

GRANDFATHER'S FIRST WIFE

(village wife, name unknown)

- b. 190x shandong province, china
- d. 19xx shandong province, china

totem

Here are the items she brings to her husband's home: clothes, a silver comb, a pair of ivory chopsticks, a small ring set with an orb of carved jade. *Not for the family*, her mother whispers. *To keep, just in case*. Her father has disappeared without goodbye. What would he have said? Already, she is becoming a faint memory. Her husband-to-be is an intellectual from a good-enough family. Later, alone in that strange bed, she will pull the ring from her underclothes and slip it onto her finger, raise it to her lips. She searches for home with each probe of the tongue. She will wonder if she can swallow it whole.

courtyard

Clipped wings stretch, fly the short distance to nowhere. Her future husband arrives this afternoon, the wedding ceremony tomorrow. His parents sent a message to the university: *Come home quickly. Emergency.* She helps her mother-in-law prepare. The family has her dowry—her chickens have become his chickens.

When he arrives: shouting. Her future father-in-law breaks a stool in anger. She doesn't hear the voice of her husband—she tries to imagine what he looks like. She sits on the bed, dressed and waiting, vision obscured. When he lifts the red silk veil from her face, she sees kind eyes. She lays with him that night, spreads her legs and consecrates the marital bed. She considers her good fortune.

The next morning, she is alone. Her new husband is gone, returned to university. He is an educated man—she cannot read or write. He is *Jīdūjiào*—a Christian. No one in the village understands this. She tends the graves of his ancestors, lights incense to call him home. Nine months later, a girl is born, company for a short time. The baby dies an infant—still he does not return. All that remain are a handful of chickens, the rest slaughtered for her wedding banquet.

first position

She could have been a dancer. Anything is possible—no one has a memory of how she looked or what she did, her hidden talents, her gifts. Before she became my grandfather's first wife, she was known for her alabaster skin, her long arms, her mischievous smile. She danced the emperor's dream, donned feathers and silk, held court as the other concubines watched in envy. She was not the favorite, but she was the first. The first to marry him, the first to lay with him, the first to bear him a child.

My grandfather mentions her in passing to his only living daughter, my mother. He tells her when she is a mother already.

At the table sits his second wife, my grandmother, the one I always thought was the first. *Womanizer*, she teases, but she is matter-of-fact—she has always known about first wife. *A village wedding, it doesn't count.* These are my grandparents smelling of camphor and mothballs, with skin spots and grandchildren, frayed knit cardigans, black Chinese cloth slippers. What they have been through—a first wife, a dead baby, a third wife, a dead baby—and let us not forget the war, one more page in their secret shared history.

My mother mentions first wife in passing, when I am a mother, too. A footnote to a conversation I can no longer recall, a detail easily missed when spoken in a whisper.

**your husband's second wife's granddaughter
has some questions for you**

When did you die? Did you stay in the village? Did you think about your husband? Did you think about your daughter? Were you angry with your husband? Did you hear stories about his life? Did you think about finding him in the city? Were you waiting for him to come home? What happened to you during the war? Where are you buried? Did you ever sleep with another man? Did you remarry? Did you have more children? Did you leave the village? Did you get sick? Was it easier being alone? Were you lonely? Were you afraid? Did you feel you had failed? Did you want a different life? Did you feel it was your fault? Were you punished? What was your childhood like? What were your parents like? Did you have any brothers or sisters? Was your family poor? Did you ever see them again? Did you care for his parents even though you knew he wouldn't come home? Stay in their house? Were you relieved that he was gone? Was it easier? Were they kind or did they gossip? Did you care? Did you find passage on a ship to Taiwan? Did you have another life? What name is on your tombstone? Who do you watch over? Who watched over you?

grave

In her final days, she looks back and considers. *So. This is all there was.* Routine offers freedom—the stirring of the morning porridge, scalding hot and dotted with seeds, dates, pickled vegetables stored in porcelain jars, in case of his return. *You never know.* The sewing, the stories, the familiar laughter of women who may or may not have taken her in, but still she sits among them. *That was something, wasn't it.* On days when children wander the dusty patches of dirt, small clouds rising to cover their face and clothes, they clap each other on their arms and legs to avoid a scolding when they get home. Had she lived, her daughter would have been among them, small twigs woven into braided pigtails, the smell of sweet sweat, young arms circling her neck. *When you drink the water, think of the source.* It could have been different—it could have been worse. To contemplate another life—she will save that for the dreamers, to make this living enough.

