Grandpa's Other Wife

另一個太太*

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I heard quite a few stories concerning "that woman" when I was growing up.

The first account I heard was simply this: "That woman's yer grandpa's 'other wife'! Y'all must never let 'them brats' beat ya, hear?" So murmured my mama while glancing over at a brood of unfamiliar boys and girls sitting quietly around another festive board. Them brats ate quietly and solemnly, gazing at the mottled wall around the courtyard, as if they saw clear on through that wall to the mess that lay beyond.

A mess of grease and smoke settled on Uncle Ah Hsiung's hair. That day, Mama's little brother, the fourth boy in line, showed up unannounced at the old family domicile. Seeing what was about to go down, all the grownups on hand up and swarmed around my grandpa, petulantly grabbing ahold of him and hollering, "Otosan! Your son's come home and that's what matters, right? Right!"

"You said it!" said my third granduncle, Grandpa's younger brother, who often told us tall tales about his exploits during the Japanese era. "How does the saying go? Early to rise—this year's

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new! Family ties—on day two. There ain't no excuse for anger during New Year's. Ah Hsiung, don't just stand there! Come on over here and drink a toast to yer old man!"

It was the second day of Chinese New Year, a day Taiwanese folks devoted to strengthening family ties between married daughters and their natal families. As always, Grandpa had invited all his daughters home. The narrow courtyard in front of the family abode was packed with big red tables, and the place was humming: the adults were playing fingers to an accompaniment of the cleaver on the chopping block and the roar of the caterer's gas stoves. Obasans in aprons brought out big steaming bowls and shouted: "Buddha Leaps the Wall Stew! Watch out, it's hot!" My mama's lashes were black and curly, and she and a few of her sisters were wearing a kind of vented scarlet cheongsam with a peony pattern. Running down the side corridor from the courtyard to the kitchen, me and my little brother caught sight of my grandma—Mama's mama—changing clothes in her bedroom. She was just standing there with her top hanging all the way down to her elbows. Her beige brassiere made her skin seem all the more sallow. A faint perfume of white jade orchid blossoms wafted through the unlit doorway.

"Grandma . . . ." I whispered and dropped my Mazinger Z toy on the floor.

She heard my voice, looked up, and squinted, as if an oncoming car had suddenly appeared out of a thick and narrow gloom. In the headlights of my gaze, she wore a confused expression, as if she was wondering: Should I keep undressing or hurry up and put my blouse back on? We looked at each other for quite a while, not making any move. Then, in a somewhat awkward tone, she said:

"Are ye havin fun this New Year's?"

I nodded, then shook my head, seeing that all my red envelopes were with Mama, and I hadn't gotten the Smurf I wanted, let alone the model toy that was all the rage: the Victory Leo V-Former, which transformed from robot to lion and back again. My grandma's eyes were shining bright in the dim room, like two little lamps, and me and my brother kept staring at those lamps until—suddenly—we heard a

loud "CRASH!" followed by a faint sobbing sound.

"He said he wants to di . . . ."

"He said he wants to divahd . . . the family property . . . ."

". . . divahd it up . . . with 'theeeyem.'"

Then, frozen in place, I saw deep wrinkles start stretching from my grandma's chin down her neck, round her jugular notch, and all the way to her chest. Those wrinkles stretched so fast, akin to some reckless soul running on a drought-stricken plain, forming huge cracks with every step. Meanwhile, a pattern of wrinkles and veins seemed to radiate out of Grandma's shins and made as if to seize me, like a shadow towering over me. I stared helplessly at her nearly bare, trembling upper body.

(So . . . was that the second claim I'd heard about 'that woman'?)

(That we mustn't let them brats beat us because they were there to try and steal a share of the family fortune?)

One day, years later, Grandpa was turning the pages of the big old *Scripture of the Regal Lord's Meritorious Vow* on the ancestral altar in the family room, when he suddenly let out a long puff of smoke, like a big old flower growing out of his mouth. In the haze of smoke, he quietly turned his head and gave his face a forceful rub, out of repentance or pure exhaustion I don't know. Then he exclaimed: "A wife'll worry 'bout her man; a husband'll suffer time and time again."

Then: "It's all mah mama's fault. What man would want to be a daddy twenty times over?"

