

Her Heart
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My sister died from a heart attack when she was twenty years old.

Today was my twenty-first birthday. I visited her at Diamond Hill Crematorium every year. On her birthdays and the anniversary of her passing, I went with Mom and Linden. On my birthdays, I visited her alone.

My Mother told me on a night eleven years ago. I was ten years old in Primary 5. She organized a funeral and brought me and Brother Linden to the venue. Father did not come, and of course he did not. No one would expect him to attend. The room was all white, with silk curtains hanging in the background and empty chairs waiting for people to come say goodbye to my sister. There was a big bunch of flowers, some from where Lily taught biology. White carnations, orchids, ivy, and other flowers I didn't know the names of, with clusters of small petals tightly packed together, like cream on cakes. And lots of white lilies.

Lily, that was my sister's name. She was ten years older than me. If she could see all the white here, she would have found it funny and irritating, and said, "I told you I don't like white! Let's make it blue instead. Sky-blue or ocean-blue would be better."

Or she would pretend to be angry and pinch my cheeks if she was here, and said, "You should be preparing for your secondary school entrance exams instead of standing here." She would giggle when she saw my annoyed face.

My Mother used to take me to church every Sunday morning. I expected that for my sister's funeral, our church would bless her afterlife in a ceremony organized by the same place we visited regularly. But as I looked around, there was no casket for me to see her for the last time. I could not spot any crosses, Bibles, or the elevated stage for the priest.

I wanted to ask my Mother why, but she was crying. There was no way words could form and escape her lips.

People had not arrived yet. It was still early, around 7 am on a hot, humid Saturday morning. My Mother stood silently in front of my sister's photo, and Linden had been crying since that morning, his tears falling ceaselessly and uncontrollably. He was older than me and my sister, but he always acted like a child. Mother had told me that Linden was younger in his mind than

me. I stood beside my Mother, tried to hold her hand, but she was busy wiping her tears. The moisture in the air was weighed down by the grief of crying. My Granny was here with us, her gray hair was not combed, eyes swollen red, the wrinkles on her chalky face were etched even deeper. Mother's, Linden's and Granny's faces were bleached by the sunlight outside the funeral parlour, looking pale and washed out. The only vibrant presence, who was smiling with exquisite makeup, was my sister in the picture in this cold, white funeral.

The photograph of my sister was placed in the middle, standing prominently on the metal with the frame catching the glint of a solitary candle. I reached out my hand, fingertips grazing the smooth surface of her face. She was beaming and smiling like she always did before she died. I used to feel happy and warm whenever I saw her cheerful smile. But the air was thick with fragrant lilies and the sharp tang of detergent clinging to the white cloths draping the chairs. My eyes began to itch again, I kept rubbing them until the dry skin around my eyes was abraded and started to flake and peel. All I knew was that my protector and best friend had gone forever. My Granny grabbed my hand and stopped me, my eyes were red and the searing pain spreaded on my skin. But I could not cry.

“Granny, I want to cry,” I said.

Granny looked at me and drew me into her hug. Her frail body was trembling, the timbre of her cry was growing achingly raw and primal from her throat. I witnessed a side of Granny I had never imagined — a woman whose tears flowed not just from her eyes, but from the very core of her being, her aged soul.

When I said, “I could not cry,” it was not because I was trying to be strong. Tears just never come to me. I had never had tears since I was born.

Every morning when my sister was still here, my Mother would wake Linden up. He threw tantrums every morning, pounding the walls with his fists and screaming. But he would eventually calm down after a fight with my Mother at a certain point, and then she would take him to the school bus stop. During those tumultuous mornings, I would glance at my sister for reassurance that everything would be fine. She would cover my ears and give me a comforting, gentle smile. I was scared, but I knew this was the daily routine, the way each day unfurled. A morning without these tumultuous starts would not feel quite right, and would not feel normal.

But why would he argue with my Mother every morning? Why did he hurt himself by banging his fists against the walls?

I tried it once in the morning too, pounding my hands against the wall like my brother did. My Mother looked at me with emptiness and weariness in her eyes. She did not stop me. She just frowned, or maybe not even that. I could not remember. What stuck with me was the pain in my fist. It really hurt.

“Behave yourself,” my Mother said. “You’re different from your brother, you’re normal.” Then she turned her attention back to calming my brother down.

