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Grandmother

Hui Yen's grandmother was smoking again. She wasn't supposed to, for the usual health reasons, but she had told the doctors that she had been smoking for most of her life and wasn't about to stop now. Hui Yen's mother didn't like the smell of cigarettes in the flat, so her grandmother smoked at the bus stop downstairs. She sat perched on the edge of a dull grey plastic seat, one leg elegantly crossed over the other despite her age and her weakened, thinned-out limbs, puffing languorously on her cigarette as if drawing every last gasp of flavour from it. She cut a cryptic figure in the neighbourhood, with her salt-and-pepper ringlets of tightly curled hair, her out-of-fashion *samfoo*-style pantsuits in a discreet dark green or dark blue print, and her soft black canvas shoes, the kind more likely to be worn by a kung fu master in an old Hong Kong movie than a wiry, sun-faded woman in a sleepy, sallow Singapore housing estate. The only splash of colour on her was the crimson packet of cigarettes, clutched in one hand with a rumpled handkerchief.

It was against the law to smoke at the bus stop. Hui Yen knew this from assembly talks in school, when cheerful policemen in stiff, sweaty uniforms warned them about the dangers of smoking and dutifully listed all the public areas where smoking was banned. Hui Yen didn't know if anyone, policeman or otherwise, had ever tried to reprimand her grandmother for smoking at the bus stop. Probably not, given the crinkled, sour expression her grandmother typically lapsed into when she was by herself. It was the same expression that had intimidated Hui Yen into petrified silence whenever she visited her grandmother as a child, back when her grandmother still lived on her own, in a little flat in Chinatown.

Hui Yen was fourteen now, old enough not to be so easily spooked by her grandmother, and also old enough to know that the way the ends of her grandmother's lips disappeared in that downward twist, the deeply etched arches of skin that appeared between her nose and her mouth, merely meant that her grandmother was preoccupied with her own thoughts. 'Ah Ma is used to living alone,' her mother had told Hui Yen when her grandmother moved in with them. 'You try not to disturb her. If she wants to be by herself, it's okay.'

Hui Yen didn't often see elderly women by themselves in the housing estate. Most had grandchildren in tow, or they huddled with friends at the ground-floor 'void decks' of the apartment blocks, trading in gossip or furtive games of *chap ji ki* (although it was also against the law to gamble in public areas). In comparison, Hui Yen's grandmother was alone whenever she was at the bus stop. Sometimes Hui Yen saw her there when she came straight home from school, around two p.m. Other days she was there when Hui Yen got home close to dinner time, after spending the afternoon at band practice in school or dawdling at the neighbourhood McDonald's outlet with her friends.

At first Hui Yen pretended not to see her; after all, her mother had said not to bother her grandmother unnecessarily. After a couple of weeks, though, as the cool of the north-east monsoon was superseded by the relentless middle-of-the-year heat, Hui Yen began to feel uneasy that her grandmother seemed to be exiling herself to the bus stop during the worst of these scorching, sweltering afternoons. One day after band practice, when Hui Yen's white school uniform shirt was sticky with perspiration and clung greasily to her back, and her black and white checked skirt felt curtain-like and dank against the back of her knees, she spotted her grandmother's lone figure at the bus stop and, instead of going upstairs to their flat, continued straight towards her.

'Ah Ma,' she called.

Her grandmother turned slightly to look at her, then nodded and turned back, exhaling cigarette smoke away from Hui Yen.

Hui Yen hovered uncertainly, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. 'Ah Ma, you always come here to smoke, right?'

Her grandmother glanced over again. 'You always watching me, *issit?*'

'No, no, no, I just meant ...' Hui Yen slid her thumbs under the straps of the backpack that drooped limply against her sweaty back. 'Ah Ma, if you smoke at home in the afternoon, Mummy won't know. By the time she comes home, the smell will be gone already.'

'Telling me how to bluff your mother *ah?*' Her grandmother's quizzical expression deepened.