And: "As the saying goes: 'The dumbest man's a crowned monarch, the next in line's a patriarch.'"

He sighed and continued: "But it couldn't be helped, ya know? Yer Grandma kept poppin out baby girls, one after another. You know about yer little auntie, yer mama's youngest sister? Well we had no choice but to give her up for adoption."

Grandpa kept on repeating the same old stories about how he dutifully fulfilled my great-grandmother's dying wish, how he "had no other choice" but to take a second wife to bear him a son, and how he'd exhausted himself raising his two families. Every time he reached this point in his litany, I'd steal a glance at Mama. No longer young,

she seldom wore her scarlet cheongsam for the annual family reunion anymore. Her lashes had gotten thinner. Her thick, dark hair was now flecked with white, like a starry night. When she smiled, the wrinkles would flood her temples like waves hitting a shore. Her face was like a mask molded by overly forceful fingers: it wasn't ugly or pretty, just kind of perturbing, because it didn't look quite right.

"If it weren't for mah mama's dyin wish . . . ." My grandpa was still lamenting in the family room.

That year, my mother was wearing a traditional Chinese-style sprig-of-lilac dress, making absent-minded conversation with my grandma, so absent-minded that even onlookers would notice. She was actually paying attention to what my grandpa was telling me. It seemed she might be a bit peeved about what she was hearing, in fact. My mama leaned her head over and cut my grandpa off and said:

"Otosan, will you please quit repeatin the same thing over and over again. Life's a voyage over a vast ocean. You and Okasan raised us right, as everyone in the neighborhood can see. Why keep harpin on ancient history?"

"It ain't that Ah like talkin 'bout it . . . " said Grandpa churlishly, pursing his lips and taking a drag from his cigarette, bringing the conversation to an abrupt end.

My mama still had things to get off her chest, but the expression on Grandma's face told her: silence is golden.

I looked up and scrutinized my grandpa's face. Those past few years, more and more age spots had appeared on his wrinkly cheeks and on the nape of his furrowed neck. He'd lost the shine in his deep-set eyes. The discomfort of his antique false teeth often made him suck in his lips. His chest had collapsed, leaving him scrawnily erect. With his short prickly hair, he was a spitting image of a sago cycad.

A stubborn plant that had lost all its dignity.

A couple of times, the weather was so hot Grandpa'd go out in an undershirt and squat down and lean on the outside wall. He'd have himself a smoke and stare at the flower patch, which had a few little blossoms in it as well as a vigorous papaya tree. I'd see him taking in the sight, his arms hanging between his inner thighs, looking so

lonesome. He looked like a lean shadow projected onto the ground, a shadow that'd fade at some point when nobody was looking, never to be noticed again because it'd been absorbed into the soil.

What an old feller! It was hard to associate him with the young guy who could carry five or six sacks of rice on his back, easy. Folks used to say that every time he went out to make a delivery the girls along the way would rest their eyes on his glistening arms only half aware of what they were doing. In the years when he was selling lunches on the platform of the Hsin-ying Station, he used to pass the containers to the travelers on the train and take the money and make change, all at lightning speed. His hustle and his youthful smile gave him a certain charm that others in the same line of work did not have. There was even a pretty (or as my grandpa put it in dialect, 'very purty') lady customer who squeezed his hand when she reached through the window and handed him the money.

"Really?" I was taken aback. Had Grandpa really had an "erotic encounter," like in a story on the silver screen?!

He'd go on and on, as if only the mode of the spoken word would allow him to preserve those vanished moments. Unfortunately, nobody had the patience to listen to him anymore. When his kids came for a visit, they left in a hurry. They'd spent long years finding their fortunes in the big cities of northern Taiwan, only occasionally coming home on holidays to present him with a red envelope stuffed with money and say: "Otosan, this here's for you, and may ya live to a ripe old age!"

That's why I was the only one my grandfather could complain to. Often, he would tell me all about all the emotionally intense "incidents" in his past. I sometimes got tired of hearing about them, to be honest. To try to reach some sort of conclusion, I'd just come out and ask him: You knew it would make Grandma angry, so why'd you go and marry your "other wife" for?

