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Wasted Rice Child

I.

WHenever I get angry—if my son is late for school, or makes a mess in the bathroom—I’ll jab his forehead and say, “Ai-ya! What a waste of rice!” As a little boy, Derek would cry and run away, but as he got bigger, he didn’t move, just stared me down, daring me to smack his ass. When he grew taller than me, I was the one who turned and walked away.

Chinese parents curse their children, but it’s not because we enjoy telling them we regret their births, or that with these grades, they’ll end up living on the streets. A woman on the *Oprah* show talked about magical thinking, and this is what we try to do: protect our children with the power of words. We point out the calamity around the corner—the misstep that leads to epic failure—because if your family expects the worst for you, you must work harder to prove them wrong.

LAST NIGHT, after Derek ran out and slammed the front door, Winnie Ah-Yee came over, her pig snout sniffing the ground, digging for gossip. I would have ignored the knock on the door, but my wife finds this impossible. Soon enough, Winnie Ah-Yee sat in our living room with a plate of egg custard tarts and McCormick’s chocolate biscuits in front of her, as if fattening up the sow would make her take pity, blind herself to my wife’s swollen eyes and chewed-up cuticles. Twenty years in Toronto and my wife still thinks saving face is possible.

After only two biscuits, Winnie Ah-Yee had swallowed all that she needed, “Too bad, too bad.” Turkey neck wobbling, she left quickly, anxious to share the news. The building shook as the neighbors wagged their tongues. *Those Yangs, always so proud. Now their only child bringing home shame. Serves them right. They should have seen it coming.*

When midnight came and Derek still wasn’t back, my wife woke me, begging me to look for him. I was worried too but had dozed off when Peter Mansbridge bid the country good night from his anchor desk.

“It’s too cold; he’ll die or get frostbite and lose all his toes,” she said.

“He has a jacket. Maybe one glove.”

“No matter what he’s done, we have only one son.”

“He has to learn.”

“You don’t think he’s already learned? That his father is a mad-man?” My wife is short, and nowadays, gone to fat. She didn’t look like any of the other village girls when I married her: skin so pale it looked like she sprinkled herself with flour every morning; brown eyes that slanted upward, not down, so that she always looked surprised and happy to see me, even when she wasn’t. “Derek is young. It’s only natural he writes about things he doesn’t understand.”

“He’s a cannibal, feeding off my life. For what? To humiliate us?”

She marched toward the front door, her slippers slip-slapping on the linoleum. She pulled her nubby woolen coat off its hook, then looked up at me with disgust. “Husband, if you don’t do it now, then I will go and look for our son.”

2.

THE OTHER DAY, I caught Derek staring at my uniform: brown pants, collared shirt, company logo printed in red on the back. I wear these shirts on my days off too, when my wife and I shop in Dragon City mall or visit friends in St. Jamestown.

“Why don’t you wear normal clothes to work?” he asked. “Heather’s dad wears a tie.” His lips were pinched, like when his mother makes him drink bird’s-nest soup with ginseng and lotus seeds.

“Don’t stupid. Without uniform, no look professional.” When I speak English, it feels like my wires have crossed, short-circuiting my words, but this is how Derek hears me best. I packed my dinner—three oranges and two pork buns—inside a paper bag, ready for my late shift emptying wastepaper baskets and mopping floors at one of the big banks downtown.

“People think we can’t afford normal clothes.”

“Ai-ya,” I gave him a smack on the temple. “What people I should worry about? They paying our bills? Buying us food?”

He’s in grade eight, and cares too much about how he looks and how our family looks. His shoulders don’t quite fill out his red jacket, and when he shrugs, the cracked, fake leather barely budes. *Thriller* plays on continuous loop on his Walkman, but we won’t let him wear a single glove, otherwise people will think we can’t afford to buy him a pair.

“Why so worry about my clothes?” I looked out the window at the city streets below, guessing it would take ten minutes to warm up the engine, dig out the tires, scrape the ice off the windshield.

“No reason.”

I didn’t like how he sounded, too much like those black kids on TV, always talking back to their parents. “How school?”

Pride flickered in his eyes, but it disappeared so fast, maybe I imagined it. “Miss Ellman asked me to read my story out loud.”

“When?”

