

HOSTING THE DIVINE: A DAUGHTER'S MEMOIR

附神：我那借身給神明的父親

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We frequently hear people say that their father was their hero when they were little. But what if your father were, literally, a god? Essayist Lin Che Li describes growing up with a father who dedicated his life to serving his community as the earthly host of a local deity. The book puts a modern face on a millennia-old mystical tradition that many Westerners know nothing about.

When he was young, Lin Che Li's father didn't believe in gods and spirits. Not only had they never helped him, the mystics and mediums of seemingly every temple in Taiwan flat-out refused to intervene after his brother contracted an inexplicable illness that led to his death. But one day, without warning, a spectral entity entered his body and spoke to him. It was no longer a question of belief.

In a series of essays originally published in periodicals, Lin Che Li describes her father's career as a divine medium, from his first, unexpected visitations (when the god helped a woman heal her young daughter) to his weekly seances for the community. His unasked-for power transformed their family's living room into a community gathering place that could become volatile amid the haze of incense smoke, as people brought fears, concerns, and hopes to the feet of a man who occasionally spoke with the voice of a god.

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Winner of the China Times Award, Lin Che Li is a young author of fiction and non-fiction. *Hosting the Divine* is her first published book.



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By Lin Che Li

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Part 1: The Shamanic Ritual of Planchette Divination: Father Is a God, a God Is My Father

When the god leaves his body and enters Father's, the cavity of Father's body resembles a vessel. Whenever necessary, the soul inside gives way to house the god instead. Father's soul and god take turns inhabiting that cavity. At this moment, he is not my father, but the god himself.

Both Father and God

On the sixth day of the Lunar New Year, at around ten o'clock in the morning, I was still asleep. Gongs and drums were already roaring outside, and I knew Father had turned into a god once again. Today was the day the god had fixed to perform sacrifices, and so Father ate breakfast and the god entered his body right away. Standing in a veil of incense smoke and holding a Seven Stars Sword and a flail (two of the five treasured weapons of Taoist spirit mediums), he helped every faithful man and woman who crossed the plank bridge with three joss sticks and fate cards in hand to destroy the ill fortune that awaited them. At that moment, Father's eyes were firm and he radiated pride as he steadily practiced the Seven Stars Steps, wearing a black pair of soft, flat-bottomed shoes. His imposing manner seemed to raise him up taller than his one hundred and seventy centimeters of height.

Ever since I was young I knew Father was a god. Every night on the weekends, he would bathe and seat himself in the middle of three wooden chairs in the living room. Father's good friend Uncle Lin then turned to move the incense burner from the worship hall to the long wooden table in front of the chairs, gently put a small piece of wood into the incense burner and slowly add sawdust. These arrangements made, the living room became gradually smoky, like the scene of a sacred ritual. At the proper time, Father clenched his fists and bent his arms over his head. He went up and down, with the slightest tremble to his body, exhaling from between his teeth. Finally, Father lowered his arms slowly and held his palms firmly on the table at a distance wider than that of his shoulders, sitting upright, looking somewhat intimidating.

Father's voice then still had his timbre, but it carried a special, ancient-like intonation. In these circumstances, his voice was slightly heightened, every sound was somewhat elongated and

his usual southern accent was missing – instead, it was as though he was seemingly speaking some kind of elegant Taiwanese. At those moments, he was not my father, but a god.

The people at the long table took turns to ask their questions: “Business is not good; I can’t make money. Even if I close a deal, I’m still losing money. What should I do?”, or “My daughter has been running a high fever ever since she returned from a trip. The doctor said it was all okay, what should I do?” A great deal of issues emerged: all kinds of difficult and miscellaneous conditions, including the usual matters concerning birth and old age, sickness and death, higher education, marital problems...every kind of trouble known to humankind, and Father dealt with them one by one. Sometimes he frowned and made an augury, then picked up a brush dipped in red ink and wrote a mysterious collocation of words and signs on yellow paper. He would then explain to whomever that they were to either carry these on them or burn them. They would then circle the gold furnace three times before dissolving the ashes in the so called yin-yang water and take a few sips of the concoction. Alternatively, one could use a talisman to ignite a fire and then chant incantations and rotate around the enquirer while saying: “I implore the gods in worship to come and give an order....” Father would ask so-and-so under what constellation they had been born, and what kind of trouble they’d encountered, and after reading he would take the red ink-dipped brush to draw Taoist glyphs or leave a red dot on their forehead. Like any other competent professional, he carefully solved the problems of those who came to him, his movements neat, concise, and practiced, his demeanor purely self-assured.

