

BOOKMARK
by Serena An

Characters

LYDIA YIN	22-year-old masters student, 24-year-old PhD student
ANGELINE JIANG	21-year-old college student, 23-year-old author
PROFESSOR (JINGYI LI)	Late 50s, professor of Chinese literature

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Prof. Ken Urban and my 21T.350 classmates for their useful feedback during class. Thank you to Crystal Chang, Prof. Claire Conceison, Prof. Wiebke Denecke, Kaia Johnson, Benjamin Landauer, Xiyuan Meng, and Clarice Yi for helpful conversations about translation, Chinese literature, and graduate student life.

SCENE ONE

LYDIA and ANGELINE are at a cafe.

LYDIA

Translation is something that most people don't think about, when it's done correctly that is. It's the only job where the better you are at it, the more invisible you become, and no matter what you're always seen as inferior to the author. But the process behind translation is beautiful. I could describe it as conducting an orchestra of words, or building a bridge between two languages and cultures. In my case, it was a bridge in another sense too: the first time I met her was through a translation project.

ANGELINE

Nice to meet you, Lydia right?

LYDIA

Yeah! And you're Angeline?

ANGELINE

Yep.

LYDIA

So, I just started my masters here, and my class has a project where we have to translate something and discuss with the creator.

ANGELINE

Okay.

LYDIA

And my advisor suggested that I reach out to you, saying you do creative writing.

ANGELINE

I have written some short stories before, in Chinese.

LYDIA

That'd be perfect.

ANGELINE

You can choose one. I printed out my favorite three.

LYDIA

Thanks! I'm excited to read.

ANGELINE

Actually, not many people have read them before, so let me know what you think. These days I'm writing more in English, because of my classes.

LYDIA

Is it harder for you to write in English?

ANGELINE

It used to be, but now it's mostly just different. With English, I'm much more intentional about the words I use.

LYDIA

Oh that's interesting. Like when you speak too?

ANGELINE

Nah, I still don't have a filter. I went to an international high school in China where could only speak English. We weren't allowed to speak Chinese.

LYDIA

You weren't allowed to speak Chinese?

ANGELINE

We'd get "strikes" every time we did.

LYDIA

My parents probably wanted to do that. Growing up, they'd speak Chinese to me, but I'd always respond in English. I only realized how useful Chinese was during college, and I'm even studying Chinese literature, but now they're stressed about about my career prospects. Nǐ zhèng bùliǎo qián (你挣不了钱).

ANGELINE

What do you want to do in the future?

LYDIA

I want to be a professor, following my own research interests, and I enjoy teaching. The only thing is I don't like how academia is oftentimes about connections. I want to become well respected in my field through my own strength.

ANGELINE

I can imagine you as a professor.

LYDIA

Yeah?

ANGELINE

Like the type of professor who really cares about her students.

LYDIA

Aw that's kind of you. I hope so.

ANGELINE

I had this one professor... oh actually it was your advisor Jingyi! I took mythology with her and really liked it.

LYDIA

Wow really?

ANGELINE

I'd go to her office hours and just talk sometimes. She'd always put her hand on my arm
(reaches out to touch LYDIA's arm)
and be like "Angeline, it's okay. Don't worry, it's okay"

LYDIA

Oh she's done that to me too. Or like once, but I accidentally pulled away.

ANGELINE

You didn't this time.

LYDIA

I guess not. *(pause)* Um, what about you? For what you want to do.

ANGELINE

I have a deep urge to create.

LYDIA

Wow...

ANGELINE

And I want to do what I want: writing. Wouldn't it be such a privilege to write for a living?

LYDIA

That sounds amazing. It seems like we both want freedom?

ANGELINE

Yeah. But to get there, it might be hard, and there might be things we don't always want to do. In my case, I have to really commit and produce good work, the earlier the better.

LYDIA

I think you can. I mean I've only looked at the first line of this story, but the fact that you're already putting yourself out there is incredible. If you write something good in the future, I could translate it officially.

ANGELINE

I'd really like you to. Do you want to make a deal? You'll translate my book into English...

LYDIA

What's in it for me?

ANGELINE

If you become a famous professor, I'll write your biography.

LYDIA

(LYDIA shakes ANGELINE's hand)

Deal!

(to the audience)

I wouldn't say I chose to become a translator, but that it found me. My studies inherently require translation from Chinese into English. So much more is translated from English than into it, so I'd like to think that I'm making a difference, bridging two languages. And that day I began to feel that it could bring together two people, too.

SCENE TWO

ANGELINE and LYDIA are seated at the dinner table in LYDIA's apartment. Music is playing softly in the background.

ANGELINE

(pouring wine for LYDIA and then herself)

You're a good cook.

LYDIA

I'm glad you liked it. I feel like I have a really specific taste / so...

ANGELINE

In women?

LYDIA

(almost spits out her wine)

What??

ANGELINE

Just kidding, but it's cute when you're flustered.

LYDIA

It's too early for that. I haven't had enough wine yet.

ANGELINE

Okay, then. How did you learn to cook?

LYDIA

I just figured it out once I moved off campus. My family always said that cooking for yourself means you won't be taken advantage of. Like one of my friends ended up working at this company just because they had free food.

ANGELINE

Instead, you can take advantage of people, and I'm becoming the loyal employee.

LYDIA

Maybe... Anyways, how's your new short story going, the one about the two strangers. Do they have a special connection?

ANGELINE

Probably. Do you know what exactly draws you to certain people?

LYDIA

Is that a rhetorical question or...?

ANGELINE

Like for you, I'm jealous of people who can learn a lot of languages. My memory is so bad. Your phone is in Korean right?

LYDIA

Yeah it's a masters requirement.

ANGELINE

You speak English, Chinese, Korean...?

LYDIA

And some Latin from undergrad, because comparative literature. What about you?

ANGELINE

Just Chinese and English.

LYDIA

What's your Chinese name?

ANGELINE

Jiāng Hǎiyīng.

LYDIA

The characters are...?

