

Time Like Water

by

Grace Li

James Liu folded back the top sheet of his blanket, resting his palms on the pale white expanse of hospital bed. Morning light streamed through the open window, the California sunshine warm and golden even in late September. He hoped it eased the sharp lines of his face, the wrinkles that he still wasn't used to, and he considered placing his hands at his sides—harder then to see the spots of age, the veins that jutted out blue and spider-like—but elected to keep them where they were, the face of his watch pointed up like a promise. It was a quarter 'til nine.

He had told the nurses a friend was visiting him today. He hoped it was true. Time moved differently now, the past and the present overlapping as memories came and went. Claire might have come already or she might never come, the wounds of the past still unhealed. There was an idiom in Chinese for this sort of thing, he knew, but the words floated up and then dissipated against his tongue like sugar. Still, Chinese was easier than English now. He knew the nurses speculated he was losing language the same way he was losing memory, but the truth was that as more and more things disappeared Chinese was what remained. It was his mother tongue, his first language, and though he had moved to America over fifty years ago it still reminded him of childhood, of softness, of love. Both his parents were long dead, and yet in Chinese they were still there, their voices clear in his mind.

A knock on his door. "James?"

The chatter of the nurses—a low, background hum like the thousand medical devices hooked up in his room, more noticeable in absence than in presence—stopped.

Claire stepped through the door. He didn't recognize her at first. The face he had once known so well was now lined with wrinkles, her eyes smaller beneath the heavy folds of her eyelids, and her hair was a dark gray, cut short, the hairstyle his mother had worn it as she aged.

He realized with a jolt that this was how he looked too. Time had worn them down the same way. “James,” she said again. “Do you remember me?”

“*Qing ai de,*” James said, softly, reaching out a hand. *My love, my wife.* The words were better in Chinese, more true. It took a moment for him to realize that it was the wrong answer. They had not been married for almost fifty years. He wanted to take back his words, was about to, when she crossed the room to sit at his side.

Her smile wavered for a moment, then held. “Yes,” she said, and though it was a lie he wanted to believe it. The doctors would have talked to her already—Alzheimer’s, they would say, in slow, carefully enunciated English, and Claire would nod as if her research wasn’t in protein folding, as if she did not know better than anyone how James’ brain was dying.

James tipped his head back. Outside the window, he could see the clear blue of the late summer sky, the flutter of palm trees in the breeze. His memories had turned slippery, changeable, like the fish that gleamed silver in the Yangzhou River beneath a high sun, and if he closed his eyes, he could let himself believe that time moved around them like water, that the past fifty years had not played out like they had. “What have I forgotten?” he asked.

Claire turned his hand over, her fingertips tracing the lines of his palm. It took him a moment to realize that she was forming a character. *Ji*, she wrote. *Remember.*

Still, when she told their story, she told it differently.

They had met in graduate school in Michigan, two foreigners from the same province of China, and though that wouldn’t have meant anything back in the mainland, where provinces stretched for hundreds of miles, it was enough here in America that they had dinner together in a Shanghainese restaurant, the closest thing either of them could get to home. They had spoken in

Chinese, the language tumbling out like water after so many weeks of stumbling over English phrases in spaces where their accents were too sharp, too pointed, too foreign.

That much was true. In the early years, it had been easy. Love had been cooking in a cheap apartment and buying toilet paper in bulk at Walmart, talking in the hallway between their labs as they waited for experiments to finish running. They had done their postdocs together in New York City, where they had gone to Chinatown for the first time and ate Peking duck on the side of the street, their hands greasy and their laughter curling into the air like steam, like smoke.

He could not remember when things started to change. Maybe it was the memory loss or maybe it was him, afraid to reach for memories that still cut like glass, but love had been easy until it had been hard. They fought about who would cook that night, about whose turn it was to clean. They fought about whose career they would move for, who would take care of their future kids. When they would have kids. It was the kind of fights James had thought all married couples had, the kind of fights that hadn't meant anything to him at the time. But he had reached for her after they fought one evening and she had turned away. *I don't want to do this anymore*, she said. After ten years in America, her accent had all but disappeared.

