

Remembrance

By Jennifer Li

Growing up, my mother always instilled in me a sense of spirituality – *a part of the culture*, she would say, as she carefully placed another wreath of white lilies on my grandmother’s grave and handed me a bowl of fruit. *Now say hello to your grandmother.*

My grandmother passed when I was young, seven years old and still struggling to wrap my head around the idea of someone being gone forever. I grew up remembering her through photographs and dreams—brief, snapshot moments blurred with the stories my mother would tell me, over and over, as if she were trying to create a scrapbook in my head, until I couldn’t tell which memories were mine and which were hers. She taught me to pay attention to the minutia in the time we spent with people we loved, both with my remaining grandparents and with each other. Every time we visited my grandfather in Beijing, I would take notes: the way his apartment always smelled mildly of mildew, the crinkling yellow of his plastic tablecloths, the layers of dust framing tall, mahogany bookshelves, the rattling creak of the pipes when we turned on the gas to heat water for the shower.

I remember the trips we would take together out to the mountains, dripping sweat in the stifling, humid heat of Chinese summer. My grandmother’s grave lay in middle of a wide, expansive cemetery plot that covered endless acres, littered with numerous family names and cool, marble headstones. I wasn’t sure how much I believed in it; but I did as I was told, going through the motions of lighting the incense, arranging the fruit, sprinkling petals along the edges of stone, wondering to myself what would happen when inevitably the pelting summer rains would come to wash away all our offerings.

As I grew older, the offerings also grew. At twenty-one, we lost my favorite grandfather, and I once again watched as we marched through processions of large, towering lily wreaths, fluttering red calligraphy papers and bowls of food meticulously laid out. It felt contrived to me, like another person’s life. Almost resentfully, I thought to myself, if they really wanted him to have what made him happy: someone would have brought him his portable stereo, or his handheld coffee grinder, or the sugar-free chocolates I gave him every year when we visited. I did not know if, as I had grown into adulthood, I truly believed anymore in the abstract, ancestral spirituality we yearned for. If there really was truth to the flames we stoked and prayers we offered in whispers, in the bold, bright reds of fortune and gratitude they were meant to bring.

In July of my intern year, I was signed out a patient who had already been in the hospital for over a hundred days. She was sick—sicker than anyone I had been trained or learned to care for as a medical student; every one of her organ systems had either already failed or was in the

process of doing so. She had pulmonary symptoms from newly diagnosed polyangiitis, she was in acute renal failure, she had invasive candidiasis in her eyes, she was volume overloaded, she might also be bleeding. She, like my grandfather, had long-term COPD and diabetes, and had come in for respiratory failure before she acutely decompensated and was sent to the ICU before she finally, eventually, arrived on the general medicine floor after many months of recurrent decompensations, diagnostic tests, and endless blood draws. I walked into her room on my very first day on service and she looked at me, and asked, “Am I going to die?”

Make sure you take photos of me, so you have them to remember me by when I'm gone, was one of the last things my grandfather ever said to me. *Sometimes, people just know,* my mother had said, when my other grandfather died six months after he took a trip around the world to see the places he grew up in for the last time. *Sometimes they just have a feeling.*

At the end of 2020, just months before I started residency, I felt a feeling. I was home for a week for the holidays, caught in the depths of application-induced stress and my childhood cat struggling with the last vestiges of her late-onset kidney failure. I had just put her to bed, cradled in a soft cushion in the corner of my room when I felt the feeling of a searing, burning pain on my finger, sharp and unexpected, a lightning bolt that began to tear its way up and down my whole body.

As I turned on the light, I noticed a wasp, barely the size of the tip of my pinky, wobbling its way along my windowsill. The room began to spin, air gasping and strangled in my throat. I thought I was having a panic attack. “I can’t breathe,” I announced, out loud to the silhouette of my mother in the hallway, as my knees landed on the ground. The nausea slammed into me, sudden and overwhelming in its intensity. “I have to –”

The last thing I remember is making it to the bathroom. After that, it was silence. Dark, heavy black, like a film reel cut abruptly in the middle, an indie movie at the pivotal scene where the sound drops out and the entire theater is quiet, soft, cotton-candy thick. I found myself—at a table. In between my fingers, the crinkle of plastic tablecloth, my feet in rubber slippers, an apartment filled with the smell of mildew and filtered, dusty lighting, the creak of water pipes close by. There were my grandparents, sitting, my grandmother at the head of the table, smiling. *Jennifer,* someone said, through static fuzz, the flicker of the speaker box on an old television set. *Jen, listen.*