The corners of his mouth curved like a dumpling. “In front of the entire middle school. At assembly. Tomorrow afternoon.”

I switched back to Chinese. “What time does it start? Your mom can call in sick—she hasn’t taken a sick day all year from that damned factory. I’ll ask my foreman if I can go in late tomorrow. Is two hours enough?”

His hand flew up as if in self-defense. “No. Parents aren’t allowed.”

“What? This school always asking us for something, bake cookies, sell raffle tickets. Now they don’t want us?” I was disgusted by the selfishness, the two faces of these teachers. It had started in kindergarten. *Oh, Mr. and Mrs. Yang, Derek’s English is so much better, but there’s room for improvement! We think it’s best if he only speaks English at home. No more Chinese. You understand, don’t you?* We stopped making him go to Chinese school, pretended not to mind when the soft, round tones of our native tongue turned hard and flat in his mouth.

“That’s the rule. Parents aren’t invited. It makes kids nervous.”

I looked down. His upper lip is prickled with short black hairs and his nose tip is wide, the nostrils fleshy. *Look at that rich man’s nose!* his mother cries out at regular intervals, much to his annoyance.

“Make sense. What is story?”

“It’s fiction. You know, made up? About a hockey team that keeps on losing but then comes back from behind and wins the Stanley Cup.” Derek watches Hockey Night in Canada every Saturday and he worships the Montreal Canadiens, even though this is dangerous in a city of Maple Leaf fans.

I patted the top of his head, happy for this honor and that my paycheck wouldn’t get cut. “Always do your best. It must be a good story.”



A FEW DAYS LATER, I was late for work and ran out of our apartment building, half-sliding along the icy sidewalk. At first, I pretended not to see Winnie Ah-Yee pushing a heavy grocery cart on the opposite side of the street, but she waved at me like a crazy, and against my better judgment, I crossed over to help.

“Ah-Yee, hard at work! Too cold for you, let me do it.” I gripped the handle of her cart, piled high with brightly colored grocery bags, pulling it over the slippery curb and around the mounds of piss-stained snow.

“Sorry to bother you.” Her voice was muffled, hairy frost clinging to the mouth of her balaclava. “I was telling old husband last night how I’m worried about your family.”

Winnie is clever. I didn’t know what she wanted, so I kept talking in the way our people do best—deflecting and diluting, giving nothing away. “Our problems are not new ones.”

“Then why weren’t you at the boys’ school? I looked for you.”

“Why would I go to school?” We stood in front of our building. I hadn’t bothered with gloves, and my fingers felt flash frozen to the metal handles of the cart.

“Andrew presented his science fair project. It won first prize for all of grade eight in our district.” The woolen layer over Ah-Yee’s mouth couldn’t hide her smile, but I forgave her for bragging. Winnie and Old Ping had given up on having children after many years of trying, and Andrew’s birth was considered a neighborhood miracle; that their boy turned out to be a genius was an extra blessing from the Buddha.

“That is good news, Ah-Yee, but why would I go to school to see Andrew?”

“Don’t you know anything about your own son?” Seeing my instant displeasure, she tried to comfort me. “Derek read his story at assembly. It was very good.”

“You were at the assembly? How did you get in?”

“Why would they keep parents out?” she exclaimed. “How did that idea get inside your head?”

I recalled that afternoon, how urgently and easily he lied to me. “Stupid me, getting old,” I said, as if bothered by my forgetfulness. “We couldn’t get the time off.”

Winnie shook her head in sympathy, but through the narrow slit of her balaclava, her eyes shone with gleeful scorn: her son’s accomplishment was a bigger deal—deserving time off from her job as dumping

maker at Tri Dim Sum—while Derek’s achievement was mediocre, unworthy of lost pay. Clearly, she and Old Ping had one-upped us in status.

To defend family honor, I used flattery and a humility so excessive it sounded like nonsense, even to my own ears. “My son isn’t like Andrew, so smart! Your son is very deserving. Derek wastes too much time, always reading or writing stories. What use is that for his future? He’ll end up living in Regent Park or begging for scraps on Jane Street. But his teacher liked the hockey story. Said it was the best she’s ever heard. So what can we do?”