On a particular day, I was five and had a fever. The usual voices of my Mother’s to calm or scold my brother were absent, the only sounds were Linden’s screams and the thuds of his fists against the wooden walls. I sat nibbling on a sausage bun when my Mother came out from my brother’s room. My Mother was going to take me to the doctor after sending Linden to the school bus stop. By then, my sister had already headed to school for an important exam. I guessed she had studied all night because I didn’t sense her climbing to the top bunk or the usual bed wiggles from the night before.

My Mother lifted me from the chair and held me tight. It felt like the first time she had hugged me, at least as far back as I could remember. Mother was usually busy with my brother, so there wasn’t much time to hug me. The hug felt so warm. I smiled and looked at her, but what was on her face was not a smile. Her mouth hung open briefly, as if she wanted to say something, then closed without a word. Was I not warm enough to be hugged because I was sick? My body must be cold because of the fever. But it felt good to be in her arms.

She dragged a plastic chair with Winnie the Pooh and Piglet patterns towards the window, both characters smiling, they were hugging just like my Mother and I. She stepped on it while holding me, and lifted me high enough to see the view outside. She pushed the window wider. We lived on the 25th floor, with a wide horizon and scenic views. There were rivers, birds, trees, and people strolling along the roads. I scanned the scene, hoping to catch a glimpse of my sister, all under the blue sky painted with fluffy clouds like marshmallows. The breeze

brushed my face, and I coughed with my sore throat. It was warm nestled in my Mother's embrace, but it was quite chilly and windy outside the window.

Suddenly, a strong force pulled me away from Mother's warm embrace. It was my sister. She hugged me so tightly that I struggled to catch my breath.

"Sister, when did you come back? Mommy and I were looking at the view..."

"What are you doing?" my sister interrupted, her voice stern like the time I doodled in her workbook.

My Mother gazed at us, then she started to cry.

"Mommy..." I began, and tried to disengage myself from my sister's tight grip to offer tissues to my Mother. I wanted to cry too, but I could not. I had been told that my eyes could not produce tears since birth, a condition with a long, complicated name — Keratoconjunctivitis sicca. Knowing the name would not change my inability to cry anyways. I wanted to feel the water running down my Mother's cheeks, and wipe them away.

But my sister would not let me go. I felt warm droplets falling onto the back of my neck. I wanted to turn and see her, but she pressed my head so firmly that I could not move. I hated it — that both my Mother and sister could express their grief through tears, but I could not. All I could manage was to sob and contort my face in a desperate, ugly manner, yet my eyes remained dry and itchy.

My sister set me down in our bedroom and said, "Stay here, wait for me. I'll take you to the doctor later."

I bit my fingernails and looked outside the living room. My sister busied herself tidying up the house, collecting the metal ruler, scissors, and utility knife from the table before disappearing into the kitchen. I heard sounds of metal clinking, then she came out with a heavy red plastic bag crammed with assorted items.

Mother was still sitting on the floor, her back against the wall, her eyes vacant. Was this how tears worked? Did they drain one's eyes, leaving them hollow? When would tears return to replenish their eyes?

"Lily, I am sorry..."

"Don't you ever do that again," my sister said. "How could you... and Poppy, what were you thinking? You did this with me before, I haven't forgotten a single bit of it. If I hadn't left my wallet at home, and hadn't come back this time..." Her words faltered, she still had her school bag on her shoulders, rising and falling with each breath.

"It is so hard to carry on, Lily, it's just so hard... I thought..."

"Stop. Just stop," my sister sobbed. "I'll call Granny, she'll come. I need to take Poppy to the clinic now. She's cold and shivering. As for Linden, let him be for now. I don't hear him banging the walls, perhaps he's exhausted and asleep. I'll contact his school as well. I can find the school office number online. Reporting him absent today should be sufficient, right? Just let him be, Mother. Let him be."

"I prayed, Lily. I prayed to God every single day..."

My sister stowed the red plastic bag in a drawer and locked it. She closed the windows, and soon Granny, whose hair was dyed dark then, arrived. They exchanged a few words, then my sister took me to the clinic. She was holding my hands so tight, as if afraid I might fall down without her support.

"Sister, what about your exam?" I asked while waiting for my turn with the doctor.

"It's alright. I can talk to my teachers and take it another day," she patted my head. "Which means I have more time to study," she added with a smile.

"Were you with me in bed last night? I didn't feel you there," I mumbled, feeling drowsy as I lay on my sister's lap. There were too many things that happened in the morning which I

could not quite comprehend, but I knew it was not something that I should be happy for, my throat was burning and more painful than earlier.

