

JACK'S KITCHEN

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“What I am telling you has already happened,” my mother began. I took the phone from the crook of my shoulder and held it tight against my ear. My mother’s news has always come to me in one of two ways. In Cantonese, *I am telling you something now* readies me for general advice and wisdom, whether her own or borrowed. Sometimes the phrase precedes a sharp reiteration of whatever I was not listening to carefully enough. But when she prepares to tell me *what has already happened*, she means there is nothing to be done about it now.

“What is it?” I asked her in English.

She replied in English, “Ah-Yeh is in the hospital today.”

I looked at my watch, though I didn’t need the time. It was a Wednesday in mid-October, 2006.

“What happened?”

“He there because he fell down in bathroom. Yes, it’s like that. Pretty bad fall to hurt his back and his head.”

I wasn’t alarmed at first. My grandfather had fallen many times in the past few years as his muscles weakened and his bones thinned. He would bruise himself, sometimes badly, sometimes enduring short hospital stays, but always recovered.

“How is he?”

“Hospital not saying anything yet. Your Uncle Terry is there waiting now.”

My grandfather lived in the apartment above his restaurant. Soon after my grandmother died, he started his retreat. First, he stopped cooking, only descending the two flights of stairs into the restaurant din to help chop vegetables and trim meats, as arthritis began slowly arching his back and sculpting his hands into hard, unusable claws. A few years later,

he was staying in the apartment all day, shuffling around with the help of metal railings we installed into every wall. One day he moved his radio, the next week his TV, and finally his rocker from the living room to his cramped bedroom, so that by the time he fell, 16 years after my grandmother died, he was spending every waking and sleeping hour in that rocker, with few trips to the bathroom. He watched National League baseball in the summer and the Caribbean League in the winter, from the patchy brown chair he never rocked. My mother or uncle brought up his meals on covered trays.

In the restaurant below him, work had gone on. My mother, Auntie Betty, Uncle Terry, and sometimes a cousin during the Sunday dinner rush, churned out hot boxes of food for patrons all over Los Angeles. The restaurant that for so long *was* my grandfather became a thing of its own without him, and my mother and aunt and uncle inherited its work.

“How did it happen, MaMa?”

“His balance not so good anymore. No matter we have steel rails for him, he fall on the way to bathroom. Happen after closing time. He stay on the floor all night until your Uncle Terry come to open up.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

I didn’t think I could afford to fly back from Indiana to see him in the hospital. I wasn’t sure I could if he died.

“What you mean, ‘do?’”

“I mean, will you close the restaurant?”

I don’t know why I asked. I knew the answer would be no. We would never close the restaurant as long as my grandfather was alive. Its weedy lot was the first thing either of my grandparents had owned, in China or America. Even as it declined, was moribund, really, for the last years, everyone knew closing it would kill him faster than his failing heart. But my mother answered without pause.

“Maybe. Maybe, yes.”

MY FATHER’S PARENTS opened the first Jack’s Kitchen in Hollywood in 1952. It failed within a year. Then they found partners to help buy another in Chinatown, but infighting forced my grandparents to sell out their share. On their own, and with four children, my grandparents picked a site in Bellflower, near a busy freeway and amid a row of car dealerships, with hopes that hungry salesmen would help start up their new business. They poured the last of their savings into gallons of blue paint, new appliances, and a six-foot sign glowing in the middle of Lakewood Boulevard. For the first months, sales were so miserable they filled a dumpster with all the unsold food they couldn’t eat themselves. Every day, my grandmother took two buses into Chinatown where she worked as a seamstress to pay

some of the restaurant's expenses. On her way, she left menus on benches and seats, and made her children stick menus under doormats and windshield wipers. Slowly, customers started coming, then coming back for more.

Since 1956, maybe a dozen car dealers have come and gone in the lot next door. The bar and flower shop across the street were knocked down for a sprawling motel and its parking lot. A mini carwash sprang up to replace a family grocery. Somehow, we managed to stay open despite the city changing all around us, and we managed to change little about the restaurant itself. My grandfather's menu remained exactly the same as the day they opened. Our regulars had been coming in since they were children. They liked the familiarity, they said, of our restaurant being the one place from their childhood that remained untouched. As they waited for their food, they chewed on free toothpicks and remembered to me my parents when in their twenties and when the lines for house special fried rice pushed out into the street and down the block. The older women who brought me magazines and little flowers in scrubbed coke bottles rattled off the dishes their husbands had loved, the ones they now ate alone or with the occasional visiting grandchild.

