

电影

Electric Shadow

The morning sunlight filters in through blinds dusted twice already. My grandmother pushes the thick VHS tape into the port and presses rewind. The machine whirs to life. Names of studios, writers, actors, artists scroll up faster than I can read them. My grandmother pushes herself to her feet with a sigh, her bad knee creaking.

“There we go, doll,” she says, crossing the room. She pulls the wool blanket tighter around me and presses her hand to my sweaty forehead. “Well, you’ve got a fever, but that’s a small thing. Do you need anything to drink? I’ve got soda in the garage.”

“Sprite,” I say weakly. She won’t give me anything with caffeine; Coke is saved for Christmas and Easter only. Besides, Sprite is better for the stomach.

I turn my gaze back to the television as my grandmother busies herself in the kitchen. The tape rewinds noisily. The end of the movie is playing in reverse, lines of static crossing over frantic cartoon characters moving at twice the normal speed. I watch the images flash by, anticipating the moment when the movie will start. Everything is moving backwards in a freakish parrell of life. Faces contort, wordless. A pirate jumps back up onto the deck of his ship from the blue water below. Peter Pan flies away from the boat, leaving everyone behind. He soars back into the sky, vanishes in the clouds. Static fills the screen and shadows dance between the pixels.

Eight, ten, sixteen wooden poles in each hand, dragging flat leather puppets over white canvas. The figures are so thin and delicate that the light from the gilded lanterns shines right through them, projecting their color through the screen. A dozen villagers sit just on the other side of the screen, watching the colorful shadows joust with paper spears. It's a small showing, but the food is warm and good. A young girl with raven-black hair watches the two puppets run at each other, bouncing back with each *crash* of the symbols. In the second act a princess emerges, a lithe actress with a round face and red lips. Her arms move through small wooden joints and a high voice rises from behind the screen. Her song is forlorn; it mourns the loss of what has once been. This is a tradition handed down from master to apprentice, father to son, since the Tang Dynasty. A hundred years of storytelling. These actors are so fragile, so easy to tear and to burn. They dance in the glowing light of the very thing that could destroy them.

I've seen this movie a dozen times. I know it by heart. The tape clicks softly in its port, and the movie starts with vibrant orchestral music. I close my eyes.

The first moving pictures in Europe are paintings on a wheel. When spun, the figures come to life, moving stiffly in circular dances. The very first moving picture to be made on film is called "The Roundhay Garden Scene." It's made in 1888 by French inventor Louis Le Prince. The shadow of a horse gallops in tiny gossamer boxes.

Another moving film premiered in France in 1895. It's created by the Lumiere brothers, and this time the power of movement is shown by a train moving so realistically audiences are

convinced that they are about to be struck. Less than a year later, Lumiere films are shown across the world.

When movies arrive in China it is through the affluent teahouses of Shanghai. Patrons sip tea while watching live performers and shadow plays, and moving film is soon a popular item on the menu. Within a year, China is obsessed. A new word is created to describe the unimaginable: they call it *dianying* 电影. Literally translated, the word means “electronic shadows.” It is a new form of cultural expression. Chinese cities abandon old stories and fables. They want something new, something modern, something fresh. Armed with handsome actors and brilliant directors, Shanghai becomes the film capital of China. In 1917, Zhang Shichuan directed the first Chinese film: “The Difficult Couple.” The movie takes after Chinese opera and shadow plays, with long pauses, dramatic facial expressions, and crashing music, and within the electronic box two modern shadows deal with modern problems. An actress emerges on the flickering screen. She is beautiful. Were the film in color, her lips would undoubtedly be red.

When the movie stops playing, my grandmother is asleep on my grandfather’s chair. The *hiss* of static does not wake her. I quietly slide out from underneath my neatly tucked blanket and crawl towards the television. I push the button marked with a black triangle and the box spits out my tape. I always forget to rewind the tapes when I’m finished, much to my grandmother’s annoyance. The screen is still crackling with gray and black and white. I touch my hand to the polished glass surface. For a moment I can almost believe the static moves towards my fingers, pulling with it the memories of all the stories ever played in the shadows. A sharp *crack*, and I yelp, ripping my hand away from the bite of electricity. The noise wakes my grandmothers. She

sits up with a snort and looks around. Her dark brown eyes, so similar to her mother's eyes and my mother's and my own, land on me.

“All finished, doll?”