“Rest for a while, Poppy,” she said, running her fingers through my hair. “Sleep, and forget about everything...”

Honestly, I’m not sure why those memories from that time remain so vivid and clear to me. Perhaps the fever I had at that time distorted some details, but certain things stand out — the raw pain in my throat, the quivering of my cold body, the warmth of my Mother’s embrace, the beautiful view glimpsed through the window, and the comforting yet mournful tones of my sister’s voice. Just like how a melody or a familiar scent can trigger a rush of specific memories or conjure up the image of someone I’ve met before.

I am also not sure why I remembered every bit of detail from my sister’s funeral, as I was only ten years old back then. Sometimes, the scenes revisits me in my dreams. Perhaps this is why I can recall my childhood time with my sister. Now, when I smell coffee or a specific blueberry scent, I am reminded of my sister. When the scent of chlorine from cleaning products tickles my nose, I remember what the swimming pool looks like, the times and scenes when we were there.

My Mother and Linden stayed at Granny’s house for a period of time. Honestly, I did not quite see Linden as my brother when I was young, not in a negative sense. It wasn’t because of his unique facial features or the way he occasionally spoke like me, despite being much taller and older than my sister. It was not that I viewed him as “different” or “abnormal.”

But why was I “normal” while my brother was not?

My sister told me that my brother’s time stopped when he was 10 years old. He was going to be a 10-year-old boy even though he would be growing taller and taller. His time had been frozen. Now I came to understand fully what she meant, as my sister’s time had also been frozen at 20 years old, in a different manner.

It was also not because he didn’t share the same surname as us. I became aware that our Father wasn’t Linden’s biological Father when my Chinese teacher explained family surnames.

“Your Father’s name begins with ‘Chui,’ which is why your name starts with Chui as well. It’s how Chinese surnames work.” He said.

I was Poppy Chui, my sister was Lily Chui, but my brother’s surname was Yu, Linden Yu.

Yet, this detail was not important. If we cared for each other and lived together, we were a family.

But I hated how he created loud banging noises in the morning, how he seemed to drain the love and vitality from my Mother. I hated the sorrow he brought to my sister, she was so happy when it was just her and me.

The first time I knew the brown liquid that always filled her cup was coffee, I was eight, in Primary 4, while my sister, then eighteen, was busy preparing for her university entrance exam.

“Sister, drinking too much coffee is bad for you,” I told her one afternoon after school.

“Where did you learn that from?”

“General studies. We talked about the food pyramid and nutrients today. Coffee can make your heartbeat very fast, and one day, if your heart can’t handle it, you might... you might...”

“Don’t worry, Poppy. I won’t die!” She laughed. “The human body is much more resilient than you think. And I’m an adult. Caffeine is my necessity, just like marshmallows are yours every day,” she tousled my hair and returned to her papers.

With her sleepless nights and endless cups of coffee, she entered her dream university. She wanted to become a Biology teacher when she graduated. She maintained the habit of drinking coffee, persistently like how my Mother would pray every day. Besides coffee, she began to smell like blueberry too, I could smell it on her clothes. Those were not fresh blueberries that one could smell in the supermarket. If others smell the blueberry scent on my sister, they would

not be interested in tasting them, a bit artificial I would say. I wonder if she was drinking blueberry flavoured coffee or wearing a perfume with that aroma.

“Coffee’s for staying awake, not falling asleep,” she said. But I knew she had heart issues; there was a chance she inherited them from our Father, who also had heart problems and required regular check-ups at the hospital. “My heart can’t beat without caffeine, so conversely, I might have a heart attack if I don’t drink it,” she always made such excuses.

But sister, the coffee took your life, your heart could not endure it, as I have told you. If only I had grabbed every coffee you purchased and thrown them away, you wouldn’t have suffered that heart attack, and left us.

These were my thoughts at the funeral.

I had been aware of my sister’s heart condition for some time. One night, I found her clutching her chest, huddled like a fragile shrimp plucked from a water tank of the bustling market. Sweat dripped down her face to her eyes and her cheeks, and she gasped for air. Her chest was in pain again. Each breath she took seemed strained and desperate, her chest rising and falling erratically. Her hand pressed tightly against her chest, fingers digging into her skin. The other hand was clenched into a tight fist, nails biting and digging into her palm. She mumbled something inaudible to me.

“Sister, sister. Are you okay? Is your chest painful again?” I stood on the bed and checked.

