

Chapter 5

The Student

01:20.21

With every glance at my watch time seems to slow down. I tell myself this is because I am bored, frustrated and cold. I remember from a textbook on quantum physics that time is radically variable but flows evenly as long as we remain relatively still. In my mind, however, it's the stillness that's the problem; that sense of being fixed in one spot forever.

Finally, after over an hour of digging, my grandmother's coffin is ready to be raised. My father and my two uncles heave it out and place it before the small crowd of family and friends that has gathered for my grandmother's reburial. Father gently prises open the lid of the teak veneer coffin, which he had crafted himself. I inch forward and stare at the first corpse I have ever seen. My grandmother's skeleton is black and almost comically small. A layer of grit covers the bottom of the coffin – all that's left of her flesh and organs. Her burial shroud and clothes are caked with mud but largely intact. After removing the shroud, my father turns to my grandmother's gloves. The long violet-coloured gloves that once shielded her arms from the summer rays and winter chills are now washed-out shades of pink. I am surprised at how well they have retained their elasticity as father stretches them before turning them inside-out so that

grandmother's wrist bones and knuckles tumble out like misshapen marbles. I thought that this part of the ceremony would be gruesome and sickening. Instead, I am unmoved.

Father cradles the blackened skull in his wide hands, carefully scooping out the grime from the eye sockets with his fingers. As he removes the dirt and clumps of wispy hair, a fracture opens up along the forehead and the skull suddenly breaks into two. Some of the onlookers gasp, sensing this is a horrible omen. But Father is unfazed. He places the piece of cranium on the ground and continues using his thumbs and fingers to brush the soil from each cavity and crevice of the skull. Everyone around me is reassured by the steadiness of his gaze and the sureness of his gestures. Some of them comment that my grandmother and those looking on from the next world in judgement would also approve.

The swaying fluorescent bulb hanging over my father cuts out and we are engulfed by night. Again there are gasps. Only one person has a torch. An outbreak of cigarette lighters and mobile phones raised in the air make it seem as if we are in an enchanted forest surrounded by glowing nymphs.

I take the opportunity to close my eyes. I listen to the wind battering the tarpaulin sheets on the makeshift A-frame tent sheltering my father and the gravesite. People behind me use the anonymity of darkness to grumble about the bitter cold and unholy hour. Lorries rumble away from one of the nearby concrete quarries. Seconds later, someone restores the clip connecting the bulb to a truck battery. I open my eyes to see my father running his hands along the length of a blackened thigh bone, as if nothing has happened.

Latecomers appear, navigating their way across the rice fields and between headstones. Many have tied white sashes over their foreheads to show that they are still in mourning. The clean white bands glow on top of vibrant scarves wrapped around their necks and faces. I suspect that anyone who looked on us without knowing our sombre purpose would burst out laughing. This suspicion is heightened when the multicoloured mummies are joined by figures that glide in wearing motorbike helmets and plastic ponchos to protect them from the blasting wind. They look like astronauts leaving for another planet, or maybe aliens visiting this one.

I am struck by the banality of comments accompanying this sacred event.

'Is that a leg or an arm bone?'

'Surely that's too small and blunt to be a rib?'

'Are my hips anything like that?'

But soon enough I find myself emulating those around me, trying to label the bones as they emerge. What else is there to do?



A turtle emerges from the dark and starts to dawdle across the dirt mounds of the gravesite. Again, there's inane speculation about what this all means. Is it warning us or welcoming us? Has anyone seen this particular turtle before? Are they nocturnal? Why is it tottering about here? I suspect it was simply making its way from pond to pond and was attracted to the light. The turtle retracts into its shell as my uncle picks it up and moves it on its way.

Oblivious, my father scours the bottom of the coffin, salvaging everything down to the minute toe bones and teeth, which he cups in his hands as if they are precious gems. I have long admired his strong and unfaltering carpenter hands, the first ever laid upon me.

I think back to when I was six or so and was playing in the river with my friends. I had wandered into deep, fast-flowing water and plummeted so quickly that I had no chance to scream out for help. My arms flailed as I sank. When I made contact with the riverbed I tried to leap up for air, but the sand gave way. As the sunlight receded and I lost all sense of where I was and what to do, I felt my father's hands around my arms, hauling me up to the surface and throwing me over his shoulder before marching back to the shore.