"I'll tell ya straight: it wasn't cause I wanted to marry again!" Judging from how feebly he defended himself, my grandpa was probably feeling mighty frustrated. Later he abandoned all his rationalizations and justifications. He'd just keep raising his voice and

saying that the second worst fate for any man was to be a patriarch.

Which reminds me of those times when we were eating in the kitchen and Grandpa would suddenly start yelling at the wall that separated our side from theirs: "Hsiu-yee? Is it Hsiu-yee? It's yer grandpa here. Ya eatin'?"

At this, my grandma and my mother, who'd have been chatting away happily, would fall suddenly silent, and all you could hear in the narrow space of the kitchen was the jostling of people eating rice and spooning soup—*ffffp ffffp slurp slurp*—and the soft sound of speech from the other side of the wall: "Grandpa . . . hi!"

It wasn't like Mama never complained about the arrangement: "Why'd you go and put a row of window vents in the kitchen wall for? Whenever someone cooks next door we hear the wok sizzle, and the fumes carry over here and make us cough!"

My mama knew exactly why but asked anyway. The duplex design of the domicile was all my grandpa's idea. The two halves of the house shared the same foundation and had a central wall and a front courtyard in common. In this way, his two wives had children under the same roof. They observed the customs of the postpartum month under the same roof. They experienced the ups and downs of life under the same roof—"the other wife" lived on the other side of the wall, and my grandpa and grandma lived over here. Which meant that my grandpa was openly enjoying the life of a man of Chi, as the philosopher Mencius euphemistically described the blessed existence of a man with both wife and concubine.

When my mama heard me use this expression she smacked me upside the head.

According to Mama, you could blame my grandpa (as he was after all not a professional architect) for the fact that these two houses kept each other "cool in winter and warm in summer!" You felt overwhelming waves of heat down the side corridor in July, and in January, the whooshing of the wind was like a special effect in a horror film. I don't know if it was to facilitate good feelings between the "two families," or in consideration of ventilation, but in any case Grandpa had drilled a row of window vents up on the wall between

the kitchens. It was like some kind of a "channel of communication."

"Hsiu-yee, you et yet? Better have dinner. Wait a sec now. *Ack ack ack.* You jus wait there and Grandpa'll bring ya a charm, and bless ya so ya'll grow up quick!" Grandpa kept talking to the wall like it was the most normal thing in the world.

At the time, I didn't understand why my mama and my grandma's faces were covered in a layer of gloom. Or why their eyes were full of silent rage. My grandpa could see their expressions plain, so why'd he keep talking reckless like that?

Years later, we were still eating in the kitchen, but my grandma wasn't fixing meals anymore: she'd employed a Filipina maid called Maria. Maria was young and eager. She had a pair of big old eyes, but she only ever able to see what was going on under our roof, not next door, just like I could never understand how Grandpa was ever able to support his "two families" at the same time. Did he go "next door" on a regular basis? (But didn't he spend his days in the family room?) As for my grandma, how did she carry herself when she ran into "the other wife"? Did she watch her every move? (After all, they were next door neighbors!)

"Kids sure do love New Year's!" said my mama, glaring at me and bringing my interrogation to an end.

I was sitting at the dining table, a bowl of hot rice porridge in my hands, when suddenly another space appeared in the midst of a mess of steam: there was a refrigerator, a gas stove, and a woman—I blinked. There "shay" was, behind the concrete wall! She was stooped like Grandpa, and she was wearing a loose pair of floral cotton pants. She was eating there by herself, her brow ends drooping. Behind her was an old wooden cupboard, a counter, a table with a floral pattern carved right into the wood, and, on the table, an octagonal nylon fly cover for the food . . . about the same décor as over here on our side!

I was shocked. I wanted to get a good look at her. But no matter how hard I looked, we were separated as if by a layer of frosted glass. I could only tell that the woman had gray hair, but I couldn't see her expression—which is why I couldn't help asking: What does she look like, after all?

As always, my grandpa was leaning on that wall, feet apart, squatting on the ground in front of the flower plot, staring at the papaya tree, with a bee buzzing overhead and a rose periwinkle—the flower of eternal spring, folks say—beneath, swaying in the breeze. A kind of pleasant afternoon air descended upon us, and the unseasonably bright sun made my grandpa's hoary hair seem all the hoarier, accentuating the fact that he'd gotten so darn old.

