

BLOSSOM.

Yan Sham-Shackleton

On the way home from school, I decided to walk by the park to see Gong Gong, my mother's father, the last of my grandparents. I found him under the shade of the large banyan tree, its roots gnarled and twisted into itself like an octopus caught midswim. On one side of him, a row of bell-shaped birdcages hung off a smaller tree. In front of him was a concrete table with the lines of the board already cut into its surface. A small handheld AM radio blared high-pitched Cantonese opera between the static.

Gong Gong's opponent made a good move, and the men standing around the players responded with approval. "*Ai, ho ye,*" Gong Gong shouted as he slapped his hands on his thighs, complimenting his friend.

As I approached him, I could see one tuft of white hair left on his otherwise exposed scalp, sunspots dotting it menacingly. My mother nagged him to go to the doctor to check them out, but Gong Gong paid no notice. Staring at them that moment, I started to stress about them, too.

The old men, seeing me, let me through to the front. We watched the game for a while, everyone concentrating on each move. I always found the rules too complicated to follow.

Then, at the end of the game, when the last move was made and Gong Gong had won, all the slight old men in their sixties and seventies groaned and clapped at the same time. Gong Gong looked up, basking in his momentary glory, and noticed me. He opened his arms wide and said, "San San!" He always used my Chinese name, which meant "mountain." When he stood up, his shorts showed his thin, bony, blue-veined and dark-patched legs. Up top, he wore a new singlet mum had bought him.

"Can't believe it took you so long to see her!" Mr. Wong said in Cantonese.

"He was playing! That's more important," Mr. Lee, who was grandpa's opponent, replied.

"*Hai ah,*" Gong Gong agreed with Mr. Lee.

I walked away from the table with Gong Gong following. Very few grandchildren came down to visit, so it was something of an event when I did. Wanting to show me off, Gong Gong stood on his tiptoes as high as he could and placed his hand over the top of my head to demonstrate our height difference.

"How can she be taller than me?" he asked his friends, some of

whom were still in their pajamas, all of whom I had overtaken in height in my early teens. He squished my cheeks with both his wrinkled hands. "Your skin is so smooth," he said, patting my cheeks a few times.

His friends laughed.

Mr. Lee, having lost the game, decided to leave and took down his birdcage, whistling at the finch as he held it from the bottom like a waiter's tray. "*Lei sick jor fan mei ah?*" *Have you eaten?* It was always the first thing any old person would ask.

"*Sic jor* lunch," I told him in Chinglish.

"Here, have some salty plums," Mr. Wong continued in Cantonese. He was the only one with any girth, and he always had snacks with him.

"*How sic ah?*" I replied overenthusiastically. I had outgrown the excitement of being given snacks long ago, not to mention that I preferred Western-style sweets full of sugar and fat or oily and salty Japanese chips over the traditional Chinese snacks of sugared gingers and preserved lemons.

"Here you go." Mr. Wong handed me one of the dried fruits with the hard skin and smiled. He knew I only acted like I loved them because I wanted to please him and continue the relationship I had had with him since I was a little girl. "How old are you now?"

"Nearly eighteen," I replied.

All the men clicked their tongues and made impressed noises as they expressed their disbelief I had grown up.

"About to go to university!" Mr. Wong continued. "Have you been studying?"

"Is she a good girl?" Mr. Lee added as he covered his bird with a white covering so it wouldn't be startled as he walked her home on the busy streets.

"Look at her," Gong Gong beamed. "What do you think?"

"Okay, *la,*" I said, half in English and half in colloquial Cantonese, and smiled with an uncommitted shrug.

"They grow so fast," Mr. Wong said. "So big!"

"Never been hungry in her life," Gong Gong said.

"Never had nothing to eat," Mr. Lee agreed.

"Never been in a war," Mr. Wong said, shaking his head. "Such easy lives, this generation. They don't even know."

There was a pause as each of them remembered a more difficult time.

Gong Gong and his friends' conversation never deviated long from reminders of invasion, starvation and loss. Their young, bright futures had been destroyed by the Japanese invasion with all its atrocities and the Chinese civil war that followed.

Gong Gong had fought on the prewar government's side, defending first his country, then democracy and the free market against the Communists with the KMT. After his side lost, he fled to British Hong Kong, which was invaded by the Japanese but not the Communists. Although the British kept him safe, he only grudgingly accepted them being there. He and his friends lived in constant discontent. Their memory of a free and prosperous China, a country not marred by invasion and dictatorship, could not be returned.

