

My Mother

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My mother is laying on the living room couch, her eyes closed, brows slightly wrinkled, and her lips ajar. Her breathing is heavy and accented with a soft wheezing. I watch her: her small frame limp and still. A dark green jade pendant, the shape of a gourd, rests on her chest, rising and falling rhythmically with each efforted breath. My mother is dying.

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Jade. Chinese jade is smooth and cool to touch. It comes in an assortment of different colors and sizes. Most people think it is solely a green stone but it actually varies. There are jades white as snow with a soft whisper of green melted in it. Pure and refreshing like a winter melon. Frosted green with the texture of a crisp apple on the inside. Soothing the innermost parts of the soul.

And there are jades the shade of rich tea; the color of warm oolong. That was the color of my first jade. My mother gave me a polished ring of jade for my eighth birthday. I was thrilled to get it because my mother and all her friends wore a smooth circle of jade on their own wrists. It shined in the light and danced up and down their arms as they talked and gestured. "Don't lose," my mother commanded solemnly, slipping the bracelet on my wrist, "very expensive."

It is Chinese tradition to give your daughter jade. According to an old wives' tale, it brings good luck, prosperity and happiness. This was my mother's gift to me, as if the ring of precious stone could somehow encircle me with its mystical powers of promise. That was my mother's way of protecting me.

I lost that bracelet at school during recess the following week I received it. One minute I was swinging on the monkey bars, banging it against the black heavy steel and the next minute, it was gone. My left wrist was bare. It slipped off my skinny wrist unnoticed and scuttered off somewhere.

Five times one is five, five times two is ten, five times three is fifteen... my classmates chanted during our multiplication lesson. I had a hard time concentrating in my classes for the rest of the day. There was only one thing on my mind, the *bracelet*. *Oh please, God, please, please, please help me find it*, I prayed silently in my seat, perspiration beading on my forehead, remembering my mother's words. *Don't lose. Very expensive.* I put my head down on my desk. *I promise I'll never be bad again. I'll do all my homework and I'll always listen to my mother. Oh please, God, I've got to find it.* I searched my memory wildly, trying to remember where that bracelet could have possibly slipped off to. *Six times one is six, six times two is twelve, six times three is eighteen...*

I searched and searched for it frantically afterschool. I even enlisted in the help of several of my friends, tantalizing them with ice cream cones from Thrifty's if they

could locate my precious bracelet. "Bobby, look in the sandlot. Annie, look around the handball court," I directed. "Lucy, let's go to the monkey bars, there are some bushes on the side. Whoever finds the bracelet will get a triple scoop," I promised, even though that was a whole week's worth of my allowance. But after combing through the entire playground and sandlot for two hours, it was nowhere to be found. My friends lost their interest in the bracelet and the ice cream and left me alone.

"I'm sorry, honey," the janitor said after he found me scouring through the school grounds, "it's gone. You'd better go home before it gets too dark."

That evening, I wore a long sleeved sweater to hide my naked wrists. I nervously chopped green onions on a round cutting board as my mother washed the rice at the kitchen sink. *I have to tell her, I thought, she'll notice I'm not wearing it.* I was too afraid to face my mother's fury, even though at that time, I didn't know how much jade meant to her. I just knew she never took off her own bracelet.

"Why you wear thick shirt?" she asked, eyeing my sweater disapprovingly, "Hot in house. You catch cold?"

"Oh no..." I said, uneasily, "This is my favorite sweater. I really feel fine."

"Hmph, you never take care of self, never listen to your mother. Play all day and night with friends. Get sick."

"Really, Ma, I am fine," I protested.

My mother walked over to me at the cutting board and removed the knife from my hands and pressed the back of her hand on my forehead, feeling for any signs of a raised temperature. A look of alarm flashed across my eyes as she touched my hand.

"Take bracelet off to cut onions?" she asked.

"Well..." I began.

"Better," my mother continued, "in case you break."

"Actually, I-I-I lost it," I stammered.

Her hand flew up with rapid speed and swiftly slapped me across the face. My cheek tingled with fresh pain and was moist from the impact of my mother's wet hands. My eyes instantly filled with tears. I stared at her. Her face was red with silent shaking anger. I ran to my bedroom and threw myself on my bed. *I didn't do it on purpose,* I cried softly to myself, but I knew it would be useless trying to explain to my mother. She'd only accuse me of being careless, a girl who didn't appreciate the worth of things.