"How does shay . . . ." I said. I was still dying to know: "What on earth does 'shay' . . . ."

My grandfather didn't pay me any mind, just looked up through the tree-sieved sunlight. Then, in a swath of shaking drops of light, he very carefully picked off weeds and broke off twigs and leaves and examined several fresh papaya blooms. The pale green petals were curled out, exposing the inner hearts of the flowers for all to see. But I guess they weren't as fragrant as you'd expect them to be.

"Shay . . . was jus like this here pawpaw bloom," said my grandfather, by way of reply. He took another drag and said: "It was arranged . . . she talked so softly, softer than yer grandma."

My grandfather put out the cigarette and paused a moment, then thought of something to say but never ended up saying it. Instead he just closed his eyes and let the southern wind caress his brow until it blew away the furrows in his forehead. His chin upraised, he looked like he was enjoying himself; there was even a moment when he looked like he'd gone and fallen asleep. Loose threads from his worn and faded collar were flapping up and down, up and down, in perfect rhythm with the tree. There were glossy green herbs all around.

(How many stories about "that woman" had I heard now?)

Right then and there I closed my eyes and quietly felt the breeze rub and pinch my face. The sun was warm, and a faint herbal fragrance was wafting from the flower patch. A passerby would never have imagined that such an old man had taken two wives, and that in his youth he'd gone and built a duplex, two domiciles side by side, with exactly the same floor plan, so that the whole family (or both families) could live together under one roof.

He was after all an old coot covered head to toe in wrinkles.

(My mama'd said: Yer grandpa is in his eighties. Who knows if he'll live to eat your connubial *tangyuan* soup!)

"Grandpa," I said, a thought suddenly flashing through my brain. "Why does everyone say that 'shay' led Uncle Ah Hsiung astray?"

"Why?"

But this time my grandpa really had fallen into a daydream. His soft snores were like little stones tossed into a sea of trees; there were extremely faint echoes and ripples all around. The wind swirled up the stolid afternoon clouds, piling them up into pale gray clumps. It was looking like rain.

In dribs and drabs, a vague idea of 'that woman' had formed in my mind. She was a cunning fox spirit temptress. Mean. With narrow hips. (Folks said she'd had difficult deliveries.) She wore a floral print skirt all summer long. Her neck gave off the faintest white jade orchid perfume, just like I smelled when I passed by Grandma's room. She cut a figure that was so near, yet so far. Over the years she had become like my mama's dark side. Each secretly had the other figured out, but Grandpa kept them wondering: to which side did his heart incline? Was he nicer to "them" on the sly? Did he take better care of his "other wife"?

Strange to say, I don't know if it was because Mama made a point of turning a cold shoulder, or because I'd always been exhorted to stay away from "them brats," but I never, after hearing so many different stories, ever saw "the other wife" on my visits back to the family abode, nor did I see much of "them." Occasionally when I was passing by their side of the duplex, I would make out swaying human forms through the screen in the front door. And I'd hear noises emanating from the gloom, soft and low, but I could never be sure whether or not that was the sound of people talking.

It sounded more like a Buddhist mantra, or the low growl of a beast that had stolen in.

"The Lord-in-Heaven is all-seeing!" my mama said. She pinched my ears and continued: "Kids aren't supposed to talk. Sit quiet and listen!"

At the time my mama had learned to color her hair. One afternoon

every month, she would get out her hair dye from the vanity, squeeze it out into a little saucer, and brush it into her locks, wrapping her head in layer after layer of plastic wrap. Her hair was sparse and white; it had a transparent texture—and the harsh smell of ammonia spiraled stubbornly into every nook and cranny, leading me to the conclusion that age is just different kinds of dye. You get all mixed up and blended in the end into the same shade of gray, dull in odor and color.

Just like my mama was always saying: "Y'all must never let 'them brats' beat ya, hear?"

(Is there any reason why we can't let them beat us?)

"Don't go and disgrace yerselves!"

(What does our dignity have to do with "them"?)

"Don't you ever . . . ."

Time had been stretched into an endless corridor. I thought there'd be light at the end of the tunnel, but what did I find when I finally came out on the other side? A storm! It passed over the town, whirling through the streets and whooshing around the fruit stands and the automobiles; and there was my grandpa making faces and twirling in midair and shouting, "Didn't Ah tell ya not to?"

