

Wen-Ying

i. jade

The day of the funeral, my po po and her four siblings mouthed unspoken prayers, heads bowed to the sepia-stained photographs and wreathes of lilies arranged in the front of the chapel.

I only remember small things from that day: how the oak of lao po po's casket glistened, how sweat gathered in the hollows of the pallbearer's temples and leaked down his cheeks, how the funeral program lay crooked beneath my feet.

At the end of the service, my po po took my hand in hers and pulled me aside to a shaded bench overlooking the bright, grassy slope of the cemetery, studded with whitewashed tombs.

The skin beneath her eyes was tender and purple, and her curly hair, dyed a coppery-brown, was slumped in the humidity. "Hannah," she said, gently. "Do you know who you are named after?"

"An actress," I said. My parents told me that they had been watching some 90's movie in their old apartment, and that when the credits scrolled through, one of the first actress's names they saw was Hannah.

Po po laughed. "No. Your *middle* name."

"*Wen-Ying*," I said.

Po po nodded. "Your lao po po's name was *Ma Wen-Ying*. She was the bravest and kindest woman I know. Now I want to give you something that belonged to her." I swallowed the curdled sugar in my throat and looked down at my feet, at the black slip-ons my mom had bought from Nordstrom's.

Po po pulled a black box from her bag and opened the lid, revealing a jade bracelet, heavy and milky and cold, like the heart of a napa cabbage, nestled inside.

“The greener it is, the older it is, and the more it has been worn and loved,” she said. “I meant to give it to your mom on her wedding day, but it’s yours now. Take care of it.”

“Okay,” I said, and I slid the bracelet onto my wrist. It was too big, too pristine for my small, scraped-up hands.

That night, I wrapped the bracelet in a pair of socks and tucked it into the drawer of my wardrobe, next to my elementary school jersey and the shoebox where I stored my tooth fairy money. Then I forgot about it.

ii. kumquat

I visited po po’s house almost every weekend before lao po po’s death.

Lao po po stayed in the master bedroom, an airy room attached to the backyard porch. In the afternoons, sunlight spilled through the sliding glass doors, thick and viscous like honey, and formed a kaleidoscope of rainbows across the floor.

“Come say hi to your lao po po,” po po always told me, hefting me into her arms and pushing me onto lao po po’s bed.

Nin hao, lao po po, I said each time. *Wo ai nin*. I quickly kissed her cheek. Her skin was delicate and mottled, near translucent, like the peel of a peach.

Afterwards, po po carried her mother to the bathroom and lowered her onto a stool with a hole in the bottom and a plastic tray which caught what little she could digest. Then she fed lao po po fluid through a fat tube that coiled and disappeared into her stomach.

I darted upstairs to avoid watching po po insert the tube; it seemed unnatural, foreign. In po po’s room, I ate the black sesame squares that she collected on her nightstand, grinding the candy into soft paste with my molars, and watched *Dora the Explorer* on her T.V. When my eyes

ached from staring at the screen, I ran outside and climbed po po's loquat tree, pulling the most fragrant bunches of fruit from the branches, peeling the skin back with my fingernails and spitting the seeds onto the ground.

I'd like to think that I thought of lao po po before the strokes rendered her immobile. I'd like to think I wondered if she shuffled outside and picked kumquats from the tree, too, and bit into the cold orange flesh whole. I'd like to think I wondered if she bent to smell the star jasmine that grew from the neighbor's tree and soaked the flowers in water to make perfume, or if she hummed to the music in Chinese soap operas, or if she loved the black, star-strewn ocean and the smell of fresh, black ink and hot grass jelly suffused with red beans. I'd like to think I wondered, but I never did.

iii. name

The September after lao po po passed away, my fourth grade teacher said, "Let's go around and tell each other a story about our names." She turned to me. "Why don't you go first?"

"My...my middle name is *Wen-Ying*. I was named after my great-grandmother." I leaned into my desk, felt the wood dig into the soft space beneath my ribs.

"And what does *Whin-Yi*—your middle name—mean?"