ANGELINE

(takes a pen and sticky note from the side of the table and writes)

Jiāng (姜) ginger, Hǎi (海) ocean, Yīng (英) heroic.

LYDIA

It sounds nice.

ANGELINE

Do you have a Chinese name?

LYDIA

(writes underneath ANGELINE's name)

Yeah, Yīn Liánhuā.

ANGELINE

Liánhuā (蓮花) is lotus?

LYDIA

Yeah and Yīn (陰) is darkness.

ANGELINE

That's so rare, I don't know anyone else with that character for Yīn.

LYDIA

Oh yeah, my parents told me that too. Your handwriting is really pretty by the way.

ANGELINE

I don't normally write like that. If I were signing my test papers, it would be more like this.

(writes fast)

LYDIA

That's something I'll never have experience with, no matter how much I study Chinese, I still didn't go through the school system there. Like how many poems do you know?

ANGELINE

One hundred.

LYDIA

That's so cool to me. I ask anyone else and they say zero.

ANGELINE

How many do you know?

LYDIA

Just a few by heart. Like chuáng qián míng yuèguāng. (床前明月光)

ANGELINE

Above average. But I'm sure you know things that most native speakers wouldn't.

LYDIA

Maybe. Do you know how tones work in Chinese music?

ANGELINE

No, I've never thought about that.

LYDIA

A song has a melodic line, but that can conflict with the lyrics since the four tones also vary in pitch. It turns out that the melody takes precedence, and native speakers can still understand the lyrics anyways. However in Cantonese which has six tones, they are actually often present in the music as otherwise it'd be incomprehensible and sound weird.

ANGELINE

You're such a nerd. Did you write a paper about that or something?

LYDIA

Yeah, you got me. Also back to the learning languages thing, I don't think it's about memory, because everyone forgets things. It's more about having an interest and a routine. But also, you had to learn English.

ANGELINE

It's fine, my high school was very immersive.

LYDIA

Oh yeah, immersion is so helpful. My home would've been the perfect environment for learning Chinese, but I used to be really embarrassed about it. There was this one girl in my kindergarten class who showed off that she spoke Korean, and I wished in that moment that I spoke Korean instead or really any language other than Chinese.

ANGELINE

You were like five so maybe this wasn't the reason, but it's definitely true that Korea has a lot of soft power these days, like with K-pop and K-dramas, and same with Japan. China doesn't have that sort of soft power in the U.S. or other western countries.

LYDIA

True... I wrote another paper on that.

ANGELINE

I knew you were gonna say that.

LYDIA

(laughs)

But honestly that's fine right. As an analogy for you, it's like writing for the male gaze.

ANGELINE

That was the hottest take I've heard from you so far.

LYDIA

Is it? What's your hot take.

ANGELINE

All cheese tastes the same.

LYDIA

What??

ANGELINE

Yeah.

LYDIA

Are you serious? Like mozzarella and blue cheese, how do these taste the same?

ANGELINE

No one has ever agreed with me.

LYDIA

Because you're wrong? Or your sense of smell is off? I'm now skeptical about when you said my food tastes good, like does all food tastes the same to you?

ANGELINE

No, bread and cheese are different. But all bread tastes the same too.

LYDIA

Maybe I can understand that a bit better, but like sourdough and white bread? Or white and whole wheat.

ANGELINE

They're the same to me.

LYDIA

That's crazy.

ANGELINE

Alright let's find something we agree on. Favorite animal?

LYDIA

Um... sorry I've never really thought about this. Maybe cats?

ANGELINE

Okay then, favorite language?

LYDIA

Ahh that's a hard question too. Out of the ones I know, or in general?

ANGELINE

Either way.

LYDIA

Maybe Thai? I don't understand it at all but I do like hearing it. The tones feel melodic. What about you?

ANGELINE

Honestly, maybe English.

LYDIA

That's a terrible take.

ANGELINE

Because it's what I speak with you.

LYDIA

Even worse.

ANGELINE

Okay, best novel?

LYDIA

That's too hard! There are so many.

ANGELINE

Worst novel?

LYDIA

The last 40 chapters of Hónglóumèng (红楼梦).

ANGELINE

Ha! You have a point. But sometimes it's not as interesting if you share the same opinion as everyone else.

LYDIA

So that's why you're so provocative about cheese.

ANGELINE

Read the last 40 chapters of Hónglóumèng (红楼梦) or admit that all cheese tastes the same?

LYDIA

Read the last 40 chapters.

ANGELINE

And how many have you read?

LYDIA

Like one and a half before I gave up.

ANGELINE

Then you better get started. Favorite author?

LYDIA

I don't have one.

ANGELINE

You could have said me.

LYDIA

Okay fine, you.

ANGELINE

Thanks, because you're my favorite translator, and I want to learn more about you.

LYDIA

Me too.

ANGELINE

Let's play a game. Tell me something real and something fake about yourself.

LYDIA

And then you guess?

ANGELINE

Maybe.

LYDIA

Okay let me think... The first one is that I wanted to improve my drawing skills, so I went to this one park every Sunday afternoon last year and drew caricatures of people sitting nearby. The second one is that in elementary school, we were doing a volunteer activity in a forest, but then a tree fell on me. I screamed for help, but no one heard.

ANGELINE

Oh wow. Actually don't tell me which one is real. I want to try to figure it out, but it might take me some time.

LYDIA

Okay. Do you have one for me to guess?

ANGELINE

Sure. One, I don't know what I'm doing with my life. Two, I'm going to write a best-selling novel.

LYDIA

What? I didn't know you could make up stuff about your future?

ANGELINE

(shrugs)

Which statement do you think is real?

LYDIA

The best-selling novel, obviously.

ANGELINE

Thanks, I hope you're right.

LYDIA

Okay I get this game now, let me try again. One, you're going home soon. Two, you're staying over tonight.

ANGELINE

That's too easy.

ANGELINE leads LYDIA offstage.

SCENE THREE

ANGELINE and LYDIA are studying together in LYDIA's apartment.

ANGELINE

I like your keyboard cover. I just love it when there are signs of use, like how the “a” is totally rubbed off but the other letters aren’t.

