

A figure in Steam and Smoke

by Rita Leung

That old kitchen was tiny and forbidden, so most of the time I observed it from a distance. It was generally white, its design allowing a tiny moving space which was as wide as the doorway, and long enough for a curious child to join the cook for a moment and peek in on the action. The whole kitchen seemed to have been covered with a single sheet of white something, aversion of tiles, linoleum, grease, and sweat all rolled into each other. Once in a great while, I would be allowed to be that curious child and step just a tad closer to the kitchen--never completely inside, "The oil will scorch!", just a few inches in--to lay my hand on that massive white something and actually feel it. It wasn't a blob after all; there was actual texture. I would run my stubby, hungry fingers over the surface, absorbing every ridge and outline I could, over every expected curve and every unexpected jagged edge. Right when I stood there long enough to observe the mold ingrained in the grout between the carefully scrubbed tiles, or spotted the occasional meandering cockroach, Ah-Ma would order me out of the kitchen with her sharp Cantonese. This, of course, would make me all the more curious and provoke me to find more ways to sneak into the kitchen when her back was turned.

This was my grandmother--the magician who turned the raw and ugly into something divine, tears into laughter, questions into answers--and her dwelling was that mysterious old kitchen.

I don't remember much of her story either. Sometimes I try to recall memories of her, but since she dwells in the hidden recesses of my childhood, she is only part of the mosaic, or perhaps even the cement which holds that mosaic together. I don't have an "earliest memory" of her; she drifted along happily in her place of consistency in my mind, sometimes jolted out to take the foreground for a brief moment, then retreated to where she was. Whenever I try to recall my old room in this first of many houses that I lived in, I cannot recall a time when Ah-Ma wasn't there to put me to sleep, patting a comforting rhythm on my back gently with her hand, humming some tune from an old Chinese black-and-white screenplay. Her voice was never beautiful, always coarse, and the same went for her hands. The skin on them were loose on her bones, the flesh somehow missing, so one could squish the rubbery, wrinkled skin back and forth and Ah-Ma wouldn't feel a thing. Right before I drifted off to sweet slumber, Ah-Ma would bend close, her fragrance of sweat and twenty daily cigarettes flooding my nose and mind, and give me what she thought of as a kiss. It wasn't until later on that I could distinguish between the way Mom and Dad kissed my forehead and the way Ah-Ma kissed me. She did not know how to kiss. Mom and Dad always left a mess of slobber on my skin, so that their marks stayed on me for a brief moment or two. Ah-Ma did not kiss like that; she held her face close to yours, then instead of reaching with her lips to touch your skin, she took a large breath through her nose, and smelled you rather than kissed you. She never left a physical mark, but her air would stay on you for the rest of the night.

I followed Ah-Ma everywhere, or it could have been the other way around, I could never tell for sure. I was willing to go anywhere with her, except for the marketplace. I could not tolerate the stench--of the rotting food, the animal waste, or the people. The vegetable stands were fine, because they were usually relatively clean, but I would always beg for her to bypass the butcher's. Her darting eyes allowed her to see through the swindlers and buy straight from the head butcher. She would hold my hand tightly until it hurt, then charge into the dark alley, her mind on nothing but the meat she needed for that night. Her eyes would be oblivious to the blood on which she trampled, which oftentimes leaked through her sandals and onto her dulled feet--blood from pigs and geese and cows and fish--not because she was insensitive to her dirty surroundings, but because she would rather get it over with, rushing through the alley and into the daylight again. Every day I gained more wisdom about the market--look for the fish with clear eyes, they are fresher; hold the eggs up to the light, to make sure you're not getting the ones with the chicks in them; the oranges must have thin skins, otherwise they would be bitter. Though we wove through the flux of loud Chinese women, I was never afraid of getting lost.

There were times when she was jolted out of the background. One time I sat staring at a cupboard that had dwelled in the corner of my room forever. It was painted in these obscure patterns with apple-red and white paint. Just when the red was riding happily along the face of the wood, a white patch would come out of nowhere and get in its way. I did not find the cupboard aesthetically pleasing, partly because I did not understand its amorphous patterns. It frustrated me more than anything, to the point where Ah-Ma noticed my annoyance and had to explain it to me. She traced out the white paint with her weathered finger and slowly showed me each number: a large "1" on the first drawer, a "2" on the second, et cetera. Most ghastly of all, I thought, was the "4." She laughed and that was that. She merely dispensed whatever I needed to know, or ask much as my limited mind was prepared for, then went back to her kitchen. The cupboard suddenly turned into something quite pleasant that day. It was magical, to the inquisitive mind of a youngster of three, that she made this confusion into something beautiful. From then on I asked her everything.