What I remember: Uncle Terry's AM-only radio sitting on the RCA television with wood façade sides. My cousins' almond cakes and egg tarts hidden behind the bell peppers on bottom shelf of the farthest-back refrigerator. Rows of takeout containers lining the wall by the giant rice warmers and the buckets of vinegar and pineapple juice for making sweet-and-sour sauce. My mother and aunt eating lunch every day on those same olive dishes from a Chinatown discount stand. The backyard overgrown with my aunt's failed attempts to cultivate a squash patch, and the stumps of plum and persimmon saplings that refused to flower.

Until I started high school, I spent every afternoon at our restaurant. The air hit me each time I walked through our heavy glass doors. Weighed down by oil and salt, it hissed with fan blades and rang with metal spatulas striking the woks. Every day after school, I dropped my bag at the door and sat at the counter to take phone orders. I shouted over the high, rumbling fans, and I absorbed the smell of deep fat frying meats and dark pressed soy sauce. No one left tips at a take-out only place, but if a customer was especially loyal, or litigiously fragile, I carried food down the front steps and into the car, and took back the change I had just made.

The restaurant walls were fourteen feet high. The front windows and doors were made of heavy, nearly bullet-proof glass that held together against stray bullets and, we think, a crowbar. These were the building's only windows. Refrigerators and sagging shelves covered every wall, and metal bars darkened the back door. Once inside, the rest of the world slipped away, along with its language, rules, and the white-ghosts my grandfather refused to trust. We never let anyone in the back, not even to take their squirming children

to the bathroom. If someone's car broke down in front of our place, we took the phone and its cord off the wall and let them dial a tow truck from their side of the counter. Three times a year, we endured health and safety inspections, surprise afternoon visits from inspectors who were often themselves immigrants from China, the Philippines, or Indonesia. Sometimes, if the inspector wanted to get done quickly, or if he was from a village near ours and sympathetic, he would call ahead. We usually got through inspections silently, watching doors get opened, cans turned over, vegetables prodded. They checked refrigerator temperatures, the proximity of raw meat to vegetables, preparation dates, and wok surfaces, ready to choose between the bright blue A slips, the green Bs, or red Cs to post in the front window. The restaurant always felt off after a stranger had been there, as if all the appliances had been rearranged.

By the time I finished high school, we had been robbed five times. Before we installed the rolling security gate, they broke down the back doors and knocked over the register in vain, looking for the cash we carried upstairs each night. Once they came in through the back, taking nothing, but overturning buckets of soy sauce and smashing cans of tomato paste on the walls. Another time they got into the free-standing storage building where we kept a bank of freezers, and stole dozens of whole, frozen chickens. We never reported any of the break-ins. We kept to ourselves and we kept inside. Our walls shouldn't have been penetrated by outsiders, and we certainly weren't going out there looking for help.

IN JANUARY, I CAME BACK to LA for a New Year's visit, and saw my grandfather at the recovery center where he had been since his fall three months before. As soon as I got off the plane from Indianapolis, my parents drove me to see him. He had shown little improvement since arriving, refusing to exercise and snapping at physical therapists who cycled his legs and pumped his arms. He had also, very early in his stay, stopped eating. The center sent my grandfather a psychiatrist, who promptly asked to meet with my parents. My mother called the psychiatrist *bak-gui*, white ghost, for what she perceived to be his hysteria.

"Huh," she said to me as we navigated the hallways toward my grandfather's room. "Doctor try to tell me Grandpa is depressed. Like he thinking of killing himself, thinking suicide." She hissed the last word. "Doctor say, we have to put Grandpa on medication for being sad. *Gong-mat-gui-ab? Kai-ai!*"

The rhetorical question is roughly translated as, "What in the hell are you talking about?" The epithet, however, I cannot translate. My cousins and I tested it out frequently when our mothers were out of earshot, never knowing if we used it right. Eventually, afternoons filled with "Hey, *kai-ai*, give me the remote," so deflated the insult that we grew

tired of it. I still don't have a good translation. Our restaurant's crazy neighbor, Richard, who threw his garbage into our yard, was a *kai-ai*. So was every health inspector and every faceless punk who smashed in our windows or bubbled graffiti on our building. But so was my Uncle Terry when he screwed up an order, so I wondered how bad it could be.

