

When Jason was a child, watching as strangers flowed in and out of his parents' funeral, he wandered away from the bustle and the uncomfortable pitying glances he kept getting and found himself in the workroom. He zeroed in on the wide back of his grandfather, walking up to him and staring, transfixed as his grandfather's hands moved deftly, shaping the clay into a beautiful plate. The hands paused, and a low gravelly voice whispered to him.

"The souls of the dead come home every year. Monuments help us remember who they are, and memories help them come home." His grandfather paused, before he turned to Jason. "Do you want to try?"

Jason nodded.

Days later, his grandfather would teach him how to etch the design into the slightly wonky plates they made.

That was his first experience with clay work and was the first of many times after.

Now, he was in the workroom again, surrounded by his old projects, kept surprisingly well despite their age. In retrospect, they were not particularly any good, and his trained eye kept picking up on the mistakes he made. He remembered his grandfather's proud smile and the heavy hand he kept on Jason's head every time Jason showed him a new finished project.

The thick glob of *sadnessgriefangerpain* filled his throat, and he tempered it down quickly, forcing himself to look away. The funeral was a week ago, but the days had been blending together since the first call. Home had never felt this empty before.

He sat quietly at his grandfather's desk, which had been unused for a long time. Except, as he did, he realised that was not quite true. An unfinished mound of clay sat upon the table, covered with a damp tablecloth. His chest twisted. His grandfather had not worked clay for a long time, so what changed?

He uncovered the cloth. The clay was half moulded into different objects, not quite finished and, as Jason could imagine his grandfather, not quite satisfactory. His grandfather must have been working on this before he...

Jason carefully wrapped the clay back into the cloth. As he lifted it, he realised there was something beside the mound. He picked it up.

*A key ring?*

He turned it over in his hands. *What was a key ring doing here?*

The key ring was small, small enough that it would have been easy to ignore, but Jason knew his grandfather was careful about keeping irrelevant items out of his workshop. It didn't make any sense.

He frowned, looking between the ring and the clay. He had an idea what it was for.

*But for... who?*

He put the ring down, hands shaking.

He needed to – he should – he had to get out.

He turned around and left the room.

When he was six years old, his parents passed away. He wasn't sure what it meant at the time, but by the time he was ten and his grandmother followed them, he knew he would never be able to see her again. His grandfather was never the most open, but it was in the days after his grandmother passed that the old man looked his age, a sudden weight on his shoulders.

He turned to Jason and said in a quiet voice, *it's important to remember that you could lose someone with a flip of a coin. That's why when you're with them, love them with your whole heart, treasure them. Don't leave behind regrets.*

After making one last monument to his grandmother, a bowl with raised red ceramic static flowers with petals that look as soft as tissue, he never touched clay again.

Jason breathed in slowly, let the outside air balloon in his chest. He closed his eyes and counted the breaths. His head was spinning, and his heart hammered and twisted painfully.

Jason knew that to his grandfather, symbols held more meaning than words. In the plates with the slightly wonky looking bluebirds that they made for Jason's parents, there was a wish for their happiness, a hope for a second chance at a sweeter life. In his grandmother's, there was admiration of her strength despite first glance. These symbols were not just monuments, but memorials, testaments of the lives they led and the sincere wish the maker had for their souls.

There were no accidents.

He struggled to remember the days before his grandfather passed. They had a system. For the many years while Jason was overseas working with the best clay sculptors in Italy, he would call his grandfather once every week and check up on him. There had been no changes, no hint that there was something wrong. There was no reason why he should think that his grandfather was preparing his own memorial.

*But, his brain traitorously mentioned, that last call you had, didn't he feel different? How long has it been since you visited?*

5 years. He thought he had time. He took a shuddering breath, his eyes burning. He slid down against the door and pulled his kneecaps closer to his ears. Had his grandfather...?

He did not want to think of it. There was no way.

He had to go see if there was anything else in the room, something that could tell him what his grandfather was thinking of.

He stood slowly, shakily.

In the house, the quiet was tension filled, a string pulled taut and ready to snap. Every step he made echoed off the walls of the house, and the rebound felt wrong. But there were necessary evils.

He walked down the stairs again.

The past hour did not change anything about the room. The same stale smell of clay and dust hung over him. The same dim light. The same unfinished project. He walked in, but instead of moving towards the table, he turned to the cupboards lining the side of the room and started sliding open the drawers. On the third one, he found what he was looking for.

The picture was not unfamiliar. He had seen it a long time ago, when his grandmother was in the hospital and all they could do was *prepare yourself*. His grandfather pulled it out from his wallet and stared at it with tired eyes and pursed lips.

“Who is that?” Jason had asked.

“My best friend.”

Looking at it now, though, reminded Jason that it wasn't quite the whole truth.