A few years ago when the river flooded I recalled this event to my father, who had no recollection of it. When I said how shocked I was that he had forgotten he replied, 'How can you expect a father to remember every time that he saves his child's life? Between you learning how to crawl and getting your motorbike licence there were hundreds of times when I had to step in to save you from catastrophe. There's nothing unusual about that. Your sister has needed much more rescuing than you. Your mother and I are still trying to save her from drowning in one way or another. Parenting is about giving, saving, and making a life for your children. You probably don't know what I'm talking about. But you'll find out someday, when you have kids.'

By 02:42:42 all the bones are arranged on a plastic sheet. The conspicuous pieces of dirt and putrefied flesh have been brushed off so that the ritual washing can begin. At this point I notice a pause in my father's efforts. No one else registers this because they are focused on the skeleton, not close enough to see, or they don't know him as well as I do. His deep, long breath followed by a slight tremble tells me he is a little nauseous, reluctant to continue.

My father began charging himself with rice wine at the banquet before the ceremony, and had drunk steadily throughout the evening. He is under great pressure to get everything right, convinced that a single mistake could have drastic consequences for his mother's soul. And then there is the propriety of thoughts and sentiments that has to be maintained because, as far as he is concerned, his mother's soul can see straight into his. Father recently reminded me that the umbilical cord connecting him to his mother was buried in that same field, as was the cord that connected me to my mother. This symbolised the enduring bond between our people and the countryside. I wanted to tell him that if he really wanted to do something useful with our umbilical cords, then he shouldn't have allowed them to be eaten by worms and bacteria. I wanted to explain to my father what I learnt in biology class, about how umbilical cord blood is a rich source of stem cells that can be used to treat diseases, repair injuries, improve the immune system. Instead, I cast my eyes to the ground and nodded. 'Yes Father, I know.'

Throughout the ceremony everyone solemnly pays their respects to my grandmother. Many recount the hardship she endured raising three boys on her own. My grandfather was killed somewhere in the Central Highlands during the American War, with no one to wash and honour his bones. She had picked and sold betel nuts for a pittance, laboured in the rice fields, risked her life to reach black markets and, in the 1980s, took a job in a plastics factory when she should have been preparing to retire. Somehow, she always managed to come home in the evening with something for her family to eat, even if it was their only meal that day.

The congregation is convinced that whatever is conveyed to my grandmother now, with her bones laid out before us, is as important as any words they had uttered to her when she was still alive. Twice I have heard people solemnly recite the proverb, 'Final impressions upon the deceased must be righteous and proper, for they are everlasting.' But surely it is far better to make an impression on people when they are still alive. It is absurd that I have to remind myself of this. Gratitude, resentment, esteem, anguish, adoration and all other sentiments mean nothing to the deceased.

It also seems ridiculous to me that so many people are guided in their beliefs by folktales and proverbs. No one knows the author of these proverbs and even if they once offered some insight into the human condition, this doesn't mean they have any relationship to the present. It's as if a few lyrical lines, repeated often enough, transform into a law of nature. Whatever happened to scientific rigour, double-blind trials, healthy scepticism? It occurs to me that a million proverbs do not amount to an ounce of reliable knowledge.

02:56.52

The wind dies down just as my father begins to wash the bones. He appears focused and tranquil, even though I know he's in the middle of a cyclone of sensations and memories.

I have seen that face many times. His eyes are softly creased, his jaws are moving gently back and forth as he purifies and revives his mother's remains. This is his workshop face, the face with which he planes doorframes and girders, chisels rooftop decorations and varnishes coffee tables. It is the face that dovetails with the words of advice he has often tried to pass on to me. 'You can't perfect the past or dictate the future. So just devote yourself to the task in front of you. If you can focus on what is at hand, then the shelves, table, house or whatever it is you're building will come together as planned.'

I am not a capable or enthusiastic carpenter. My hands are not like my father's. And although he has never urged me to follow in his footsteps, I sense that he always wanted me to appreciate what he did for a living – our living – if not show some aptitude for woodwork. Now, as I watch my father undertaking this sacred task, I begin to grasp a small part of the skill, patience and exactitude it requires.