LYDIA

Yeah?

ANGELINE

Yeah it always tells you something. Last year I went to a cocktail party on the top floor of this crazy fancy apartment, and the elevator had long columns of gold buttons. But guess which one was completely rubbed off.

LYDIA

The ground floor?

ANGELINE

No, it was the “close door” button.

LYDIA

(laughing)

Such impatient people...

ANGELINE

Yeah. I can’t imagine being in such a hurry that I would need to save one second.

LYDIA

Or for privacy, so people don’t know which floor you live on, or to avoid being in the elevator with other people, especially for a long ride.

ANGELINE

Mhm. What are you listening to by the way?

LYDIA

Oh just some old K-pop album. I never like new music, I have to hear it for awhile in the background, like at stores or cafes, before it grows on me.

ANGELINE

I'm the opposite, I get tired of things easily. Like music, food, sometimes people.

LYDIA

Oh. Like talking to me?

ANGELINE

No, never you. But sometimes I wonder if you do.

LYDIA

Why?

ANGELINE

To be honest, I've noticed that you started having Do Not Disturb constantly on, and it's only after I started texting you a lot.

LYDIA

That's true... but it's because one day I was in a meeting, and then I guess I never turned it off. I do like talking to you, and I don't have anyone else who messages me that much. Am I responding to you fast enough?

ANGELINE

Sometimes. But also sometimes I text you back right away and then you take eight hours.

LYDIA

Sorry. Sometimes I see it but am in the middle of something. But I'll get better at that. I don't know... I don't know how you do it.

ANGELINE

Do what?

LYDIA

You're always so carefree and have so much energy.

ANGELINE

Maybe because I get enough sleep. How many hours did you sleep last night?

LYDIA

Maybe five?

ANGELINE

What were you doing?

LYDIA

I have an essay due tomorrow that's nowhere near complete, I'm meeting with my advisor on Wednesday and haven't done enough in the past week. Also I need to finish up the translation of your short story. Ugh, I never stay up late because I want to, it's because I have so much to do.

ANGELINE

But all you do is work. I've seen you less and less the past few weeks.

LYDIA

But I feel like I'm just doing the bare minimum, to get by in my classes, and to make my advisor happy.

ANGELINE

Jingyi is chill though.

LYDIA

Yeah she is, but maybe too chill. I sometimes wish she'd get more disappointed at me when I didn't get my work done because I'm not getting anywhere with my research.

ANGELINE

Have you like, always been this busy?

LYDIA

At least since my junior year in college. I was taking six classes, to become competitive for grad school admissions. I had so much to catch up on, because I hadn't really considered grad school before then. People told me that things would be easier in grad school, but I've only felt busier since then.

ANGELINE

Is the grind ever going to stop?

LYDIA

Maybe once I get tenure.

ANGELINE

That's in what, at least ten years?

LYDIA

Yeah.

ANGELINE

Then what if you shut your laptop and went on a walk with me.

LYDIA

That does sounds nice but I don't know...

ANGELINE

Don't burn yourself out now, let's go outside. And think about how I'll be graduating in a month.

LYDIA

Ahh I do want to, but I don't think I can.

(LYDIA reaches out for ANGELINE's arm, but ANGELINE pulls away)

ANGELINE

Have you thought about what happens after I graduate?

LYDIA

(thinks for a moment)

Not really.

ANGELINE

Why not?

LYDIA

I don't really feel a need to. I feel like if things are going well, then we don't need to worry.

ANGELINE

That seems unlike you. You told me one of the first times we met that you specifically want to have a baby when you're 35.

LYDIA

It's because after my masters I'll be 23, after my PhD I'll be 29, then an assistant professor for five years until I'm 34. Then once I'm an associate professor and have tenure, six years into the university seems like a reasonable time to take the fall semester off for maternity leave, and the spring semester off for a sabbatical.

ANGELINE

Am I in your future calculation?

LYDIA

Any amount of time we can spend together is good.

ANGELINE

That makes me sad for some reason.

LYDIA

Aww don't be sad.

(LYDIA hugs ANGELINE, but ANGELINE pulls away.)

ANGELINE

It's okay. *(pause)* You know, I'm planning on going back to China once I graduate.

LYDIA

So that's why you asked. Would you have changed your decision if I had thought about it more?

ANGELINE

I don't think so.

LYDIA

Good.

ANGELINE

What?

LYDIA

That means you can make your decisions independently and do what's good for yourself. That's what I have to do for myself oftentimes too. And I recognize that it can be polarizing. Like all the times when I have to say "no" to hanging out because I need to get my work done. Then I can actually enjoy it when we do hang out.

ANGELINE

That hurt.

LYDIA

Why?

ANGELINE

Why? You're more invested your work more than in me.

LYDIA

When did I say that?

ANGELINE

Just now basically, but you also don't need to say anything, it's in your actions! I understand you're busy, but when you can't spare a few minutes to glance at things I send you, don't have the energy to initiate any hangouts, I feel like I don't matter enough to you. Were you happy with how things have been going between us, or were you just telling yourself that?

LYDIA

Why would I tell myself that?

ANGELINE

Because you don't know what to do about it if you're not. You're way too busy and shut out everyone when you have deadlines, which seems to be all the time.

LYDIA

You don't know what my life is like. I have to make it in academia. I chose it, and there's no turning back. But this is nothing compared to what my family does. They run a restaurant, working 12-hour workdays, 7 days a week. I don't have the fucking luxury of writing for a living like you, and if that doesn't work out, then "whatever I'll figure it out" as you've said so many times. I wish I had your life, honestly it sounds like a lot of fun. But having fun is not going to get me a professorship at Stanford.

ANGELINE

Yes our lives are different, yes I'm lucky that I can become an author which not many people can make a living from, and yes I understand your ambition better than anyone else. I feel like I've been very understanding but you don't listen to me! When I invite you to stuff I know you'll make up reasons for why you can't go, when it would be better if you just said you don't want to today.

