

Aftershocks

By Julie Heng

i.

If my mom were here, she would say, “Don’t tell that story. That’s family business.”

Here’s the story my mom doesn’t want me to tell: she blames herself for her mom’s—my Grandma’s—death.

My mom is a doctor, a hematologist-oncologist who has treated hundreds of patients. She is trained to save lives, in particular the lives of cancer patients.

She is used to offering professional diagnoses, used to saying things like, “This is an indolent disease—incurable but treatable if necessary.”

Or, “We’ll need to use fluorescent in situ hybridization for the prognostic tests.”

Or, “Treatment options include proteasome inhibitors which may cause peripheral neuropathy or numbness of the extremities in 5-10 percent of patients.”

She has a toolbox of tried-and-true techniques amassed over years of practice: Don’t use numbers that inspire false hope. Don’t suggest a medication without thoroughly defining its side effects in layman’s terms. Remember to maintain a certain clinical detachment.

She is used to being the only calm voice in the patient room—the trusted consultant, the expert listener. She is used to being impartial—the navigator on ever-rough seas, armed with prescription maps and imaging telescopes. She is used to taking the wheel and saying, “Alright, here’s what we’re going to do.”

But now, she’s adrift.

Nine months ago, Grandma died from ovarian cancer, and my mom believes she could and should have saved her. She's a doctor. It's what she does for a living. And somehow, she failed—or thinks she failed—to diagnose and treat Grandma.

At the burial site, Mom took out the casket of Grandma's ashes, preparing to go through the motions for the ceremony. She worked to look stoic as she knelt on the cobblestones, rubbed out those persistent specks of dirt on the gravestone, careful to clean the caulk seal edges. She tied the red ribbons around the casket before it was lowered it into the ground, then laid out the pink-white-purple flower bouquets.

Mom's dress was wrinkled, her glasses were sliding slowly off her nose, and her hair was millimeters away from the nauseatingly vanilla incense sticks, close to lighting. She was crying, lamenting, mourning, in alternating spasms of English and Mandarin and maybe even French.

“How can I call myself a physician, a daughter?”

The extended family—the uncles and aunts and great-aunts and great-uncles—stood in between and among the rows of gravestones, mute.

I wanted to tell Mom that she was wrong.

I still do.

I want to remind her of the hours she spent researching, worrying at work, at home, and everywhere in between. I want to hand her the diligently annotated print-outs spent comparing chemotherapy and radiation options, debating trade-offs and best hopes. In fact, she found the best surgeon in the country for Grandma's operation.

I want to tell her, over and over and over again, that she didn't fail. Not as a physician. Not as a daughter, not as a mother, not as a wife. Right now, Mom's injured. She's hurt, and I want to take out the first-aid kit and the rubbing alcohol and I want to treat her wounds. I want to tell her what she tells me, and my little brother, and my father, and my grandfather and all her patients every time they doubt themselves. I want to tell her:

“Alright, here's what we're going to do.”

Mom, you did everything humanly possible. No one could ask for more.

ii.

I survive tripping on the ratty shag carpet in the hallway, and the ceramic flowerpot I'm carrying from the kitchen to the living room survives too.

But the orchid does not. Its long neck snaps easily, and one of its magenta-veined petals falls on the floor next to me.

I sit on the carpet for a moment, and I hear my grandfather close his well-worn cookbook, dropping it onto the coffee table. He stands, removes his rimless glasses, and calls for me.

"Julie? Are you hurt? I heard something fall."

"I'm okay, Grandpa," I answer. "Tripped on the carpet. It was an accident."

He walks into the hall, where I'm still on the floor with the flowerpot and the broken orchid. If he's upset about the orchid, he doesn't say or show anything. He doesn't need to. I know how important it was to him.

This orchid is no last-minute housewarming gift. This has been the object of my grandfather's affections ever since she left. When he couldn't nurse Grandma back to health, he instead saved this orchid. I have watched him gingerly prune the edges with more care than a Michelin star chef, seen him shift its position every half hour to absorb all the sunlight it can through the grimy condo windows.

This is the orchid from Grandma's funeral.

I still remember that small room, what with its striped walls, sweet incense, and Clayderman piano cadenzas. We were all dressed up, me in my pink ribbon dress, everyone else in black. They decorated the altar very simply: a silver-beaded photo frame next to the open casket and two lily bouquets bursting with the life none of us thought to bring.

The orchid was exposed, almost wilted, bruised-violet capillaries shot through a chalk-white center, edges frayed to ash. Its silhouette stood out against the walnut grand piano, extended in an

arabesque, a prima ballerina's final pose, reaching towards my grandmother's resting face with a certain yearning, a certain something that wasn't quite ready to let go.

My mom made us all write farewell notes to put in a pretty box, final thoughts in flowery script. I didn't have enough words in my sixth-grade vocabulary to fully articulate something that would be left inside a coffin, but it seemed none of the adults did either. Or maybe tears smudged all their writing, too.

My great-aunt and uncle fell to the floor when the lid was being closed, when her body was taken away.

"We're sorry we couldn't do more," they sobbed. "Our sister, our sister..."

Grandpa was on his knees when they stood up, left the room, started to head outside. He was still on his knees as the next few years blurred by, as the lily bouquets dried into potpourri. He is still on his knees now, in that same vulnerable position.

"Grandpa? I'm sorry," I say.

"Well," he says slowly, climbing to his feet. He smiles a smile I haven't seen for years. Maybe this careless accident snapped more than the orchid's neck. Maybe it snapped Grandpa from his quiet melancholy. Maybe now, he's ready to move on.

"You know, I'd like to buy a cactus," he tells me over tea. "A sturdy one, just for me."

"You do that," I say. "But let me come with. Let's get one for Mom, too."