As a child, I understood little when they recounted the convoluted history of their lives. Those peripheral conversations and the dark fairy tales of my childhood lingered—one day you left your village and went to university in the big city; the next day, planes were bombing overhead—and were to me no more real than any other myth or story until much later in my life when I studied Chinese history.

“Are you going to school here or abroad?” Mr. Wong asked.

“America, after June,” I said. My family was leaving because Hong Kong was about to be transferred from British to Chinese rule.

All three men looked down to the ground, sadly shaking their heads because they knew it meant that I wouldn't see Gong Gong anymore. I didn't know how often I would return.

In the silence, the songs of Cantonese opera mixed with the chirping of finches came to the fore. I walked over to them and looked into the cages. I had indeed grown. As a child, I could only see the bottom of the cages, hand carved with clouds and storks. Sometimes, Gong Gong and his friends would take the cages down so I could feed little crickets to the birds by hand. On very special occasions, Gong Gong might take out his bird, Blossom, and let me cup my hands around the golf-ball-size grey finch with pink trim. She wouldn't fly away because her wings had been clipped.

Mr. Lee interrupted all our private thoughts. “Go have afternoon tea. San San hasn't eaten since lunch.”

“*Hai ah, hai ah,*” Gong Gong agreed. “Let me take you to afternoon tea,” He patted my shoulders and tilted his head towards the birds.

“Go take Blossom's cage off the tree. You're tall enough.”

* * *

Gong Gong lived in an old-fashioned four-story walk-up with large windows, slightly rusted window frames and high ceilings. His building was one of the last holdovers in that part of town; every other one had been knocked down to build high-rises with tiny flats and barred windows. His flat was on the second floor, which wasn't too far to walk but still a

worry for a man his age. As I tried to help him up the stairs, he swatted me away.

“*Mei gum loa ah.*” He wasn't *that* old.

When we arrived at his house, I called my mother to let her know that I was going to stay for dinner with Gong Gong to keep him company. The maid was going to make steamed fish with soy sauce and spring onions—one of my favorites.

As I started my physics homework, Gong Gong put on a video of an old black-and-white movie adaptation of the Cantonese opera, *Dai Lu Fa*, or *Emperor's Daughter*, about a princess trained in martial arts who led the resistance to reclaim her father's reign.

I loved that opera. When I was younger, during festival days, Gong Gong would take me down to the park to watch the operas on bamboo stages decorated with bright-colored banners made with cloth and flowers. I would sit on his shoulders and watch the singers with their elaborate headdresses of hanging silk pom-poms and silver decorations and white painted faces accentuated by pink highlights.

Distracted, I became mesmerized by the repetitive reflections of the ceiling fan's spinning blades on the glass that held my great-grandfather's portrait. Next to them were two other black-and-white portraits of his wife and their daughter, my great-aunt. My great-grandparents looked young, younger than Gong Gong for sure, maybe the same age my parents were. Their eyes were blank, as were their expressions, their lips closed and thinned as they held their position so the photos wouldn't blur—old cameras had such long exposure times. They were wearing traditional Chinese clothing.

Growing up, I never saw those photos. It wasn't until scanners were widely available that Gong Gong asked Mom to take the passport-sized photographs with patterned edges to be enlarged and framed. When mom brought them home, Gong Gong took them out of the tissue paper and demanded I leave the TV to see the photographs of his parents and sister.

Until then, I had no clue whom in the family I looked like. I was tall, broad and dark. My cousins were thin, slight and delicate. But I saw a full reflection of myself in my great-aunt's photo.

I wondered how my great-aunt felt about being bigger than the rest of the girls who lived in the village, imagining them all to be like my girl cousins. Had she wanted to blend in like I did, or did she take pride in her stature? I had no idea how she felt because during the Sino-Japanese War, while Gong Gong fought the Japanese, his village was burned to the ground and he didn't know if his family had lived or died.

He ended up in Hong Kong all by himself. He met my grandmother,

and they had five children. He's watched as each one emigrated to the US or to Australia, my mother the last to go. Sometimes, I would imagine walking down the street and coming across an old woman who looked like me, only to discover she was actually Gong Gong's *mui mui*, and I could reunite them, as she too had fled to Hong Kong, made a life, married and had a family.

"Gong Gong?" I asked, still considering the faces of his family I had never met.

"*Hai*," he replied and turned away from the TV and towards me.

"What would have happened to you if you had stayed in China?" We were speaking in Cantonese.

"The Communists probably would have killed me," he said with the nonchalance of a person who has made peace with the horror of war long ago.

"Is that why you say you're never going back to China?"

"I won't go because I can't stand the Communist Party."

