

which in turn enabled me to start school one year earlier. My father was pursuing his Ph.D. in the same city, but he lived in a dorm. My grandfather had died of cerebral thrombosis at fifty-five, when my mother was pregnant with me.

My widowed grandmother had short hair and wore gray outfits and a heartwarming half-smile. Her one-bedroom apartment was on the fifth floor with no elevator. She and I shared the living room bed, my eldest aunt and her husband took the bedroom, and my older uncle squeezed into a nook in the hallway with a curtain.

When my aunt's alarm rang like thunder at 6 am, everyone jumped out of beds and raced to the bathroom. One second late, ten minutes' wait. Before and after dinner, we dodged each other in the narrow hallway, balancing dishes in our hands like Cirque du Soleil performers. No soup spilled; no food dropped. On the weekends, my father and my younger uncle joined in the chaos. My two uncles played Tank 1990 and let me enjoy my Super Mario Bros after dinner. My mother and her other sister's family would join the gathering on holidays.

It was bedlam but teeming with life.

My grandmother enjoyed everyone's company. My mother had often told me she was her mother's favorite child, but I couldn't tell if my grandmother had a favorite. At night, she ignored my mother's order to make me study until bedtime. She said I was a child of strong will and best left be, viewing me in a way my mother never did. Grandma let me watch her favorite romantic TV show with her, *Many Enchanting Nights*, by Qiong Yao. In the show, the characters cried their hearts out for this thing called love.

My grandmother shed tears, too. When I asked her why, she patted my head and said one day I'd understand.

She clearly missed my grandfather. I had never met him, but the stories she told of him filled in the gaps my mother had left. He was an educator, a skilled storyteller, and a jokester. During the starving years, he adopted a