

Taijen Ng-Chan / THINGS FOR THE DEAD

I wake up shivering. My window is iced over into opaque-white crystal, fracturing the morning light. I stand for several minutes with my hand against the glass, thinking how cold and how beautiful.

There, the imprint of my hand.

Through this space of melted frost, I can see the snow-filled street outside, the bundled-up people hurrying along Ste. Catherine's on their way to work.

There is no time for breakfast, as usual. I throw on some clothes and get to work a little late, drink too much coffee on an empty stomach; after work, I come home, make macaroni and cheese for dinner, and watch a bit of the news on the television while I eat. I decide to finish some reading.

And then at 11:07 p.m., my mother calls.

"Your grandfather died," she says. "Last night."

There is a space, and I put down my book. I look over at the window with my handprint blurring now in soft edges of white, and the blinds which are dusty, and then I look down at the floor which needs sweeping, the table with faint white rings stained onto the wood, and the glass with bits of orange pulp stuck to the sides. My mug of half-finished cold tea, the ashtray that I should empty. Then the room shifts a bit to one side. My mouth is forming the sentence "Oh, so how was your day?" which suddenly flees, splinters, blurs like a speeded-up tape into something I know isn't right.

I realize what she has said.

A brief moment is suspended in the air like that first quiet stillness in the morning, before it is broken by the sound of cars and birds, when each noise is as broad and as bright as the sun moving up towards the horizon. The moment breaks.

"Oh," I say, swallowing the rest of the sentence. So how was your

day? is caught stark and swollen in my throat. I don't hear what she says next, still tasting the "Oh," still trying to grasp that blur, figure out what it meant. Oh. My grandfather's died. I suddenly don't know the meaning of words.

There is a reaction I'm supposed to be having — *the word for sad flits through my head* — but instead it's the distant sound of an echo passing too quickly to be caught. I think of my grandfather in his sunny kitchen on the sixth floor of a crowded Hong Kong apartment building, and pineapple buns in the morning — *I'm not sad* — and the black and white picture I have of creeping up behind him as he was washing dishes, and calling *grandpa!* His head turning towards me as I clicked the camera, with the out of focus pots and steamers and spoons hanging on the tiled wall behind him, and *good morning* he said to me in English, as he would say every morning, happy to use the only words he knew of my language. *Good Morning!*

And then the "oh" again, catching the blur and sucking it down into my lungs. *Why am I crying?*

We say nothing for a while, until my lungs run out of air and need more, and then I manage to calm my gasping.

"Mom," I say. But then I stop. There isn't anything else to say.

My mother tells me about the funeral arrangements. She wants a proper service, one with a preacher and everything, but nothing has been settled. "Uncle Chu and Uncle Len flew back to Hong Kong today," she says. "They'll take care of things."

Uncle Chu is my mother's oldest brother, and Buddhist. I don't know what Uncle Len, the youngest brother, believes in, though I can't imagine him being religious. I wonder what the funeral will be like.

"You're not going to go back?" I ask.

There is a pause and I can hear my mother thinking about how she could pay for a ticket, how she could maybe take a week from working and how much she has saved. "I don't know," she says.

"You really don't need to go back, you know. Uncle Chu and Uncle Len will take care of everything."

"Yes," my mom says. "Well . . . they're thinking the funeral will be on Friday. Friday Hong Kong time. Thursday night here."

I've never been to a funeral before, and I think about a black casket and white flowers, or maybe there will be paper money and incense. I think about Chinese movies I've seen where the mourning is loud and elaborate, the relatives wailing and dressed in rags.

"Are you going to wear white?" I ask.

"It doesn't matter. Nobody does that here."

"Do you think they'll go to a temple or something? Maybe Uncle Chu would want that."

"Oh, I don't know," my mother says. "That's up to them." Her voice is a frown, and I can almost hear her shaking her head. Village superstitions. Tsk. I want to ask her about paper money, paper houses, paper clothes — the things for the dead. But I don't.

"What we should do," my mother says, "is go for a walk next Thursday night. At the same time next Thursday, we'll go for a walk outside. You can go walk outside your apartment."

"Yes, okay."

"And I'll go for a walk here. So we can think about him together. Then our whole family will be thinking about him together."

"Okay."

"Is it cold in Montreal now?"

"It's freezing. How is it there?"

"Not too bad."

