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Chicken Curry

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CHICKEN CURRY NICHOLAS MUI KER LIK

My grandmother is a cloud of grey smoke, the smoke of charcoal cooking fires and frankincense. I know her, and I know she exists in a small jade crucifix, a pair of heavy glasses, and the spicy smell of chicken curry, but I cannot touch her. I cannot see her wrinkled face or hear her soft, gravelly voice. I cannot recall her stories, what kind of tea she liked, or even how old she was the last time I saw her. My memory of her is blurred by my lack of fluency in Cantonese, the language of my ancestors. My parents, proponents of the British education system, rarely spoke to me in my mother tongue. Growing up in an English-speaking household, I could rarely converse with my grandmother or understand what she said to me. Sometimes I caught fragments of meaning and bits of stories, but I cannot even tell how much of that was truly said, and how much stemmed from things I made up to fill in the gaps. All I can remember of my grandmother are small things, like the food she used to cook, the way she sometimes sat in the armchair in her living room, and the steel-rimmed glasses she wore.

On a grey Tuesday morning in 1997, my aunt woke me up and told me that my grandmother had died. The day before, at the hospital, my father had instructed me to follow my aunt to her house and spend the night, while he and my mother dealt with family matters. I had eaten dinner with my aunt's family and had fallen asleep soon after.

I sat still in the guest bed while my aunt said we were going to prepare for my grandmother's funeral. My first thought was, I've got to tell mom. My second thought was, I don't have to go to school today.

What did *poh poh* die of? I asked.

The official cause of her death was liver failure, my aunt said.

That meant nothing to me. In my mind, liver failure could not have been the thing that killed her.

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After my grandmother's death, I spent the next two days at home or at my cousin's house in Petaling Jaya, I'm not sure which. I must have read some Doraemon comics or played some video games, and I can clearly remember the hotness in the pit of my stomach, the sweatiness of my palms, the dry feeling in my eyes. I may have been excited. I was supposed to be sad, but I didn't understand why, or why everyone around me moved in fast motion while I walked around the house and watched them: my mother, beginning to fry eggs, then turning away and crying while the eggs burned; my aunt yelling at someone over the phone; my cousins playing with their dolls and asking me to join them; the neighbor's dogs barking at the people rushing in and out of the house. I was waiting for something to happen, and I couldn't breathe properly. The air was too thin. I had to take long, gasping breaths, and my hands were numb. I wanted to ride my bicycle to the local park but I was afraid that I'd stop breathing or my hands would steer the bike into oncoming traffic, and then they'd have to prepare for two funerals.

My grandmother favored thin shirts and trousers with floral batik prints, and always wore a green jade bangle around her left wrist and a ring of Indian gold on her right ring finger. Once, when I was eight, I asked about the ring. It was right after the Palm Sunday mass and my mother and I were taking my grandmother home from the church. I asked my mother, *Why is poh poh's ring Indian?*

My mother said, *The ring is called Indian because the gold it's made of is darker than normal gold.*

We got into the yellow family Mitsubishi and, during the drive back to my grandmother's house, the ring was on my mind. Was grandmother not allowed to wear a brighter shade of gold? Was wearing dark gold a punishment for some crime committed long ago? Perhaps any gold my grandmother wore would eventually tarnish. I wanted to take the gold ring and keep it hidden and see if it ever got any darker. If it did, I would bury it in the field behind my house, beneath the grave of my first dog, Snowy, so that she could guard it and not let it escape.

John was my grandmother's oldest son, but I would never admit to him being my uncle. He was a pot-bellied scoundrel, with wild hair and beady, brown eyes. He was named after John the Baptist, but the only liquid he washed his sins in was beer. I often wondered why he lived with my grandmother when he seemed to resent her. My mother told me that John felt the universe owed him a great debt, that he was born in the wrong place at the wrong time, and the only person he could collect from was my grandmother. My aunts and

uncles would sometimes say that he was a bad son, that he would insult my grandmother, hurl obscenities at her, especially when he was in a bad mood. He was always too busy driving his bus or going out with his drinking buddies to take my grandmother to the doctor, or to have a conversation with her, or to spend time with her and ask her to tell him stories about the past. I despised him because, whenever he looked at me, I could see my reflection staring out of his eyes.

