Yellowface

One

The night Athena Liu died was the night her Netflix deal was announced. Athena already had a publishing contract before she graduated, and her list of awards was longer than a grocery list. She published three novels before the age of twenty-seven, and they were all hits. As a consequence of these successes, she had no friends; her Instagram sometimes posted about her career achievements and tagged no one. June and Athena became friends because they happened to be in the same place all the time. They went to the same high school and lived on the same floor. June had a shaky debut after her first editor was fired before her book got published. She hated her new editor, who cut down the number of copies printed. Athena's debut, by contrast, went well; she sold her book's rights in foreign countries and got a six-figure sum from Penguin. Athena was born in Hong Kong, raised between Sydney and New York, and educated at Yale. She did not know what was expensive and what was not. June and Athena drank together, and Athena became vulnerable when she was with June. Athena wanted to talk about the Netflix deal, so she invited June to her apartment. June was jealous of her success, but the jealousy was more like a fear of not measuring up to her. Athena was unbearable sometimes, but June wanted to make this night hers and also wanted to see her apartment. So they went to her apartment, and June saw a two-bedroom place that seemed minimalist but luxurious. Athena wanted to drink whisky. June looked around the apartment while Athena was trying to find it. June saw Athena's creativity palace, the one she had posted on her Instagram. Her writing desk had a typewriter. Athena did not use Word or Google Docs; she used a typewriter because it helped her think better. There were two words on the sheet: 'The End'. Athena told June that she had finished her World War One project, and June asked if she could read it. Athena did not let anyone read her unfinished books. Athena told June that she could read it since it was finished. June realized that the writing was great and that she could not write like this in her lifetime. But she told Athena that she could not read well when she was drunk. It dampened Athena's mood, but she kept talking and asked more about June. They just hung out and talked about their love lives and high school friends. Then they made pancakes together, and Athena started eating a lot of them and choked. June knew the Heimlich maneuver and tried it on her, but it did not work. So, she called an ambulance; it took some time because June did not know the address right away. When the ambulance arrived, Athena was dead. She had choked to death on pancakes. The officers asked June for a statement but told her she could give it in the morning. An officer dropped

June off at her home, and June threw her bag at the foot of her bed — the bag that contained the manuscript of Athena's writing.

Two

June did not feel much about Athena's death. She was just a friend. June went to two therapists, but they made her feel worse by reminding her how little grief she felt for Liu. She did not have any breakdown except once, when she was watching YouTube tutorials on the Heimlich maneuver. She spent most of her time drinking and panic-eating, but that was as bad as it got. Mrs. Liu called June, and June expected that Liu's mother would accuse her of killing Liu. Instead, her mother wanted her to speak at the funeral and apologized to her for Liu dying in front of her. June posted a template tribute on Twitter that drew thousands of likes and followers. She liked it but felt gross, so she blocked all her Twitter accounts on her devices. June took a month's leave from her tutoring. June read 'The Last Front', which was about Chinese laborers sent to the World War. Many of them faced harsh treatment at the front. Athena did not write the story in a linear way. She wrote it like what Nolan did in Dunkirk, letting the crowds sing in harmony. It was a masterpiece. But the manuscript was a first draft with many unfinished paragraphs, so June started editing and rewriting it. It took June three weeks to finish the manuscript. Then she sent it to her agent, saying that she had finished a second book, without mentioning that it was Athena's manuscript.

Three

June was anxious about the response from her editor. The editor responded to her book with enthusiasm. He told her that he could send it to the 'reach list', a list of famous publishers. Then they set up meetings with publishing houses, and June chose a mid-sized indie publishing house named 'Eden'. June signed a deal worth thousands of dollars. She called her mother, and everyone congratulated her. June thought that Athena's book would have gone unpublished if she had not edited it. She thought about herself being a thief, a plagiarizer, or a racist. Then she remembered her ex-boyfriend, who had majored in philosophy. He had argued that we could use the property of the dead for the good of the community. He argued, 'We owe nothing to the dead'.

Four

June felt like an eternity passed while waiting for the book to be published. It took several months from signing the contract to publication. The editors suggested toning down some of the language and cutting some flashbacks. Athena had written on a typewriter and drawn the Chinese characters by hand, and her flashbacks did not add much context to the main story. June read books about Chinese laborers and the history surrounding them. She accepted the cuts from the editor, which made the editor happy. But June did not hide the traces of Athena in the story. To make up for it, she shared posts on Instagram suggesting that she and Athena had been close friends who read and shared each other's books. June then saw an announcement from Yale University saying that Athena's mother would donate Athena's notebooks — the ones Athena used while writing her books — to the public. June had forgotten to take the notebooks; they were lying beside the typewriter. June called and visited Athena's mother and told her that Athena had been discreet about her writing and would not want her notebooks to be seen by the public. Athena's mother realized that she was making a mistake and did not donate the notebooks.