“Hockey?” Winnie’s voice was sharp with disbelief: on top of everything else, it seemed that I was clueless too. “That wasn’t the one he read.”

“Ai-ya! My brain can’t keep track of all the stories his teacher admires.”

“He is a good boy, but now I have to ask you,” she said. “How come you don’t talk about your family? How hard your life was? There’s no shame anymore, it’s 1988! Don’t think I don’t know,” she cackled. “You Yangs can’t hide from me.” It took everything I had not to push her cart over into the dirty snow.

“That boy!” I shouted to emphasize the lunacy in my family. “Always making up stories. That is his dream. Such a waste.” Desperate to escape, I told her I was late for work, but she stopped me.

“What’s wrong with your hands?” she asked.

I looked down. My hands were strangely white and I could no longer feel them. My palms were raw, and upon closer inspection, the skin was blistered, small pockets of fluid bubbling on the soft pads. I’d seen this in the government health pamphlet, “Winter Preparedness Tips,” that Derek brought home from school, but I’d never believed that cold could burn your skin.

THAT NIGHT, I got home from work after midnight and pulled him out of his warm bed. It was below freezing outside, but in our overheated apartment, he wore boxers and an undershirt that didn’t cover his concave belly. His arms and legs, suddenly long, stuck out at awkward angles. I barely recognized him.

“You think you can lie to me?” I demanded, tiny bubbles of my spit dissolving on his face. “Parents always find out.”

He’d been sound asleep moments ago, but my rage didn’t seem to

move, or surprise, him. “What’s the big deal? It was just a stupid assembly. Why do you care?”

“I clean up the shit left by strangers because I don’t care? I wear this shirt that embarrasses you because I don’t care?” I switched to English in case he would claim later on that he didn’t understand me. “Derek, why lying?”

“You’d feel weird, I’d feel weird. It’s embarrassing.”

I knew what he really meant, and the slap, when it came, was harder than I intended. I blamed my cold-bitten hands, raw with their own pain.

He touched his cheek reflexively, but instead of burying his face in a pillow like I expected, he stared at me, his eyes as cold as black jade. Behind us, my wife sobbed, but we ignored her: this was a battle between men.

“You don’t want me or Mommy there. We look ugly, talk funny. But why tell story about my family to school? Why make more embarrassment for me? For you?”

His tongue worried around in his mouth, tasting for blood. “Miss Ellman likes my story. A lot.” His arrogance surfaced like a shark fin cutting through water.

This made me even angrier. “Now people thinking Yang family is full of crazy.”

“I knew you wouldn’t like me writing about your family, but people loved it. My teacher submitted it to the Scholastic Story Contest.”

“No,” I said. “I not allow.”

“It’s done. Besides, you don’t even know what the story’s about.”

“I’ll read.”

“You can’t.”

“Why?”

He hesitated, still a child, not ready to destroy the illusion that I was in charge. “You won’t understand most of it. The words are . . . big.”

Two years ago, we’d stared for hours at a problem about trains traveling toward each other at different speeds. Until then, I’d managed to help with his math homework, wrestling with arithmetic and fractions, hiding my uncertainty under commands of *How come you not see? Easy!* But when the only answer I had for the train problem was that I hoped they didn’t crash, he stopped asking for help. With anything.

“So, the story about my family in China? My village, my parents?”

He nodded reluctantly. "I told everyone it was fiction. I don't know how Ah-Yee knew it was based on your life – I didn't use your name."

"You think you're the only smart one? People get suspicious, they ask around."

"Who cares? We're not important."

I know all too well that it's the small, insignificant person who burns to hear about another person's despair. "Give me the story."

Derek looked defiant, and I thought I'd have to tell my wife to get the feather duster so that I could threaten him with it. Where was my good, obedient son? But he surprised me, reaching across the rumpled mattress and heaving his backpack off the floor. He poked around inside, pulled out a crumpled stack of sheets, and thrust it into my hands. "Here, take it. I need sleep." He jumped back into his bed and turned his face toward the wall.

My son has never had to eat bitterness because I swallow it for him every day, storing it in my belly, my limbs, my bones, my heart. For the first time that night I felt something slip loose inside of me, letting the bitterness overflow, black ink dribbling into milk.