"The doctor don't know," my mother continued, "that old people say this all the time. This is how you make your children show respect for parents. Get them to say, 'Oh, no BaBa, don't die, live for us.' A good son says that to father. This is how we talk. Grandpa doesn't need medicine. If he wants out, he better *exercise*."

My mother's frustration was compounded by her discovery that my grandfather wasn't eating simply because he didn't like the food. Trying to tempt him one day with melon soup and dumplings, perhaps somewhat afraid that he actually was depressed, my mother soon found out that he was willing and able to eat, just not salt-free vegetables and reconstituted potato buds. Now, someone was cooking and delivering food to him three, sometimes four times a day.

As we approached my grandfather's open door, my mother whispered, "Don't say anything about the restaurant. Don't, or he'll ask how's business and how much did we make this week and who had the best deal on chicken yesterday."

I suddenly realized that we were here in the middle of the afternoon, right before the dinner rush would begin. "What is going on with the restaurant? Is it closed for now?"

"Closed some, but don't say, ok? We open only for a few lunch hours every day now."

"I won't," I promised.

I saw my grandfather's feet sticking out beyond the half-drawn curtain around his bed. His neighbor was completely enclosed behind his own two curtains.

"Hi, Grandpa," I said, shuffling against his bed rail. The hospital gown made him look jaundiced and small. I hadn't seen him since I moved to Indiana a year earlier.

"Mm," he nodded, closing his eyes and jutting out his chin as he always did when greeted.

"Have you eaten yet?"

"Mm."

The recovery center was really a nursing home, a hospice for those who had no hope of recovery. My grandmother had died in a nursing home after a brain tumor operation left her unable to sit up or feed herself. This place's stench, the abandonment, the terrible cheerfulness of the staff, were all too familiar.

Behind me, a physical therapist in pink scrubs appeared and abruptly pulled back the curtain. She told my grandfather it was time for his therapy in the workout room.

"No. Leave me," he moaned and batted her away.

"Yes, we have to exercise," she said in a lilting voice full of impatience. This must have been how she stated every session with him.

“Take me home,” my grandfather said. “You,” he pointed at us. “You come everyday, but nobody takes me out of here.”

Both my parents assured him that we would, as soon as he finished his therapy and could walk on his own.

“Okay, okay,” he relented, but still didn’t get up. “Exercise tomorrow, okay?”

“No, Jack, today.”

With all our arms braced around him, we got my grandfather to sit up and swing his legs over the side of the bed. He panted hard, his chest heaving and arms shaking. He had barely enough strength to hold his head up.

“Gah,” he sputtered, still clutching at someone’s two arms near him. “Gah.”

He leaned over and I could see the peaks of his spine and the veins on his back through the loosely tied gown. “Gah...Goddammit!”

We all eased our grips. My grandfather’s arms went limp at his side and he continued sighing, moaning, gasping for breath.

“Okay, okay,” he whispered finally. He reached up for our arms again and quieted. “If I do this, I go home?”

Yes, yes, we all assured him.

“Oh, I want to die. Why don’t you all just let me die?”

No, no. No one wants you to die. We want you to live for us.

We finally left him at the door of the crowded, sun-bleached workout room, as the therapist wheeled him between low parallel bars he could barely wrap his fingers around.

“Come tomorrow,” he called, holding his arms weakly below his shoulders. “Come take me home tomorrow.”

“Okay,” we called back.

WHEN THE RESTAURANT CLOSES and I have time, my mother often said of the many things she wanted to do, the trips she wanted to take, my parent-teacher meetings and piano recitals, if only she were not cooking. I, too, wanted to be home with her more. Still, hearing her say that was like hearing our house would be boarded up and abandoned.