"That's good."

"I'll call you Thursday night," she says. "Just before we go out walking. And give your grandmother a call now, just ask her how she is."

Alarmed, I start to cry again. "Now? I can't call her now."

"It's alright, I'll give you the phone number."

"Mom, I don't know what to say . . ."

"Just ask her how she's doing. Just say you called to see how she is."

I try to breathe, going over the conversation with my grandmother in my head. I can barely imagine doing it in English, and Grandma speaks only Cantonese. *Grandma, I'm sorry to hear about Grandpa. How are you? Grandma, I'm sorry to hear . . .* Even in English, the words sound foreign. All I can manage to translate is *how are you* — *nay ho mah. Poh poh, nay ho mah?*

I lose my breath again and start to sob.

"I know you're upset," my mother says. "You can call in a little while."

"Well . . . I don't know. I don't know *how* . . ."

She tells me a few words in Chinese. "Just say *Poh poh, nay ho mah?*"

"I can't . . . I can't call and say just that."

"You don't have to say much. She'll be so happy to hear from you."

I am crying so hard now I can barely speak. "Tomorrow, okay? I'll do it tomorrow."

"Okay," she says. "That's okay. Just try."

I hang up the phone and cry a while longer. *What a coward.* I look down at my hands blurry through the tears and the ragged nails I've been chewing on, and the silver ring that my grandmother gave me when I was thirteen and I told her I didn't care for yellow gold. And then my grandpa took me out to buy a silver bracelet with a phoenix on it. I sit at the table thinking about the phoenix and noticing my ashtray is full, and maybe I should wear white — it makes more sense to me — but I don't know if I have anything appropriate. My nose is running and I just sit there with the sleeves of my shirt wet and my head aching and my eyes sore, trying to summon courage from hundreds of miles away. I sit there until I can speak steadily again. *What a coward I am. Shit.*

I light a cigarette. Then I call my mother back.

"I'm going to call grandma now," I say.

"That's good," mom says. "Do you need the number?"

"No, I have it."

"Call me back after, if you want. Tell me how it went."

I flip through my phone book to find my grandmother's number. All I can think about is how the number four in Chinese sounds like the word for *dead*. I stub out the cigarette and reach for the phone. I try to find my tongue.

I'm going to call my grandmother now, even if I have no words for her. I

dial the number slowly, my mind a blank. The phone rings on the other side, oceans away, one ring, two rings, three rings, four. Then someone picks up the receiver.

"Weh?" It is a woman's voice. *Is this my grandmother? It doesn't sound like her. I don't think it's her.*

"Uh, weh?" *Can I speak to . . . how do you say that? I don't know the word for "speak."* Finally, I manage to say "Is my grandmother there?" My words in Chinese sound cracked and rusty.

"Eh?" says the voice on the phone.

"This is Kai . . ." I can't think of any other Chinese words, so I repeat the ones I already have. "Poh poh hain m hain doh?"

"Kai? Ah! This is Ling . . . you know, Ah Nui's elder sister! You remember me?" Ling's dialect is slightly different from mine and I can barely understand her.

"Ah!" I say. *Of course — gan hai.* Ah Nui and Ling are my cousins. "Gan hai gai dac, la . . ."

Then a rush of language follows. I try to pluck out words that here and there bob up from the stream, but Ling talks too fast for me. I catch the words for *good* and *newspaper* and *waiting*. Then, "You want to speak to Poh Poh, of course . . . just a minute . . ."

I hear the phone being put down, and Ling saying "It's Kai on the phone, from Canada . . ." I imagine my grandmother in her thin beige pajamas, and the way she must be walking now, slowly from where she was sitting on the hard bed, to the other side of the room where the eating table and bookshelf are, where the phone sits waiting. The phone is picked up and then, "Weh?"

"Hello?" I say in English. "Uh, weh?"

"Kai? Is that you?"

"Poh poh! Yes, it's Kai," I say in Chinese. "I called to ask how you're doing."

My grandmother's dialect changes from time to time, back and forth from my Cantonese to something I can't understand at all, maybe Toi-Shan. I've noticed that she slips in and out of these different tones and rhythms when speaking with my mother, but not so much with me — I can understand her better than I can understand Ling. "Do you know about your grandfather?" she says. "He . . ."