Every time, after the needle had completed several rounds, the god would ask: “Is there anything else?” When everyone replied: “No!”, the spirit withdrew from Father’s body, and Father raised his arms up and down again and bent inwards. Then he would slowly exhale a long breath through his teeth. Father loosened up completely, hunching his body forward with his elbows on his thighs. At this moment, Mother would first boil some water or brew ginseng tea for Father to drink. She said this was meant to soothe the internal organs, known in traditional Chinese medicine as the five viscera and six bowels. Once the god had left his body, Father leaned back into his chair and drank his tea slowly, mouthful by mouthful. He asked Mother what the god’s commands had been, and as she told him, he made arrangements to deal with every matter, big and small, as usual. Like a squad leader organizing his “troops”, he delegated everything for our family. The return to reality left him with a slightly weary expression.

It was only normal that he’d feel tired in his capacity as a god who drifted all around the country, always bustling about and dealing with all sorts of difficult and complicated cases of illness and troubles on behalf of everyday people. Perhaps once that god’s divine halo faded away from him, Father was simply much more like those mortals who came in supplication – had his own tasks and problems. I do not know which one of the two it was.

In addition to being a god, Father had also worked a plethora of jobs over the years to seek his livelihood, including as a carpenter, chef, greengrocer, metalworker, and others. He also once opened up a factory, so he clearly had a vast range of skills. During my childhood, I had a hard time keeping track of when he was a deity or my father, but I always believed Father was a god, because he was like a celestial being with superhuman strength who had never been

stumped in his life. When I was a child, I loved swinging, so Father used scout ropes and wooden slats to make me my own swing. When I grew up, I got injured while riding a bicycle. Father turned into a traditional Chinese martial arts master, massaging my sprained foot and applying medicinal oil to help disperse the contusion, so that the injury would heal without a trace. Furthermore, the names of the six children in the family all contain the perfect number of strokes that he painstakingly calculated by using the five elements, so that we would each enjoy the blessings of a good name.

I was not the only one to find out about Father's "godliness". Later on, more and more people came to our house. They were like those temple-goers who burned incense in hope of gaining something.

On nights when I was awakened by the noise downstairs, I drowsed on the stairs and watch the people who gathered in the living room through a crevice. They seemed to be waiting for something, I thought. Among them were relatives of Father who kneeled on the cold floor, crying and pleading with Father, saying that they were at the end of their ropes, and could they borrow a few hundred thousand dollars or a house as collateral for a loan? There were also friends of Father, drinking and snarling on the wooden bench, saying that they'd had to flee because of an accident and threatening to kidnap us children if Father didn't contribute to their running expenses. There were also distant relatives who didn't often contact us other than to show off their wealth and the high-end delicacies they'd feasted on. These people asked Father to hire the chef they'd recommended to prepare Sister's engagement banquet, claiming that otherwise the guests would find the dishes shabby and therefore judge our family as unsophisticated and short-sighted. This all highlighted the shallow insides of society we'd never been aware of.

Many people came to see Father and take over our living room for many different reasons.

I actually never understood why they came to him, nor did I know how he dealt with everyone such that that they would leave of their own accord. Although he faced each of them with a furrowed brow, when the noise was over, he would still stand outside the house alone, take a cigarette from his pocket, and smoke silently. No one could read his thoughts.

Ever since Father's hair turned white, he has spent less time as a god, and I presume that his divine power has somehow decreased. Yet those who came to him and gather in the living room haven't left, but are ever changing. They happily share with Father tall tales of their children's education and salary. Every now and then they also ask Father tentative questions. On these occasions, Father always simply smiles and answers: "Not much," and then he stops replying. Besides enthusiastically sharing their lives, when they heard Father's car was so old he'd have to exchange it for another one, they rushed to introduce themselves and take him to a familiar buy-and-sell car factory. In the end, he bought a car that had been involved in an accident for a high price. When Father realized he had been cheated, he tried to get an explanation from the car dealer, but the guy avoided all attempts to meet and conveniently disappeared. Father was indignant, but didn't want to look further into it, fearing that he'd damage a good relationship, so he took it privately.

In recent years, Father has frequently suffered from minor maladies like colds and toothaches. Occasionally, some hereditary bone pain will flare up, and the disease erodes his body. At these times, he looks like a sluggish cat, resting in bed all day, yet he will not give up his daily ritual of serving tea morning and evening in the worship hall, and his body keeps on going, his condition unchanged either for the better or worse.

Sometimes I've wondered – could it be that Father simply suffers from a special kind of mental illness?

When the god isn't there, Father resembles a child, ridden with ailments, easily duped and wounded to the eyes of the world. I do not know if he has ever wept to himself; all I know is that he has been silently trying to carry something on his narrow shoulders all along.

I liked Father as a god. When he seemed endowed with the power of the entire world, he could grasp everything there is to life in the palm of his hand, and he was always held in high regard – there was no chance of a heavy fall.

If he could always be a god, perhaps everything would be better?

