

Inheritance

Hannah Yang

Grace

The reading of Ma's will marks the first time I've seen my mother in fifteen years.

She looks frailer than I'd remembered, almost childlike, her limbs like disposable chopsticks under her gown. Her hospital room is decorated entirely with inoffensive colors, beige and charcoal and sea-foam green. The unmistakable scent of antiseptics pricks my nostrils, along with a more sinister smell underneath, some kind of rot.

Two men sit in metal folding chairs against the far wall. It's easy to tell which is Ma's lawyer and which is her memory bank technician. I ignore the empty chair waiting for me and pick a spot to stand near the door, so I can make a quick escape when all of this is over.

My little sister Lily is the only one at Ma's bedside, holding her hand. Lily, the good girl, the favorite child. Forty-three now, wrinkles around her eyes, dressed in nude flats and a cream-colored blouse, and she's still trying to be the good girl.

"Grace," she says. "You're late."

"Traffic. Sorry."

"Yeah, we've all been there. Don't worry about it."

This is an uncharacteristically generous response for Lily, but of course she'd feel generous today. Ma's going to leave her entire memory bank to her, and Lily knows it just as well as I do. You can see it in the way she's got her shoulders scrunched up. In the slight tinge of guilt every time she looks at me, like she's worried she's wronged me. At this point, the reading of the will is just a formality.

I wish I could tell her I don't mind. That she can keep all of our mother, for all I care. But that seems like a callous thing to say in front of everyone else in the room.

After we've all introduced ourselves, the lawyer begins to read. "I, being of sound mind, would like to make the following wishes known. I wish for my memories to live on after my brain loses the capacity to store them."

He continues to drone on in legalese. Lily leans in toward Ma and brushes a strand of hair away from her face, ever dutiful, waiting for the lawyer to get to the important part.

"After my own brain loses its viability," the lawyer says at last, "all of my selected memories are to be transferred to my oldest daughter, Grace."

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Ma

Grace at twenty-two, distant and polite. It's been three weeks since her new boyfriend, Rick

or Ryan or something, kicked her out. She moved back in after the breakup, but she still hasn't talked to me about what happened. About anything at all, really.

I knock on her bedroom door. "Are you hungry? I'm about to start making dinner."

She takes out one of her earbuds, then puts it back in. "Not really."

"What are you in the mood for?"

"Let Lily pick."

I hover in her doorway, unsure whether to leave or to stay.

I always knew she would rebel against me eventually. Don't all daughters? When I was a girl, I gave my own mother no shortage of white hairs with my backtalk, but those types of frictions were just another way of expressing how much we cared about each other. I'd expected to have similar battles with Grace when the time came. I'd almost looked forward to experiencing the other side of these arguments, like riding a carousel all the way round.

What I didn't expect was her unexpected penchant for fighting with silence, rather than words. Small silences, each one thin and weightless and shaped to a point. The stiffening of her shoulders when I open her bedroom door. The monosyllabic answers when I ask her about her life.

I don't know when she started being this way. I've replayed key moments in our memory bank over and over, trying to figure it out. Sometimes I think we just send out signals in the wrong ways, at the wrong times. Love from both ends, returned to sender.

"Hey," I say. "Try to remember that you don't need a man to be complete. Look at me, yeah? I survived after leaving your dad."

She snorts. "You've been unhappy your whole life. Is that what you want for me, too? A life like yours?"

I stare at her. "What's gotten into you? I'm trying to help you."

"It's a little too late to start helping me, Ma. And I'm not going to stay here if you're just going to lecture me."

I fold my arms. "Look, don't act like you're doing me some kind of favor by moving in. Where else are you going to go?"

She shrugs, disinterested.

I make liang mian, one of Grace's favorites, as a peace offering. At the dinner table, Lily chatters a way about her coursework and her friends, but my mind is upstairs, wondering when Grace will come down.

When Lily and I have finished eating, I plate Grace's portion and leave it out on the kitchen table for her. When I come back down in the middle of the night, her plate is still untouched.

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Grace

After the lawyer finishes speaking, silence surrounds us, as thick as water.

Lily's the first to come up for air. She turns toward me. "You? Why you?"

"I don't know," I say.

"Did you make her write that? Manipulate her into it?"

"Why would I want to do that?"