I went to sleep without any dinner that night. I don't know what was more painful, the gnawing hunger in my stomach, my bruised cheek, or the great sense of guilt I felt for disappointing my mother in losing the bracelet. When I woke up the next morning, I found a jade pendant, laced with a string of gold, under my pillow. *She must have slipped this in while I was sleeping,* I thought to myself. I fastened the chain around my neck and dressed quickly.

She was eating her breakfast, rice and last night's leftovers, when I arrived at the table. I looked at her searchingly, her eyes were sad with remorse. She put her bowl down and touched my face with the outside of her hand, this time caressing my cheek. Fingering the dark stone around my neck, she said quietly, "Get ready for school."

That's the Chinese way of apologizing, *you simply never do.* My mother was never a woman of many words, but she always communicated clearly, with sighs full of

exasperation, looks that could send chills down your spine, or loud clangs with her chopsticks, startling you with its shrill notes. She was enshrouded in a thick veil of mystery to me as I was growing up and even to this day, I still do not understand her.

I learned later that the jade pendant that swings from my mother's neck was given to her by her own mother when she was a little girl; a link that was never to be broken, symbolizing the relationship between mother and daughter. "Each year it grow darker as you keep next to your heart," my mother said.

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"Mui mui," my mother mutters under her breath. Mui mui is the Cantonese title for addressing the youngest daughter in the family. It is also a term of endearment. *She's calling out to Aunt Mei, I think.*

My Aunt Mei once told me that if I ate too much candy before I went to bed I'd have bad dreams. I once dreamt that I blew a giant bubble and it carried me high above the sky. My aunt told me I was lucky she woke me up or else it would have dropped me into the ocean for eating too many plum drops. When my Aunt Mei immigrated to America, she stayed with my mother and me in our tiny apartment in downtown Los Angeles on Vermont avenue. In exchange for room and board, my aunt took care of me during the day and took night classes at a local adult school. I loved my Aunt. She was seven years my mother's junior and she spent most of the day pouring over books and studying. "To learn English," she would say, balancing a cup of tea and an ESL workbook.

Tales and legends flowed freely from the tip of her tongue. She often told them to me to lure me to sleep so she could finish her homework. There was one that she loved to tell me over and over again...

Long long time ago, she said, a beautiful phoenix was flying in the heavens. The phoenix was a mischievous creature, not content to remain solely in the heavens above or the earth, so she roamed the two realms seeking amusement. As she was flying through the enchanted fields of the celestial city, she came upon a clearing with a large lotus pond. Two majestic cranes were planting seeds in the shallow water. Lotus blossoms with pink hearts floated on the surface of the water and the phoenix could see the darkened shapes of bright orange koi swimming underneath the lotus pad. The crane had placed a small mound of seeds on the leaves of a lotus plant. The bird used its beak to bury seeds in the soft soil under the tepid waters. Looking further down the pond, the phoenix could see younger lotus plants growing. But these were no ordinary lotus flowers. The fragrant aroma given off by the ethereal petals intoxicated the phoenix with its rich scent. The flower was like none others anywhere; it was more beautiful than anything the phoenix had seen.

A devilish spirit must have seized the phoenix because suddenly, she sprang from where she was perched and flew towards the precious pile of seeds, managing to capture one in her own beak. The cranes stopped their planting and leapt up into the air in attempt to catch the naughty phoenix but they were no match for her. She flew with rapid speed and grace that no creature could surpass. So the phoenix flew. And flew. After flying for seventy seven days without stopping to eat or drink, the phoenix

decided to land. Searching for a place to rest and careful to guard her stolen treasure, she glided above the earth. The guarded seed still in her mouth, the phoenix sought refuge in a luscious fruit tree.

One day, as the phoenix was napping in the branches of the persimmon tree, she saw a beautiful girl with luminous almond shaped eyes picking a crop from the tree. The tree shook lightly as the girl's hands tenderly plucked the ripe fruit. She sang gaily, her voice enchanted the bird with its clarity and sweetness. As the phoenix crept closer to listen to the girl's song, the seed fell from the Phoenix's beak and into the mouth of the singing maiden. The seed was swallowed, unnoticed by the songstress for she continued her melody, delighted that even the brilliant songbirds among her wanted to hear her sing.

