

HOLDING ONTO HER WORDS
by Serena An

CHARACTERS

LYDIA YIN	Late 20s, PhD student
ANGELINE JIANG	Early 20s, author
JINGYI LI	Late 50s, professor

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SCENE ONE

A university library very late at night.

LYDIA

(to the audience)

Translation is a bridge. It can bridge two languages, time periods, cultures. The pages of a book and your mind. Even the space between two people. Translation involves reflecting on yourself and your relationships with others. That's at the heart of why I study Chinese literature. But it took me many years to realize that.

I came into grad school insecure about how much there was to read and how little I knew. But my advisor Jingyi reminded me how learning is a lifelong journey, and that the most important thing is to put in a consistent effort. Meeting her was the first time I felt like someone believed in me academically. Besides my grandparents. They used to tell me famous Chinese stories, but I was too young and couldn't sit still. Now I wish I'd asked them more about it and their stories too.

(LYDIA sits down at a table. ANGELINE enters and sits across the table from LYDIA.)

ANGELINE

Do you come here often?

LYDIA

Hm? Me?

ANGELINE

Yeah.

LYDIA

Sorry have we met before?

ANGELINE

No, but it gets lonely at this hour, and I saw you've also been here for awhile. I'm Angeline. I was an undergrad here, graduated last spring.

LYDIA

I'm Lydia, 4th year grad student. And yeah, I come here a lot.

ANGELINE

What do you study?

LYDIA

Chinese literature from the Ming and Qing dynasty, with a focus on gender, sexuality, and critical translation theory.

ANGELINE

I had to read Hóng Lóu Mèng (红楼梦) in high school. Hated it.

LYDIA

A lot of people say that, but I actually really liked it.

ANGELINE

What about it?

LYDIA

All the characters coming in and out, completely unlike anything I'd read before. And I really liked how my professor mixed in history lessons which gave us a lot of context.

ANGELINE

Okay... what about the last 40 chapters?

LYDIA

Absolutely terrible.

ANGELINE

Glad we agree.

LYDIA

It was so good, and then I don't know what happened. There was this scholar who did a famous English translation, but only for the first 80 chapters.

ANGELINE

Who did the rest?

LYDIA

His son-in-law.

ANGELINE

Damn, what did he have against his son-in-law?

LYDIA

Who knows. But also, it's really important that someone translated it.

ANGELINE

Do you translate too?

LYDIA

Almost everything I read is in Chinese, so if I want to discuss it in my dissertation then I need to translate it.

ANGELINE

How do you know if your translation is good?

LYDIA

It's about understanding the emotions of the text, and being able to convey them in a new language. Finding kinship between two languages.

ANGELINE

What if you don't understand it?

LYDIA

Then I have to do my research, like if there's an archaic word, then I have to find other texts in which it's been used before. But contemporary literature is easier.

ANGELINE

Do you translate webnovels?

LYDIA

I used to, but haven't had time since grad school.

ANGELINE

Actually, I want to write a webnovel.

LYDIA

Really? About what?

ANGELINE

Not sure yet, but I'm thinking about a bunch of stories about this woman that end up being connected. It might start out with her meeting her girlfriend through a series of events.

LYDIA

That sounds cute.

ANGELINE

But actually it's mystery/horror.

LYDIA

Interesting! Could I read it when it comes out?

ANGELINE

Of course, I'll let you know.

LYDIA

Have you written anything else before?

ANGELINE

Just fanfiction. This would my first time coming up with something original.

LYDIA

Still, fanfiction is very cool and creative. I used to read a lot of AO3.

ANGELINE

Really? A lot of people don't get it.

LYDIA

I also think it's nice that it includes more women and LGBTQ voices.

ANGELINE

Yeah.

(opens a book)

What if I read this in Chinese and you translated?

LYDIA

Okay...

ANGELINE

教室里有个小女孩, 笔袋塞着几张纸条。(Jiàoshì lǐ yǒu gè xiǎo nǚhái, bǐ dài sāizhe jǐ zhāng zhǐ tiáo.)

LYDIA

There was a girl in my class, and her pen pouch was stuffed with a few slips of paper.

ANGELINE

That's so literal, be more poetic!

LYDIA

You're making me do it on the spot. I'd be better with more time.

ANGELINE

I'm just teasing you. 她的笑声中藏着神秘。(Tā de xiào shēng zhōng cángzhe shénmì.)

LYDIA

Her laughter hid a layer of mystery.

ANGELINE

她的口袋装着什么?(Tā de kǒudài zhuāngzhe shénme?)

LYDIA

What might her pockets hold?

ANGELINE

一首诗, 一个梦想?(Yī shǒu shī, yīgè mèngxiǎng?)

LYDIA

A poem, a dream?

ANGELINE

有一天, 我看到了一个。(Yǒu yītiān, wǒ kàn dào le yīgè.)

LYDIA

One day, I found one.

ANGELINE

在校园里, 挂在树枝上, 写着。(Zài xiàoyuán lǐ, guà zài shùzhī shàng, xiězhe.)

LYDIA

In the courtyard, caught onto a tree branch. It said...

(ANGELINE shuts the book.)

LYDIA

What did it say?

(ANGELINE puts the book back on the shelf.)

ANGELINE

It's a secret.

LYDIA

Hey...

ANGELINE

What do you think it said?

LYDIA

I don't know.

ANGELINE

I guess it could've said that.

LYDIA

That's not what I meant.

ANGELINE

Then what?

LYDIA

"I like you"? Like a love letter.

ANGELINE

That's cute.

LYDIA

Or it could be test answers.

ANGELINE

Or story ideas.

LYDIA

Or fortune cookie slips.

ANGELINE

You know the fortune I got the other day?

(ANGELINE holds up her phone case which holds the fortune.)

LYDIA

“The only way to move forward is to let go.”

ANGELINE

What do you think it’s saying?

LYDIA

It’s saying you should become a writer.

ANGELINE

It’s really hard to make it. And I don’t have much to show for it yet.

LYDIA

And you should *let go* of your self-doubt. You said you’re working on a webnovel right now.

ANGELINE

My parents don’t support me. They want me to do something that makes money.

