

SECOND LEAD

女二

* 2023 Kingstone Bookstore Rising Star Award

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A young actress can't seem to break free from supporting roles, both in her family and in her work. As she comes to terms with the sexual politics of the industry, and the relationship patterns imposed by her childhood, she gradually finds the strength to write the script of her own life.

Growing up in a household with an absentee father and an emotionally unavailable mother, Claire Huang was primarily raised by her elder sister Stella. With a twelve-year age gap separating them, Stella served as Claire's primary role model, but she also cast a large shadow. As an adult, Claire's resemblance to a Japanese movie star leads her into a career in acting. Starting as an unseen stand-in, she applies to talent competitions, and attends various screen tests, finally signing a contract with an agent after receiving the recommendation of a middle-aged movie director, Mr. W.

As she pursues her dreams in the performing arts, Claire watches as her sister becomes mired in an extra-marital affair, leading to a falling out with their mother. The realities of sexual politics become all the more apparent when the power dynamics of her relationship with Mr. W begin impacting her career options. Still stuck in the rut of playing supporting roles, and aware that time is slipping away, Claire moves to London for further training. When yet another big opportunity suddenly evaporates, Claire is forced to question whether she should continue to pursue her passion for acting. Or is there some way to thread the needle between her relationships and her dreams, and begin living the life she truly wants?

With sensitive and refined prose, and an eye for the rich visual detail of life in the performing arts, Joanne Deng recounts the story of an actress contending with the issues of class, gender, and family, as she



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charts her own course in life. From her days as a stand-in, to fresh-faced newcomer, to supporting, and finally, leading actress, to motherhood – through all of her loves and follies – Claire remains steadfast in her search for her authentic self, bringing sincerity, tears, and laughter to this tale of modern womanhood.

Joanne Deng 鄧九雲

Actress, director, and writer Joanne Deng earned degrees in Korean language and advertising from National Chengchi University, and an MFA from East 15 Acting School at the University of Essex. Debuting as a model at age eighteen, she began acting at age twenty, and by thirty she was writing and curating exhibitions and performances. Her previous published works include essays and short story collections. *Second Lead* is her first full-length novel.

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By Joanne Deng

Translated by Mary King Bradley

Act 1: Stand-in

01

Barefoot, she stepped into her sister's cloth shoes, so loose they were all but unwearable. Grit pricked her bare soles, but she didn't care about that. As soon as she had started to run, the shoes had fallen off. She had to turn back, scoop them up, and put them on again, then shuffle as she ran to make them stay.

This childhood incident was probably why Claire Huang took such small steps as an adult. Whenever she was in a hurry, she felt as if something was about to fall off. Her movements were neither fast nor slow, a bit constrained, all due to those hand-me-down, ill-fitting shoes.

Before the start of everything else, there had been her sister, Stella Huang.

Claire was convinced that her sister's face was the first thing she had seen after she was born. Or at least that was how she remembered it. Stella used to spend the whole day leaning over the front of Claire's crib, extending a playful finger. The two sisters were twelve years apart. Rumor had it that their mother lost a baby in the gap between them, and just when she thought another child would be impossible, Claire was born.

Claire's arrival meant a complete reshuffling of everyone's place in family portraits. When Claire was small, she wouldn't let anyone except Stella hold her, so the elder sister sat next to their mother, her arms around the younger sister. Their father stood behind them, alone. Their mother had a portrait taken every year, but the four of them were invariably looking in different directions. Their mother would look left, their father right, Stella down. Claire was the only one who always looked at the camera. After she turned six, her father's place in these photos remained empty.

When Claire was learning to walk, she would toddle along on unsure feet and bump into Stella's backside. She was soon eager for school, and it was Stella who took her to kindergarten on the first day. Right before Stella was about to leave her there, she told her little sister that she would wait for her at a bigger school. So from that very first day, Claire never cried, her initial fear of separation overwhelmed by a certain longing. Claire remembered all these things, but didn't often think about them.