“It’s just that my heart isn’t feeling well. I’ll go take some pills,” she said before descending. She was breathing so fast, as if the room was out of oxygen and air. That was how I breathed when I nearly drowned in the pool, or when I had nightmares.

The pills my sister took were called “Nitroglycerin,” she had told me. Whenever she felt chest pain and struggled to breathe, she relied on them to ease the discomfort. At times, I wished there was a medical for my eyes to shed tears too.

“Sleep, Poppy,” my sister’s voice drifted from the kitchen where she kept her medication. Minutes passed, but she didn’t come out.

“Sister, should I call mommy?” I ventured into the living room.

“No, no. I’m feeling much better now,” she reassured, stepping out with a smile. “Look, I’m fine. Don’t mention this to Mother, okay?” I was relieved as I saw her smile once more, that the medicine always seemed to rescue my sister in those critical moments.

“But your heart has been hurting almost every night,” I said. I was very worried about her, “If this continues, you should consider visiting the cardiology clinic for regular check-ups, just like Dad.”

“Alright, I promise. Now, off to bed.”

The next day, she would go to school and work as if nothing had happened. How did she move on from those horrible incidents? She was the bravest person in our family. While my Mother often wept, my Father’s demeanour ranged from grumpy to outright harsh, Linden threw tantrums and tears, and I would tremble in fear. During those times, my sister would cup my ears with her hands, mouthing the words, “It will be alright soon.” But her hands were trembling, I knew she was afraid just like me. I told myself that one day when I grew up, and when my hands were as big as hers, I would protect her by covering her ears, just as she had shielded me from the unpleasant loud noises in this house time and time again.

But she did not give me the chance to do so. She had left before I grew taller, before my hands grew larger than hers.

The only times I saw water on my sister’s face were when she swam and dived in the pool, which didn’t qualify as crying, I know. Or times when she was sweating with shiny bits on her face during the nights because of her chest pain. However, if she were to cry, I could envision her wiping away tears, much like how she squeezed her eyes and cleared the pool water from her face.

When I was a child, seeing tears from others would sometimes make me feel jealous. I knew I was being unappreciative and perhaps mean, as tears people shed are mostly sad, not happy. I tried to yawn deliberately, yet not a single drop of moisture appeared in my eyes.

Before she passed away, we would go swimming on Sundays. That was her only day off, or relatively freer day in the week. She would fetch me from church, and off we went to the pool together. Mother would have lunch with her church friends. I actually begged to go with my sister to the swimming pool, although she was hesitant to take me along. Due to my dry, sensitive eyes, I always had to wear swimming goggles to safeguard them from waterborne germs.

“I really shouldn’t have brought you here every time, it’s not good for your eyes,” my sister said, firmly adjusting and pressing the swimming goggles hard on my face. I would get two marks around my eyes like a panda. But as long as I could get to the swimming pool with my sister, everything was worth it.

My favourite spot at the pool had always been the children’s slides. I could not see the original colours, I could only see them through my blue swimming goggles — some of them were darker, some of them were lighter. I was not allowed to play since I could not take off my swimming goggles, but hearing the gleeful screams and exhilarating cheers from the playful crowd made me happy. I liked the bleach smell in the swimming pool too.

My sister’s favourite part was the diving pool located on the right side of the main pool. Instead of leaping from the springboard, she simply stood there, and splashed into the water. I often sat beside the pool, next to the tall seat of the lifeguard, near the towering seat of the lifeguard — a middle-aged man with tanned skin and a beard. He seemed intimidating to me, always wearing a serious and stern expression. Peering up at him from the pool’s bottom with my goggles on felt like sitting next to a giant. A towering, blue giant.

I redirected my focus back to my sister. “You are doing it all wrong! You should jump up and spin like the Olympic athletes on TV, not just drop into the water,” I yelled. “You should

push off from the springboard, soar through the sky like Spiderman, and then splash into the water.”

She always just fell in the pool like a plain, human-shaped paper card, or limp paper doll, without springing from the springboard. It seemed as though she approached the dive without a flicker of effort or the will to try. She didn't even bother to try.

She swam to the pool's edge where I waited. Her face glistened with water, her eyes were red from the splash. She flashed me a smile, and said, “You think it's easy because you haven't tried yet,” wiping her damp face, “I was trying to free-fall! Jumping on it is too difficult.”

“What is free-fall?” I asked.

She pushed herself up from the diving pool, sat next to me and said, “Complying with gravity, flying freely and being unrestrained.”