The picture of the two boys, dressed in white school blazers, shirts and pants, wasn't just a picture. It had been, in its own right, a memorial. There were smudges of wear on the photo, particularly on the edges off to the side of one of the boys' faces. He turned the photo, and there written in his grandfather's handwriting was *Jacob and Leong Wei, 1935*. The ink of the '5' was smudged, the pigments separating in the circular grey mark.

He had recognised the younger version of his grandfather easily, with the familiar smile and glasses. But his grandfather was different, happier, more innocent. He did not have that tired edge in his eyes that Jason thought was always there, at least until he saw this picture. His grandfather's eyes were cast to the camera, midway through an eyeroll, a picture of annoyance that was only offset by the grin on his face.

The other boy, *Leong Wei*, must have been the reason why his grandfather was smiling. He was down on one knee, whatever he was presenting to his grandfather held

upright in his fingertips. Maybe it was meant to be a joke, looking at his grandfather's body language, but the picture, the expression on the boy's face, Jason knew it was not.

He brought the photo to the table and took the key ring. He held it against the photo.

There was no mistaking the item in the boy's fingertips.

Jason put the photo and ring down.

The boy's eyes, gentle and turned towards his grandfather, and his gentle smile stayed stuck in Jason's mind.

Before his grandmother got sick, she would tell Jason not to disturb his grandfather on February nights, that he lost an important person a long time ago. His grandfather wouldn't speak and would just sit at the sofa and stare vacantly at the mini altar he set up. After she passed, Jason would join him. He could feel the tremor in his grandfather's hand, tightly clasped as it was in Jason's.

When he was 13, he told Jason about a friend he lost in the war. He was taken, his grandfather had said, and killed at Changi Beach. His grandfather's eyes were unfocused when he told Jason the story, and his voice was low and slow. The friend was only in his 20s when he passed and, had his grandfather's family not fled to England and forced him to go as well, they would have been taken together.

It was only now that Jason could recognise that Leong Wei was the friend he was talking about, and only now that Jason truly understood the implication in that story.

He would ask why there was no monument for Leong Wei, but there was a part of him that understood. The same feeling dogged at his feet, that feeling of *I should have been there* that he wanted to avoid, that his grandfather did try to avoid. He thought to the clay that sat on the table, waiting for another attempt, decades of hiding finally culminating in one final night that ended in his grandfather falling and not getting up again.

His grandfather died trying to get to the workroom.

Despite himself, despite the sympathy he felt towards this stranger who had his grandfather's heart, despite everything he knew about this man, he felt something sharp and awful twist in his chest. Because of this man, *because of this man*, he lost the last of his family.

Because of this man, he was alone.

He glared at the photo, at the boy's loving face, at his grandfather's smile, and felt the feeling grow until he choked on it.

*Fuck it.*

He walked out again, past the familiar hallways, past the pictures of his family, past the door of the house that stopped being his home.

He went into the first bar he saw.

His anger was unwarranted. Even drunk, he knew this. Being angry at the ghost of a man who had been dead since the 1940s was foolish. But with the alcohol still sloshing in his stomach, he found himself not quite caring about logic. He yelled loudly to whoever would listen, which probably was not wise.

When the police release him, it was close to six in the morning. The schoolkids were out and heading to school, and his mind had cleared to the point where he felt shame deeply tattooed into his soul. *Dear god*, he thought between the ache of his hangover, *please let the ground swallow me up*.

But losing it did give him clarity, and when he returned to the basement, he did what always helped him process his thoughts.

He sat at the wheel and threw a lump of clay on it. He pressed his foot lightly onto the pedal and he gently guided the clay into a shape. It was not that he had something in mind, but the ebb and flow of clay under pressure never failed to calm him down.

*Be gentle*, his grandfather taught him when he was younger, *don't rush it*.

He pressed his thumb to the wet clay, felt the form give way into a new shape.

*Everything is by design*, his grandfather whispered in his head.

*I wonder*, he thought cruelly, *if it was by design that you fell down the stairs. That you left me behind, that everyone leaves me behind*.

He presses the clay just a bit too hard. The clay separated, the top half flinging itself off the wheel and onto the table, bits of mud splattering against his shirt. In the long moment of silence that followed, he stared at it, the first rookie mistake he made in a long time.

He cursed, and swiped his hand through his hair, immediately realising that there was clay in his hair now too. He scooped the clay back into a bucket, blinking at the heat in his eyes. His leg shook so hard he sat back down.

Hot drops of water dripped down onto his palms, mixing with the remnants of clay. He blinked harder, and realised with mortification that he was crying, like a child after a tantrum. But the tears did not stop, and he laughed wetly, snot and phlegm dislodging from his body.