"Yes, yes . . ." I say hastily. "Uh, I know . . ." *How do you say sorry?*

Sorry to hear that. *Doi m jee . . . is that it? Doi m jee means sorry, but maybe only for things like breaking a teacup . . . I don't know if it's the right expression. It sounds so fake.* "My mom called and told me," I say in Chinese, finally. "So . . . I'm calling to ask you how you are . . ."

"Ah, gum nay yow sum," my grandma says. *Yow sum. You have heart, literally. You have care.*

I bite my lip. "Uh," I say. I can hear the silence racing back and forth under the ocean, into my ears and back again.

"Nay ma, la?" my grandmother asks. *How is your mother?* "Nay tse gai, la? Ho m ho?"

"Ho," I say. "Good! Er, I'm . . ." *There must be another word in Chinese for good, one that doesn't sound so . . . good. But I can't find it. . . .* . good. Mom's good, too. She's at home now, in Calgary, I'm calling from my home in . . . um." *What is Montreal in Chinese?* "Uh, nay ho mah?"

"Ho . . ." she says.

There is a pause.

"So," I say in Chinese. "That's about it. I just called to see how you were."

"You should come back to Hong Kong some time," my grandmother says. "You can go sightseeing . . ." *Sightseeing. Literally, walking around.*

"Yes, I'd like to come back and see you." *See gan. Time.* "When I have a little more time, maybe next summer." *Or did I just say spring?*

"We're all very proud of you . . . studying so hard in school . . ."

"Ah," I say, not being able to explain that I've graduated already. There is another pause as my eyebrows knit together in frustration over my knotted tongue, the things I want to say, the spaces tangled in my head. "So, well, that's about it. I just called to see how you're doing . . ."

"That's good," my grandmother says to me in Chinese.

"Bye," I say in English.

"Bye," she says back, in English.

I hang up the phone.

"So fast?" my mother says when I call her back.

"I just asked her how she was," I say. "I didn't know what else to

ask her."

"What did she say?"

"She asked if I knew about Grandpa. She said I should come to Hong Kong to visit."

"So you said when you have some time?"

"Yes. I said maybe next summer. Is summer *ha teen* or *yeet teen*?"

"*Yeet teen*," my mother says.

"Oh. Then I told her maybe next spring."

"Did you talk to Uncle Len or Uncle Chu?"

I knew I had forgotten something. "No," I say. "I talked to Ling, she answered the phone."

"Ling's still there? That's good."

". . . Mom?" I say.

"Yes?"

"Do you think that was alright?"

"Yes," my mother says. "Yes. That was fine. They'll be glad you called."

After I hang up the phone, I'm suddenly aware of the quiet room, empty of sound but not quite clear, like the air after an echo has just faded. And I don't know what to do next. I don't know what to do, so I sit there until it is faintly light outside. Then I turn out the lights in my room and stand by the window. I can see a few of the lights in the apartment buildings across from me, lights in tiny box-shapes, and I wonder why those people are still awake. Maybe they're just getting up, or maybe the lights were left on all night. I think about how the darkness inside makes the windows glow street-light orange, how the traffic noise outside has settled into the ground, how snow muffles everything into white. And there, the imprint of my hand, how it has dimmed with new frost. It'll be gone by the morning.

Thursday night, my mother calls at a quarter to eleven.

"I'm just about to go out," she says.

"Right now?"

"In about ten minutes."

"Okay," I say. And my head which has been filled with that muffled air of after-echo these past two days is suddenly clear.

I pull my boots on and tie the laces slowly. I have on two pairs of socks, two sweaters over my shirt, then my jacket, a pair of gloves, a scarf, and a hat. Out the door, down three flights of stairs, then outside into the bitter cold. Turning right at the corner onto a smaller street. As I walk, I look down at the sidewalk. Thinking of grandpa, thinking of grandpa. What am I supposed to think about?