My Aunt Mei told me that the maiden was my mother and the seed that she had swallowed was me. My aunt said I was really a lotus blossom from Heaven, sent to perfume the lives of my mother and her's in America. "But you weren't ready to be born in China," she said, "so she had you in America."

When I graduated from high school, she sent me a red card with Chinese characters written vertically and a gold embossed phoenix hovering over large lotus flowers.

My mother's childhood was very different from mine. In China, boys are valued more than girls. I heard my Uncle Nan say that five daughters cannot equal the worth of one son. My mother blames his philosophy on my great uncles and my grandfather's family, who helped raise him after my grandfather died. If there was only one bowl of rice left, Nan would get it. While my mothers and her sisters went hungry, their youngest sibling was stuffed like a great roast pig. If he even lifted a finger to do something, my mother and aunts were ordered to stop him and do it for him. *He will bear the family name*, they said and my grandmother was powerless to all of this.

When Nan grew older and started his own family, he killed three of his baby girls. His wife, my aunt Lai Lun is the mother of three dead daughters. Does her son know his mother's unspoken sorrows? She hugs him frequently, oftentimes clasping him tightly against her breast as if she were afraid to let go.

My mother birthed a daughter, an only child. *I am lucky*, my mother often told me, her face warm and soft with love. *I have a daughter and I have planted her in America.*

America in the late 1800s, California was referred to as Gaam San - gold mountain. This is a place where gold is everywhere, overflowing in the streets, glittering in the river, a place where nobody is poor and nobody suffers. China was experiencing a great deal of political and economical turmoil after the defeat and demise of the Kuo Ming Tan regime and the insurrection of Communism was causing havoc and confusion. Great grandfather was stripped of his farm and accused of being an enemy of the Communist party because he had been a land owner. The family was thrust into poverty. Foreigners came to various provinces speaking of a place where gold lined the streets, glittered in rivers and it made you dizzy because it shined so much. They promised you

could make millions to send your family and when you had amassed enough wealth, you could come back to China and live in luxury for the rest of your life. My grandfather became incaptivated with this place and left his young wife and their four young children to follow the gold trail to California. My grandfather came on a boat to California but he was quickly herded off to Colorado. He was killed in an avalanche building a railroad in the snowy Colorado mountains but his dreams for a better life were not blown up on that day as well. Before he died, he sent his hopes and dreams spinning into the heart of his young daughter, waiting for him to come home. She received his letter from a place called America when they hauled out his frozen body the following spring.

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I unfold a blanket over my mother, tucking it in underneath her thin arms. She continues to mutter fragmented phrases and words in Cantonese. I can barely hear what she is saying.

When I first started school, I only spoke Cantonese so my teachers enrolled me in ESL classes. I cried because my friends moved on to the next grade while I stayed behind. This was hard for my mother as well, who was first in her high school graduating class in Canton, where she received her education.

When she received a Xerox copy slip, requesting "her active participation during parent teacher conference week because (scribbled in) her daughter was not performing at the optimal level", she went to Ynez elementary armed with a Chinese/English dictionary wedged under her elbow.

"Clar-ah bright girl," my mother insisted loudly, "what problem here?"

"Oh, I'm sure your daughter will catch up," my teacher, Mrs. Bellenson crooned, "she's a pleasure to have in class. She is wonderfully artistic and does all her homework. But..."

"But what?" my mother demanded, pausing to look up from her dictionary.

"But she needs to work on her *English*. Mrs. Woo, I understand you are relatively new to this country. In the interest of what is best for your daughter, I suggest that you stop speaking Chinese to her at home. Why don't you speak to her in English? It will give you a chance to practice as well and afterall, you're not in *China* anymore."

At that point, my mother stood up from her chair and starting cursing at Mrs. Bellenson in loud tonal Cantonese. If only my teacher could have understood the perfect eloquence of my mother in her native tongue, Mrs. Bellenson would have realized how bland her own English really was. How plain and inartistic her language was compared to my mother's skillful cursing with it's rising and falling cadences, intonation that subtly put her in her place.

But the injury my mother suffered that day cut her deeper than the cancer that eats away at her now.

"Never forget you are Chinese," my mother said to me that evening, with a heavy sigh, "*Never be ashamed of who you are.*"

A bamboo shoot remains thin and fragile for the first seven years of its life. But after its seventh year, its stem thickens and grows tough. It is only after then, can it grow into a large tree.

