

The Other *Ah-Por*

On this last day of winter, I park my hatchback beneath a gnarled gum tree outside *Ah-Por's* flat. Three years ago, at the age of seventy-six, my grandmother decided to abandon her monthly visits to Dr Chu, whom she had seen since we arrived in Melbourne from Vietnam in 1988. She suffered from hypertension and her rheumatic joints required anti-inflammatories, but she told me, 'I'm close to the other end of life now. There's no point in tending to my old bones.'

Stepping out of the car, I grab my GP home visit case and a bunch of lily buds and drag my feet along the gravel path leading to her front door. I take the key out of my pocket. The lock is jammed. I try coaxing it by turning the key right and left. Still the door won't budge. It happens every time I visit. Exasperated, I almost turn away and drive home. Inside me, my baby wakes and a small bump rises just below my heart. Stroking my belly, I remember that patience is a virtue I need to nurture.

I knock on the door and call, '*Ah-Por*, it's me!' But after several minutes there is still no sound of her shuffle. I begin to panic, thinking *Ah-Por* might be lying with a concussion on her bathroom tiles. Dropping the bags by the door I dash to the side garden and lean over a hedge of rose bushes to tap at the window. I yell, '*Ah-Por*, are you ok? Please open the door!' I think about smashing the glass by swinging my stethoscope if she doesn't respond. I am certain I can fit through the opening.

At last, *Ah-Por* opens the door. She looks into the distance without making eye contact, though I'm standing less than a meter from the threshold. I grip her bony shoulders and ask, 'Are you ok? Why didn't you open the door earlier?'

She blinks and smiles, showing a gap where three top and two bottom incisors used to be. She refuses to get dentures.

Ah-Por is not wearing her hearing aid. It is a constant battle between us: at first she complained the device gave her ear ache, so I swapped the chunky model funded by Medicare for a slim-line version the size of ear buds. She said, 'Don't trouble yourself with fancy gadgets. I don't want to burden you, sweetheart.' Yet, all her actions cause me anxiety. I have offered to relocate her to an apartment in my neighbourhood but she won't move from her commission flat in Springvale, almost an hour's drive from my house. The

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distance prevents me from making more frequent visits. I'm worried that she is lonely, but *Ah-Por* claims, 'I just have to walk to the shops and I'll bump into a familiar face.' But I know she has long abandoned the tai-chi group and the mah-jong club organised by the Chinese Elderly Society. At first her friends dropped by, but they have long since abandoned the visits. Now even her Chinese neighbours have moved into nursing homes, leaving her with new Australian tenants who she can't speak to.

I raise my voice and say, 'Let's go inside!'

She says, 'You are waddling. You shouldn't have driven over to see me if you've sprained your hips or back.'

'*Ah-Por*, I'm over eight months pregnant, remember?'

She pats my belly. 'Let's go sit down. Sprains won't get better unless you rest.'

Over the last few years our conversations have become little more than an exchange of questions and answers about hunger, thirst and pain. Any other topic seems to be too challenging for her.

As she hobbles down the hallway *Ah-Por's* head shakes from side to side. I wonder if it is an early indication of Parkinson's disease.

Inside the lounge room, I immediately notice a rotten stench coming from the withered irises that stand in a vase between the *Guonyum* and Buddha statues on the altar. I say, '*Ah-Por*, you shouldn't buy irises. They're not hardy blooms. You should get lilies. Their petals are robust and will remain fresh longer. Also, lilac is a mournful colour.'

'I like purple.'

Sighing, I grab the vase and hold it at arm's length as I march to the dumpster. I should drain it first, but I can't bear the putrid water, so I tip it into the bin along with the dead petals, then I flush the vase with the garden hose and fill it with fresh water. I arrange the firm green buds in a bouquet and place it back on the altar.

I walk to the sofa and sit at the opposite end to Grandma. I ask, 'Have you been feeling well lately?'

Ah-Por flips her palms and stares at them.

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'Do you still have a headache or pains in your joints?'

Ah-Por asks, 'Have you eaten lunch yet?'

'It's only ten in the morning.'

She beams. It pains me to see her smile, spoiled by slackened lips. The rosy hue they used to have has given way to purple. Her mouth looks battered and moist. I turn my face away, wanting to protect *Ah-Por* from my revulsion. I am ashamed but can't control my feelings. Each time I see *Ah-Por* I fear that I will age in the same ghastly way, though I have seen enough women of different generations in the same family to understand that lifestyle choices have a bigger impact on aging and health than genes.

I rearrange my face into a cheerful mask, turn back to *Ah-Por* and apply the blood pressure cuff. Her arm is the colour of bruised plums. The skin is as dry and translucent as crumpled tissue paper. The reading tells me *Ah-Por* hasn't been taking her pills but, at 140/80mmHg, her blood pressure is not high enough to cause me urgent concern.

