the country's fate like a cherished candy beneath his tongue. At times, however, he did wish he could fulfill only those duties with the smallest margin of error or embarrassment. Today—New Year's Day—Ming prepared to open the temple with a shaky hand and dry throat. Through the door, he sensed one hundred bodies pulsating with a united fervor, indistinguishable in their sufferings and desires. Templegoers always wanted the same things: health, wealth, happiness, and love. Above all, they wanted immunity from misfortune and affinity with fortune.

And then the mob trampled in, nearly knocking Ming off his feet. He backed away from the stampede just in time and followed the pack until he discerned a figure at the front. A woman had broken from the crowd, leaping over stone steps to the gold-plated basin in the temple courtyard. Her face broke into a victorious grin as she planted the head incense, securing the first blessing of a year that would surely be in her favor. The others followed, and soon the large basin, already brim-full with ashes, was packed with a hundred glowing incense prayers.

Now the day's festivities could begin. Ming delegated tasks around the temple: supervising worship, cleansing souls, and interpreting fortunes.

Prayers and conversations alike were made public in the open air, and the snap-pop of firecrackers accented the soundscape like an orchestral score with no beginning or end.

By the time the reporters arrived an hour later, Ming was eager to complete his final and most important task of the day: drawing the fate of the country for the coming year. Of course, he himself was not determining their fate, but instead relaying the prognosis of the temple's saint. There were saints covering all matters of life — career, health, and love, to name a few — but this temple's saint specialized in collective fate, something Ming pictured as a constellation in which every citizen was a star, and which formed an image only from a distance. He had performed the annual duty seamlessly for decades, and there was no reason to believe this year would be any different.

And yet, Ming grew hot under the searing gaze of the temple-goers and camera crew, not to mention the twenty million watching on television screens across the country. Millions waited for Ming to draw their fate, a matter made all the more urgent by the impending election, where the president would face off against a younger (but not necessarily less experienced) candidate: a moderate, upright woman with a head for politics and heart for people. By and large, Taiwan's citizens blamed their current leader for the country's deteriorating conditions: electricity shortages, banana surpluses, and overseas competition for semiconductor manufacturing. In less than two years, the once popular president had become a national scapegoat, rebuking his critics with sharp horns; a favorable fortune this year could provide him a much needed boost at the polls.

Across the courtyard, a reporter smiled at Ming good-naturedly, but her heavily made-up face reminded him of a Chinese opera mask, painted and artificial. Slowly he walked to the altar. Atop it rested a bamboo bucket holding one hundred wooden fortune sticks, each coded with a different number. Beside the bucket lay a pair of the temple's most auspicious oracle blocks: two crescent moons, curved on one side and flat on the other, the wood painted red like blood.

By now, Ming could perform the steps of selecting fortunes in his sleep (and in fact, he had dreamed of doing so more than a few times):

- 1) Shuffle the fortune sticks in the bucket until one protrudes above the others.

- 2) Draw the protruding fortune and lay it with its number code facing up.

3) Toss the oracle blocks. A pair landing on the same face (both curved or both flat) signaled a *no* from the saint; a pair landing on opposite faces (one curved, one flat) signaled a *yes*.

4) Repeat steps 1–3 until you receive three consecutive yeses, signifying confirmation of the fortune from the saint.

5) Match the number code on the fortune stick with the corresponding slip of paper that detailed one's fate, which range anywhere from *low-low* to *high-high*. As would be expected, *high-high* fortunes are the most auspicious, while *low-lows* are the least.

Ming knelt on the prayer mat and began shuffling the sticks. In the sudden hushed air, the wooden fortunes clacked against each other with a familiar cadence.

If this year were anything like the past, the country's fate would reveal itself in under ten minutes, fifteen tops—roughly the time it took to draw a third of the one hundred sticks. History had verified time and again the accuracy of these fortunes. It was not uncommon for querents who received *high-highs* to win the lottery by the month's end, or for recipients of *low-lows* to be involved in traffic accidents shortly after.

Ming's own fate he drew annually on his birthday, though it was more ritualistic than anything, for he always received *middle-middle* fortunes. And it was apt: he had a very *middle-middle* existence. But it was no time to ruminate over his uninspired life, which was, if nothing else, righteous.

The first fortune fell to the ground. A symphony of whirs and clicks erupted as a dozen cameras zoomed in on Ming's quivering hands. He recognized the stick's number code—13—as corresponding with a *low-low* fortune.

Against better judgment, Ming thought: *Please be a no, please be a no*. He tossed the oracle blocks with a sharp, learned flick. The pair landed on the same side—a *no*—and he breathed a sigh of relief. He picked them up and repeated the action. No again. Then, a third no. A temple volunteer offered Ming a handkerchief, which he graciously accepted to wipe his brow.

*One down, ninety-nine to go.*

But even under scrutiny of the camera crew, no gaze was as piercing as the altar saint's. As they had done on Ming's first day at the temple, the saint's wrinkled eyes now squinted down mockingly, as if withholding a life-altering secret whose reveal required the surrender of one of Ming's own.

Shuffle, draw, toss. Shuffle, draw, toss.

Ming cringed each time the oracle blocks landed, as jarring as the morning's stampede. Each time they yielded another *no* from the saint, the audience gasped, groaned, and grunted a little more loudly. Ming wondered if they, too, were riding the emotional arc of disbelief, confusion, and anger. Until now, he had never considered the possibility of not receiving a fortune confirmation from the saint at all.

Ming adjusted his sweaty knees on the prayer mat, which failed miserably in padding the stone floor underneath. His heart thumped in rhythm with his actions: shuffle, draw, toss. The sound of the sticks against the bamboo bucket decrescendoeed to a sad rattle. By the time the bamboo bucket held fewer than thirteen fortune sticks, the initial mob of temple-goers, including the woman who planted the head incense, had left. Even the sun seemed exasperated and soon disappeared behind the clouds.

