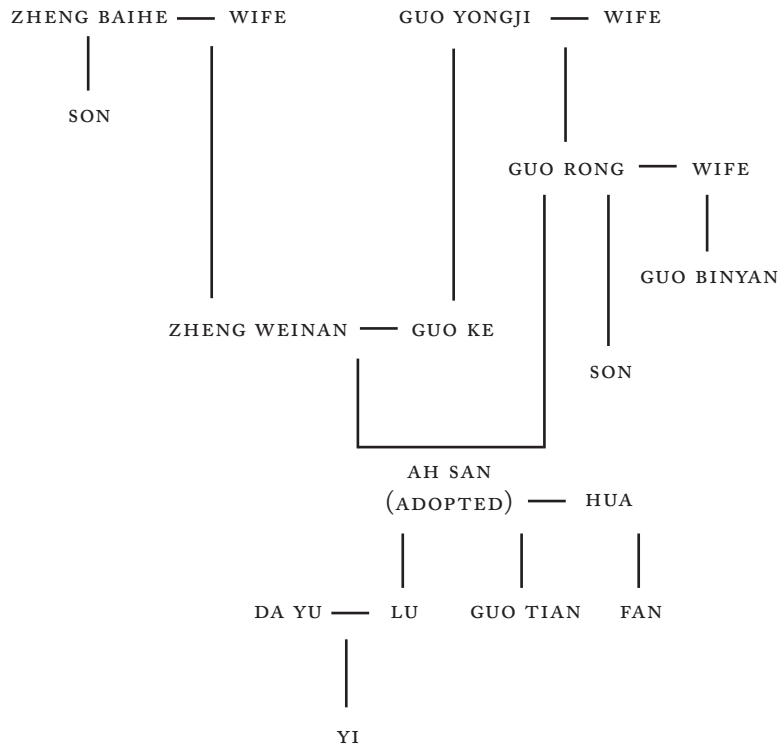


## FAMILY TREE



## CHAPTER ONE

FAN WALKS along the stone-slab street leading to her house in Guo Village. The long uneven slabs clucked underfoot with each accompanying step. Through narrow gaps between the slabs she sees water flowing gently below. The surface of the stone has been worn smooth under the weight of centuries of traffic. An ancient mud wall, mixed with pebbles and shells, stands beside the road.

Fan follows the road to the centre of the village then turns left and walks up a broad stone staircase that leads to her house.

The wooden door is ajar. She pushes it open, the rusty hinges echoing a sharp “kek-kek” sound.

As she steps onto the wooden threshold and is about to enter the house, she hears her grandma’s voice.

“Don’t stand on the threshold! It brings bad luck. You’ve always turned a deaf ear to me.”

Fan enters the house, walking past the wooden partition with its delicately carved flowers and birds and enters the corridor leading to the courtyard. A tall plant stands in each of the four corners of the courtyard. She looks up and sees the windows of the rooms upstairs are tightly shut.

The two-storey wooden house is in the style of southern China. The main door of the house opens to the south. The

sitting room facing the courtyard is separated by a wooden partition, behind which stands the kitchen. There are two bedrooms on either side of the sitting room, and three bedrooms and a study upstairs. A sparrow's nest is perched under the roof.

On rainy days water runs from the slanted rooftop to the drainage pipes, then travels down to the courtyard, where it flows into small stone ditches before leaving the house. Water from the sky makes a trip around the house, following the principles of *feng shui*. Water means wealth. This is a house with good *feng shui*.

She climbs the narrow wooden stairs to the left side of the courtyard and enters the study. The room is dark, thin shafts of sunlight seep through gaps in the window. Tiny particles of dust dance languidly in the thin beams of light. The house is so silent. Where is her grandma?

Even in the dim light, Fan can tell where every piece of furniture stands in the room: The bookshelf is against the wall on the right, and next to it is the cupboard that stores the fine old porcelain reserved for festive occasions. Fan feels a bit uneasy standing alone inside the dark study. No one is home. Maybe she should go downstairs.

"What's taking you so long? I need those porcelain plates now," Grandma is shouting from downstairs.

But where is she? Is she playing hide and seek with me? Fan wonders.

Suddenly, Fan wakes up in her apartment in Singapore.

In her dreams, Fan still lives in Guo Village. She used to believe the past would be neatly left behind when she emigrated from

China ten years ago, but she now knows she was wrong.

She has not returned home once in these past ten years. Her sister Lu often reminds her home is only a five-hour flight away.

Fan sits up and grabs her cell phone. What? Eight o'clock in the morning!

She gets dressed and rushes to the bus stop but finds it unusually empty. The familiar faces of the regular passengers are absent. Then it dawns on her: it is Saturday! She has been looking forward to the weekend to catch up on her sleep. But when it finally comes, she scrambles out of bed to go to work.

As she walks back towards her flat, her cell phone rings. It is Lu.

"Grandma passed away this morning. The funeral is on Monday. When can you come back?"

She should get a ticket to fly home now. But what about her trip to Barcelona next week? She has already paid for the air ticket and the travel dates cannot be changed. She's been planning the trip for months, looking forward to seeing Gaudi's famous architecture and meeting up with her good friend Sophia. As her mind lingers on the images of Gaudi's works, she starts to resent the fact that her grandma died this morning.

When grandma was alive, she complained about her miseries incessantly. Lu and Fan often avoided her in order to have even a minute of peace.

"Why do you only have bad things to say about other people? Why do you harbour so much bitterness?" Fan snapped at her one day. "You always complain about things that happened

before we were born. Why are you living in the past?”

“You’re in an alliance with your mother. She goads you into distancing yourself from me, the way she goaded your father. Your father, he used to be a son with filial piety. He used to care about me so much. He changed after he married your mother. I tell you, your mother is not a good woman.”

