

The Fire From An Ember

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I pushed my grandmother in her wheelchair to the joss-paper burner. We watched as the joss paper and burnt pieces of papercrafts tossed and flew, dancing around the golden flames. My mother and her little brother stood in front of it as they poked the giant paper bag deeper into the fire.

“Look,” my grandmother said to me, “look at your mother and your uncle. Look at how old they have grown.”

I nodded. A strand of long, greyish-brown hair flew along the autumn breeze, landing on my mother’s face soaked with sweat. My uncle got rid of it, before fixing his cap that hid the bald patches on his head as my mother whispered thank you.

The youngest children in her family were not as young as she remembered them to be.

“*Ai*, Cheuk Yin,” my grandmother’s wrinkled hand shakingly grabbed onto mine, her droopy eyes fixed on her daughter and son, “I pray that your grandfather will look after all of you in the sky.”

A month after our visit to the columbarium, I bought a new pair of black jeans as I had thrown away the old ones I wore at my grandfather’s funeral two years ago, thinking that I wouldn’t be needing to wear them again any time soon.

The *daoshi* asked me and my little sister to put on the white sackcloth funeral attire. “What about *jie jie*?” my sister asked our mother, pointing at the woman standing in front of the altar, staring blankly at the photo on the wall. “Why doesn’t she need to wear these white clothes like us?”

The *daoshi* overheard. “Well,” he answered with a low but audible voice, “she isn’t married to him, that’s why!”

The woman in black shed a tear as she continued to stare at my uncle’s portrait.

It was four in the morning when my mother's phone rang. I stayed asleep, knowing my mother always has an alarm set in early mornings.

"*Wai?*"

"What?" she exclaimed as she sat up in bed.

That was when I knew something was wrong.

"Oh my God... Which hospital is- Okay, stay put, I'm coming right away!"

"*Ga jie!*"

I sat up at once, barely awake but my eyes widened in fear. Is it my grandmother? I thought to myself. I mean she is old, but that's still too early-

"*Kau fu* is in hospital- You need to wake up. Now. Your sister needs to get dressed and have her breakfast by six-thirty a.m., and she needs to get on the school bus by seven. Oh my God..." Her voice faded away as she got lost in her thoughts.

My mind went blank. My uncle? The one who's only forty-nine? The one I just saw four days ago at the columbarium? My eyes squinted to observe my mother, searching for answers. The room was pitch dark, yet on her blurry face I could clearly see her furrowed brows and teary eyes. She ran her fingers through her hair, failing to say another word, and hopped out of bed.

"*Ga jie,*" my mother was already putting on her socks when I was finally snapped out of my mind, "take care of your sister. Don't be late, and-"

"Leave her to me," I assured her before our door banged shut.

My sister sat up on her bed. I parted my lips, trying to process how to tell an eight-year-old about the sudden news. "I know," she simply said, "*kau fu* is in hospital. Just as grandpa was."

I have a theory. One that can be seen as the opposite of the law of attraction. While the law of attraction suggests that the more you think about a scenario, the more it will happen, I believe that the scenarios you can imagine will never come true. I think God likes to play tricks on us – he only gives you the unthinkable. That’s why I find calm whenever bad thoughts pop up in my head, and it’s also why I tend to not fantasize about positive outcomes.

My mother had not come back. It had already been three hours since she received the call. I covered my eyes with a towel soaked in warm water, hoping my dark circles would fade away, just so no one at university would notice my tired face. I looked up at the mirror, heartbreaking scenarios slipping into my mind. I imagined my uncle lying on the hospital cot, doctors and nurses rushing him into the operating room as they called for help on their walkie-talkies. Yet the surgery was not successful. My uncle still died in the end. His girlfriend sobbed as she held his cold and bony hands, while my mother and Aunt Fun cried behind her. Wait. Hold on. Aunt Fun wouldn’t cry. She had always been this disgustingly rational woman with her long, white hair swaying on her back, like a witch who would do rituals and read a chant to a dead person with lit candles placed around the body. Wind it back. It should only be my mother, who was the closest to my uncle, that would be crying. The details had to be correct – God could always read one’s mind, and would only do the unthinkable, even to the littlest details.

