

左興萬, Hsing Wan Tso: Against the Current

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CHAPTER 1: What He Didn't Choose

I never liked to visit my grandparents when I was little. They lived far away in the distant land of Brooklyn, New York, where there was no grass and nowhere to play outside. Grandma and Grandpa owned a big building, but they rented out the first floor to a sushi restaurant.

As a result, my parents told us, *there is absolutely no running in Grandma and Grandpa's house.*

My little feet pounded the cheap hardwood strips of the hallway as I sprinted to the living room. My footsteps resounded through the floor, but I couldn't hear them over the whooshing breeze created by my speed. *Pat pat pat.* The vibrations traveled up the wall as I closed in on the living room door.

“Der!” My dad shouted my name from the other end of the hallway and I stopped, skittering just a little as the rest of my body caught up with my feet. I whipped around, bangs flinging in my eyes, wishing my already-tiny frame could shrink away from his patented Dad Stink-Eye. “<What did we say about running?>” He asked sharply.

“Not to do it,” I mumbled.

“<Speak Chinese!>”

“<Not to do it,>” I said a little louder.

“<Go sit in the living room for twenty minutes.>” Having delivered his sentence, he retreated back into his home office.

I dragged myself the rest of the way down the hall to the living room, where Grandpa was watching some soap opera on the Chinese TV channel. I shuffled past his brown recliner and mumbled a halfhearted “<Hi, Grandpa.>” I tucked my feet up under me and squatted defiantly on the sofa, looking around for something to do. I couldn't understand the rapid Mandarin of the

soap opera, and Grandma told me yesterday not to play with her magnifying glass or I'd burn the house down. I flopped over onto my stomach and started poking around the side table for a book to read.

Grandpa turned his head to look at me. He had definitely heard Dad scold me and exile me to the living room, but if he thought anything of it, his dark eyes and stern face did not show it.

I stared back at him, blinking awkwardly. Our eyes, exactly the same but seventy years apart, looked right at each other for the better part of a minute.

Right in that moment with the two of us sitting four feet apart in the living room, looking into each other's eyes, I felt immature and stupid. He was old, experienced, and wise; I was a little brat who got in trouble for running in the hallway. I was not worthy to look like him.

I quickly picked up the biggest book from the table and shielded myself from his gaze.

The book was a collection of Egyptian myths edited down to a third-grade reading level, and I easily got lost in the story of the sun god Ra and the creation of the world.

As the pages turned, Ra grew older and older until he was essentially an old geezer ripe for the takeover, sinking in his throne, regularly falling asleep, and drooling all over himself. By the end of the chapter, the magic goddess Isis had created a snake with Ra's drool and used it to effectively coerce him out of his power. The picture of Ra was especially unflattering: his falcon head was withered and dribbling, his crook and flail looked like they were about to fall out of his hands, and his torso, so toned and cut on the cover of the book, was now saggy and sad.

I looked up at my Grandpa, who had drifted off on his reclining leather throne. His glasses hadn't budged at all and his mouth stayed firmly shut. The skin was loose on the back of

his hands and there was a small divot on his left thumb from years of chopping food, but his arms remained steady, even in sleep. He looked peaceful and strong.

In that moment, I thought, *Grandpa is way stronger than the Sun god.*

I always thought that my Grandpa was invincible. In everything he ever did, he looked intentional and prepared for anything to happen. He might not have been the Sun god, but he was always *my* Sun god. He radiated power and demanded respect everywhere he went. It seemed to me like he had always known the kind of power he had, even though he never had a deep conversation with me or verbally told me what was on his mind.

He made intentional friendships, he made great food, and he gave up an easy life for the sake of a legacy that blessed all of his grandchildren. It was almost like he knew that the choices he made would trickle down and make us richer, smarter, fuller, and even more diligent. He always did the best he could, even when he knew it was unconventional. Grandpa was a man ahead of his time, making decisions against all cultural norms to do what he believed was right and good. Many of his choices raise eyebrows from Chinese communities to this day, but those who knew him tell me that he was the best of men, and the effects of his choices still matter to everyone individually.

I thought that no one could make him do anything he didn't want to, forever.

Of course, that wasn't true.



The first decade or so of my Grandpa's life, all of his decisions were made for him. He did not choose to be the youngest of twelve children, so far removed from his mother that he didn't even know her name. He did not choose to be born in the small, hilly mountain village of

Zuo Jia Wan, or “The Tso Family Bay,” where there wasn’t actually any bay. There was no good school, no books, no bikes, and nothing to do.

He did not choose to be sent to culinary school or be defined and eventually renowned for his cooking skills. He did not plan to be an apprentice washing dishes and intensely preparing all kinds of food at all hours. He did not choose to cut vegetables until his thumbs wore down. The teaching chefs of the school would use extremely large, industry-sized woks that spanned about three or four feet in diameter; as the head chefs cooked, they would toss the gigantic used woks across the kitchen for the apprentices to scrub up. Just one time, he didn’t clean the wok fast enough, and the head chef hurled a wok at him. It hit him directly on the head with a *clang*—but he was back at work the next morning. He did not choose the life of a cook. It was literally thrown at him.

He did not choose an arranged marriage. He did not choose to get married at sixteen years old to a woman significantly older than he was, and he did not choose for her to get pregnant with a daughter in the patriarchal age.

But the things he did choose, he chose as drastically against all expectations as possible—not because he was a rebel, but more because he saw through the hypocrisy and double standards of society. He couldn’t read—he hadn’t been taught to—but he knew what was right.

He did not choose his family, but he loved and committed to them. He promised his wife, Shu Feng, that he would take care of her, and all that he did and worked for was for his family’s comfort. He named his daughter Yung Yu, naming her according to the Gift that she was to him.

He chose what was best for his family, even if it meant leaving them to work in Taiwan. He chose to send home as much money as he could. He chose to eat little more than rice and tofu

so that Shu Feng and Yung Yu could be comfortable. Culturally, Chinese men didn't leave their families at all. But Grandpa was willing to do whatever it took to give his family the best, and he chose to cross the sea to Taiwan.

He did not choose for the Chinese delegation to lose everything to the communists in mainland China, and he definitely did not plan for the borders of Mainland China to close completely.

He did not choose to spend his first twenty years of life almost helplessly.



His name, Hsing Wan, meant "ten thousand successes."

Every choice he made following this point went towards making him worth his name.

CHAPTER 2: Choosing Love

Hsing Wan did not choose to leave his wife and daughter behind. He did not choose to be alone. He did not choose to be a whole Sea away from everything he had ever known, in a country where they didn't speak the language he already barely knew. For as long as he could, he tried to send money home, but once even mail became illegal, he chose to move forward.

He chose to work. For years he cooked for the Chinese delegation. He worked until Taiwan opened its first five-star hotel, where he was instantly hired as the first Head Chef. He chose work over trying to go back to China, where he would have ended up in a communist concentration camp. He chose work over trying to escape and being executed as a traitor. He chose life, and he chose work.

He spent each day in the kitchen, working and waiting. From 6 a.m. to 1 a.m. almost every day, he baked and broiled and barbecued and waited. He boiled and braised and burned and waited. He fried and flambéed and grilled and waited. He salted, smoked, steamed, stewed, sautéed, seared, simmered, and served the best Szechuanese food that anyone in Taiwan could have asked for—spicy mapo tofu, hot and spicy shrimp, and all kinds of dried fish in spicy sauces. He worked hard. He smoked cigars. He observed. He waited.

It's hard to say what exactly he was waiting for. He did not really have friends beyond the people he worked with, and he was not actively looking for someone to spend the rest of his life with. He could not speak any language well enough to socialize very much, so he never really went out. His money built up from ceaseless work and social inactivity. He had chosen life; now he just needed to make something out of it.

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“I can’t believe he didn’t go crazy.” I tilted the photo of my Grandpa in the restaurant, wearing his apron and white ingot-shaped chef’s hat. He smiled intensely, almost aggressively at the camera, holding a shining meat cleaver in his hand. His eyebrows arched intensely downwards in an angry expression, even over his toothy smile. “I don’t think I could stand it, being alone and trapped in my own head all the time.”

“Well.” Dad took a thoughtful sip from his coffee cup. “He was very observant. He noticed a lot. He would probably look at things and analyze them in his own way.”

“It’s not like he could think in a language,” I pushed, tapping my nails on the dining tabletop. “How did he think?”

“Food, probably,” he laughed. “Smells. He would have been the type to think in different dishes instead of words. I bet he’d see something he liked and think of it as his favorite food.”

“What did he see?”

Dad grinned. “Your Grandma.”



Hsing Wan definitely noticed his young, feisty, spicy neighbor, Hsiao Li, who fully embodied his favorite food: double sautéed sliced pork with baby jalapeño peppers and peanuts.

They lived in the same small wing of an apartment building, where tenants slept in separate rooms but shared the same bathroom and kitchen. It was not the most upscale type of building, appearing as just a shabby-chic, whitewashed block of brick. The rooms were just big enough for a couple pallet mattresses and the walls were paper-thin. In the hours that Hsing Wan spent at home, he would have heard his neighbor moving around in her room. They passed each other in the hallways from time to time, but they interacted minimally other than to say good morning or good night.

Part of the problem was that Hsing Wan did not really talk, even back then. No one had taught him more than a few words of Chinese when he was younger. He had picked up enough kitchen terminology to be successful, but his language abilities never exceeded the skill level of a kindergartener.

While Hsing Wan didn't talk, Hsiao Li essentially never stopped talking. She could speak at least three dialects of Chinese (Mandarin, Taiwanese, and Cantonese) and possessed a God-given supernatural talent to complain about literally anything for literally ever. Hsing Wan would walk past her apartment space and hear her jabbering on about the space, the mess, the heat, or whatever else happened to be going on that day. There was a lot to be noticed about this one small lady—and he noticed everything.

She was nineteen, and he was in his mid-thirties; she had a two-year old daughter, and he was all alone— but he noticed that she wasn't married, and he also noticed when her daughter's father came around.

He noticed when Hsiao Li became pregnant again and had another daughter. He noticed when she gave up the child to another family. Hsing Wan recognized the woman that left with the baby as a local prostitute.

He noticed when she became pregnant again, with yet another daughter, and gave up the baby to a distant circle of the family. He noticed when the family came and took the girl away. Hsiao Li stood in the doorway and watched them leave, eyes brimmed with angry tears, toddler clutching at her skirt—but she was never the type to let any weakness or emotion show.

“<What are you looking at? Mind your own business!>” She snapped at him.