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The Visionary Drifting of My Father's Youth

For many years, Father has not only worshipped the god, he has also maintained strict selection standards for customs and ceremonies, which the entire household must follow. If Mother doesn't have certain sacrifices ready for worship, she is sure to hear Father's light reproach.

On the first and fifteenth day of the month, Father observes a strictly plant-based diet that does not even allow for dairy and eggs. No matter whether the ceremony is held at home or at the temple, all daily life matters where caution is advised – marriage, sacrifices to ancestors, funeral arrangements, anything – require us to check the almanac to determine an auspicious day and time. Sometimes, a clashing zodiac has to be avoided. When naming a child, the name must match the child's eight-character birth time and align with the Five Elements; this is no slapdash decision.

Every year on New Year's Eve, Father sends off the deity with the greatest respect. With each family gathering for the New Year Eve's dinner, a stove burning charcoal has to be arranged in the living room. This is said to expel the filth in the air, driving away any unclean spirit that may be in the house. It is also meant to pray for the family's prosperity. Every year we gather for dinner in a room shrouded in white smoke. We then cook mustard greens (known as "longevity greens") that we are careful to put in our mouths whole before chewing, in a prayer for longevity.

I imagine that Father's reverence might arise from his ability to become one with the god at certain moments. Such close proximity means Father necessarily had to pay his respects.

However, Father did not always believe in gods.

In his youth, when Father burnt incense to worship the gods, he did so merely out of awe and veneration, rather than a sincere belief in power of the divine to change anything. Father

spent his youth chasing his livelihood through all sorts of jobs, trying to make enough to cover his living costs. There was no room for the superfluous in that period of his life, no margin in which to ponder whether divinity was really effective. That fantastic, mystical, and unfathomable power only manifested itself when he dropped out from school to become a soldier. There he took turns with his fellow soldiers to stand guard at the foot of Dagang Mountain, keeping watch of his troop's sleep and the the dim lights of night just before daybreak. Suddenly, a strange voice came from the blockhouse. He initially paid no mind to it; the troops were in the mountains, and he figured it might be the sound of some animal. A gust of cold wind blew in, shrouding the sentry post in a white mist and sending the army hounds into a fit of wails like blowing on a conch shell. The cold woke Father up, raising goosebumps on his skin. He glimpsed something in the haze, but was unsure and could only shake himself awake, widen his eyes, and touch the gun at his back, until his watch came to a safe end.

Back then, Father didn't pay any attention to the gods, nor did he feel any sense of connection with the divine, until one day at noon, when he lay down to take a nap in a foxhole. He then first felt as though something was touching him. Then, all of a sudden his body was hit by an unknown object. He opened his eyes and looked all around him, but could not find anything suspicious. Then came several more thumps, followed by a blurred figure that resembled the Thunder God, revered by Father's grandpa that year at their hometown. The Thunder God advised Father to be careful during his time in the army, guarding him against the perils of encountering ghosts. Of course, young Father was filled with gratitude and respect towards the gods, though he did not foresee that his future would be tied to the divine.

There is an ancestral shrine located next to the table devoted to the gods in the deity hall in our house where the ancestor tablet for the Lin family is consecrated. To one side stand three photographs framed in black and white. Two picture my grandparents, whom I have met. The third one, an old photograph covered in yellow spots, shows my third uncle, whom I've never met because he made his way to Heaven long before I was born. In the photograph, he has bright, piercing eyes with double eyelids identical to Father's, a high-bridged nose and dashing eyebrows. However, the expression in his eyes seems melancholic, like a frustrated artist left out from some biography on eminent personalities.

In the past we always included my third uncle's grave in our tomb-sweeping ritual. It was once a wide tomb, with room for people to walk about at the back of the mound. The other children and I often sat rather fearlessly on the high fence behind the grave. Father, who had always been superstitious about funerals, made us kids pose for a group photo with the large admonition of "Reverence for the Ancestors" in the background while saying: "We are all family. You must not worry; your Third Uncle will watch upon you."

Among all his brothers, Father was closest to Third Uncle, who resembled him the most. The two young men also did carpentry together. In his attic apartment, no larger than a few tatami mats, they polished wooden beads. They distributed the work harmoniously by tacit agreement, moving jointly towards a goal. They were in their twenties at the time. Third Uncle saw himself abruptly besieged by illness in the very prime of his life, and his condition worsened quickly, like

the flowers of the datura also bloom and spread suddenly. Climbing up the wooden stairs in the kitchen of father's home led to their former small attic, which would later become Third Uncle's individual room, a space prescribed for him to recover from his illness.

All changes in life always creep upon us quietly, like the silent footsteps of thieves in the night. Once they've overturned our lives, there's no use in trying to change fate with sentences such as "if...", "if I had...".

