

## **A Fallen Feather of a Boy**

by Jiaqi Li

Yuelong Ma was a transfer student. For almost two years, he was in our class, but his presence was hardly felt. Our inability to take notice of him wasn't his fault; my previous headteacher ruined things for him from the very beginning. On his first day with us, the headteacher briefly introduced him, saying only "Yuelong Ma used to study in class 8, but from today on, he will be with us." He was sort of lanky. He had big eyes. Before I could cast a second glance, the headteacher sent him to her office to do some errand so that he would not hear the rest of her speech. But when the door closed, she hesitated to resume, knitting her brows and biting her lips. She was a very young teacher, and in retrospect, it must have been a tough issue for a novice headteacher like her to address. She wanted to do right. The silence built to a depressing note, and we started to whisper to each other. She cleared her throat and said, "There were some irreconcilable issues in his old class, and I volunteered to accept him into our class as I think he is kind." She paused, glancing at our faces, and continued, "But he is still a bad student. You guys should never play with him. Just leave him be."

This took place in grade two. We got a new headteacher in grade three, but from that first day when the teacher introduced him, every time I saw Yuelong Ma, I couldn't help thinking to myself, "He is a bad student, and I should not play with him." I guess it was the same with my other classmates.

He sat alone, and his seat was never changed, always the one next to the platform, where it was the easiest for teachers to watch for when he was distracted.

---

I liked my second-grade math teacher. He was nice and even a little indulgent of me. I guess it was because I always did fine on math. Not teacher's pet fine, but fine nonetheless. Sometimes, when he caught me talking in class, he would not criticize me

to my face. He would just give me a “detention” where I tutored other students for half an hour of math after school. Even when I was accused of cheating, on the grounds that I flunked the pop quiz but got a perfect score on the exam, he stood by me. But in Yuelong’s mind, perhaps, our teacher was a complete monster.

The math teacher beat him.

We had seventy-eight students in our class. When Yuelong and our teacher fought by the platform, the seventy-seven of us watched quietly as if it were a movie.

The math teacher first struck Yuelong’s head with a textbook, criticizing that he did not study. Yuelong talked back. In a flush of embarrassment, the math teacher thumped Yuelong’s head a few more times, this time with his knuckles, while continuing to mock and berate him. He did not expect Yuelong to dare retort again. When he did, the math teacher grew madder still. He kicked Yuelong in the stomach, setting Yuelong in a flying trajectory into the corner where we stored cleaning tools. Yuelong disappeared from my sight, but I could hear the clash of brooms, mops, and dustpans. A few seconds later, though, he stood with the look of a bull gone berserk. He charged forward. At this point we were dumb struck, the seventy-seven of us. The scene did not feel real; it was like watching a violent film. And we didn’t know what to do aside from being an audience. Given the difference in age and build, the math teacher easily broke Yuelong’s attack strategy, kicking him back into the corner within the disarray of cleaning tools, even before Yuelong could establish a wrestling stance. The duel repeated itself several times, until Yuelong couldn’t gather enough strength to stand up.

Still, no one spoke.

The math teacher ambled back to the center of the classroom and resumed the class. Several minutes later, Yuelong crept from the corner to his desk. When the bell rang, the boys ran out immediately, and the girls refilled the classroom with the sound of their chitchatting, as usual.



In grade two, our Chinese teacher had a reward rule for her pop quizzes. If the student could identify a vocabulary flashcard she randomly chose, she would give the vocabulary card to that student as a gift. It was just a plain piece of cardboard with a red

Chinese character in the center of the white background. However, it was a big deal among the students. Kids love the weirdest things. And to a certain extent, it not only meant you were good at Chinese, but also meant the teacher liked you, which was self-evident as her favorite students had the most cards. For two years, I only got one chance to answer a quiz. I had a “胸,” which means chest. Though I felt very excited about winning the card, as a girl, I felt a little embarrassed with this word. Therefore, I left the card in my bookcase.

One day, while we were lining up on the playground for the crossing guard to take us home, I noticed that Yuelong Ma also had a vocabulary card. He might have got it from his pervious class. It read “差.” This word has different connotations in different contexts, but generally, especially for students in primary school, it means different, mistakes, or poor. In short, bad. Yuelong put the card in his backpack. He placed it exactly where there was a transparent compartment on his backpack for everyone to easily see.

The sunset dyed the sky orange. Laughter was everywhere on the playground, but Yuelong stood in a shadow by himself, with a flashcard that said “差,” conspicuously red on an innocent white backdrop.

---

As children do, we learned things from each other. Sometimes we heard rumors about Yuelong. Stories about him floated around the school like tarnished feathers. Stories like “He is an apprentice of a bully in grade six. They hold up girls on the bridge next to our school and kiss them.” It was a bunch of he-said-she-said tales. Everyone seemed to know them, but no one actually witnessed the events described. My friends and I passed the bridge often enough and never for once did we see the kidnapped girls suffering from forced kisses. But Yuelong was a bad student, or so were we told. And we believed the rumors about him with all our hearts.

By third grade, Yuelong Ma didn't appear all that special anymore. He shrank into his designated seat as if he were no more than a ball of feathers.

Nothing changed. Not his seat. Not his unwillingness to participate in any activities. Not his failure to meet any academic requirement. Our new headteacher just let him be.