My mother knew nothing about restaurant work when she married my father, but was expected to learn quickly and put in fourteen-hour days. She had worked in Sacramento canneries and sewing factories before they married, but nothing had prepared her to be a new wife, cook, and daughter-in-law. Though the restaurant was my father’s to inherit, it was my mother who owned all the cooking skills, business sense, and family stories, a little more picked up each day. My father and his siblings all grew up working in the restaurant, all expected to run the business someday. But, his sister and youngest brother went to

college and found well-paying jobs as far away from restaurant work as they could get. It took my father ten years at two different junior colleges and the state university to get a degree, trying to study between the daily runs to Chinatown for meat and vegetables, or constant equipment repairs heaped upon him, the eldest son. As soon as he could, my dad got a job working on computers. Though my uncle Terry and his wife stayed, my grandparents needed more help. After their wedding, my mother took up the duty so my father wouldn't have to.

In the early days, my mother didn't sleep much. She spent mornings cooking the day's rice, then she rolled dumpling skins, pre-grilled egg foo young patties, thickened vats of gravy, and filled deep bins with chopped vegetables. The restaurant opened at four o'clock for dinner, and until after nine o'clock there was no rest between cooking, boxing, and serving food. After closing, she deep fried into dawn. Once home, my mother peeled away the old socks she altered to wear as protective sleeves, revealing burns down her arms from oil splatters and hot utensils. She pricked her blisters with a safety pin, let the liquid run, and smeared her hot, rippled skin with gingery Chinese ointments. By the time I was in junior high we opened from noon to nine, hoping to draw lunch customers, but each year we made less and saw fewer regulars. Often my mother and Auntie Betty were left with long, empty afternoons that even the food prep couldn't fill.

I stopped going to the restaurant soon after high school started. At first, I begged off with the excuse of too much homework. The truth was, I hated not being able to hang out with friends because I was waiting for phone orders all afternoon. My parents didn't make a fuss about the change. I was old enough to be left alone, and I needed good grades to get into college. That first day I stayed home, I sat on my bed and talked on the phone for five hours. I blew off my homework and my mother's sesame chicken, and I ate junk in front of the TV until she came home. I didn't miss the restaurant noise or the constant errands. In a few years, I would go to college in Berkeley, then graduate school in New Mexico, then Indiana with my now-husband. I would come home only on holidays and breaks from school. Like it did for everyone, what was "home" to me as a child became "my parents' house" as an adult. The restaurant, too, went from being "our restaurant" to "my mom's work."

I RECEIVED TWO PHONE CALLS from my mother when I returned to Indiana after seeing my grandfather in the hospice. In April, she said they had set a date in July to close the restaurant. There was no reason to go on. No one believed my grandfather was coming home.

“He’s sick. He’s never feeling good,” she said.

He had quit physical therapy altogether, eating little of what was cooked and brought to him every day. My parents filled his room with things from home, trying to make it a little warmer, but he hardly looked at the pictures or watched anything on his little television. He hardly moved. My parents and aunt and uncle visited diligently, but there was little to say, and the visits were frequent but short. He never asked how the restaurant was doing.

“Why wait until July?” I asked my mother.

“Have to make plans,” she explained. “Sell things, close up, let customers know.”

They planned to sell off whatever utensils and equipment they could, give whatever frozen meats and canned goods they had to neighbors, and toss the rest. Signs in English and Chinese told customers these would be the last months.

“What are you going to do, MaMa?” I asked.

“Oh, maybe something. An office job, or maybe I take some classes. I don’t know yet,” she mused. I was happy for her.

In July, the building was locked up. No one was interested in buying it, not even as a tear-down. My parents and aunt and uncle had emptied it out as best they could. I know my mother would have noticed how quiet it was with the fans off. How vast it must have seemed with the shelves pulled from the walls. I thought of that air, thick and oily and unmoving, now layering over the dust and its greasy self until the whole building, its cement floors, six dented wok burners, and two opaque windows, all petrified in a slick, solid stillness.

Her second phone call came in October. My grandfather was dead.

I ARRIVED AT MY PARENTS’ HOUSE late Wednesday, the night before the wake. Just as I was going to bed, my mother asked me to write something down for her. She recited details of my grandfather’s life I vaguely recognized: how my grandfather came to America alone when he was a boy and worked his way up in Chinatown kitchens, from washing dishes and emptying lard trays to being a full cook. She used words like “hero” and “deeply revered” and told me to type it all up in large font for a prominent member of the Chinatown Gee Association to read at the funeral. I realized this would be his eulogy.