"Why don't you come to America with us then?" I asked in an attempt to do what none of my aunts and uncles nor my mother could do: persuade him to change his mind. Maybe, I thought, as the date of our departure came nearer and reality set in, he wouldn't want to be apart from us.

"What would I do there? Who's there to play chess with me? What about Blossom? Who's going to take her on a walk every day?"

"You'll have us," I said.

"San San, I'm too old to move again," he sighed, then turned back to his TV.

* * *

A day or two after I saw Gong Gong, I was alone in my room. In front of me was an empty box for the things I no longer wanted. My father had given me the task of throwing things away before the packers came: clothes I didn't wear, books I had read, CDs I didn't listen to. He even said cuddly toys, which upset me because although I had stopped making elaborate stories about their daily adventures, I remained attached to them.

In my hand I held a pencil, a white unsharpened one, with Hello Kitty waving to her friends from a school bus. I'd had it for years and liked it so much that I had never used it, not wanting to ruin the design. Twisting it around and around in my fingers, seeing the pattern repeat itself, I thought deeply about this pencil.

Pencils were widely available in America and therefore there was no need to bring

them with me. But I particularly liked this one. It would be irreplaceable, as I hadn't seen it again. So was this something I should bring with me because I loved the design or something I should discard because it was a writing instrument?

Deciding to keep it, I returned it to the drawer of my desk.

Next, I picked up a CD, *Now That's What I Call Music! 1994*, which I rarely listened to. That, too, caused a dilemma.

If I threw away a CD, then regretted it, would I be wasting money buying the exact copy when I got to America? Wasn't it better to bring it just in case, because then I wouldn't waste Dad's money even though I hadn't listened to it for a while? But there will always be new music to listen to and buy.

When I placed it in the near-empty box, the CD looked so small. I took it out again—it didn't seem big enough to get rid of. Since the CDs didn't take up too much space, I decided I would probably keep all my CDs, and I ignored that shelf completely. I looked at the one above, and the first object I saw was a clear vase that had come with the flowers my friends gave me for my sixteenth birthday: the first bouquet of my life. It was a simple vase, delicate and cheaply made. Afraid it might break in my hands, I cradled it in my arms and contemplated its emotional weight.

How could I decipher what was useless or not? What were the criteria my parents felt I should use? Was there an exact number of possessions they expected me to get rid of, and, if so, what was it? Would Dad even check what I chose to keep and what to leave behind? And if he deemed something was not worth keeping, would he become angry when he found I had packed it?

Despite drinking too much at times and having an occasional joint with my friends, for the most part I had an extremely sheltered and simple home life.

Both my parents were soft-spoken people with reasonable expectations—they just wanted As and Bs. They even allowed me to quit piano when I got bored with it. My teenage rebellion had mainly taken the shape of walking around our flat morosely, listening to music too loudly (on earphones) and maybe slinking away with a pout on my face, then going into my room to shed quiet tears as I held a giant soft toy of Miss Hoi Wai, the resident orca at Ocean Park that had died earlier that year.

I never tested my parents, never yelled or defied them to their faces.

What if I refused to throw anything away?

I contemplated just telling my parents I would not do what they had asked.

Would Dad just tell the packers to take everything, or would he start making decisions for me? Whittling down my possessions without my input? He wouldn't do something like that, would he?

Just then, I lifted both my arms back behind my head and launched the vase at the wall across the room. The glass shattered: light became a

physical object, the beams refracting into different directions and ending up as fragments on the floor.

Staring at it, I tried to fully comprehend what I had just done. My parents rushed in, full of concern.

“What happened? Are you okay? Did you cut yourself?” Dad asked.

Not replying, I still stared at the glass glinting under the light.

“Let me grab the dustpan,” my mother said. “How did all that glass get across the room? It’s everywhere.” My mother didn’t even consider I had thrown the vase, as it was so out of character.

She left, heading towards the kitchen to let Cielo, our maid, know she needed to clean up my room.

“Why do I have to throw away anything? I want to keep my things,” I said.

“Because it costs a lot to ship all our belongings, and if you don’t need them anymore, it’s better we don’t take them,” my father said.

“What if I throw away something I need when I get there?”

“We can buy it again. You can buy everything in America. There are a lot of shops. Remember how large the malls were?” My dad tried to placate me. “You and your mum can go shopping. We’ll give you money, more than usual. I know you’ll like that.”

Even though I loved shopping with my mother, and that would usually make me extremely happy, a promise of future purchases didn’t appeal. What I wanted was not something new. What I wanted was to keep my old things.

“I’m not going,” I told my dad.

“You have no choice,” my father replied sharply. He lowered his voice again. “I know it’s hard . . . but . . .”