There I had it. The worst ending I could ever think of. Death. I should feel relieved, as I knew well God would now withhold this ending, or perhaps even use his powers to change the ending he first chose. Yet I wasn’t. I knew what God was capable of. If he must take one person’s life, he would do it. With the least expected methods, he would always succeed.

“Sis.” My baby sister was sitting on the bench right outside the bathroom door, biting into the messy grilled cheese sandwich I made. “Don’t worry,” she said, putting down her sandwich and clasping her hands. Closing her eyes, she said, “Pray with me. God will know what to do.”

I followed, begging God to spare my uncle, when I never even believed in the God my sister was praying to.

My theory was again proven not wrong. Just that my imagination was limited, and God's plans were infinite. I still had to see my mother drag herself into the flat, her round eyes hid behind the puffy, pink eyelids. My father, who must have also rushed to the hospital after his night shift, gently led her in. As she was taking off her shoes, my mother looked up. Our eyes met, and I already knew what had happened. Yet deep down I still wished to hear good news from her. She sniffed, swallowing the lump in her throat. There was a lot in her head, but only a few words came out.

"Kau fu is gone."

My theory remained correct, as I later learnt that my uncle didn't die in the operating room. He didn't even die on the hospital cot. The paramedics told his girlfriend he had already died before they arrived. When she went home after work, when she swung open the door, when she rushed towards him, shaking him awake, calling out his name as she cried – my uncle's heart had already stopped beating. Sending him to the hospital was simply a fixed procedure, or perhaps just wishful thinking.

My theory wasn't wrong. I just got outplayed by God again.

For a few months, my mother and I would wake up to the smallest noise, bolting upright in bed in the middle of the night. We would panic when we heard our phones rang, especially at night. My mother later had to keep her bed light on, a sign for her that everything was alright so she could calm herself down.

My father would ask me to take care of my mother and sister every night before he left home for work. He used to say that a lot too. He would tell me now that there would be no male at home to protect us at night, as the oldest daughter with a mentally drained mother and an eight-year-old sister, I must be in charge. Yet he meant it more in those months.

My mother was always said to have psychic abilities. She could see spirits or feel their presence since she was a child. I fully believe her after learning that she almost fainted once in a cemetery.

So, when she told me she could feel my uncle's presence, I wasn't even scared or confused. But somehow, she was.

"I feel like I'm missing something," she said, peeking into our bedroom as if he could hear us, "like he's not at peace because there's still something undone."

My grandmother has four children.

Or should I say, she had four children.

Aunt Fun is the oldest of them all, being around 60. She is a rational, sometimes too cold-blooded even, person who could handle everything (except hers) very well and in detail. She is still single, as she thinks that having too many emotional connections would be a burden in her life. When my grandfather died in the hospital, she hadn't shed a single tear. She just stumbled towards the nurse station, her crane clicking on the floor, and asked them what should be done next. She is a great eldest child – one every parent would dream of having.

Next is Aunt Fong. Barely two years younger than Aunt Fun, she is the exact opposite of her. She is a strong woman, still living with her abusive husband and two teenage sons who she can never leave behind in the U.S.A. Yet she is easily emotional, perhaps a result of her being alone across the oceans for decades. When my mother called to tell her about my uncle's death, she collapsed on the floor. She hadn't seen her brother since their father's funeral, which was already two years ago. She bawled in the kitchen, waking everyone up. It was the only time her husband had reached out to comfort her.

Then there's my mother and uncle. There's a seven-year gap between my mother and Aunt Fun, and a five-year gap between her and Aunt Fong. So, when my uncle was born two to three years

later, easily he became the closest sibling to my mother. Their sisters both got into university, while they were troubled kids that got scolded every day by my grandparents. When my uncle decided to get an ear piercing, it was my mother who supported him and even took him to the store where she got her previous three piercings. When he brought home his girlfriend seven years ago, it was my mother who welcomed her at the door. And when he was in the ambulance, passing away next to his girlfriend, it was my mother who she first called.