I'll think about the way he liked to climb stairs. And the last time I saw him. He was 83 the last time I visited Hong Kong, I was nineteen then, and he liked to climb the stairs up to the sixth floor, said it was good for him. He would get up early and go out to buy breakfast pastries from the bakery before anyone else was up. He would go talk with his friends who were all up early as well, reading the newspapers. He had thin, bony hands that I held when we went walking in the afternoon, to get dumplings at the noodle house, to buy oranges. That was only the fourth time that I had been to Hong Kong. It was always summer when we went, and so hot that I always said I would never go back in summer. I reach an intersection, and decide to turn left. The streets are slippery with ice, and it is beginning to snow. My hands are cold already, even with these leather gloves on, and I wish it was summer now. *Once we took a trip to China, and it was so humid there that I hated it. Grandpa refused to set foot in China ever again, so my mother and my grandmother and I took the train there without him, under the ocean to the mainland, where my mother's sister still lived. Grandfather was a landowner once. They threw him in jail during a revolution. I don't know which one.* My mother told me all this about my grandfather, and I have only these few images of him, ones that I keep trying to call up as I'm walking down this dark street, trying to keep warm. My ears are starting to hurt and I pull my hat down over them, fold my arms across my body. The trees are all spindly and brown-boned. *I only have these few images of grandfather, and I can't be sad about them. What does it mean that my grandfather died? It means I won't have any more images of him, it means that he doesn't walk up the five flights of stairs anymore, it means that I should be sad now. How to be sad? Good morning! he'd say emphatically to me, every morning, triumphantly pleased. My grandmother knew no English at all. Tsoh sun! I'd say when I got up, and they would beam at me. The breakfast pastries would be on the table, the tea brewed and poured for me already. The wind is blowing right through me and making the snow fly like wisps of ghosts across the street. I look through the windows of the apart-*

ments, some dark, some with light, and I can see a ceiling fan whirling long shadows, a street sign saying Kingston that someone has hung on a livingroom wall, a kitchen table with dirty dishes scattered across. I kick at an icicle lying on the sidewalk, watch my breath become smoke, pull down my hat again. *My mother is walking with me right now, across the country my mother is walking with me. We are walking together, thinking about my grandfather. What is she thinking? My mother's father. And what are my relatives doing now, across the ocean where it is tomorrow already? Is my grandfather ashes in an urn, or is he lying in a coffin looking like he's asleep, only in a more perfect sleep? My family there, are they dressed in white, or black? I wish I knew. I wanted to dress in white, but I didn't have anything except a summer blouse. How am I grieving? How is he dead? Is he in heaven like my mother keeps telling me, climbing the stairs with bags of gai lan and fresh fish, to cook dinner? He was the one who did the cooking, not my grandmother. I always thought that was so wonderful. There is a busy street up ahead, and I turn around, not wanting to walk under glaring orange lights, not wanting to see anyone. I pass an all night greasy-spoon, an alleyway, a flower shop with pots of cacti in the window. And all I have of my grandfather are these few images, two words in English, and the taste of pineapple buns for breakfast. I have that picture of him, turning towards me as he was washing the dishes. And I have his chin. Ho tsim, everyone said, just like your grandfather's. And just as stubborn as him, too, my mother said.*

And then I know what to do. A memory of a spirit-place falls into my head — incense smoke, a plate of oranges, a picture of my great-grandparents on my grandmother's bookshelf — things not just for the dead. I know what it is that I want to do.

I walk up the stairs carefully, counting each one. 42 stairs. The door to my apartment is shiny black. The warmth is beautiful. Someone is cooking with garlic and the hallway is pungent and I am hungry. I fumble for the keys in my pocket and open the door. There is my cat coming to greet me, there are my books, my bed, the rug on the floor, the television set, the table with a dirty mug. What are my relatives in Hong Kong doing now?

There are some incense sticks on the dresser. I remember the picture of my grandfather, turning towards me, smiling. There are pots and steamers and strainers on the wall behind him, out of focus.

He is washing dishes. I dig the photo out from an old cookie tin and put it on the window sill, the window sill facing west. And then I light some incense before his picture, the smoke wafting up towards heaven, though I don't know if he believed in heaven. The smell of smoky jasmine, my grandfather's picture, the window facing west. My grandfather has died, and it's all right that I'm not sad because here I'm remembering him, and because suddenly, I think that I *am* sad, *I think that I am sad though this sadness is not the opposite of happy, it is something I hold in my hands and send wafting up in the smoke for him, because he did all the cooking and liked to walk five flights of stairs every morning, because Good Morning, and pineapple buns, his chin, and this picture are all I have left.* I wonder, although somehow I doubt it, if across the ocean they are burning red paper houses for him. And I wonder where I might find a red paper house, or maybe I will make one for him, to send up with the smoke.