LYDIA

Well I've tried that too, and it didn't make you feel better.

ANGELINE

Because I *liked* spending time with you! And now I almost don't recognize you anymore, or what I liked so much about you.

LYDIA

I think we actually agree here, that I am busy, that I have a "problem" with prioritizing my work, and it's making you unhappy. But that's the reality for the foreseeable future and you either deal with it or leave, which is fine by me. I have better things to do than argue with you right now.

ANGELINE

You are so fucking cold.

LYDIA

I don't give a shit about what you say about me, from now on.

ANGELINE

I didn't want things to turn out this way.

LYDIA

It's good you're leaving for China. Fresh start, if I'm such a negative influence on you.

ANGELINE

I wished that you'd be more sad about it.

LYDIA

Shouldn't you be glad that I'm not?

ANGELINE

No, that's not how emotions work.

LYDIA

Sounds like you know everything so well. How emotions work, how you feel, how other people feel, how other people should feel, and then when I'm so different from your model of "how people work" what do you do then?

ANGELINE

I have been trying so hard to get along with you.

LYDIA

And same for me with you. Then what isn't working?

ANGELINE

I just don't understand you.

LYDIA

What about me?

ANGELINE

How you can be so oblivious to how other people feel in the real world? Yet you're so well-read, able to analyze the meaning and emotion of literary texts.

LYDIA

I'm doing perfectly fine. I might be a hermit by your standards but I'm happy, I love what I'm doing and I love my life.

ANGELINE

You just said you wish you had my life.

LYDIA

Something changed just now when I realized that what you think doesn't matter to me anymore, that I don't need your approval. You might think it's a hard life, but I *will* do it, I am motivated, and it's my only choice.

ANGELINE

Hope I see your name on the walls when I walk through Stanford in ten years.

LYDIA

You will. You know, you tell me so much about the future. But I care more about the present. And by focusing on the present, I know that I'll be able to secure my future.

ANGELINE

I am being genuine. I don't think we'll get along on a personal level again, but as you always say, academic life is separate.

LYDIA

I better be finding your books on the shelves in a few years. Chinese or English.

ANGELINE

This is it then.

LYDIA

Yes. Safe travels next month.

ANGELINE

Have a fun six years of grad school.

LYDIA

I will, don't worry.

ANGELINE gets up and walks out of LYDIA's apartment.

SCENE FOUR

LYDIA is facing the audience, standing up.

LYDIA

(to the audience)

“The Restaurant.” It’s a story about a family-owned restaurant whose business is struggling. The clever young daughter comes up with an idea to save it: customers have to go to the restaurant alone, and they’ll be paired with another person for a meal. This generates a lot of attention, even makes the news, and the daughter herself meets someone interesting.

But in the end, she realizes that most people don’t come out of the restaurant that satisfied, and that usually, people want to go to restaurants to socialize and deepen connections with friends or family. She then scraps this business idea by the time the Lunar New Year arrives.

Honestly, it wasn’t hard to translate. I think I cheated. I used to talk to Angeline all the time, so I just wrote it how I imagined she would tell it in English. The professor praised my nuanced phrasing, and I became a TA for the class the next semester. It’s just sometimes when I would work on it and imagine her voice, I’d end up imagining our last argument, and hear her shouting.

ANGELINE

What’s your role as a translator if you’re just imagining how I would say it?

LYDIA

(to the audience)

Or sometimes I’d get into random conversations with her in my head.

ANGELINE

What’d be the difference from me just writing it in English in the first place?

LYDIA

(to the audience)

I’m not sure how realistic they were because we hadn’t been talking for awhile by then.

ANGELINE

What exactly is the task of the translator?

LYDIA

I can refer you to the scholars. Walter Benjamin says that translation is about finding kinship between the two languages and being faithful. He makes an analogy with a tangent line to a

circle. Rudolf Pannwitz says that translation is about making the target language sound like the source.

ANGELINE

But what do *you* think?

LYDIA

(to the audience)

She'd always ask me this. And sometimes it'd be about the most random things.

ANGELINE

Do you value humor? Like being funny?

LYDIA

Oh, uh, I don't know. That's sort of deep.

ANGELINE

Is it?

LYDIA

Or maybe just like, I haven't thought about it before. So probably not then? Do you?

ANGELINE

Yeah, I'd say a lot of people I enjoy being around are funny. I mean, they're fun and make me feel at ease.

LYDIA

(to the audience)

And then I'd feel bad for not being like that, in addition to not having a good response. She was always so confident, and always knew what to say.

ANGELINE

Hey, should I get this shirt?

LYDIA

It's up to you.

ANGELINE

But what do you think? It's 30 dollars, is it worth it?

LYDIA

I don't know, it does look nice on you, but I don't think I should be the one making the decision.

ANGELINE

Sometimes I just want to know your opinion.

LYDIA

(to the audience)

And I'd feel so indecisive, and unsure of myself. Did I really want to be more like her? After we had fought so much about our differences.

ANGELINE

So translation then, what's your take?

LYDIA

From my experience, I believe the task of the translator is to understand the emotions of the text, the feeling, and to be able to convey that in the new language.

ANGELINE

Hmm, that's a good answer.

LYDIA

(to the audience)

I turned in my translation for the class, but these conversations in my head continued. And then I'd talk with my advisor, and see the same themes reappear.

PROFESSOR

What is your reason for studying Chinese literature?

LYDIA

I'm not sure if I have a deep reason. My parents encouraged me to study something practical so I actually started out in biology. But I didn't understand it, so I switched to comparative literature, since I thought I could understand English better. Then I shifted towards Chinese literature to connect more with my heritage.

PROFESSOR

That sounds like how you ended up studying it, but why do you? Your reasons.

LYDIA

I don't know. It's interesting I guess? Sorry I should come up with a better reason.

PROFESSOR

I'm sure you have one, no one does this work without some reason. You might just need to figure out how to express it.

LYDIA

I know some people like to relate classical literature to the world today?