LYDIA

My parents don’t get me either, mostly my mom. She wished I never went to grad school and studied CS or something.

ANGELINE

But you’re doing what you like right?

LYDIA

Yeah.

ANGELINE

That's what matters. I hope I can do that too.

LYDIA

Why do you want to be a writer? Besides the fact you're creative and good at it.

ANGELINE

I have a deep urge to create.

LYDIA

Wow.

ANGELINE

Yeah.

LYDIA

You will. I can't wait to see your books on these shelves.

ANGELINE

I think you believe in me more than most people in my life. Right now I just work for the city government. It's really boring.

LYDIA

Why are you here so late then?

ANGELINE

I'm the most creative at night. But also I couldn't sleep. Ugh I have to be up at 8.

LYDIA

That's in three hours! You should sleep.

ANGELINE

But it's nice talking with you.

LYDIA

(yawns)

Yeah.

ANGELINE

You seem like you could use some sleep too.

LYDIA

Okay, if I go then you'll go?

ANGELINE

Yeah.

LYDIA

Okay, good night Angeline. It was nice meeting you.

ANGELINE

I hope I'll see you around more.

LYDIA

Yeah, you will.

SCENE TWO

ANGELINE and LYDIA are seated on the couch in LYDIA's apartment. There are wine glasses and books on a table nearby. Music is playing softly in the background.

ANGELINE

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

You're cute when you're flustered.

LYDIA

(pours herself more wine)

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

ANGELINE

You have an interesting apartment.

LYDIA

What do you mean?

ANGELINE

Lydia, in the kindest way possible, who the fuck has this many papers lying around. Like even in the kitchen?

LYDIA

Sorry, I didn't have time to tidy up after seminar today.

ANGELINE

You're like cooking and reading about what,

(picks up a paper)

"Common and distinct quantitative characteristics of Chinese and Western music in terms of modes, scales, degrees and melody variations"? Hell no!

LYDIA

Do *you* know how tones work in Chinese music?

ANGELINE

No...

LYDIA

The melody actually takes precedence over the tones, at least in Mandarin. But the four tones also vary in pitch, so this can make understanding the lyrics more difficult, but native speakers still can. However in Cantonese which has six tones, the tones take precedence as otherwise it'd be incomprehensible.

ANGELINE

You're such a nerd.

LYDIA

Thanks.

ANGELINE

Why were you reading that? I thought you studied Ming-Qing literature and feminism or something like that.

LYDIA

I probably was reading something that referenced a song and wondered what it would sound like. It's just like how your writing might lead you to places you didn't expect.

ANGELINE

Like your apartment.

LYDIA

You basically invited yourself.

ANGELINE

You didn't say no.

LYDIA

Yeah, because I like it when you come over and...

ANGELINE

And what?

LYDIA

We can talk, for hours, and just get closer.

ANGELINE

Yeah.

(moves closer to LYDIA)

I like your taste in music though. It's calming.

LYDIA

I hoped that you would like it.

ANGELINE

Yeah.

LYDIA

I don't usually listen to music, but it feels right when you're here. You're like the tones in Cantonese music. And I'll clean up my papers next time.

ANGELINE

No, it's cool how you're so driven and set on academia.

LYDIA

It's just every time I call my parents they're stressed about me not making much money.

ANGELINE

Like that's sorta true?

LYDIA

Thanks...

ANGELINE

But you're the best of the best. You'll become a famous professor, just like Jingyi!

(ANGELINE puts her head on LYDIA's shoulder.)

LYDIA

I still remember what you said about your future: "I have a deep urge to create."

ANGELINE

You have a good memory.

LYDIA

Yeah, when it comes to you.

(pushes a charcuterie board)

Did you know cheese improves memory?

ANGELINE

(while eating a piece of cheese)

Wanna hear my hot take?

LYDIA

What?

ANGELINE

All cheese tastes the same.

LYDIA

What?!

ANGELINE

Yeah.

LYDIA

Mozzarella and blue cheese?

ANGELINE

Yep.

LYDIA

Does all food taste the same?!

ANGELINE

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

Sourdough and white bread?

LYDIA

Yeah.

ANGELINE

That's crazy.

LYDIA

No one's every agreed with me.

ANGELINE

Because you're wrong?!

LYDIA

We can find other things to agree on.

ANGELINE

Okay...

LYDIA

Favorite animal?

ANGELINE

Um... cat?

LYDIA

Mine's axolotl.

ANGELINE

There's no way I was going to say that.

LYDIA

But wouldn't it have been so cool if you did? Okay, favorite language?

ANGELINE

That's hard. Out of the ones I know, or in general?

LYDIA

ANGELINE

Okay multilingual. Either.

LYDIA

Then Thai. I don't understand it at all, but the tones feel melodic.

ANGELINE

For me, probably English.

LYDIA

That's a terrible take.

ANGELINE

Why? It's what we speak together.

LYDIA

I'm going to start speaking to you in Chinese.

ANGELINE

But I like English. I'm much more intentional about the words I use.

LYDIA

That's interesting. Would you write in English then?

ANGELINE

I could, or I'll write in Chinese and you translate.

LYDIA

Okay.

ANGELINE

Anyways, best novel?

LYDIA

That's too hard! There are so many.

ANGELINE

Worst novel?

LYDIA

The last 40 chapters of Hóng Lóu Mèng (红楼梦).

ANGELINE

I knew you were going to say that. Read the last 40 chapters of Hóng Lóu Mèng (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

You better get started. Favorite author?

LYDIA

I don't have one.

ANGELINE

Really?

LYDIA

Actually... you.

ANGELINE

Thanks. You're my favorite translator, and I wanna learn more about you.

LYDIA

Me too. Do you want to play a game?

ANGELINE

Sure.

LYDIA

Tell me something real and something fake about yourself, and I'll guess which is real.

ANGELINE

Have you played this before?

LYDIA

Yeah.

ANGELINE

Then you go first.

LYDIA

Let me think... Okay, one, I used to go to a park every Sunday and draw caricatures of people. And two, in elementary school, we were doing a volunteer activity in a forest and a tree fell on me. I screamed for help, but no one heard.

