

Fish Mirror

Grandfather was very quiet. He was thin, wrinkled and wore a pair of black-framed glasses with very outdated subscription lenses. He smoked Panda brand cigarettes and, after a few puffs, he would carefully put it out and save the rest for later. Most of his clothes were deep navy blue. He sat on a tiny stool next to the television with his face just a few centimeters away from the screen.

He liked to start his day tending to the small garden on his balcony. Over the years he had acquired a few orchids, roses, plum blossoms, chrysanthemums, wintersweets, shí hú (the noble dendrobium), and even built a small pond to house his goldfishes. The most prized member of his garden was a Flower Horn fish kept in a separate tank.

A man-made hybrid, the Flower Horn fish are best known for their protruding foreheads, a symbol of good luck. Grandfather's fish was a proud one, a fighter, and couldn't stand anybody else in his territory. He was an emperor dressed in dazzling shimmers of red and white.

Because grandfather couldn't see well, it was my task and pastime to feed the emperor during summer break. When he got drowsy, I would fetch a small mirror and put it in front of him. As he saw the intruder (his reflection) and rushed to it, I would swiftly move the mirror away from him and wait for another attack. The bullfighting-like confrontation would last for ten to fifteen minutes. Later I learned that this technique was used to make his forehead grow bigger, to get a more prized and auspicious feature.

It worked well for the emperor. His head looked about to explode, the stretched skin formed an intricate pattern and texture that resembled a peeled orange. When I described this to grandfather, he responded with a curious chuckle. A bitter smell of strong tea came out of his nostrils. Then he leaned forward with his glasses just a few centimeters away from the tank.

The emperor appeared in his glasses, and swam into the clouded darkness of his left eye.