PROFESSOR

Yes, it is very connected. That is the whole point of studying literature, even from thousands of years ago. It tells us something about life then, and we still analyze it now not just because it's intellectually stimulating, but because we can apply it today. Although with the recent funding cuts, the government seems to beg to differ.

LYDIA

Yeah... I'm lucky to have gotten into the masters program.

PROFESSOR

I am not surprised, you are very hardworking. Sometimes, maybe too much. And this is rare for an advisor to say to their student.

LYDIA

That's what someone told me the other day.

PROFESSOR

It sounds like they care about you.

LYDIA

Oh I don't know... But I feel like I'm not doing enough. There's so much out there to read, that I don't know yet.

PROFESSOR

It's only your first year. If you read it all, you would be bored for the rest of your life. Learning is a lifelong journey. You know there's this other student that used to come to my office hours, and we would discuss from time to time. She wanted to be a "good writer," but didn't know how to get there. I said, it would be so boring if the first piece you produced was already "good." Life is about the trial and error, seeing how your style evolves over time. The important part is to put in a consistent effort.

LYDIA

That's reassuring. Thanks Jingyi.

PROFESSOR

In any case she's doing great these days. She graduated recently and is working as an author in China now. And her book won a prestigious award recently. That's how I know you will be fine too.

LYDIA

(to the audience)

I knew exactly who she was talking about, and it was something I had heard before too.

ANGELINE

It's going to be fine Lydia, everything's going to be fine.

LYDIA

You really think so?

ANGELINE

Yeah, I know you, and I believe in you.

SCENE FIVE

ANGELINE and LYDIA are calling.

ANGELINE

You wanted to talk again?

LYDIA

Yeah, sorry. *(pause)* How do I say this. *(pause)* I'm sorry about how I acted then.

ANGELINE

Okay...

LYDIA

I know I pushed you away. It didn't help that I was so stressed about my work. But I've been realizing recently that, you did a lot for me, and cared a lot about me, just sometimes in ways I didn't understand.

ANGELINE

Hmm.

LYDIA

I feel like I threw away what we had because of a heated moment.

ANGELINE

Maybe.

LYDIA

I know this is probably sudden and a lot, but thanks for listening to me. You don't even have to respond, and if you don't want to continue talking either, I understand.

(silence)

ANGELINE

Why'd you reach out all of a sudden?

LYDIA

I was talking to my advisor, and she was talking about you.

ANGELINE

What about me?

LYDIA

Just like what you're doing these days. But I don't think she knows that we know each other.

ANGELINE

What? Didn't she connect us in the first place?

LYDIA

Yeah, but she does a lot of stuff, so I don't think she remembers.

ANGELINE

And you never mentioned me to her?

LYDIA

No. *(pause)* Sorry, it's not—it's just—my work and personal life are separated.

ANGELINE

That's not true, like us.

LYDIA

Well, it's just, she's my advisor.

ANGELINE

I talked to Jingyi about all sorts of things.

LYDIA

You did? Like what?

ANGELINE

I don't know, family, relationships, life.

LYDIA

I didn't know she'd be the type to talk about that.

ANGELINE

You'd be surprised. You could try opening up to her sometime, because if there's one person in this world who cares the most about you, it's her.

LYDIA

Maybe you're right.

ANGELINE

I also thought that if I talked to her more, I could understand you better. Although it didn't really work.

LYDIA

Yeah, I'm sorry. You did a lot already. I should've been there to talk to you instead.

ANGELINE

Yeah.

(silence)

LYDIA

Um, also, I finished the translation of your story awhile ago, but never got to show you.

ANGELINE

Oh. If you want feedback or something I could read it.

LYDIA

No the class is over. I just thought, in case you wanted to see it...

ANGELINE

Okay, send it to me sometime. Also you should know that I published that story recently. Along with some other ones.

LYDIA

I know, I read it.

ANGELINE

You did?

LYDIA

Yeah, I hope that's okay. I just searched you up one day, I don't really know why, but then I found it.

ANGELINE

What did you think?

LYDIA

To be honest... It was really fucking good.

ANGELINE

(relieved exhale)

Oh.

LYDIA

It was like when we'd go to the library but then just tell each other stories instead of working. It almost felt like you were there with me. And that's when I knew... that I just felt like asking, in case there was a chance to do better. But also it's okay if not.

ANGELINE

First of all, thanks. You don't give praise easily. And second, I'll think about it.

LYDIA

Yeah, thank you, and no rush. You should only do what you feel comfortable with.

ANGELINE

But on the professional side of things, we're looking for a translator, to translate my book into English.

LYDIA

Wow congrats, that's a pretty big deal.

ANGELINE

Yeah. My publisher was probably just going to ask around, but if you're interested... I could let her know.

LYDIA

Oh really?

ANGELINE

Yeah but also you don't have to decide right now.

LYDIA

Um, would I have to do a translation sample?

ANGELINE

You already did. "The Restaurant."

LYDIA

Oh, right. Maybe I have to polish it up some more then.

ANGELINE

I'm sure it's fine.

LYDIA

You haven't read it though.

ANGELINE

You probably thought about every single word in there at least twice. I know you Lydia.

LYDIA

Yeah, you do. Is that weird?

ANGELINE

That's just what happens. We were really close once.

LYDIA

Yeah, I'm sorry about that.

ANGELINE

It's natural. I've had it happen over and over with friends. Our priorities become different, or situation, or location. Or when you feel like you really truly understand someone for once but then realize you actually never did.

LYDIA

Is that what you felt about me?

ANGELINE

Maybe. I think that's as much as I want to say for today. I'll read your translation, and we can go from there.

LYDIA

Okay, that sounds good. Thanks.

SCENE SIX

ANGELINE and LYDIA are in a virtual meeting.

LYDIA

“She left her drawing behind, but it was too late to call out. She would know where to find me, if she cared. I still bring her drawing when I remember, usually on rainy days.”

ANGELINE

It made me feel like you could identify with my character.

LYDIA

What?

ANGELINE

Because you translated this story in first person. “I waited.” Not “he waited.”

LYDIA

I did. You could call that “translation liberty.” I thought the story would be more powerful in first person.