His cleaning moves from the large bones to small ones, starting with the femur bones, then the hips, ribs and vertebrae, followed by all the tiny pieces that must be sifted in plastic colanders. Last, he turns to the broken skull. There are no sponges or implements. Cloths are used, but only delicately to pat dry the remains; everything else is done with his bare hands.

The first washing takes place in spring water scented with pomelo leaves. The water was ordered by the crate and came out of dark green glass bottles with pictures of snow-capped mountains on them, a brand I haven't seen before, but can identify as lavish. From this my grandmother's soul is prepared for revival. A second, final rinsing takes place in a receptacle brimming with homemade rice wine. From this solvent, rich with all the sustenance and joy of my village surrounds, it is thought that my grandmother is sent into the beyond with the assurance that she will never be left wanting.

As the washing draws to an end, my mother prepares the small metal casket that will permanently house the bones. The burnished black casket is adorned with silver dragons symbolising the ascension of the spirit. My mother lines it with red cellophane and votive offerings of faux gold taels and oversized US dollars – more money than my grandmother had ever possessed in her life. On top of these flashy offerings, Mother sprinkles a handful of plain cooked rice from the banquet the night before. She grows frustrated as she tries to remove the grains sticking to her woollen gloves. My mother has several layers of clothing on, two scarves and a face mask, in stark contrast to my barefoot father, whose sleeves and pants are rolled up as if he had just discovered treasure on a tropical island.

Hardly a word passes between my parents throughout this part of the ceremony. Each of them knows what is to be done. Their silence masks a great discord.

‘Talk some sense into your father!’ was how mother had begun a phone call to me just over a month ago. ‘He still insists on doing the exhumation himself.’

‘Well, I agree he shouldn’t do it, but I don’t see why anyone should either’, I said to her. ‘But there’s no use trying to convince him. He’s not going to change his mind.’

‘You know the Daos up the road? They just reburied their grandfather a few nights ago. I asked them how much it cost to hire professionals, less than 2 million dong. I would pay 10 million. But your father won’t listen.’

She went on praising the benefits of hiring specialists. They’d be proper and thorough, and they would do it quickly. Most importantly, it was the safest option. Mother was frightened that the soul caller had miscalculated the date for the ceremony and they would disinter my grandmother’s body only to discover that it hadn’t fully decomposed. She had heard that this commonly occurred, largely because people were not as skinny as they used to be and soul callers not as skilled. Father would then have to strip away all of the flesh with his hands and a knife which was, in her view, repulsive and risky. Stories abounded of disease after such ceremonies.

But my mother’s major concern was supernatural in origin. There was a very thin line in her mind between commemorating and desecrating the dead, a line that mortals could never accurately gauge. An undetected morsel of rotting flesh or slight ill-positioning of the bones was enough to offend greatly those from the other world, and thereby attract their wrath. She had read newspaper articles about a family who had captured and eaten a snake that was resting on their ancestor’s grave. The family hadn’t realised that the snake embodied the spirit of their forebear who was informing them it was not time to move on. The agony inflicted upon the deceased was duly transmitted to the living family members who were, in the following months and years, dragged into the underworld in

freakish ways. Above all, Mother wanted to hire the team of professionals as insurance; they would assume liability for committing a grievous crime against my grandmother.

I could tell from my mother's voice that she was growing more and more distressed, and so agreed to speak to my father.

'I will do it the way my father and his father did it, not the way that some people prefer to do it today.'

I had never heard my father come so close to yelling.

'How can we pay *others* to carry out *our* duties? Your grandmother gave up everything for me, for us. She never shirked a thing in her life. And now you're telling me that I should not do this for her. It is not like your grandparents do not have any sons. There are three of us, all able-bodied and devoted. If I do not do it, one of your uncles will. They would never hire "professionals", as your mother likes to call them, as if they are doctors with degrees. Your mother acts like your grandmother was infected with cholera and has been festering in the grave. She died of old age, and even then it took three strokes. So what do we have to fear, except disgracing ourselves and her memory? Do you understand what I am saying, Son?'

'Yes, Father. Mother and I are only worried about you. We love and respect Grandmother too but ...'

'We didn't abandon her to the care of others when she was old and infirm. We didn't dishonour her then, in her final years, and we will not dishonour her now. So don't ask me to bring in strangers with rubber gloves and boots to tramp all over our ancestors and pretend it is the best thing for everyone. Only I can do this. I alone.'