I wrote it badly. My mind was on the sixty papers I had to grade, my fiancé at home covering my classes, my world that didn’t include the restaurant anymore. I rushed together a choppy, unpolished life story in terribly simple language for a stranger with limited English speaking skills to read.

The Thursday afternoon viewing was open-casket, and the funeral home did a mediocre

job on my grandfather's complexion. He looked ill, like he had, indeed, died of a heart attack. My mother reassured me that it happened suddenly, and was over quickly. She and my father were visiting that Monday morning, and my grandfather was agitated. Out of nowhere, he insisted on getting up and walking on his own. Weak from months in bed, he couldn't even turn on his side without help. The realization of his own body's failure seemed to sink in, and he began to cry. Then he was shouting in pain as his heart gave out.

"He saw us last," my mother told me. "Small thing, but good, seeing us last and not strangers."

He was laid out in a black suit and one of my father's ties. Propped on an easel by the casket was his wedding portrait from sometime in 1939. The over-the-shoulder head shot showed a slender, serious face, long before deep jowls set in, before hair silvered and thinned. He was probably six feet, a giant among those in Chinatown. I hadn't seen him stand up in almost ten years.

When the family all finally gathered, my mother handed out swatches of cloth to my father and his siblings, whispering instructions to each. My father took his turn first. He walked stiffly up to the casket and laid his gray cloth over my grandfather's chest, tucking it softly around his arms. Then my uncle Terry laid his down, a little lower to make sure my father's cloth was still showing.

"What are those for?" I whispered to my mother as my father's sister was walking up with her flower print in hand.

"Oldest son's cloth, that your dad, must be closest to father's heart."

"Yes, but why are we laying the cloths on him?" I asked.

"Just tradition."

My mother led us through several funereal rituals with little explanation. None of us really knew what tradition dictated. But we bowed three times before the open casket, and three times again when they closed it. We lit three sticks of incense and wafted the smoke over our heads. Each act meant something for his spirit or ours: one gesture kept him warm, another gave him strength in the afterlife, another money and clothes, all so we could take comfort in his well being. As we were leaving, my mother handed us each a Werther's candy.

"Death is bitter," she said. "Eat this."

Then she collected our wrappers in a tin to be burned, and we were instructed to finish the candy before we got home. "Cannot take the dead's things into your house," she warned.

We spent the rest of that evening stuffing quarters into little red envelopes to press into the palms of mourners the next day.

The casket was waiting for us at the front of the chapel on Friday morning, open again for the just-arrived mourners. My grandfather never attended any church, but the

cemetery provided a chapel and a pastor for the service. My cousins and I took our places in the front pews and turned to see the seats fill with relatives and my grandfather's old friends we didn't know. Minutes before the service started, my mother tapped me on the shoulder and held out a piece of paper.

"I need you to do me a favor," she said, then squeezed in next to me and handed me the eulogy I had typed up. "I need you to read this."

"Why, is there a mistake?"

"No." She pointed to the podium. "I need you to read this up there."

I asked her why the man from the association wasn't doing it.

"I find out he can't read English at all. So, you have to read."

Before I could answer, she was talking to the pastor, pointing at me as she explained that I was taking over the first reading. The pastor, who had never met my family before, nodded. Following the line of my mother's finger to my face, he came over, asked me how to pronounce my name, and what my relationship to the deceased was.

I should have read the eulogy over as the pastor made his opening remarks. I should have at least looked at it to be sure I could pronounce the names of his parents and their village, but I was too embarrassed to unclench the script from my fist. The chapel was filled to the last row with people I didn't recognize. Looking out at them all from behind the sagging podium microphone, the first thing I said was that my mother had given me all the facts for the story, as if to blame her for the boring, stilted sentences that I read like a fifth grader reporting on a forgotten president. As I read on about my grandfather's childhood immigration to California, his marriage, his restaurants, I realized I had forgotten to change the wording for myself, so that my eulogy gave the shallow life details of "Mr. Gee" instead of "my grandfather." Everyone thought my voice was shaking from emotion, not from having to read this drivel like the stranger to my grandfather I was. "Lovely speech," they whispered as our hands met in the receiving line. "What a history," they marveled.