Clara has been bad. She has an uncontrollable temper. We are suspending her for three days. There I was, a ten year old menace sitting outside the principal's office, listening to him to speak to my mother on the phone. *Pal, I remembered. The principal is your pal. That's how you can remember how to spell it. It sounds the same as the word principle. Some pal he really is,* I thought. My mother frowned with displeasure when she came to pick me up from school.

"Why did you do it?" she asked. A boy pulled my braids and called me chink. China girl. He made funny noises with his mouth and laughed at me. Ching, chong, ching. I had to hit him. So I hit him hard. I turned around to face him, my eyes hot with anger and my nostrils flaring. My fists were small but powerful. It was as if my hand was no longer connected to my body. It outstretched itself with amazing force and the other hand rapidly followed. Crushing his jaw with the clenched fists, I couldn't feel myself punching anymore when my teacher pulled me from the boy. Tears flooded my face and everything was blurry, the taste of warm salty tears lingered over my lips. The next day my hands were purple and swollen, but I didn't care. You see, I wasn't ashamed.

My mother didn't punish me. Instead, she rubbed my bruised hands roughly with a smelly brown tonic. "Don't complain," she commanded, but her touch became gentler and seemed to rub away some of the pain in my heart. "My daughter is tough," she said with pride as her strong calloused fingers held my own, "someday you grow become like tall bamboo tree. Big and tough."

Big and tough so no one can laugh at the way you talk, or at the pearl yellow of your skin, or the delicate almond shape of your eyes.

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The phone rings and I walk over to the kitchen to pick it up. It's my Aunt Mei, calling to check up on me and my mother. I hold the phone, her words flowing listlessly into my ear. She tells me I sound worn out and she will come over to tonight to watch my mother and bring me dinner.

"All your mother's friends are so sad to hear about her illness," she continues in her slightly accented but clear English, "they went to temple together to pray for her last weekend. Some people have written me, promising to fly from China just to attend the funeral."

"Really?" I ask.

"Yes," my Aunt replies, "your mother is a very loved woman, Clara. She was very popular in our hometown."

"I know she has a lot of friends-"

"Did your mother," she asked, "ever tell you what a magnificent Chinese Opera singer she was? She used to sing in the local Peking Theater. People came from all over

just to hear her pretty voice. That's what your father fell in love with her for."

I pause for a moment.

"No, Aunt Mei, I *never* knew."

There are a lot of things my mother never told. She never told me she sang Chinese opera. When she played tapes of it, I complained of the high shrilly singing and the brassy banging of the Chinese symbols. *Hmph!* she would say. *Cannot appreciate high quality singing. High quality music.* I would just grimace. As for my father, he died when I was a little baby. My mother offered no explanations, just vivid stories. I don't remember much about my father, but she tried to paint images of him in my mind for me. Every time my mother told me a story about him, she would change the ending, add a character to the plot, or give it a new twist saying she just forget to tell me about this or that the last time. On certain days, my father was a very dashing looking man. *He was tall and handsome with smooth skin and good strong teeth. All girls crazy in love for him.* But the next time my father became a plain humble man, with no good looks to draw people to him. *Oh no, he had no appeal to him, but he keep courting me. He had good heart so I marry him.*

I used to wonder what life would have been like with my father. Would he have comforted my mother in the dark hours of the night as she was softly crying in her room when she thought I was already asleep? Deep throated crying muffled by a pillow, its stuffing flattened and stained with tearspots? Would he have rubbed away the tight tree of knots in her back after working a twelve hour shift at the sweatshop for less than minimum wage.

As my mother's health continues to deteriorate and her cancer progresses, I have started packing up boxes around the house. Last week, I found a newspaper clipping, yellowed and faded with age, preserved and neatly folded in one corner of her dresser drawer. Dated November 16, 1970, a small paragraph reads, *Oriental Dies, Victim Of Racial Hate Crime. Wai Lan Woo was killed by a group of four men...*

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The doorbell rings and it is my Aunt, carrying take-out boxes from Sam Woo's, the local Chinese restaurant. "Come and get it," she calls from the kitchen. "Thanks. Be there in a minute," I respond. Squeezing her hand in mine, I bend over and kiss my mother's cheek gently. Her eyeballs are fluttering under their lids. "She's dreaming," my Aunt says, standing by the doorway. I look at my Aunt thoughtfully before responding. "I hope she's dreaming about Heaven."