

FrameWork 9/23/2

Weiyi Chang on Liz Magor

Eclipse

She left on a Tuesday. What was she wearing? It doesn't really matter. It was raining. Plump, tired drops collided into the windows, cutting wide wet welts through the condensation. Water puddled on the ledge, seeping between the frame and the flaky paint. The house was poorly sealed. All manner of things managed to worm their way through the cracks.

She never got used to the climate, though it rained nine months out of the year. Her image was a blur, distorted as much by the morning fog as time. I remember seeing her dark silhouette through the window as she left. It was early morning and the sun struggled against the damp. She walked to the car under her transparent umbrella, the model preferred by the Queen herself. She liked the Queen well enough, but she loved Princess Diana. The tragic death, the unrequited love, the feathered hair. *I wanted to name you Diana*, she told me once, *but I thought it might be cursed*.

She did not see me waving my floppy, distinctly un-royal goodbye. The headlights flickered on, she reversed out of the driveway and disappeared into the street.

The house was silent except for Papa tinkering in the kitchen. He worked nights, she worked days. This way someone was always home with me, though most importantly, they were never home with each other. That night, when she didn't return, Papa called the police first and Nai Nai second. Nai Nai was there within the hour, even though her joints ached in the rain and she walked with a cane. She made a spicy seafood stew, wisps of chili oil hung suspended in the air. I devoured it and licked the bowl exaggeratedly, performing my enjoyment to make her smile. This time she just patted my head and carried the bowl to the sink wordlessly. I understood then that I had lost my charm.

It was nearly midnight when the police arrived. Papa didn't go to work. He sat at the kitchen table with the officers; their heavy boots dragged mud and grass all over the clean linoleum floors. One of them took notes while the other sat with his arms crossed on the tabletop, questioning Papa's story. The chili residue made their eyes water. Their faces were solemn and they spoke to Papa in low, baritone voices. The one questioning Papa sipped occasionally from a styrofoam coffee cup. Each sip opened up a gnawing gap in the conversation laden with unspoken doubts. The one taking notes handed Papa a piece of paper, then they too disappeared into the dark.

I found the cup the next day, in the same spot in the kitchen, half empty, its contents cold. For once, I was allowed to skip school. Papa must have called the school because the bus didn't show up.

Nai Nai stayed with me while Papa slept. During a break in the rain, we went for a walk. I brought the monkey I had begged her for at the zoo. She normally wouldn't let me take my toys outside,

worried that I'd lose them and throw another tantrum. I clutched his furry synthetic paw tight in one hand, Nai Nai's in the other. Perhaps if I were better behaved, she'd come back. We jumped in puddles along the street and water splashed all over my boots and onto my leggings. The air was cool and moist and smelled of wet concrete. I climbed a tree in the park and shook the branches until they showered Nai Nai with raindrops and tiny black bugs, annoyed, came out of hiding.

A few weeks later the phone rang and Papa went out wearing a dark suit. He folded the sheet of paper in his pocket. Me and Nai Nai stayed at home and watched *The Land Before Time*. Nai Nai pulled the curtains shut and dimmed the lights, while I assembled my stuffed animals into a dutifully silent audience on the couch.

When Papa returned, Nai Nai paused the movie and went to the kitchen. They spoke in whispers. Papa pressed his exhausted face in his hands and shook his head. *It wasn't her*. Nai Nai leaned back into her chair, her body letting go of the tension that had accumulated in her weakened joints. Despite the good news, the discovery of a woman's body tempered the mood. We didn't finish the movie. When Papa returned the tape, he had to pay a fine because we forgot to rewind it.

After a while, we packed up her things and put them away in the basement. Papa cobbled together a crate of cheap plywood, the lip of the lid fitted precisely to the base. Beneath the bare light bulbs, I folded her clothes into tidy rectangles and stacked them on top of one another: her winter coat with a stand-up collar, the grey fleece vest that she wore camping, the black wool skirt she bought on clearance, the thin red turtleneck she paired with it once for a neighborhood Christmas party. Delicate things in sober shades of black and beige and navy and cream and grey. She dressed deliberately and shopped conscientiously. *Don't buy cheap things*, she would say, *buy good quality, quality lasts forever*, as though her perfect weekend didn't consist of combing the clearance rack at Banana Republic.

Still she was beautiful, and not only in the way we are taught to believe that all mothers are beautiful. At night, she would smear thick white creams all over her unlined face, and every morning she would daub rouge on her freshly washed cheeks. Her hair fell down her back in thick, shiny curls. She wore fine clothes with an insouciance that made everything look twice as expensive. Her grace was an eternal struggle against time's depredations.

Before she came here, she told me, she was a minor celebrity, traveling around the country reporting on breaking news for the state broadcaster. People would come from across the province to give her all manner of small luxuries: brilliantly coloured silk scarves, lambskin leather gloves, small vials of perfumes, alcohol smuggled in from less oppressive regimes. I wonder if the exchange was worth it, if me and Papa and this house and the rain were payment enough for the elegant life she left behind.

I caressed the rabbit-soft cashmeres and fingered the nubby wools, stroked the soft black velvet dress that she bought after she saw Diana's infamous revenge dress. We shut the crate and her sweet fragrance billowed out with a sense of finality. I draped a blue-and-white striped blanket on top of the crate, thinking of Diana's elaborate shroud and how she would have liked a more stately funeral.

After Nai Nai died, Papa sold the shitty, leaky house to a developer. The whole block was being rezoned and a new set of young families would move in. In a certain light, families too were fungible.

With the money, Papa bought a new condo near the mall and I came back to help him sort through the piles that inevitably accumulate over the course of a life. Buried amongst cardboard boxes filled with old toys, book reports, and photo albums—objects intensely treasured, celebrated, then replaced—I found the crate, still wrapped in its shroud awaiting burial. The blanket was stiff with dust and punctured with holes, their edges frayed with cocoons discarded upon the transformation from larvae to moth, from child to adult.

I touched it apologetically and surprised an eclipse of moths. Their delicate feathery wings fluttered weakly, unaccustomed to flight, having matured free from human desperation. Inside, the clothes that we had packed so carefully were eaten through, generations of larvae gnawing tunnels through the densely layered fabric. The taupe cardigan, the stack of identical jumpers, even the velvet dress that had never been worn—I exhumed it all, clutching the filthy remains to my chest and inhaling the pungent odor of mildew and rot. Each piece felt as though it might crumble in the light of day. So much for *quality lasts forever*.

I later learned that female clothes moths do not eat; they live just long enough to mate and lay their eggs before dying. The males go on living and mating for the rest of their lives. Dozens of dead parents spilled onto my lap, their miniscule sacrifices immortalized in the damage left by their children.

I read once that, in some cultures, butterflies are believed to carry the souls of the dead. Do moths carry the memory of the disappeared? Papa was less sentimental. He hauled the boxes upstairs one by one, and told me to take what I wanted; the junk removal company would come for the rest. I rescued my stuffed companions. Their smiles had faded but their synthetic fur had resisted the passage of time. When he spotted the half-empty crate, he frowned as though he had forgotten he once had a wife and that I once had a mother. *Hmph*, he said after a pause. *What a shame. She had nice clothes. I should have sold them.*