Of course, there were also more dramatic moments. One afternoon, I hear an airplane flying overhead. Being a nosy child, I wanted to see where the noise was coming from. I ran to the window and squeezed my face as close to it as I could, forgetting that there were bars between me and the window. Before I knew it, my head was stuck. I jerked my head back. Still stuck. I tried rotating my head this way and that way (now that the plane was long gone) and was more annoyed than frustrated when I could not get out. Then panic set in. What if no one finds me? I'll surely die of starvation, loneliness, and embarrassment! I began screaming, and it was no more than a second before Ah-Ma was out of the kitchen and at my side, rescuing me from the grips of danger with smears of corn oil on my neck and hair. This was another facet of Ah-Ma--my rescuer--that I took for granted too often.

When I called for Ah-Ma, I expected her voice to come from two places: the kitchen, where she was again concocting another heavenly brew or from the living room, humming along with the black-and-white characters in ancient garbs on the television. If there was no response, I knew immediately where she was. First door on the hallway in every house we had ever lived in, I never found a need to knock before I enter. The reason was probably not as much that she welcomed me with hugs and kisses every time I made a visit, but rather too engrossed in her surroundings and smoke to see me scuttle into the room. She never smoked in any other room in the apartment. She always sat on the edge of her bed, smoking her unending supply of cigarettes, thinking, never looking out the window by her side but always at the wall which was plainly decorated with a Chinese calendar and pictures of her grandchildren. The way she handled her cigarette was never ostentatious; she merely took it up to her lips and filled her lungs with smoke, then exhaled--the smoke was air to her. Smoke cradled her profile and made her look like a gray mess: her dulled-silver hair melted into the ceiling and window and walls as the red-orange glowing end of her cigarette grew closer and closer to her face. The smoke gave the room a hazy, gray overcast, dissolving all the features of the room together so one couldn't tell a chair from a bureau, like smog blurring a city skyline on a hot summer day. But I never felt suffocation; I didn't know what that room would feel like otherwise. Words were unnecessary in Ah-Ma's room. Once I entered, I would feel myself around the room, contemplating the possibility of getting lost in that smoke, until I found myself on her bed. There I would sit, side by side with Ah-Ma, and stare at the wall as she smoked. Her hand would settle on my back and I would feel safe, all over again.

Ah-Ma did leave the house every once in awhile, but even in her absence she was consistent. Every Saturday morning she stood, bright and early, in front of the bathroom mirror. There would be the consistent tap of her toothbrush on the porcelain sink, which sent the house ringing with it for minutes after she was done. I would watch her as she talked over the screams of her hairdryer (but I almost never heard her, because of all the noise). Then hairspray, and more hairspray. So much that years later we found out she wasn't deaf after all, but hairspray collected in her ear and hardened the wax so she could not hear well. The hairspray made her curls and every thing else rigid to match her rigid frame, which included her jutting, childbearing hipbones and empty shoulders. She would put on her best clothes and leave the apartment to have dim-sum with her friends and my older aunt. She always walked with a certain awkward sway of the hips, one hand to the waist and the other swinging at her side. This way she would leave and return promptly on Sunday night, when my parents would go again to work and she was needed.

I knew my relatives, and especially my mother, talked about Ah-Ma behind her back. I have specific memories of words that were used to describe her bossiness or her anger at her loneliness. Outwardly they would bear with her and grant her demands to take care of her grandchildren, especially me, her youngest, and often picky demands for everything else. But I never saw it; never could I imagine anyone holding a grudge against Ah-Ma. One weekend morning, later on in my childhood, when we were packing our whole house into boxes right before our move to the United States, people were shuffling around minding their own business, the air burdened. Both my parents and Ah-Ma were present, the maid who came later to take care of my younger sister, even at Ah-Ma's violent reaction to not having blood relatives raise her. I cannot recall, but Ah-Ma must have said something to upset Mom, who screamed at the top of her lungs, "Good, we've been waiting for you to leave for years now!" I thought Mom was mistaken, Ah-Ma said she was leaving for the weekend, as always. Suddenly insults were flying through the house, and so were people, my mother urging Ah-Ma to defend herself, with remarks like "We never asked you to come and work for all these years," and "If you are always complaining, just take your bags and go, we won't miss you!"