Hui Yen shrugged one shoulder awkwardly. 'Not really ... but it's very hot and you sit at the bus stop so long. It's cooler upstairs in the flat. Can turn on the fan also, blow away the smoke.'

Her grandmother took another drag on the cigarette and when she blew out the smoke, it surged forward in an enthusiastic, ephemeral tangle. 'You very clever to think of these things. Just like your father.'

Hui Yen felt a tingle along the side of her neck, as if a bead of perspiration had just snaked down from her hair to her collarbone. Her father, Ah Ma's son, long vanished from their lives, whose face she knew more from photographs than from memories. Her mother kept the photographs in a battered biscuit tin and had solemnly passed the tin to her a few years ago, telling Hui Yen to keep them, look at them, do whatever she wanted with them – but don't ask any questions. That her father was her grandmother's son seemed improbable – this short, taut, serious woman, that loose-limbed, athletic-looking man in the photographs. In the decade since he had disappeared, Hui Yen had gotten so used to not asking any questions about him that she didn't know how to respond to her grandmother now. She let the silence drag out between them, like the years that stretched between the present moment and the last time she had seen her father, when he and her mother had dropped her off at the childcare centre before they went to work.

Her grandmother didn't speak either, until she finished her cigarette and flicked the butt onto the ground. 'I stay in your mum's flat. I'm only a guest,' she said to Hui Yen as she stood up. 'Mustn't make life difficult for her.'

'Okay, but I won't tell her anything,' Hui Yen volunteered as they headed towards their block. 'I didn't tell her I saw you smoking before.'

Her grandmother looked bemused again. '*Wah*, what other secrets are you keeping from your mum?'

'Don't have *lah*, Ah Ma,' Hui Yen said impishly. 'I help other people keep secrets only.'

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Hui Yen's grandmother had come to live with them after she slipped and fell at home and broke her left leg. Once her injury had been set in a cast, the hospital wanted to discharge her but insisted that she couldn't be allowed to live alone. At first Hui Yen thought this meant her grandmother would live with Auntie Ruth, her grandmother's only other child, who had studied business, met and married a doctor, and now lived in a grand house in Bukit Timah with three children, two maids and a Siberian husky. But after a few hurried phone conversations between Hui Yen's mother and Auntie Ruth, Hui Yen's mother said Ah Ma would come to live with them in Bedok instead. 'Auntie Ruth has too much to manage already,' was all she gave Hui Yen by way of explanation.

'Then Ah Ma's flat in Chinatown – how?'

'Your auntie will rent it out. We have to help your grandmother pack and move her things here. With the crutches, it'll be quite difficult for her to move around for a few months.'

Hui Yen, who liked her grandmother well enough for someone she saw only at Chinese New Year and her birthday, thought that having her grandmother live with them meant that there would always be someone to talk to when she got home from school. She was growing

into the kind of teenager who enjoyed jabbering away with her friends for hours or prattling with her mother on weekends when she wasn't worn out from her secretarial job at the bank. But her grandmother stumped her with silence. Unlike her mother, her grandmother didn't seem very interested in what Hui Yen did in school, what instrument she played in the band or what she was doing with her friends over the weekend. Her grandmother was so quiet that Hui Yen barely even knew if she was home unless she heard, in the first month, the tap and rattle of her crutches and subsequently, the sounds of chopping and cooking in the kitchen (her grandmother, without being asked, had started cooking all their meals once her leg had recovered, relieving Hui Yen's mother of having to buy dinner after work). After a few months of this, Hui Yen hazarded to ask her mother if her father had been like that too, reticent and keeping to himself. Her mother only shook her head, then made an excuse to leave the room, looking as if she had been about to cry.

The other tell-tale sign of her grandmother's presence, that first month, was the whiff of cigarette smoke. Hui Yen caught it several times, usually drifting out of her grandmother's room, until her mother said something over dinner about how the smoke made her throat itch and she didn't want the smell to get into the curtains or the mattress. After that, Hui Yen thought her grandmother had stopped smoking altogether – until she started seeing her at the bus stop.