03:16.13

I am deeply doubtful, not so much about whether to side with my mother or father about who should be doing the reburial, but whether it should be done at all.

Specks of rain appear on my glasses and gusts of wind are mounting again. Whereas before my lips were dry and chafed, now they're so numb that I can barely feel the mucus running from my nose down over my lip and into my

mouth. I rue forgetting my gloves. The cold has trapped my hands in my pockets, barring me from wiping my chin. I shuffle my feet and run on the spot to get warm, but this draws my father's attention. He stares at me menacingly before shifting the bones to the driest spot under the tarpaulin sheets.

A family friend with a penchant for the obvious remarks that reburials would be much easier during the daytime. But everyone knows that that is not an option. The world of the dead is negative, nocturnal – not the positive light-filled world of the living. For this reason, the fire lit before the ceremony is kept small and at a distance from the gravesite. Here the ephemeral needs of the living make way for the demands of the deceased.

'But what does this negative world nonsense really mean?' I ask myself. 'All this fuss over auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, the finicky details of divination and paying respects to the dead. Does any of it matter? If by some off chance the spirits of the dead prefer the night, what's wrong with exhuming them at seven or eight o'clock, right after dinner? What's sacrosanct about the smallest hours of the morning and the coldest months of the year?'

Of course it is fruitless to ask. I know the answer already. It's the catchcry of people across the countryside, village elders in particular: 'Because ancestors are there to be worshipped. Because filial piety is the first and most fundamental virtue. Because it has always been this way.'

I vaguely recall a folktale about the earnest peasant Dong Tu, who was so poor that together he and his father owned only one garment, a loincloth that was worn by whoever needed to go to the market. When Dong Tu's father became very ill he informed his son that as much as he dreaded the thought of dying, at least Dong Tu would no longer have to face the indignity of scurrying around unclothed. But when the time came to bury his father, such was the young man's reverence that he could not bear the thought of allowing the old man to leave this world as naked as the day he had entered it. And so Dong Tu dressed his deceased father in the loincloth and resigned himself to nudity and shame. Instead of going to the market to sell his wares he stood in the river and fished, trading his catch with boats that went by, never emerging from the water until the end of the day when no one could see him.

Even as a young boy, I was convinced that Dong Tu was more deserving of ridicule than praise. But in the story, if I remember it correctly, he is royally rewarded for his sacrifice, receiving the hand in marriage of a beautiful princess along with an enchanted staff, hat and bowl, all of which help him to establish a magisterial kingdom.

I think back two decades to when I watched my grandmother as she piled plates of food onto our ancestral altar in preparation for my grandfather's death anniversary: dishes of spring rolls; steaming hot sticky rice; crab-mince soup; lotus shoot and jelly fish salad; piles of biscuits; and a sumptuous array of carefully arranged fruit. As a young boy I was drawn to a glistening bunch of plump, purple grapes.

'Grandma, is this all for Grandpa? How can he eat so much in one go?'

'It's all for him, my darling. Not just for now, but for the entire year. Don't worry though, once we have made our offering and he has had his fill there will be plenty left over for us. He was a generous, not gluttonous man.'

'But everything will be cold by then. And sticky rice is better hot.'

As my grandmother strained to remove the plastic from a packet of incense sticks, I locked my index finger and thumb around a fat grape. When grandmother finally looked up I mischievously asked her, 'What if I had just one of these now, Grandma? What would *he* do?'

My goading provoked a soft, crinkled grin from my grandmother.

'You may not know it now, my darling, but life can be hard, sometimes very hard. And during these times we all need to believe in something or someone. Otherwise we would simply give up. Me, I believe in my mother and father and my grandmother and grandfather. I am grateful to them for all the sacrifices they made and the wisdom they have imparted to us. Most of all, I worship your grandfather. Although he was taken away long before you were born, I have faith that he is still looking over us. I know he cares for me and for our family, and especially for you.'

'If he cares for me then he won't mind me eating a grape or two. He would be happy to give me a whole bunch!'

'We don't pay our respects to our ancestors so that we can get something from them, child. At least I don't. Of course there have been occasions when I wished that your grandfather could come back and make all of my troubles go away and riches would rain from the sky. But that's not what I have ever truly asked for. As it happens, I don't really ask your grandfather for anything. In the short time that we were together, he gave me more than enough love for a hundred lifetimes.'

