

Guāi 乖

by Annie ZH Sun

When she's born, she is greeted by a word that is the sound of a lowered jaw, pursed lips and breath pushing high against the tongue, straight into the roof of the mouth, where expectations set. It is a murmur that cuts above her wailings in the night, becomes a weapon disguised as lullaby stalking her through childhood, a synonym for 'no' towards simple demands of another ice-cream, five-more-minutes-please TV time, of please-please-let-me-wear-purple-during-New-Year, and please-don't-send-me-to-violin-lessons-I-hate-it. That word is the justification of unbuilt boundaries, doors with no locks, and do-not-argue-with-us-we-know-best in her teenage years. It is the reason why she must not have opinions or hobbies or friends outside the approved list. An adjective crafted to describe the collective image of millions of faceless and ghostlike women who are the perfect daughter. She is not them, but she must be them.

She tries to fight. At five, she soaks the festive red of her dress in fancy berry juice. Her mother does not speak to her for a week despite her cries, pleads, apologies. At fourteen, she chops off her hair with a pair of garden shears and the uneven bits sticking on her head are as sharp as her father's slaps. At twenty-three, she decides not to marry. The tears and disapprovals flowing from her parents, her relatives, the neighbours turn into a river with no end. She never expects that one little word in negative form to be so potent, so poisonous. She is a sinner, an existence stripped of identity, ready to be shunned by society. She learns to loathe that word.

It is everywhere; it sits on tongues of boyfriends who compliment her for her considerate nature when they show up late, wearing bad breath and bed hair. It borrows deep into relatives' speech when they urge her to reconsider her choices in life. She does not know it yet, but in spite of her battles and aversions, she will have a child, a baby girl who will steal her heart and melt her principles. She will marry for the sake of her daughter's future, so those gossiping stares and vile whispers of 'bastard' will stop its hauntings. She will vow to her growing belly that she would not be like her own parents, that she'd be different. She does not know yet, that between balancing a job, house chores, and mounting bills, and a husband who never helps out, she will cave in the dead of night, and while the baby cries insistently, she will whisper, plead, beg her to stop.

Don't cry. Be quiet, be pliant, be submissive. Be obedient, be good: “乖.”