Ever since her younger sister had told her she wanted to act, Stella had been saying that she would have to start digging deep, to dig up each and every fragment, no matter how small, and also that she would have to try to see herself from a "distance". And so, as Claire stood there

looking into a reflector, slightly dizzy from the hot sunlight shining down on her, a story Stella had told her popped into her head –

A man told his wife a story.

The husband said, "I'm going to tell you a story. It's best if you can think of it like that, as if you're just listening to a story." The wife listened. With her hands arranged gracefully on the table, she demonstrated the same focused concentration she had maintained for the past thirty years. At first, the husband spoke in a calm, even tone, as if explaining what he had eaten for lunch. Then, to the wife's surprise, images began to bloom in her mind.

Her husband's words seldom had this effect on her. But after a certain point in the story, it seemed as if she heard as well as saw. She even smelled a foul odor. Goosebumps roughened her skin. Unheeding of what she did, the wife scraped her index finger against the edge of the table.

The husband stopped mid-sentence, shifting his gaze from side to side. He reached over and folded a hand over his wife's restless one. He didn't take her hand in his, simply laid his on top, as if to press it down. Looking directly at his wife, like a foolish child with reddened eyes who hopes to be comforted, he said, "Can you understand? Understand how I felt?"

The wife discovered she had left a mark on the table, a small indentation gouged out with her fingernail. The husband continued to speak, his voice rising and falling, loud, then soft. The wife couldn't hear every word clearly, but she heard enough to know that this was a middle-aged man's story of a lost love.

She gently withdrew her hand from his and swung it at the man's face.

The first time she heard this story, Claire didn't understand why the wife wanted to hit her husband. Stella didn't answer her question. Instead she told her the story again from beginning to end without a single change of word or tone. Claire nodded, as if she understood. Stella told her to try retelling the story several times in her own words, until she no longer needed to think about what to say next, until she could see in her head the faces of the husband and wife, could envision in detail their eyes, noses, and mouths, their each and every expression.

Last but not least, remember, Stella said. A story begins with a sentence. Some people say every story can be told in a single sentence. But – and Stella's pause here was deliberate – the first sentence determines the last.

Because of her resemblance to a famous Japanese actress, a student from a prestigious university embarked on a career in acting.

Claire composed a first sentence to distract herself from the set's high-pressure atmosphere. It was her first time shooting a commercial. After eighteen hours in the sun the previous day, she had discovered that the skin on top of her head was peeling. When she had awakened that morning, both her arms were red. If it hadn't been for that message on the PTT

forum's Beauty Board, asking if anyone knew the College of Communications student who had been in the main library that afternoon and looked like actress X, Claire would be at home now, drinking mung bean soup with Stella.

After her name showed up on the PTT board, she attracted the attention of interviewers. Journalists came to the school to snap pictures of her in class, of her eating, reading, walking. They dubbed her "Little X", and referred to her this way on the news report headline banners. Claire's name was plastered right next to her face. On-screen comparisons were made, her facial features juxtaposed with those of the Japanese actress.

After these broadcasts, Claire received countless phone calls. *I saw you on TV, congratulations!* At a loss for words, Claire couldn't think of anything to say other than thank you. She didn't think she looked anything like the actress. At most, she bore a slight resemblance to her when seen through a lens at a forty-eight-degree angle, but that was because her long hair covered part of her temples. In other words, Stella looked far more like her, a fact Stella herself had discovered. One day, while they were watching a Japanese drama, she had suddenly walked over to the screen and said, doesn't this woman look a bit like me? Stella wouldn't let her younger sister tell the reporters, however. She had absolutely no desire to ever appear on TV.

A few weeks later, the call from the production company came. The Japanese actress was going to shoot an endorsement ad and needed a stand-in. Claire asked what the stand-in would do. The main thing was to stand there while they set up the lighting. Twenty-two hours over two days, eight thousand yuan. She immediately agreed. That was a month's salary at her part-time job in a coffee shop. Stella wanted to come along just for fun, but Claire never agreed to this. Everyone would see Stella. She was afraid others would realize her sister looked more like the actress than she did.