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My grandparents lived in what used to be a small village called Old Town, on the edge of the city of Petaling Jaya. As a child I thought that Old Town was where all the people over fifty went to live after they'd retired and their children had grown. It was a quiet place with narrow roads, and the houses that lined each street were usually made of wood planks and cinderblocks. My grandparents' house was one of the few exceptions. It was a large, double-storied cement and brick house with spacious concrete front and back yards, and a tall rambutan tree outside. My grandparents lived on the ground floor and the upper floor was rented out. My mother said that it used to be the same as the other houses along the street but my grandfather renovated the house after saving up for many years.

Long ago, when the house was still small and made of wood, my grandmother kept ducks and chickens for their eggs and meat. The oldest chickens and ducks would get taken to market and a few of the fatter ones would be slaughtered on festival days. While my grandparents celebrated Chinese New Year, the Winter Festival, and Christmas, the chickens and ducks probably lived in fear of the cleaver and prayed there would be a Heaven for them to go to. When the house was renovated and the yard was paved over, the bones of the slaughtered animals were stuck in the earth, mixed up in a bloody mess so that some ducks had chicken's beaks and necks and chickens had ducks' wings, and none of them could ever fly away. Perhaps they pecked upwards with their crooked beaks and beat their broken wings against their concrete coffin lid. Maybe their screams kept my grandmother awake at night and left her feeling so tired that she didn't notice what she was cooking for herself anymore. That might have been the first thing that killed her.

Speaking to my grandmother was like drawing on a black sheet of paper with a piece of charcoal. *Lei hao ma?* I would ask, How are you? Beyond that, I spoke gibberish, and she said words I could not understand. When she spoke, I tried to capture her words on that black sheet of paper, build them into comprehensible images, like crude drawings on the walls of a cave that tried to capture the moment, but not its meaning. I would try to trace the lines and contours of our conversations, the general shape of what it was she tried to tell me. When I spoke to her, I tried to tell her what I could understand of the images on the dark paper. I could never see my own drawings of her words with any clarity, and I hated that black sheet for hiding from me all the things my grandmother said. I tried tearing it up and throwing the scraps away. I tried to learn more Cantonese so that I could directly listen to what my grandmother had to say but every time I turned my head, the black paper was there

again and I'd have no choice but to use it. It was either that or refrain from talking to my grandmother at all.

My grandmother wore a mask at all times. It was a perfect replica of a human face and had lips and a tongue that could speak, and eyes that could see. I sometimes wanted to take the mask away, to stop her endless shuffle, and ask her what she really thought of her children. Particularly John.

The first funeral service was for immediate family members. It was held in the morning, in Assunta, a church of the Blessed Lady of the Assumption along Jalan Gasing. I went to the funeral in a red t-shirt because I didn't have any black ones. My grandmother's white wood coffin was placed right before the altar: an offering. I wrote, Please accept, on a scrap of paper and drowned it in one of the small holy water wells at the back of the church. I was afraid of getting caught, but the rest of my family was standing close to the altar and talking among themselves, so they didn't notice what I was doing. I crossed myself, walked to the front, kneeled, and sat in a pew with a group of my cousins.

The priest who conducted the service was Father Volle, an old Frenchman who sometimes spoke so softly that I could not hear what he said. My grandfather stood in the front pew and began to cry when Father Volle walked around the coffin, swinging a censer of burning frankincense back and forth. Each time the priest passed in front of the coffin, the smoke from the censer grew thicker and thicker, as if to hide the casket from my sight. While the priest's voice droned on, I thought about plates of crispy rojak, bowls of ice-cold cendol, and what I would like to have for lunch.