“I’m staying with Gong Gong. Someone has to look after him,” I said.

My father looked resigned. Maybe he had been waiting for this conversation to happen.

“We’ll come visit. We will see him as much as we can.”

“I want to stay with Gong Gong,” I was resolute.

“I know you don’t want to go, but we have to.” Dad walked me over and led me to my bed and sat me down.

“Why? What if I don’t protest like the students in Beijing? What if I don’t join them so the government can’t hurt me? I promise, I’ll stay away.” Clenching my teeth, I tried to hold all my muscles as tightly as I could so I wouldn’t melt into a flood of tears and frustrations.

“It’s more complicated than that; there are many other factors to worry about: the independence of the courts, my job as a judge . . . but that doesn’t matter. You don’t have to think about that. For you, there

are more universities, more jobs, more opportunities.” He took my shoulders, and he tried to ease me towards him, as he had done many times throughout my life.

“I’m not leaving home,” I told my dad again.

“We’re just moving to a new home. You’ll like it just as much. It will be the same.”

When I heard that, I felt a new and unknown emotion towards my father: *disappointment*.

Until then, I had believed my father would never lie to me, would never let me down.

But when he told me it was going to be the same, he lied.

Something besides the vase shattered that day: my faith in my father.

Even though I wasn’t too old to move, I was old enough to know that you didn’t just arrive at a place and call it home.

* * *

The phone call came early. It was hazy and grey outside, and cold air emanated from my windows. My mother cried, and my father woke me up and told me to put on my school uniform and bring my school bag.

Gong Gong had passed away the night before while we all slept, and the maid had found him in the morning. He hadn’t been sick; in fact, he was as grumpy and energetic as ever. A few days after my birthday, I went to visit him at the park. He won all his games while I was there.

The curtains were drawn when we went into his room. The sun wasn’t fully up. The room smelled of old age, antiseptic and Tiger Balm, a brown waxy ointment Gong Gong rubbed on his joints to loosen them up, made of eucalyptus oil, tea tree oil and Chinese medicinal herbs.

He slept facing the ceiling, his mouth mid-snore, his lips concave as he’d taken out his dentures the night before. The duvet covered his body, his arms out. I stood by the door and wondered why my father had asked me to put on my uniform—as if I could go to school after that.

My mother yelled, “Ba Ba!” and threw herself on him, sobbing on his chest like in Hong Kong soap operas. Watching her, I still expected Gong Gong to get up and start talking to her, laughing loudly because she was being so dramatic. He didn’t. Peering at his face, I stepped hesitantly towards the two of them.

“Gong Gong,” I said. “Gong Gong.”

I waited for him to break into a smile like he always greeted me. Even though he hadn’t responded to my mother, he surely couldn’t help but be happy when his favorite granddaughter came near. I had never known him any other way.

I touched his hand lightly with my two fingers; his translucent skin looked grey. Purple patches had gathered around his elbows and the bottom of his arms.

“Gong Gong,” I said again, still hoping those lips already tinged with blue would break into a smile.

Then, it finally occurred to me that Gong Gong was not going to wake up. He would stay like that. He would never move. He would never smile for me again. He would look like that until his body degraded and turned to bone.

I recoiled, let out a small gasp and ran out.

Before I had worked out where I was, or where I was going, my father appeared beside me and held my arm as if I was about to fall. Maybe I was. He led me to the living room, sat me down on a very old wooden chair with green upholstery where Gong Gong would sit, and I would sit on his lap. I didn’t speak or cry, though I could hear my mother crying in another room. I wanted my father to leave and be with my mother and stay with me the same time.

My father said something, and though I didn’t hear what he said, I knew he spoke to me. I replied, “*Or Yi Mui Fa.*” *I want Blossom.* My father went over to the window and took down the birdcage off the curtain rod and placed Blossom on my lap. The little grey bird chirped, expecting to be fed, and I whistled to her like Gong Gong had taught me. I placed my fingers in the cage and allowed her to peck my fingers. It hurt more than usual because I kept my fingers there, letting her gnaw.

I thought about how she didn’t know that Gong Gong wouldn’t return.

But I didn’t really know either. I still thought I would see him again.

I didn’t know that after my mother spent some time with him, people would take Gong Gong’s body away so quickly. I didn’t really know they would take him away—it never occurred to me. After all, he’d never left the house without me when we visited.

At some point, the doorbell rang, and people came with a stretcher. My first instinct was to stop them. To me, they weren’t allowed to take him before I had talked to him. It all happened so fast. I wouldn’t see him again until he was in his coffin with a strange white powder over his face hiding his sunspots, a light rouge on his cheeks and lipstick hiding the blue of his lips, his face like a faded photograph of a Cantonese opera singer. He looked like an imposter of my grandfather. He couldn’t sing—a thick thread, possibly a wire, ran through his lips, sealing them shut.