Except for the sun, everything felt fresh on that first day. Evidently, filming a single shot for a commercial could last three hours and thirty-eight takes. It was now the second day. By the time she had finished her fifth bottle of water, they were ready for her to start, and the umbrella shielding her from the sun was removed. Once the lighting had been adjusted, the assistant director asked Claire to extend her hand.

Let's see a slap.

What?

This is a close-up. The female star is going to slap the male actor. This will be a tight shot on just the hand, so please do the slap as the stand-in.

A real slap?

A real slap.

Claire was stunned. She had never hit anyone in her life. And she wasn't used to being the focus of attention.

The actor whispered to her. It's okay, don't be afraid. Just slap me.

His forehead was covered in a sheen of perspiration. Thin trails of saliva stretched from his upper to lower lip as he spoke, probably caused by extreme thirst.

Slap.

Somewhat horrified, Claire looked at the actor.

Again.

Slap. Slap.

Again. A bit more straight on, and watch your nails.

Slap. Slap.

Four in a row, shouted the director off in the distance.

Slap. Slap. Slap. Slap.

Claire's lip quivered, and she giggled.

Hey, don't laugh when you're hitting someone! The actor's manager spoke in a loud voice, scowling at her.

Sorry.

Claire's eyes ached suddenly. She realized just how heavily all of their gazes weighed on her.

Let's adjust the lighting again. The two of you stay where you are.

Claire looked over at the big umbrella a short distance away. Beneath its shade, the female star wore sunglasses and sipped a drink, surrounded by a large group of staff brought over from Japan. Claire recalled the front page of today's entertainment news, which said the actress liked to drink pearl milk tea with her soup dumplings. She had to see herself from a distance. She had to tell a story –

The female stand-in watches as the actor's face slowly turns red. His left cheek is now swollen to almost half-again the size of his right cheek. After each slap, someone presses an ice pack to the swollen side. Holding it in place, the actor asks the female stand-in, is your hand okay? It's fine, I'm fine. The female stand-in tinges her voice with a note of regret. Hearing it, the actor smiles and tells her not to worry. This apparent non sequitur makes sense only to the two of them. The female stand-in discovers that when the actor smiles, the point of his chin curves upward, like a crescent moon. It's such a hot day, yet she can think of the moon and forget the sun. Is she on the verge of heatstroke? The female stand-in's hands are in fact gradually reddening, as are her cheeks, the redness evenly distributed. No one notices. Everyone's eyes are on the actor's left cheek under the ice pack. Even when only half of someone's face is visible, it remains obvious how good-looking the person is. A female college student becomes a stand-in and meets an actor. A story is about to begin.

Be sure not to miss a single word, she murmured.

What did you say?

Nothing. Not a thing. Am I hurting you?

Not at all. Don't worry.

Their voices are pitched just loud enough for the other's ears.

Okay, it's an official go, shouted the assistant director.

Slap. Slap. Slap. Slap. Slap. Slap...

Claire couldn't remember how many times she had performed the slap. Sweat dripped from her forehead into her eyes, and she could feel moisture soaking her armpits. The actor's eyes conveyed a message full of encouragement.

Don't be afraid. Again.

It was a message only Claire could hear.

02

***Insomnia* stage play casting call**

Three female roles, ranging in visual age from 18 to 23 years old.

Type: slender, ethereal, an element of fantasy.

***Please wear a white dress for the audition.**

Clipped from *POTS Weekly*, the casting call was tucked inside Claire's communication theory textbook like a discount coupon, reminding her to use it before the deadline. Every time Claire flipped through the pages to it, she re-read the four words highlighted in fluorescent pen – an element of fantasy.