'Why do you go to all this trouble if you don't get anything?'

‘When I pay tribute to him I feel less lonely. I get a sense of who I am and where I belong. And it’s from that sense of being and belonging that I find the strength to get through my days.’

Hearing this, I loosened my grip on the luscious fruit, but did not let it go entirely.

‘So let me tell you this, my precious grandson. Your grandfather deserves some respect and restraint. He is worth believing in. He is worth letting your sticky rice go cold. And to be honest, I’m not sure what he would do if you plucked that grape and ate it. But I know what I’ll do if you don’t get your paw off it this instant. I’ll give you a smack on the bottom that you won’t forget for a very long time.’

Reflecting upon that moment with Grandma, I am reminded of how faithful and resilient she was. She must have had chances to remarry. From the few pictures I’ve seen and stories I’ve heard, she was very beautiful and much admired. However, I do wonder whether staying true to my grandfather was worth the loneliness and hardship. And I question the great pressure placed on widows to remain loyal to their deceased husbands. I suppose Grandma made a reasonable case for ancestor worship. And if one is going to thank any spirit, then one’s genetic and material forebears constitute a logical choice.

But this is the best of bad arguments. I am not a child anymore who is easily frightened and persuaded. I have lived in the city and can support myself. My life and my destiny are self-made. I have come across other faiths with their own compelling logics and convictions. Most importantly, I know the value of science over superstition, not only in terms of accuracy, but also in openness, fairness and efficiency; my education in civil engineering and urban planning provides me with all the confidence and identity that I need.

I’m not sure how much the ceremony has cost my parents, but my cousin Truong confided, ‘Good thing Aunt Lien sent us all that money. Otherwise your parents would be in serious debt.’

My father’s cousin Lien owns a chain of nail salons in the US and comes back to Vietnam every couple of years. I haven’t spoken to her or her husband since I was a boy, in large part because her visits have turned into bidding wars in which relatives and friends seek cash handouts or loans for small business ventures, school fees and home renovations. She also funded the reconstruction

and upgrade of my father's family communal house and altar after it was damaged in a storm. And while everyone shows their gratitude to Aunt Lien for 'remembering her roots', I suspect she could never give them enough money.

I've overheard a few of my older relatives taking credit for my Aunt's success. 'It's only because we have honoured our ancestral spirits and tended to their graves that she has had such good fortune and success. If it wasn't for us, she wouldn't have gotten anywhere. She wouldn't have her own house to live in, let alone four of them to rent out. She wouldn't have ever made it out of the country in that rickety little fishing boat.'

My parents have never sought anything from Aunt Lien and I don't think they asked her to help pay for the reburial ceremony. They didn't have to. She would have found out that the ceremony was taking place and known exactly what was expected.

As father continues to clean and organise the bones, I occupy myself by tallying up all the things my parents and aunt have had to pay for. The money they saved by not hiring grave removalists was significant, but they still had to pay the soul caller to determine the day and time of the exhumation. The truck battery and transformer that supplied them with light look brand-new. Copious amounts of water and rice wine have been consumed by both the living and the dead. The major line item is catering. Mother and the women of the village undertook some of the preparations and cooking, and will clean up, but much food has had to be brought in, tables and chairs have been hired for the pre-ceremony dinner and the morning banquet, which looks like it will rival a wedding reception.

With these calculations done, I evaluate the effect of ancestor worship on my village and Vietnam; how throughout the country ever more land is being taken up by cemeteries. The problem is made worse by the opulent tombs intended to show off the prosperity of the occupants' family. Often there is jockeying over favourable *feng shui* locations overlooking bodies of water, but where the soil is not so moist that it would make it uncomfortable for the ancestors. Fortunately, the cemeteries around my village are modest, although a handful of 3-metre-high marble headstones have been erected. The local authorities decided to thwart grave-grabbing and conspicuous displays of wealth by standardising the plot size and recommending that people choose from a small selection of gravestones. I've heard some villagers have grumbled that this is an act of impiety against their ancestral spirits and an infringement of their human rights.