He retreated silently to his own space.

He noticed how broken she was every time she failed to make a son. And he noticed how hard she worked as a house-slave, making barely enough to keep herself and her toddler alive. A woman her age, unmarried, who could not produce a son, was basically a worthless whore by East Asian cultural standards. No Taiwanese man wanted to choose her. No desirable man should have even tried to associate with her.

And yet, he chose her.

It's not like he didn't have options. There were plenty of nice Taiwanese women that his friends could have tried to set him up with, all of them probably more docile and less argumentative than Hsiao Li—and yet he chose her.

Part of him must have seen the reflection in this little family to his own family back in China. Here was a strong, passionate woman with a little daughter, not much younger than his own little daughter would have been, looking for family and looking for security that a Taiwanese man could not give her.

Love struck his heart. And even though he didn't quite have the words to explain the how or why, he knew that he wanted to marry this intense woman.

Whatever he said or did, Grandpa asked Hsiao Li to marry him. And she said yes.

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“<What was your wedding like?>” I asked my Grandma directly.

She immediately scoffed at me. “Pfuh! <I did not like your Grandpa.>”

I laughed to cover my surprise. “<Why not?!>”

“Pfuh!” Grandma made that sound again and waved her puffy little hand dismissively at me. “Uhm, <he was old, and he wasn't smart. He might have had money, but I always imagined myself marrying someone who was smart.>”

I knew there was more to that explanation. Grandma had always wanted to go to school, but the circumstances of her family and the abusive, misogynist nature of her father always prevented her from learning as much as she wanted to. There was a reason she was out on her own at such a young age trying to give the guy she liked a son.

“<But what was the wedding like?>” I asked again.

“<Simple,>” she answered. “<We had dinner with a lot of people. Your grandpa made double sautéed sliced pork. We drank tea. I held flowers. That was about it.>”

My dad later dug up what is probably the only surviving photo of that wedding day, where the entire party was jammed into one frame and only one person looked like he was smiling. It turned out that he wasn't even really smiling; he just had a massive overbite. There are twenty-seven people in the photo other than the bride and groom, twelve of which are children. Grandma and Grandpa are in the center of the picture, unsmiling and not really looking at the camera.

I recognized very few of the people in the photograph. Most of them were Grandpa's coworkers and their families, but I didn't know any of them by name, and I surely didn't recognize any of their children.

My great-grandma, Grandma's mom, sat directly to her right. She looked too old to be the mother of the bride; her eyebrows barely existed, her eyes were lost in puffy wrinkles, and her shoulders hunched forward and made the rest of her body look shapeless. There was a white handkerchief, or tissue, or napkin, clenched up tight in her right hand. Maybe she cried, I thought. Or maybe she just helped that kid sitting next to her blow his nose. Or maybe it was just garbage she picked up and forgot to throw away before taking the picture.

Grandpa sat as I knew him to in life, with his back straight and shoulders set. A big flower was pinned to the lapel of his immaculate suit jacket, and I knew from experience that it would have been bright red and made of paper. His face betrayed no feelings; his eyebrows almost touched the tops of his eyes.

Grandma sat straighter than I ever thought she would have, even though I knew she couldn't have been more than twenty years old in the picture. There was a massive bouquet of flowers in her hands and what looked like a sparkly crown on her tight black curls, but she looked annoyed, bored, and a little bit cross-eyed.

Even though I knew they were not very expressive people, I expected a little more emotion from what probably could have been a great day in my grandparents' lives. Grandpa had once again done something absolutely crazy that no cultured Chinese man would have done, marrying a culturally old maid with a toddler, and shouldn't he have been proud of his decision? Did he even care?

I pushed this thought away. It's just a picture.

I swiped to see the next photo.

It was a much later picture, taken probably around the 1990s. Grandpa and Grandma stood in a tourist-y looking garden. He had one arm around her and was kissing her cheek. The garden was chintzy and touristy enough that I could recognize the Southern point of Taiwan, *Eluanbi*, the tourist town three hours away from where Grandma and Grandpa had originally lived. The flowers around them were cartoonishly big, betraying the excessive care they had received, and the large landscaped stones were just a little too round to be natural.

I'd been told before how much Grandpa loved to travel, but I was never able to travel anywhere with him in my life...

But he loved Grandma enough to take her out. He worked every single day for years and then spent hard-earned money on experiences for the people he cared about. He adopted her daughters. He made memories with them. He traveled with them. He made sacrifices for them.

That picture was enough to sway me into believing that he cared about Grandma, but I had barely begun to discover the story of how much he cared about everyone else.



“Did Grandpa marry Grandma because he really loved her?” I asked Aunt Ming. We sat in the car on a three-hour road trip, and it seemed as good a time as ever to ask her deep and personal questions about her family history.

“I think there were a couple of reasons why he married her.” Aunt Ming answered. “Grandpa was just kind of an inherently caring person, and part of it must have been to save Grandma from her crappy circumstances. But part of it was also that he loved children, he wanted a family, and he saw how strong and capable Grandma was. I think he loved her strength.” She laughed, slapping her armrest. “And then she used that strength to clash with him and be dramatic for the rest of their life together! They are two very dramatic people with a very dramatic story.”

“There’s just one thing I don’t get,” I said. “Why did she keep going back to the other guy?”

I saw her grin suggestively at me in my peripheral vision. “Young girls like attractive guys.”

I sighed. I never had patience for stupid girls that chased stupid guys. “She had to know that he was a lost cause after *three kids*.”

Aunt Ming raised her grey eyebrows. “Your Grandma is not a stupid woman.”

“Mm-hm.”

“Really!” Aunt Ming turned completely in her seat to look at me. “It was difficult to be a girl back then. She worked with what she had. And what she had was the ability to have a son.”

It was quiet for the next stretch of the highway. I flipped the headlights on as the sun started to set. “I knew that you weren’t Grandpa’s daughter,” I said slowly, “but I didn’t know that Aunt Mei and Aunt Jean weren’t Grandpa’s kids, either.” I couldn’t think of a more tactful way to say what I was thinking. I wasn’t sure if I should apologize, or ask another question, or try to discuss the subject further.

She shrugged. “We’ve never really called anyone else our father. And now all of my siblings are named Tso.”

I blinked. I had never considered the prospect of my aunts being named anything other than Tso. “How did that happen?”

She smiled. “When they immigrated over to America from Taiwan later, they had to choose names for their American citizenship. And since they were a part of the family, they chose the last name Tso.”

I thought about my aunts and my cousins. We were spread all across the world, in Taiwan, in New York, in Wisconsin, and in Maryland. We weren’t even all related by blood the way that we thought we were. Yet, the fact that my oldest aunts had voluntarily chosen to be a part of the Tso family seemed to make our family that much more special. Grandpa chose Grandma, and all of her daughters chose him.

Chapter 3: Choosing Principle

I stood with my Grandma on the platform of Grand Street Subway Station, waiting for the B train to come. It was monthly Grandma-and-Der-Hang-Out-Day, and we had just come from getting facials at our favorite spa. I'll admit we looked very Fresh Off the Boat. My eyebrows were newly micro-bladed in the trendy Korean shape, I had the Asian LINE app open on my phone typing in Chinese, Grandma was using her cheap, ugly, green-and-white pharmacy umbrella with the Chinese ads on the side, and we were speaking Mandarin to each other; even *I* would have assumed we were FOBs.

“<The subways are always too hot,>” Grandma was complaining. She smacked the ferrule of her umbrella against the textured subway platform. “<I can feel the facial melting off my face.>”

“<It's humid, too,>” I added. It was always best to agree with whatever Grandma was saying.

“<Your eyebrows look really good, though!>” She beamed at me. “<They show off your eye shape! Big eyes, just like your Grandpa's. So pretty, like a real girl.>”

I smiled and nodded. “<I hope the train comes soon.>”

The platform was full of people; there was just enough room to stick my elbows out, but not enough to walk without running into someone. Rain always drew more people to the train station, and we were pretty far from the edge of the platform. I hated when the subway cars would crowd closer than a sardine can, and I could already hear how Grandma would complain about the closeness for the entire hour-long train ride.

I glanced around at the people filling the empty space around me. One man clipped my shoulder, and the shoulders of many other riders, as he shoved his way to the front of the station.

“<There’s probably too many people for us to get seats,>” I told Grandma.

“<Aiya, I can stand! No problem.>” She gripped my arm with her umbrella-free hand.

“<Train is coming.>”

The B train screeched into the station, and the doors opened with a chime. “This is: Grand Street,” said a pleasant automated voice. “The next stop is: DeKalb Avenue.”

People, all kinds of selfish people, pushed each other to get into the subway car, old Chinese ladies carrying more plastic bags than they should, young Chinese teenagers with their cat-ear headphones and thigh-high socks, African-American girls with their jewelry and high-waisted jeans, Caucasian men with their AirPods and briefcases, and Caucasian girls with their long hair and fake nails, all kinds of people bumping my Grandma to the side as they rushed the subway doors.

Just another day in New York City.

I wrapped Grandma’s hand tighter around the crook of my elbow and speed-walked her to the doors, where there was just a little more than enough space for us to fit. “Stand clear of the closing doors,” the automated voice chimed. I put my arm out and held the door open as Grandma stepped up into the car. “Stand clear of the closing doors,” the voice persisted. The doors slammed shut with a sense of finality, and the cars screeched against the tracks as the train started up.

A couple of people in the subway car glared at us for making the train pull out of the station five seconds later than it should have, as if the MTA wasn’t late all the time. I shrugged at them. “<There’s no seats,>” I said to Grandma.

“<I told you, I can stand!>” She waved her hand in the air the way she did. “*Meiguanxi*. <It’s fine.>” She was the loudest person on the train.

A couple of young Caucasian women cast a side-eyed glare at us. They couldn’t have been much older than me, but they looked at me as if I was twelve. “It’s always the motherfucking Asians,” one of the girls said, “pulling this motherfucking shit.”

The other girl laughed wryly. “It’s like they don’t know how the subways work or something.”

I raised my eyebrows high and looked around. The majority of the passengers on the train were Chinese, but no one moved.

“It’s like, if you can’t understand the PA’s English, why are you here at all? Just learn English.” The first girl looked around and scowled, confident that no one around her understood her.

A couple of the Chinese people in the car shifted awkwardly in their seats, but still no one said anything. I frowned.

Grandma poked my forehead. “<You’re messing up your eyebrows. If you scrunch them up, the coloring is going to get messed up.>”

The first girl rolled her mascara-laden eyes up into the back of her head. “Asians.”

