**Tai**

*Norman Yeung*

“I can’t sleep.” Nudge nudge nudge.  “Ah Tai, I can’t sleep.” I never had to nudge much more.  In the midst of thunderous snoring, Great-Grandmother would always wake up.  She would turn over, get up, and trudge five steps over to join me in my bed, pulling the quilt over me.  A few minutes later her snoring would return, now only inches from my ear.  But I didn’t mind.  I was finally fading into sleep.  I was safe.

No, it was never her snoring that kept me wired at night.  It was falling.  A giant lead ball dropping from the sky into my chest.  Being chased but my legs feel like wet concrete.  Ghosts.  Freddy Krueger.  Being a six-year-old and learning that the world offers more and more to fear every day, every day.  Seven-year-old.  Eight-year-old.  I spent much of my childhood sharing my room with Great-Grandmother.  Many of those nights had me nudging.  “Ah Tai, I can’t sleep.”

She was alive in three centuries.  When she was a teenager, China still had an emperor.  She spent decades apart from her husband -- my great-grandfather -- as he worked on our New World railroad while she cooked over the straw-burning brick stove in our Guangzhou village.  She couldn’t read, certainly not.  She did math by fingers.  She had robust, unbound feet, because how could a peasant shovel soil with stumps in perpetual pointe.  I inherited her feet: flat.

Of her fifteen great-grandchildren, I like to believe I was her favourite.  Sure, why not.  Of course I was: I was the youngest, I was a boy.  Eighty years between us and we were chums.

We played marbles.  Cross-legged on the carpet click click click.  She would always beat me.  She took walks up the block to the Dairy Queen and back the other way to the corner store.  She would return with her cane in one hand and Corn Nuts in the other.  She didn’t understand the money and I always feared she would pay for the snacks with her fifty-dollar bill and receive five in change.  I warned her about dogs, but she said, “I’m not afraid”.  Whenever she came home I would run downstairs to help her up.  She would swat me away and walk the stairs alone, clutching the banister: “It keeps me young.” As years went on she would still go up the stairs alone, but on all fours like a beast.

The last time I saw her she was 103.  For almost ten years she had been living at an old folks’ home.  She hated it.  Her roommate would hit her.  She was thrilled when I’d visit. Mom took me to see her regularly, every few months. She doted on Great-Grandmother with patience, wetting a towel to wipe her raisin face. I have yet to ask Mom if she’s forgiven Great-Grandmother for forcing her to hoe the dirt late into her pregnancy.

Great-Grandmother would hold my hand in hers, spotted wrinkled skeletal, grasp my wrist and say, “You’re skinny.  A young man like you shouldn’t be skinny.  You must eat more.” I would nod.  We both got older.  I became a man and she became a century old.  She would repeat herself: “You’re skinny.  You must eat more.” I would nod.  “You’re skinny. You must eat more.” [nod].  “You’re skinny.  You must eat more.” [nod].  She began repeating herself constantly and talking to her dead husband.  Then she forgot who I was.  But still, even though I became a stranger, whenever I had to end my visit, she would follow me out to the hallway of the home, and as I passed by crumbling old people in wheelchairs reeking of Tiger Balm, I would turn back to see Great-Grandmother leaning on her cane and waving goodbye to me.

“Ah Tai, I can’t sleep.” Before the old folks’ prison.  “Ah Tai, I can’t sleep.” Before crawling up stairs with four paws.  “Ah Tai, I can’t sleep.” When she knew my name.  Rolling into my bed became her familiar duty.  Not one complaint.  Never said a word.  Unless she caught me easing into sleep with my hands at my chest.  “Don’t do that,” she would say.  It was years later that I would understand why she would push my hands away when they crept up to my chest: Don't lie there like death, just go to sleep.