GRANDFATHER'S SECOND WIFE
(my grandmother (po-po 婆婆), hsu shiu ying)

- b. 1903 shanghai, china
d. 1994 white plains, new york
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a woman of god considers her husband's first wife

You weigh what you know with what you don't. You ask: who? Where? Your new husband shakes his head. She might still be in the village, or maybe back with her parents. He doesn't remember her name or what she looked like. *I saw her only one night.* This should bother you—it does, a little—but such old-fashioned-village-thinking is not for modern women. Not for Christians. That marriage had been a trap, not a union under God. He did as he was told to please his parents. *All the arrangements had been made.* He left the next day, no matter there had been a ceremony, no matter he had planted a child in his village wife's belly. *I heard later the baby died.* A sign or a curse, if you believed in curses, but you are a woman of God. Such things are not for believers, or so you tell yourself.

rumor

Your husband is sleeping with his secretary. The others say it is because of the distance, the long separation, the war. They are certain it will not last. *He's just lonely.* A Christian man, your husband works for the YMCA and is stationed far away, inland and to the southwest, in Chongqing. You are in Shanghai with the children. Your young daughter might have jaundice from being indoors, your son might have TB. You surrender your fears, give them all to God. You are prepared to lose everyone.

But.

You try not to imagine them together. You know the feel of his hand in yours—you wonder about his wedding ring. You are not a romantic. You are a teacher—well-respected, well-liked. Many people call you *Hsu Lao Shi*—Teacher Hsu. When you are promoted, you become *Hsu Xiao Zhang*—Principal Hsu.

You are not one to cry or shout. Instead, you do what you do best: you write your husband a letter. You tell him everything is good. You talk about the children though there is nothing to say. *They are bored but well-behaved.* You tell him you miss him, that you trust the Lord to deliver him back to you, safe and sound. You don't mention Julia. Perhaps that was the mistake. Perhaps your silence was the only permission he needed.

likeness

Oval mirror, square room. Your reflection returns your gaze, sees you in this new place, a neighborhood in a suburb of America. You are the same woman and yet. Your husband travels between Taiwan and New York where you now live with your son and his family. Julia is not here. She is far enough away that some days you forget about her—some days you feel as if your life has always been this way. You brought one suitcase, left everything else behind, including him. Julia would not let him come.

In America, no one asks about your past. They don't care that your husband isn't with you. *Widowed*, they might think. *Possibly an immigration thing*. Or: *maybe he didn't want to come, preferring the old country*. Never mind that you are not from Taiwan. Never mind that you fled the country of your birth—China—you by boat and Julia by air because she was carrying your husband's next child. These details are lost to foreigners, though, wait, it is you who is the foreigner. The stranger stares back and wonders what she sees.

hospital corners

You teach your granddaughter how to make a bed—lift a triangle of sheet, fold it beneath the mattress, and pull. Tight. *A well-made bed means good rest.* You teach her how to make paper-wrapped chicken, how to play Johann Sebastian Bach's Minuet in G on the piano, how to knit an afghan. With your own daughter, there had been no time for such things. Air raids trapped her in the bedroom of your dark apartment while you went to work, ducking between buildings, your husband three thousand *li* away.

Your Chinese-American granddaughter obliges you, holds the yarn while the needles click. A teacher, you consider what else she needs to know—what is essential, what is necessary. When you open your mouth to speak, the words do not come.

an act of repair

When the phone call comes, your husband's voice ragged on the other end, you are seventy-two years old.

Julia jumped. Julia was gone. Julia *is* gone. You replace the receiver in the cradle, your slight frame wavering. Your glasses fog up. Your glasses clear. You sit down. You stand. You are in the living room—you walk into the kitchen. You begin to make dinner. You tell your son, maybe you call your daughter. Julia is gone.

Your lips move in silent prayer. You are an old woman but you have nineteen years ahead of you—still, this feels like the end. Over half of a lifetime with Julia on the periphery, edging in until your own boundaries collapsed. *What choice did I have?* There is a name for women like Julia—Lady Wife of the Resisting War, *kàngzhàn fūrén*. In English this makes no sense—how else to say who Julia was to your husband, who Julia is to you. Many husbands returned from the war with new wives, new children. Some women were happy to be rid of their men. You wanted yours back.

Julia is gone. You remain in the wake of her unanswered questions. At night you think of her unhappiness and how it eclipsed—always—your own.

GRANDFATHER'S THIRD WIFE

(julia chu)

b. 1913 guangdong province, china

d. 1975 taipei, taiwan

at the quay

Julia flew on the American army plane from China to Taiwan because she was pregnant and the Communists were coming. Her husband and his other family journeyed by ship, bringing her son, not even three. The women on the plane ignored her, whispers accompanying each kilometer to her new life.

