

# Heirloom

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**M**y name is Benjamin Tan, eldest son of Rufus Tan, who is the fifth son of Dorothy Neo, the woman in that coffin. I found Mama two years ago on her bed, cold as the marble floor, dressed in her pajamas with her jade brooch, the family heirloom, secured round her neck. Her face, though pale, was calm. There were no signs of a struggle for life, as if she knew her time was up. She had a slight smile, her dimples sinking mildly.

“Old age” the doctor said, “She lived a long life”. It would later be reflected as osteoporosis in the death certificate.

And so we called for the funeral director, who came and had a brief chat with mum. Within an hour, he and two burly Indian men left with Mama. She was draped in black cloth. They took a bundle of her clothes and some accessories, but not the brooch. Dad was in the next room, bawling like a child.

I had never seen him cry like that ever since Danny died in that incident at Hendon Camp. I had to accompany him and mom to identify the body. Though his face was bloated, I could see the ends of his lips curl up into a wry smile.

After the forms were filled and letters of apology received, we brought Danny home and held the wake at our void deck over the next three days. It was a hodgepodge of people that came: former schoolmates and teachers who proclaimed that Danny was a grade A model student and constant friend, army buddies who spoke of him as a true leader and a daring soldier, and of course, relatives came in their throngs to gossip with one another, under the pretense of paying respects. Even the head of his camp came down to pay his respects and offer sincere apologies to mom. He resigned a month later, after a thorough investigation concluded that he had failed to ensure proper safety standards in the camp.

Since mom and dad were incredibly distraught, Mama made most of the decisions regarding how the body should be displayed. She was a stoic woman who'd had sufficient experience in handling grief. She had to bury Grandpa while dad was still in secondary school. Dad said that while everyone wept as they tossed handfuls of dirt into the grave and sang "Amazing Grace", Mama did not shed a single tear and walked back home in silence.

Danny was dressed in his finest formal: a black pinstriped suit with a red tie, and his hair combed into a nice centre-parting. Mama put the jade brooch around his neck to complete the attire. Though he was only 2 years younger than me, his face possessed all the tranquility of a sleeping baby. They had clearly hired an excellent mortician.

Although there was no fixed schedule, we took turns taking care of Danny. Mom and dad would receive visitors from noon to one or two in the morning. I would take over the graveyard shift from two to six in the morning before Mama replaced me.

On the first night, after the last of her mahjong kakis had gone home, Mama came to me and started advising me on the do's and don'ts at wakes. "Especially don't leave the body alone." She drummed it into my head. Mama was a very pantang woman, I suspected it must be because of the times she had grown up in, and her odd Catholic background, muddled with the Buddhist and Taoist ideologies of her ancestors.

The night was colder than usual and drafts amplified the loneliness I felt. It was getting difficult to stay awake, so I started making myself busy, clearing up the peanut shells off the tables, restocking the packet drinks in the cooler and relighting the candles that had extinguished. Mom had left a stack of newspapers on one of the tables earlier in the day, so I pulled up a chair to the closest table to the coffin and began settling in for what seemed an eternity. The wind whistled in between pillars and no amount of subjectivity on the opinions column could keep me awake. I began to drift into slow slumber. The paper lightly crumpled as it rested onto my thigh and the headiness of the post-midnight silence kicked in, and all slowly began to blur.

There was Danny sitting on a dirt heap, throwing rocks into the clear lake. I must have been 13 then. We were tossing stones into the quarry to hear the sound it made hitting the water surface.

"What's the highest note you can hit, korkor" He asked me.

"I don't know, a plop", trying to blow the highest burst of air from my puckered lips. My voice had already begun to break by then so I could only manage a raspy croak.

"I can do better than that" Danny was feeling haughty. His ego got the better of him and he picked up the largest pebble he could find. I would not even call it a pebble, maybe a stone. He methodically counted five steps from the ledge from the edge and began a run up, but the momentum got the better of him and his right foot slid past the edge and he went over the ledge. I dived and caught him, wrapping my arm around his, grasping his forearm firmly.

“Don’t let go, korkor!” He yelled in desperation.

I was never the fittest of boys back in secondary school. I could not even pass my physical test, but at the quarry on that afternoon I summoned all my strength and gripped onto him as if my own life depended on it. He struggled, kicking at the ledge to search for a foothold until he found one, and I hoisted him back onto the ledge.

“Fuck” he sighed. It was the first time I had ever heard him swear. We lay on the quarry floor, t-shirts caked in mud and sweat.

“Korkor, if I ever go, you need to take care of mom and dad and Mama alone. I give you all my savings to take care of them”

I woke up from my brief slumber, and saw it there, its eyes gleaming in the shade of fluorescent light from the void deck ceiling. It was on the top of the coffin. Perching next to Danny’s head!