My grandmother had four children.

After she had given birth to three daughters, she was informed by her doctor that, perhaps because she had overworked herself, her stomach shifted. The doctor said it had moved downwards and the situation was so bad even surgery could not help, that she could die from this. But she could not die. Not yet. Her husband, a broke worker in a factory, could not raise three kids alone.

God decided to give this woman a miracle – he gave her a son. A son who, when he was just a fetus, would do the unimaginable. Surgery could not save this woman, yet the child could, pushing her stomach back up to where it should have been. She could never forget her doctor's face when he heard the news.

“A miracle,” the doctor told the mother, “Your son is a miracle.”

Ten years after my grandmother had a stroke, leaving her with weak limbs that made her barely able to walk, she asked her children to send her to a nursing home, believing she would only be a burden to her ninety-year-old husband. It was also the year my uncle decided to move out with his girlfriend to Yuen Long.

My uncle worked a daily 8-to-7 job in Wan Chai. For the past three years, it would take him over an hour to travel from his new home to work every morning, and an extra thirty minutes to go home at night. In those thirty minutes, he would make a stop at Sham Shui Po, walk to the bakery in

Dragon Centre to buy a loaf of bread, and drop it at the counter in the nursing home. He would then walk towards the path next to the car park, standing under the tree as he looked up at the window, the window next to his mother's bed. He would call her, waving as she slowly sat up, adjusting her glasses to see her son, and waved back. In those thirty minutes, across the window, the son and mother would talk about their day on the phone, before he had to wave again and say goodbye, and her waving back, smiling as they ended the call.

The thirty-minute calls used to be the thing my grandmother looked forward to the most, and the happiest time in her day.

That night, that night when my uncle did not come, when my uncle could not come anymore, my grandmother, tears falling from her swelling eyes, sat on her bed, and looked out the window, staring at the empty path under the tree.

Before my uncle moved out, he lived in a dilapidated flat with my grandparents and Aunt Fun. They had been living in the flat since around forty years ago, with my mother and Aunt Fong, who later got married and fled from home.

After my grandmother's stroke, she couldn't stand up for a long time even with the help of her four-wheel walker, causing the woman, who constantly reminds her granddaughters the importance of learning to cook, unable to step into the kitchen anymore.

This was a disaster for the family – who's going to cook then? Sure, my mother can cook, but she has her own family to take care of; Aunt Fun couldn't cook at all – she could barely take care of herself; my grandfather was too old to stand in the hot and humid kitchen for more than ten minutes; Aunt Fong only comes back once a few years... And my uncle, well, no one ever taught him how to cook. As the only son, my grandmother never expected him to do basic chores, let alone cook.

For the next two years, my grandparents would go downstairs for free meals at the Food Angel's canteen, while my uncle and Aunt Fun would either eat outside or have takeaways. My family hadn't had festive meals at my grandparents' home ever since.

Until one day, my uncle dropped my mother a message: "*Come home on the second day of Lunar New Year ;)*".

That night, we entered the muggy old flat and took off our coats as my sister and I greeted our grandparents. My grandfather was drinking from his large beer mug, something he always did before dinner; and my grandmother was watching TV from her small leather chair, the only soft seat beside the couch. Aunt Fun had set up the fold-up dining table, with wooden stools placed around it, occupying the entire living room.

"Watch out!" My uncle suddenly appeared from the kitchen, a plate of hot steamed fish in his hands as he hurriedly put it on the table. My mother stared at the dish, shocked, and followed my uncle into the kitchen. What took me and my sister by surprise, however, was that it was only fourteen degrees outside, and before our eyes was our uncle, who was so lean a blow of wind could knock him down, wearing a white sleeveless undershirt and a pair of shorts.

As the dishes were placed one by one on the table, the scene became familiar. Steamed fish, shrimp with garlic, choy sum and beef... Every dish my uncle had prepared was exactly what my grandmother would make for Lunar New Year. "*Ah ma*, try it out," my uncle said as he sat down next to my grandmother.

