

**Young Writers Award  
Runner up  
2016**

**Bitter Melon  
by Bella Zhong**

The first thing I remember about my grandma is hating her.

There really is no other word for it – for the primal antipathy that makes my fingers twitch just sitting here outside the room. For the past five years, she has occupied that special place in my mind most people reserve for Hitler, or the Devil.

For me, Hell was the shack she lived in when I was little: a one-bedroom house at the end of a cul-de-sac, with patterned linoleum flooring and a toilet you had to use a bucket of water to flush.

The last time I'd been there was the day we'd left for greener pastures. Mum signed my soul over to Satan for a few hours so that she could finish signing away the rest of our stuff in peace.

Sadly, my grandma only lived a ten-minute walk away, a pilgrimage Mum and I made every Sunday morning. Her house shied away from the road and was mostly hidden by a number of large palm trees. As if resentful of this skulking, my grandma liked to do tai chi by her letterbox, Repulsing the Monkey whenever anyone dared to do a U-turn in front of her.

Walking that last twenty metres to her house felt like when I had stumbled out too early during the Year 1 nativity play and faced public crucifixion in my sheep costume.

That day, I was fortunate enough that the stifling heat had managed to keep my grandma at bay, though my sweaty neck still prickled with the eyes of an invisible audience. There had once been a wide lawn out the front of the house, but my grandma had declared it 'useless' and promptly planted what Mum called a garden and I called a swamp. She grew garlic chives in swathes, as well as something that looked like a diseased cucumber, the bitter slices of which were land mines in her cooking.

As we passed, I kicked one deeper into some shrubbery in the gleeful hope that she'd break something trying to find it.

My grandma opened the door after the first knock. I toed off my runners sullenly as Mum negotiated the final terms of my incarceration, and then she was gone and it was just me and the old woman. Really, she was more wolf than woman. I was never fooled by the squat physique and dandelion hair. I knew her for what she was and nothing less.

Beetle-black eyes swept over me, lips pursing, then she turned her back and disappeared into the kitchen. I trudged after her, well-trained.

I sat at my end of the pockmarked little table with some homework I would never have to hand in, while at the other end, my grandma set herself to crushing garlic cloves with a mortar and pestle. I was pretty sure that grannies were meant to force-feed kids with sugar, but my grandma's weapon of choice was pungent, spicy raw garlic, on the pretext of supposed medicinal properties. The pounding was machine-gun-loud over the scratching of my pencil and drone of the fan. But I gritted my teeth and battled on. She was more merciful when I looked like I was furthering my education.

The racket finally ceased when my grandma rose from her chair and came prowling to loom over my shoulder. She breathed hot air on me in tandem with the fan, tutting at my work. I tried not to look at the stained, stumpy fingers braced on the table next to me.

'As bad your dad,' came the verdict in her usual clipped tone.

My grandma was of the opinion that her son had gotten his brains blown out by an IED because he hadn't gone and become an engineer like she had wanted.

In that moment, I agreed. I wished that my dad had built a bridge or something and left behind more than just a medal in Mum's sock drawer. Left behind more than this old woman who was beyond translation.

Horrified by the burning behind my eyes, I shoved back the chair with a screech and lurched out of the room. I couldn't look at her.

I slammed a door behind me, breath furious and ragged, and found myself in the one room I'd never entered. I didn't know why my grandma guarded it so assiduously, because there didn't seem much to see. It was bare and tidy, or maybe tidy because it was bare. Sunlight slunk in through half-opened curtains and fell on the desk in the corner. Splayed over the surface was the pair of red velvet pants my grandma wore for any and every occasion as a tribute to the glorious Revolution. Laid open beside them was a sewing kit.

There was only one other thing on the desk: a photograph propped up by the wall.

My sweaty feet stuck to the floor slightly as I padded closer. The photo was yellowing, its edges soft from handling. Next to each other were a man and a woman, hands clasped in front of them and staring into the camera. The young guy matched pictures I'd seen of my dad, so I could only assume that the older, rosy-cheeked woman was my grandma.

Whom I could hear closing in outside the room.

Heart rattling my ribs, I scrabbled in the sewing kit with a shaking hand while snatching up the photo with the other.

It was only small.

It only took one snip.

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'Billy,' Mum says.

I start guiltily back into the present, looking up to see her stepping out of the room. Mum's eyes are red, and I stare in barely veiled horror between her and the door she has left ajar.

'Mum, are —'

'You're up,' she mutters, knocking the hood off my head in a practised motion.

When I don't move, she jerks her head at the door.

‘Go on.’

The first thing that strikes me when I enter the room are the flowers Mum brought, in a vase on the bedside table. The decor is modern chic or something, white on white, and the flowers dominate the space in a garish display that would surely make my grandma narrow her eyes. She looks small on the bed next to them, crisp white blankets drawn up around her waist. I can’t tell what pants she has on, if any, and that mildly disturbing thought I immediately discard.

She is leaning back on the pillows with her eyes closed, hands clutching at the sheets around the IV drip.

‘Hi,’ I say, inadequately.

Immediately, I realise I should’ve let sleeping grandmas lie. It’s terrifying.

Her eyes flutter open, and a monstrous smile rends her face in two.

‘William!’ she calls, beckoning with a flurry of hands.

I squirm in my shoes as I walk over the carpet to sit at her bedside, where, to my horror, she takes my hand in hers. They’re soft. I blanch.

‘How are you?’ she beams, the foreign phrase leaving me wrong-footed.

‘Good?’ I try. ‘How are ... you?’

‘Much better for your mum and you visit,’ she gushes, patting my cheek.

We chat. I can’t quite reconcile ‘chatting’ with my grandma, can’t quite shake the feeling that any moment now she will shoot me a withering glare and chide me for being so easily deceived.

When I leave, she is sad, and tells me so. I look at her swallowed in the bed, receding into the blankness of her surroundings. The years have filed away her edges, leaving her reduced.

She is a poor forgery.

I turn away, crushed.

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The last thing I remember about my grandma is the way she picked up the pieces of the photograph and arranged them back on the desk as I cried.

‘Also, I found your bitter melon,’ she said.