The cat was a strange magnolia colour, with a streak of white running down its spine onto its tail. Its ears semi-folded, not perked straight up. There was no sign of claws. It was playing with the brooch on Danny’s neck as if it was a toy, occasionally staring deep into its reflection, then making gentle swipes but never actually tugging. It was more curious than aggressive.

Mama once reminded me about the omen of cats at wakes. “Never let a cat jump over the coffin, the body will wake from the dead.” Mama, I could never understand how she resolved her pantangness with her faith. But there it was: a cat on Danny’s coffin. I rushed forward and shoed it away, and it leapt off and dashed into the nearby bushes.

I told Mama about the incident. She swore repeatedly in Malay then struck me over the head with the newspaper, then went upstairs immediately. I knew she was angry because she would only swear in Malay when it upset her the most, like the time when dad was fired from his job.

That evening, she called the priest over and what followed was the longest prayer session ever, with many Hail Marys and sprinkling of the holy water. Feeling guilty, I wanted to join in, but Mama’s glare would not let me do so. Though I felt strange about her mixed bag of religious principles, I had developed a certain respect of her as the guardian of the family beliefs.

The next two nights passed without incident and we transported Danny’s body to Mandai Crematorium for cremation. We made our final round after the funeral mass; Dad had to support mom, who was weeping and unable to stand. I noticed Mama, she made a brief stop at the head of the coffin, where she stopped for a short prayer, then kissed Danny on the forehead, and with a deft movement of both hands, she removed the brooch and placed it in her pocket. All I did was lay a single flower in the coffin.

That day was the last time we saw our sleeping babe in the flesh.

Now it was Mama’s turn. There she was: lying in stillness, dressed in the finest of her culture, displaying her stature as matriarch of the family and mother of her five sons, in a violet batik kebaya

with embroidered silk slippers. Her hair was kept in a bun, put in place by a pearl hairpin. In the centre of her garb was an ornate kerosang. To top it off, mom took out the brooch from her pocket and placed it around Mama's neck, letting it rest in the middle of her chest.

Once again, we took turns to guard the body, and I took the late shift from midnight to eight. There was no mahjong this round, only more gossiping relatives, some I had only seen for the first time. Most used it as an excuse to make small talk about the good ole' days. "Weddings and funerals", dad said. Many of them did not have good words about Mama. They commented on how stingy she was, not willing to spare money to the rest of the extended family. I guess it is easy to say these things when you do not have six mouths to feed while working in dangerous conditions as a tin miner. Dad had this sarcastic smirk on his face. Suffer first, we know where we came from.

As the last visitor left, my parents retired for the night and I was left alone with Mama, about 15 empty tables, and lots of peanut and kua chi shells strewn all around. I took the broom and began my long journey into night.

The floor was swept, the rubbish disposed and the cooler restocked. What was left to do? I picked up my copy of W.B. Yeats' *Complete Poems* and tucked myself into the chair nearest to the coffin and began reading. And the widening gyre caught hold of my imagination and I began to drift, dreaming of Minnaloushe and the moon.

And as the falcon heard the falconer's call, my eyes regained focus and there was the most peculiar sighting. It was old magnolia, with her white tail, again at the head of the coffin. She was busy preening her fur, licking the base of her paws. I did not want to react immediately, feeling a sense of wonder and curiosity. Was it the same cat as the one at Danny's wake? But it could not be. That was three years ago!

But it looked exactly the same, with the same pattern and colour, and the same keenness for the brooch. I put the book on the table gently and slipped out of the chair, making my way to the coffin. With each step, I could feel the wooden planks crackle under my feet. I made myself as light as possible, shifting my weight slowly, each foot hovering mere inches above the floor, like a geisha in performance, until I was about a metre away from her. She was still there, gently tapping on the brooch, her glossy full moon eyes peering into its reflective surface. They were hypnotizing and hypnotized at the same time. Her nose wriggled in the chill of the night air. I snuck closer and was within reaching distance, yet she remained almost oblivious to my presence. I pounced.

As if she'd been playing coy and knew I'd been there all the while, in one swift motion, she had the brooch in her mouth and bounded from the coffin! If Mama saw what had happened, she would have surely woken up from the dead! She sprinted across the carpark towards the high grass. Fearing the living more than the dead, I immediately gave chase, leaving Mama alone, open to the elements.

I was clearly not as fit as I used to be in the army. Then again, I was never fit. Still, I dashed across the carpark as if my life depended on it. My life did depend on it. That brooch was not just Mama's,

it was given to her by her mother-in-law when she died. My parents would never forgive me if I had lost it on my watch.

The wind was picking up, and it began to drizzle. The rain crept into my glasses, stinging my eyes as I reached the high grass. The cat must have gotten away by now. Then I saw a glister in the distance, the light dancing on a now-wet jade brooch, under the fluorescent bulbs of the opposite block of flats. She was preening herself again, drying her fur while sitting on the stone seats. Her taunting worked, and I gave chase.