Whenever my sister disagreed with me, she would use these difficult terminologies to answer, and she knew I did not know how to form rebuttals. That was unfair.

Then, she climbed up the platform stairs of the dive tower, and free-fall again. Sometimes she would change her positions and fall from her back, and splashed into the water with her arms stretched like the cross shape in the church. Mostly, she fell directly at the front, facing the pool. Again, again, and again.

I was quite bored, and shouted again, “Sister, this is not how you do it!” I was a bit frustrated at that moment, I did not know why. Perhaps it was because she was not doing it the right way, or she was falling too many times, like practicing something you want to be good at but not even trying to make it right. She should have jumped first before landing in the pool.

“Let her be, kid,” a voice came from the upper side of the pool. “It doesn't matter how she wants to perform it, as long as she is not falling on the ground and is safe. Being in the pool is safe.” It was the lifeguard. His masculine body with a pair of wild eyes scared me again. It was so weird for a middle-aged man that looked mature but had a youthful presence at the same time, “She needs this, I think. So let her be.”

I still remembered how the safeguard told me “she needs this,” it was weird, and a bit creepy. How on earth would he know what my sister “needs”?

“He probably had done exercises and sports all the time,” my sister said while we were getting changed, after I told her about the lifeguard. “There was a phrase that goes ‘aging like fine wine’,” she chuckled.

“All I know about wine is that Jesus turned water into wine, and...”

“Oh stop it, you’ll get it when you grow up.” She covered my mouth and took the towel from the bag, and added, “It seems like going to church with Mother has done something to your brain.”

“Her friends are nice, they bring me snacks every time I go with her.”

“They are nosy, and Mother does a very good job in satisfying their need to gossip. They have a ‘saviour’ heart to save everyone.”

I noticed that my sister was getting a bit sullen at that point, so I did not say anything.

Now, my eyes are getting better, and the doctor said if I used the eyedrops every day, my eyes would not get red and hurt that often, but they still could not produce tears.

“There are cases where as patients age, their eyes produce a few tears,” the doctor told me. “But there is a possibility that light sensitivity, such as strong sunlight, causes teary eyes. Remember to use antibiotic eye drops when necessary.”

After my sister passed away, I tried what she had done in the diving pool. It was actually not difficult to jump on it, the board was bouncy. It was easy to lose balance and slip, though. It was high, and scary for me.

Sister, I should have prevented you from engaging in those dangerous, extreme activities that your heart could not withstand. If only I had stopped you from falling from the high springboard at the diving pool, you would not have had a heart attack and left.

I thought at the funeral.

The empty place started to fill with sounds. People started coming to the funeral, all wearing black suits, black dresses or trousers.

I recognised some of the faces, they were my sister's friends. I had seen them in the photos on the wall in our room. My sister would have been happy if she had seen them here, and I could imagine them hugging like the day they hugged in the airport when one of her friends was going to study overseas. The girl returned and came to the funeral.

There were my Mother's church friends too, some of them looked unfamiliar, but I thought they were also from the church because they were wearing cross necklaces. My sister would be furious if she saw that those whom she did not know well had also come.

Even relatives we didn't see at the once-a-year Lunar New Year reunion had come. They arrived in groups of two or three. I watched the funeral staff members bustling back and forth, listened to my relatives sharing updates on their lives, and smelled the perfume and fragrances from the visitors. Why did my sister's death seem to be a euphemism for reunion? They were able to gather together so nonchalantly in the shadow of my sister's passing.

After my sister passed away, we had reunion dinners on Lunar New Year for a few years with the relatives. Naturally, her name was never mentioned. Everyone avoided it so deliberately, like it was a taboo — it would be sinful if one brought her name up. But the absence of her had become more conspicuous to me at those moments. The reunions did not last for many years, though. Many had either immigrated or our interactions were reduced to exchanges on WhatsApp.

At the funeral, there was a man wearing a suit approaching me and my Mother, he said, “Lily was a wonderful girl. We were glad that she was on our team. She was passionate, caring and hard-working. Please accept my heartfelt condolences.”

He was my sister’s boss in the tutoring academy where she taught zoom online courses.

He was right, my sister was a hard-working person. I always saw her fall asleep on the desk in our room, with her bright laptop screen on and coffee next to her. I woke her up in those mornings when she could not sleep in bed, and I hoped I would never become a grown-up, it looked so hard. My sister went to university, and taught students who were slightly older than me every day.