Five

June had a meeting with her marketing team. They had all read the book. Some of them wanted to know if June was Chinese. It annoyed June a bit, but the meeting went well. Two weeks before production, Daniella, the editor at Eden, sent June a message saying that they should let a Chinese sensitivity reader review the book for cultural appropriation. June did not want that. Then the editorial assistant, Candice Lee, sent a message saying that she strongly believed they should have it reviewed, and sent a second message after June declined. June then messaged Brett, her agent, to handle it. Eden transferred Candice to another project. The marketing team suggested that June change her author’s name from her debut name, Hayward, to Juniper Song. June accepted. Then she started preparing her social media accounts, tweeting about activism in China. The early reviews averaged 4.8 on Goodreads and other sites. Then she got her first one-star review, from Candice Lee. June sent a message to her editor.

Six

Months became days, and the launch date arrived. Eden sent a basket with champagne to her house. She posted it on her Instagram, which drew thousands of likes. The book sold well; it became the third best-selling book in New York. Daniella, Brett, and her publicity team sent her messages congratulating her on her success. She got invited to book readings. Before 'The Last Front', her book readings had always been unbearable events with no more than ten people. The book readings after the launch were filled with crowds who loved her. Then she saw someone who looked exactly like Athena. She thought it was a hallucination, but the figure did not disappear. June searched online for keywords about their names, and only one comment, from an anonymous user, came up. It said, 'The book reading was as if Athena's ghost was within the crowd'.

Seven

June got invited to after-parties and moved into another class of writers. She met authors of renowned books and well-known publishers, and everyone seemed friendly to her. June started giving back to Asian communities by funding the Chinese American Writers' Association. She set up a scholarship fund in Athena's name. June joined a program that pairs published authors with new writers. June began contributing back to the community.

Eight

June got her first royalty statement. June had been frugal about spending her first advance, but she indulged herself by buying a new laptop, renting a new apartment, and ordering IKEA furniture. Then she started reading reviews on Goodreads and elsewhere and found that some of them were out to get her. Her editors at Eden said that she should not read reviews. There were some YouTubers trying to point out things that were not culturally appropriate in 'The Last Front'. A girl called June out for being white and profiting from Chinese people. June responded well. She remembered the first time she met Athena, at a museum about US POWs in North Korea. June even saw Athena shedding tears and interviewing some old people in wheelchairs. June thought she had stolen the stories from those people. Then Athena wrote a piece, 'Life on Yala', that won awards.

Nine

June got an invitation from a person named 'Susan Lee' to host a book talk in a Chinese community. June wanted to share it as a post on Instagram to show that she cared about those communities, so she accepted the invitation. Susan picked her up, but when she learned that Juniper Song was not Chinese, she turned cold toward her. The event went well, and June ate the Chinese food Susan had prepared. Then she met Susan's uncle, Mr. Lee, who had fought in the World War. He thanked her for telling his story. June felt bad about exploiting their stories.

Ten

June asked Emily not to accept any more invitations. The book was selling well and was a commercial success, and June won many awards. June had a meeting with Hollywood executives who wanted to make a film based on 'The Last Front'. She was not sure about screenwriting, so she told them they could adapt the screenplay as they saw fit for the film. June did not hear anything back from them. She was hitting her publishing goals, but her dreams were bigger: she wanted more awards, the film, and the world.

Eleven

June saw a page on Twitter named 'Athena Liu's Ghost'. It claimed that June had stolen the novel from Athena. The post got thousands of likes, and many people sent messages to June — some insulting her, some asking for clarification. June cried for two days, but she got over the feeling. She started untangling the post, and it seemed that the page had just made a guess and had no evidence. June called her agent and told him that these rumors were false. Brett, Daniella, and Eden were firm in their support of her. June realized that Athena had faced a similar struggle with threats and comments on social media. Athena and others had gotten over it and published more books.

Twelve

June went to library events. She read her book to children. They asked inane questions, like what authors are and how they publish books. But one panel was a disaster: June was late and was called out by a person named Diana, who told the audience that June had taken the novel from Athena.

Thirteen

June had a quiet evening with her sister and her sister's husband. Her sister worked in accounting, and her husband was an IT technician. So, June asked her brother-in-law if he could locate an IP address. June took some courses on HTML, created a fake account, and sent a link to @AthenaLiusGhost, saying that she had some proof. June got the IP address, and her brother-in-law asked if she knew anyone in Fairfax. June knew who it was: Geoffrey, Athena's ex-boyfriend.

Fourteen

Athena and Geoffrey had gotten together after meeting at a publishing event. They were a promising couple in publishing. They both signed six-figure contracts for their books, but Geoff had a bad time on Twitter because of his tweets. Then Geoff was recorded groping someone at a bar. He also made some cruel tweets about Athena, which led her to dump him. June had his phone number, so she sent him a message saying that she knew @AthenaLiusGhost was him and that she wanted to meet him at a shop. They met there, and June learned that Athena had talked to Geoff about the book but that he had no proof. Then she got him on record saying that he wanted a portion of her money to keep his mouth shut. She recorded it and told him that she did not want to hear about it anymore. June released a statement, and the Twitter account disappeared. Greenhouse offered June the option for the movie.