The bus stop was deserted most afternoons, when it was too hot to go anywhere, too hot to think. Once every ten or fifteen minutes, the lone bus service that plied this road appeared, discharging a hodgepodge of passengers who dispersed almost as suddenly as they arrived, shrinking like frenzied ants into the expansive shade of the surrounding blocks of flats. Mostly, her grandmother had the place to herself.

The next time she saw her grandmother there, Hui Yen was with her classmate Prem, who lived nearby, and they were nursing ice-cold bubble tea drinks. After saying goodbye to him, Hui Yen drifted towards the bus stop, slurping loudly from her plastic cup. 'Ah Ma,' she hailed, 'you got try bubble tea before?'

Her grandmother had just lit a cigarette and waved it to decline Hui Yen's offer. 'All the drinks nowadays, too sweet.'

'Nice what.' Hui Yen slid onto the bus stop bench beside her grandmother.

Her grandmother smoked silently, silkily. Eventually she said, 'Just now, that boy, is your good friend, right?'

Hui Yen was surprised that her grandmother had noticed. 'Friend *lor*. We're in the same class since last year. Sec One.' She didn't have the words to explain her friendship with Prem, how she found him so easy to talk to, how they found the same things hilarious, how they text-messaged each other every day, all day.

'He's Indian, right?'

Hui Yen nodded.

'Last time I had an Indian good friend also, when we joined the police together. A woman *lah*.' Her grandmother nudged her cigarette against the edge of the bench, letting the ash scatter to the ground. '*Donno* know what happened to her now. She became an inspector, then later assistant superintendent or something.'

Hui Yen's mother had told her that her grandmother had retired from the police force around the time Hui Yen was born. Hui Yen had seen old photographs of her grandmother as a young woman wearing a stiff police uniform, a diminutive figure whose face seemed to vanish below the dark blue peaked cap. 'Were you an inspector also?' she asked.

'No *lah*,' her grandmother said dismissively. 'No proper education, how to become inspector?'

She lapsed into silence again, puffing on her cigarette intermittently. A single tendril of smoke meandered up from it.

Hui Yen pondered what was left of her drink. She wanted to make it last and lowered the plastic cup to her lap, cradling it with both hands. 'Ah Ma, why did you join the police?'

'Needed to earn money, after your grandfather died,' her grandmother said matter-of-factly. 'I had to take care of your father and your auntie by myself.'

Hui Yen had heard her mother say as much and she felt reassured that the stories lined up. 'But you can do a lot of different jobs what. How come you decided to join the police?'

Her grandmother snorted. 'Cannot study, cannot do office work. Police work I thought: the money is not bad, not so much funny business for a woman, and I already know how to fight. Last time I got three older brothers in Malaysia, you know – of course I know how to fight.'

While Hui Yen knew that her grandmother, like her mother's family, had been born in Malaysia, she had never given much thought to what other families they had come from, belonged to – left behind. She imagined the small, faceless woman in the dark blue uniform brandishing her fists or a gun, barking down cartoonish men twice, three times her size. 'You really used to fight? Fight with the criminals?'

'Not fight because want to fight,' her grandmother corrected. 'It's my job, *unnerstand?*'

Hui Yen had seen lots of police dramas on TV, wild American cop shows with wisecracking characters and convoluted plot twists, and extravagant Hong Kong or Singapore series that alternated between solving horrendous crimes and resolving contorted questions about loyalty, morality and duty. 'Ah Ma,' she began, then pulled up her thoughts in a halt.

It was her grandmother's turn to prompt her. 'What you want to ask?'

Hui Yen rotated her cup in her hands, the tepid plastic crackling with every twist. 'Ah Ma,' she tried again, 'did you ever kill anybody before?'

Her grandmother didn't answer for a long while. A bus pulled up and a few passengers got off. Hui Yen thought the bus driver was frowning at her grandmother with her cigarette, but he drove off without comment. To fill the silence, Hui Yen sucked up the last mouthful of her drink and got up to throw the cup into the bin. Then she didn't know whether or not to sit down.

