

When I was three, ma brought home a clock. It was crafted from lacquered dark brown wood and shaped like a small temple, with its four feet and spire bedded in gold. At the front, a glass door opened to a white dial, adorned with black lettering. In motion, its gears would seep the dining room with a stilly, rhythmic beating; the percussion for the chirping of cicadas during long summer nights and the conductor for dinner-time laughter amidst plates of velvety milkfish, caramelized pork, and leafy greens.

Grandma was its keeper. A plump, mannerly lady, she would, without fail, turn the key that wound the clock every Sunday morning. At dinner time, she would tell me, always and sternly, “Eat your fruits and vegetables, don’t let ah-ma worry about you.”

I stand in the dining room, looking at the clock, its wreaths of gleaming gold long since withered to shades of bronze. The arms are stopped at 3 o’clock. Recollections of the dining room fleet across my thoughts.

“We’re late to visit ah-ma,” ma calls. So, I leave the clock, its shimmering bronze almost varnished in gray from the clouds outside the living room window.

I slide into the passenger seat and stare distractedly out at the city that rushes by. Apartment buildings ascend dozens of stories above us, their facades dotted with store fronts, sounds, and smells of everything conceivable. “Oh, ah-ma would love these green bean pastries filled with meat,” ma exclaims, and she stops the car by a small shop. “Sure, I’ll go get some,” I reply.

A bell tinkles as I push past a glass door. Loaves of bread, buns filled with beans and meat, and caramelized tarts are arranged on small trays, illuminated by mellow light. I look at each tray and find the green bean buns, wrapped in plastic, that ah-ma liked. I take one. Almost absentmindedly, after a moment, I take another.

“How much for both?” I ask the clerk. She responds and I pay, getting back in the car.

The car slows and ma tells me we're almost there. We park and approach two outer pillars brushed in red, encircled by twin dark stone dragons that twist towards a lintel of red latticed with gold. We pass between the pillars and enter a courtyard that surrounds a building of dark gray, undecorated except for a horizontally tiled roof of red-brown brick and four sloped ridges culminating in decorative eaves in the shapes of more dragons. I follow ma to the building doors. The doors are made of dark wood and left ajar. We pass through the doors into a vestibule then step onto a staircase that winds down a level, leading to a small room containing several cupboards filled with plates and pots.

"Take two plates for ah-ma," ma says, and I take two red ones from a cupboard nearest to us.

We step into a much larger and brighter room, plain except for four large glass cabinets that extend the entire length of the room, laid such that the contents of each glass were orthogonal to anyone looking in. At the end of the room was a large golden statue in the shape of a meditating man, surrounded by a sea of chrysanthemums. Ma begins counting softly as we approach the second cabinet from the left. The contents of each cabinet, I could see now, were five levels of dozens of wooden tablets, polished to high sheen, and inscribed with gold lettering. She suddenly stops, and I stop with her.

"Here's ah-ma," she says softly, pointing at one of the tablets. She gestures to the red plates on my hand, and I place them onto a table in front of the cabinet. We begin arranging snacks and fruits for ah-ma on the plates, including one of the green bean buns. Ma nods at me, and begins talking.

"Dear ma, it's three years to the day since you left. Your granddaughter is here today to see you for the first time since. Now, she's in her second year of medical school." She says, and tears, not from sorrow, at least not yet, but of sundered moments, arrive.

Time is said to be a healer. In that bitter moment, I knew this was a lie. In the instant, days, months, and even years after, all time absolves of us is thinking too intently about that moment when we notice they have stopped breathing or when we receive *that* call. The moment when our future precious collections of shared memories are incised by a scalpel from the most skillful of surgeons. For, you still exist. But that person is gone. And so, we eventually forget, slowly in small pieces, then everything all at once. Time is that unwelcomed amnesiac. As we mourn, we realize it is a necessary forgetting. Otherwise, to remain in constant remembrance of that moment of parting is to remember they are forever gone.

But my own moment of true mourning had eluded me. The distance of an ocean, of a pandemic, and of years pursuing medicine had stolen that from me. At the foot of the table, I finally mourned. Like many, I grieved of the passing of our loved dead. But I mourned mostly for the loss of time shared, like the hands of a clock prematurely advanced.

“Please take care of her.” Ma finishes speaking, and we bow three times and start placing the carefully set refreshments back into bags to bring home. As we turn and leave, I watch one of my tears fall from my cheek to the polished white floor, unbidden.

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I stand again in the dining room before the clock of wood and weathered gold, its arms still motionless at 3 o’clock. I close my eyes and listen. There are cicadas chirping, carried by a summer breeze, and laughter, somewhere, far way. After a moment’s silence, I open my eyes and move the hand backwards, to 12. I unwrap the crinkled plastic wrapping the green bean bun and bite into it. “Ah-ma,” I murmur, “don’t worry about me.”

A small smile briefly touches my lips.

“I’ve been eating my fruits and vegetables.”