"That's the thing, though. You don't even talk to her. I've been here for her this whole time. I've visited her every week since her stroke."

"Believe me, Lil, I don't want this either." It feels strange arguing with her again, after years of speaking to her through a glossy veneer of politeness.

"All right, then let me have her memories instead."

The lawyer clears his throat. "I'm afraid my client didn't authorize any secondary transferal. That means Grace can't alter her mother's will."

I wrap my arms around myself, trying to think. "I can refuse to take the inheritance, though, right?"

He nods. "Nobody can force you to accept a memory transferal. If you decline, however, your mother's memory bank will be permanently erased as her dementia progresses. You'll have to

make up your mind soon.”

“Friday at the latest,” the memory bank technician chimes in. “After that, her memories will almost certainly cease to be viable.”

“Grace, please,” says Lily, grabbing onto my arm. “You can’t do that to her. What would people think of us?”

I shake my arm free. “You can tell your friends whatever you want. It’s got nothing to do with me.”

“Nothing to do with you? Do you even hear yourself?”

“I haven’t spoken to Ma in years. This doesn’t change anything.”

“No,” says Lily. “No, this can’t be right. I’m her daughter too. I have a say in this.”

She picks up her purse, fumbles for her phone, presumably to call a different lawyer, or maybe her husband. She marches out of the room. I wait long enough to make it clear to everyone that I’m not chasing her down before I walk out too.

I mull over Lily’s question as I drive back to my apartment. Those two words follow me inside as I flick on the light, sweep the empty pizza boxes off the couch and sit down alone in my living room.

Why me?

Memories are biased things, irretrievably twisted and warped from the ways we’ve played and replayed them over the years. If I accept Ma’s, they’ll infiltrate my own until it’s hard to disentangle them anymore. I’ll lose a piece of myself. How is it fair that she gets to force her perspective on me, when I will never get to do the same to her?

Maybe it’s one last jab at me. Ma always had to have the final word in any argument, and there’s nothing more final than this.

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Ma

Grace at fifteen, red-faced and sobbing. For weeks on end she holds her anger close to her chest, like she’s afraid it’ll escape if she lets it get too far away from her. Then comes a moment when the pressure bursts—when I tell her she can’t go to a friend’s sleepover party, such a tiny thing—and all her pent-up feelings erupt at the same time.

“I bet Ba would have let me go to the sleepover,” she says.

A punch to the gut, those words, even though I’ve heard them before. “Your father was always charming when he was in a good mood. You don’t remember what he was like when he wasn’t.”

“I remember everything.”

“No, you don’t. You were so young.”

“Why didn’t you leave him earlier, if he was so bad?”

“He was the only person I had when we moved here. I didn’t have any choice.”

“Bullshit.”

I recoil. “Hey. Don’t use that kind of language in this house.”

“That’s where you draw the line, at swearing? Really? When everything else in this house is falling apart?”

I stiffen. “I don’t know what I ever did to deserve a daughter as ungrateful as you. You know what? Maybe your dad was right to discipline you the way he did.”

Grace laughs, but she hasn’t yet learned the woman’s art of feigning indifference, of hiding her hurt. I can see I’ve cut her more deeply than I meant to. She turns around and walks back toward the stairs, her shoulders stiff, her head high.

Lily slides up next to me and grabs onto my hand. “I’m not ungrateful, right, Mommy?”

I almost yank my hand away. She’s too young to be such a kiss-ass.

Instead I hold onto her hand. Squeeze it tighter. “Of course you are,” I say, hoping Grace will hear me, hoping to goad her into doing something. Doing what? Apologizing? Letting me apologize? I’m not even sure. It doesn’t matter anyway, because she doesn’t react at all.

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Grace

The week slouches by. By Thursday morning, Lily has left me seventeen voicemails. I don't bother listening to them.

I go to work, but I can't focus. Everywhere I go, I see inheritances. Most of my teammates hold at least one generation of inheritances inside their heads. They make comments about these memories sometimes, in meetings or at happy hours, referencing stories from their grandparents' childhoods.

Now I find myself picking apart the things I know about these people, trying to find those influences hiding inside them. Trying to draw the line between what's theirs and what isn't.

Varun, my boss, stops by my cubicle after lunch. "Hey. You still owe me the N&M analysis."

"Yeah, I know. It's been a busy week."

"When do you think you can have it done?"