My mother often told me that my grandmother was a strong woman. When I looked at her, a small woman in thick glasses, I couldn't say what kind of strength she had. Probably not the same kind of strength a soldier would need to lug a full backpack over miles of rocky terrain, or the strength of a coal miner, chipping away at the cavities in the earth. Years ago, my mother and I would sometimes visit my grandparents in the mornings before I had to go to school. My mother would see to it that my grandparents had an adequate supply of heart and liver medicine, and help them with little chores around the house. I'd sit on the living room floor and stare at my grandparents as they sat in their chairs, watching a black-and-white television set. Grandfather would sprawl all over his seat, letting his long limbs and large head fill the space around him. Grandmother would sit back in her chair, her hands neatly crossed over her lap. Her back was bent with the years, but she would stare at the television with the intensity of a tiger stalking its prey, even when she watched Hong Kong dramas and comedies. My grandfather watched early newscasts, but when it was time for my grandmother's favorite show, she would slowly stand up, make her way to the set, and change the channel to RTM 2 before going back to her seat beside him. I would offer to change the channel for her, but she would insist on doing it herself. My grandmother was no more than four-and-a-half feet tall, and watching her sit next to my grandfather, an imposing man over six feet in height, I wondered what had possessed this big, boisterous

man to chase after and marry this unassuming woman. I could never ask because I did not know how to.

My grandmother always wore a worn jade bangle around her left wrist. It was handed down to her from her mother, and her mother's mother, and her great-grandmother, and so on. It must have been incredibly heavy, a stone circle around my grandmother's heart line, because I don't know if I ever saw her raise her left arm high enough to wave goodbye. I imagined a great reverse pyramid of ancestors, with whole clans balancing at the top and each layer, each generation supported by a successively smaller number of descendants until it came to my grandmother at the bottom, holding up the entire structure of bodies with one manacled hand. The crushing weight of the pyramid must have been too much for my grandmother's brittle bones to support, and I believed that was the second thing that killed her.

It was the Chinese New Year of 1993 and my grandmother was busy at her outdoor kitchen, stirring the contents of a large metal pot on a clay charcoal stove, preparing the reunion dinner as only she knew how. The rich aroma of cooked meat hung in the air as my grandmother moved around the kitchen, ladling large portions of chicken curry into bowls filled with steamed white rice. She then carried them to the wooden dinner table in the dining room and set them neatly down, one before each seat. Every time my grandmother set her load on the dinner table, she wiped her hand across her brow before returning to the kitchen to get more bowls of rice and curry. She moved slowly, formally, without making any noise, her feet tracing the steps of a familiar dance. I sat to one side of the dingy dining room and watched her, not saying anything to interrupt her concentration.

Just after she set down the last pair of bowls and retreated to the kitchen, I went up to the dinner table. There were orange plastic bowls, white porcelain bowls, red clay bowls, and shiny steel bowls. To me, the scent of the curry was darkly spicy, pungent with the aroma of age and blood. It smelled like hot nights, warm sea winds, and fragrant wood smoke. I reached out, took a plastic bowl of rice and curry in my hands, and almost dropped it. The bowl was too hot for me to touch, but my grandmother had held it barehanded. I thought my grandmother had gone through some special training to carry hot things, some secret that was passed down through the family. I walked to the kitchen to ask my grandmother how she could carry the bowls without getting burned before I realized that I didn't know what words to use in Cantonese.

The second funeral service was held at my grandmother's house, at night, and was attended by friends of the family. When my mother and I arrived, there were people sitting in folding chairs all around the concrete yard. Some chatted and drank yellow packets of chrysanthemum tea while others complained about the hot weather and scolded their children for running around. They had an air of subdued cheerfulness about them, as though they were attending a reunion dinner instead of a funeral.

My mother had arranged for black t-shirts to be provided for everyone there, so I had no choice but to wear one. My cousins dragged me away to change my shirt while my mother spoke to a pinch-faced man in white.

Where can I get changed? I asked.

Cousin Gilbert said, The bathroom's being used and the girls are using uncle John's room, so you'll have to use *poh poh's* room.

I walked into my grandmother's room and closed the door behind me. I leaned against the door and stood in the stifling gloom for a while, turning my head left and right, looking for any sign of movement. Nothing crawled out from beneath my grandmother's rickety bed. No shadows leapt at me from behind her chest of drawers. A portrait of Mother Mary hung over the headboard, but not even her eyes seemed to be looking at me as I stood there in the near dark. I began to sweat after a few minutes, so I stumbled over to the box fan and switched it on. The windows were closed, but they didn't shut out the raised voices from outside. Enough light filtered in through the panes to allow me to see, so I didn't switch on the lights.