ANGELINE

Damn, that sounds traumatic... This is hard.

LYDIA

Should I say?

ANGELINE

Let me guess. The second one?

LYDIA

Nope it's the first one.

ANGELINE

That tree story sounded real though. How do you make that up?

LYDIA

It happened to my friend. That's probably the trick to telling a convincing lie.

ANGELINE

Well everything has happened before to someone, so you could've just said you're creative like that.

LYDIA

Ha okay.

ANGELINE

So Miss Artist, can you draw me sometime?

LYDIA

I'll draw you for your birthday.

ANGELINE

For once I'm looking forward to getting older.

LYDIA

Hey! I'm older than you.

ANGELINE

I like older women.

LYDIA

What's your truth and lie?

ANGELINE

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

LYDIA

How can you make stuff up about your future?

ANGELINE

(shrugs)

Which one's real?

LYDIA

The best-selling novel, obviously.

ANGELINE

Hope you're right. Actually can I say another one?

LYDIA

Yeah.

ANGELINE

One, you're going to kiss me. Two, I'm going to kiss you.

Two.

LYDIA

(ANGELINE leans in to kiss LYDIA on the forehead.)

Your lips are really soft.

LYDIA

Yeah?

ANGELINE

(LYDIA leans in to kiss ANGELINE on the lips, and they begin making out.)

Fuck I've been waiting for this. You're so beautiful.

ANGELINE

No you are. Come over anytime.

LYDIA

I'll come over for you.

ANGELINE

Do you want to stay with me?

LYDIA

Yeah.

ANGELINE

SCENE THREE

LYDIA and JINGYI are in JINGYI's office.

LYDIA

Jingyi? Hi.

JINGYI

Lydia, come in. Our meeting will have to be quick since Ryan wanted to meet about his presentation next week.

LYDIA

Sure, no problem.

JINGYI

The pages you submitted this time... “agency of women in the Ming dynasty.”

LYDIA

Yeah, it's an outline of a new chapter.

JINGYI

It looked reasonable, but a bit brief. How do you plan to fill it in?

LYDIA

I plan to begin analyzing a few paintings of “beautiful women.”

(pulls out her computer and shows JINGYI the screen)

In each of these, the court ladies have an almost standardized look, which seems to represent their lack of agency and individuality.

JINGYI

You could consider how that relates to the emerging female consciousness in the Ming dynasty, which I was just discussing with my class but in the context of comparing the Chinese and western myths of Xīwángmǔ and Hera. These are obviously from much earlier, but it could become a source of inspiration.

LYDIA

Of course, thanks. I'll look into that.

JINGYI

Also, I heard from Ryan there's the Harvard East Asia conference in a few months.

LYDIA

Yeah, I wanted to go last year but my abstract wasn't accepted.

JINGYI

What did you submit?

LYDIA

The first chapter of my dissertation.

JINGYI

Hm. Why wasn't it accepted?

LYDIA

I don't know, but it's fine. It's one of the most competitive conferences.

JINGYI

It is, but I thought you would have gotten in. Did you receive any feedback?

LYDIA

I forgot, but I could check.

JINGYI

Sure.

(LYDIA opens her email.)

JINGYI

At this stage of your PhD, it's very important to go to conferences like these. It's a key opportunity to meet other top students who will become your future colleagues.

LYDIA

Of course, I do really want to go. Um, as for the comments, one reviewer didn't leave any, and the other said it was too preliminary.

JINGYI

I see. This time, make sure your argument is well refined and that your paper has sufficient evidence. When is the deadline this year?

LYDIA

The deadline for the abstract is in a month. I was thinking to use my new chapter.

(silence)

JINGYI

While your new chapter has some interesting ideas, I'm worried it won't be developed enough before the deadline, and you might receive the same feedback. *(pause)* What if... you and Ryan wrote a paper together?

LYDIA

Oh... on what?

JINGYI

One option is the Ming dynasty court, which is under both of your research interests. You could read each other's working drafts for ideas. That should increase both of your chances of getting in, and it would be a great collaboration opportunity. What do you think?

LYDIA

Oh, okay. I mean yeah, it sounds great. But is it okay if I think about it for a bit?

JINGYI

Yes, but let me know soon. There's another reason why I bring this up.

LYDIA

Yes?

JINGYI

Recently, you have been submitting significantly fewer pages to me. Is there something going on?

LYDIA

No, I don't think so.

JINGYI

No family deaths?

LYDIA

No.

JINGYI

No medical emergencies?

LYDIA

No...

JINGYI

No boyfriend?

LYDIA

No... Wait what?

JINGYI

Good. It's better to date after finishing your dissertation. Have I told you about my experience?

LYDIA

A little.

JINGYI

My husband and I became friends during our PhDs but did not begin dating until after. Finishing our dissertations was a hectic time, and we almost did not talk at all.

LYDIA

Oh, I see.

JINGYI

This is an extremely important year in your academic journey. It is the turning point between being a student and a researcher.

LYDIA

Yes, I understand.

JINGYI

The work you put in this year will pay off, and it's important to not get distracted. In any case, working collaboratively may help with accountability. I'll bring this up to Ryan too.

(knock on the door)

Ah that must be him.

LYDIA

Sorry, I'll head out now.

SCENE FOUR

ANGELINE and LYDIA are in LYDIA's apartment. There are no more papers scattered around the apartment. Instead there are more of ANGELINE's belongings, such as clothes and jewelry. It is the early evening.

LYDIA

Jingyi wants me to write a paper with Ryan.

ANGELINE

Who's Ryan?

LYDIA

He's in the same year as me, same advisor. He knows a lot and I can see why Jingyi really likes him. But he has this mentality of only being able to do things his way. I just know that if we did this paper together, he'd take over it and leave me the boring sections.

ANGELINE

Ugh.

LYDIA

And we don't even have the same interests. He's super into the military or whatever!

ANGELINE

Red flag.

LYDIA

But every few weeks he'll message me about studying together or looking over a draft.

ANGELINE

He's definitely into you.

LYDIA

What?

ANGELINE

Yep.

LYDIA

Ew...