As a boy, Third Uncle and a friend had their fortunes read via rice grain divination. The fortune teller faced both of them, pointed Third Uncle and said: "This is not an ordinary person." Third Uncle did not believe him, and the fortune teller continued: "You may not believe me, but your life will be cut short in your twenties, and you will depart this world." When Uncle Third felt trapped by his fear of dying, his relatives accompanied him back to the fortune teller, who said that his skills were insufficient to reverse Third Uncle's lot, and that he should hurry and go find the gods. Third Uncle's life was like a secret that had been revealed. Not long after the fortune teller's prophecy, he was hit by a cab on a dark night without streetlights. Back then, medical treatments were underdeveloped and costs were high; passers-by who found Third Uncle lying in the road left him at the office of an undercover doctor. Though he seemed fine on the outside, without any apparent physical injuries, he felt a constant, penetrating pain emanating from within. The undercover doctor administered him an intravenous analgesic that stopped the pain momentarily, but Third Uncle suffered from chronic aches for the rest of his life. The pain seemed to have no source or explanation, but kept him in constant discomfort. Father was angry with the fortune teller whose prophecy had revealed Third Uncle's fate. Had he not uttered a word, perhaps Third Uncle would have carried on with his life smoothly, but there are no such things as "if" and "maybe" with which to earn a second chance.

Pained at the sight of his third brother suffering daily from this unexplained illness, Father ran around in great distress to try and find him a doctor. Third Uncle had tried both Chinese and Western medicine, but neither had been of use. Only injections were occasionally helpful to relieve his pain. Consumed by worry, Father turned to the temple to ask the gods. Some replied that there was no hope; Third Uncle was to depart this world when his life reached its end. Father did get a distinct reply from another god he asked: "Stop expending yourself on this cause, no matter how many gods you turn to it will not make a difference." Third Uncle is not an ordinary person; he should leave when his time is up, and his family should not grieve.

Father was unwilling to give up. He returned to his birthplace and went to the nearby Tong-An Temple to ask Lord Wu, the main god there, one of the Five Royal Lords of the Wufu Qiansui Temple. Ranking third among the Royal Lord, the deity was commonly known by the locals of Wanli as the "Third Royal Lord". Lord Wu initially said that the family's ancestral grave had a problem with its *feng shui*, and that the Lin family could not undertake the burden of Third Uncle, so no energy should be spared on this matter, and they were to let nature take its course. Motivated by the arrogance, resolution and skepticism of his youth, Father followed reports from relatives and friends that the patriarch of the ancestral temple in Zhuzaiang, Kaohsiung, who pursued his religious practice in Guanziling, had become enlightened at the age of twenty, and

that he should have boundless dharma power. Perhaps he would find a way to solve Third Uncle's fate. The patriarch asked Father's family not to covet fleeting enjoyment, and exhorted them to find straw sandals to carry out religious services. That was a time where nobody was wearing straw sandals, and Father travelled far looking for them, even going to Youyingong Temple and graves that nobody dared to visit. However, the patriarch then said: "This is not a matter where the desires of your heart will come to fruition just by willpower...." Furious, Father cursed the patriarch out, accusing him of being entirely selfish. Where was his alleged high dharma power? After all, everyone had said his dharma power was so strong that he was able to perform many mysterious miracles that mortals could not comprehend; Father could not believe that he was unable to save Third Uncle. He searched high and low for the straw sandals, and it didn't change anything. Insulted, the patriarch retired from the divination chair and refused to talk to Father. In subsequent years, the patriarch took to raise funds to build a temple, and Father remained adamant that he did not want to donate a dime to someone who understood nothing.

After the dispute with the patriarch, Father's friend took him again to visit Lord Guan Yu, whose responded: "I have already done everything in my power." Those words said it all. Until the day that Third Uncle passed, Father had been unrelenting and seemed to overturn the whole island. He had visited temples and palaces big and small, as well as private altars. Doctors were of no use, so he clung to hope by pleading with the gods. Father's final stop in his pilgrimage took him back to Tong-An Temple near his hometown. After all, the Third Royal Lord that were the main subjects of cult there were the ancestors of our family, who had followed Koxinga's army from Tong-An in Fujian to cross the sea and relocate in Tsaoputsai, Wanli. Therefore, people always say that Tong-An Temple is the "Lin's Palace", and many of the surrounding residents and believers have the surname Lin. Father placed all his hopes on the Third Royal Lord like one last wishing coin left on the palm of his hand. He thought that the Third Royal Lord who had guarded the Lin family for generations since the time of our ancestors had to be able to spare Third Uncle. However, the Third Royal Lord instructed him with this admonition: "This person has fallen into the mortal world from a constellation, and his time to come into this realm has arrived. The residents of the house should let him go without reluctance."