He kept crying, the laugh turning into heaving sobs, and the heavy, heavy feeling that had been tagging behind him overwhelmed him. He wondered, ugly emotions mixing together, if his grandfather had been this lonely when he died.

He missed his grandfather, missed the warm hand that tucked him into a warm embrace, missed the gravelly voice that would guide him, missed the feeling of knowing that someone was still there.

Instead, he was here, covered in clay and tears.

And he was alone.

The realisation haunted him at every turn now. It made it hard to walk, to eat, to leave the bed. He curled into the slightly-too-small mattress of his childhood bed, pulled the covers tighter around him and did not move. Occasionally he scrolled through the different apps in his phone, disconnected, but soon he found himself staring at his call log. The rows of calls he made to his grandfather, the five minute long conversations he did not remember. He wished he'd recorded it. Maybe he would have felt better.

Maybe.

He doubted it.

His grandfather was somewhat hesitant to let him leave for Italy after Jason completed his national service. Jason told him he would call, and he did, but now he wondered if he regretted it. He had left his grandfather alone, here, half a world away, and now the consequence faced him. Could he have stopped it, if he was here?

He scrolled further down and paused at the only call that had a different number. His thumb hovered over it, circling in thought. Then letting out a sigh, he clicked it.

He did not even know if they were busy, at this time. He started to wonder if he was being selfish when the call goes through.

*"Jason?"* his friend's thick Italian cut through the silence of the room.

*"Hello Gian,"* Jason's voice came out rough and gravelly.

*"Lord, you sound terrible. How are you holding up?"*

*"Like a lazy bum. I'm sorry for calling, were you busy?"*

Gian laughed. *"Busy? Me? I decided to stay in today, after yesterday, if you get me."*

Jason rolled his eyes. It was like nothing changed in Italy. At least he was not the only one.

*"Anyways, are you okay? It must be like 10pm there?"*

*"It's 9."*

*"Have you eaten, at least? Have a Nissin or something. Or order in, your cooking is atrocious."*

*"It is not that bad."*

*“Hmm, keep believing that.”*

He laughed, the sound coming out of him unplanned.

*“You know what, how about this? You make your horrible watery noodles, and I’ll start lunch. We can eat together.”*

Jason blinked. Gian never failed to surprise him. *“I... would like that actually.”*

*“Put me on video call. I miss your face. Oh, and get some water.”*

*“I’m ugly as hell right now though, wouldn’t want to ruin your day.”*

*“Silly man, you’re ugly every day. It won’t make a difference.”*

Jason laughed, a raspy thing that took nearly all his energy. But he complied and switched to video call. Gian smiled when they see him.

Gian grinned at him from across the screen. *“Look, nothing different. Now, let’s go to the kitchen.”*

*“Yeah... Hey Gian?”*

*“Hmm?”*

*“Thank you.”*

Jason decided that instead of going to the workshop again, he would bring the photo upstairs. After a moment’s thought, he brought the ring up too. He placed it on the dining table and frowned at it.

Jason could not imagine what the picture meant to his grandfather. He could try, could make his assumptions about the smudges and tear stains, or how it was kept hidden but not thrown away like a lot of the other things his grandfather owned. But it did not feel authentic.

At the same time, how much did he need to know about this man?

Much like Jason, Leong Wei cared for his grandfather. And his grandfather cared for this man. What else would Jason need?

He made his decision soon after that.

Planning out the design took longer than he expected, but as he completed the sketches, he thought that he hit the nail on its head. Smiling, he held the designs up. Not even the way his back ached from the hours he spent leant over the desk could dampen the sense of pride he felt at the designs.

He sucked in a breath and got to work.

Jason had, in his years as an apprentice in Italy, trained in sculpting rather than the pottery his grandfather had taught him. But for this last gift to his grandfather, he wanted to

use both the skills he learnt. It had taken nearly a week to make the vase, between the sculpting and the firing, but as he put it with the other memorials it looked like it made sense.

The vase itself was for his grandfather. He etched Eustoma flowers into the vase, painted them with the red of his grandmother's statice, the blue of his parents' birds and the white of the uniform in his grandfather's picture. *Gratitude*, he thought, *and peace*.

On the rim of the vase, he sculpted and attached a sparrow. When looked at from afar, it looked like it was mid-drink, a picture of tranquillity, a symbol of safe passage into the afterlife. There was just one more piece he needed to add.

"I might not have known you," he said to the air, *to Leong Wei*, "but with the way he treated the photo, I know you would have found your way here. This is your home now."

He attached the key ring to the sparrow's mouth where it hung into the mouth of the vase. He looked at it, smiling.

Suddenly, the quiet of the house felt more peaceful, rather than scary. He closed his eyes and felt the sounds of the house move gently within its walls.

Then, the doorbell rang.