ANGELINE

Still, I was surprised.

LYDIA

You know that digital artists flip their canvases while they draw? It’s so they don’t get too used to looking at it one way. I think my translation is flipping the canvas for you.

ANGELINE

I suppose it does work. What was your translation process?

LYDIA

I read a line, think about it, become somewhat of a saltshaker

(shakes head forward and back)

and then just output something on the page. I check that it made sense and is in the same tone. I guess that’s still sort of a black box, but usually I can come up with something.

ANGELINE

Was there a line that was the hardest to translate?

LYDIA

No, the difficulty usually isn't in finding the words itself, like it'd be easy to do a verbatim translation. The point is whether these words make sense in the context and convey the correct feeling. Rhythmically, my goal is to make the English sound like Chinese.

ANGELINE

Then was it hard to capture the feeling of the text?

LYDIA

In this case, I knew it very well. Because I still remember so clearly, that time we went to the park, and you needed to go back to my apartment for something, but I didn't go back with you. I waited on the park bench for I don't know how long, but you didn't return, and it was my fault.

ANGELINE

I don't remember that.

LYDIA

Maybe you subconsciously do.

ANGELINE

Hm. Then what is this story about for you?

LYDIA

(flipping through the pages)

For me it's about the brief moment of tension between the two people, through art. She tells him that "drawing someone is an act of intimacy," and while sitting in front of him, she feels analyzed, but also seen, and becomes able to tell him something that she hasn't told anyone else before. And he says that showing her his drawing is also deeply personal, so they're both being vulnerable. Though there's something about how she left the drawing behind, like was that intentional, and what is he supposed to do with it? Maybe he wished for something more...

(pause)

To be honest, I tried to forget about you when you left, because I thought I couldn't let myself be too attached. But from reading your book, you've been so open about your emotions this entire time. I don't think I could've been this honest with you otherwise.

ANGELINE

When I finished writing this story, I considered messaging you the same day. We hadn't talked in months, but I was emotional, spending New Years alone in my apartment, with just a manuscript.

LYDIA

But you didn't...

ANGELINE

I realized it wasn't what I needed in the moment. "Validation from others is temporary. Getting published is forever."

LYDIA

Is that something I said to you before?

ANGELINE

No I was being sarcastic.

LYDIA

But I had a realization recently that I've been hyperfocused on my own success these first few years of grad school, like trying to determine what's the most "optimal" step at each moment. But my success doesn't happen in a vacuum, nor is it linear. This semester I started teaching a section of an undergrad seminar, and it gives me so much clarity about my own thoughts, when I have to construct related arguments and answer questions in front of my class.

ANGELINE

Sounds like your students have a thoughtful teacher.

LYDIA

And similarly for translation, it's a bridge so that more people can understand a work, and in turn care about it. I think it's not just me, a lot of people will be able to resonate with the feelings in your book. I've also never translated anything this modern before, like I'm normally not able to discuss with the author? But it's been fun. Maybe this is what that moment in the park has since taught me, that I should be more open to helping others, and in turn it will help myself.

ANGELINE

Well maybe if you hadn't left me alone then, then I wouldn't have "subconsciously" been inspired to write this story, as you said. And you know, this book has been a lot more popular than my other one. It's what got me a visiting artist position at Stanford this fall.

LYDIA

Really, this fall?

ANGELINE

Yeah.

LYDIA

Wow. I wasn't expecting you to be back so soon.

ANGELINE

Me neither, but I'm excited. We could probably meet up more often. To discuss your translation, or anything else.

LYDIA

Sure! And let me know how it is at Stanford. I would love to become a professor there.

ANGELINE

Because I'm there?

LYDIA

No... You wouldn't even be there anymore.

ANGELINE

Unless you were. Then I'd crash in your office.

LYDIA

Uh...

ANGELINE

You're still so serious.

LYDIA

Does that bother you?

ANGELINE

Not necessarily.

LYDIA

Okay. Um, did you want to talk about the other stories? The next time we're scheduled to call is in a month.

ANGELINE

It's okay, I have a feeling I'll be seeing you sooner than that. My flight number is CA576.

SCENE SEVEN

LYDIA and ANGELINE are talking in a park.

ANGELINE

Hey, I know I've asked you before, but why did you agree to translate?

LYDIA

I told my advisor about it, and she was supportive.

ANGELINE

But what's *your* reason, personally? Not everything can be because what other people tell you to do.

LYDIA

I trust my advisor more than myself.

ANGELINE

This is more than just doing a translation, it's a commitment and a relationship... that's professional I mean.

LYDIA

I don't think I get as attached as most people.

ANGELINE

I don't think you're answering my question.

LYDIA

What do you want me to say? *(pause)* That I still think about you, that I feel like if only I just did one thing differently, said one thing differently, things could've ended up so differently.

ANGELINE

How much of that is true?

LYDIA

All.

ANGELINE

Really?

LYDIA

You don't know, or you can't tell?

ANGELINE

I still can't read you at all.

LYDIA

And that was frustrating for me, back then, because I thought I was being so clear, or at least the way I always am? I guess my default was just being defensive, so I couldn't get hurt. But then my close friend said that she feels like she doesn't know anything about me, that I'm such a "mystery."

ANGELINE

I can see that...

LYDIA

Then let me tell you directly. Do you remember that last time we talked? It was almost your birthday, so I had been trying to prepare a meaningful present. But I remember you got really mad at me earlier for not telling you what I was doing, because I didn't want to spoil it. Then when it was your birthday we were no longer talking... Meanwhile I made drawings of you for the next three years. The intention was that they'll only unlock on your birthday, but it sorta backfired because it's only made *me* think of you every year when it gets to your birthday.

ANGELINE

That's really thoughtful... I'm sorry it brought up bad memories though.

LYDIA

So I don't know if you want them anymore, but reading your book gave me the courage to ask. I mean it had so much that reminded me of us?

ANGELINE

That was also outside of my comfort zone. Normally I don't write about characters similar to myself. You know how when you write something personal and it gets critiqued, it feels too personal?

