

Paper Flowers

By Nathaniel Fang

I remember that day in the library, hearing you accidentally bump into a customer. “Watch where you’re going, lady!” he said. He was a young man, clearly too focused on his own life to have seen you walking in front of him. I remember hearing you apologize in the lowest of voices. *Sorry*. It must have been one of the few words you knew in English, because you just kept repeating it. From the balcony above, I looked down to the library’s four-way courtyard to see what the commotion was. You kept your head low until the man left in a hurry. After that, you went on sweeping the courtyard as if nothing had happened.

You swept and swept the stone floor, collecting fallen leaves and trash that people had left behind. You swept around the flower bushes and under the log benches. You swept until your broom found something new – a paper flower. Looking around, you wondered how someone had forgotten something so delicate. Either way, it was trash now. I heard the opening of the garbage lid as you threw it out. Once I heard the lid close, I tossed another flower over the balcony’s railing, watching it float gently down to you. This time, you caught it in the air. You looked up to the floor above, hoping to catch a glimpse of who could be making these paper flowers. “Hello?” you yelled up at me. “You drop?” and held the flower up to the sky. I wasn’t sure whether or not to respond. I opened my mouth, but a moment’s hesitation was too long. Another customer’s voice echoed from below.

“Excuse me, do you know where the restroom is?” You were silent in response. The customer gave you a puzzled expression and asked their question again. Silence.

Just then, a woman’s voice came from behind. She spoke with confidence. “The restrooms are down that hall on your right.” I heard footsteps as the customer left. The woman spoke again, “Good afternoon, Mrs. Ling. I presume things are going well out here?”

You nodded.

“Good. If a customer ever asks you anything that you don’t know how to answer, just point them to my desk right through that door, okay? Okay. And clean up these paper scraps, someone could slip.” The woman exited the courtyard. I listened carefully as her heels clicked on the stone pavement and as your broom began to sweep again. From inside the library, I heard the woman’s voice again. “Honestly, I don’t know what we’re going to do with her. Mrs. Ling barely speaks any English – she can’t just be paid to sweep that courtyard all day long. It’s a waste of everyone’s time.”

Not knowing what else to do, I tossed down another paper flower. I didn’t look to see if you noticed, but a few moments later, I sent another down. I repeated this, folding flowers and letting them float off the balcony, the process almost rhythmic. I don’t know why I felt the need to make you so many; if anything, I must have been making your job harder. I only stopped when I heard the sound of your voice from inside the library.

“Who make?” you asked in a hushed voice, careful not to disrupt anyone’s reading. I couldn’t see it, but you were holding one of my flowers to show one of the clerks at the front desk. The young man, unable to decipher what you wanted, could only give a half-hearted chuckle. You asked your question again, this time pointing towards the courtyard. The clerk must have made some sort of connection, because soon I heard you walking with him out to the courtyard. “Who make?” you repeated, pointing up to the balcony.

The clerk thought for a moment. “Unfortunately, the second floor is closed off for customers – it’s staff only.” He must not have known that you *were* staff. You didn’t have the words to explain that to him. He walked back to his desk.

I don’t know what made you do what you did next, but I leaned over the railing to see you storming back inside with a determination I had yet to see, clutching several paper flowers in your hands. This time, you approached the woman who spoke to you earlier. “Second floor,” you said to her. It was not a question.

“Excuse me, Mrs. Ling, but why would you need to go to the second floor? That’s where the staff works.” You *were* staff.

“Second floor.”

The woman scoffed. “Fine, if you must, the stairs are behind the front desk.”

When you reached the front desk for the second time, you did not stop to ask the clerk for help. Instead, you walked firmly past him and began to climb the stairs.

“Excuse me, ma’am, you can’t go up there,” he called to you. “It’s staff only.”

“Wǒ shì gōngzuò rényuán!” you yelled back at him. *I am a staff member.*

As you ran up the stairs – for you were now being pursued by the young man – you were still holding the flowers I had made for you, practically crushing them in your grip. You flung your head left and right, searching for the balcony exit. The chase caught the eyes of every staff member who had been previously working, and they watched in awe as the clerk struggled to keep up with this elderly woman.

Finally, you found the balcony which overlooked the courtyard. It was empty, safe for a log bench for people to rest at and enjoy the view. On that bench, you saw three things: a stack of origami paper, which no doubt provided for the paper flowers in your very hands, a thin book that had been checked out of the library on the basics of Chinese for English speakers, and one final paper flower. You clutched it in your hand gently, dropping every other flower to the ground. The clerk reached the balcony, pitifully catching his breath, just in time to see you unfold the flower.

In terms of words, you possess fewer than dollars to your name. You sweep the stone floor of the courtyard from dusk to dawn, gathering the filth that we wouldn’t want our customers seeing. You do this not for yourself, but for us, the library. If anything, you have shown this building more care than I ever have, even though it is never reciprocated. That is why I have never listened to my staff when they say you are a waste of time and money. It is why you will work here until you no longer wish to, while that clerk is certainly losing his job after this. It is why, Mrs. Ling, when you unfolded that final flower, you read a note scrawled in poorly-written Chinese: Wǒ tīng dào nǐ de shēngyīn. *I hear your voice.*