One day, she was having zoom lessons in our bedroom, since Father was in the living room. He would come to our home and stay for three to four days every week. He was a grumpy old man to me, and we did not interact that much. I treated him with politeness and avoided interactions. I was afraid of his temper and the venomous words that slipped from his lips at times.

I was very curious about my sister changing her identity into a “teacher” but not a “sister” at those times, and sat next to her quietly. I smelled coffee again.

“Do not make a sound, and do not move too close to the camera, ok?”

“Don’t worry, your students will never notice me, I am transparent,” I pulled my T-shirt over my head, hiding my face.

She giggled, and helped me tidy up my clothes. She took a sip of the coffee and started teaching. It must be her second or third cup of the day already, I already smelled it before I woke up this morning.

That evening, she was teaching the concept of DNA. She looked so confident whenever she was teaching, and she would make the lesson as light-hearted as she could. Even I would be interested in what she was explaining.

It was all in a sudden, there was a large noise. It was Father, he was throwing things again, everything that was near him whenever he was angry, to the ground. Sometimes, he accidentally threw them on my sister's face.

But this time, my sister was having a lesson.

"Wait a minute, I will be right back," my sister told the students, turned off her camera and muted her microphone.

"Don't go out, Poppy. Stay here."

I nodded and she went out.

"I am working, could you stop for a while?" It was my sister's voice.

"So what? You are earning a living now, aren't you? You think you're more superior than me," he said, and there were gulping sounds. The smell of alcohol covered the smell of coffee in the room.

"No, I am just asking you to stop."

There was a large banging on the floor again, something made of glass was broken. Then I could hear more and more things being thrown to the hard ground, they sounded like the Chinese firecrackers that people would play illegally in my neighbourhood.

My Mother was not at home at that time. I hope she was here. My sister was short and she did not have the power to stop my Father. But my mum was tall, she could stop him maybe. Why wasn't she here every time this happened?

"That bitch, always going out, never behaves like a housewife. Hell knows what she is doing out there," my Father said while breaking the room's doorknob. "You, and Poppy, will grow up to be just like her, unappreciative, depressed for no reason, and useless. Come out! Come out!"

“Miss Chui, where are you?” one of my sister’s students unmuted his microphone.

I switched off her laptop immediately, and hid it under the blanket. I did not know if I had done the right thing, but my sister would hate to let anyone know what was happening, not to mention they were her students. I was afraid that my Father would break in, so I hid under the table. I was crying without my tears.

“I told you to stop! Or else I would call the police, you don’t want anyone to know, do you?” my sister said. “Everyone in this building will come out and see what is happening, so stop it.”

I heard the knife cling on the floor. A final bang on the ground, and the main gate was shut.

I came out from the table, and opened the door when there was no sound out there. I saw my sister, kneeling on the ground, picking up the pieces of glass that my Father broke. Her hands were bleeding, there were bruises on her arm. I looked at the hair dryer on the floor, and everything else that was on the table laid on the floor.

“Are the students still on zoom?” my sister asked, she did not turn her back because she was still picking up the things. I could not see her face.

“No.” I sobbed, “I’m sorry, sister. I did not know what to do, and I just switched off your laptop, I did not know if the students were still on zoom or not...”

“It’s okay, Poppy,” she put the things that were not broken, such as a tissue stand and plug board on the table, then others in a red rubbish bag. “Thank you, you have done the right thing.” She turned to me. She looked so tired, but weirdly calm.

“You must be frightened,” she lowered herself at the same height as I was. She was forcing a smile. I knew it was not a true smile, it was fake, otherwise her lips would not be trembling when she curved her lips upwards, and her wounded hands would not be shaky when she touched my face.

I dared not say anything. I thought it was normal, and my friends’ family would encounter similar situations sometimes, too. It must be hard for them to deal with. But nobody would talk

about it, because fighting was bad behaviour. So I did not tell anyone too, I didn't want to be seen as a bad girl.

Sister, Father passed on a weak heart to you. I couldn't imagine the chest pain that you endured those nights. I should have said something and comforted you at that time when I saw your wounds from the fight. I should have seen the wounds crawling in your heart too. I have searched online that stress could worsen heart function. If only I had told you that it is ok to cry, that you did not need to put on a smile always, your heart would not have been strained, and it would not lead to a heart attack, and you would not leave.

I pondered at the funeral.

