

### **An excerpt from *The Best of Times***

The sofa, lumpy from decades of use, had these enormous camellias indicating where one's buttocks should rest, one's torso should lean. The dazzling pink of it overcame our bodies. Nestled, my mother picked up my hand, then Meimei's.

“I miss the good old days,” she said. “Remember when we thought Ivan would still come home?”

She laughed, a loud and barking sound.

“We didn't think he would survive. Right out of the army! Running off with all his life savings. And those places...I can't even pronounce their names.”

“The UK,” I said.

“Other countries too.”

My mother's thick black eyebrows hitched hillocks over her doe eyes.

“Remember when I said he would bring home a foreigner girlfriend?” she said. She laughed again, the sound squeezed from her dry, skinny throat. Then she wiped her eyes.

“You girls work hard so you can see these places too,” she said.

I looked them up later, the names of the countries we had never thought to visit: Macedonia, Finland, the recently-formed Czech Republic. I remembered how conscientiously Ivan had called at first. He made it a point to whenever he reached a new city. The phone calls came at approximately the same time, but on unpredictable days.

Back then, my mother would take a few rings to get to him, strolling as she wiped her hands on a kitchen towel. But once the receiver was on her ear, it felt like she could sit there forever. Often, their conversations were accompanied by the smell of some food burning in the kitchen, neglected. Meimei and I, who weren't even ten then, often played with our Polly Pockets by the long window looking out into the common corridor. We eavesdropped. We watched my mother curl the landline around her finger. She asked many times when Ivan would apply to university, and because Papa was no longer angry, when Ivan would book his flight home. Every call would enliven her, as though electricity itself were coursing through her veins. If electricity were Ivan's voice.

“Ma,” we would sometimes remind her. “Mama.” Pulling on her pants leg.

“Do you want to say hi to your sisters?” she asked the phone tenderly. “Okay, darling.” To us, “Gor says hello.”

“Hello,” Meimei would say obediently, as she clambered toward the receiver, the hard, heart-shaped Polly Pocket still gripped in her hand. I would shout from my mother's shoulder, “Where are you?”

We all wanted to know.