

Yellow Bastards

My grandpa used to pick yellow bastards on the hillside for Grandma. That is, before he left her, before he moved into our former study room next to the garage, where he slept on a cot and played sudoku.

My grandmother moved into my uncle's house, where she cooked and cleaned and gardened; she didn't live with Grandpa anymore. Once a month, however, Grandma and Grandpa saw each other again when my extended family gathered for hot pot at Uncle Jim's. Whenever Grandpa walked into the house, Grandma made another batch of noodles even though we had enough for everyone in the family. Grandpa watched the television and ignored her. Even though they only saw each other once a month, they never talked directly. They always communicated through a middle party, which was usually my uncle.

"Jim, tell Father I say the 'Merry Christmas,'" she said. We were all in the same house, but I looked at Grandma and Grandpa and felt as if I were witness to a translation between two eccentric warlords. Even if they conversed directly, I didn't think they'd understood each other, with Grandma's voice like a librarian's and Grandpa's ears like vestigial appendages, only useful for hooking glasses onto.

Before my grandparents split up, I thought marriage was predestined; I thought couples would never choose a lifetime of nitpicking. Yet I'd seen toddlers resolve their problems quicker than my grandparents had.

When they were together, Grandpa used to fall asleep in the living room while eating.

"Wang, wake up! Your food is getting cold, Lazy Pig!" but he wouldn't hear her. He would be holding a forkful of xiaolongbao and his head would tilt to the side, his eyes would close, and the fork would slip out of his grip. I always wondered if marriage was something that only a hearing aid could fix. I wondered what it was like when my grandparents were young. I imagined them as attractive movie stars, conversing over lunch on a voiceless, black and white screen in their silent film.

After spending a week at my grandparents house when I was seven, I asked my mom why they slept in different rooms. She shrugged and said that maybe she and father should also sleep in different rooms, so that she wouldn't have to deal with his snoring anymore. Our house didn't have enough space for my mom to put another bed anyway. Even so, I spread all my toys on the ground just to make sure that Mom didn't have any space to sleep in my room and separate herself from Dad. I wanted them to wake up next to each other every morning.

Of course I wanted my grandparents to be happy, too. Not long ago, I asked Grandpa, "What would you like to do that you've never done?" I supposed he'd mumble, "Go on a cruise," or "Win the Bridge jackpot," or some other activity that old people like to do.

"Maybe, Xiao De, I'd like to travel."

I asked him why he didn't travel more, and he laughed, shifting on his recliner as his Chinese drama played on the television.

The next month, at the family dinner, Grandpa came in and announced that he'd bought a one-way ticket to Thailand. Mom began to rub her temples and Uncle stood up from his seat the same way Father would when he'd tell me to go to my room. Grandma was the only one who kept eating. Meanwhile, the rest of us glanced back and forth, from Grandma to Grandpa, not knowing what to expect. I wasn't sure if Grandma mistook his sudden decision to depart as his grudge for her, but she played it off cool with a scoff and a "That's one less bottom to wipe."

A week later, Grandpa hoisted his luggage into the taxi and made his way to the airport. After the departure, Grandma called us every day. She would ask me to hand the phone over to my mom. Twenty minutes after every call, we always drove over to Uncle Jim's, where we ate dinner with the rest of the family because Grandma accidentally cooked twice as much as she normally would. One night, we walked into the house and the food was in plates all over the counters, like she didn't know what we liked to eat so she just made everything she could think of. She watched us while we ate and asked us if we wanted more. I couldn't help being reminded of the witch from Hansel and Gretel, who fattened up her guests for some sort of climax. Even when we said we were full, she stood over the stove steaming, baking, and frying more shrimp soup, more dumplings, more cake. She disappeared into the kitchen and yelled, "Don't drink the hot soup too quickly or else you'll burn your stomach!"

I responded, "The soup is cold, Grandma." And she ran back into the dining room, glaring at me as if I had reminded her that Grandpa had left her.

"You didn't appreciate it while it was warm! You saved it until it got cold and you no longer wanted it. You are so ungrateful. Drink your soup. Pigs do better than you. When I was raising pigs on the farm, they ate everything we gave them and never complained."

So I drank my soup cold and pondered why Grandma had compared me to pigs. I knew the soup was warm once, but in that moment it was cold, and I still drank it anyway. Maybe pigs ate all the scraps Grandma gave them because they'd never tasted anything fresh from the oven. Then I thought about telling Grandma why Grandpa had left. She always compared him to pigs, and called him a leech, but she already knew. I didn't want to hurt her, so I let her hurt me.

After a few months of Grandma calling and inviting us to Jim's house for dinner, my mom began to concoct solutions. She asked Grandma whether or not she wanted a dog, but they were talking on the phone, so I couldn't hear what Grandma said. I assumed Grandma replied that she was fine, she didn't want a dog, and that she didn't know why Mom would ask such a thing. Then Grandma hung up and didn't call us over for dinner again.

After that day, Grandma took up power walking. She power walked past our house as if to show us that she was fine. Then she'd power walk back again, straight past our house without a glance in our direction. In each hand, she carried green weights that didn't match her pink headband or her purple jogging suit, which swished between her legs.

One evening I called Grandma and asked her "Why do you walk by our house every day and never come inside?"

She said “Who is this!?” and hung up on me. The next day, Grandma didn’t walk past our house. I didn’t think anything of it. Maybe she’d given up power walking and taken up water aerobics.

That evening Mom ran down the stairs, the phone in her hand, and yelled, “Grandma’s knees have given out! The Millers found her lying on the sidewalk and called an ambulance!”

We rushed to the hospital, the brand new one on the hill that looked like a hotel from a distance. The receptionist pointed us down a gleaming white corridor and it felt like I was falling down a rabbit hole as I ran through it. Grandma’s doctor said that she would need new knees, but he would clean out the cartilage first to see if they could be salvaged.

A week later, she had surgery, and we came again to the hospital to see her. I brought her a tin of matcha mochi and a handwritten card wishing her health, and as we walked down the hallway, I was proud that I had remembered mochi was Grandma’s favorite dessert.

When we rounded the corner to the room, Grandpa was already standing by Grandma’s hospital bed in an outfit I’d never seen him wearing before, an unrecognizable haircut above his tanned face. The clothes he wore looked new and foreign, as if he’d taken them from another man’s closet. I grumbled at his sudden appearance without calling first and opened my mouth to speak. I searched for a sentence that would summarize the stress he put on Grandma, the way he’d turned her into Julia Child, the way he’d made her become the energizer bunny, pounding away at the drum and destroying her knees. I tried to think of a way to explain all the shrimp soups and pork dumplings and red bean cakes that were made and wasted in his absence, but Grandma spoke first.

“Wang, it wasn’t nice of you to come see me,” her voice sounded coquettish.

“Xiao De, go and put these in water for your Grandmother,” Grandpa said, handing me a cluster of hand-picked yellow bastards.

Taking the yellow bastards, I worried that they’d wilt by the time I got them water. I set the box of mochi down and went to the sink to fill a plastic cup with water. By the time I turned around to give Grandma the flowers, she and Grandpa were talking as if I weren’t there. Caught off guard, I watched them in silence before leaving the room, not realizing I still had the flowers in my hand. I gazed down at the yellow bastards, which, surprisingly, were still standing tall.