I sat underneath a bare lightbulb at the kitchen table with my English-Chinese dictionary, a pencil, and blank paper. It was hard work, translating Derek's story: the language he used was complicated and too much of the time it felt like he was showing-off. But by the end, I understood enough to know that like a magpie, he'd collected only the shiniest bits and pieces, most likely gleaned from mah-jongg parties, after the elders had drunk too much Johnnie Walker, letting loose their idle chatter.

3.

I DON'T LIKE to think about my childhood in China. At the time, I didn't know it was bad because I wasn't aware that anything else was possible. We had no television or radio; books were rare and expensive. Our newspapers came in single sheets, used as wrapping paper for supplies brought back from Meizho, the closest city. The villagers who knew their characters could read the first bit of a newspaper article (*The government's Five-Year Plan will bring many jobs*), or the last bit of another (*Therefore, signing the agreement is important for Sino-Soviet relations*), but usually, the newspaper pages would be ripped and stained with animal droppings or blood, so we filled in the missing information with our own imagination.

The villagers were generally misinformed and stoked this with gossip, which was plentiful and free. It didn't help that we lived in a walled village, some four hundred of us, squeezed inside a doughnut-shaped fortress, encircled on the outside by earthen walls reinforced with stone, and filled on the inside with loud and bickering families. As a child, I had no idea that round houses were unusual because our compound was one of many found at the foot of Yinna Mountain. There's a rumor that in the 1960s, American satellites mistook our round houses for hidden missile bases; if that's true, we're lucky they didn't choose to bomb first and ask questions later. These earthen fortresses, built to withstand warring clans and earthquakes, still stand, huddled together on the gentle slopes.

I WAS ELEVEN years old. I'd been running through the compound with Fatty Deng, exploring the places children weren't allowed to explore, like the dozens of rooms on the ground and first floor that were reserved for grain and firewood storage, cooking, toileting, and even for the storing and care of dead bodies.

Fatty and I got away with being bad because my parents had a lot of power. My father had paid to have a separate shed built on the ground floor for ancestor worship because my mother thought it was disrespectful for the spirits to share the patio with the shit smells coming from the animal pens. It was, they explained, why the trees yielded only tiny, worm-ridden fruits. The ancestors were displeased.

"Get away!" yelled the elders, swatting at us with their fans and brooms. Fatty and I laughed, dodging out of reach. We flopped down next to the small pond, built in the center of the compound to collect freshwater drainage.

I turned over onto my back, gazing up at the thin clouds drifting across the giant opening above our heads. Our fortress was four stories high, with hundreds of people living in dozens of rooms on the third floor. Fatty, his parents, and four brothers shared a room on the second floor, while my family, along with a few others, lived on the top floor. This was considered the best place to live because we were far from the pig and cow stink, while during the rainy season, we were protected from flooding.

I felt a soft, familiar rumbling in my belly. "Let's find your mother," I said to Fatty. When I'd gone around to pick up Fatty this morning, his mother was making stuffed bean curd. With five boys and a husband

to feed, his mother only left the kitchen to wash their clothes in the river, or to go to bed at night. My mother had a girl who cooked and washed for us, but the girl was simple and didn't know how to make stuffed bean curd, my favorite dish.

"I'll race you," Fatty shouted, springing up on his bare feet and running ahead.

I couldn't let Fatty beat me again. I tucked my chin, pumped my arms, and barreled behind him. Fatty took us the long way, down the central hall, up the side aisles, and past the open front gate. I could only see the blur of Fatty's dirty legs ahead of me and didn't notice the woman until it was too late.

It wasn't the pain behind my eyes that bothered me, it was the moist cow shit that, to my horror, covered my face and body. I was lying on the ground, the smell so overpowering I couldn't move because of the nausea.

"I tried to get out of your way, but my buckets are too heavy and you move too fast, little one."

A woman knelt next to me, a sorrowful gaze on her face. Her cheekbones were broad, her chin sharp and narrow. Her nose was thick and fleshy like mine, but it was her eyes that struck me most. They were black and sparkly, and only later did I think that they'd been full of tears.

"What happened?" I heard Fatty's nasal voice.

"I was on my way out of the compound, and you ran past me first, but your friend didn't see me," the woman explained. She looked down, sheepish. "My buckets were so full, and when he ran into me, I couldn't hold my balance."