Third Uncle did not let the family rush about for him either, and seeing how the household was impoverished from throwing money on his treatment costs, he instructed Father not to spend a dime more on him. Sooner or later, he argued, he would have to walk this road on his own. By then he had been an inpatient in the outstanding Han Internal Medicine Hospital in Tainan for quite some time, with no improvement in his condition whatsoever. The hospital director told Father that there was no chance of finding a cure without knowing the cause of the illness. Third Uncle was tormented by pain day and night. The night before his passing, the wind howled outside the hospital, while the birds shrieked and the monkeys wailed, as if to herald a miraculous event that science couldn't quite explain. An elderly gentleman in his seventies in the same ward told Father: "Your brother is very brave." He meant to say that the family should not be sad, and instead let Third Uncle go. He then added that should Father's second daughter is adopted by Third Uncle, a simple ceremony would suffice, and the money would be kept for life. It was as

though the old man was aware of something unknown. Whether he was, in fact, a god sent to pull Third Uncle away from the living and simultaneously comfort his bereaved family, nobody has been able to ascertain so far.

When Third Uncle passed away and the time came for his burial, a feng shui master hailing from Hsiaokang district in Kaohsiung hurried all the way to the family that night to determine the right location for the interment. He told Father that Third Uncle should be buried three feet away from the spot that had been initially determined as his resting place, to ensure that he would be shielded by feng shui. Furthermore, the feng shui master instructed the family to cut a length of red cloth to drape it over the body's shoulders, to help Third Uncle complete his rites after death, as it wouldn't be courteous otherwise. Last but not least, the burial ceremony was to be completed with the recitation of mantras.

Thinking back to their carpentry days, Father said that his brother had shown unique artistic talent in life, and had made many exquisite objects. He evinced in his bearing an air of spiritual refinement, so much so he even mumbled divine words in his sleep, as if he was talking to something invisible but very much present. This had been Third Uncle's nature, and yet Father had never stopped to consider whether Third Uncle really possessed immortal traits that set him apart from mortals.

Father then thought of Peng Zu, a mythological character whose fate was very similar to that of Third Uncle. Both of them had been told by fortune tellers that their lives would be short. However, Peng Zu met the Eight Immortals and pleaded with them to let him live – and he did go on to live for eight hundred years. Perhaps the life and death book of Yama, King of Hell, had been altered and had gaps and omissions, or maybe this simply was Peng Zu's lot. Father lamented that Third Uncle had no deity to save him. In a short time, he had visited countless, allegedly almighty gods who were able to protect all living beings. However, Father had not been able to turn Third Uncle into the next lucky Peng Zu, favored by the gods to extend his life.

Prior to his passing, Third Uncle had said that he was sacrificing himself to make the whole family better. After his death, his three surviving brothers – Father's elder brother, Father himself and the youngest brother all went on to make lots of money. The family enjoyed years of remarkable prosperity in their hometown of Tsaoputsai in Wanli, and they were regarded by their neighbors as successful people. Yet Father never interpreted anything about Third Uncle or the inexplicable circumstances of his death as a divine manifestation or a blessing from the gods. Still in the prime of his life then, Father regarded deities and oracles as distant stars in the sky that cannot be grasped, while destiny could be taken with your own hands. When Father himself began to say that Third Uncle had come from the spirit realm, it was merely a way of forgiving himself for letting go. His introducing Third Uncle to us children as a god from heaven above came much later in life.

Father's possession happened all of a sudden when he was stubbornly doubling down in his statement that "there's no gain without pain" and refusing to believe that fate lay in divine hands. Once during a visit to his second aunt to handle some matters, it just happened that Second Aunt's daughter was feeling unwell and unable to breathe through her nose. Doctors had been of

no avail. Possessed by the god, Father requested a cigarette from Second Aunt. She was very intrigued and asked cautiously: "You are not my young brother...are you?" Speaking in ancient Taiwanese, my father replied: "My name is Yu Hai. I am twenty years old, and your young brother is my lord. It is my desire to come to the Lin family to pay a debt of gratitude, however I do not possess a formal Godhead. Promptly take your daughter to Ma-Chen Temple and announce to Lord Ma that I, Yu Hai, have sent her. Your daughter has a nasal illness, a malign growth in her nose. Ask Lord Ma to prescribe a prescription, and she will recover." Second Aunt took the child to Ma-Chen Temple near her homeplace in Wanli, where temple staff held the planchette for fortune telling. The prescription itself was less than a dollar and the child recovered afterwards.

The first time this happened, Father did not yet understand what had changed in himself and thought this to be nothing more than a strange, yet entirely casual incident.