I know from my urban planning studies that by far the most heated confrontations between the living and the dead occur when new housing developments and roads demand that cemeteries be relocated, moves that are accompanied by public uproar and unrelenting media attention. And while I feel for the families

who are forced to disinter their relatives, I can't think of a viable alternative for a country growing in population and shrinking in arable land. How can we allow the deceased to encroach upon those of us still above ground? Otherwise, it will be like the zombie films I've seen, except that the dead wouldn't even have to leave their graves to reap havoc on the living. I make a mental note to choose cremation when my time approaches.

'Don't forget to factor in the opportunity costs', is the lesson that has stuck with me from high school economics. 'Remember', my teacher liked to say in English, 'time is money.' At first I didn't think much of this saying because I knew many people in my village who were largely idle and had a great deal of time on their hands but no money to show for it. But through the notion of opportunity cost I realised that it is not so much the amount of time that matters but what people do with it. And as a result I've come to believe that far too much time-as-money is wasted in Vietnam on worshipping the dead. I consider the impact of General Vo Nguyen Giap's death on national productivity. Hundreds of thousands of people descended upon his house and millions more took part in mourning ceremonies across the country, some of them weeping as if he were a close relative. Then there was the two-day-long national funeral that must have brought government to a standstill. General Giap was a great leader and patriot, but this suggests to me that he would not have wanted his death to damage the country. We should have devoted more to celebrating him while he was alive and far less to commemorating his death.

As I apply this thinking to my grandmother's reburial I grow increasingly frustrated at how the conveniences of the spirit and soul are inconvenient to the mind and body. None of us huddled around the gravesite tonight would get any work done the next day, and I suspect most of us will need another day or more to recover. I can feel the harbingers of illness coming on: phlegm is building up in my throat and chest; there is an insistent weariness in my limbs; my head is light and dizzy. Hopefully it's just a cold. If by chance I can get a seat on the bus back to the city, then I will try to rest so that I can return to work the next day.

The soul caller obviously didn't take my work into account when he chose a time for the reburial. He should have known I'm in the middle of an internship with an international civil engineering company and that I've been working long hours in the hope of turning this opportunity into a prestigious career. Or perhaps he did know. Perhaps he knew how important it would be for me to impress all my bosses in these last few weeks so that I stand out from the other interns. Perhaps the soul caller was determined to make this ceremony as difficult and costly as possible. And maybe that's exactly what my grandmother and all the spirits of the dead desire – to impose themselves in the most impractical way on the living. But I shouldn't unduly credit the soul caller with this foresight, nor discredit my grandmother's memory. I refuse to tie myself up in this lie.

It was necessary, however, for me to lie to my German supervisor as to the real reason why I needed a day off to return to the village. 'It's for my cousin's engagement ceremony ... a really close cousin, like a brother.'

'Do Vietnamese often have engagement parties in the middle of the week?' my supervisor asked, more out of curiosity than suspicion.

'I'm not sure. It's just a lucky day, I suppose.'

03:21₂₃

What frustrates me most about the reburial ceremony is how much fuzzy mysticism is dressed up as fact and law.

Protruding from my father's shirt pocket is a piece of paper upon which the soul caller set out precisely when and how each part of the ceremony was to be performed. This program has to be followed exactly, but by whose clock and measure I'm not sure. A different soul caller would no doubt provide totally different instructions. Yet such is my father's faith in this mysticism that he committed the program to memory, reviewed it just prior to the exhumation, and keeps the paper close to his chest in case he forgets something. It is as if he is following a recipe of delicate ingredients and complex techniques, and one mistake will ruin the entire meal.

From speaking to my friends, I know there is a wide variety of bone-washing practices. Some people insist that relatives of the deceased must be crying as the coffin is opened so that the ancestor knows she or he is still missed. Others prohibit crying outright as a fearful affront. The washing can use any number of medicinal concoctions, often wine, and sometimes just water.

As my grandmother's bones emerge from their wash, relatives and friends cluck and coo as if they are greeting a newborn baby. 'Oooh, the bones are so beautiful and youthful looking!' Minutes later they argue over whether black, gold or white bones are most auspicious and appealing.

When I told my friend Binh, who is of the Tay minority, that I was attending a reburial, he said that compared to him I was getting off lightly. When Binh's grandfather passed away they had to refrain from haircuts and sleep on the ground for 40 days. 'It would have been even worse if I had a girlfriend because

we wouldn't be able to fuck for 100 days after the mourning period! Anything that might be pleasurable was banned. Going to the dentist or sitting exams was totally fine.'