Once I am satisfied her chest is clear and the knots around her knees, wrists and knuckles are no more swollen than usual, I get up to put on a video for her, an old Hong Kong film from the late 1970s starring *Dungbicwan*, her favourite actress. It is difficult to come across videotapes these days. I have offered many times to buy a DVD player so she can have access to a wider selection of Chinese movies, but she claims she is happy just watching the Australian channels, though she doesn't understand a word of English.

Ah-Por says, 'New movie?'

'*Dungbicwan* passed away over ten years ago. Don't you remember?'

Again, *Ah-Por's* head sways from side to side. Her stare is empty. I'm not sure whether she recognises the actress.

She gazes at the altar and softly chants, 'Dear Buddha and *Guonyum*, please let me go soon in my sleep so I'm no trouble to Pearl.'

I turn the volume up to block out her prayer. I know if I continue to listen, I will blame *Ah-Por* for her degeneration. I think she is hastening her decline by resisting all my attempts to help her. I am almost angry enough to cut my visit short.

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Then *Ah-Por* gets up and fumbles under a heap of old and unopened newsletters from the Chinese Elderly Society to pull out a box of my favourite chocolates. She pushes it into my hands, saying, 'I got these for you. Do you want one now?'

I hug her. As the creamy centre of a Swiss chocolate ball melts over my taste buds, I can't help thinking about the time I furtively stuffed three of them into my mouth, when I was seven. At the time, *Ah-Por* told me to eat it quickly. Since she could only afford to buy one box with her first pension payment from the Australian government, there wasn't enough to share with my siblings and cousins. *Ah-Por* has always favoured me. In her eyes I can do no wrong. Each time I feel fed up and begin to wonder why I bother to go on caring for her, memories from my early life remind me that my grandmother wasn't always like this.

In Vietnam, *Ah-Por* lived with us in District Five, an ethnic enclave many Chinese migrants flocked to after fleeing Mao's regime.

Every late autumn, my grandmother made an annual thanksgiving trip to the Buddhist temple overlooking the valley of Zi-Douk. In preparation, she selected a range of incense from the best suppliers – some sticks were like matchsticks, others as thick as cigars, and the really special ones were coiled into conical lanterns that could be hung from the ceiling, where their fragrance burned well into the next day. She believed a longer burning period equalled more blessings for our family. With offerings of dragon-fruit, lychees, longans, grapefruit, and yellow and cerise chrysanthemums, the basket of incense made up two loads close to four kilos each.

When I was five, she allowed me to tag along. The journey began just after dawn, with a cyclo ride into District One where we boarded a mini-bus that took us to the edge of the city. There, we caught another bus to the next major town. At the next stop we hopped off and had to walk to another pick up point where a connecting bus would drive the final two hours to the temple. I gripped the hem of her shirt and trotted behind her. Three of my footsteps barely matched one of her strides. Her cracked heels hung over the edge of the sandals; the largest size could not contain her Long Northern Chinese feet.

Growing tired, I whined, 'How much longer? I'm thirsty.'

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She lowered the baskets and burrowed until she found a small plastic bag of sugar cane juice sealed at the end with a rubber band. *Ah-Por* pushed a straw into the tight opening and told me to sip. Sweetness filled my mouth.

Her pockmarked face, blemished from a childhood bout of measles that had carried off the rest of her sisters, burst into a smile as she tousled my hair. ‘Silly girl!’

I took no offence. She favoured me, even above her own daughter.

As we resumed walking, *Ah-Por* slowed her pace. Thick veins ran from her wrists to the creases of her elbows. They flexed as she clenched her fists around the basket handles. Looking at her knuckles, round and smooth like marbles, I thought there was nothing *Ah-Por* could not do.

The bus spluttered into the foot of the Zi-Douk ranges. On top of one of the mountains sat an eight-tier pagoda with the tips of its pentagonal roof-line gleaming in the mid-morning sun. It was majestic. I raced ahead of *Ah-Por* in my eagerness to reach the top of the thousand steps that led to the temple. But it was not long before her long gait overtook my child’s pace. Standing several steps above me, she called, ‘Come on, Pearl! You can do it! Try to outrun me.’ I looked up at her and wondered if I could ever be as strong.

By the time we had walked around the two lowest levels of the pagoda, bowing every few meters to offer prayers, incense, fruit and flowers to the various Buddhist gods, my legs refused to walk back to the bus. *Ah-Por* hoisted me onto her chest, allowing my flushed cheeks to press against her square shoulder. Her right arm supported my bottom while her left carried the two baskets, each still partially filled with the blessed fruits that we would take home to share with my family.

On the way down, I asked if we could stop at a hawker stall that sold models of the pagoda and the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac sculpted from pink sugar dust. These specialities were hard to get in Saigon.