Shortly after, a young friend invited Father to accompany him in his worship of a Venerable Master. Since Father did not believe in gods, he went just for fun, but he was once again possessed. At the time, the main god there was Royal Lord Chih, the most fearful among the Five Royal Lords. Royal Lord Chih erroneously believed that Yu Hai, the town god that had possessed Father, was an evil spirit. A group of Taoist priests initially wanted to beat a possessed Father away, but failed to do so. Yu Hai suddenly burst in laughter and said: "Do you know who I am, foolish Taoists? How could you possibly just beat me like this?" Such was the arrogance of Yu Hai in his early twenties, which resembled young Father's own unbending, arrogant, and exuberant nature.

Yu Hai introduced himself to Royal Lord Chih as a water ghost whose good deeds had granted him godhood. As a mortal man, he had lived in the interim period between the Ming and Qing dynasties. He had been an orphan since birth, and some wealthy people had taken him in. After his adoption, he had to work to support his family, so he was sent to make his living from the sea. The young man encountered waves that overturned and crushed his raft. When he was left drifting along on the surface of the sea, he saw a god in passing. He longed for divine help, and prayed incessantly, but there was no deity willing to extend their sacred hands. The young man became henceforth a water ghost, saving people from shipwrecks by scooping them out of the water and placing them on the shore, eventually becoming a god by virtue of his actions. Taipei's well-known god Xia Hai patrolled the north, and Yu Hai was in charge of the south coast.

The arrival of Yu Hai sparked change in my atheist father's own solitary mortal life.

When Third Uncle was still earthside, he too had been possessed by the gods, presumably due to his extraordinary physique. However, his poor health made it so that prolonged episodes sent his body into waves of pain. When Third Uncle died, Father took over his unfinished affairs to become a vessel for the god. It was as though a button that had never been touched was gently pressed. Young Father, who had led a rather ordinary, dependable life, was now embarking on a fantastic, marvelous journey without end, an endless drift downriver. As it turned out, this was Father's destiny.

When Yu Hai made his first appearance, Father was still unable to fully feel the existence of the divine. Therefore, each possession episode felt invariably sudden and unexpected to him. The comings of Yu Hai were always rather abrupt, which never failed to vex young Father, whose

life at the time was greatly disrupted. In addition to that, it was not too long ago that Yu Hai had attained godhood. He was merely bestowed with the authority to deal with affairs of the underworld. More specifically, his power was strictly limited to dealing with the entities of the deceased who lurked in spiritually unclean places, entangling mortals or causing them discomfort. Yu Hai did not have the heavenly decree that would have enabled him to handle human affairs, including forecasting the direction of a person's fate, fortune-telling, careers, affairs of the heart and other matters, such as guiding and leading those who are bound to practice Taoism. Yu Hai had not been granted authority by the Jade Emperor, the Supreme Deity of Taoism; as a godhead, he was still unable to transcend the yin and yang.

Father realized gradually that when he was about to be possessed, sometimes by the Five Royal Lords. Through several instructions, the Chief Royal Lord and the Second Royal Lord both had assisted his family. Then, both Father and Grandfather unexpectedly dreamt of a goddess local to Madou town in Tainan stating that she was bound by a predestined relationship to the Lin family, who was to worship her. At the time, a still somewhat reluctant yet curious Father went with Grandfather on a visit to Madou, where he found out that there was indeed a temple. At the temple, Father asked the female deity for guidance by throwing poe three times. This divination method was meant to determine whether he should invite the female celestial being to return home with them and become the main deity of the family. Each time he got a positive answer, and the coming of this goddess thus seemed to complete Father's divinity and life. She said that in their quest for a cure for Third Uncle's illness, the Lin family situation had gradually deteriorated. Therefore, she was to reward Father that he would make money. When Mother went through a difficult birth, the goddess sent Empress Zhusheng to watch upon her and enabled Yu Hai the town god to finally attain the heavenly decree.

Upon receiving the decree, Yu Hai's Godhead was finally complete. Henceforth, when mortals had affairs of any kind, the gods came through him in his capacity as a town deity to instruct as needed. Stubborn, heathen Father was told by Yu Hai that he would come to bring relief to suffering mortals, and that if he was to use Father's body, he would like to instruct Father in the sciences of astronomy and feng shui. Yu Hai went on to say that Father would come to suffer hardships at the hands of his "non-compliant kin", and that his relatives and brothers would be unable to help him attain success or offer support. At the same time, Yu Hai advised Father to abstain from money-based relationships with people. Otherwise, his every endeavor would fail.

Father hesitated for a while, until coercion changed gradually to acceptance, and he became the god's willing envoy in this realm. Father said he thought about it for a long time. At first, apart from the fact that he did not believe that gods could affect the lives of mortals, there was another thought constantly in his mind – what did Yu Hai mean when he said he was bonded by a debt of gratitude? Before he was possessed, nobody knew Yu Hai, nor had he any connection to the ancestors of the Lin family. It thus occurred to Father that the only possibility left was that this was, in fact, the extraordinary Third Uncle, who had died an early death and become a celestial being. Third Uncle had then travelled across the sea to help Yu Hai become a god, asking him to repay his debt of gratitude with Father.