LYDIA

No, but that's because I only write academic papers well-distanced from myself.

ANGELINE

Hot take: does humanities academia actually do anything? I've looked at some papers before, and they're not making any claims.

LYDIA

Just because something is different from what you do doesn't mean you should be shouting about how it's worthless. People might say the same about your creative writing! Although I wouldn't.

ANGELINE

Yeah I know that was arrogant, but I just wanted to see how you would react.

LYDIA

Also, I think there's still something special about reaching a new conclusion, even if it's modest, or largely just rephrasing previous work. I could make an analogy with translation: you might think one translation of a work is enough, but translation is not only between languages, but also over time. There are probably dozens of translations of *Romeo and Juliet* from English into English. There's also a Shinto shrine in Japan that has been rebuilt every 20 years for the past thousand years. It's easy to say that it's such a waste, both time- and resource-wise, but if you look hard enough, you might begin to see the value: for example, it's preserved the craftsmanship for such a long time.

(pause)

Ahh this is making me self-conscious because I know you don't like how I always bring in academic jargon.

ANGELINE

I sort of missed your fun facts. And some things are just the way that you are and things that I shouldn't try to change, and actually don't want you to change. It's just that underneath all the academic jargon, I do want to be able to know what you mean.

LYDIA

I understand. But I don't know what to do right now exactly?

ANGELINE

It's okay, let's just talk. Could I see the drawings?

LYDIA

They're digital. I'll share the folder with you later but let me just open it on my phone for now.

(finds the drawing on her phone)

The first one is already unlocked.

ANGELINE

Oh wow, you're really good. The attention to detail also, like my earrings.

LYDIA

I'm glad you like it.

ANGELINE

I'm so curious about how the drawings are going to progress. Is there going to be much of a difference?

LYDIA

You'll see. Sometimes it's about the finer details, like what I was saying about academia.

ANGELINE

Remember back to when we first met, when you told me a truth and a lie? I guess I finally figured it out now.

LYDIA

What did I say?

ANGELINE

Your first one was about drawing caricatures of people walking by Berkeley every week. It has to be true for you to be this good.

LYDIA

Ohh yeah, and the second story was about a tree falling on me.

ANGELINE

Yep.

LYDIA

Good job. You got it right.

ANGELINE

Maybe that's what inspired my short story now that I think about it.

LYDIA

I'm happy I had that influence on you.

ANGELINE

But where'd the second story come from?

LYDIA

I think it was something that happened to my friend. That's probably the trick to telling a convincing lie.

ANGELINE

Well basically everything in fiction has happened before to someone. So I'd prefer calling it "being imaginative."

LYDIA

Such an author thing to say. But what was your truth and lie again?

ANGELINE

You don't remember?

LYDIA

Let me think. *(pause)* Oh my god, ahhhh! Something about staying overnight.

ANGELINE

No no no no *you* said that!

LYDIA

What?

ANGELINE

Yeah! That was 100% you. Mine was about how I don't know what I'm doing with my life, or that I'm going to become a successful author.

LYDIA

Okay~ you remember so clearly. I know which one is true now too.

ANGELINE

Yeah, it meant a lot to verbalize it then though. Anyways, I remember what you said even clearer.

LYDIA

Oh my god.

ANGELINE

And I was like I didn't know she could be this direct.

LYDIA

As long as you don't turn whatever I say into your next book.

ANGELINE

Are you saying you want to talk with me more?

LYDIA

Maybe.

ANGELINE

Well, thanks for the drawings, it means a lot. For once I'm going to look forward to getting older.

LYDIA

Hey! I'm older than you.

ANGELINE

I do like older women.

LYDIA

I am *thirteen months* older than you.

ANGELINE

And I am just joking.

ANGELINE gets up and hugs LYDIA.

SCENE EIGHT

ANGELINE walks up to LYDIA who is sitting on a park bench.

ANGELINE

What are you doing?

LYDIA

Just reading, for fun.

ANGELINE

From the Heart? What's it about?

LYDIA

It's about two childhood friends who reconnect after forty years.

ANGELINE

You look so peaceful.

LYDIA

This is my favorite place in the city.

ANGELINE

Why?

LYDIA

Because everytime we come here, you look so happy.

ANGELINE

It's because I'm with you.

LYDIA

You're too much.

ANGELINE

You started it.

LYDIA

Anyways, I saw someone drawing caricatures over there, could we go?

ANGELINE

Sounds like you want to live out my story.

LYDIA

I do. All of them actually. Except the part about leaving the drawing behind.

(They walk to another bench and sit down, talking to the caricature artist.)

ANGELINE

Yeah we're together.

(pause)

LYDIA

It's sort of a long story, but the very first time was a few years ago through a translation project. And the past few months we've been working on another one.

(pause)

ANGELINE

First impression? Probably too serious for her own good. But now that's grown on me. And she's really sweet too, like the way she texts is adorable.

LYDIA

I thought she was too good for me.

ANGELINE

What! How?

LYDIA

You're really independent, have such a bright personality, you're the person in the room that everyone wants to talk to. Although that did make me feel good when you chose me.

ANGELINE

I'm glad you chose me too.

(pause)

LYDIA

Oh it contains a lot of really interesting stories. One of them is about an artist, so maybe you'd like that.

(pause)

Yeah I hope you'll read it too! It's in bookstores now, in Chinese and English.

(pause)

ANGELINE

Thanks for the drawing, that was really fast!

(They walk back to the original bench. ANGELINE holds up the drawing.)

As our resident artist, what do you think?

LYDIA

(tracing her finger along the drawing)

I like the way she drew us sitting together, how the edges of our jackets fold into each other.

ANGELINE

I like how you notice these details.

LYDIA

What do you think?

ANGELINE

It's really cute! Although not as good as your drawing of me.

LYDIA

Maybe that's because I know you. Also, she only had like two minutes.

ANGELINE

Next time you should draw one of us together.

LYDIA

Of course, whatever you want.