One of my sister's friends went out of the funeral, and I saw him smoking. I thought it would be smelly, but it had a blueberry smell. He looked at me, and put his flat, black rectangular device away hurriedly. He used his hands to wave the smoke away.

"You must be Poppy," he said. "I am Clement, your sister's friend. I always find it interesting how Lily's siblings are named from flowers and trees."

"Yes. I am Poppy," I replied. "Why does your smoke smell like blueberry?" I was curious. That was an oddly familiar smell.

"It's called e-..." he paused in the middle, and shook his head. "No, it's just something bad for your health. Your sister would strangle me if I told you. There is nothing more you need to know. People get addicted to it, so never try it."

When I was young, I always thought that the grown-ups were weird. They told the younger generation to not do something, because it was "bad for you", but they were doing it all the time. Not sleeping at night, drinking excessive amounts of coffee, smoking... Yet now as an adult, I did the same. I told my tutees the same advice, warning them against things I myself did all the time.

At that time, the white smoke from Clement outside the funeral reminded me of a scene. It was midnight, about three or four weeks before my sister had a heart attack. I was going down to 7-11 and wanted to eat something. I was hungry and could not wait until my sister finished her work to bring me extra mid-night snacks. Some white smoke was floating from the park. It was so dark, and there were two shadows on the facility. The girl was wearing a skirt, and sitting on the man's lap, and their bodies were sliding to and fro. I tried to walk closer to see what they were playing. The woman buried her face in the male's neck, and the male was smoking cigarettes while closing his eyes. It was so dark. Then, a pair of eyes fixated on mine.

It was the familiar, wild eyes. He looked at me, and coughed, then stopped moving. He pressed the woman's head even closer to him on his neck. He placed the cigarette in her mouth, and whispered something in her ears.

I turned my eyes away from the lifeguard, and ran away. I did not know that the lifeguard would wear proper clothes and sit in the park with her female companion. My image of him was always wearing a yellow vest with red shorts in the swimming pool, but not in a T-shirt and a pair of jeans.

When I went home, I ate the chocolate ice-cream that I had bought at 7-11. After a while, my sister came home with the same ice-cream too. She always worked until late night recently, and I wondered how she could manage to be energetic every day when she was meeting people and with me. How would she relieve her stress? Did she even feel stressed? Whenever I felt anxious preparing for the internal assessments in order to get into a good secondary school, I would scream in the park, eat ice cream and share my thoughts with my sister.

"Sister! Guess who I have encountered today," I asked immediately, she had not taken her shoes yet.

"I have no idea, Poppy," she said while placing the ice-cream in the fridge. "This is for you, you can have it tomorrow." She opened the fridge.

"Wine."

"What?"

“The fine wine that aged,” I said. “I saw him in the park near our house.”

Her face and ears turned red, then she burst out laughing.

“He was playing with a woman in the park,” I said.

“Well, it is certainly none of my business,” she replied.

“They were sitting on each other, and...”

“Ok, I do not need any details, Poppy. Go to bed,” she ordered.

“Fine,” I walked to the bed. When I closed my eyes, I could smell a tinge of cigarettes and blueberries in the house. Slowly, I fell asleep.

I stared at the smoke that remained in the air outside the funeral. Clement patted my head, and said, “Just remember how strong and brave she was, she had tried her best.” Then he returned to the funeral.

Of course I knew that. I was the closest to her. I knew my sister was a strong, cheerful girl. But God decided to take her away earlier. You can’t “try your best” to defeat death that is uncontrollable. I wanted to defend her, but I knew he was just trying to comfort me, and he was sad too. So I did not say anything.

I went to the washroom. Finally, there were other colours other than black and white. The walls were painted in blue, it was my sister’s favourite colour.

“Poor Connie... her life has not been easy, a son with intellectual disability, the youngest daughter had eye problems, two unhappy marriages, and now her daughter...” It was one of the church ladies.

“Young people now are quite fragile,” the other voice said. “I told Lily to pray and give her life to God once, before she got into university. God will show His power and save their whole family eventually. But she just smiled and did not reply to me. Then she did not come to church anymore. Connie said she was busy. If she had put her faith in God, this would not happen.”

That was not true. My sister was not fragile. She did not cry like others did. She was the strongest person in the world. She worked hard, and always cheered me up with a smile. She was the best sister in the world. Having a heart attack was not her choice. At that moment, I did not understand why the omnipotent Father in heaven would not heal her heart or miraculously replace it with a healthy one.