ANGELINE

Sounds like you don't want to work together, so just say no.

LYDIA

I can't just say no to my advisor.

ANGELINE

Why not?

LYDIA

She determines my future in academia.

ANGELINE

How?

LYDIA

A good rec letter would be really nice.

ANGELINE

Wouldn't a good dissertation also help? You'd have less time for that if you wrote this other paper with Ryan.

LYDIA

I guess. I could bring that up to her.

ANGELINE

And is it worth it if you're miserable?

LYDIA

But I'd be letting her down even more...

ANGELINE

What do you mean?

LYDIA

She said my work has fallen off recently...

ANGELINE

Why?

LYDIA

I don't know, I thought I'd been doing the same as usual.

ANGELINE

She's probably making this up to get you to work harder.

LYDIA

Hmm.

ANGELINE

Don't worry babe.

LYDIA

Okay, I'll just work a little harder from now on.

ANGELINE

I believe in you.

LYDIA

Thanks baby. How are you doing today?

ANGELINE

I hate my job. I wanna quit.

LYDIA

What? Why?

ANGELINE

It's boring and no one respects me. They think I'm too young. And I have no friends.

LYDIA

What would you do then?

ANGELINE

I don't know. What should I do?

LYDIA

You want to be an author right?

ANGELINE

Yeah.

LYDIA

I really support you, but most authors need a day job too, at least when they're starting out.

ANGELINE

Ugh, I don't know. I haven't been good at writing alongside my job. I go home, am too tired to cook half the time, do nothing for a few hours, then go to sleep.

LYDIA

You could go back to school? Get an MFA in writing?

ANGELINE

Those are expensive.

LYDIA

Yeah. Then you could get a PhD? Some famous writers / are professors too.

ANGELINE

Hell no. I'm so done with school.

LYDIA

If you quit your job, I guess you could find another one. But I can only help you if you have something specific in mind.

(silence)

ANGELINE

What if I went back to China?

LYDIA

Oh, for how long?

ANGELINE

I don't know. But to recharge. I could live with my grandparents in the countryside. Figure out where my novel is going and actually write it. Think about what I want for the rest of my life.

LYDIA

That sounds nice, like a gap year.

ANGELINE

But then we'd be apart...

LYDIA

There's nothing wrong with prioritizing yourself. I've done something similar before.

ANGELINE

Really?

LYDIA

Has to do with my ex, do you want to hear?

ANGELINE

It's fine.

LYDIA

You know we were long distance for a year during college.

ANGELINE

And broke up because of grad school?

LYDIA

Yeah, but I could've been in New York with him, or close enough. I got into Rutgers. But Michigan was a better fit academically, and I didn't feel right choosing where I was *because* of him.

ANGELINE

That's tough.

LYDIA

I didn't want to break up at the time, but it got too hard. Well, he broke up with me.

ANGELINE

Oh. Damn.

LYDIA

It's okay, it's been awhile. And we're still friends.

ANGELINE

Definitely can't say the same about my ex.

LYDIA

What happened exactly?

ANGELINE

We couldn't fucking communicate, constantly got into arguments. She didn't care about me, said I didn't care about her.

LYDIA

Sorry to hear that.

ANGELINE

It's whatever now. But are we gonna be okay if I go to China?

(silence)

LYDIA

I thought we had a few more years here, until I graduate.

ANGELINE

I'm sorry. I should've brought this up before we started dating.

LYDIA

All we can do is try. And if it gets too hard...

ANGELINE

Don't give up so easily.

LYDIA

I'm not giving up, I'm just being realistic.

ANGELINE

We're going make it work okay?

LYDIA

Yeah, we will. I should be more supportive.

(ANGELINE gets closer to LYDIA and hugs her.)

ANGELINE

You are babe, I want to be more like you.

LYDIA

No you're perfect.

(They begin to cuddle.)

ANGELINE

What would you do if the person you love was happier with someone else?

LYDIA

I guess I'd let them go. Because there's no point in trying to keep someone who doesn't want me.

ANGELINE

What if their new partner is a jerk?

LYDIA

Oh. Then I'd be upset.

ANGELINE

But if they're truly good for them?

LYDIA

Yeah, I think loving someone means you should want them to be happiest, even if it makes you less happy.

ANGELINE

That's very generous.

LYDIA

Really?

ANGELINE

I don't think I could do that. This probably sounds selfish, but I'd always want to be able to make you happier if I'm not right now. Because like theoretically, there's always someone you could be happier with.

LYDIA

But if they're repeatedly unhappy, then I don't think you should force it. It shouldn't ever be just on you to make things work, and if it was, then you should be okay with letting go. Have that respect for yourself.

ANGELINE

That's easier said than done when you love someone.

LYDIA

Yeah.

ANGELINE

What else does loving someone mean to you?

LYDIA

For me, it's a shared commitment, like depending on each other, spending time together. And fully supporting each other, no matter what.

ANGELINE

No matter what? What if it drives us apart?

LYDIA

What do you mean?

ANGELINE

The past week you've been so busy with your dissertation, which I know is really important and sorta determines your future, but also we've been talking so much less.

LYDIA

I'm sorry. I'll manage my time better, so I can spend more time with you.

ANGELINE

Okay.

LYDIA

Especially before you go to China.

(ANGELINE separates from LYDIA.)

ANGELINE

I wish you'd be more upset about it.

LYDIA

Why? You said your dream is to become an author, and I'll support you no matter what.

ANGELINE

I thought you would've wanted me here more.

LYDIA

I'm okay with any amount of time we can spend together.

ANGELINE

That makes me sad.

LYDIA

Don't be sad.

ANGELINE

I don't understand you.

LYDIA

What about me?

ANGELINE

Like how you're not sad at all. But also a lot of other things. Like how you don't talk much to your friends.

LYDIA

Yeah. I can be really close to someone without talking to them much. That's just the way I am.

ANGELINE

I don't get that.

LYDIA

That's okay. We're different in many ways.

ANGELINE

But I get scared when I can't understand how your mind works. I've never met someone who thinks like you.

LYDIA

No one's ever told me that before.

ANGELINE

Really?