No field of high grass would stop me. The mud caked my feet as I dragged myself through the field, the grass resisted my approach, until I jumped across the small drain onto the hard concrete. She was not there anymore! Then a slight purr and a flick of the white at the top of the stairs. It was as if she wanted me to follow her.

I made my way up the stairs, following the trail of white, like an astronomer following a comet. We reached the tenth floor. I was a wheezing, sweaty, muddy, bent over mess. Old magnolia stood at the end of the corridor, with the brooch on the ground, as her paws toyed with it. There was no better chance than this now. With my last ounce of energy, I sprinted across, but she must have taken this into account. Clasp the brooch in her mouth, she bolted into an open window. After coming this far and slogging it through the rain and mud, I was not about to go back empty-handed and face a potential expulsion from the family. I peered through the window.

It was definitely a bedroom, clearly meant for sleeping only. There was a bed, some loose sheets of paper on it, a brown rosewood cupboard and a wall light. Whoever the room belonged to was clearly afraid of the dark. There was a click, then the doorknob turned and the door whined open. I ducked to the side so as not to be noticed. A glance. She could not have been more than 25 years old. But more importantly, she had the cat on her lap, stroking her back. The brooch was missing!

I was more intent now. I peeked over the window. "Hi there, don't mean to disturb." She froze there in semi-shock, probably not expecting an invited guest at two in the morning, but her face looked so beautiful amidst the fright. I gave her my name and opened my palms to her, showing that I meant no harm.

"Is that your cat? She took a very important thing that belongs to me." I asked her, hoping to cool her nerves. She relaxed a little, and the look on her face became more of amusement at this scruffy-looking boy at the window. She moved closer.

"No, it's not my cat. But she occasionally pops in. Are you looking for this?" Her voice reminded me of vanilla, its mellowness and smoothness of tone. She took the brooch out of her pocket. There was a slight smidge of mud at the edges, but it was undamaged. My eyes widened. I felt a sense of ease at the sight of the intact brooch, yet my attention was drawn much more by this woman holding the brooch, than the brooch itself. I nodded when she presented it to me and asked me for my address and phone number. "For security reasons," she said. I rambled on about how the brooch came into

her possession. She giggled, from the truth of the story or my over-animateness, I could not tell. All the while, the cat laid in the corner, in a posture that seemed very much like sleeping.

"I'm sorry for your loss," she tried to comfort me.

"She died peacefully in her sleep, no struggle. I think she was pretty contented with how everything turned out."

"When's the wake until?"

"Oh the 14th"

"Maybe I'll come down to pay my respects." This was my first time meeting her.

"It's OK, thanks for your concern"

It dawned upon me that Mama was left unsupervised. I had to go.

"Listen, I have to rush off, there's nobody taking care of the wake. Maybe I could have your number so I can properly thank you?" She promptly gave me a missed call.

I felt my pocket once more, to assure myself that the brooch was in my possession, and dashed down the corridor. While waiting for the lift, I heard the vanilla voice again.

"It's Lily!"

I placed the brooch back where it was, as though it had never left. There would be no one to tell of it, except Lily, and well, Mama. But Mama was dead. When dad questioned the soiled clothes and unkempt hair, I merely told him that the newspapers had been blown out of the void deck and I waded through the rain to wrestle them back.

The next three nights were pretty uneventful. Visitors somehow left on time, and I had time to reach the end of the Yeats poems. I found even more chores to help pass the time. Dad had driven the car to the closest parking lot and I spent the late nights giving the car a thorough wash and cleanup. There was no magnolia fur or white tail in sight.

And on the fourth night, after cleaning sweeping up of the vicinity, when I had finally completed the last of Yeats, she appeared. She headed towards the foot of Mama's coffin, saw the jade brooch glistening under the fluorescent lights, then closed her eyes and muttered a soft prayer. She walked over to me and pulled up a chair and sat next to me.

"Yeats at one in the morning at a wake. That's a pretty depressing way to spend your nights," she chided me. There was a giggle in her voice. I wanted to rebut but the sight of her in my void deck left me speechless.

“Loosen up. It’s not every day that somebody appears in the middle of the night out of nowhere”

And so Lily and I spent the night chatting about everything under the sun, from our families to studies to hobbies, a shared passion of music, art and literature, and realized we had much more in common than just a visit by a cat. She liked Yeats and Gauguin just as much as I did, and I enjoyed re-runs of *Friends* as much as she did. She told me of a manuscript she was writing, about solitude in the modern world. I could not agree more.

Having company sped time up, and before long, it was half-past-six in the morning. We had talked for five hours.

“You sure the cat isn’t yours?” I asked.

“No, it’s an occasional visitor”

“What happened to her after I left?”