But Ah-Ma did not fight back. I was surprised as her head bowed and took much of my mother's lower cuts with so much resignation. Perhaps she was tired of fighting, after seventy years of fighting. My father retreated to his room, and Mom screamed on. I wanted to wrap my arms around what I could of Ah-Ma, to somehow take the stabbing that she was then taking at that moment from my mother, and if I could for once, hold her in my arms as she held me in hers for ten years. Ah-Ma said, her reaction not surprised at all, "So it finally comes out. That's how you've been feeling about me all these years? Fine, I'll go," and left to pack her bags. I don't remember much after that, except that I cried, all afternoon, held on to her leg and would not let her out the door, even when she was dragging me across the apartment floor while I held on. She sat me down when my fit was dying down, and said that it was okay, I would be leaving for the States in a couple of months anyway, so I should just pretend that she was leaving for a long weekend and everything will be fine. I shook my head and couldn't see anything, my vision blurred from the tears that tormented down my cheeks and probably all over Ah-Ma. This was my magician, my rescuer, she could not possibly leave! After a few hours (or it could have been days, but either seemed like an eternity to me) out of my sight, the argument was resolved, and Ah-Ma moved back in and things went on as they did, as if nothing had happened. When we did leave Hong Kong a few months later, I did as she was told, and pretended that this time we left for a long weekend. I did not know how to miss Ah-Ma or cry, so the last I remember of her was at the airport, when she shouted Chinese proverbs about good health and being obedient to my parents and studying hard.

We went to visit her grave years later, on the day of a No. 8 hurricane, when boats were flipping over in The Harbour and no sane person would go outside. The cab driver must have thought we were crazy for hiking up a hill, lightning and all, to find her grave. My sister came also, 7 or 8 years after we'd left for the States. The rain was torrenting down, raining buckets, so heavily that our umbrellas buckled in resignation and we let our clothes soak the rough in the tropical air. These were new graves, so no lawn had been put on them, not even tombstones, so our feet left muddy marks on the ground as we tried to look for the plot number, printed on little wooden stakes that stuck out of the running ground. I was almost afraid that the mud would slide off of the grave and her corpse would surface, not a corpse at all but Ah-Ma in front of my eyes. Thunder rumbled continuously in the background. When we finally found it, Mom urged us to quickly bow three times so we could get back indoors. I did, much more than out of respect, but to come back to tell her that my health was fine, I did what Mom and Dad told me to do all these years, and I studied hard, I'm going to MIT. When we made our retreat back to the cab, my Mom looked up and said, "Look, your Ah-Ma must be crying so hard in heaven, to see her two youngest grand children visit her and that they're doing well." That was perhaps the nicest thing she's ever said about her that I could remember. I was relieved, to know that in the years of our absence she had quit smoking and found God, and that she was safely in heaven. Instead of waiting for my correspondence, incredibly sparse and always in broken Chinese, she can now watch me whenever she pleased. I became more cautious of my actions, knowing that now she was watching me, and I the last thing I would do is to disappoint her.

As I said, I didn't know much of her story. I did not know that she was orphaned as a farm girl in rural Canton, or that she withstood years of marriage to an adulterous man, or that she single-handedly raised four boys through the war and the Japanese invasion, driving them to seek refuge in Hong Kong. Her past

was as obscure as her dwelling, which looked pristine and soft at a quick glance from a distance, but was surprisingly jagged and scarred to the touch. My mother told me that she recounted tales about my grandfather to me every day when she toweled me down after my bath and on those Saturday mornings when she fixed herself up in front of that mirror. Yet I always knew she was a strong woman, down to her last breath, relinquishing her life to the cancer she fought in her last days. In retrospect, she seemed to have been driven by the wars around her, not only with the Japanese and the Communists, but with her husband, her erased past, her ungrateful daughter-in-laws, and had learned to trample on the blood which was left on the ground after all these battles. Perhaps in her bearing children and grandchildren after all these years a piece of her made lasting impressions in our genes or our souls. And really, she is just gone for the weekend, and I will see her, all dolled up, when I meet her in Heaven.