I cleared my throat, looked back at my Grandma, and put as much of my American accent into my voice as possible. “If she has such a problem with us not knowing English, why is she in Chinatown?”

The two girls flushed through their white skin—a feature I was never jealous of—and looked down at their phones.

Grandma looked back at me, confused, but I'd said what I needed to. I smiled at her, feeling like a heroine from a feel-good coming-of-age Hallmark movie. “<What happened? What did you say?>” She asked me.

I summed up what happened, and she *laughed*, loud barks of laughter jolting enough that at the next stop, the girls exited the train. “<Thank you for saving me,>” she said, hooking her hand on my arm again. “<You didn't have to say anything, you know. You could have saved face and just waited for them to leave.>”

“<I didn't want to do that.>” I shook my head. “<I speak English, and they should know that.>”

The doors opened again, and enough people left the car that we could finally sit down. “<You're like your Grandpa, you know?>”

I sighed and pressed my back against the subway seat. “<I know.>”

“<You have his spirit. He never let anyone get away with anything.>” Her little eyes welled up with wrinkles as she smiled. “<One time your Aunt Patty took Grandpa to a restaurant where the food was really bad, and he screamed at the head chef in front of everyone and really embarrassed her.>” Grandma laughed. “<He wasn't afraid of losing face.>”



The first restaurant Hsing Wan opened in America, Szechuan Royal, flourished under his cooking. Good, authentic Szechuanese cuisine was in high demand in New York in 1975, and the critics knew that the quality stuff was wherever Hsing Wan was. There were some days that customers lined up all the way down the block. Hsing Wan cooked and ran the kitchen team, and his partner, Lin, handled all the finance and administrative duties of owning a restaurant.

Life was patient and perfect for a while: Hsing Wan ran the restaurant, Hsiao Li ran a textile sweatshop, the four kids went to school, and the Bronx was a reasonably clean and pleasant place to live.

However, the law had started to crack down on the “temporary” residents of the United States. Those who immigrated needed to have a very good reason to ask for permanent residency, and Lin couldn’t be sure that he had enough reasonable cause. He owned half the shares to the restaurant, but he didn’t spend enough time or money on it to show the government that he should be allowed to stay. He only ran the restaurant administratively; he didn’t actually spend *time* there.

One morning he wheedled into the kitchen, surprising all the workers that didn’t see him often, and sidled up to Hsing Wan at the stove, greeting him respectfully. Hsing Wan looked up slightly from the dish he was making. “<Morning. What do you want?>”

Lin didn’t waste any time. “<I’m applying for permanent American residency, and I need to say the restaurant is fully mine, so the Judge will let me stay here. I just need to borrow the shares until the case is over.>”

Hsing Wan turned to look at his partner, whose face was sincere. There was no reason for him to suspect any shady business; after all, Lin had been the one to encourage him to start a new restaurant in the first place.

“<After the hearing, you give them right back.>” He responded shortly.

Lin assured him he would, and Hsing Wan transferred the shares to Lin’s name. Hsing Wan continued to cook, his wife continued to work, and the kids continued to go to school.

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Lin's court date came and went. The day he received his permanent residency, there was a small celebration in the restaurant, where all the workers lifted their shot glasses high into the air, crying, "<Bottoms up!>"

Hsing Wan drank, and then it was back to business as usual. He waited until the end of the day to finally ask Lin about the shares.

"<Oh, that's right,>" Lin brushed him off. "<I forgot today, I'll give them to you next time!>" He patted Hsing Wan on the back and then left the restaurant.

Days turned to weeks. Hsing Wan waited, and asked, and waited, and asked again, but he was always passively dismissed: "<I'll give them back, don't worry about it.>" Hsing Wan still received his due salary for his cooking and for the long hours he clocked at the restaurant, but potentially having a deceptive partner made him uneasy; it had been long enough that Hsing Wan was starting to suspect Lin would never return the shares. Nothing substantial had changed from before to after the exchange occurred, and Lin hadn't made any major shareholder decisions. But their short, one-sided conversations showed Hsing Wan that Lin clearly did not respect him intellectually, as if being quiet made him dumber or less qualified than him to run a restaurant. Lin had probably hoped that Hsing Wan would just dismiss the ownership of the shares and work for the sake of a stable, paying job, but Hsing Wan refused to be dismissed. He waited, and asked, and waited, and asked again, only to be blown off every time.

Months later, Hsing Wan had had enough. "Ming ah," he said to his oldest daughter, "<come to the restaurant with me.>"

She was twelve years old and not completely aware of what was happening. "Why?"

He stood her outside the doors of the restaurant. "<So you can tell all the customers to go away.>" He sat inside at one of the tables, calmly smoking a cigar, stove unlit, pots untouched,

kitchen quiet as a cemetery, while Ming stood outside and shouted at anyone who came near the doors: “*We’re not open today!!! Go away!!*”

Some of the restaurant’s most busy days were on Saturday afternoons. Since Szechuanese cuisine was trending, critics and rich white people from the Cloisters would often make their way to the restaurant to try out the latest dishes. Adventurous people and families going out for lunch that weekend would head to the restaurant, eagerly anticipating the newest of the spicy foods—only to be abruptly turned away by a screaming Chinese kid blocking the doors.

The phone in the kitchen started to ring. Hsing Wan turned and calmly picked it up.

Lin’s indignant voice came on over the line. “<Old man, what are you doing?>”

Hsing Wan promptly hung up the phone, even as it started ringing again instantly. He went back to his cigar. Ming had turned away enough customers to draw Lin’s attention.

Szechuan Royal was nothing without its head chef, and Hsing Wan made sure that Lin knew it.

He finally showed up at the door of the restaurant in person and sidled up to Ming. “*Meimei ah,*” he said softly, as if talking to a baby. “<Little sister, what are you doing?>”

“We’re closed!” She responded forcefully.

Lin sighed and pushed past her into the restaurant. She followed him in.

There Hsing Wan sat. He was not an expressive or intimidating person, but his energy radiated fury.

Lin was angry, too. “<Why did you close the restaurant?>” He demanded. “<You’re driving away business!>”

“<I want my property.>” Hsing Wan replied.

“<Why do you even need it? You’re still getting your money, aren’t you?>”

“<My property.>”

Lin tried to bargain. “<I’ll give you six thousand dollars for them.>”

“<I want my property! It’s mine!>”

“<Seven thousand?>”

“<Give them back!>”

“<Eight thousand!>”

“<No!>”

“<You want more than eight thousand dollars?>” Lin yelled.

“<I want my shares!>”

“<Enough!>” Lin finally roared. “<You can have the shares; will you open the restaurant now?>” His face was red from frustration. Time was money, and the longer the restaurant stayed closed, the more profit Lin lost.

Lin might have known the value of time, but Hsing Wan knew the value of himself, and he wasn’t about to let all of that go so he could steadily work for a Snake. After all, *he* was the moneymaker behind the business. One whole day of business meant nothing to his stubborn principles. He demanded honesty.

He stood up, victorious in all his five-foot-five glory. “<I’ll sell them to you for eight thousand dollars,>” he said casually.

“<WHAT?>” Lin screamed.

“<Also I quit.>” Hsing Wan put down the remains of his tobacco roll and strolled out of the restaurant, Ming skipping along in his shadow. He did not have a pithy parting line. He was not a performer ending the stage with a bang. He could not say “good luck finding a new head chef” or “it was a pleasure doing business with you;” he did not have the vocal capacity for that.

But he had the emotional capacity. And in that moment, his simple words and actions landed with more authority than any theatrical swan song ever could.

Hsiao Li bombarded him with questions the moment he got home: “<What were you thinking? What’s wrong with you? What was the point of that? You embarrassed the restaurant! You embarrassed yourself! Don’t you care about the business? Don’t you know how much money you lost today?>”

Her spitfire Taiwanese anger would have cut any lesser man down to the bare bone of his dignity, but Hsing Wan stood his ground. “<It wasn’t about the money; I wanted my property back.>”

Hsiao Li threw up her hands in irritation. “<People will know!>” She cried. “<People are going to know that you closed the restaurant and blew off all those angry customers on your busiest day! What are you even going to do now?>”

He stayed calm.

His next restaurant baby, Sichuan Omei, would quickly become the best Sichuan place in Brooklyn.



At some point in the early 2000s, some well-meaning friends of my Aunt Patty recommended she try out a Szechuanese restaurant in Brooklyn. “It’s great!” They said, not knowing any better. “It’s probably as close as you can get to the real thing!”

This was a bold claim, but Patty and her husband Geoff had no reason to think that their friends could be wrong. “Let’s try it,” she suggested. “And hey, as long as its Szechuanese food, we might as well bring Dad, too, right?”

To this day, they don’t know why they trusted their friend’s judgment.

The restaurant looked “okay.” It was nice and of a moderate size, big enough to seat about seventy people but casual enough not to flaunt waiters in suits and matching red bow ties. The dining area was encouragingly half full of customers who seemed to be enjoying their food, pleasantly chattering, clinking their glasses, and clicking their chopsticks. Grandpa was probably overdressed in his usual Italian suit and hat, but he sat with Patty and Geoff and ordered his favorite dish for the table: double-cooked pork with peppers and peanuts.

Patty knew from the first bite that they had made a mistake. The pork was overcooked and dry, cracking like untreated leather against her teeth. The sauce was spicy, but not the right kind of spicy; instead of a featuring a deep, earthy spice that enhanced the flavor of the pork, the sauce just burned like fire on the tongue. Oil separated from the surface of the dish, congealing into small amber blobs that clung to the skin of the peppers. Having eaten her father’s cuisine before, Patty knew that this food was not up to par. It was unbelievable that anyone could call this restaurant good, much less recommend it to anyone else.

It was all downhill from there. Aunt Patty reported that “the more he ate, the more upset he got. He was so disgusted, he was *so disgusted*, that he just had to make a scene.”

Patty and Geoff jumped once he started banging his fists on the table. “<Tell the chef to come out here!>” He barked at the restaurant manager, who bobbed his head up and down frantically before rushing into the kitchen.

Patty picked up her father’s napkin from where he’d thrown it on the ground. “Whoa, dad, <are you alright?>” She cast her eyes from side to side; some of the nearby tables were staring. Geoff shifted awkwardly in his seat.