"Um... Amazing!" my grandmother grinned from ear to ear as she chewed on the fish, "my son is going to be a better cook than I am!"

My uncle spent the rest of the meal asking his mother for detailed comments, jotting notes as she taught him new techniques. In the corner of my eyes, I saw my sister spitting out a piece of fish, and I heard my mother explaining to her that it tasted like rubber because it was overcooked. I looked across the table at my grandmother, who had sold seafood for years in the wet market and had cooked fish for decades, and only ate choy sum and beef for the entire meal.

While I was unwillingly washing dishes after the meal, with my mother watching behind me like a hawk, my uncle walked into the kitchen as he lit up the cigarette between his lips. “*Sai lou*,” my mother asked when she saw him, “why are you learning to cook all of a sudden?” My uncle took the cigarette out, as the wind sent the smoke he huffed out toward the sink, nearly choking me out. “I mean, I’m moving out with Yoyo soon, so I might as well learn how to cook.”

“Besides, they say food can bring people together,” he looked out of the window as he spoke, “Someone has to cook in this family, and for *Ah Fong* and the two boys, when they come back.”

Since Aunt Fun was young, she has always had a habit of collecting and keeping items – from newspapers (her proudest collection, dating back to at least the 1970s) to used plastic bags. It has always been a concerning situation, especially when it reached a point where Aunt Fun had to sleep on the couch, as her chubby body could no longer fit into her bedroom piled with mountains of newspapers and magazines, her bed disappearing behind the paper pillars. Although the room has since then been abandoned, we would still find geckos and ants roaming out of it occasionally.

My mother and my grandfather, when he was alive and well, tried convincing her to get over this weird obsession, but it never worked. They didn’t have the heart to throw away her stuff either, for they didn’t want things to end poorly.

But my uncle knew what should be done. Every now and then he would return to the flat, grab as much as he could hold with his bare hands, and take them to the refuse collection point ten blocks away. Of course, he knew he would get yelled at by his sister, but he also knew his sister would go easy on him, for behind her stone-cold face, Aunt Fun has a soft spot for her siblings, especially for her brother.

Even after my grandfather passed away, my uncle would still go back to the flat monthly to visit Aunt Fun, who now lives there alone, looking for things to throw away, and checking for broken

appliances that need to be fixed, for he also knew his sister, who had lived with her parents for over fifty years, now struggles to take care of herself.

I stepped into the flat after a long day of work. If Aunt Fun had not told me about the burnt-out light bulb the previous night, I would've been having dinner at my home. I followed her across the living room, squeezing past the cardboard boxes stacked up in front of the TV. We ended up in the pitch-black bathroom and looked up at the bulb on the ceiling.

Since the flat was built decades ago, when high ceilings were considered modern, the flat is almost twice my height. When I was a kid, my almost 180 centimeters tall uncle would lift me up and hold me up in the air. "Go on, Cheuk Yin," he would grin as he straightened his arms, holding me higher, "try touching the ceiling." Aunt Fun stood next to us and chanted, as my parents and grandparents watched afar, their faces lit up. I reached up, my palm touching the cold, dusty surface, and everyone in the living room cheered. I looked at my uncle, smiling as he lowered me down.

"I will be taller than *kau fu* when I grow up! So tall I will be able to touch the ceiling without anyone's help!"

My uncle chuckled and nodded.

I took the wooden stool and tested it on the lumpy green tiled floor, looking for the most stable spot to put the stool, only to realize the most stable spot was still not stable enough for me to safely climb up on. I put one foot on the stool, and with a deep breath, I gathered all my courage and pulled myself up, the stool tilting slightly towards different angles as I balanced on it. The only times I pictured myself on a wooden stool was when dying came across my mind, with a loop hanging down, waiting for me to rest my head on it and jump off.

I blinked as the thoughts vanished. I looked up. The bulb still seemed far away from me. I reached up, my arm straight and my feet on tiptoes, barely touching the bulb with my fingertips. Afraid I would fall, Aunt Fun stumbled towards me and hugged my legs tightly with her short thick arms.