LYDIA

Maybe it means you know me better than everyone else.

ANGELINE

It doesn't feel like it. Maybe you're not that close to anyone else.

LYDIA

That's okay. I'm happy with how things are right now.

ANGELINE

Are you?

LYDIA

What do you mean?

ANGELINE

I don't think you even have time to think about whether you're happy. All you think about are your deadlines.

LYDIA

Baby... I'm sorry. I'm just trying to keep my life together...

ANGELINE

You just said you were happy.

LYDIA

Jingyi has started calling me to check in.

ANGELINE

What? How often?

LYDIA

Every few days. She said I seemed distracted and kept on pressing until I said I was in a relationship.

ANGELINE

Uhh...

LYDIA

And she was disapproving.

ANGELINE

She's homophobic?

LYDIA

No! Well I mean I don't know, I didn't say you were a woman.

ANGELINE

Then what?

LYDIA

She's worried if we broke up, it might affect me a lot and be hard to finish my dissertation.

ANGELINE

That's what she's worried about?

LYDIA

And, well some other stuff / but...

ANGELINE

I thought she'd be more concerned about you, not your dissertation.

LYDIA

She's supposed to care about my dissertation. You care about me.

ANGELINE

What'd you say to her?

LYDIA

I didn't want to talk about it. I didn't really say anything.

ANGELINE

I get that you might not want to come out to your advisor, but can you stand up to her for once?

LYDIA

If something ever comes between us, it won't be her.

ANGELINE

I see what she's doing. She's making you choose, me or her.

LYDIA

No...

ANGELINE

Your work or your life.

LYDIA

Angeline, I will always choose you.

(silence)

ANGELINE

You promise?

LYDIA

Yeah I promise. Come here.

(They hug.)

LYDIA

I'm sorry we've been seeing each other less. I think about you all the time.

ANGELINE

Me too. I miss you so bad.

LYDIA

Aw baby. How's your book going?

ANGELINE

I came up with the title.

LYDIA

Yeah?

ANGELINE

Imagine this. One day you get a phone call from Memories Cafe.

LYDIA

How do they have my number?

ANGELINE

They say you called earlier today, saying you lost some book.

LYDIA

I did?

ANGELINE

Nope. But still, you go to the cafe and get it. It's called *Shūqiān*.

LYDIA

And it's your book?

ANGELINE

Yep.

LYDIA

What's it about?

ANGELINE

You'll find out one day.

LYDIA

I can't wait.

(LYDIA's alarm suddenly goes off.)

LYDIA

Fuck, I need to meet Jingyi.

ANGELINE

At this hour?!

LYDIA

It's the only time she's free today.

ANGELINE

She needs to respect your personal time.

LYDIA

She's only on campus once a week, I didn't have a choice.

ANGELINE

You just said we could spend time together. I came over and cooked for you.

LYDIA

I'm sorry, I forgot about this meeting.

ANGELINE

If she's been calling you so much, why can't you call her instead of meeting?

LYDIA

Angeline...

ANGELINE

She calls you more than you call me. If you leave for that meeting, then I'm leaving your apartment too.

LYDIA

I can't seem to make both of you happy at the same time, ever.

ANGELINE

What did you just promise me?

(silence)

LYDIA

I'll tell her I can't meet in person. I'll stay with you.

ANGELINE

Okay.

LYDIA

Do you want to sleep over tonight?

ANGELINE

Yeah.

SCENE FIVE

A few weeks later. ANGELINE visits LYDIA's office which is a small, angular room.

(ANGELINE enters.)

ANGELINE

Lydia? *(pause)* Hmm, not here. Interesting room though.

(ANGELINE sits in LYDIA's chair and starts looking at her phone.)

(JINGYI enters.)

JINGYI

Lydia? *(pause)* Who are you?

ANGELINE

I'm Angeline. Her, uh, friend. I wanted to talk to her.

JINGYI

Do you know where she went?

ANGELINE

No, but I could check her location. Wait, her phone is here. She probably went to the bathroom.

JINGYI

Okay.

(silence)

ANGELINE

You must be Lydia's advisor Jingyi?

JINGYI

Yes.

(silence)

ANGELINE

I know Lydia works really hard. Haven't seen her in a week.

JINGYI

Yes. From Lydia, I get a glimpse of my graduate school days.

ANGELINE

That's nice.

(LYDIA enters.)

LYDIA

Hi Jingyi—what?

ANGELINE

Lydia!

LYDIA

Why are you here?

ANGELINE

I haven't seen you in a week!

LYDIA

Sorry, this week was really rough for me.

ANGELINE

Can we talk?

LYDIA

I guess, but Jingyi was there something you wanted to discuss?

JINGYI

It's fine, I can wait a few minutes.

LYDIA

Thanks, sorry.

(ANGELINE and LYDIA go to the hallway.)

LYDIA

Why'd you come here?

ANGELINE

Where else do I find you? You haven't been responding to me!

LYDIA

I'm sorry, I saw your messages but haven't been in a good mood. After being at that conference for a few days, I had to write forty pages for my meeting with Jingyi.

ANGELINE

You're always trying to seek approval from her, while making me feel like I'm a distraction.

LYDIA

When did I say that?

ANGELINE

You only call me over when you're free, and you feel lonely, and you wanna cuddle.

LYDIA

No, of course not!

ANGELINE

I wish you were happier to see me.

LYDIA

I really am, it's just bad timing.

ANGELINE

You saw my text?

LYDIA

Yeah, you got into that writing workshop in China? That starts in a few weeks.

ANGELINE

Yeah.

LYDIA

And it's a year long?

ANGELINE

Yeah.

LYDIA

(starts tearing up)

I'm really happy for you.

ANGELINE

What's wrong?

(silence)

LYDIA

I need to tell you something. I was going to wait, but I think you deserve to know now.

ANGELINE

What?

LYDIA

I can't do a long distance relationship.

ANGELINE

You've done long distance before.

LYDIA

I just don't have the bandwidth. I can't seem to care about anyone I don't see regularly.

ANGELINE

What do you mean?

LYDIA

I haven't talked to my parents in months, I wasn't able to keep in touch with even my closest friends from college. You're the only one I'm close to because I see you so often.