“<Not alright!>” Grandpa continued to slam his hands on the table as the restaurant’s head chef came speed-walking into the dining area. “<You! What kind of garbage are you

cooking up?>” Grandpa snarled at the chef, poking at the dish with his chopsticks. “<You should not be cooking here or anywhere! What are your credentials?>”

The chatter around the dining area stopped. Glasses clinked awkwardly as Patty stood up and pushed her chair in. “<It’s fine, dad, let’s just go, we won’t come back.>”

The head chef was young and looked fresh out of culinary school, cooking what he sold as Szechuanese food without having received any authentic Szechuanese training. He nodded and bobbed his head like a chicken, casting panicked looks at Patty as if begging her to help him. A lady at a nearby table muttered under her breath. “What’s wrong with that old man?”

“<You give Szechuanese food a bad name!>” Grandpa screamed as Patty and Geoff collected the rest of their things. “<How dare you market this as authentic? You lie! You lying cheat!>”

At this statement, the other customers stirred in their chairs, as if only now starting to see the flaws and foul imperfections in their own dishes. The restaurant manager grinned uneasily, as if to say, *what’s up with the crazy old man, right?* But the damage was done, and the restless, awkward side murmurs grew louder.

Geoff ushered him out of the restaurant, still yelling. “<Don’t cook here! Don’t cook anywhere!> *Ni wangbadan*, <you bastard! You son of a bitch!> Fuck!”

The drive home was long and mostly quiet. Everyone in the car was still hungry, but Grandpa’s fuming left no room for questions. “So,” Geoff finally said, “I guess next time we should *make sure* that the restaurants are good before we bring Dad.”

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“At the time, it was pretty embarrassing, and awkward.” I could hear Aunt Patty’s smile in her voice. “But now, looking back, it was pretty hilarious.”

“It was just that important for the chef to know how bad the food was, huh? I wonder if that place is still open,” I laughed. My youngest aunt understood best how children could be embarrassed by their parents.

“He never had inhibitions,” Aunt Patty mused, turning her coffee cup in her hand. “You couldn’t hold him back from doing or saying what he thought was right, even if it meant embarrassing himself and me in front of a whole restaurant.”

And a good thing, too, I thought as I wished Aunt Patty good night and headed home on the train. I caught my own eyes in the subway window and smiled at my reflection; my life and my whole world would be very different if Grandpa hadn’t chosen to stand for what he knew was right.

Chapter 4: ~~Choosing Principle~~ Choosing God

Religion had never done anything for Hsing Wan. As a child, he was raised Buddhist, but he had never understood the philosophies enough to bother believing in them, and Buddha had never helped or given him any reason to believe in Nirvana. He'd gone through life with faith only in himself and his abilities. Hsing Wan was a self-made man, and there was no room for religion in his life. He would have been happy to live out his whole life this way.

The only obstacle to Hsing Wan's version of Happily Ever After was Hsiao Li, who went to church faithfully and insisted on bringing the children.

Hsing Wan and Hsiao Li clashed over Sundays for years. “<They should be working at the restaurant!>” Hsing Wan would yell. His newest restaurant, Sichuan Omei, was running pretty smoothly, but he always could use the extra helping hands from his kids.

“<They have to go to church!>” Hsiao Li would scream. “<They have to learn virtues and morals and reading!>” She waved her red wool slipper threateningly in the air.

“<They already do that at school!>” Hsing Wan yelled back. Foaming spit collected at the corners of his mouth.

Hsing Wan knew, or thought he knew, exactly what would happen if his children grew up religious. He saw the monks on the streets outside the restaurant begging for money just to live. They would pace the streets in their bright, saffron-colored robes, drawing attention and money from potential customers, a nuisance that no one ever had the courage to badmouth or say anything rude about because they were religious. There was no way his precious children were growing up to be beggars hiding behind the face of religion!

Unbeknownst to Hsing Wan, while he was too busy arguing with his wife over whether or not the children should go to church, the children were sneaking out the back door and going to church, pockets heavy with quarters for the communion plate.



He may not have believed in God, but he still had morals, a strong conscience, a good sense of justice, and a compassionate heart; these things just manifested in his religion-less actions. His love showed in his care for his wife, his children, and his grandchildren. He had chosen work and principles all his life for the sake of taking care of those he loved. There was nothing he wouldn't do for his family, and he received the same from them.

His care for his family showed even through his vices, where he found ways to bond with the grandkids through his smoking. Grandpa smoked almost every single day for seventy years. In Brooklyn, New York, the air was so polluted that it almost didn't matter that he smoked all the time. All the residents of New York were so used to smoke that Grandpa and my cousin Daniel made a game out of it: Grandpa would blow a big cloud of smoke in the house, and five-year-old Daniel would try to whack and disperse it with a whiffle ball bat. Grandpa had a good collection of pipes, and he took his daily smokes seriously.

My older brother Emmet, unlike cousin Daniel, grew up in suburban Boston and never experienced the smell of smoke in all his three years of life. Upon seeing Grandpa, he took one whiff of Grandpa's daily-smoker breath and exclaimed loudly:

“<Grandpa, you stink! You smell bad! What's that smell? It's bad!>”

Grandpa did not have to take this comment to heart. He could have let it slide off his back and carry on smoking the way he did. He didn't have to listen to this snot-nosed little toddler and he definitely did not have to give up smoking for him.

But he did.

My mom was sitting in the living room when Grandpa walked up to her, waving his drawstring bag of tobacco. “<Hilary,>” he called. “<This is my last bag of tobacco.>”

She stood up. “<Do you want me to go buy you some more?>”

“<No, no, no.>” Grandpa shook his head. “<This is my *last bag of tobacco*.>”

He quit smoking cold turkey overnight after over seventy years of constant smoking. He expressed love through his decisions. He gave up smoking for a grandchild that he only saw a few times a year.

Even before he had Christ in his life, he chose to prioritize family and love over himself. He must have been the closest to “godly” that a non-Christian Chinese immigrant from the Szechuanese Buddhist mountains could have been.

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In 1990, Andy was a successful immigration lawyer, the pride and joy of his mother and father. Hsiao Li was over the moon, all the time, humble-bragging about all the work that her son had to do all the time, so much work that he didn’t have time to find a nice girl and settle down.

When Andy came home one day that year, she was over the moon as usual. “<My son, my son, my son is here! My son the lawyer, my son that works so hard, he is here!>” She was all sweetness as he followed her into the living room. “<How have you been? We’ve been great! The other day the laundry machine was making a weird sound, and I thought I’d have to call you to fix it, but it just turns out that your dad left some change in his pocket and it was rattling around. Have you been eating enough?>” They sat in the living room around the coffee table. Hsing Wan nodded briefly in greeting to his son, who nodded back. “<Or maybe, are you eating too much? You look bigger than usual, you must be getting fat. You probably get it from my side

of the family. That's why you're bald, ha! Runs in the family.>” She paused. “<So, how are you doing?>”

Andy took a deep breath. “<I don't want to be a lawyer anymore.>”

Hsiao Li's eyes popped out of her head. Hsing Wan stood up from his recliner. “<Say that again.>”

“<I think God is calling me to ministry. I already applied to Gordon Conwell, and I'm going.>”

Hsiao Li sat stunned for a moment, but quickly shook herself out of it, back into her old spicy self.

“<You're going into ministry?>” She asked, incredulous. “<Who's going to listen to you fart?>” She pressed, scoffing, laughing, angry. “<We spent all that money for you to go to law school! We spent all that money for you to go into law and be a lawyer, and now you just want to throw it all away?>”

I don't know what was said after that. I think that my father suppressed some of that night. I know that he knelt on the floor, shins pressed against the carpet, spine straight as a board, hands on his thighs, staring down at the floor while his parents circled him, shouting, yelling, demanding answers without giving him the opportunity to speak.

I know that the night ended with Hsing Wan screaming as he left the room.

“*Ni bai yang!*” You were raised for nothing.

“*Ni bai du!*” You went to school for nothing.

“*Ni bai chi!*” You are good for nothing.

It was one thing for religion to take away his family every Sunday. It was another thing for his son to throw away all the support he'd ever received and the life he had as a result in pursuit of this stupid religion. Good sons didn't do that to their parents. Not even for religion.



Hsing Wan and Andy's relationship was rocky for years after that, but Hsing Wan had to admit that he only had one son and only one opportunity for the Tso family legacy to live forever. He dealt with the fact that Andy wasn't a lawyer; sometimes, if he didn't think about it all, he could just forget it happened.

When Andy brought home a special lady friend a couple of years later, Hsing Wan was skeptical. This lady, Hilary, wasn't necessarily the kind of girl he'd ever envisioned his son marrying. She was older than him, and not very easy on the eyes; at least, not by Hsiao Li's standards. She had big untamable hair and gigantic glasses that covered almost half her face in lens—but she was also a tenured professor with a PhD from Cornell, so Hsiao Li gave her stamp of approval.

Hsing Wan remained skeptical. She had a *PhD* and she was *tenured*; why was she willing to marry an idiot like Andy, who was throwing away his juris doctorate to be a cult leader? He watched and listened to this homely woman move and speak with Andy's sisters. Her speech was patient, gracious, and smooth without the abrupt spit-fire Taiwanese bumpkin accent; he couldn't understand everything she said, but he could see from the way she interacted with everyone that she was humble and respectful. He could also see that Andy looked at her as if she knew all the answers to the mysteries of the universe.

He had been quiet for most of the night, so it was a surprise when he asked her. “<Hilary, what do you see in him?>”

She answered simply. “<I don’t know.>”

Hsing Wan knit his eyebrows together. “<What?>”

Hilary was unfazed by his confusion. “<The pieces of my life fell into place, one after another, and I knew that God was telling me I was supposed to be with him. There was no doubt about it.>”

This was the beginning of Hsing Wan’s understanding that there was a higher force at play in his life. Hilary was just so overwhelmingly out of Andy’s league that there was no way she would have fallen for him without some kind of mystical interference.

Hsing Wan stopped resisting, and he gave them his blessing—the woman had a *PhD*. He had no other objections.



For decades, Hsing Wan was not sold on the church, or the fact that Hsiao Li kept giving money to the church, or taking the kids and eventual grandkids away from work to go to church, or using up time and resources to cook lunch for the church, but he was happy to go along when the Brooklyn Chinese Christian Church offered its members an all-expense-paid trip to Israel—not because he cared about the Bible stories behind the tours, the history of Jesus’ walk, or even the community of Christians that he went with, but just because he liked traveling.