“I’m not sure if this is the right one,” she said as she passed me the new light bulb she bought, “your *kau fu* bought and installed the old one, all by himself.” She paused, thinking as she hugged my legs again. “I’m too short for this. But at least you are tall, right?”

As the light turned on, I climbed down the stool. The corded phone in the flat rang. It was my grandmother, calling Aunt Fun after her daily calls with my mother and sister, which only started after my uncle passed away.

“Cheuk Yin is here. She was helping me change the light bulb.”

“Yeah, only Ah Kin could do that before,” Aunt Fun sighed, “at least we can count on Cheuk Yin now.”

I never am taller than my uncle, nor am I even his height.

Yet I am the tallest in the family now. Aunt Fun was right – at least I am tall. Or else, who could she count on to change the burnt light bulb? Or else, who could she and everyone else count on?

I can't die, I thought to myself. They need me.

I can't die.

A lot of people came to my uncle's funeral. They walked towards the attire, where the *daoshi* stood. “First bow!” Their torsos bent, bowing at the portrait. “Second bow!” And again. “Third bow!” Only their heads lowered. “*Gaa suk ze lai!*” They turned to us – my family and my uncle's girlfriend

– and we bowed at each other. They would walk up to his girlfriend, then my mother and Aunt Fun, and say, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Your loss.”

“Loss.”

We have lost him.

Most of the people there were his friends, friends who would take him to bars and clubs to drink all night, or friends who would invite him to monthly parties to drink and smoke together. They teared up when they saw my uncle, who didn’t look like my uncle without his glasses and awkward smile, all dressed up and lying in the coffin. They gathered around his girlfriend, hugging her as she wept. I imagined them being loud and drunk – I believe that was what my uncle used to see most of the time – so seeing them with their sad and serious faces felt odd. Perhaps, my uncle would want them to stop drinking so much and quit smoking. He might want to tell them it was heart disease that got him killed, that he doesn’t want them to die so soon like him. Yet he couldn’t. And his friends kept on, at least that’s what I have been seeing on their Facebook posts, tagging my uncle like they had invited him, somehow.

His mother wasn’t at the funeral. She didn’t want to be there, for that would only be a slap on her face, reminding her that her dearest son is gone.

Among his three sisters, only two were there. The pandemic was still going on, raising the prices of plane tickets. Two months before the funeral, when Aunt Fong was telling herself she had to come back, to be there for her brother, her 18-year-old son, Matthew, was punching her husband in the face after the old man had smashed their TV onto the floor. Andy, just 13 years old, silently sat on the couch as he knew there was nothing he could do. My aunt got pushed to the ground when she tried to stop the fight, hurting her back. It only stopped when their neighbor called the cops.

“I can’t,” she told my mother on the phone, “I can’t leave my sons alone with this man. They are still too young to protect themselves.”

“I can’t take the risk of them getting hurt, or even killed.”

“Can I at least keep his glasses?” Aunt Fong asked my mum.

“The glasses he used to wear- the ones I picked for him years ago?”

“*Ga jie*,” my uncle’s girlfriend whispered to my mother, who was sitting next to her as everyone was folding paper *yuen bao*. “I will move out of our apartment soon. I just want to know if it is okay to keep Kin’s pillow.”

“What?” my mother could not believe her ears, “why?”

“Well,” she dropped her hands on her lap, her fingers fidgeting on the paper, “all these nights when I sleep alone in bed, it feels somewhat comforting to see his pillow. Feels like he’s still there next to me.”

“Yoyo...”

“It’s fine if that’s not okay.” She looked up at my mum. “I just think I should ask for your opinion as you’re the closest to me and Kin in this family.”

“I’ll respect your decision. After all, *ga jie*, to me, I’m already married into this family.”

One summer night, eight months after the funeral, my mother and I went to pick up Aunt Fong and her two sons at the airport.

“When can we see Dad and *sai lou*” was the first thing Aunt Fong said to us after the fifteen-hour flight.