The one regret that Father kept in his heart of hearts was his failure to spare Third Uncle from death. The arrival of Yu Hai not only helped him, perhaps otherwise destined to suffer; it had also seemingly connected the two brothers who had been separated by the spirit and mortal realms. Their mutual feelings of care and concern were reconnected in an invisible place. For many years, Father devoted himself to the study of almanacs, and gained some understanding of numerology and feng shui. In addition to lending his body to a god and joining forces with Yu Hai to save the world, he will occasionally check the feng shui of a room or offer his naming services for free. At the same time, he abides by all rules of etiquette, and is deeply afraid of breaking a taboo. I have come to understand that Father's caution comes from his fear of further regret. He would rather believe than blunder.

Even during the year Third Uncle protected everyone's feng shui, Father's brothers bickered about who Third Uncle favored most, and ended up ruining the perfect feng shui created by the master from Xiaogang. After the Lin family lost their relative, the family fortunes were never quite the same. However, every time Father was possessed by Yu Hai, he would remember that this was the last act of tenderness left behind by his third brother, as much as the moment when they were closest to each other.

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A Divine Body

I've never asked Father how he senses the god and what it feels like to be possessed. Does it feel as though a spy was infiltrating a building? Is it like a secret that has never been revealed? It's as if he found it as natural as eating, sleeping, excreting, or sitting on the toilet in a daze is for us. During a period of extremely cold weather, I used to go to the bathroom just before dawn, turn the water temperature up as high as possible and curl up like a baby on the tiled floor where there had once been a bathtub. There, I would squat under the shower nozzle and let the water wash everything down quietly, as if I wanted to erode something. In a state of trance, I watched the water splash all about and flow in a long, drawn-out spiral from the nozzle into the drain, spraying upwards like a wishing well. However, this was no real wishing well, and so I couldn't make a wish. I wanted to curl up into the big washbasin for the warmth like cats do, but most of my body hung out of it. I stared blankly at my body amid the vapor like White Rose did in the novel, sitting on the toilet and staring at her belly button.

As I sat, I pinched my rolls of belly fat, squeezing and letting go repeatedly. At first it was only an unconscious, idle fondling, but it brought a great deal to my mind. When I was young, I was called to the bathroom every morning to brush my teeth and wash my face. Many times, I was actually asleep there. The most comfortable position was next to the bathroom door, sitting on the blue-and-white ceramic tiles with my elbows on the door threshold, head lightly against the door. With sunlight pouring straight in through the small window above the tub and projecting

on my face, the small bathroom felt like a pool ring holding me up in an empty, blue swimming pool. Everything felt still, as if I were drifting by myself in a vast ocean, listening comfortably to the unhurried sound of water in my sleep. In a whirlpool like that, I could have drowned without ever noticing. When I was even drowsier, I used to take off my pajamas and underwear and sit on the toilet, either leaning back against the water tank or slightly sideways against the wall, and fall asleep. The faint sound of water flowed into my clouded consciousness, while the wind from the fan-shaped ventilation tile under the wooden door leading to the balcony hit the bare and dangling underside of my body. At that moment it seemed that something had entered my body, but I was not very sure. Could it be that there was another me, brushing my teeth right then? Every time a knock on the door disrupted my dream I thought I had finished washing my hands and face. It was only when the adults' fingers wiped the yellowish residue from my eyes, which then adhered to their fingertips, that I realized what I really looked like.

Sometimes I don't know where I am, or whether there's another me. Once, when I was in junior high school, a classmate and I happened to find a fellow student from the third year class in a phone booth. I couldn't remember why I knew her, but I did, and when she hung up the phone and talked to us, my gaze fell exactly on her bulging chest. Then, I noticed that her light yellow bra was showing through her white shirt, and the color of the two embroidered rows with the student number on the chest seemed to be slightly different to the usual one. I was always wanting to see something, and I was curious that there was something wrong with the color of the embroidery or with my eyes, so I lightly, briefly poked a finger at her chest. It seemed as though we'd stopped breathing and that time stood still. Only the second hand of the clock still kept its pace. Then she was shocked, as was I, as if I'd just become clear-headed after a dream spell. Her nauseated voice as she called me a pervert reverberated through the entire campus, ricocheting on the wall and turning back into my ears. It formed a circle over my head like an angel's halo. After the incident, we never approached each other again. That day, on the way back to the classroom, my classmates interrogated me to no end in anxious tones. Why did I do that? "I really don't know," I replied. Had I, really?