"I don't know," I said. "When you switch the characters, it means English. *Ying-Wen* literally means 'English'. But the other way, *Wen-Ying*...has no meaning."

My classmates had stopped staring and were already going back to sharpening their pencils and prying out the dirt under their fingernails with their pens.

"Interesting," my teacher said. "That's a beautiful name. Next?"

It was the way she said it. Beautiful. Like my name was an eighteenth century teacup on Antiques Roadshow, a curio to weigh in her hands. *Wow, you did a beautiful restoration job on it. Can you explain the history behind it?*

That's a beautiful name. She said beautiful like she didn't understand it.

iv. now

After the funeral, my mom made a shrine for lao po po in her bedroom. Two candles and three picture frames, from back when lao po po was able to smile, and her eyes were bright and crinkled. It still stands in our house, on the same dresser. It took me five years of passing by that shrine, of looking at her shadowy face within the silver frame, to ask about my mom and my po po about her—the woman that my po po and her siblings had bowed to, their five bodies warped with the same grief. I listened to their stories and tried to piece the parts of lao po po's life together, stringing them like glass beads on a bracelet.

v. her story

Eight decades ago, in Shanghai, *Ma Wen-Ying* hung her children's school uniforms on the clothesline beside the naked pink chickens she boiled for dinner. When her daughters and her son came home from school, cheeks smudged with dirt, they immediately ran off to play with the neighborhood kids, throwing pebbles at stray cats and kicking around a leather ball. They had just gone when *Wen-Ying* heard footsteps, and then someone rapping on the door of her military bunker—Number 48, painted a faded green.

She opened the door. There was a military officer on the other side. His shoes were scuffed, just at the toes. His eyes were very dark.

After he left, she went to the kitchen and diced the ginger into small pieces, and then took out the onions and diced those too, her knife moving so quickly it was just a shimmer.

Later she lit three sticks of incense and placed them on the dresser, along with a framed picture of a young pilot. Before, she had dreams of him being chased by Japanese aircraft. As the radio crackled beside the dining table, she would hear the invisible missile whistling, and then the silence, and him, falling, wings snapping. Her eldest daughter would complain to fill the quiet, tell her to change the station because she wanted to hear Elvis Presley.

After the officer appeared at the door, the dreams warped, blackened. She saw him driving in the military-issue truck, rounding the corner on the way home. She saw the sun glancing off the windshield, the sparks blinding him just as the telephone pole tipped over, falling soundlessly, endlessly. Crushed metal, crushed bone.

A freak accident.

She gave birth to her fifth child alone and learned to feed five hungry mouths without a husband. Two decades later, she was forced to board a plane to escape from a different war—a cultural war—to a country 6,498 miles away that didn't have chickens cawing in the yard and military trucks grunting along the roads.

vi. us

In America, my lao po po took care of my mom and cooked her scallion pancakes each morning before school, mixing the batter and slicing the onions and laying them on the oiled pan herself, each of the hundreds of papery layers.

Lao po po loved her best of all her grandchildren. My mom loved her more than her own mother. So when my head was resting on my mom's collarbone in the hospital on that windless February day, my mom told my dad what she had decided my name would be: *Wen-Ying*.

vii. voice

Once, when my family and I came home from dinner, there were spiderweb fractures in the bedroom window and bouquets of broken glass sparkling on the floor.

"Oh my God," my mom said. "What *happened*? What did they take? Hannah, check your room."

The bureau in my room had been overturned, the drawers opened, school uniforms and Lulu Lemon leggings hanging out like tongues. The shoe box that held my tooth fairy money lay empty on the floor, next to my crumpled elementary school jersey.

I paused and held my breath and yanked open the second drawer of my bureau, running my fingers along the seams. Lint clung to my fingers. It was empty. They had taken the jade bracelet.

That night, I knelt in front of my lao po po's shrine and cupped my hands to my chest, pressed my head to the floor.

Lao po po, I don't understand how you were so brave, so fearless. I hope that one day, I may live up to your name.

Outside, the wind rustled the pine trees, and the moonlight drifted across the courtyard like smoke, and no one answered.