“She slept there under the bed for a while longer. After I switched off the lights ‘cause I was sleepy, she sprang out the window before I closed the windows. Never came back after that”

After that, she gave a light yawn and nestled her head on my shoulder and fell asleep. I laid a blanket over her and saw the sunrise. My parents came down late that morning at nine and noticed Lily soundly asleep. I told them it was a friend who stayed nearby and that I would escort her home. Later at ten the visitors came and the funeral director and his assistants prepared the coffin for transport to the final resting place.

We accompanied the van in slow march, all three generations striding one after another. Some were crying, others wondering why they were even there, there was a gossip or two heard among the sea of white t-shirts. And of course the wailing. When we reached the entrance of the carpark, we boarded the bus and made our way to Mandai. I took the opportunity to take a nap and dream.

The weather was blistering hot when we reached the crematorium and the holding rooms provided only brief respite. There, the priest conducted the funeral mass to an audience that barely listened. A torrent of belief welled up within me. I prayed for Mama and her struggle for her children. I prayed that they would know her more in death than in life. I also prayed for Lily.

And similarly to Danny, we made our final round around the coffin. Most of the relatives tossed in the flower stalk that had been provided. Dad teared up at the sight of his mother and kissed her on the forehead. Mom, the stoic individual throughout the entire ceremony, was last in line. When it came for her to stand at the head of the coffin, she gently lifted the brooch and placed it in her pocket, then kissed Mama on the forehead and whispered something. I could swear she made a brief glance over to me. It would be a long time before I saw the brooch again. As we proceeded on and filled the viewing room, Dad and a few of my uncles broke down at the sight of the coffin moving slowly towards the furnace, towards the unknown, towards eternity, towards the widening gyre. I, too, cried. I guess there's a first time for everything.

That was the last we saw of Mama in the flesh.

Life returned to normal and we made adjustments to convert Mama's room into a workspace where my ever-increasing collection of books would be placed. As for her belongings, dad and mom hid them away. Her clothes were donated to the Salvation Army and her books became my books, all of them: Austen, Hardy, the Bible, a practical guide to white magic and several more. In a few weeks, I would drum up enough courage to ask Lily out to dinner, our first official date. We were engaged after a year and moved to a small 3-room flat in Punggol. Mom requested for our photoshoot to be in cultural garb, and so we were dressed in accordance to tradition.

On the day of the shoot itself, she presented Lily with the brooch. Since neither Lily nor I revealed the escapade that I had trying to recover the family heirloom, she did not know that Lily had seen it previously. Still, she received it with her usual giggle and that twinkle of familiarity in her eye, but yet with that decorum of handling a priceless gift. After the photos were taken, mom swooped in to retrieve it.

"In due time," she said. I echoed the same thing in my head.

Since then, we added a member to the family. My son, William Rufus Tan was born early in the morning in KK Hospital, and for the next month, mom played the role of midwife to my wife during her confinement period. They grew surprisingly close over the month, mom teaching her to take care of the little one, and Lily teaching William to call her Mama. We did not know that the cancer had already begun to spread to the rest of her body.

Lily walked over with a paper cup of dispensed coffee. It tasted sterile and waxy.

"She'll be fine," Lily assured me, "It's only a few sessions. She'll get through this safely. We'll get through this." She put her hand on my lap as I rested my head on her breast.

That afternoon, after dad arrived to take over from us, we decided to make a trip to the SPCA along Mount Pleasant Road to distract myself and we left with a magnolia-furred, white-tailed kitten.

### Exegesis

“Heirloom” was originally written as a means to consolidate two seemingly contradictory sides of the same self: one, the heartlander who was still attract to a good ole’ romance and the other, the reader whose diet of modernist texts provided a sound base of scepticism of such romance. The short story draws heavily from both eastern and western representations of cats, whether it be in superstition or literature. Cats are often remarked on their freedom to move in and out unnoticed (as opposed to dogs which are seen as more subservient) and it is for this reason that they are often associated with magic and mysticism. The ancient Egyptians claimed that cats had the power to see both the physical realm as well as the afterlife. In local folklore, it is often claimed that if a cat jumped over a body while it was still resting in a casket during the wake, the body would wake from the dead. As such, I merge the mythical nature of the cat with the western representations of cats such the Cheshire Cat from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and Minnaloushe in Yeats’ poetry.

The cat then becomes a metaphor for the synthesis of practiced religion with local customs in Singapore. The Peranakans provide an excellent context to this as they incorporate not only Chinese (and of Confucian) customs, but also Malay elements into Catholicism. What results is religious belief that is draws heavily from the hereditary practice instead of mere Catholic doctrine brought in by the Portuguese and French missions during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

As such, “Heirloom” becomes a documentary of synthesis between the East and West, set in cosmopolitan Singapore among one of the few ethnicities which has found a sound balance integrating Western religious belief with Eastern cultural practices.

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