ANGELINE

That's it?

LYDIA

And hasn't this relationship been really hard on you? I know I'm bad at texting and that I've been so busy all the time. It's hard to spend time together when we live within a few miles of each other, let alone on opposite sides of the planet.

ANGELINE

Why can't you do better? Get better at texting. Do you care about me enough to call me every day, even in opposite time zones?

LYDIA

I'm sorry Angeline. I do care about you so much.

ANGELINE

We've talked about me going to China so many times.

LYDIA

I know, I really thought it'd be okay. But when you sent that text...

ANGELINE

You were the one who told me to apply for this stupid program!

LYDIA

I thought it'd be good for you professionally.

ANGELINE

No, you were looking for every opportunity to push me away so you could concentrate on your fucking dissertation.

LYDIA

No, Angeline...

ANGELINE

I am worth doing long distance for.

LYDIA

You *are* worth it. You are so fucking worth it.

(starts crying)

But is our relationship worth it? You need to find someone who can do long distance with you. You deserve someone way better than me.

ANGELINE

(starts crying)

We were working through it.

LYDIA

I'm sorry. I understand if you want to break up.

ANGELINE

You're not giving me a choice. You're the one who can't do long distance.

LYDIA

I'm sorry.

ANGELINE

It's been a long time since I felt like you wanted me in your life.

LYDIA

I care about you so much Angeline. I don't want our relationship to end messily over long distance.

ANGELINE

No, you were looking for every opportunity to push me away so you could concentrate on your fucking dissertation.

LYDIA

No, why are you assuming that?

(JINGYI begins to view the conversation in the hallway by standing in the doorway.)

ANGELINE

I'm pretty sure a lot of the time you don't know what you want, and that's why you're so easily influenced by others, like Jingyi.

LYDIA

Please be respectful to my advisor.

ANGELINE

She's the reason why I've barely seen you!

JINGYI

If Lydia wanted to talk to you more, she would.

ANGELINE

What the fuck. Stay out of this, I'm her girlfriend! *(pause)* Or was. What the fuck are we now?

LYDIA

Oh my god Jingyi, I'm so sorry. I can't believe you said that.

ANGELINE

What the fuck? Are you defending your advisor right now?

LYDIA

Angeline! / You...

ANGELINE

Shut up. *(pause)* You're right. I do deserve better. I got used to you never having enough time for me. I lowered my expectations to meet yours because I liked you, only for you to choose Jingyi, over and over.

LYDIA

You need to leave right now.

ANGELINE

Fuck you. I don't want to see you ever again.

(ANGELINE leaves.)

LYDIA

I'm so sorry. That won't happen again.

JINGYI

Your... girlfriend?

LYDIA

No, we just broke up.

JINGYI

Oh.

(JINGYI closes the door.)

JINGYI

You made a good decision, and she will respect your professional boundaries.

LYDIA

I don't think it was my decision.

JINGYI

A long distance relationship is hard, and you knew that you could not do it. It also sounded like your career goals were not aligned.

LYDIA

I feel terrible.

JINGYI

Especially with a girlfriend, I don't want your life in academia to be harder than it already is. Even when Ryan got a girlfriend / people...

LYDIA

Ryan has a girlfriend?!

JINGYI

Yes.

LYDIA

Since when?

JINGYI

Two years ago.

LYDIA

Then why has he been hitting on me for the past year?

JINGYI

I believe they broke up.

LYDIA

That's not a good answer. You were just talking about "professional boundaries."

JINGYI

I could talk to him, if that's helpful.

LYDIA

It would be helpful to not make me write with him. He gets so physically close every time we're together and doesn't respect my ideas.

(silence)

JINGYI

Lydia, how about this. You do not have to work with Ryan. Only one of you has to write the paper and present at the conference. You can decide who.

LYDIA

I'll do it. I have extra time now.

JINGYI

Great. Then the department will give you a travel scholarship.

LYDIA

Okay.

JINGYI

Take the rest of the day off. And remember that I will always support you as your advisor, even if I don't support all of your choices.

SCENE SIX

LYDIA and ANGELINE are in their respective rooms.

LYDIA

(to the audience)

We weren't compatible. I wasn't able to give her the time and care that she wanted in a relationship. I know it's unfair to her, and she's going to take it harder than me.

But for some reason, I don't feel much right now. Not sad or anything. I'm just so tired.

At least I'm no longer writing the paper with Ryan. I'm writing it by myself like I originally wanted. It took a breakup for Jingyi to give me some space, but she realized that I was working hard all along.

ANGELINE

(on the phone)

Why did I say that? That I never want to talk to her again. I know I shouldn't. But why do I want to? Why can't I get over her when I know she was way too busy for me? All I think about is being next to her, is that bad? What if I still want that? I'm not even leaving for a few weeks.
(pause)

You're right, temptation is a bitch. I should move my flight up. But why do I still like her so fucking much? Even though I knew it wasn't going to work out. *(pause)*

You're right, I deserve someone better. And she couldn't be that for me.

LYDIA*(to the audience)*

The next few months went by quickly. I presented at the Harvard conference and met some professors who were really interesting. I continued writing my dissertation, chapter by chapter.

When I thought I was fully over the breakup, I searched her up. That's when I found her webnovel, *Shūqiān*. I couldn't stop flipping through the pages. I could tell that those were her words and her emotions.

I read the new chapters every week. I couldn't stop thinking about it. A grad student joked that I should translate it so that they could read it too. And I started to think about that seriously.

SCENE SEVEN

LYDIA and JINGYI are in JINGYI's office.

LYDIA

I started translating a webnovel.

JINGYI

I did not know you had time for that. Is it famous?

LYDIA

It only came out a few months ago, but yeah. It's a collection of short stories revolving around a woman.

JINGYI

I wouldn't know the author, would I?

LYDIA

(calmly)

No.

JINGYI

Lydia, I do not think a "side project" like this is valuable at this stage of your PhD.

LYDIA

I have plenty of reasons. For one, I felt more represented in it than in the literature I usually translate. And I used to think that "side projects" were distracting, but I wrote that paper for the Harvard conference.