At the bus stop in Tuen Mun, where my uncle had waited for us four days before he passed away, we hopped on the bus to Tsang Tsui. We, but not my grandmother, who refused to go, saying that she was too exhausted.

My sister urged me to sit with her at the front of the upper deck, while Matthew and Andy happily followed. To the boys, my sister was still the little toddler who liked to grab their fingers as

she walked with her tiny steps. And to me, Matthew was still the nine-year-old boy who would flash a shy smile and say thank you when my dad took the two of us to the front of the bus's upper deck, after he had begged his own father to let him do so for days since he had come back to Hong Kong.

I looked at the two boys. Matthew was already a head taller than me, and Andy was my height. With them here, I was not the tallest in the family anymore. I let out a sigh. Not sure why, but I felt relieved.

The *daoshi* said we had to wait until next spring to worship my uncle. It is such a weird thing to say. To worship my uncle. Saying that makes me feel like he is so far away from us.

Although that is the truth. He is very far away from us.

We first took Aunt Fong's family to see the niche of our grandfather. It was their first time seeing it as only Aunt Fong came back for her father's funeral three years ago, and she had to leave before his ashes were allocated to a niche after one year. She immediately broke down the moment she saw his black-and-white photo on the wall, quietly burying her face into the piece of tissue paper Matthew gave her, only to soak it as she sniveled when my mother took us to my uncle's niche. Andy went to give her a hug. Matthew stared at the ceiling, tears welling up in his eyes. Even though it had been years since the boys last saw their uncle, they had not forgotten about him at all, I realized. Yet, after all these years, could my uncle, if he could see them at all, recognize these two teenagers standing in front of his niche? Would he be proud that little Andy is now taller than his mother? Would he smile when he saw Matthew's ear piercing?

"*Dai ga jie*, mind staying here with *yih ga jie*?" Aunt Fun nodded and walked towards her little sister. My mother took the gigantic paper bag. Matthew and Andy followed her to the joss-paper burner. The thought of me being the oldest cousin, and that I am my mother's eldest daughter, urged me to go with them, so I did out of instinct. My sister came along.

Hand in hand, my sister and I watched our mother light the corners of the bag with a lighter. The paper bag touched the flame, but the fire hardly spread, leaving the corners charred with

smoldering fire on the edges. She tried again at the middle of the bag, only to end up the same. My uncle would know how to do it properly. He used to carry a lighter with him all the time. Our birthday candles, his cigarettes, and our grandfather's papercraft bags. *Flick*, and he had lit them all up. My mother sighed as a drop of sweat landed on her shirt.

I was about to go up and help my mother when Matthew stepped up from behind, "Yee yee, let me help you."

Flick, the paper bag caught fire. My mother quickly threw it into the furnace, giving Matthew a questioning glance. He didn't notice, his eyes already on the rising flames. He later told me he had been smoking weed and cigarettes for the past two years. Like my uncle, he carries a lighter everywhere.

"Yee yee! Can I help too?" Andy jogged towards them as my mother picked up the metal rod. She turned and smiled, handing him the rod. Andy poked and dragged it along the burning paper as she guided him patiently. Soon, the bag was completely on fire, burning in the bright blaze.

"Chinese believe the dead can receive what we burn," she explained to the American boys, "so we are actually sending gifts to your grandfather now."

"What about *kau fu*?" Andy asked.

"We can't burn him anything yet," she answered, "but I'm sure your grandfather will share them with him."

I watched as the fire burnt in front of the three. I had been at this very same position, watching my uncle and my mother with my grandmother, just four days before we lost him.

I rubbed my eyes, and my uncle vanished, leaving the two boys next to my mother.

"Look at your cousins," I said to my sister, "last time they were in Hong Kong, I was still holding their hands and taking care of them." My sister nodded.

"At least we are together now," I told my sister as tears rolled down my cheeks.

"*Ming hei*," I tightened my grip on her hand, my blurred eyes fixed on my mother and my cousins, "I pray that our grandfather and uncle will look after all of us in the sky."