Fifteen

One year had passed since the launch of 'The Last Front'. Things had quieted down, and it was no longer on the bestseller list. June did not get many likes on her tweets, and she

missed the attention. Her mentee, Emmy, got a six-figure deal for her book. Brett was asking June about her next book, Eden had the first look, and so everyone was asking what her next book would be. June had writer's block, as she kept hearing Athena's voice when she wrote. On the day of Athena's death, June took two things: the manuscript and Athena's drafts. Athena and June wrote the same way — they wrote phrases first and then the paragraphs. June took one paragraph from Athena.

Sixteen

Athena had once stolen ideas from June — more like feelings. June had dated a sophomore but got drugged in his apartment and did not remember anything except that they had sex. June had felt good at first, since the sophomore was nice-looking and she had wanted to make out with him. But then she started worrying about getting pregnant and about STDs. Athena noticed, and June told her everything and cried to her. June thought Athena was being kind to her. Then Athena published a piece about it in a reputable magazine. June named her next book 'Mother Witch'. It was shorter, so its audience after publication was smaller. But someone recognized the opening lines from printouts handed out at one of Athena's events. The whole internet weighed in with the judgment that June had stolen the book from Athena. June turned off her phone and did not pick up calls from her agents. Then Eden held a meeting with a lawyer, asking June whether she had stolen the books from Athena. June told them that she and Athena had shared some ideas and that she had taken the opening paragraphs from Athena, but that she had not stolen The Last Front. Daniella was cold to her. Brett told her, after the meeting, that sales were up and that Eden liked it. Then Athena's mother called June, saying that she had refused someone who was asking to see Athena's notebooks.

Seventeen

June's book sales were up, and Brett was asking what she was writing for her next book. June was out of ideas. She tried several approaches, such as writing down what she saw in daily life and visiting Chinatown. But she got kicked out of Chinatown by someone who thought she had stolen the book from Athena. Brett asked June to write science fiction about China's one-child policy. Brett wanted June to have a new look. June did not want to write it.

Eighteen

June got invited to a class for high school students to critique their writing. She was invited because she funded Athena's scholarship. June had a good time with the students, reviewing each other's writing, and it made her feel that writing was a communal thing, like when she was an undergraduate. But the students found out about the posts. June had a rough time and was harsher in her critique of one student. Peggy called her and told her that the school had a strict anti-bullying policy. June told her that she quit, as she was going to visit her mother.

Nineteen

June went to Philly to see her mother. Her mother nodded and agreed with everything June said. June learned that her mother was trying to sell the house and move nearer to the girls. June looked inside her old room and found some notebooks from her high school years. She realized that writing had once been fun for her. Her mother then suggested she take up accounting as a new career; she had been suggesting it for the last four years. June did not want to work in an office. Her mother was also doing June's tax returns and planning investments based on her income. June came back home without any idea for a new book.

Twenty

June tried to write, but the seconds felt heavy. When she had a project, hours flew by. June started reading reviews and then saw someone suggest that 'The Last Front' was a mix of Athena and June, and another reviewer said she would pay to read about the relationship between them. June had a new idea for a book. She started writing about her friendship with Athena as fiction. The first two-thirds were a breeze, but she could not finish the last part because she could not write the truth. June had not logged in to her Instagram for some time, but she posted a photo about her new book. Then she saw Athena's Instagram, now with a blue check mark, messaging her. She messaged Geoff, but it was not him. June knew it was not Geoff, but she asked him to meet with her anyway.

Twenty-One

Geoff told June that the photos on the Instagram account were taken from old photos. Then Geoff learned that June had taken the book from Athena. Geoff told June that Athena had also turned their relationship and his pain into stories. He told June not to pay attention to the Instagram account. June could not resist herself, though, and swiped up on Athena's account.

Twenty-Two

June had a breakdown. Athena's account was posting photos of Athena going around the city. June looked into Chinese ghost stories and even tried some traditional offerings. Then June saw someone who looked like Athena; it was not her; it was Diana Qiu. June tried to talk to Rory and her therapist, but they were busy. June could not take it anymore, so she messaged Athena's Instagram account, and it replied, telling her to meet at the Exorcist Steps.

Twenty-Three

June wondered whether Athena was really alive. The Exorcist Steps had been the site of their private conversations, so June went there and heard Athena's voice. Then she confessed, and a girl came forward. It was Candice Lee, who was trying to take revenge on June for getting her removed from Eden. Candice had videotaped the confession. She did not care about Athena; she just wanted to build her career on this confession. June could not let her get away with it, so she attacked her, but she could not overpower Candice because Candice was bigger. Then Candice kicked her, and June hit her head on the floor.

Twenty-Four

When she woke up, she was in the hospital. There were no police around her; someone had called emergency services from her phone and disappeared before they arrived. Then, four days later, Candice published her confession. Daniella told Candice that she could make amends. A month later, Candice got a seven-figure deal for her new book. June was calm. She would write a detailed memoir about the attack and her encounter with Candice. She knew that the video Candice had used would show the audience that it was Candice who attacked June. Brett would like the book. It would be a pseudo-autobiography. Her book would be in bookstores a year later. Then it would be her story once again.

Summary Written by Thura Htoo.

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