Furious, he'd pushed away my grandma's hand and said:

"Didn't Ah tell ya not to keep puttin sugar in? You deaf or something?" The thump upon the table gave us all quite a scare. I never thought such an old fart would have such a big temper, and it was getting worse and worse the older he got. He was getting more and more stubborn, too. Mama just drank her soup, her face dismal. My little brother and I kept eating, heads down, but then we heard my grandpa's whole tone of voice turn gentle all of a sudden: "Hsiu-yee, Hsiu-yee, have ya et yet?" he said towards the kitchen wall.

From the other side of the wall came the sound of footsteps. Maybe someone responded, or nodded, but in any event it was just a quotidian interaction, a pleasantry. Who would really pay it any mind? Especially considering it might be Grandpa's other wife's reply. My mama and grandma didn't bother to knit their brows anymore. Their faces were fixed, expressionless, and the conversation always revolved around the cooking:

"Why is the dried radish so damn salty today?"

"Kaasan, have a bit more of this perch . . . ."

"This cabbage is astringent!"

They'd gotten accustomed, by making as much conversation as possible, to the silence on the other side of the wall.

I was so curious that finally one day I couldn't help stealing down the fire lane behind the kitchen and standing tiptoe on the cover of that foul smelling gutter to try to get a glimpse of Grandpa's other wife. What did I see when I held my breath and peeped in through the wooden bars in the old-fashioned lattice window? An octagonal nylon fly cover on an octagonal dinner table, with an open wooden cupboard to the one side. I took a sniff and smelled something stale. The smell was sour and sweet, like food left out too long. From the corner came a muffled crackle, like a fan or something. The faucet was dripping . . . but I couldn't tell if anyone was moving around. An aged and desolate odor is all I smelled. My toes started to go numb. The brilliant sunlight beat down upon my head, and the sweat of my brow ran down my cheeks and made them itch.

I felt like shouting.

But I only ended up running away!

Once again, an image of "that woman," whom they'd been complaining about all these years, emerged in my mind: she was a lady of merciless means, her hair towering over her head in a loose bun, a mysterious dark gully occasionally appearing at her chest. In retrospect, "that woman" had remained so distant in spite all the stories I had heard about her. My impression of her was almost abstract. I couldn't get any closer to the core, to a solid ground of reality. At which point, I asked my grandpa:

"Is 'shay' the one you really love?"

"Why doesn't 'shay' ever come over for a visit?"

"And what does 'shay' look like? Is 'shay' really so bad?"

My grandpa didn't say anything, just kept up his old routine of inspecting the papaya tree in the crystalline brightness of the scattered sunlight, taking a leisurely drag on his cigarette. Then he took an old wallet out of his pocket, rifled through it and finally got out a

small photograph. He handed it over, his expression self-pitying and aggrieved, like he was intent on confiding in me and defending himself at the same time.

I carefully cupped that photograph in my palms, afraid it would fall and rip. It was so old! The woman in the photograph was all blurry. Mildew had more or less taken over the entire scene, as if this slightest puff would lift the grass and trees and blow her smile away!

I looked hard at the photograph, which made such great demands on my "imagination." My first impression was: she's unfamiliar. My second impression was: "Oh?" My third: "Huh!" Having gone from disappointed to flabbergasted, I was like: so this was the woman for whom my grandpa had had to endure so much finger pointing? How could she turn out to be so plain?

"Don't be silly," my grandpa said, his lips twitching. "'Shay' bore me five baby boys. And your grandma? Nothing but girls, for the longest time!" His whispy gray hair shone whispily in the sun. His nostrils flared. It appeared he was displeased.

I didn't know what to say, for this was the first time I'd ever faced my grandpa's fury. After all, sitting with him in the garden enjoying the sun and the breeze was the happiest memory we shared. How many times had we sipped freshly brewed chrysanthemum tea while checking out the golden phoenix balsam blooms? Or what about that spider lily? Best feed it a bit of fertilizer. We might even spend the whole afternoon not saying a word, just leaning on the wall, our legs splayed, smoking—I still remember when Grandpa handed me a cigarette for the first time. He tensed up his lips, helped me light it, and told me that the next time I'd have to make a fist around the lighter, and use my little finger to tap the fire-sharer's hand as a way of showing respect.