“Don’t say things like that!” the other lady replied. “I can’t imagine how I could handle it if I were Connie. Lily was the only daughter who works hard for her family. I heard that she was doing great in university and her part time jobs too. Did you tell her that our church has funeral services?”

“Of course I did. But I think I know why she didn’t want to do it in Christian style...where did they find her body?”

“On the ground of a square area in another building. The building structure is similar to where they lived, but within another estate.”

“It would be devastating to live in the same building where her daughter fell. Lily might have thought about that too...”

“During the church meeting next time, do not mention it, okay? I think it is best if we pretend that we don’t know.”

“Yes. We should inform the group members too, I will WhatsApp them tonight,” the lady replied. “Where should we have dinner later?” Their voices went further and soon faded. They had left.

I came out from the compartment in the washroom. I washed my hands. I took a piece of paper to wipe them. I used to like the hand dryer, but at that time I thought it was too noisy. I

rubbed my itchy and stinging eyes hard, I did not know why I wanted to cry after hearing their conversation. Tears simply refused to reach my eyes as always.

She needs this. The voice of the lifeguard in the diving pool echoed in my mind at that time. I did not spot him at the funeral. Now as I have grown up, I knew he was in a relationship with my sister in the past. How well did he know her? I did not know how long their relationship had lasted, and I dared not think whether the lifeguard was married, given his age. He was obviously old enough to have a family of his own.

I went out of the washroom and looked around the funeral, my vision was blurred. The flowers were the only colour that were not in black and white, but there were more lilies than this morning. The walls were white, black clothes moving everywhere. People's mouths were moving, but I could not hear anything anymore. I could not concentrate.

I went to the centre of the room, and looked at my sister smiling in the photograph. If the church ladies were not making up stories, there must be a reason why my sister fell from that building. She might have had a heart attack on her way to her private tutoring, to the building where her student lived, and fell on the ground.

I looked at my Mother standing next to the photograph. She had a familiar expression, the same expression as the time she was holding me and standing next to the window, a long time ago when I was five. Several of my Mother's church friends stood clutching a Bible, their eyes closed in what seemed like fervent prayer, as if their collective faith could bring my sister back to life. I did not recognize who the ladies were chatting in the washroom. All I thought at that time was that they were all stupid, naive, and held superstitious, blind faith.

Now I was standing in front of the same photograph, but in a smaller size. It was quiet in the crematorium. A few people were also visiting their deceased relatives. I raised my hand and touched her face on her grave niche. My heart ached every time at the sight of her smiling in the picture.

“Sister, I am older than you now. Today is my twenty-first birthday,” I looked at the photo and said. “It seems that, regardless of what I did or did not do, I could not stop you from free-falling.”

I placed white lilies beside her photo. As I grew older, I understood what “free-falling” and the conversations between the two church ladies in the funeral washroom meant, even though my Mother and Granny never told me about the truth.

And I knew why her funeral did not have a traditional clear top casket cover or Bible.

Perhaps a part of the ten-year-old me recognised the illogicality of falling from a high floor due to a heart attack. The estate floors were enclosed on all sides. One could not fall unless they intentionally climbed over the railing. But my consciousness denied and refused any other possibilities.

Lily complied with the gravity, and landed on the ground too hard. Her body could not be accommodated in a glass casket for the farewell viewing at the funeral.

During my time at a Christian secondary school, I have learned this scripture from the Bible in the Religious Education and Ethics lessons:

“But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” — Revelation 21:8

To the eyes of Christians, it seemed like my sister had committed every sin detailed in the Bible.

“Only cowards take their own lives,” Father once said while watching the news of students committing suicide because of academic stress. “They choose to murder themselves when no one wants to harm them. How foolish.”

She was her own murderer.

She was faithless. She did not believe in God.

She was sexually immoral. She had an affair with the middle-aged lifeguard.

And she was a liar. The most successful liar in the world. In all those nights she had chest pain, she probably had nightmares. The pills she took were not Nitroglycerin but Benzodiazepines for panic attacks, which I would take when I needed them after she died.

“Your death has nothing to do with your heart. But at the same time, it does, doesn’t it?” I said to my sister, as she remained smiling in the photograph. “You should have cried more when you were here.”

The sun in the sky was annoyingly shining, its sunlight piercing in the crematorium, stinging my eyes. I was rummaging in my bag for sunglasses to shield my fragile, dry eyes. Then, I felt something unfamiliar. I stopped digging.

For the first time, there was a hint of warm moisture in my eyes.