I turned my head and could see her bamboo yoke lying next to the overturned buckets. I sat up slowly, not wanting to spread the dung.

Now that he knew I was okay, Fatty pinched his nose and stepped back. "You're disgusting. What are you going to do? Should I get your mother?"

"No." I stood up too quickly and grabbed the woman's shoulder for support, leaving a dung handprint on her rough tunic. We heard a small crowd of people shouting and I knew it was already too late. Someone had flown up to the fourth floor and reported everything to my mother.

In my memory, my mother is always old, but not like how children always think that anyone over the age of twenty is old. She kept her

long, gray hair tied back in a bun and her face was pleated like a fan, with small, black moles dotting the hills and valleys of her skin. She always wore black clothing—loose pants and a padded jacket—no matter what the temperature. She didn't know her actual birth date except that she was a Rooster (no one in our village kept track of actual dates, but they knew their zodiac year), and on that afternoon, she was already elderly.

Perpetually stooped, she marched down the central aisle with an angry expression. Quickly, the woman next to me stepped back and bowed her head.

“Yang Li Wei! What new trouble is this?” my mother scolded, not daring to come too close to her stinky son.

I bowed my head. “Ma, I'm sorry.”

“It was my fault. I did not get out of the boy's way,” said the strange woman.

Only then did my mother take notice of the woman standing behind me. She narrowed her eyes in the way that I was used to, when she was about to punish me, or tell off my father for drinking too much rice wine. “What? It's you?”

The stranger bowed deeply at the waist, taking me by surprise. “I'm sorry, Mrs. Yang. Usually my brother collects the dung, but he is very sick. I thought that I could come in and out without anyone seeing me.” Her voice was thick, as if she could barely form the words.

“You understood my instructions,” my mother said.

I looked up at the two women, understanding that something heavy rested between them.

The woman shook her head. “My mother knows nothing of this. She wouldn't have let me do it. But we need the dung, and now that my brother is so sickly—”

My mother looked around, suddenly aware that she was now surrounded by half the village. Her tone softened. “Pick up your things. Leave. Don't come back.”

“Yes, Mrs. Yang.” With everyone watching, the young woman gathered up the bamboo pole and the empty buckets with one hand. Before she turned away, she reached out to me with her free hand. I winced, thinking she was going to take a swipe at my head, but instead, she gazed into my eyes and touched my forehead with a tenderness I'd never felt before, not even from my own mother.

“Always do your best, Yang Li Wei,” she whispered.

“Go now!” shouted my mother. She was elderly, but her lungs and body were strong. In fact, she would live for another twenty years after this.

After the crowd was through laughing at me and had dispersed, my mother told Fatty to take me to the river and scrub me clean. In exchange, she would give him a small bag of rice from our stores.

FOR MONTHS AFTER that, I would sneak over to the neighboring round houses, looking for the mysterious young woman who had this strange relationship with my mother and an undeserved tenderness toward me. I knew that if I could just get to know her, some emptiness in my life would be filled. Eventually I was caught lurking in another compound and was dragged home by two angry men, who suspected I was there to spy on their women and steal from their granary stores. My mother calmed the men down with a bottle of rice wine and a basket of eggs. After they left, she unleashed her fury. No matter how often she smacked me or yelled at me, I wasn’t smart in school, wasn’t helpful around the home, and like a pig, I did nothing more than eat and sleep.

“When I think about how much I’ve wasted on you!” she cried. “Why are you sneaking around like that? Bringing shame to our family? Are you stealing? Peeking at girls?”

“Why?” she asked me over and over, sobbing into her hands. Usually I knew better than to answer, because anything I said would be taken as disrespect. But today I knew she would tell me the truth. Her hatred was primal; she would do anything to be rid of me.

“I was looking for that woman,” I said. “You must remember that day—she was collecting cow shit and I ran into her. Got it all over me. Poor Fatty had to clean me up.”

My mother stopped sobbing so quickly, I wondered if it had been an act. “Why?”

“The two of you knew each other, but I’d never seen her before. Who is she?”

She sniffed, looking around the room. My father was in Meizho, buying supplies, and would not be home for days. “She’s a nasty woman. You want nothing to do with her.”

