MARISSA YUAN

LOVE LIVES BEYOND THE WATERS

D on't let men fool you," my mother told me. "True love only exists between a mother and a child."

The first time she gave me this advice was when I was eight. We were living in Shenyang, China. My father was pursuing his Ph.D. in Changchun, my grandmother's city, a six-hour train ride away. He only came home on holidays. Our apartment only had one room; my parents' bed and mine were two feet apart. When he was gone, I lay in his place. That was where, in the dim, yellow light, with me in her arms, my mother read me "The Little Mermaid" by Hans Christian Andersen.

In the original version of the famous story, the Little Mermaid let the Sea Witch cut off her tongue in exchange for a pair of legs. The deal was, if she won the prince's love and he married her, she would gain an immortal human soul. If not, she would dissolve into sea foam on the morning after his wedding. Every step she took on her new legs felt like treading on sharp knives, but she danced for the prince and accompanied him everywhere, leaving a trail of blood-marked footprints. Despite growing fond of her, he married someone else. On his wedding night, the Sea Witch gave the Little Mermaid a knife and said that if she plunged it into the prince's heart and bathed her legs in his blood, she'd regain her tail and a 300-year life. She chose not to. Before the first rays of the morning sun hit, she threw herself into the sea.

My mother's eyes were watery when she finished. "Never trust a man.