In that moment, I realized how acrid and bitter sweet seventeen actually is.

"Ya know what they say: 'Lettuce on flatbread holds the meat, some folks think it's quite a treat.' No matter what you say, we got married, me and 'shay.'" My grandfather sighed, most unwillingly, with a slight gleam at the corner of his eyes, maybe a glint of sunlight,

or maybe a tear. In any case his expression at that moment was so calm and serene, as if he'd done all that he could do, as if now he could retire and just dream the dream he'd been wanting to.

I observed Grandpa's expressionless face and remembered everything I'd heard about "that woman" ever since I was a boy, all those stories that kept making the rounds of the local gossips in a game of telephone, getting blown out of proportion, becoming hostile and unreal. Over time she'd become a floating "rumor carrier," looming just out of sight, never defending herself. Nobody heard them whisper their side of the story, either. (But who knows? Maybe my grandma was a floating rumor carrier to them as well.) But because people kept talking and jumping to conclusions, "Grandpa's other wife" had become a hidden source of trauma for my whole family. (Though maybe my grandmother was a taboo subject for "them," too.)

"Hey Ah Ping, know how to tell the girl papayas from the boy papayas?" asked my grandpa suddenly, his eyes growing wide.

I don't know if I'd heard one too many non sequiturs, or whether curiosity had welled up inside me until I burst, but this time I didn't reply. I just up and rushed towards the other side of the house, leaving Grandpa in the garden hollering my name.

I told myself it was time for me to confront years of profound confusion concerning "Grandpa's other wife" (or "my other grandma").

I stood before the front door, which was so mottled it looked like a funny face. Only looking at it up close could I see that it was covered in rust that would flake away at the slightest touch. From inside came a sound that was vague but also very clear. It had a whispering tonality, like mice or rats were scurrying around in there.

I hesitated. Then I yanked the front door wide open.

It had the ambiance of something left out and forgotten about, this place. My palms were besmirched by massive sheets of ineffable shade. Dancing particles of backlit dust rose and fell in the air. I fought the urge to cough. Then I noticed beneath my feet a long accumulated murk that was dotted with what seemed to be cat or dog prints. Which suggested that some other living thing had been there before me.

The altar to the Bodhisattva Guanyin in the family room was covered in a layer of dust, and a swipe of the television screen left my finger slick with an oily scum. A tea table lay aslant on the floor, and the clock was off kilter as well: the cracked face grew with pale greenery; the hands indicated 3:01 . . . . I careened down the corridor, brushing away cobwebs and shadows hanging in the air, rushing straight towards the kitchen.

I pushed open the screen door. A creaky old electric fan was turning; the faucet was crawling with water droplets. The plates and bowls inside the sink were coated in an emerald scum of soft mold, and there were mildew stains on the floor all the way from the sink to the dining table. The whole kitchen was floating with an almost fern-like gloom.

I was shocked. I couldn't believe that the image I had had of "Grandpa's other wife," of how "that woman" looked, and even of "them"—which my mama, my grandma, my aunts and uncles and even my grandfather's accounts had constructed in my mind—could turn out to be an empty construct, a mirage.

(When had "they" up and left?)

(How long ago did "they" move away?)

(Long gone, the ambiance the place had once had. Its shine had dulled; the space, whence living beings had fled, was empty now, and left for dead. Did this mean that the other woman my grandpa had been searching for was just a dolled up memory and nothing more?)

(Or was this a scene in a recurrent dream my mama and the others couldn't stop having?)

Then I heard, from behind me, the heavy sound of shuffling steps. A gruff, gravelly voice said:

"Ah truly . . . ."

"Ah wasn't . . . ."

"Ah really . . . ."

(About my "other wife," . . . .)

(If it hadn't been for mah mama . . . .)

(Next dumbest is a patriarch!)

By now my grandfather was sitting in defeat on the floor, pulling

at his hair and saying in a voice so low and so faint you couldn't hardly hear: "Ah really, truly miss her, very much . . . ."

(So how many stories about "that woman" had I heard now?)

Translated by Darryl STERK 石岱崙