* * *

During Chinese funerals we wear white. I knelt on the floor with the rest of my family, many of whom had returned from the US and Canada. Mourners filed past to pay their last respects. In the evening, we burned bamboo and crepe paper replicas of things that guaranteed a safe passage and comfortable afterlife.

We called out to Gong Gong, asking him to receive our gifts. We told him, “Here’s an airplane for you to visit us.” “Here is a TV for you to watch.” “Here’s a house with two maids.”

“Here is a birdcage,” I called.

The next day, we went to Gong Gong’s home. Every seat was taken in the small one-bedroom apartment. My aunts and uncles stood close to each other, drinking Chinese tea and eating black sesame biscuits; they were Gong Gong’s favorite, and there were a few tins left. The mood of the room would swing from jovial family reunion to sad mourning. All would seem well, then there would be a sudden change in the molecules, as if one person’s grief would spread through the whole family silently. Then a moment would pass, and the fact we were all together would bring joy again. What was unsaid between us, although we all knew, was that Gong Gong’s passing lifted the burden of worry from the whole family. He would not be left alone in Hong Kong with no one to look after him.

After going to the bathroom, I slipped into Gong Gong’s bedroom. I sat on the bed and touched the sheets. The last time I had been in the room, Gong Gong was still there. He wasn’t alive, but his presence, his body, remained. I thought how he had been turned to ash and was now in an urn.

How does a life that lived through so much end up in such a small physical space?

My mother came in, followed by my father. Mom looked haggard; her hair, usually set nicely, looked windblown. Pinned in her hair was a white flower made with yarn, and on my father’s arm, a black cloth band.

“Are you okay?” Mom asked. I nodded. “We didn’t know where you went.”

“I’ve been here for a while.”

“We’ve been talking about what to do with Blossom. We think it’s best to let her free. I’m sure that’s what Gong Gong would have liked. Your dad suggested you could be the one to do it. All the aunts and uncles agreed.”

A sense of irrational fear swept through me: I panicked my aunt and uncle would open the cage before I could stop them. I ran to the door where my father was standing.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“We can’t! Don’t do it!” I said.

“Why not?” My mother asked carefully, surprised by my overreaction.

“Blossom’s had her wings clipped! She can’t fly!”

I imagined her falling straight down from the second-floor window onto the ground as my whole family watched and how upset everyone would be. Also, falling to her death would be a very clumsy and humiliating way for a bird to die.

“Okay. I’m glad you told me. We won’t do it then,” my mother assured me.

“I’ll take care of her,” I said.

“For now, yes,” my father replied.

* * *

About a month later, my mom received the death certificate. He didn’t die of a stroke or a heart attack. In the box next to “cause of death,” it merely read “old age.” Dad said it probably meant he simply stopped breathing. It didn’t make sense to me; he was only seventy-seven.

If I’m asked how Gong Gong died, I would say he kept the promise he made to himself the day he left China: he would never  turn until it became democratic again. I would say Gong Gong willed himself to death so he didn’t have to step on Communist soil after the handover. He never lost his faith in his cause.

A week before we moved to America, my mother and I took Blossom down to the park. Mr. Wong adopted her. ■

SNAPSHOTS OF A FATHER

Sarena Pollock

*The neighbor gave Pollock her car keys
and he drove away in the stolen Acura.
Police say Pollock was involved in a crash
shortly after he fled in the stolen car.
The car sustained disabling damage
and Pollock fled the scene on foot.**

I used to stay up looking
at a Polaroid of my parents,
one where she’s laughing
and he’s kissing her cheek,
the flash washing out the shadows,
and for a moment, I’d close my eyes
and pretend I was there with them.

*Pollock allegedly approached
the neighbor who began to call 911
when he entered the house behind her.
Pollock was holding a pen and yelling
“I think I killed them! I killed them!”*

*Does it hurt? I’d ask
as I poked at his tattoos.
Nah, not that bad. It feels like this!
He jabbed me with his finger
making a zzz sound, and I laughed
because it tickled and
kinda hurt at the same time.*

*Pollock’s mother told police
she saw Pollock grab an object
from his pocket prior to threatening her,
and she believed this object was a knife.*

*Family comes before everything,
he once told me, squeezing me tight,
it’s you and me against the world.*

When the mother tried to intervene,

* The Mercury (Pottstown, PA) 19 May 2011 By Carl Hessler Jr.