I had no memory whatsoever of this event, not even a physical one. I could not remember touching her chest with my finger. Was that me? Wandering in my sleep, I would open the refrigerator to grab handfuls of food that I stuffed into my mouth, or open the entrance door and walk aimlessly at night. However, once I woke up I'd find I'd lost my memory completely. In an unconscious time and space, my soul did indeed float, or else it concealed itself and then fled. I had told the optician that I was only slightly short-sighted, however I was given contact lenses for a prescription of at least 2.0. When I came back to myself, I couldn't recall why I had answered that way. Perhaps, in that window of somnambulism between lights, my soul had momentarily disappeared. As I let the scooter take me quickly across the alleys, the world was coated in a thin film. I was in it, like an old variety show, with a hideous face to wear out that was then rebounded by the film. I saw the road wave in front of my eyes and the trees in the park sway, even their trunks. The vehicle tires didn't touch the ground, and the scenery in front of me was mixed like a color palette. This was right after getting my prescription from the Chinese medicine clinic. It

seemed that a door had opened to enter another time and space, but it was just the floating and distorted alteration of reality.

I looked into our family's history of sleepwalking, imagining it to be some sort of invisible, inherited illness that was hard to get rid of. It was like a vine expanding inside the body, spreading and encircling all the invisible organs under the skin, breaking out whenever necessary. It neither hurt nor itched, but the scabbed wound would tell you that those cracks shed blood.

When Father is possessed by the god, he gets angry the moment it takes place. The noise and intensity of his wrangling overlaps incessantly. Sometimes, when an incense joss stick is placed on his head, a puff of scarlet red smoke flows out. When he gets up, he sometimes hits himself with a magical artifact or incense. Blood then flows like a puff, but it doesn't seem to hurt or itch and is merely a demonstration of the power of the gods.

Here is where the father pierced the head with the burning incense, causing blood to flow. Everybody then has to suppress the god's temperament, deeply scared to provoke his wrath and make him retreat.

I used to envy Father for having good reason to spend so much time detached from reality and drifting in an illusory realm, with nobody to blame him. After bathing, Father wore neat outdoor clothes on top of his white Sun Flower brand underwear and brushed his teeth. It was like a solemn ceremony. He positioned himself right on the middle of the long bench in the living room to take on another identity. Occasionally he would relax and yawn or chat some, then re-assume his solemn posture. Amid the smoky darkness, something entered his body, and he became another self – he became a god. When the god was present, Father was not. Everyone was aware that it was the god who inhabited Father's body at those moments, and those who came to ask their questions offered him their earnest prayers and listened to him. When the god was angry, everyone feared he'd leave and set to appease him, but who would at that moment ask where Father's hidden soul was, or whether it was floating in space without a body?

The god departed his divine body and entered Father's, which acted as a receptacle. When necessary, the soul gave way, leaving space to safely seat the deity. Both Father's soul and the god came and went in this cavity. Like a refrigerator crisper, his body was filled and emptied over and over, until the constant stress of opening and closing began to degrade it.

I have never seen the true appearance of the god who replaced Father's soul. It was an abstract, incorporeal being that couldn't be touched with the fingers, its very existence impossible to accurately ascertain.

When I left my thoughts drift in disorder I often wondered – was Father the one who made the god exercise his responsibility to help the needy, or was the god enabling Father ascend to a high position at certain moments? When I interrogated god, I kept my innermost thoughts mostly to myself. I imagined that maybe he still kept traces of Father, and that this was a secret not to pry about. There's god, therefore Father's human side was gradually stretched and lifted like a net. Those who came to the god with questions kept lighting one cigarette upon another in his hand without a pause, while the smoke from the small incense burner curled upwards and into

the vessel of Father's body. Would those who ask the gods know whether this excessively sacrificial smoke was absorbed by the god or by Father?

Father did not live like a god, nor did his stature allow him to see things from a high vantage point. He couldn't step back from involvement, there were many catastrophes he could not avoid, and he couldn't predict his own fate. None of the auspicious and ill-suited birthdays in those numerology books were his own. Too often I have worried that those many burning gazes and words, like the nameless terror in my heart, have been directed at me. I fear being despised and abhorred, and I always choose to shield my fluctuating heartbeat with an indifferent attitude. Those who ask the god must be present on the day of his coming, and otherwise let our family retreat to a natural, peaceful life, leaving only a trail of comments like confetti or falling autumn leaves. Who's had a word in those days where the god isn't present? Every time, after greeting someone, I meticulously strive to remove any recognition of their faces from my mind. I reflect on the faraway distance of a few steps between them and I; perhaps it is merely a momentary, eternal encounter. If Father was just Father, on the day his body can no longer be loaned to the god, would those who brought offerings and were voices on the other side of the phone not dissolve into phantoms and disappear with the last wisp of smoke from the furnace?