JINGYI

That is different because it led to opportunities.

LYDIA

It did. I met Professor Qin who wanted to discuss more the intersection of gender and community in Ming-Qing literature. She wants me to visit in a few weeks and give another talk.

JINGYI

That is not your research focus.

LYDIA

It's all connected, and I am really interested in her work, even if it's not the exact research path you've laid out for me. I need to learn how to explore my own interests and ask my own questions. Working with Professor Qin will help me grow in this way. She actually offered to co-advise me.

JINGYI

Are you seriously considering that?

LYDIA

Yes, I really want to, and I hoped that you would approve.

JINGYI

Lydia, I have been looking out for you all of these years, since the moment you came into my office as a masters student. Why would you leave when you already have everything here?

LYDIA

I appreciate everything you have done for me, especially when I was first starting out and we met every week. Now, I wish you would trust me with my own research directions.

JINGYI

You are not ready, you are still a student. But under my guidance, you will be on track for a good position with tenure.

LYDIA

That dream has gotten me through countless all nighters. But it's also caused me to lose sight of why I came here in the first place. I don't study Chinese literature just to read classical texts and advance knowledge, but for the people I care about. And that's why I'm translating her book.

SCENE EIGHT

A year later. LYDIA and ANGELINE are calling.

ANGELINE

What exactly do you want?

LYDIA

I'm sorry for everything. I'm sorry for pushing you away and not making you feel valued. You cared a lot about me, even though I didn't appreciate it enough at the time. I don't want anything from you. You already did a lot for me. But I read your webnovel, and it was really good.

ANGELINE

Shūqiān?

LYDIA

It was like when we'd go to the library and tell each other stories instead of working. It felt like you were there with me again. And it made me realize I had a lot of unprocessed emotions.

ANGELINE

It's been a year. I haven't thought about us in a long time.

LYDIA

Sorry to bring it up again.

ANGELINE

The first month after our breakup, I was really emotional. I wanted to see you but I also didn't. I don't even know why but I went to your office again.

LYDIA

Jingyi told me.

ANGELINE

I hate that bitch.

LYDIA

Sorry.

ANGELINE

She said that if you wanted to talk, you'd reach out, and it hurt because I knew it was true.

LYDIA

I'm sorry, I was scared. It sounded like you never wanted to talk to me again.

ANGELINE

I felt so stupid for waiting to hear from you. I wanted a sign that I had some impact on your life, because I was so good to you. But you didn't want me, you chose Jingyi.

LYDIA

And I regretted it. You were the one supporting me the most. I've been thinking about everything you've taught me, how you've helped me change for the better, and I'm grateful for you. Also, Jingyi's not my main advisor anymore.

ANGELINE

What?

LYDIA

I got another advisor, a professor who liked my work at the Harvard conference.

ANGELINE

I didn't know you could do that.

LYDIA

Jingyi made me feel insecure because of how judgmental and hands-on she was. I also started to have new research interests, which she didn't support, so I found someone who did.

ANGELINE

That's good you learned how to stand up to her.

LYDIA

I also started translating *Shūqiān* into English.

ANGELINE

What?

LYDIA

I've never read a book that has made me think so hard or reflect so much on myself.

ANGELINE

Because I wrote it?

LYDIA

Maybe. I could hear your voice in a lot of it and understand your emotions.

ANGELINE

Hmm.

LYDIA

And I think it's not just me, a lot of people will be able to resonate with the feelings in your book. Translation is a bridge so that more people can understand a work, and in turn care about it.

ANGELINE

Why did you start translating?

LYDIA

Because I still care about you. *(pause)* And you really cared about me. I knew that before too, but translating your book helped me realize it again.

ANGELINE

Can I see it?

LYDIA

Yeah. I just finished the story about the artist.

(LYDIA sends a text.)

ANGELINE

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

LYDIA

Yeah.

ANGELINE

I feel like you can identify with my character.

LYDIA

How come?

ANGELINE

Because you translated this story in first person. “I remember,” not “she remembers.”

LYDIA

I thought it’d be more powerful in first person.

ANGELINE

Perhaps.

LYDIA

My translation is letting you see the story in another way. Like how digital artists flip their canvases while they draw, so they don’t get too used to looking at it one way.

ANGELINE

What was the hardest to translate?

LYDIA

Nothing in particular. The difficulty isn’t in finding the words, but making sure they make sense in context and convey the correct feeling.

ANGELINE

Then was it hard to capture the feeling?

LYDIA

No. For this story, I thought back to that time we went to the movies, and you needed to go back to my apartment for something, but I didn’t go back with you. You didn’t return and I watched the movie by myself, and it was my fault.

ANGELINE

I remember that too. I got really upset and went home.

LYDIA

I’m sorry.

ANGELINE

We don’t have to talk about that now.

LYDIA

Okay.

ANGELINE

What's this story about for you?

LYDIA

It's about a brief moment of tension between two people, through art. While sitting in front of the artist, she feels analyzed, but also seen, and becomes able to tell the artist something that she hasn't told anyone else before. And the artist says that showing her drawing is also deeply personal, so they're both being vulnerable. Though there's something about how she left the drawing behind. Maybe she wished for something more...

ANGELINE

When I finished writing this story, I considered texting you. We hadn't talked in months, but I felt so lonely and sad.

LYDIA

But you didn't...

ANGELINE

I needed to heal on my own. Also "validation from others is temporary. Getting published is forever."

LYDIA

Is that something I said to you before?

ANGELINE

No I'm being sarcastic.

LYDIA

But was I right about your story reminding me of us?

ANGELINE

So many things inspire my writing, you can take from it whatever you want. But I try not to write my characters too similar to myself, because when it gets critiqued, it feels too personal.

LYDIA

I guess I wouldn't know because I only write academic papers.

ANGELINE

I wouldn't understand that either. Is it mostly rephrasing other people?

LYDIA

If you're rephrasing, then it's to reach a stronger or more relevant conclusion. As an analogy with translation, there are probably dozens of translations of *Romeo and Juliet* from English into English.

ANGELINE

I sorta missed your fun facts.