Stella said this was a hint that anyone who auditioned should be attractive and have sex appeal. The audition panel was probably all men. When she heard this, Claire's heart thumped a signal to retreat. Stella added that the white dress was very much in line with the virginity complex straight men had. Claire was about to wad up the newspaper clipping and throw it away when Stella suddenly twitched it from her fingers, hiding a little smile, and said, if you really want to act, you might as well try a stage play. You're going to run into something like this sooner or later, whatever you do.

The first stage play Claire had ever watched was the end-of-semester performance by Stella's high school drama club. Claire was five years old that year, the play her earliest memory to be clearly recalled in its entirety. She was in the front row, so she could see without having to sit on an adult's lap. The story was about a girl and her imaginary friends. The girl suffered from a delusional disorder, and the script made comedic allusions to fairy tales, which Claire was too young to understand. Gradually, the girl was pushed back into the normal world as her friends disappeared one by one. Stella, who played one of the friends, had the ability to hear every secret in the world. To block out the noisy buzz of these, she wore an oversized hat shaped like a Rafflesia flower.

From the moment Claire saw her sister appear on stage, she couldn't stop laughing. These episodes of laughter had been a problem from the time she was small. Stella was the last of the girl's friends to leave. She let her choose whether to go with her or stay behind alone. As the girl was thinking it over, the lights changed. During this brief interval, Claire felt sure her sister was looking right at her from up on stage.

The girl said, I want to stay.

Stella said, you're okay being left all on your own?

The girl nodded vigorously. Stella took off her hat, helped the girl put it on, and turned to leave. Before she disappeared, she stopped and glanced back into the auditorium. Claire felt her sister's eyes on her. Stella waved, and Claire, sitting in the audience, wanted to wave back. Once Stella's silhouette had faded into the deepest reaches of the stage, Claire cried.

Stella later said she didn't have any idea where they were sitting, and the bright stage lights made the audience invisible anyway, but Claire continued to believe that her sister had been looking at her. Their eyes had met. At that moment, she had felt something pass through her.

She appeared whole, flawless, with no obvious gaps. Like most people, however, she was still incomplete. As a five-year-old sitting in that audience, she had in one mystical instant felt herself come fully alive. That sensation of something flooding every cell of her being had been a kind of good fortune. As she grew up, it was what drove her. In the years to come, when she was standing on stage, she hunted frantically for the moment in which that force would take her over completely, body and mind. Until she gained mastery over it, her desire to reproduce this moment remained a desperate struggle, as if her life hung in the balance.

On the day of the *Insomnia* audition, Claire went alone.

There weren't many people there, maybe five or six girls, each with someone accompanying them. The first thing she noticed was that none of the other girls' dresses were completely white. Some had black dots; others, contrasting stripes. Only Claire wore an all-white dress, made from a square-patterned broderie fabric, unblemished. Stella had bought it for her, an off-season item from a famous label, her original intention that Claire would wear it at her wedding. In a pair of low heels, holding a small bouquet, she would have made a simple and elegant bridesmaid. But Stella's wedding day had not come as soon as anticipated. No one had expected Claire to wear this little dress for the first time in this rehearsal room, standing barefoot on the vinyl floor.

She walked to center stage, glanced back and forth at the people seated in front of her, and said, I'm 168 centimeters tall and weigh 56 kilograms. With a faint smile, she took a few steps back, leaving behind moist footprints on the vinyl floor. It was a summer night, very nearly the weekend, and a typhoon was approaching.

What's your name?

A man in square-rimmed glasses that matched the square line of his cheeks had spoken. This was Hsiao Kai, the play's director. Fresh out of college, he was only two years older than Claire. As she stood there, the basement rehearsal space seemed small and crowded for the first time, the ceiling about to suffocate him.

Oh. My name is Claire Huang. *Huang*, like the character for yellow.

OK. And Claire? Rhymes with *air*?

That's right.