One of the last stops on their Israel trip was the Jordan River, where all the famous people of the Bible were baptized. They stood at the bank that morning, and Grandma jabbered. “<Wow, this is so beautiful! Look at that! So refreshing! So much history! Jesus was baptized here!>”

Grandpa looked out over the unremarkable water, probably feeling like General Naaman when he had leprosy. The Jordan underwhelmed many who saw it; it was small for a river,

muddy, and kind of greenish-brown, with some landlines in it that kind of ruined the scenery. Grandpa didn't know or understand the rich history of the Jordan, but he listened, stoic and silent, as Grandma spoke and watched as the younger tourists splashed around in the shore.

Something stirred in Grandpa's heart as he stood there on the bank of the Jordan.

He must have thought about his family. He thought about how much he cared for them. He thought about all that he had sacrificed for their sake, and how he had done all that he could for them.

Then he thought about Andy, his precious son, who was doing fine on his own, who was taken care of by a higher power that loved him enough to give him a brilliant wife and four truly wonderful kids. Nothing in Hsing Wan's own power could have given his son this kind of future.

There had to be something more.

"<Hsiao Li,>" he said. "<I want to get baptized.>"

Grandma's eyes popped out of her head. "<What?>"

Grandpa took off his hat. "<I want to get baptized.>"

"<Are you joking?>" Grandma looked around. "<Here? Now? Why? Are you messing with me?>"

"<No.>" He looked around. "<Who do I talk to? I want to get baptized.>"

"<I mean...> Okay?" Grandma was confused. "<Do you even know what it means to get baptized? Do you know what you're doing, or what you believe in?>"

"<I don't know,>" Grandpa said casually. "<But I want to be a part of it.>"

They found out that people were baptized in the Jordan all the time, hence the landlines. Grandpa was given a white robe and baptized in the Jordan within the hour.

He shocked his wife, he shocked the church, and he must have shocked himself. He was not an impulsive person. But in that moment, he chose God over his own pride and principle.

The first time I saw the one surviving photo from that day, I was underwhelmed. The Jordan River was even less awe-inducing in a grainy, underexposed picture from a disposable camera. The landlines that marked off the baptismal area were dirty white and stained by the water, vaguely reminiscent of half-smoked cigarettes, and the white plastic chains that connected them were rusted and crusty. The water itself didn't look as nasty as Naaman thought it was in my picture Bible, but it definitely wasn't the clear tropical teal I expected from the Photo-shopped images on social media. It wasn't special. It wasn't magical. It looked just a little bit dirtier than seaweed soup.

But Grandpa's face was calm and peaceful. His eyes were closed as he stood in the water, flanked by two people I didn't recognize. His white robe was still dry, meaning he hadn't gone under the water yet, but he looked certain. He looked ready. He looked like he knew what he was doing—which, of course, he did.

The waters of the river rose in waves against his robe, tilting the landlines and the plastic poles, but he stood straight and strong, pressing against the current the way he always did before yielding to the flow and going under.

CHAPTER 5: Choosing Me

“<Grandpa likes you the most.>” Grandma said all the time. For years, it would be the first thing she’d say to me every time I saw her. “<He loved you when you were a baby. We always remember when you were little, and you tried to cover him up with your little baby blanket. Of course he didn’t fit, so you’d just walk around him and pull on the corners and pull on the corners and pull on the corners.>” She mimed the tugging action. “<You were so cute! So precious! So precious that you have his big eyes, with the epicanthic pair folds.>”

I remembered looking over at Grandpa, who nodded and smiled as much as he usually did, and I could feel his happiness with me. I couldn’t remember being the baby from the story, but I could remember my fuzzy beige baby blanket with the pink and green house on it. When I smiled at Grandpa, he stretched his lips back at me.

I had heard a million times in my six years of age about how my eyes looked exactly like Grandpa’s. The majority of Chinese people have mono-lids, or eyelids without creases, but Grandpa had been blessed with the enviable eyelid crease and genetically passed it down to me. All the rest of my family, including cousins and some cousins of cousins, had small and classically Asian eyes. According to my older cousin Angela, “Der and Grandpa have eyes that the rest of us have to get surgery for:” big, expressive, and the exact color of dark buckwheat honey. I was proud to be unique among my thirteen cousins, but I did *not* like having my eyes be a constant reminder to my Grandma about how full of potential I was—as if having my Grandpa’s eyes made me more capable of success than my siblings and cousins.

He should have chosen to love my brothers more than he loved me. It would have been more patriarchal-Chinese culturally correct, or even just generally better. Boys were stronger, faster, smarter, and able to carry on the family name. Emmet was four years older than me,

athletic, smart, and charismatic; Jeddi, even though he was younger, was smart, sweet, and calm. Beyond their ability to keep their last names, they both ate all food, all the time, fulfilling the one requirement of most caring Chinese parents.

I am a daughter, and not even the older, smarter, prettier one. I was an unremarkable kid that just had a lot of energy, a loud voice, and epicanthic eyelids. I should not have been the favorite.

There was no culturally logical reason for him to choose me—but I think he knew before anyone else that I had inherited more than his eye shape. I had his compassion, his persistent care, and his love. The only difference was that I was able and unafraid to express it. Grandpa chose me basically because I, as an unknowing toddler with a blanket, had showed him that I chose him first.



Grandpa made the best Szechuanese food in the state, even after he retired. He cooked for his grandkids just about every single day that they were with him and went out of his way to make their favorite food, ramen, drastically increasing the quality of the meal while he cooked it. He would boil a whole chicken in water for days, standing over the pot for hours skimming off impurities to make a beautifully clear chicken consommé, lay down fresh curly noodles that glistened like pearls, and slice vegetables and fish cakes to lay on top; the end result was ramen, but undeniably, deliciously gourmet. Any normal, hungry person would have been honored to eat a bowl of Grandpa's ramen for lunch, steaming hot with a dollop of homemade hot sauce and a few leaves of cilantro on top.

Unfortunately for seven-year old me and my family, I was a very picky kid that didn't know what treasure I was turning my nose up at. There was something about fried dollar ramen,

with its oily MSG-laden goodness, that appealed to me more than the deliciousness in front of me every time.

I poked at the noodles while my siblings slurped their soup and chewed obnoxiously loud. I stabbed my chopsticks into the noodles, twirled them up, slipped them off in a bundle, twirled them up again, and tried to get them to wind around the sticks in a perfect coil. The noodles got fatter and softer as they cooled and absorbed the soup.

My brothers and sisters lifted their blue-and-white porcelain bowls to their faces, using their wide flat-bottomed Chinese spoons to scoop out the rest of the bits of noodles and meat, while I used my chopsticks to stab a hole in the fishcakes.

“<Der, eat your noodles,>” my mom said in her quiet-but-angry voice “YeYe spent a lot of time making them.”

I made a face, picked up a few noodles in my chopsticks, and put them in my mouth.

The noodles melted in my mouth, releasing the spicy-sour soup onto my tongue; even lukewarm, it was flavorful and warming—but it wasn’t what I wanted to eat, so I refused to eat it.

My siblings finished their second helpings of noodle soup and rose from the table, speaking their thanks before plopping down in front of the television set to watch our favorite Chinese drama with Grandpa.

I sat at the table alone and picked at the placemat under my bowl; it was made of cardboard and covered in shiny paper with little blue flowers on it. Part of the paper was starting to lift like the label on a water bottle, revealing the brown cardboard under it.

I peeked over my shoulder at the television screen; my favorite character in the drama, Shuang Shuang, was saying something in Mandarin that I kind of understood.

Grandpa, sitting in his brown leather recliner, glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. I quickly whipped back around to face my bowl.

Dad finished his third or fourth helping and cleared his own bowl away before shooting his patented Dad's-mad-stink-eye at me. "Der, eat the noodles!"

English meant business. I sighed, as if eating delicious noodles was the most difficult action in the world, and dramatically choked down the cold slop I had created from one of the most delicious dishes in the state. I stood, muttering my thanks to Grandpa without checking to make sure that he'd heard me, brought my bowl to the sink, and sat down in my usual spot on the couch next to the recliner.

The television played some loud Chinese commercial. Grandpa turned to face me again. "<What do you *want* to eat?>" he asked me. He sounded grumpy.

My face got hot. "<I dunno.>" I was more aware than usual of how American I sounded. "<I don't like it when things are too spicy. Or vegetables.>"

"<You have to eat vegetables,>" my mom called from the table.

Grandpa blinked behind his black framed glasses. "O-kay." He turned back to the television, where a loud Chinese model was promoting Chinese probiotics.

I stared, sulking, at this sculpture of an old Chinese fisherman that sat on top of the television console; he was a hungry-looking fellow, hunched impatiently over his fishing rod waiting for his dinner to bite. I stuck my tongue out at him, knowing I'd have to go through the same process of forcing myself through a meal all over again later for dinner. The fisherman and I stared off until the show came back on the television.

I didn't notice when Grandpa got up from his recliner a couple of hours later to start cooking.

When mom called my siblings and me for dinner that evening, I dragged my feet. From the moment I climbed up onto my chair, I could already feel my butt getting numb from sitting for too long.

The dining table was set with our typical bowls of white rice, and Grandpa's dishes were spread in the center. I squinted at them suspiciously, but they looked surprisingly tame. There was one shiny dish of thick slices of beef and green peppers in sauce that looked like the same stuff my mom made, and there was one big dish of chopped bok choy.

None of it looked like I would hate it. We prayed, and as usual, my siblings dove headfirst into their bowls while I picked out one slice of beef and chewed it gingerly.

It was good; spicy but not burning, tangy with the flavor and smell of oranges with just a little bit of sweetness from the bell peppers, chewy but not overcooked, and perfectly offset by rice.

My mom heaped a scoop of the bok choy onto my rice bowl. "You need to eat your vegetables!"

I pouted, but I ate the vegetables, which were not bad, cooked to a steaming crunch that went well with the tender orange beef.

I had two helpings that night, almost keeping up with my siblings and getting my bowl to the sink just after they finished. It was the first time in a long while that I was really full.

I never thanked Grandpa for cooking specifically for me that night, or any night that he adjusted his dishes to my taste, simply because I wasn't bright enough at the time to see that he'd made changes for me. He didn't have to cater to me. He could have just let my parents continue to force feed me and carry on cooking the way he did. He didn't have to change the fundamentals of cooking for me, especially when my pickiness went against his culinary training

and knowledge, but he chose to anyway—because he loved me. He never said that he did, but I never doubted that he did.



The family remembers Grandpa for being strong. My oldest cousin Angela called him a man of steel. “He used to flex his chest and abs and tell us to punch him in the stomach,” she told me from the floor of the living room, long after Grandpa was past the point of being able to take such a hit. “We would hit him, and it wouldn’t even faze him.”