The stall owner asked, ‘What year were you born in?’

‘Monkey! Just like my *Ah-Por*. Do you have a little and a big monkey for sale?’

‘Oh, monkeys are very popular. I’ve just sold my last one. But if you wait, I can send my assistant to grab a couple more. It’ll only take a few minutes.’

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I looked at *Ah-Por*. 'Can we please wait?'

'We might be late for the bus.'

'But I really want one. Please!'

Never able to resist indulging me, *Ah-Por* relented.

But my stubbornness meant the coach left without us. There was no public bus service on this route. We scanned the car park in the hope of seeing someone who might give us a ride. It was empty. Dark clouds blocked the rays of the sun. I shivered. A gust whipped dirt in my eyes. I sobbed, fearing we would never return to Saigon.

'*Ah-Por*, what are we going to do?'

'Don't worry. I'm sure if we head back towards the city, something will come up.'

'But we're lost and so far from home! And I'm hungry.'

Ah-Por peeled a handful of lychees and fed me the silky flesh, telling me to savour it by sucking instead of chewing.

As she carried me, she told me stories about karma that rewarded good people. Distracted by the syrupy pulp and folktales, I thought only minutes passed before we reached a fruit stall on the side of the road. Years later, when I learned to read maps, I realised *Ah-Por* had carried me for several kilometres.

Ah-Por bartered with a local in her broken Vietnamese, offering him a wad of notes in exchange for his bicycle. Sensing our desperation, he would only take *Ah-Por's* jade bangle.

As we pedalled away, I asked, 'Where are we going?'

'Just down the road. I think we can catch up to our coach at the monastery where the tour group stops for a couple of hours.'

'Am I in trouble?'

'What for?'

'You had to give up the bangle because of me.'

'Don't be silly, little one. You're worth more than any jewel.'

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When we finally boarded the coach, *Ah-Por* collapsed into a seat and fell asleep. A soft whistle escaped her parted lips with each breath. I watched her eyes flutter beneath their smooth lids before snuggling next to her. As long as she remained with me, there was nothing to fear.

Yesterday, my obstetrician confirmed that my baby had engaged. The baby's sturdy limbs thrash in my womb, keeping me up at night. I am delighted with my child's impatience to enter the world. I doubt *Ah-Por* would understand but I try explaining. 'The baby is coming soon. I might not be able to visit you for a few weeks. Will you promise to take your pills every day?'

I expect her to answer with another vacant stare. But *Ah-Por* says, 'Don't worry about me, you silly goose. I can't wait to be a *Tai-Por*! Since your mother isn't around anymore, it'll be up to me to make the ginger dishes you need to eat during *choryu*, the month of confinement after the birth.'

Surprised by her lucidity, I say, '*Ah-Por*, do you really understand I'm going into labour soon?'

She moves over to sit beside me and rubs my belly. 'Of course! You look like you're about to burst! The bump is so pointy that I'm sure the baby is a boy.'

I press against her gaunt frame and cry. She strokes my hair and says, 'Hush, Pearl. You'll be a mummy soon.'

But fearing her clarity will soon disappear, I continue to sob until I notice *Ah-Por* slump forward, her left arm hanging like a dead weight beside my shoulder. I lay her across the crouch and ask, 'Do you have a sudden headache, or numbness on the left side of your body?'

Ah-Por looks at me with wet eyes, unable to speak. The left side of her face is already flaccid, her features fading before my eyes. I am certain *Ah-Por* is having a stroke.

I reach for my mobile and dial triple zero, but I end the call before the operator has a chance to speak. When I turn back, *Ah-Por's* eyes have closed. I pry her lids open and see

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her eyes have rolled back into her skull. All I see is blankness, white and opaque like two blown light globes. I use the edge of my sleeve to mop up the trail of saliva on her chin.

To save her, I know I must act fast. Her survival depends on rapid admission to the emergency department. I make another attempt to dial for an ambulance but I cannot go through with the call. I can't bear to let go of the *Ah-Por* I've loved for most of my life. I fear the doctors can only revive the other *Ah-Por*.

I know women stroke victims can suffer from shortness of breath; I've seen some patients panting with each inhalation. But *Ah-Por's* breathing is slow and steady. I turn her head towards me so that her left cheek is nestled in the cushion. She looks peaceful, like someone in a sweet slumber. It is the face I saw beside me all those years ago when *Ah-Por* fell into an exhausted sleep on the way back from Zi-Douk. I reach over and smooth her grey bob, tucking each strand behind her earlobe, just the way she likes. After I have wrapped her in the blue cashmere throw-rug I gave her last birthday, I kneel and tap my cupped hand on her chest in the same rhythm that she used in the past to lull me into sleep.

I am aware of a sweet scent floating from the altar. I turn and see the lilies have opened into full pink blooms.