'Hui Yen.' Her grandmother patted the space on the bench beside her, as if Hui Yen were a little girl again.

Hui Yen sat obligingly, her schoolbag slumping heavily against her back.

Her grandmother took a drag on her cigarette, the smoke she exhaled clouding her face before she spoke. 'Hui Yen, some things we can tell you now. Some things, not yet *lah*.' She sounded, uncharacteristically, like Hui Yen's mother, laying down some unconvincing boundary when Hui Yen asked if she could go to a midnight movie with her friends or buy a slinky tank top or a pair of impossibly high heels.

Her grandmother went on, 'Doing police work, I got kill people before. Because if I didn't kill them, they will kill me. Last time all the gangsters, you know, not scared of police one. So sometimes, no choice ...'

Something in her grandmother's tone made Hui Yen think she should apologise for asking the question, or at least stop her grandmother from saying any more. But her grandmother seemed to have found some kind of rhythm – inhale on the cigarette, exhale away from Hui Yen, then talk.

'I never say kill a lot of people. But sometimes you have to. To protect yourself, protect other people.'

Hui Yen stared at the space between her feet, clad in well-scuffed, once-white school shoes. Now that she had the answer to her question, she didn't know what to think of her grandmother. *She's killed people before*, she thought and snuck a glance at her grandmother's rough, bony hands, one clutching the cigarette, the other resting inert in her lap. *She took a gun or a baton or something, and she ...*

'I try not to think about it too much,' her grandmother said, raising her cigarette to her lips and just holding it there. 'But sometimes I ask forgiveness from God *lah*, Guan Yin *lah*, whatever god – sorry that I had to take away a life.'

Abruptly, Hui Yen asked, 'Do you think my father is dead? Do you think someone killed him?'

Her grandmother lowered her cigarette without having taken a drag, holding it with her arms folded. It would have been an imperious gesture, if not for the softening crow's feet around her eyes, the gentle droop at the edges of her lips. 'Why you ask this kind of thing?'

Hui Yen shrugged. 'Nobody knows what happened to him what. So many possible reasons.' She had discussed numerous permutations with Prem, usually after they had

compared notes on the latest episode of some crime show on TV. Prem had a more vivid imagination and dreamed up scenarios in which Hui Yen's father was leading a dramatic, glamorous but secret life somewhere; Hui Yen leaned towards the more straightforward possibilities. She went on casually, 'If he's dead, maybe it was an accident, or maybe someone killed him.'

'You think so?'

'Ah Ma, I know you retired from police a long time already, but when my father disappeared, did you ask your friends in the police to help find him?'

Her grandmother resumed smoking; her cigarette was almost burned down to the end. 'Ya, I tried to ask for help. But a lot of the people I knew, they retired from police around the same time as me.'

Hui Yen nodded. 'So weird – that someone can just disappeared like that.'

'Not that difficult,' her grandmother mused. 'Last time, if you know how, you can get over to Malaysia without passport. Anyway, your father was always quite playful, like to *kaypoh*. Not only a busybody about other people's affairs, but like to get involved also. Lucky your mother is very different.'

'She is?'

'Anyway, if your father is here, *donno* whether he will let me live with you all or not,' her grandmother said, then took one last drag on her smouldering cigarette.

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Hui Yen wanted to pick up the conversation when they were at home, to find out more about what her father had been like, and what could have become of him. But it was harder to find an opportunity to talk to her grandmother in the flat. Hui Yen offered to help her cook dinner, but she declined, telling Hui Yen she should be doing her homework. At other times her grandmother bustled purposefully about her room, and even though her door was always open, to Hui Yen it felt like a threshold that she couldn't cross unless she was invited. At nights and on weekends, her mother was at home, which made it difficult to have a private conversation in their compact flat.