"I'm not sure," I say, but I'm not really thinking about the N&M analysis. I'm thinking about what's going on inside Varun's head. He mentioned once that his father's memories came with half of his paternal grandparents' inheritances. Can he actually experience his grandparents' memories as clearly as his own? Or do memories get sanded down like sea glass over time, until they're closer to feelings than to conscious thought?

He gives me a funny look. "You seem stressed. You want to grab a drink later?"

"I should probably stay and crank out the rest of the analysis."

"Great. I'll expect it first thing tomorrow then."

He strides away, whistling. I wonder where he got his confidence from. If that came from somewhere in his own family, or if it grew from scratch inside of him.

If there's one thing I inherited from Ma, it's her stubbornness. Neither of us could ever be the first to admit we were wrong. There were long stretches of time when neither of us would speak to the other, to the point where we both forgot what we were fighting about.

I don't even remember what our last fight was about, fifteen years ago. By then all of our conversations were inflated with air, niceties over things left unsaid; nothing we said to each other felt sincere. I always assumed I'd forgive her once things got to this point. But her dementia has robbed me of any hope of a real conversation, and if anything, that only makes me angrier. Like she got to let go, when I never did. All the things I wanted to say to her, all the apologies I'd hoped to hear, and now there's nowhere for all those words to go.

It feels as though I've been pushing against a stuck door all my life, harder and harder, trying to get it to open, and all of a sudden it's unjammed. I thought I would finally be free, but I'm not. I'm just falling forward now, pushing against empty air.

* * *

Ma

Grace at seven, giggly and hyper from all the junk food she probably ate at school. She clings to her father's leg as he stands half in darkness, broad shoulders and wire-rimmed glasses, more of a shadow than a man. She hasn't yet learned the warning signs, hasn't yet figured out when to stop.

I don't get there in time to pull her away. She tugs again, and he slaps her across the face, backhanded, harder than he means to. He doesn't know his own strength.

Grace stands there, looking stunned. Blood trickles out of her nose, down her chin.

Lily, sitting in her highchair, begins to cry. But Grace doesn't react at all. She's strong-willed, like me. It won't serve her well. It will just make the men in her life try harder to see her break.

I take her to the bathroom after her father's done shouting at her. I sit her on the bathroom counter and check for damage. Nothing serious, thank goodness.

"We can go away," I say suddenly. "We can go anywhere."

"Where?" she whispers, breathing through her mouth as I clean out her nostrils with a cotton cloth.

"Back to China. Or off to somewhere totally new, like Africa. Or Australia."

"Or Hogwarts?" She's really into Harry Potter right now.

"Hogwarts too. Or even Nannia."

"It's Narnia, Ma. And we can't go there. The White Witch would get us."

We make up our escape together, spinning exciting tales, turning the future into a dream that belongs to the two of us alone. Is she still young enough to believe that we can actually go? All of a sudden, I don't know which I'm more afraid of: if she knows we're lying to each other, or if she trusts me still.

* * *

Grace

By the time I turn in the N&M analysis, it's nearly eight, and I still haven't decided what to do about Ma.

I'm about to pop a Lean Cuisine into the microwave when the doorbell rings. It's Lily, dressed in a dark peacoat, carrying a bulky Trader Joe's bag.

I lean against the doorframe. "What do you want?"

"Can I come in?"

"Only if you promise not to lecture me."

"I'm not here to lecture you. Ben told me that would be intrusive, and I know he's right."

Thank goodness for Ben. For a typical suburban husband, he gives surprisingly astute advice.

She pauses. "I was actually hoping we could make dinner together. Have you eaten yet?"

"No." I relent and step back from the doorway. "Come in. Hang on, let me clean up a bit."

I clear enough space for us to walk into the kitchen. Lily casts a judgmental look around the living room as I lead her inside, at the empty pizza boxes and unwashed wineglasses on the floor, and I remember why I've never invited her over before.

She's brought the ingredients for *liang mian*. Noodles, peanuts, sesame oil. We haven't cooked together in years, and it takes a while to remember how it all works again. We curl away from each other at the kitchen counter, trying not to intrude on one another's space.

I'd forgotten until now that Lily and I both chop garlic the same way. Curling our fingers in so we don't cut ourselves, crushing each clove with the flat of the blade so the skin slides off more easily. Both things that Ma taught us. All these things we've inherited from her, without consenting, without even noticing.