His presence in our class faded frame by frame like a discarded feather slowly disintegrating.

---

I was on the verge of forgetting his existence, if not for my infatuation with origami. One day, I brought a deck of lovely paper strips to a music class and distributed them to friends around me for completing my mission of making 999 paper stars in a month. There was no purpose behind making the stars, nor were they intended as gifts; I made them simply because I wanted to do so.. I was easily obsessed with such things. As I said, kids do the stupidest things. My hands were busily folding the strips of paper into stars while I pretended to memorize the notes of a new song we were required to learn. Suddenly, I heard a voice say, “Would you mind giving me some paper strips?” I looked up and was shocked.

Yuelong Ma was next to me!

We were free to sit wherever we wanted in music and art classes and somehow, I ended up his neighbor that day. I passed him some paper rapidly without a second thought. His image of a bad student was so successfully fixated in my mind that I was afraid if I refused, he would get mad and become violent with me, like he had done with the math teacher.

I thought he was just bored with the class and needed a distraction. After passing him the paper, I shifted my attention back to my sacred origami mission, forcibly not allowing myself to look at Yuelong to see what he was doing with the paper. I hastened my efforts, afraid if he were to demand more paper from me, I might run low on the material and not be able to finish before my self-imposed deadline. However, just before the class ended, someone’s hand blocked my view of my desk. When it was removed, I saw several neatly-folded paper stars on my desk. Some were better than my work.

“Thank you,” I said. I managed two words. He did not reply. He just smiled and turned away.

It was a smile just like anyone's. A smile that almost convinced me he was a normal student. I looked at his back, the clean white shirt, desiring to talk more with him. This was the last time I saw him at school.

---

One week later, during a break, our headteacher barged into the classroom and asked us whether we had seen Yuelong during the past week. The classroom was still noisy. No one answered his question, so our headteacher asked again.

Now he had our attention. I stopped chatting and looked at him. His sleeves were rolled up and his frown carved steep ditches on his forehead. Something must have happened. I looked at Yuelong's corner and suddenly realized that his seat had been empty for the whole week. The classroom was silent for a moment, and the headteacher asked for the third time. Still, no one spoke. And we went back to our break.

---

When they finally found Yuelong, only pieces of him remained.

He had been killed and his body had been dismembered.

The next day, we dedicated a whole class to Yuelong. Our headteacher brought the newspaper for each of us, and we read the article about him, silently, for forty-five minutes.

In a picture that covered half of the newspaper's first page, a worker cleaning the crime scene picked up a transparent bag where there was a leg, while a crowd of onlookers gathered in the background like an audience..

We mourned as if we knew him well, as if he was ever part of us.

---

The murder was cliché, almost corny, like you'd see on old time TV series.

Yuelong Ma was abducted while in an arcade. The man next to him, apparently a veteran video gamer, invited Yuelong to his home to show him vintage games. Yuelong hesitated briefly, according to the paper, but ultimately went with him. It was in the

man's home that Yuelong was drugged, killed, and mutilated. When the man recalled the process, he said he was taken aback when "the little boy" woke up from the drug dose. Grasping what was going on, Yuelong, according to the man's confession, begged for his life. Over and over he pleaded for mercy, "Please, please do not kill me. I will not tell the police." His pleas did not move the man. Yuelong was not the man's first prey. He had let his first victim, a girl, go and was jailed anyway. He had sworn to himself that he would get even with the society and go through with the job this time no matter what.

He cut Yuelong into pieces. Several days after sleeping with his girlfriend on the very bed under which he had put all the pieces of Yuelong Ma, he decided to get rid of the body. As if for dramatic effect, he decided to scatter the pieces all over the city.

---

We barely thought of Yuelong Ma, but sometimes, we were excited to gossip about rumors that had surfaced. Kids. On some level, we knew the grave seriousness of death, but such realization lasted only for a little while before we became distracted by something else. We heard rumors that Yuelong Ma's father had been in jail and it was because of this that his parents had divorced. Just as there were rumors that his mother worked some lowly job and did not visit him often. We heard that Yuelong Ma had lived with his grandmother, who had been the only person who cared about him, and who came to school often in the days following his murder demanding reparation.

I once overheard parents while at my dance school. They were waiting for their children and were talking about Yuelong's abduction and murder.

They said, "How silly the boy is to fall for such an easy trick."

They said, "I never let my child walk alone from school to home."

They said, "A child who goes to the arcade must be a bad student, and of course, he would get this kind of result."

It was a ballroom dance class. Parents were talking, and wonderful waltz songs were playing. Boys and girls whirled around the room, ethereal and gentle, like feathers.

---

I recalled the afternoon when Yuelong helped me fold stars. When he gave the folded stars back to me, he smiled. It was the first time that I was able to see his face closely. His enormous, watery eyes recalled something said by my previous headteacher when she first introduced him to the class: “He is a kind boy.” When the music class was over, we even waved goodbye to each other. “He is not that bad.” I thought as I stood by the school gate, carrying a little steel container with 999 folded stars.

It was summer. Childhood memories were liveliest in summer, both the best and the worst. That summer, Yuelong faded into the shadow of trees and never came back.

**Jiaqi Li** was born and raised in Xiangyang, China. She currently studies at Stony Brook University and majors in civil engineering. Li hopes to eventually become an architect and to continue chronicling her life experiences.