I was never allowed to hit anyone, much less the patriarch of the whole family, so I didn’t get to see his strength for myself until I was six or seven. I had been plodding down the hallway when I heard a vigorous slapping sound. There was no accompanying shrieking or any contextualizing sound at all; just loud, ominous, almost echoing *WAP WAP WAP*.

I stopped at the kitchen doorway just in time to see Grandpa hanging a gigantic, aggressively wiggling, live shimmering fish on a hook above the sink while another gigantic fish flopped wildly in the sink. The fishes were about as long as I was, at least three feet and a few inches long, but to my little eyes they seemed as big as sharks, especially with their rows of pointy teeth baring and biting. Drops of briny water and bits of fish scale glinted in the air as the fish’s wide body whipped the deep stainless-steel sink. The metal resonated like a gong with the power of the fish, clanging ominously—and yet, above it all, there was my Grandpa, *eighty-seven years old*, wrestling fish half his size without so much as breaking a sweat. He took up the fish in the sink and slammed its head against the counter in one swift motion, effectively ending its life and simultaneously impressing the image of Chinese Grandpa Superman into my mind forever.

I was impressed, sure; but at the same time, I was scared. If I was going to have to be just like Grandpa, I didn't want to have to try to be strong. I didn't want to be the Sun god. I didn't want to wrestle sharks, much less kill them by beating them on the countertop. I didn't want to have to be as physically strong as he was or have to make the same emotionally difficult decisions that he did. I didn't ask to have his eyes, and I certainly didn't ask him to choose to love me as much as he did.

The older I got, the better I understood the expectations that had been placed on me. Those expectations went beyond having the strength and agility to wrestle a fish in the kitchen—which, at fourteen years old, I was reasonably sure that I could do; the expectations evolved to become more academic.

My mom had a PhD and was a tenured professor at twenty-seven years old, my dad graduated college at nineteen and became a successful lawyer not long after, and my grandpa was legendary golden chef Hsing Wan Tso, the foundation of our gigantic family! It was on me to achieve as many of those same things as I could. From the moment I started even looking at colleges, my Grandma was out and about, telling anyone who would listen that “<my granddaughter is going to be a doctor! She's graduating high school, and she's only fourteen!>”

It was nice to hear my Grandma praise me for having prettier eyes than all my cousins, but the implication of “you're going to be a doctor!” became heavier the more I learned about exactly who had expectations for me. Grandpa's silent agreement throughout this time and my inability to understand how much he loved me were just confusing.



“Der, did you invite Grandma and Grandpa to your graduation?” My older brother Emmet asked me from his study spot at the dinner table.

“Yeah,” I answered. “Grandpa’s not going to come. He’s probably not feeling well.”

“Did you talk to him?”

“No.” I clipped the graduation tickets to a magnet on the refrigerator. “Would he understand me if I did?”

“He probably understands more than you think. You should at least tell him that you’re graduating, and you wish he could go.” Emmet’s voice was serious. He was almost never serious.

Where Grandpa’s leather recliner used to be, a hospital bed spread halfway across the room. His eyes were closed, and it was impossible to ignore the tube that wrapped across his face into his nose, but his hands were steady, and his mouth was shut in quiet dignity. In sickness and age, he still held himself like a king—a small, five-foot-four king, but a king nonetheless.

I stepped up to the bed and touched his hand lightly. It felt like a cool, slightly overripe peach. His eyelids twitched but didn’t open.

“<Hi, Grandpa,>” I said softly. My Chinese had improved over the last years.

He didn’t move. The stream of oxygen made a weirdly soothing hissing sound through the tubes that filled the room. It was strange to be in the house now. I always remembered it with his recliner. I always remembered it with the television blaring as Grandma counted cards on the couch. I didn’t like thinking that the clinking kitchen sounds were now coming from Grandma instead of Grandpa, lying so still in sleep in front of me.

It felt wrong to speak and break the ghostly hissing sound. He couldn’t hear me anyway.

So I didn’t speak. I held Grandpa’s hand and thought as hard and intentionally as I could, wishing that he’d hear me somehow: *I’m graduating tomorrow, YeYe, and I’m going to college.*

I'm going to be a doctor, and you're going to be happy. You're going to be proud. I wish you could be there.

He breathed in and out. His white Henley smelled like tiger balm and alcohol.

Grandma walked into the living room holding a porcelain bowl. “Der, <do you want to eat?>” She asked.

I let Grandpa’s hand go. “Okay.”

Grandma had made me his classic noodle soup, but something was different. I couldn’t put my finger on exactly what was different, but the noodles were a little flatter and curlier and the soup was less clarified. It probably had all the same ingredients, but the fish-balls had a weird aftertaste and the meat was prepared a little differently. Maybe my taste buds had matured since I was seven—but the reality was that Grandpa’s perfectly cooked gourmet ramen had gone with him, I had never appreciated it, and I would never be able to have it again.

That year, I studied harder for Biology and Chemistry than I ever had before, hating it almost the entire time, knowing that my life would be easier if Grandpa would have just chosen to love one of my brothers. I had made a promise to meet my Grandparents’ standards. Grandpa had chosen me, and I was going to do my best.



Over the summer of 2019, my best friend Sherry invited me to a Szechuanese place for lunch. She looked down at the menu and started circling dishes. “I *love* the bok choy here,” she gushed. “It’s the best I’ve had yet.”

My eyes scanned over the list of classic Szechaun dishes. I’d never been to this restaurant before, and true to my picky nature, I didn’t see anything that stood out to me.

“Do you see anything you want?” Sherry asked me. My eye skipped over the basic dishes and landed on “Orange Beef.”

“Have you ever had Orange Beef?” I asked her.

“No,” she responded. “It looks spicy.”

“Let’s try it.”

Sherry circled the dish on the menu and handed it to the waiter. “Why Orange Beef?”

I shrugged. “My Grandpa invented that dish. You probably don’t remember him, but he was a really famous chef when he was around. If you Google him, it’ll pop up that he created it.” It was sad, I thought. I’d known forever that Grandpa had been the chef that created Orange Beef, but I had never tried it.

The Orange Beef was covered in red sauce so dark it was almost black. Sherry picked up a piece and squinted at it. “It looks *really* spicy.”

I laughed. I wasn’t at all surprised. “Szechuanese food is supposed to be spicy. It’s really not Szechuanese food if it’s *not* spicy.” I poked around the dish, trying to identify all the ingredients. I could see the generous beef slices, chunks of pepper, thin slices of onion, and small yellow chunks of orange. I finally picked up a piece of beef and a chunk of pepper, dabbed the excess sauce onto my rice bowl, and ate it.

The flavors blended in my mouth, tangy and citrusy and sweet and weirdly nostalgic all at once. It really was spicy—not burning, but enough to send me diving into my glass of water. “Okay, you were right, it’s pretty spicy.” I exhaled fire through my lips, but I helped myself to a few more bites. “I think I’ve had it before. I just can’t place it.”

Sherry tried a piece. “It’s good; just really spicy. I like the orange.” She ate another piece. “Maybe he cooked it for you when you were a kid.”

“No.” I was sure. “I would have remembered something this spicy.”

Sherry lifted off some pieces of bok choy and laid them on top of my rice. “You need to eat your vegetables.”

I choked. “Oh my god, I’ve had it before!”

The memory of my Grandpa asking me what I liked to eat came rushing back. He had made me this dish—*his signature creation*—and intentionally de-cultured it for *me*.

Sherry cocked her head. “Was it this spicy? I feel like this is not safe for a kid.”

“No.” I dropped my head sideways onto the table. “He, like, de-spiced it for me so I could eat it. I didn’t like eating spicy stuff, so he made sure to make food that I wanted to eat.”

“Awwwwh.” She ate another piece of the beef. “That’s so sweet.”

“Yeah.” I smiled. “That is sweet.”

Chapter 6: Choosing Life

I was lying upside-down on the couch in my living room the first time I remembered that Grandpa was capable of dying. While other grandparents and old people trickled in and out of the hospitals, complaining about their age-relevant diseases to their personal home-aid helpers, *my* Grandpa remained invincible. He never gave even a hint of faltering or asking for assistance with anything; honestly, I forgot he even aged at all.

Everyone in the family took his seeming immortality for granted. We tried to take care of Grandpa, of course, but his favorite thing to do was take care of us. We never had to cook for him, clean up much for him, or even press the button to summon the elevator for him; he always cooked for us, tidied up the whole house before we could blink, and took the stairs up until he turned ninety-three years old. Sometimes Aunt Ming, Aunt Patty, or my dad would drive him places he wanted to go, but that was about the extent that Grandpa allowed anyone to actually take care of him.

I was flat on my back on the couch, head hanging off the edge and legs draped over the pillow-back, wishing that I wouldn't have to think about life after high school, while my dad was having a life-changing conversation with my mom in the kitchen, fifteen feet away from me. "I think something's wrong with Dad," he said to her as she stood over the sink.

I heard her turn the tap off and pull a towel off the rack. "Why? What happened?"

"He hasn't been talking that much, and he just looks really zoned out all the time."

"He never talks that much."

"Okay, but he never looks zoned out like that."

"What are you going to do?"

His voice lowered, but I heard pieces. “Doctor Li. See what she says. Prepared for the worst-case scenario. Go now.”

I swung my legs off the side of the couch, rotating and sitting up as straight as I could. A cold tremor of dread prickled at my neck, and I strained my ears. Grandpa didn’t get sick. Grandpa didn’t get old like everyone else. In my mind, there was no such thing as a “worst-case scenario.” Even if he did get sick, he could just will himself better, right?

My dad walked past me, swung his keys up into his hand, and left the house without a word. I tried to go about the rest of my day with the tension building in my spine.



When my dad came home from taking Grandpa to the doctor, he didn’t seem affected at all. He came through the door whistling through his teeth, went to the kitchen, and started experimenting with different ways to roast brussel sprouts. He was still whistling a couple hours later when he served the sprouts for dinner with chicken and golden potatoes. “I tried baking them in the oven instead of on the stove this time,” he said.

I sat at the dinner table and stared at the back of his head. I couldn’t tell if he was in denial and manifesting his joy through the brussel sprouts or genuinely happy because he’d received good news from the doctor about Grandpa. Most people didn’t get this excited over brussel sprouts.

“The special ingredient is the olive oil,” he said, holding the tray with a balled-up dish towel. “Garlic and olive oil.”

Chinese cooks never used olive oil.

That one little detail pushed me over. “Dad, how was Grandpa’s doctor’s appointment?” I asked with no preamble. “Is he okay?”