Julia could write her son a letter. *He promised to divorce his other wife. He promised to marry me.* She could leave the leather satchel, a gift from her father, a man her son will never meet because her family has disowned her. *They said I brought them shame.* Leave the Bible so her son can see the tissue-thin pages, the bent corners, the scripture underlined in pencil. *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing one another in love. Ephesians 4:2.* He will know she tried. He is too young to remember the fighting or how Julia clung to her husband whenever it was time for him to go to his other house. Her son won't remember the time she wore her best dress, lips painted bright rouge, and appeared at a party where her husband was with the other wife. How the two women hung on, one on each arm, neither willing to give him up. Her son won't remember how she threatened to kill herself, so many times.

At the dock with taxis and pedicabs, the locals press against her, offering their wares—paper fans to stave off the heat, squares of cloth to press against sweaty lips. Bananas, almond cakes, inky newspaper cones of roasted peanuts. In the distance, Julia sees their ship steaming across the Strait. She wonders if his wife's house will be larger. She feels her foolishness, thinking it might be different here.

So, a plan: she could leave her husband at the dock. Julia would lose her son, but she has the baby in her belly. If she walks away now, maybe five months later the baby will not be born a girl, or a "Mongoloid," or choke to death at age two. If she walks away now, maybe thirty years later she will not climb to the top of her apartment building and take her own life. *The end of a matter is better than its beginning. Ecclesiastes 7:8.* Maybe she would live to 88, or even 100. Maybe she would make it to America, and maybe this moment will become a memory, a tale with a different ending, a story of what she had to give up to save her own life.

lucky number

Count the days—he comes tomorrow. The new piano sits in its place, immovable.

Julia thinks of his other house, sees his wife sitting upright, fingers at ease over the keys, their husband behind her, a smile on his face. Julia closes her eyes, concealed in the shadows of a plum blossom tree.

Julia insisted that she get one, too, no matter that she cannot play. Alone on the wooden bench, she taps a finger against the ivory, hears each note in turn. *A single tree makes no forest; one string makes no music.* Eighty-eight keys in total. Eighty eight, a symbol of good luck and fortune. Count each one—an empty kiss, a reminder of how she is not enough, another chance at happiness, lost.

afterlife

After the war, there was just enough room to start over.

How easy it would be for Julia to disappear, a corporeal reminder of what can happen to any modern marriage. She could vanish, an apparition, a wisp of thought, a question mark. He might doubt she'd ever existed at all.

It is not the money. Both Julia and the other wife work, manage their own expenses, their children, their desolation. They live parallel lives that intersect at a single point. Him.

Julia accepts her fate. They know who they are to each other, they have already been through so much. She thinks, *why not make it forever?* Stay tied together in the afterlife—three plots, three souls (make that four—don't forget the village wife). Company for eternity, one big happy family.

a night at the movies

Alone at last! The two of them, arm and arm, dressed for an evening out. Julia has been asking for this time, just her and her husband on a date. A neighbor will watch their children. They will have dinner at a restaurant, then see a movie. Maybe an American movie, dubbed in Chinese. They will hold hands, they will kiss, she will think, *I can be happy like this.*

Julia's husband laughs at something she says—she can always make him laugh. She rests her head on his shoulder as they walk home. They arrive, door open, the neighbor frantic. *It's not my fault she doesn't know how to swallow properly!*

The doctor, bag in hand, goes to her husband. Julia, on winged feet, to the kitchen. There, her daughter, two years old, blue in the face, unmoving. Her wide look, almost surprised, the folds along her eyes slanting upward. *My luminous pearl.* Julia gathers the child in her arms, but she can't hold it all—her daughter, her marriage, her loneliness. Some things she must let go.

fairy tales and ghost stories

Name on passport: *Chu Li Shin*

English name: Julia

Derivation of translated name: “Chu Li” = Julie = Julie-ah

Place of birth: Guangdong Province

His promise: to marry Julia once the war is over

His second promise: to leave his wife and children

His third: to start a new family with Julia

Outcome: he keeps both women, both families

Fall-out: Julia’s birth family disowns her

Proviso: they are in love

Offspring: one son, one daughter

Complication: daughter is born with Down’s Syndrome

Obituary: daughter chokes to death as a toddler

Doctor’s report: Julia has depression, may be manic, may be bipolar

Daily rant: why don’t you leave her when will you leave her you promised you would leave her I hate you I hate you I love you please leave her

Authoritative response: it’s complicated

And also: how can I choose

Finally: I love you both, differently

Simple math: Julia has been with him for over 30 years

Fact: he will never leave her (“her” is subjective)

Fact: Julia has had enough

Obituary: Julia dies at age 62, death by [omitted]