I was expecting that. “How do you know her?”

“Did you like her, Li Wei? Why else would you still be thinking about her after all this time?” My mother’s voice was shrill, a high

wind blowing through tall reeds. “Or maybe it’s because you recognize her? Is that why you can never please me? Because somehow you know?”

“Know what?” My body tensed.

“That she birthed you? That your real mother is a whore who sold you for a bushel of rice?”

I’d been lashed before, by my father’s belt or my mother’s slippers, but nothing physical had ever struck me like this.

“Yes, Li Wei,” my adoptive mother intoned. “She sold her baby boy for a very high price.” She cackled. “Too high, it turns out, because I will never earn back my investment. On you? I wasted so much of my precious rice. You will never amount to anything.”

I NEVER DISCUSSED this again, with my adoptive mother or anyone else. The entire village must have known, but fear of my parents kept their mouths shut. I didn’t dare look for that kindly woman again, afraid of any other secrets I might uncover. When I look back, I see that I was cursed: How many people can say they lost two mothers in one day?

4.

WHEN I STEP outside, it’s snowing, which means it’s not so bitterly cold. I don’t know where my son is, don’t know where to start looking. I stand outside our building and light a cigarette—I allow myself two a day – but my hands are stiff because of the blisters. Inhaling deeply, I hold the smoke inside my lungs. I figure I’ll stand here, smoke, and strategize. Derek ran off earlier tonight because he found out I’d called the principal of his school, demanding that the story be retracted from the contest.

Derek frightens me. He’s as foreign to me as this country, where I’ll always be an outsider. It’s a dilemma, having a child in a culture that isn’t my own: he believes in happiness, in the quest for self-fulfillment. Derek’s entire being is created from this air, from this soil, so how could I have expected anything different?

By now I’m getting cold, so I decide to tell my wife that I walked around with no luck, but then a figure wearing a red jacket and a pair of gloves lopes toward me.

“Dad?” Derek says with surprise. He’s not shivering, the tip of his

nose is just pink; he must have been at a friend's house, watching television while his mother lost her mind. He comes to a stop.

"Your mommy crazy with worry."

"I had to get out. My head was going to explode." The night air makes him snuffle. "You were so upset."

In our memories, we can be the hero or the victim, but how do we choose? The reality of the present changes how we perceive the past, so the choice often depends on how things have turned out for us. I will never be American enough for him, but he will never be Chinese enough for me. "You think people here care what happen to me? About you? Why share my life with strangers?"

"I like writing, and my teachers think I'm good." He pauses, as if forgetting his memorized lines. "Stories are important. It's how we learn about each other."

"Family stories are just for family."

"Not in this country." He looks down at his boots, two sizes too big. "You'll never understand."

"You think you learned more about me because you wrote a story?"

He shrugs. "I made a lot of it up. You don't tell me much about your life in China."

"Better that way."

"Why? Are you embarrassed?"

I don't answer him. Can shame be inherited, like coarse hair or stubby fingers? I spared Derek my skinny arms and pockmarked face by choosing a girl who wasn't the prettiest but had a solid build, smooth skin, and a gentle heart. She married me despite knowing very little about my family. She didn't understand—with only a fourth-grade education—that shame can trickle down from our ancestors, slowly eroding our lives.

The lighting above us is unkind, designed to scare off muggers and stop the homeless from sleeping outside our building. And yet, under this harsh, yellow cast, I see concern in his dark eyes, a tenderness that's unusual, but I recognize it. The wide cheekbones, the sharp chin, the fleshy nose. I haven't seen her face in over thirty years, but here it is. Maybe one day I will share the story of the mother I never knew with the son who doesn't know me.

I throw my cigarette butt into a snowbank. "You want to know about my life in China?"

Derek nods hopefully and like a tree branch, I bend toward the light.

“Let’s go inside and I’ll tell you about my childhood.” I’m surprised he believes me, as if I’d turned into a white man over the course of a few hours and was now willing to share my life’s misery. As Derek walks past, I reach up and smack him gently on the forehead. “Wasted rice child.”

I’ll tell him about the happy days in the round house, that I was a dutiful son, beloved by my parents.

It makes for a better story.