The next few times Hui Yen saw her grandmother at the bus stop, she happened to be with Prem and preferred to linger with him in the cooler air of the void deck at the foot of her block, while they recounted for the umpteenth time something funny that had happened in class that day, or listened to music on his smartphone to see if she liked the same songs he did. He was one of the few friends she had who was always where he said he would be, whether it was waiting for her in the canteen after school, going to the library to work on a school project or meeting their friends at the cinema on the weekends. Hui Yen liked to test him sometimes, text-messaging to ask where he was in school or at the town centre, then walking over to see for herself that he was there.

Prem couldn't fathom that Hui Yen didn't have to go up and greet her grandmother every time they saw her at the bus stop. He lived with his parents, two brothers, grandparents and an aunt, all in a flat only slightly larger than Hui Yen's. He was used to having family members around all the time, at home and in the neighbourhood. 'If that's my grandmother and I don't say hello and then she sees me,' he said one afternoon as they loitered at her block, 'I'll *really* get it from her when I reach home.'

Hui Yen toyed with the straps of her backpack. 'My grandma's quite relaxed about these things *lah*.'

'Ya, okay, your grandma *is* quite cool. Smoking at the bus stop some more,' Prem added admiringly.

Something in his tone made Hui Yen consider her grandmother anew. She chatted with Prem until he had to leave for a tuition class, then went over to join her.

'Ah Ma,' she greeted. It had been several weeks since the last thunderstorm and there was a kind of unremitting hostility on the air, as if it would never rain again.

'Talking so long at the void deck *ah*,' her grandmother said.

Hui Yen wasn't sure what to make of that. 'A while only.'
'Is he your boyfriend?'
Hui Yen was flummoxed. 'No *lah*, Ah Ma – friends only.'
'You two always talking. But he looks all right, not the trouble-maker kind.'
Hui Yen tried to redirect the conversation. 'Prem said your smoking quite cool.'
'Cool,' her grandmother repeated, as if she was unsure what the word meant. She held her cigarette lazily, with the loose confidence of someone who had been smoking for most of her life.

'Ah Ma, how old were you when you learned how to smoke?'
Her grandmother shrugged, her slender shoulders twitching quickly. 'Last time everybody smoked. Never think about what age.'

Hui Yen demurred, 'Can I try?'
'You want to try smoking?'
Hui Yen tried to downplay it. 'A lot of people in school smoke also, but I never try before.' She didn't mention that her mother had expressly forbidden it several years ago.
To her surprise, her grandmother handed the cigarette over, just like that. It was Hui Yen who was left fumbling, her thumb and forefinger arched in unfamiliar positions as she took hold of the cigarette. 'Just ... breathe in?'

Her grandmother nodded. 'Inhale. Sure cough one. But never mind, just try.'
Hui Yen gingerly edged the cigarette to her lips and sucked on it as if she were sucking up the last drop of bubble tea from a cup. The acrid sensation that coursed through her mouth and snaked down her throat made her gasp, cough and shiver. She blinked furiously, seeing her grandmother watch her intently. When her paroxysm passed, her grandmother said, 'Can try again if you want. First time is the worst, or the first time after you never smoke for a while, like after I stayed in hospital.'

Hui Yen's tongue tasted thickly of charred carbon and nicotine. Instinctively she wanted to hand the cigarette back, but there was also something oddly reassuring about the foreign sensations in her mouth – a promise of new flavours and undreamt-of revelations to come. Without thinking further, she inhaled again, very quickly, from the cigarette. It burned again, but not as much as before, she told herself.

Her grandmother admitted a small smile. 'Like it already *ah*?'
Hui Yen swallowed, tasting to the full extent the stinging warmth before it flickered down her throat. She attempted a few more puffs, in between a few stuttering coughs, then returned the cigarette to her grandmother.

'Do you feel sick?'
Hui Yen shook her head, though her throat was still scratchy.
'If you don't feel well later, you tell me. Better not let your mother know.'
'Of course not!'
'And don't get into trouble in school with any smoking *ah*. You go to school to study, not to learn this kind of thing.'