I could hear my dad’s voice from a far, far distance. An ocean away. Frantic. He was calling for someone. *Jen,* someone said again. It sounded like my grandpa. *You have to go back. We love you, baby, but you’re not ready yet. You can’t be here.* There it was again, the yearning. I wanted to stay, to be here, with the fruit bowls and the patterned plastic and –

Every morning, my patient asked me if she was going to die. “I can feel it,” she would say sometimes, her eyes watchful as the nephrologists tiptoed around the word *dialysis*, arms weary

at her sides as the nurses flipped her over to clean her back. “I’m so scared,” she told me, and her breath would catch, snagging on her next words. “I don’t want to go.”

What do you think happens when we die?

She asked me that, once, as I leaned over to straighten her pillow. I had been by each morning and evening, talking her through the process, giving her updates on her organ systems. “Baby steps,” I would say, soothingly, “We’ll take it one step at a time.” At one point, she came almost close to being stable enough to be placed to a subacute rehabilitation facility, a tenuous thread of hope we all grabbed onto too tightly just before it slipped, yet again, from our grasp. “You’re still here.”

The only thing she ever asked of me was to be honest, and so I was. “How are my kidneys today? Give it to me straight,” she greeted, and I did. But as we approached day 200 of her hospital stay, she began to dwindle. She went back into the ICU for an episode of hypotension and came back to us again. She stopped needing dialysis but began to bleed again. Every day, I held my breath as I checked her labs. I envisioned, unwittingly, the flickering flames of burnt incense, of golden calligraphy on stark red. I prayed.

I resurfaced, as if from deep down underwater. Murky, muddy silence cleared slowly into the stuttering of my dad’s voice. He was on the phone with the 911 operator. “Is she breathing?” a disembodied voice asked, and I felt his hand on my face, trembling.

“Yes,” he said, and I lost the next question as I tried, desperately, to will my muscles back to life—rock back into lava, ice back into water. *I’m here*, I tried to say, my eyes fluttering open, just enough for him to exclaim out loud. “She’s here,” he yelled, repeating the words in my head. “She’s awake. She’s still here.”

In the ambulance, I fumbled to explain what had happened. If I had to guess, there is a 1 in 10 million chance of getting stung by a wasp for the first time in my life in the middle of winter in New Hampshire. A blood pressure cuff appeared on my arm, accompanied by a rumble—“it’s saying 70 over unreadable. What does that mean?”

Someone else made a noise, somewhere between non-committal and alarmed panic. “It means it’s too low to register,” he responded, before giving me a gruff warning and lifting my pajama shirt off my back. “She has hives and looks a bit cyanotic. Seems weird but we should probably give her epinephrine?”

“Please,” I whispered, and closed my eyes.

The last day I ever saw her, she had been prepped for surgery. She had developed terrible, infected sacral ulcers from prolonged immobilization, so deep that they easily visualized bone,

and she was scheduled for debridement. When I walked in, she was in tears. “It’s just one thing after another,” she said, lip quivering, eyes steamy behind wire-rim glasses. “I’m scared.”

“I know,” I replied. I was at a loss. Her wounds were so, so deep. “I’m so sorry. I hope it goes okay, and you’ll come back to us.”

“Thank you,” is the last thing she said to me. “Thank you for being so kind, and sweet, and honest with me. Thank you for always being here.”

I stepped out of the room that day and cried. I muffled sobs at the nursing station into the fleece sweater of my senior resident. She made it to the operating room and was transferred to the ICU for the last time for septic shock. She never made it back into consciousness.

She never made it back to me.

I still dream about them sometimes. My grandmother, my grandfathers, my patients, her. The apartment in China that no longer exists, the tablecloths and lukewarm water and dust bunnies. The mountainside I haven’t been to in years, now, the crackle of a portable stereo I will never hear again, bookshelves full of books that have long become recycled scraps. When the days are hard, I buy a bouquet of white lilies, and untuck sheaths of my grandfather’s calligraphy paper. I assemble a bowl of fruit, light a candle, and I uncover in myself – a yearning to believe that we continue onwards, somehow, after we are gone.

I carry them with me. I remember them when I step into other patients’ rooms and other people’s lives. I remember that sometimes, what matters is still being here for everyone who is still here with me.

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