The person who asked this question was an older man sitting next to Hsiao Kai. The sleeves of his shirt were neatly rolled up to his elbows. An obvious gap separated his front teeth. Claire had seen him before, in a TV commercial.

It's *Claire*. One syllable. Not *Clay-er*, he said, correcting her. *Claire*.

Claire dug her nails into the hem of her skirt and simply nodded.

Hsiao Kai stood up, walked over to Claire, and looked at her for a moment. He opened his mouth to say something, then stopped. He slipped his index fingers up behind the lenses of his glasses, rubbed his eyes hard several times, and heaved a deliberate sigh.

Have you acted in a play before?

No.

Can you act?

I was in some comedy sketches when I was younger –

Say *air*.

Air.

Hsiao Kai walked back to his seat at the table, scrawled something in pencil, then walked back to Claire and handed her the piece of paper. Claire stood there in her white dress, reading and rereading the lines on the paper, an exclamation point in the middle of the vinyl floor. She knew that people were waiting for her, some of whom didn't wish to be. The man with the gap between his teeth was straightening his already neatly rolled cuffs, his gaze lowered.

Speak neither of love nor hate, for I have no desire to draw so clear a line.

When we lift the vessel to drink, do we first ask if the wine is sour or if its flavor is rich and sweet?

Read it out loud.

Claire read. Hsiao Kai interrupted her.

Try again.

Claire read it again.

Do you know who wrote this poem?

Claire shook her head.

It doesn't matter. But you understand it, right?

Yes.

You understand the meaning?

Yes.

Put the poem into your own words.

Claire stared at the scrawled lines for a moment.

I don't know if this is love, or hate.

Just like when we raise the glass, we don't ask if the wine is sour or sweet.

Do you drink?

My mother sells wine.

Hsiao Kai raised an eyebrow. Claire heard laughter.

It's the sort that comes from the best wineries in France. But I don't drink.

The best.

Hsiao Kai repeated these two words, closing his eyes to think as he scrubbed a hand back and forth across his chin.

This time, imagine you're a pool of strawberry jam and read it again.

Claire looked at Hsiao Kai. She paused. Looked down, looked back up. She read it again.

Love or hate. I, don't know.

When we meet it seems, we never ask. The wine, is it sour, or sweet?

Hsiao Kai frowned. Why did you break up the sentences like that?

Claire said, because the sticky jam splashed everywhere.

OK, thank you.

A pool of strawberry jam.

That was the first acting note Claire had ever received. The way she had handled the note by appearing to take it and figure it out for herself was exactly what Hsiao Kai wanted. She hadn't asked any questions because she didn't know how to ask them. From Hsiao Kai's tone of voice, she had also understood that questions would not be welcome. Hsiao Kai didn't really know what he wanted. He just did what he thought a director should do, giving the actors a specific instruction to see how they handled it. He knew he couldn't just give them an adjective, such as asking for a bit more sadness, pain, joy. That wouldn't show he was a good director. Instructions like that would just make him look like everyone else.

When Claire heard the note, the image that came naturally to mind was a jar of strawberry jam, but Hsiao Kai had said a pool. So Claire imagined two scenarios – in one, the jar had been turned upside down allowing all the jam to pour out; in the other, the jar had smashed on the ground, the jam splashing everywhere. Keeping the second image in her head, she had read the poem again, intuitively splitting up the lines as she did because she thought that was how to deconstruct a poem. To make this sort of distinction and then come up with an explanation for it ensured leaving an impression.

She had also spared a brief moment on another thought. What was the difference between a smashed jar of strawberry jam and a jar of peach jam? Why did the director's note specify strawberry jam? She had therefore intuitively changed "raise the glass" to "when we meet", to bring the lines she spoke closer to herself. Inexplicable laughter had then boiled up inside her chest, as if to fight back against the gravity and tension of the moment. She rode the feeling out. As her face twisted, she had begun to sweat. After she left, her footprints remained for a long while.

Three days later, Claire received the call. She began rehearsing that weekend.