I remember one time when Ma was teaching me how to do this. We were standing in the kitchen, peeling garlic together. I must have been very young, because Lily wasn't tagging along yet.

Ma was making excuses for Ba again, trying to explain that he was only hard on us because he loved us. I threw the cutting board full of minced garlic down onto the floor and spoiled our whole meal.

Ba tried to punish me, but Ma wouldn't let him touch me. Strange to see her stubbornness deployed for me, not against me.

"So have you decided what you're going to do tomorrow?" Lily says, feigning casualness, as she scrapes the garlic into the pan.

"You said you weren't going to lecture, Lil."

She holds up both hands. "I wasn't lecturing. Just asking."

To her credit, she doesn't press the issue. Instead, we talk about her husband and her kids and the TV shows we've been watching. I've rarely seen this side of Lily before. The softer, quieter person she becomes when Ma isn't around to see her. It makes me wonder what else I've chosen to forget.

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Ma

Grace at three, bubbly and sweet, singing to herself in the bath. It's been two months since we moved to San Francisco, and Grace has adjusted the quickest out of the three of us, already spouting off words in English. Her father's struggling to keep up at his new job, so most days it's just me and Grace at home. We go on walks. We go grocery shopping at Trader Joe's. We read American picture books. He's told us not to buy any more, so I hide them in the kitchen where he won't see them. The more time I think about our bills, the more I wish I could give Grace everything.

I start the long process of washing her hair. Savor the feel of the shampoo in my hands, the softness of her scalp.

"I love you," she says.

I startle. I ask, "Where did you learn those words?"

"On TV."

I try to say the words back, but they stick in my throat. Even though they're true. Maybe because they're true. It's not something my parents ever said to me, not something most Chinese parents say to their kids. Love, where I come from, is an action rather than a word. Something you do, not something you say.

"What show were you watching?" I say instead. "Tell me about it."

She beams. Starts chattering away in a bizarre mishmash of English and Cantonese, splashing bubbles at me as I rinse the shampoo out of her hair. I don't even understand most of what she says, but I nod along anyway.

She's so small, so soft, and yet she's already grown so much in just two months. Suddenly I feel like it's all slipping away too quickly. I want to hold onto this moment forever.

* * *

Grace

On Friday, after work, I go back to the hospital alone. Lily doesn't come with me, says she wouldn't be able to come without lecturing.

It's almost dusk by the time I arrive. Long fingers of sunlight reach in through the half-shuttered blinds, casting everything in gold.

The memory technician is the only other person in the room. "It's a good thing you came in today," he says. "If we waited until next week, her memories would almost certainly be irretrievable."

I look up at him. "What if I still haven't decided what I want to do?"

"You'd better think it over fast, then. It's entirely up to you."

He's brought his equipment with him, a small black machine no bigger than a handyman's toolkit. The sight of it sends a cold finger of fear up my spine.

A croak comes from the hospital bed, spoken in barely audible Cantonese. "Hey. I need a new pillow. This one's no good."

I didn't realize Ma was awake. It feels strange to speak Cantonese again. "Do you want me to get a nurse?"

"This pillow," she continues. "It's too flat. Bad for my back."

"I'll get you a new one."

"You're a nice girl. Not like that last nurse I had." Ma smiles at me, guileless. "What was your name again?"

"Grace."

"Grace." She says it without any hint of familiarity, like a limp handshake in spoken form. "I'll make sure to ask for you next time."

She's never spoken to me so gently before.

I haven't forgiven her. I never will. But I'm tired of pushing against something that's no longer pushing back, maybe something that hasn't been pushing back for years now. Her anger is gone. Mine is pointless.

I nod to the memory technician.

He opens up his small black box and takes out two headsets with dozens of small protruding wires, which he attaches to our heads. Then he turns up the dials on his machine.

One memory at a time, I take in the echo of my mother's life.

It's not an apology; it's not an answer; but still in a way we speak, a conversation without words.

Hannah Yang is a Chinese-American speculative fiction writer. Her stories have appeared or are forthcoming in Apex Magazine, The Dark Magazine, Fantasy Magazine, and more. She has a BA from Yale University and lives in Colorado. Follow her work at <https://www.hannahyang.com/> or on Twitter at @hannahyang.