My cousins all seemed to know how to mourn. They cried at the casket, as they walked up the cemetery hill, as they threw fistfuls of dirt into the grave. Their grief was real; they had actually lost something. My cousins were all between ten and fourteen years older than I, and came regularly to the restaurant long into their adulthood. They all went to college and got jobs within twenty minutes of home. Many moved back home to the delight of their parents. When my grandfather died, I had been away from home for eight years, and in that time had finally seen how other families talk to each other, how they're not suspicious or afraid of everything American, how they play with their children and don't blackmail affection by threatening to die. Each year, I came home less often, and I recognized the restaurant less and less. I was relieved to have gotten away, yet I watched

my cousins throughout the day with disbelief and jealousy. Thankfully, the rest of the service passed quickly.

Through the heavy northbound traffic, I rode in my parents' old minivan down the winding cemetery hills and toward Chinatown for the reception. No one in our car cried for what was ending. We would gather that afternoon at someone else's restaurant to eat someone else's food, without once thinking about the labor of its creation. Surrounded by distant family, before a feast swirling on ten Lazy Susans, we ate Chinese food made the way our relatives would have prepared it in China. There was nothing sweet and sour, nothing resembling chop suey. There were no crispy fried noodles or fortune cookies. We toasted my grandfather's life and accomplishments with spoonfuls of rice wine and a banquet that none of his customers would have recognized as Chinese.

THIS IS THE EULOGY I SHOULD HAVE WRITTEN. My grandfather arrived in southern California on a merchant ship in 1925. He was twelve years old, alone, and carrying a handful of papers that made him legally the son of a shop owner in Los Angeles. His family came from the south of the Guangdong region, from which tens of thousands of Chinese families fled famine throughout the first half of the century. By the time he was twelve his father was dead, the Communist Party had been officially established in China, and war between the Communists and Nationalists had come as close as Canton. My grandfather had tried finding work in nearby towns, but there was nothing he could sustain at his age. So, like many thousands of young men in the 1920s, my grandfather was sent to America as a Paper Son.

To get around rigid immigration quotas, Chinese men who had gained American citizenship would travel to China and return claiming a marriage and the births of several sons. In a few years, they would find boys the right age in China to bring over as those sons. Sometimes paper fathers brought over their nephews and distant cousins to help a family, or an entire village, survive. Sometimes, they hired agents to go to China and recruit desperate village boys. Tempted by reports of steady work in America's Chinatowns, which agents talked up as so big you could walk for blocks without hearing a word of English, mothers took out loans from these agents or sold their jewelry to pay their sons' boat fares. Starving families across the region sent their boys to America, expecting them to find work to support their families and repay their paper fathers. It was an older generation helping the younger, and it was the younger beginning its life deeply in debt with nowhere to start paying it back.

It was common for immigration officers to harass young Chinese men in Los Angeles, demanding that they give up their paper fathers, even promising a fast track to citizenship

if they revealed names. My grandfather never actually learned the names of his agent or his paper father. He was given his new name and short life story to memorize on the boat and recite when he arrived. My mother only revealed to me when I was in college that Gee is our paper name.

In Chinatown, my grandfather slept on kitchen floors and the back steps of shops. Sometimes he found a bed in a boarding house. There were many Gee families in Chinatown, but all were stretched too thin for handouts to a paper relation. Back in China, agents of paper fathers were known to harass the families who had sent away their sons, claiming the boys had reneged on their debts, and demanding the parents pay instead. It took my grandfather nearly a decade to pay back his paper father, and who knows how much his mother might have been duped into paying.

My grandfather waited until his debt was paid before he married. Raising four children on dishwasher and seamstress salaries made them poor, but they owed no one. They took some help from Chinatown associations, to whom they would later give back with a fierce loyalty, and from Catholic charities, for whom my grandmother would carry a softness. My father remembers being dressed in loose peasant clothes my grandmother learned to make in China, until some nuns offered them shorts, suspenders, collared shirts, and dresses for their first days of school.