ANGELINE

How do you think knowing the person affects a work of art? Like with this drawing, or your translation.

LYDIA

For me, knowing you personally lets me catch more of your details, because I've looked at you so many times. But that artist also had certain details that she noticed and emphasized, like the texture of your hair, or the shape of your eyes.

ANGELINE

But what makes a drawing good is not the amount of detail right, and probably same for a translation.

LYDIA

Yeah of course. Translation is about loss. It's inevitable, but on the other hand, you also gain something in the new language. You just have to be very intentional about every detail you include, or leave out.

ANGELINE

Oh yeah, "lost in translation" as they say. Have you seen that movie by the way?

LYDIA

No, what's it about?

ANGELINE

It's about two Americans who connect over feeling lost in Tokyo. Maybe you'd like it. It's been awhile since I've watched it.

LYDIA

I guess I do have to watch it if it has "translation" in the title. Also that sounds like another one of your stories. The one about overhearing a stranger's conversation.

ANGELINE

All plots are connected: they take ordinary life and turn it extraordinary. You just have to choose how to tell it.

LYDIA

Yeah. What's our story going to be like?

ANGELINE

That's up to you.

LYDIA

And you.

(LYDIA leans in to kiss ANGELINE)

SCENE NINE

LYDIA and the PROFESSOR are talking in the PROFESSOR's office. LYDIA is now an assistant professor.

LYDIA

(knocks on door)

Jingyi?

PROFESSOR

Hello Lydia, thanks for stopping by! How have you been doing?

LYDIA

I'm good! My first year at Stanford has been busy, but I've also felt really supported by the older faculty members.

PROFESSOR

That's wonderful. Being a new professor is the hardest time, since there's so much pressure to publish.

LYDIA

I think working with you prepared me well.

PROFESSOR

You would always work so hard.

LYDIA

Yeah. Sometimes too much. I realized that I get a lot of satisfaction when I do my work well, but I can be just as fulfilled, or more, by other aspects of my life. Like my relationships with other people.

PROFESSOR

Yes, that's very important. I'm glad you're finding a balance, since it can be hard in academia.

LYDIA

Yeah, but fortunately there's someone who has been supporting me a lot these few years. Do you remember Angeline?

PROFESSOR

Oh Angeline, yes! She took my class once, and I remember you showed me her short story that you translated.

LYDIA

Yeah, I'm not sure if you remember, but I'm so thankful that you introduced us in the very beginning. Her book that I translated, I also wanted to give you a copy of it.

(passes the book)

PROFESSOR

Thank you. *Bookmark*. What is the significance of the title?

LYDIA

I didn't choose it, it comes directly from the Chinese title *Shūqīān*, but I think I know why it was called that. Some of the stories are related to moments in the author's life, like bookmarks. Both happy and sad, oftentimes ordinary events but turned remarkable, described in detail. Every paragraph uncovers a new emotion, and I think that's what's so special about her writing.

PROFESSOR

There's always something so special about the relationship between an author and her translator. Being able to interpret and convey these thoughts so well in a new language, it's not an easy task! From what I saw of your story back then, your translation does flow nicely, and I look forward to reading the rest.

LYDIA

Thank you so much. To be honest, we're in a relationship now.

PROFESSOR

Congratulations. I'm so happy for you two, my two favorite students.

LYDIA

For context, I first translated that story for the class.

(flips to the story in the book)

But because of some personal reasons, I didn't end up showing my translation to her then. We only reconnected a year later. I had read her book, and she was looking for a translator. We then talked out a lot of the things that had been between us in the past, spent more time together, and that's how it ended up this way.

PROFESSOR

I do remember her wanting to find a translator. I might've suggested you as well.

LYDIA

Thank you. Maybe that's why she was willing to talk with me too in the moment. It was a bit scary at first, but we were able to communicate. I mean, she does this really well in her writing too, all of her stories about human connections, about realistic interactions that somehow feel intimate and special.

ANGELINE

(knocks on door)

Jingyi?

PROFESSOR

Angeline! Come in.

ANGELINE

Thanks. Hi Lydia.

(rubs LYDIA's shoulder and sits down)

LYDIA

Hi.

ANGELINE

Did you say it yet?

LYDIA

Yeah.

PROFESSOR

I was just telling Lydia that I'm so happy for you two.

ANGELINE

Thanks. I'm really happy with her too.

LYDIA

You're too much.

PROFESSOR

Ah, this brings back fond memories of how I met my husband. It was at a conference, he was reading some book that I was also reading at the time. We then decided to write an article together and became close from that, even though we were in different places during graduate school.

LYDIA

Aw really? That's so sweet.

ANGELINE

Have you not heard heard this story before?

LYDIA

No.

ANGELINE

I guess I'm just nosy.

PROFESSOR

What are you doing these days Angeline?

ANGELINE

Same as before, but now I'm based in San Francisco instead of Beijing, and I've been writing in both English and Chinese. I'm working on writing a new book and editing another one. I was also considering going back to school, but one academic in the family is probably enough.

PROFESSOR

Well my husband is in the anthropology department, so it can work.

ANGELINE

But I think she does enough academia for both of us. Like her hobby is translating poetry from Latin.

LYDIA

Hey! Sorry for liking what I do.

ANGELINE

You don't need to be sorry, it's cute.

(squeezes LYDIA's hand, then notices her watch)

I think we have to run now, to the book signing.

PROFESSOR

For which book?

LYDIA

Bookmark, and *Shūqiān*. Actually it'll be both of ours together. I don't think translators normally do book signings like this, but some bookstore thought it'd be cute.

PROFESSOR

That's wonderful.

LYDIA

I hope we can visit more often in the future. It's always so nice to talk with you.

ANGELINE

Yeah, it was really nice to see you again. Please stay healthy and enjoy your summer break.

PROFESSOR

(hugging LYDIA and then ANGELINE)

Thank you, you as well. Even though you have both graduated, you will always be my students, and you are always welcome back.

LYDIA

Thank you Jingyi. Take care.

LYDIA and ANGELINE link arms and walk out together.

END OF PLAY