

**The
Surprising
Power
of a
Good
Dumpling**



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Chapter One

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February

THE SHADOWS OF THE LEAVES on the wall bend to the right, like gentle waves coming to shore. *It could be a good day.*

When Ma stays in bed, our mornings are a game of fortune-telling where I'm forever looking for signs. The search begins when I try to coax her up with a cup of herbal tea. I shuffle down the hallway, looking for a shadow that looks like a smiley face, waiting for a shock from the doorknob, or trying to miss the creaking board on the floor. These signs tell me something about what to expect behind Ma's closed door.

I can't say if they work or not. There was definitely a day I missed the squeaking board and Ma ended up throwing the tea I brought her against the wall. *Bad day.* And then there was the time I thought the shadows outside Ma's bedroom door looked like a kitten playing with a balloon. That day, Ma went out and bought

me and Lily new iPhones because she said they were on special.
Good day.

Today's shadows look promising and the knob doesn't shock me. The ceramic lid of Ma's special teacup rattles in my trembling hands as I push the door open. In here, the shadows look menacing; the thin slats of sunlight threaten to break through the barrier of darkness that engulfs the room. *She's still in bed, bad sign.* One for one.

I set the cup down on the bedside table. Ma's tiny form is lost in a swath of thick blanket so only a matted black nest of her hair pokes out. I know she's not sleeping. My heart sinks.

She's been in bed for two weeks now. It's not the first time, and I know it won't be the last, but I still can't smother the plumes of disappointment when she gets like this. When she stops being our mother.

Out of habit, I push my glasses up against the bridge of my nose. "Ma. Caa4." *Tea.* I can still detect the tinge of hopefulness in my voice.

She doesn't stir. A small breeze makes the blinds tremble and the beams of light shiver, but nothing else in the room moves, certainly not my mother.

"Ma." I put a hand on the cushioned part that I think is her shoulder and shake gently. Only then does she move and that's only to flinch my hand away. I stay by the side of the bed waiting for another sign, some acknowledgment that I'm here. But she doesn't turn. As I leave, I shut the door as quietly as I can. This time, I think that maybe the waves in the shadows look more like spikes on a lizard, so not the good sign I thought they were.

Or maybe they're just bloody leaves.

I plaster on a smile and head into the kitchen.

It's eerily quiet, just the sound of the dripping tap from the sink. It's the only plus side to Ma being in her room. My little brother and sister have been on their best behavior in the mornings since Ma's been in bed.

The two of them are crammed together on one side of the tiny dining room table making breakfast. Ma threw out the toaster a while back—toast is too jit6 hei3 (*hot air*) and the darkened bits cause sore throats, she says—so we are eating butter and jam on plain bread. Lily is helping to spread the jam for our five-year-old brother.

Michael flattens his slice of white bread into a gooey patty and crams it into his mouth, jam and butter smearing all over his pudgy cheeks.

I grab a paper towel to wipe it off, but it just spreads the sticky mess around. Now bits of paper towel cling to his face. I shrug and reach for the tub of butter.

“How's Ma?” Lily asks.

“Sleeping,” I say. Lily will know this is a lie, which makes it easier for me to say. I'm a terrible liar, and I don't like to argue with my sister. While some people argue to be right, Lily argues just to prove the other person wrong.

“Mommy's sleeping! Shhhhhh, don't wake her up!” Michael says this way too loudly, so I shush him.

As expected, Lily is not buying. “Okay, so, like, talking to herself or not talking at all?” At thirteen, my little sister is more matter-of-fact and sarcastic than I've ever been.

“She’s *sleeping*,” I say again, and jam the butter knife into the hardened brick. I gouge out a piece, not caring that it looks like somebody has hacked away a piece of flesh from the middle of the block. I do my best to spread it, then give up and just fold the bread over. I eat my buttered bread in two big bites. The lump of butter melts slowly on the roof of my mouth.

“If Mommy’s sleeping again, are you taking me to school, ze2 ze2?” Michael asks me, a snarl of paper towel still stuck to the corner of his mouth. His bowl haircut and perfect bangs make his brown eyes look even bigger. He’s so cute, sometimes it hurts my heart.

“Lily is going to have to take you today.”

Lily’s outraged. “I have to meet with my CT partners before our presentation. *You* can drop him on your way.” CT stands for *Communications Theater*; calling it “drama” is too pedestrian for the students at Montgomery High.

“You start at nine, Lily. If you get going soon, you won’t be late,” I say.

“*Uuuuuugh!*” Lily’s complaining is overly dramatic, but it doesn’t faze me. She is up and running to our room, her sticky plate still on the table. I sigh and pick up my hardly used plate along with hers.

I leave the dishes in the sink and wet another paper towel in a final attempt to clean my brother’s face. He sits there and lets me scrape things off with my chewed-down-to-the-nub nails.

“Baba didn’t come home last night.” My brother frowns.

“I know. Things must have been busy at the restaurant,” I say.

I've noticed this has been happening whenever Ma stays in bed, but I keep this to myself.

Michael reaches up to touch my face. "Look, Anna! An eyelash. You have to make a wish."

I smile and comply, closing my eyes and blowing on his fingertip, wishing for Ma to be out of bed, for Baba to be home.

For things to just be normal.

We smile at each other as the eyelash disappears, and Michael looks very pleased with himself.

"Okay, it's already past eight. Time to get ready for school," I tell him.

"But I need Mommy or Baba to sign my permission form." He waves a piece of paper under my nose. "Our librarian, Miss Holloway, is taking us to an art camp! But she says I have to get my parents to sign it or I'll miss out. Can't we just wake Mommy up?"

I remember Ma's shape in the bed, all bundled up and still. The last thing I want is for Michael to see her that way. "Tell you what, you go get ready, and I'll see if I can wake her up," I say.

His whole face brightens and the ache in my chest is gone in an instant.

"Are we going yet?" Lily emerges from our bedroom, already dressed. She has pulled her hair back in a messy ponytail. Her rail-thin body is almost comical with her oversized backpack hanging extra low and bouncing against her bottom. A water bottle dangles from a carabiner clipped to the side. "Hurry up, squirt. We have to go," she calls after Michael's retreating form.

She plonks herself down, backpack and all, onto one of our

metal folding chairs. The water bottle makes a loud thud as it hits the chair, but she doesn't notice, just crosses her arms and stares at me.

"She's not going to sign the form, you know." The know-it-all arch of her eyebrow is so perfect, I wonder if she's practiced it before.

"I *know*." I snatch a pen from the kitchen drawer and scrawl on the line on the form. It's not the first time I've forged Ma's signature, and I'm sure Lily's done it a million times, too. But we have an unspoken agreement between us: We protect Michael from Ma's tendencies, the bad ones at least, while we can.

Lily lets out a not-so-subtle huff behind me. "You know, if I get another lecture from Lucy, I'm going to tell her it's my *sister's* fault. I'm not taking the fall."

"Sure, whatever. And don't call your teachers by their first name."

I place the butter in a used Ziploc bag and put it back in the freezer, where Ma insists on keeping it. The bread bag I tie up tightly and then knot it up in another plastic bag and stick it in the freezer. Everything in our house is tied up in plastic bags of some kind: All our food containers, cleaning supplies, even the picture frames on the shelves are sealed in clear plastic. Ma hates dust but she doesn't like dusting, so every few weeks, she just replaces the plastic bags because they're cheap. Any eco-warrior would be terrified stepping into our house, but no one ever comes over, so there's no worry.

"*Lucy* tells us to call her that," Lily retorts. "She says that children are human beings and deserve to be treated with the same respect as adults, so I can *express* myself to my full potential."