And at last they were down to the final four fortunes. The opera-mask reporter motioned for the cameras to zoom in. Ming met her eyes once again, and each saw in the other a look of hopelessness.

Surely the fate of Taiwan was inscribed onto one of these remaining sticks. Ming's heart quickened slightly, off-tempo. Shuffle, draw, toss. Shuffle, draw, toss. Two fortunes left. Shuffle, draw, toss. He eased out the final fortune.

Across the country, millions watched Ming's shaky hands. Flipping the fortune over, he saw a familiar number—48—and knew that it was a *middle-middle* fortune, the same one he had drawn on his previous birthday. It wasn't a *high-high*, but any fortune was better than none.

He tossed the oracle blocks: *yes*.

Again: *yes*.

*Please be a third yes, please be a third yes.*

The red-moon oracle blocks clattered to land on two identical, curved sides. Their flat surfaces faced upward like a pair of empty palms: *No*.

So that was that. Out of one hundred fortunes, none had been confirmed with three yeses in a row. Taiwan was now a fortuneless, fateless country.

The air hung heavy in resignation, and a sadness settled over the courtyard like an unassuming winter fog. The reporters seemed not to know how to process the nonevent, for they soon packed into their

vans and left with the remaining spectators. Ming clutched the empty fortune bucket and realized that disappointment was a palpable thing. Looking up, he faced a starless canvas sky.

THAT EVENING, Ming was cleaning the altar saint's face with a damp cloth when its porcelain features brought to mind, for the second time that day, opera masks, and the reporter with the painted face. In a mere three hours, news anchors had popularized the theory that the saint was withholding their destiny as some sort of punishment for the state of the country. The finger-pointing had officially begun: some blamed the energy department for the electricity shortages, others the agriculture department for the banana surpluses. Those who could not quite place their blame simply directed it at the president.

After some more polishing, Ming realized that the saint's eye wrinkles were in fact a dozen tiny cracks fanning outward like fish-tails. How did that happen? Either he had missed a mischievous child climbing the altar and taking a small hammer to its face, or the cracks were simply a product of natural decay. Or maybe the saint really did reside behind those porcelain eyes; it laughed and cried and aged like the rest of them.

The temple's fortunes had never been inaccurate, but perhaps that was because the government and citizens subconsciously worked to make them true. And then a terrifying idea gripped Ming: maybe the saint *was* withholding their fate as some sort of punishment—not for the condition of their country, but for having relied so heavily on the fortunes that they never tried to challenge fate. The saint's eyes, so mocking just hours ago, acquired a new intensity that made Ming shudder. He took the oracle blocks from the altar; the prayer mat's fresh indents welcomed his knees like an old friend.

*Dear Saint, forgive me for sounding rude . . . but are you punishing us? Are we responsible for our fate? Or rather, our fatelessness?*

Once upon a time, Ming had tried to change his own fate, too—to break away from his beer-battered father and betelnut-breath mother. The final straw for him had been when, returning home from school one afternoon, he came across the two of them muttering about having another child, when they could barely afford to take care of four, just for the tax benefits. And so Ming showed up on the temple steps with nothing but a razor, four hundred yuan, and the clothes on his back. Seeing no future for himself at home, he bowed to the master of rites:

*My future is yours.* Yet Master Wei had been clear from the beginning. *That's too precious a thing for me to accept. Your future is no one's but your own.*

Those first years at the temple were probably when Ming had come closest to a *high-high* existence, when the rest of his life still lay before him like a pair of gloves to grow into. Since then, Ming had selected, without fail, only *middle-middle* fortunes on his birthdays. He found them utterly useless. What did *middle-middle* even mean? That his life was average? Or that the average of his life, after accounting for all the highs and lows, was average?

Ming sighed. It had been ages since he thought seriously about his high-low youth, when any familial tenderness (a midnight delivery of tofu pudding, an extra bill slipped to him on birthdays) was inevitably offset by some stupid action of his parents, whose greatest flaw was that they never saw themselves as parents. He chased the roller coaster of their whims until he no longer knew love from indifference or up from down.

The setting sun bounced off the gold-plated incense basin, confirming Ming's belief that evening was more beautiful than it was anywhere else in the world. He clasped the oracle blocks that held his fate, but he no longer wished to learn it. Instead his mind was elsewhere: fishtail wrinkles and beer-battered fathers, blood-red moons and betelnut mothers.

And what of their country? Was Taiwan's future stone-set, like the steps leading up to the incense basin? Suppose the current president were reelected, and his foreign policies grew even more irrational and immutable, his domestic platform continuing to favor his party over the people. Or suppose the moderate newcomer was elected. Maybe she, too, would eventually renege on her platform promises.

Maybe it wasn't that Taiwan's fate did not exist, but that it was not yet known. They were in the middle of suspension and speculation, caught in the subjunctive of what should have been and what could be. Ming thought: both fatelessness and *middle-middle* fortunes resulted in uncertain futures, which scared people into blaming others. But if they looked past the fear, there was liberation, too. The future was a blank slate—a canvas sky they could inscribe themselves.

Ming pictured himself standing at a forked trail: *right or left, high fate or low fate.* He could turn left or he could turn right, but he wasn't going to *not* turn. Perhaps it was his fate to change his *middle-middle* fate, regardless of what was already written.

A soft crinkling sound brought Ming back to his surroundings. There was nothing outwardly different about the saint's appearance, but the eyes had changed, he was certain of it. Most obviously, the fishtail cracks seemed to have disappeared, and the eyes were not quite as mocking as before, but more encouraging, challenging. Ming looked up at the dimming sky with its emergent stars and willed the constellation to reveal itself.