My question triggered a domino effect with my siblings. “Grandpa had a doctor’s appointment?” Emmet demanded.

“What happened to Grandpa?” Jeddi asked.

“Is that where you went today?” Artesia, who always sat with one foot up on the chair, sat up straight.

My dad didn’t even blink. “Everything’s okay. Doc says that Grandpa’s just getting older.” He sat down at the table. “And even if he wasn’t okay, we’re prepared for it. This is what we’re here for. This is why we came back to Brooklyn; we are ready for anything to happen.”

The tension left my body like a deep exhale for a breath I didn’t know I was holding. Of *course*, Grandpa was going to be fine. He was probably incapable of being anything less than fine.

Dad ground some pepper over the tops of the potatoes. “Grandpa always told us when we were kids that we shouldn’t make a big deal about him dying. He told us if we did, there’d be ‘<no food for us in heaven.>’” He put down the pepper mill and crooked his fingers in air quotes. “But I don’t know if he’ll have a choice at this point. He’s getting old.”

Artesia sighed and helped herself to the sprouts. “Dad’s being dramatic again.”

“Don’t worry, Dad,” Emmet said. All the stress of the moment had already melted away from him, and he mushed all the food on his plate into one homogenous pile. “Grandpa’s gonna go out his own way.”



For a long time, it didn’t look like Grandpa was going to go out the way he wanted to. He stopped being able to make his own decisions for a while. He had minor strokes, and his memory started to go.

Grandma had always played a game with the grandkids, pointing us out and asking Grandpa, “<Who is this? Do you know who this is?>”

Usually he could answer pretty well. There were eighteen grandkids and he didn’t speak enough of any language to learn our names perfectly, but he remembered all of his own children, and remembered all of the grandkids’ faces. “<Who’s this?>” Grandma would ask, pointing at me.

“*Laosan*,” Grandpa would respond: Tso kid number three.

At some point, he started forgetting the grandkids that he didn’t see often enough, but no one thought the less of him for it. Sometimes *I* didn’t even remember all the names of all my cousins.

His memory didn’t seem to be a problem until we went to their house one day to visit and Grandma pointed playfully to my dad. “<Hsing Wan, who’s this?>”

Grandpa looked at his son and blinked. “<I don’t know.>”

The room fell silent and still.

Panic flickered across my dad’s face; Grandpa might have been a joker, but he would never joke about forgetting the face of his son.

Grandma grabbed his wrist and shook it. “<Stop messing around! This is Andy, your son!>”

“Oh.” Grandpa nodded. “<Andy.>” He blinked again, and he looked around as if just realizing where he was. He nodded again and shuffled out of the living room. His slippers dragged on the hardwood.

My dad’s shoulders relaxed, just a little bit. He wouldn’t be fully relaxed again for a long time. “We’re ready for anything,” he said quietly.



My dad, an ordained pastor of over ten years, stood on the stage, delivering the Chinese sermon to the morning congregation. Grandpa sat in his usual seat in the second row from the front, Grandma on his right and Aunt Ming on his left, wearing his usual Italian suit and hat. Aunt Ming had her attention almost fully devoted to the sermon; once he finished, she'd have to get on there to sing the last worship song, and then they could go about the rest of the day planning church events and choir practice and women's Bible study and—

Suddenly Grandpa stood up. His face was crumpled and unnaturally red. His breath came in short huffs of panic, and he groped the air for his cane.

“<Dad, what's wrong?>” Aunt Ming whispered to him. He ignored her and brushed her hand aside, clutching the back of the pew. “<Dad!>”

The smell of urine filled her nostrils. She looked up just in time to see his eyes roll up before he collapsed against her, knocking over his cane and crashing his arm against the pew.

The world blurred. Someone called 911. The ambient sirens of New York City grew closer. The congregation was an endless stream of high-pitched, frantic, distractingly frustratingly loud Mandarin, Cantonese, and Fuzhounese, yelling over each other and taking up all the oxygen. “<What happened? What's happening? Did Grandpa Tso fall? Oh my god!>”

My dad grabbed the microphone from someone and started singing: “<Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me...>”

The confused congregation settled quickly, like prairie dogs after a fire. The awful din of mixed Chinese died down as they sang along. “<I once was lost but now am found; was blind, but now I see.>”

Aunt Ming exhaled. Grandpa's pulse was still strong, even if maybe his leg muscles weren't. By the time the FDNY ambulance came, he was conscious and angry.

Grandpa did not speak during the entire ride. He sat in his own filth in the ambulance, holding Aunt Ming's hand, face still crumpled in embarrassment and irritation. He did not speak when they arrived at the hospital. He did not speak when the nurses cut his ruined suit off of him and cleaned him up. He stayed in stony, resentful silence until Aunt Ming returned to his side later.

"<Are you okay?>" she asked. "<Are you comfortable?>"

"<Comfortable.>" He answered curtly. "<Go home?>"

Aunt Ming shook her head. "<We can't.>"

He did not speak again. He begrudgingly stayed in the hospital until the doctor discharged him the next day.

Not long after that, his legs gave out. His big brown recliner was replaced by an angle-adjustable hospital bed. He did not speak again, and he did not walk again. Grandma, Aunt Ming, my dad, Aunt Patty, or any one of the older cousins stayed by his side, spoon-feeding him, bringing him from his bed to the sofa to the bath, and eventually, changing his diapers. Each time I saw him after that, he acknowledged me with nothing more than a nod.

For a while, it looked like his time for choosing was over.



A few months later, Grandpa was in hospice. He couldn't swallow, cough, or breathe deeply without help. He was put on a steady stream of opioids that were meant to give him a painless, foggy, cloudy, and frustratingly semiconscious death.

My dad sat at his side in the hospice wing, watching his father lose the fight to stay awake. The room was dimly lit from the fluorescent hallway lights and the lamp in the corner of the room, both of which only served to highlight the unflattering mustard yellow color of the walls and cast creepy warped shadows on the floor tiles. The oxygen tubes hissed for attention in Grandpa's nose, and my dad was useless and frustrated. This was not how it was supposed to happen. Grandpa wasn't supposed to die alone in an ugly room, fighting the effect of drugs and age on an addled brain. It was mental torture for both of them.

Hospice patients aren't supposed to be fed. They're supposed to just take the painkillers and live out the short rest of their lives before ultimately starving to death. Feeding them could potentially cause choking, involuntary vomiting, or worse. But my dad had to try; he couldn't just watch Grandpa slowly starve, incapable of speaking or asking for help.

He took a gamble and offered a Kashi granola bar to Grandpa's lips. He had no hope that the bar would be accepted or acknowledged at all; it was not even something Grandpa would usually have interest in eating—too salty, too sweet, too chocolatey, too many chia seeds and not enough almonds—but he had to try.

Grandpa blinked his eyes and started chewing. He swallowed and took another bite with almost no effort.

My dad whipped out his phone and started recording. His heart swelled as Grandpa took another bite, and another, until he finished the bar.

He showed the doctor, and pretty much anyone who had the time, the video of Grandpa eating, living, and refusing to die in hospice care. "I'm taking him home!" Dad said to the doctor. "He's going home. He's not dying here."

Arrangements were made for home aides and home hospice care. Grandpa moved back into the hospital bed at the house, and my aunts set up a schedule to have someone by his side at all times.

Emmet and Jeddi went over to the house to celebrate Grandpa's return without overwhelming him. Grandma made steamed fish and vegetables, and the four of them sat around Grandpa's hospital bed to pray and eat together.

"I told you guys he'd go out his own way," Emmet said proudly. "Grandpa does what he wants. He's gonna surprise us forever."



The day before Grandpa died, the entire family gathered to be together; culturally, that was what we were supposed to do. Relatives I hadn't seen in months, aunts that lived across the globe flew in from Taiwan, and all eighteen cousins packed together in the living room, filling the couches and every chair, brought together one last time to celebrate Grandpa's life and be with him.

Dad and Aunt Ming lifted Grandpa out of the bed in the middle of the room and helped him to sit up in his wheelchair while the family bustled around him, chattering happily in Taiwanese, Mandarin, and English. The air was filled with the smell of sugar-powdered lotus candies and the sounds of cracking salted watermelon seeds and laughing; we were the poster image of a good Chinese family.

Grandpa sat straight up in the chair, hands folded loosely in his lap, turning his head from time to time to see everything going on around him. He smiled and nodded from time to time, surveying all of the people he loved the most in the world fellowshiping together in one room. He was peaceful and regal as ever. He probably didn't remember each of us by face or by name,

but he must have remembered that he loved us. The room was warm with people. I sat with a ring of my cousins at his feet, and we played cards and talked until the sun went down.

My oldest cousin Angela told us grandchildren sitting in the circle that even Grandpa's last days were a way for him to bless us by allowing us to pay respect to him. We didn't adore him with words or praise that he didn't understand; we showed our love by taking care of him as a family in action and caring for him when he'd never allowed us to before. He had cooked for us, and now we fed him. He had sacrificed his time for us, and now we gave our time for him. He had carried us on his back, and now we carried him in our arms. Everything he did up to that point, he had done for us, and now he blessed us by letting us care for him.

He should have passed away while we were all there with him. We were all there for the cultural significance of one last party filled with food, family, and fellowship, surrounding him with all the positive emotions, putting aside any tensions for his sake, and trying to bless him with our presence—but he stayed awake, stubbornly conscious, refusing to sleep or take his eyes off of us.

The night fell, and he was still awake.

“I guess today's not the day,” my aunts said to each other.

All the kids went home so Grandpa could rest. “We'll probably do this again next week,” cousin Michelle said as we left.



Grandpa died the next day. According to my cousin Daniel, the only witness of that moment, he exhaled deeply, and his soul left his body.

CONCLUSION:

When he died, I was just a month into my first college semester of pre-medical science, and it was one of the best academic semesters of my life. My sister Artesia was in pre-law, I was in pre-med, and I felt a smug sort of Asian pride and satisfaction over the fact that the two of us were fulfilling a stereotype as well as our Grandma's expectations for us. "<My sweethearts!>" She'd crow every time she saw us. "<Der is going to be a doctor, and Artesia is going to be a lawyer, and you're both going to make a lot of money and make your Grandpa so proud!>"

Artesia and I would usually exchange self-satisfied smirks smug enough to make a weasel cringe. I was fifteen years old, not mature enough to make my own decisions, and completely unequipped to dedicate my next eight years of life to medical school—but I had the pressure to keep up with my sister and my grandparents' expectations on my shoulders. I needed to make Grandma happy and do my Grandpa proud.