I put on the coarse, black t-shirt and sat down on the soft sheets of my grandmother's bed. Across from me, on the dark wooden dresser, nestled between a large hair brush and a box of pearl powder, were my grandmother's glasses. The lenses were thick and round and the rims were blackened steel. I took the surprisingly weighty glasses and stared at them. I had never seen my grandmother without those glasses before, not even when she was at the hospital. I looked up at the Virgin and prayed that my grandmother would find her place, but I could no longer picture my grandmother without her glasses because they were in my hands, and each time I imagined her face it slipped away from me, evaporating in small clouds of hot breath. I think I cried then but it was too dark to tell.

I don't know if it was true, but my mother would sometimes tell me about how John would insult my grandmother after he came back from a night out with his drinking buddies. I don't think he ever hit her, but he would tell her how sorry he was that he'd been born into such a miserable family, and that he couldn't wait for his inheritance.

Someone, I forget who, once told me a story about a soldier who went to war and carried his pocket Bible with him at all times. The other fighters made fun of him and told him that he was being silly, but the soldier carried his Bible with him everywhere and read a passage from it every night. One day, during a fierce shootout, an enemy managed to shoot the soldier in his chest. When the others went to see if he were dead, they found the soldier unharmed. The bullet had hit the Bible that the soldier carried in his pocket, penetrating all but the last page. I often wondered if my grandmother's Bible could stop bullets when John sniped at her. At least one of the bullets must have gotten through, and that must have been the third thing that killed her.

I left my grandmother's room and joined my cousins out in the hall. One of them, Pui Wan, looked at me. Have you been crying? she asked.

To my surprise, I bent my head and said, No.

My family stood around my grandmother's coffin. We were praying but I wasn't paying attention to what the pinch-faced man said because I was staring at the casket. It was too small for a person, much too small for me. The coffin lid was screwed on tight so that nothing could get in or out. I wondered how my grandmother could fit in there without complaining about how cramped it was. When the adults finally stopped talking, I walked up to the coffin and peered in the glass front. My grandmother's face was much paler than I'd remembered, her wrinkles had been smoothed out, and she wore dark plum lipstick. They'd dressed her up and made her look young. Her mouth was slightly open, as though she were about to say something to me and had paused to gather her thoughts. She wasn't wearing her glasses, and I wondered why the adults had decided to let her go to heaven half-blind. I worried that she might lose her way once she left the familiar surroundings of her house. The pinch-faced man said something, and all the adults bowed their heads and closed their eyes again. I half-expected my grandmother to push open the lid of the coffin, scaring the man in the white shirt and the adults whose heads were bowed in prayer. Then she'd get up, shuffle to her room, and put on her glasses before getting back into the coffin and closing the lid behind her for good. I kept one eye open and watched the casket to see if the lid would rise an inch, or start to rattle. I wondered if any of my cousins had the same thoughts, and what they would say if they knew a boy of thirteen was imagining such ridiculous things. Still, while the adults prayed on, I listened for any sound that might be my grandmother's soft voice asking me to open the coffin lid and let her fly away. By the time everyone had stopped praying, nothing had happened. I was mildly surprised.

For my twelfth birthday, my grandmother gave me a small jade crucifix. We were sitting on the sofa in her living room and she was asking me about school and my family. For the most part, I managed to answer each of her queries in Cantonese: mom and dad are fine, working too hard; the dogs are growing quickly, very naughty; I'm doing good in school. It was one of the few times when my grandmother spoke Cantonese that was simple enough for me to understand, so I didn't need the black sheet of paper or the lump of charcoal.

How are you doing? she asked.

I'm fine, I answered as best I could, how about you?

Not bad, not bad. So you're twelve now. Growing up very quickly, she said.

Then my grandmother took out a small jade cross from her shirt pocket. This is a birthday gift for you, she said, pressing it into my palm.

The cross was dull, roughly-shaped, and had small chips on its surface. It looked worn, old, like it had been carried across the sea in someone's shirt pocket a very long time ago. It was,

however, very light. It weighed so little that I thought if I moved my hand away slowly the jade cross would remain suspended in the air.

Thank you, *poh poh*, I said.

My grandmother said, You're welcome. A grown-up gift so you'll grow up well.

When I left her house a couple of hours later, I gave her a peck on her right cheek and waved goodbye. I got into the family Mitsubishi, turned, and watched my grandmother wave goodbye with her right hand.