'Learn from you, Ah Ma,' Hui Yen teased.
Her grandmother snorted. 'I got nothing to teach you *lah*.'
'Got,' Hui Yen said readily. 'Maybe about my father?'
Her grandmother had reassumed the straight-backed, seated posture she favoured while smoking. As she raised the cigarette to her weathered lips, the crook of her wrist stiffened and when she spoke, she sounded disapproving. 'You – really always thinking about your father.'

Hui Yen plunged ahead. 'I just want to know something, anything. How can there be no information at all, not even stories or rumours?'

'Of course got rumours, but ...'
'What rumours, Ah Ma?'
Her grandmother looked away from her, exhaling cigarette smoke which bloomed and wilted rhythmically in front of her face. Finally she said, 'There are some stories I heard, I didn't tell your mother or your Auntie Ruth.'

Hui Yen perked up.

'I heard your father was in Ipoh, so I went there to check. Some people told me he got mixed up in some funny business with gangsters, from Singapore all the way to Malaysia. But hard to get information, you know, this kind of underworld thing.'

'Did you see him?'

'No,' her grandmother said, too quickly. She looked squarely at Hui Yen. 'I'm telling you this because I *dowan* you to think he will come back, or that he's having a good life somewhere.'

'But you also *donno* what,' Hui Yen pointed out. 'You said yourself, this is just a rumour. Maybe he figured a way out ...'

'No,' her grandmother cut her off, 'this kind of gangster thing, it's very complicated. Your father is *not* coming back.' She closed her eyes, as if the heat and the words had all been too much for her.

'Ah Ma, what did you see? How do you know?'

'I didn't see your father,' her grandmother began, a line both reassuring and well-rehearsed. 'I saw a lot of things, cannot tell you. Things were very messy up there, very difficult to know who you can trust.'

Hui Yen waited.

'I didn't see him,' her grandmother repeated, as if trying to convince herself, 'but I saw enough to know what I had to ... what happened to him.' She opened her eyes, her gaze sterner now. 'He's dead, okay? Just like the other day, what you said.'

Hui Yen felt cheated, yet again, of a fuller answer. It was no better than her mother telling her, when she was in primary school, that her father had gone away 'just for a while', or changing the television channel whenever a *Crimewatch* episode about missing persons came on. 'But how do you *know*?' Hui Yen insisted.

'He's dead,' her grandmother intoned. 'I got no evidence to show you or to report to the Singapore police, but I know what I had to ... I know what I saw. He died already.'

Something in her leaden tone and hardened posture made Hui Yen hold back further protests and questions. There was a firm, religious conviction underlying her grandmother's words, more resolute than her usual stubborn independence – a certainty of knowledge that opened a world of stories and sealed them shut all at once.

They sat together in the shade of the bus stop, her grandmother smoking steadily to the end of her cigarette, Hui Yen wishing that she could lean against something, anything for support. She now knew more than her mother did, it seemed, but it felt like less than she had known before. One mystery unfolded into another, while her father became a more inscrutable figure than ever.

She would talk it over with Prem. Maybe Prem would figure it out – or at least come up with a good story for it. She would text him, as soon as she got home. She knew he would answer, as soon his tuition class was over.

Hui Yen slid off the bus stop bench. 'Ah Ma?'

'Hmmm?'

'Will you tell me everything one day? When I'm grown up.'

'I *donno*.' Her grandmother tossed her cigarette butt onto the ground, as usual. 'It won't really matter what age you are. I cannot ...' She let the sentence trail off.

Hui Yen knelt to retrieve the cigarette butt and threw it into the bin. 'Cannot anyhow litter, Ah Ma.'

'Ya, okay.' Her grandmother got to her feet, straightening her *samfoo*. 'Nowadays everything also must do properly, follow the law. Not like last time.'

'Ah Ma, you always break the law. Throw things here, smoking at the bus stop ...'

Her grandmother waved her hand dismissively, the bright red of her cigarette pack flashing like a warning sign. 'Must know the law, then you know how to go around it.'

'Just *dowan* you to get in trouble.'

Her grandmother clasped her free hand on Hui Yen's shoulder as they started to walk towards their block of flats. 'You don't worry. I managed to avoid trouble for many years already.'