LYDIA

I sorta missed talking to you. Is that okay?

ANGELINE

Yeah.

LYDIA

I really appreciate being able to show you my translation.

ANGELINE

It's interesting to hear how you interpret things.

LYDIA

I should be done with the rest in a month. Do you want me to send it then?

ANGELINE

Yeah.

SCENE NINE

A year later. ANGELINE walks up to LYDIA who is on a park bench reading a book.

ANGELINE

Hey Lydia.

LYDIA

Hi. It's good to see you.

ANGELINE

Yeah it's been awhile. I just saw the craziest thing in the airport.

LYDIA

What?

ANGELINE

I was in the bathroom, and there were these two women. They were asking each other stuff like, "Where are you going? Where'd you come from?" They seemed like strangers.

LYDIA

Right.

ANGELINE

But when one of them is brushing her teeth, the other one starts braiding her hair.

LYDIA

Okay...

ANGELINE

And then that other woman starts brushing her teeth with the same toothbrush!

LYDIA

What?

ANGELINE

But then they go back to asking about their jobs, and if they have any pets.

LYDIA

So they don't know each other?

ANGELINE

No they have to be married right??

LYDIA

I'm so confused.

ANGELINE

Doesn't it sound so gay? She was braiding her hair.

LYDIA

Then they're exes?

ANGELINE

No offense, but I would not do that with you.

LYDIA

I'm glad. No offense taken.

ANGELINE

You still come to this park much?

LYDIA

Yeah, this is my favorite place in Ann Arbor.

ANGELINE

Why?

LYDIA

You know why.

ANGELINE

Yeah, me too.

LYDIA

I saw someone drawing caricatures over there, want to check it out?

ANGELINE

Sounds like you want to live out that story.

LYDIA

Except the part about leaving the drawing behind.

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

LYDIA

I translated her book last year. It's called *Shūqiān* in Chinese. Or *Bookmark* in English.

ANGELINE

It started out as a webnovel, but I eventually got it published, and now it's in bookstores in both languages.

LYDIA

There's a reason why I wanted to translate it. It contains a lot of interesting stories that I could really relate to. One of them is about an artist, so maybe you'd like that.

(They walk back to the original bench.)

ANGELINE

Remember when we first met and you told me a truth and a lie? Your first one was about drawing a lot of caricatures right?

LYDIA

Oh yeah! And the lie was about a tree falling on me.

ANGELINE

Right!

LYDIA

But what was your truth and lie again?

ANGELINE

You don't remember?

LYDIA

Let me think.

(flustered)

Ahhhh oh my god! Something about kissing.

ANGELINE

No no no before that.

LYDIA

What?

ANGELINE

It was how I don't know what I'm doing with my life, or that I'm going to become an author.

LYDIA

Ohh. I know which one is true now.

ANGELINE

It meant a lot to verbalize it then. But I also remember what happened after.

LYDIA

Oh my god. Back then I didn't know you could be that direct.

ANGELINE

Anyways, as our resident artist, what do you think?

LYDIA

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

ANGELINE

I like how you notice these details.

LYDIA

What do you think?

ANGELINE

It's cute! I remember you also sketched us once. It had more detail.

LYDIA

She had like a minute. Also maybe it's because I know us.

ANGELINE

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

LYDIA

Knowing you personally lets me catch more details. But that artist also had certain details that she noticed and emphasized, like the texture of your hair and the shape of your eyes.

ANGELINE

And I suppose what makes a drawing good is not the amount of detail, and probably same for a translation.

LYDIA

Of course. Translation is about loss. But you also gain something in the new language.

ANGELINE

“Lost in translation” as they say. Have you seen that movie?

LYDIA

No, what’s it about?

ANGELINE

It’s about two Americans who connect over feeling lost in Tokyo. Maybe you’d like it.

LYDIA

I do have to watch it if it has “translation” in the title. Also that’s like another one of your stories. The one about overhearing a conversation between two strangers who don’t sound like strangers.

ANGELINE

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

LYDIA

What’s our story going to be like?

ANGELINE

That’s up to you.

LYDIA

And you.

(ANGELINE and LYDIA embrace.)

SCENE TEN

LYDIA is alone in her apartment. It is empty except for a few suitcases.

LYDIA

(to the audience)

The next chapter of my life begins tomorrow. I'll be a lecturer at Northeastern, and my first class is Modern Chinese Literature in Translation. But I'm ready. I learned a lot from my time here, and I'm leaving with good memories.

(LYDIA is holding the book Bookmark and opens it. Flashback to previous moments done by voiceover.)

ANGELINE

(voiceover)

I want to write a webnovel.

LYDIA

(voiceover)

Really? About what?

ANGELINE

Not sure yet, but I'm thinking about a bunch of stories about this woman that end up being connected. It might start out with her meeting her girlfriend through a series of events.

LYDIA

That sounds cute.

(The sound of flipping book pages as LYDIA flips to a different part of the book.)

ANGELINE

(voiceover)

Imagine this. One day you get a phone call from Memories Cafe.

LYDIA

(voiceover)

How do they have my number?

ANGELINE

They say you called earlier today, saying you lost some book.

LYDIA

I did?

ANGELINE

Nope. But still, you go to the cafe and get it. It's called *Shūqiān*.

LYDIA

And it's your book?

ANGELINE

Yep.

LYDIA

What's it about?

ANGELINE

You'll find out one day.

LYDIA

I can't wait.

(The sound of flipping book pages as LYDIA flips to a different part of the book.)

LYDIA

(voiceover)

So they don't know each other?

ANGELINE

(voiceover)

No they have to be married right??

LYDIA

I'm so confused.

ANGELINE

Doesn't it sound so gay? She was braiding her hair.

LYDIA

Then they're exes?

ANGELINE

No offense, but I would not do that with you.

LYDIA

I'm glad. No offense taken.

(LYDIA closes the book.)

LYDIA

(to the audience)

I knew that one day, I wouldn't live here anymore. And you wouldn't be here to tell me stories all the time. Our paths have since diverged. But when we were together, you were always there for me. So one day, if you need, just call me. Wherever or whenever, I will be there for you.

END OF PLAY