

**YWA Entry**

**15-17 Category**

**WE CUT STRINGS**

When my mother was a child, barely scraping six years old, my grandmother tied a piece of red string around both of their wrists. Her hardened calloused fingers entwined with my mother's small hands and the two sat on the battered futon, listening to the muffled sound of the neighbour's wind chimes, their favourite afternoon song. When the sun began to dip into the clouds and the wind chimes stilled under the late night heat of the summer, my grandmother walked over to the kitchen and soon the room filled with the familiar smell of spices and seafood. From the other room, my mother tugged on the string. My grandmother tugged back.

When my mother was seventeen, she had skin much nicer than mine and her hair was much shorter too. She was the tallest girl in her class and the only white man she had ever found attractive was Tom Cruise, but only in Rain Man, and only when he wore that white suit and danced with Dustin Hoffman. When my mother was seventeen she carried an orange backpack full of textbooks (*"English, chemistry, algebra," she muttered, "It hurt my head and it hurt my back."*) to and from school. When my mother was seventeen she spoke in a Busan dialect, a product of the South Korean countryside. Her words always ran out laughing, struggling to get out first, vowels crashing up and down in-between loud sentences. But the way my mother spoke, crashing and roaring was not the accent that got you a job in South Korea. It was the accent that was yelled at fish markets, roared as the butcher knife slammed down onto the chopping board, a deafening symphony that did not coincide with the secretary, the typist or the flight attendant. So, my mother ironed her vowels into smooth silks and flattened her consonants to croons, and the words twirled out into melodies and led her to a job at Korean Air.

*"What would you like to eat today?"*

*"Welcome sir, have a nice flight."*

*“We will be preparing for landing soon.”*

So just like that, my mother at twenty-two, her skin still much nicer than mine and her hair now longer, travelled the world with her two voices. The red string, still there, was stretched over oceans and continents, tied around my mother’s suitcase and my grandmother’s wrist. Hawaii was paradise. London was hell. New York had too many greasy, leering men but their cheesecakes made it worth the trip. France was dirty, but where wasn’t these days? It was a picture-show of countries, a super montage of the golden years where every shot framed possibility, potential and more-to-come. My grandmother, sitting on the battered futon, tugged the string from her small apartment in Busan. My mother tugged back, gliding through the world, the string pulling across an open earth of opportunity.

I don’t know what my mother looked like at twenty-five, (*“I was too busy to take photos,” she insists, “But I still had nice skin.”*) but I know she was at home. She had souvenirs and cheesecake and knew how to pour coffee in a turbulent aeroplane going 550 miles per hour. Sitting on that battered futon, now too small for the both of them, my mother cut a slice of cheesecake from New York. My grandmother, in the kitchen, filled the room once again with the potent aroma of spices. My mother, who had been away for three years, went out to the balcony and closed the sliding door. The string pulled tightly through the door and squeezed itself between the iron gates.

My father at twenty-seven, (*“I had terrible skin,” he laughs, “That’s where you got it from.”*) had first seen my mother while crossing the street. Pushing through a sliding door, he had found her waiting at the traffic stop. Their eyes, between the crowds, clicked into place. From afar, another string was plucked from the universe, red and freshly woven. The light turned green. My mother began walking. My father, pushing himself from the thick crowd, met her halfway. In the flurry of the afternoon rush, my father, ten minutes late to work, breathless from running and holding two cups of coffee, said hello. My mother, poised, hair now long enough to tie into a bun, said hello. (*“She had a cute way of speaking,” he recalls, “Like four different accents at once.”*)

My father has a way of eating at dinner tables that's always rushed, a bit hurried. (*"It's because of your auntie," he huffs, "Always stealing my food."*) But this time, he could barely lift the chopsticks off the dinner table. The room, filled with seafood and spices, seemed unbearably quiet. My mother knew this about Australia: the weather was hot, the people were wild and my father had decided to live there. It was a better environment; she was told, especially for children. My grandmother knew but this: it was very far away. My grandmother asked when they were leaving. My mother told her next month. My father assured her she could visit. A stray fish bone, caught in my mother's throat, stopped all other conversation. (*"Dinner tables are not places for revelations," is a titbit of wisdom from my mother, "Wait until tea."*)

After my father had left, the two women sat on the futon and began to drink tea in silence. A spring breeze entered softly from the kitchen window, she shuffled her feet and watched the two women stand silently on opposite sides of the room. She danced, flitted, whispered in an attempt to comfort but it was no use. The neighbours had thrown away the wind chimes a long time ago. My mother tugged on the string, now coiled around her silver wedding ring. My grandmother, finishing a slice of cheesecake, tugged back.

After four years of being a flight attendant, my mother had seen fear in all its various forms. She had seen it in the shaking hands of the customers who held their plane tickets like death certificates. She had seen it in the women holding liquor bottles as they waited for take-off. She had seen the barf bags, the tightening of belts and the grovelling to God seconds before take-off. It was now, buckled in her seat, hands clasped around my father's that she was able to understand that fear. Looking out the window, she counted down the minutes in her head. She wondered if she looked like a fool to all those younger flight attendant girls who brought her drinks of water and bags of peanuts. She looked out the window again. It was a sunny day, the air humid and heavy. One of those days that when the plane took-off, for a few minutes, it would look like it could plunge into the sun. She had read somewhere once that passengers leaving for long trips to America used to bring balls of yarn on deck. As the ship left the pier, thousands of strings of yarn stretched across the water, held tight

by two hands until they slipped out of reach. (*"In one of my many history books," she laughs, "At least my back pain was worth something."*)

My grandmother tied her string with battered, world-weary hands. Hands that had steadily re-built a family after the war had cut it from her fingers. My mother had her own blisters, fingers that grasped and held onto a country that for seventeen years had both held and spat in her hands. Perhaps one day I'll be able to count similar blisters and callouses. I had hardly known my grandmother. But the red strings wrap around my fingers, unbreakable. (*"Enough questions, help me in the kitchen now," calls my mother, "We're making your grandma's favourite recipe."*)