There was always charcoal ash left over when my grandmother had finished cooking her curry. Amid the celebrations ushering in a new year, the ashes were the remains of the funeral pyre of the hens that had died. While I sat in the yard with the other children and joked with them about school and discussed where to get fireworks for later, the ashes were on my mind. When I walked inside the house and heard the adults at the dinner table laughing about an aunt's fortune and a cousin's misfortune with equal vigor, I thought about the charcoal ashes. I even thought about the ashes while I washed the bowl from which I'd eaten the curry. I imagined the ashes falling into a river and flowing out to sea, then being lifted into the air and into the clouds, and later coming down to earth with the rain, into the dust, back into the small clay stove my grandmother used to cook her chicken curry, into the curry itself, and finally into me. When the reunion dinner was over and most of my relatives had left, my mother and I stayed behind to help clean up. While my mother washed the dishes, I took the small clay stove to the drain just outside the front entrance of my grandmother's house, grabbed fistfuls of the charcoal ash, and flung them into the air. Most of the ash drifted down into the deep drain below, but some of it was light enough to fly away from my grandmother's house forever.

John wasn't at either of my grandmother's funeral services, but he was at the crematorium the next day when my mother and I arrived. He stood in the midst of my cousins, uncles, and aunts, neither frowning nor smiling, neither crying nor shouting. His face was an expressionless mask. I didn't know if I should look at him, so I turned away.

The air of the crematorium was thick with the smell of cooking flesh. I looked around at the barren hills, and the tile-and-mortar crypt where my grandmother's ashes were to be interred. There were no graves around because PJ Modern Casket was very up to date: the hills had been covered in concrete, and recessed walls set into their surfaces had niches where the ashes of the dead could be sealed in. Those great, rectangular blocks of hollow stone dotted the hill like grim dominoes. Next to one of those concrete blocks, a flight of steps had been chiseled into the hillside. The cremation was to take place in the squat building at the bottom of the hill, but I climbed the steps to see who my grandmother's neighbors would be. At the top was a locked gate, beyond which lay five stone walls, standing close together but not quite touching, the gaps between them revealing the fallow earth in their midst. It would have been nice if someone had planted something there, but I think

the only plants that could have survived were cacti. My grandmother would be buried at the bottom of the hill, in a place where death was heaped upon death. I frowned and kicked the locked gate before going back down the steps.

I don't recall my grandmother ever smiling. She might have made some jokes and been quite happy, but she never smiled. Several years after her death, when I went through the photographs in the family albums, I couldn't find a single snapshot of her smiling at the camera or at anyone she was speaking to. It must have been that mask of hers.

The day after my grandmother's body was cremated, her ashes were put in a porcelain urn, which was then placed in a little alcove in a wall at the bottom of the lifeless hill and sealed with a slab of rusty red marble while I watched. It was a blood clot, sealing my grandmother in the arteries of a dead giant. I didn't blame the picture on her slab for not smiling. What eternal life could be found in such a place? The epitaph on the marble slab read, 'May Your perpetual light shine upon her O Lord,' and I wondered if any light could filter in, hidden as she was.

My aunt, cousins, and I lit candles my mother gave us, and I let some of the wax drip onto the ground in front of my grandmother and tried to set my candle upright in the small, molten puddle. It fell over twice, but the flame wasn't extinguished, and I managed to get it to stand straight on the third try. When my mother spoke, I said a prayer. I said the Lord's Prayer, but inside, I prayed that the marble slab would crumble so that my grandmother wouldn't suffocate. After bowing our heads for a few minutes, my mother and I climbed into the family Mitsubishi, and my mother began to drive away from the crematorium and the dead hill.

I could smell the scent of cooking flesh, even through the car's glass window. It was oily, cloying, a wretched stench that made me gag. For a little while, I saw bits of ash drift past and wondered if they belonged to anyone I knew. My hands shook and I couldn't sit still in my seat. I wanted to jump out of the car and run back to the crematorium, gather all the ash I could find, and scatter it to the winds so it would be free. Maybe I could ask the undertaker if he could burn some black paper for me.

I clenched my hands and said nothing, and my fingertips grew warm, as though I'd just touched a bowl, left too long on a clay stove, scorching with unnamed words.