“I think your son is an unfeeling and unhappy man. He always scolds me and Lu. I don’t like him! What was so good about him?”

“And you always like to argue with me,” her grandma shot back.

“Why do you complain about your son to Lu and I every day? If you have a problem with him, you should talk to him yourself. Why are you quiet like a little docile sheep while he is around in the house?”

“You have no sympathy for me. The day will come when you will be an old woman like me. Until then, you will not understand me.”

Fan believes her grandma never liked her, that she loved only one person in her life—Ah San, Fan’s father. Ah San was her grandmother’s whole universe. Now Fan is convinced her grandma deliberately chose to die two days before Fan’s holiday. She just wants to annoy her one last time.

A thin woman with heavy groceries walks past Fan. Their eyes meet. The woman’s facial expression appears reproachful as if she has detected Fan’s thoughts.

Fan returns to her apartment, throws her handbag on the floor and sits down on the only chair in her tiny apartment. What should she do with the ticket to Barcelona? She looks across to a man in the opposite apartment block. He has been

sitting in front of his computer since three o’clock this morning. Fan saw him when she went to bed. Doesn’t he need to sleep? Is he a statue?

Fan is fighting the flu. Soiled tissues are strewn on the floor near her bed. Gently, she touches her nose. The skin is peeling and sore. She walks to the cupboard and manages to find half a clove of garlic. She slices the garlic, places a slice inside each ear, puts the third one into her mouth and begins to chew. Fan believes garlic is the best cure for the flu. She has no one to kiss on this lonely island anyway, who cares if her breath stinks.

The taste of garlic spreading through her mouth is so pungent she has to swallow quickly. Soon the garlic is burning in her empty stomach. She is in tears. She should have eaten something first.

She takes a deep breath and pulls open the refrigerator. A squashed lonesome bag of Sunshine bread is all that is on the shelf. It stares out sadly at her. Smiling a wry smile at the “Brighten Up Your Day” slogan on the bag, she grabs a piece and hurriedly takes a bite. The burning continues. She opens her mouth wide and takes more deep breaths.

Death is a relief for grandma, she thinks.

Her teary eyes wander through her apartment. Furniture is sparse, books, DVDs and music CDs pile up on the bedside tables. Photos of the Grand Canyon and Balinese children and film posters crowd the walls, her favourite actress Juliette Binoche looks pensive and resolute in front of a dark blue sea.

More tears come to her eyes. She does not know if the tears are brought on by the garlic or by her grandma’s death.

The humming sounds of the fridge amplify in the apartment.

Some clothes are hanging on the bamboo poles outside the windows of the opposite HDB block. The man across the block is still engrossed in his computer. Does he feel tired? Is he lonely?

Fan's eyes then fall on the potted plant by the window. She doesn't know the name of the plant. She bought it because she liked the broad fan-like leaves. After two months in her apartment, the plant has lost some of its lustre. Only the tallest and broadest leaves that catch a few hours of morning sunlight are still shining. When she was in love with Adrian, she was shining like that tall broad leaf. She sighs. One day a friend suggested she get a pet.

"I myself wish to become someone's pet," Fan answered wearily.

She doesn't know how long the plant will survive in her apartment.

She feels drowsy. Last night, she read Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* until three in the morning. The cool-headed narration, devoid of sentimentality, brought her to tears. She thought of the way the Chinese media had reacted when Gao won the Nobel Prize for Literature two years ago in the New Millennium.

"Nobel Prize for Literature Seriously Hurt Chinese People's Feelings," read the headline in the *People's Daily*, the official mouthpiece of the Chinese government. "The granting of this award to Gao," the paper continued, "was a politically motivated act aimed at interfering in China's domestic affairs."

Fan found the accusation absurd. The paper also claimed Chinese people were strongly opposed to Guo receiving the award. She was furious to see such comments being made in the name of 1.2 billion Chinese. The tone of the commentary sounds eerily familiar to her. She cannot wait to finish Gao's book. Why

do we have to waste a third of our lives sleeping while there are so many beautiful treasure troves in life to explore?

Too much precious time has already been wasted before she came to Singapore. She has to make it up. Now her life is divided into two parts—work and after work. She is an administrator for a consultancy firm whose main clients are Chinese officials. They come from China to learn advanced management skills or public administration. The courses are ridiculously overpriced, but the demand for them is surprisingly strong. She is grateful for the job, which makes her financially independent.

Work occupies most of her time, and so she squeezes every minute she can find into doing the things she loves. She reads ferociously, on buses and trains and at the airport while waiting to receive clients. On the nights she needs to work overtime, she cuts short her sleep in order to read when she gets home. On weekends she likes to watch films. Last year she started learning Italian. There are many other things she wants to do. She is having a race with time. Lately, she has been frightened by the amount of hair lying on her pillow every morning.

"Your blood test results show nothing is wrong. You just need to slow down and take things easy. Don't stretch yourself too thin," the doctor advised.

"You need to slow down and relax. You shouldn't do things at the expense of your health," Adrian used to say.

But life is unpredictable and she could die tomorrow. If she dies tomorrow, she has to do the things she wants to do now in order to cut down the number of regrets she may have on her deathbed.

Adrian did not agree with her.

“No matter what you do in your lifetime, the moment you leave this world, everything is gone. Life will be one big void, so why live life strenuously?”

The garlic is starting to work in her body. Images of garlic molecules battling the flu virus flash through her mind. She blows her nose loudly then tosses the tissue into the bin.

Perhaps she should buy an air ticket back. She draws the window curtain, then falls asleep the moment her head touches the pillow.