I totally burned out halfway through my second semester. I barely passed my classes, and my parents were not surprised at all when I cried and told them that I hated Biology and I wanted to transfer. They had said yes, but also reminded me: "You know you have to tell your Grandma."

Grandma sat on the black leather couch that had replaced Grandpa's hospital bed, shuffling playing cards at the coffee table and watching a Chinese drama at full volume.

"<Hiiiiiiii Grandmaaaa!>" I called in my mediocre Chinese.

"<Hi, Der!>" She stood up and hugged me. "*Wa xiym gwo*, <My heart, my liver, apple of my eye. You still look just like your Grandpa.>" She looked up at the living room wall, where Grandpa's portrait hung across from where the recliner used to be. His eyes smiled like mine,

even though there was a solid, stern line between his eyebrows. Grandma turned back to look at me. “<What happened? Why are you here?>”

I prayed in between heartbeats. *Please, please don't disown me.* I sat across from her and straightened my shoulders. Tension roared audibly against my eardrums and my temples crushed my skull. I looked at the ground; just twenty years earlier, my father had kneeled on this spot on the floor and accepted verbal abuse from the same woman that sat in front of me now, shuffling cards. I swallowed the avocado pit in my throat and tried to ignore the prickling in the center of my forehead where I was certain my Grandpa's portrait was staring at me. “<I'm going to transfer schools,>” I said. My American accent seemed stronger than usual. “<And I'm going to change majors. I'm going to study...> Media Writing and Art.” I couldn't think of a Chinese translation.

Grandma furrowed her eyebrows and put down her cards. “<Why?>” she asked.

Because I'm a failure and I don't know how to study. “<I can't do it. I don't have the passion. I can't do it. I'm sorry.>” My voice shook. “<I know you and Grandpa wanted me to be a Doctor.>”

She didn't speak.

Maybe it wasn't too late to go back and try again, try harder, and study just a little bit more. I could say I'm just kidding and take the MCAT and become a doctor and then

“<Grandpa wanted you to be happy.>” Grandma interrupted my thoughts.

I blinked rapidly. “Huh?”

“<Grandpa always did whatever he wanted,>” she said. “<Does writing make you happy? Is that what you want to do?>”

“Yes,” I answered. “<Are you mad?>” I looked over Grandma’s shoulder at Grandpa’s portrait, asking him as much as I was asking her.

“Eh.” She snorted. “<If he was you, he’d probably do the same thing. He did what he thought was right, and he would want you to do what you think is right.>” She picked up the cards again, flipping them in her hands. “<I mean, you can still make money, right?>”

I sat back against the couch, feeling the tension gush out of my ears like a cartoon as the blood rushed back into my limbs. “<Yeah, I can!>”

She stood up, and it was like nothing had happened. “<Are you hungry? Do you want food?>”

“<Yes!>” I stood and followed her out into the kitchen.

I stopped in front of Grandpa’s portrait, and he looked out at me calmly as I bowed.

Chapter 7: The Inadvertent Consequences of Choices

People don't know enough about the amount of sacrifice that goes into immigration and creating a legacy in America, partially because those that came over can't write about their experiences and partially because it's still not very honorable to be an English major, or a writer at all. I'm the only one in my entire home community that pursued higher learning at all, and the expectations from everyone are high. Even after Grandpa died, I had to meet new expectations. Maybe the expectations weren't that high. I think that no matter what I wrote, reviewed by a committee or not, I still would have exceeded the ideal of whatever my less-literary-than-me family and community would have had.

I had other people to impress, other people who were smarter than me, like my classmates and my committee, but they were less intimidating because I didn't look like them and I doubt that they made decisions as intensely subversive as Grandpa did.

I thought for a long time that I was done with his shadow. I'm the only one with these eyes in the family now, and I basically get to decide what my own legacy is. I didn't have to follow what he told me, or what he thought I would do.

But I didn't feel freedom. I didn't feel like I was out of his shadow. I still felt like a failure, like I had to do something with my life to show that I was allowed look like him. I couldn't get baptized in the Jordan. I couldn't rescue a whole family despite all odds. And maybe I could stand up to a bunch of white girls on the train, but I couldn't change an entire world through my principles.

And maybe no one asked me to, but I always thought I had to.

I don't think that it showed in any way. I convinced everyone in my family that I wanted to be like this, that I was happy being a writer. And I was—but I kind of always felt like I was

doing less than I could have. I'd write my papers and be pretty good at it, better than literally everyone else I know back home, but the increasing amount of kids going into biomedical science and nursing and pharmacy just taunted me. Maybe I could write better than they could, but they were living the life that I should have had.

I think I thought that closing the door to medical school would get all the expectations off, like I could just be free of all of that because Grandpa died and I failed Chemistry—but of course I couldn't. Of course, I had to start asking about all the things Grandpa chose correctly. Of course, I had to suggest that maybe I should write about it, and of course my family would jump on that one comment I made and say, "Hey, why don't you write about that for your thesis?"

I wasn't sure what I was going to do, and I wasn't confident enough to come up with anything on my own. The entirety of my life, and everything I had to prove that I'd learned, would culminate in seventy pages of I-don't-know-what—and then the topic of the project was basically chosen for me and I was committed before I really knew why.

For the majority of my time writing, I felt kind of like a failure, even given the five years that have passed since I abandoned the path that was chosen for me. I kept writing and writing about the amazing things he had done in his life, and my life paled in comparison.

I had told Grant that this whole thesis, the fact that I had the opportunity to unite it at all, kind of felt like a physical piece of evidence that exhibited how far away I was from where he'd though I would end up, like it was a representation of my failure to be a doctor instead of a display of all I'd learned as a Master of Literature.

The best way I thought that I could redeem myself was by writing something super amazing that I would publish, and then I'd be better than everyone else. I'd have something

substantial for Grandma to hang on the wall by Grandpa's portrait and all of the grandkids' diplomas. She could have my MA diploma and a bound copy of my thesis—she wouldn't be able to read it, but she could see it, and Grandpa would see it, and I'd be deserving of praise, admiration, and these eyes.

The pressure was on again, but instead of talking about the MCAT and medical school, my whole family was talking about memories, what stories deserved to be in the final document, and future publishing and distribution, as if I was ready for any that.

The original plan was to just write a full-on biography of my Grandpa and be happy with it and make everyone else happy with it, but, true to my nature, I let myself get talked into doing what I dubbed a “literary biographical memoir,” because I was a part of the story. The thing I chose to reconstruct said things about me. And the way that I told the stories revealed things about me. Basically, I wanted it to be about Grandpa, but it was also going to be about me.

In the back of my mind, as I got closer to the end I knew that it would end with Grandpa choosing me and me epically failing his expectations, all wrapped up in the obvious fact that this document existed at all.

But I wrote about him. I wrote about how he did everything right, even though it didn't look like it to everyone around him. I found out the things he chose and the things he didn't choose. Sometimes I wondered if he thought he was doing right when he made his decisions. I thought about what I agreed with and what I didn't, but what I thought didn't matter; I couldn't change the choices that were already made, and it turns out everything he did was good anyway. He always seemed intentional and sure of everything he did.

I wanted to be like that. But I really couldn't.

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I tried to spin the story so that it would look less like I hadn't totally fallen short of what my Grandpa wanted for me. My Grandma had accepted, more or less, that I wouldn't become a doctor, but I still kind of felt like I had fallen from grace somehow, like I had received blessing from him by proxy that didn't really count.

The last time I met with my chair, I was dreading writing about myself. It felt wrong. I was supposed to write a whole chapter about how my Grandpa, against all expectations, chose me, the youngest girl of my family, to be his favorite, and how I did pretty much nothing to deserve that role. I tuned out a little; my fingers typed what Professor Grant said automatically, but I wasn't listening very intently.

"Any last questions?" Professor Grant asked me. He folded his hands on the desk.

"No." I closed my laptop. I usually spoke very clearly with all the faculty at school, but now I dropped my voice to a mumble. "It's just sad that my Grandpa died thinking I was gonna be a doctor, and I'm doing this instead."

I don't know if I meant for him to hear me, but he did.

"Actually." He turned a little in his swivel chair. "It seems like you've taken the 'anything can happen' kind of choosing gene from him. Like instead of being the doctor that everyone wanted you to be, you chose to go against the current and be a writer." He smiled.

"And I think that might even be more in line with what he would have been like."

My brain turned in my skull and I felt goosebumps rise on my skin. "Oh."

We might have said some other things. I really forget.

But I ended up here.

CONCLUSION:

A letter handwritten in Chinese and burned:

Grandpa,

How is everything up there? I'm sure it's great. I bet it smells awesome. Everyone likes to joke about how you would be cooking some big feast for us and waiting for us, and honestly I don't have a single doubt that that's what you're doing.

You've probably already seen everything that's been happening. There's just been so much shit and so much in-fighting. I bet if you were here, you could fix it in a second.

You probably saw when Aunt Ming told me all about you. You probably heard when I decided to write about you. You probably saw me type and angst over our story for all this time. And honestly, I can't tell if you'd be happy about it or not. I don't know if you'd like what I wrote, or the fact that I wrote it, or the way you're depicted in it, or the way that you didn't even know you made me feel.

I think maybe I couldn't accept that you, the Sun of my life, could possibly choose anything wrong for me. And I think after I left your choice, I was bitter that I had failed you.

But I don't think I failed you anymore.

You didn't choose me because I was good at science. You didn't choose me because I thought I was going to be a doctor. You didn't choose me just because I looked like you physically.

You chose me because I looked like you on the inside. You chose me because the minute I had a personality, I wanted to fight the current.

I beat that fuzzy beige baby blanket into submission. I told it that whether or not it wanted to, it would cover up my Grandpa, because that's what I wanted to do for him and

nothing could stop me. I ran in the forbidden hallway, multiple times, because I wanted to see you as soon as soon as I could. And I fought myself for a long time because I wanted to study hard enough to be worthy of you.

It took me all this fighting to realize that you'd be proud. You'd be proud I tried. You'd be proud that this document exists. You'd be proud that I stood against the current with you.

I used to be bitter that people would choose things for me, but I think I was always afraid that I would choose wrong. I don't think I've accepted it all the way, but I'm starting to see where maybe the decisions that were made for me helped me learn to make my own, and maybe the decisions that were made for you helped you learn to make your own.

I'm around the age that you were when you started to choose things for yourself and never chose wrong. And I'm going to make decisions, and maybe they'll be wrong. Maybe they'll be against the current. But they will be mine.

Thank you for your story.

我爱你,

左登葳