My grandfather built his restaurant with the highest walls and the fewest windows he could. Inside, he could live by the rules of a China he barely remembered. Having left one home only to find himself forever a stranger in another, the only thing he could do was build himself a fortress against suspicion and indifference. I felt that safety too. I was needed at the restaurant, even though it sometimes meant my mother's embarrassment at having to call me over when customers couldn't understand her. What that safety cost us was belonging to the rest of the world.

THE LAST TIME MY GRANDFATHER CAME DOWNSTAIRS was Thanksgiving 2003. I was home from school for the weekend, and all the immediate family were going to be in town, so we decided to come to the restaurant for an early dinner on Thursday. "Early," my mother decided, "so all the young kids can go do what they like." Holiday obligations were light in our family, and usually kids and parents got together for a while, then each met up with their own set of friends.

Before my grandmother died, we gathered at the restaurant for every holiday, no matter the absence of religious celebration, and no matter the travel distances, busy lives, or quarrels. My mother and aunt worked just as hard on those holidays as when the restaurant was open for business. On top of their regular work, they spent hours filling

and pinching dumplings, carving and marinating meats, and mixing batter for steamed buns. They scoured Chinatown markets for days looking for good rice wine, sausages, dried mushrooms, abalone, and shark fin. On Christmas morning, everyone opened their presents quickly at home, then hurried to the restaurant to prepare the dinner. My cousins and I would clean the prep tables, push them into rows, and gather chairs around, sneaking tastes of cold and pickled dishes already set out. My grandparents, mother, and aunt started the fans whirling and lit up all the woks, ladling out dish after dish.

All night, Chinatown acquaintances and relatives close and distant dropped by with cookies, fruit, and calligraphy calendars for the new year. They gasped at the spread of dumplings and buns, a roast and a bird, spareribs, good luck noodles, cloudy melon soups, seared fish, and stir fried vegetables in oyster and black bean sauces. My family looked on with pleasure as guests helped themselves to food, chatted a while with the adults, watched some TV with the kids, and left us red envelopes. On those nights, the restaurant was all ours, with no one to serve but us. A sign posted in the front window apologized to customers who might have seen our lights on and hoped to be fed. All greasy surfaces were scrubbed, and we sat around the sinks and fryers in our nice clothes. For a short time, my grandparents were hosts, not employees.

That last Thanksgiving, we met at the restaurant early in the afternoon. One cousin brought a turkey he cooked at home, one brought a pie, and my parents brought crackling pork from the Chinese barbeque. My mother lit one wok to cook rice and a small dish of clear noodles with young bean sprouts. We ate off paper plates around the little television, sipping cans of soda from the sale case. My grandfather ate his dinner alone upstairs. When my father went to collect his tray and ask him, one last time, to come down, he suddenly agreed. He got into the wheelchair he finally gave in to using, and descended on the electric stair chair to sit with us. He didn't speak. None of us did much. Everyone was eyeing the score of a Laker game on TV. After a few minutes, he asked to be taken outside.

"Don't go," we said. "Stay for a little while."

"Outside," he insisted. "Take me outside."

Someone had brought a camera, and that day we took the last pictures of ourselves at the restaurant. My mother and aunt hated having their picture taken at work. They protested that they looked awful and didn't want to remember themselves in stained aprons and hair nets. But we sat flashing smiles among the empty plates and foil cartons. We took a picture of my grandfather sunning himself in the backyard. He is in the center of the picture, a small figure in the camera's wide zoom, sitting in his wheelchair wearing pajama bottoms, a down vest over a thermal top, and a black knit cap, though November in Bellflower is usually a fair sixty degrees. He is alone and looking off to the side, though I remember we were all standing around behind the camera, clicking our tongues at the

overgrown yard, the piles of cardboard and cans yet to be hauled to the recycling center. Each of us probably could have guessed that we had but four more years here. Behind my grandfather is our lemon tree, the last of the poor garden that never did bear sweet fruit. The sun is bright and he is squinting, his hands at rest, his mouth slightly open. Around him, we used to wash oversized pans under the garden hose. We waterproofed cardboard boxes with bars of paraffin to keep vegetables from rotting. We hung aprons on long clotheslines to dry and crisp in the sun. Around him, we lived.