He hadn't understood what Claire meant until she moved out—out of the apartment, out of New York, taking a job at a university on the other side of the country. It had been winter then, the streets covered in that gray, slushy combination of dirt and snow, iced over after a particularly cold night, and he had watched her go through the window, making sure she didn't slip on her way to the taxi. Why had he not run after her? Youth, pride, all of the things that meant so little now.

In this version of the story, they still fought. But they walked home together every night, from 68th Street to their apartment on 79th, and James still reached for her hand. *Qing ai de*, he

would say, *qing ai de, qing ai de*. My love, my love, my love. Forgive me. On Friday evenings they would leave lab early and go to a fast food restaurant for dinner, sneak French fries into the movie theaters and watch English movies where the actors spoke too quickly for understanding. In whispered Chinese, they would make up their own stories about the people on screen.

James did not know how much of this was true. He could remember movie theaters, could remember holding her hand. But he had never apologized to Claire, had never been able to admit all the ways he had wronged her. In this, he had always been too proud.

After she left, he had spent fifty years in New York. He had gone to California only at the recommendation of his doctors, and though the clinical trial ultimately had not enrolled him—something about informed consent, about language barriers, about competency—he did not mind being here. Stanford, with its year-round warmth, those blue skies that reminded him of childhood, was not a bad place to die.

James folded his fingers over hers. Her hand was soft, lined with age. She had stopped talking now, the story complete. Someone else might have called it a lie. He recognized it as a kindness. Claire would let him die thinking that he was a better man than he was, that when he was gone he would have someone there to mourn him.

In truth, he did not know who was left. His parents were dead, buried in China on a plot of land they were assigned by the government, having spent their whole lives in the same city in Southern China. When he died he would go there too, had paid an agency the day he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's to carry out his will. Eventually, they would fly his body back to China and fold him into the earth, bones and muscle and memory returning home at last. Some days, the thought frightened him. Other days, he could close his eyes and see himself halfway

there, across the Pacific, the ocean an endless blue expanse and the sun flashing against the wing of an impossibly white plane.

Years of scientific papers, of publications, of running experiments in a lab that hummed with the endless spins of PCR cycles, and he still knew that marrying Claire was the one good choice he had ever made. He sat up, just a little, and she placed her hand beneath his elbow. What was the word he was looking for? It came first in Chinese. *Fu*. Support. She was supporting him. How much more would he lose tomorrow? The day after? One day, Claire would come and he might not remember they had ever divorced. One day, Claire would come and he might not remember they were ever married.

Claire might not come again.

He said her name, once and then again, just for safety, just to remind himself that he knew it.

“Yes?” she asked.

He wanted to ask for the rest of the story. He wanted to hear more, about this truth-not truth of their love, of a world in which he had spent the last fifty years with her. Memory was malleable, wasn't it? It folded beneath his hands like putty. Instead, though, he pressed his forehead to hers, closed his eyes. “*Qing ai de,*” he said, softly, “where did we go wrong?”

She didn't answer.

He opened his eyes. There were tears in her eyes, a thin film that wavered over her cataracts. She was getting older too. Someday, they would both be gone. Who would take care of her funeral arrangements? He did not want to think of that. He hoped that she had many years left. He hoped that she would think of him sometimes. He hoped that she would not. “Claire,” he said. *Ji*, she had written. *Remember*.

“I know,” she said. “I always did. But it was nice, wasn’t it? To pretend?”

“Yes,” James said. And, a moment later, fifty years too late, “Forgive me.”

He could feel her exhale, the soft movement of her breath against his face. It made him think of those early years, New York in summer, the roar of the subway beneath their feet, the rising sun ablaze with color. They had always left the apartment early, the sun emerging from the East River as they walked to the medical center, to their labs, to the rest of their lives. Fifty years later and the light was soft and faded against their skin, California gentler than New York had ever been, but Claire was holding his hand, her fingertips tracing the veins beneath his skin that pulsed blue and tremulous, and for a moment they were twenty-one again, the past and the present touching like two palms pressed together.