I wish superstition was confined to minorities, old people and the countryside. But I have seen too many fellow students flock to temples to pray for good marks before examinations. And a recent experience with one of my flatmates, Nga, also suggests that it is on the rise.

'Here, put this garlic in your bag and keep a clove of it in your pocket at all times', commanded Nga as she thrust a bag of bulbs at my chest.

'And remember, you're not setting a foot back in this place until you perform this ritual, properly. No short cuts!' On the pavement in front of our building Nga showed me what I had to do on my return. Nga struck a match and lit the end of some scrunched up sheets of newspaper. She then leant forward and passed the flaming torch from hand-to-hand around her knees twice, before throwing it on the ground and hopping over it. This would ensure that malevolent souls and nasty omens didn't follow me back from the cemetery. I hastily kicked the smouldering paper into the gutter and stamped it out.

'Okay, okay, I'll do whatever you say. But for your sake, not mine.'

I figured that this would be less trouble than facing Nga's wrath. Yet I remained uneasy, not so much at the idea of carrying out this contrived ritual on a bustling street, but rather at my sense that the vast majority of passers-by would know exactly what I was doing and whole-heartedly approve.

'Answer one thing for me, Nga. You've studied chemistry and biology. You're going to be a nurse next year. How can you know all about germs, vaccines, sickness and surgery – how can you know why people live and die – and believe in this?'

'There are lots of things that nurses and doctors can't explain', she said with an index finger raised. 'Science and medicine can't prescribe anything to improve our essence and soul; they probably never will. So I'm not taking any risks when it comes to the eternal afterlife. And neither should you if you know what's good for you. But look, I don't care what you think, as long as you hold on to that garlic and do as I say.'



While I can live with Nga's lack of concern with reconciling science and spirituality, I find it much harder to suffer my Uncle Candy's sermonising. Candy acquired his nickname because of a long-running lust for sweets. He's not really my uncle and sometimes I wonder how he and my father have remained close friends since childhood, given their dispositions are vastly different and Candy has almost no personal qualities or achievements to speak of. He has never married and has barely been to school, which is more Candy's fault than anyone else's. I have never known him to be employed or to seek a proper job. He has no credible trade or skill and stays with any relative or friend who will take him.

Uncle Candy has hardly ever left the village and has no desire to do so. One of his many mottos is 'My village is good enough for me', which is to say that those who leave are snobs and sellouts. There are many people in my village who think this way, but what makes Candy intolerable is how staunchly he voices his views.

I remember a young Japanese anthropologist coming to our village once to study the impact of urbanisation. Candy followed the man and his translator incessantly, presenting himself as the local historian and expert in everything from ceramics to ethnic minorities. Without any research or evidence, he asserted that the region had played a pivotal but unacknowledged role in Vietnam's ancient history. Just before the anthropologist departed, Candy made an effort to pull the young man's penis in the avuncular sort of way that he did to me when I was a young boy. This custom is thankfully waning in the countryside, but not in Uncle Candy's mind. I imagine that the young scholar returned to Japan and published articles about the buffoonery and barbarism of my village. I can only hope he gave the village a different name.

With everyone busy preparing for the reburial ceremony, my mother sent Candy to pick me up from the bus station. I would have preferred to hire a motorbike taxi, but could not refuse Uncle Candy, who scurried up to me as I stepped out of the bus.

'Good to see you, boy! It's been too long since you've been back.' As usual he reeked of rice wine and tobacco and spluttered his words without removing the cigarette from his near-toothless mouth. Candy was wearing a war veteran's pith helmet and rubber tyre sandals despite never having been in the army.

'I see you're still as soft and pale as silken tofu. Those glasses make you look like a pansy too, but that's what you get for staring at the books and the computers all day.'

'Greetings, Uncle Candy. It's good to see you. It's been a long time. I hope it hasn't been too much trouble for you to pick me up.'

The thing about me and Candy is that although I have little respect for and nothing in common with him, I am fond of him. And I think that he has always cared for me as his nephew. I haven't forgotten how he secretly used to share lollies with me because my parents thought such indulgences would make me unruly. But it wasn't long, primary school perhaps, before I realised that Uncle Candy was not as wise and accomplished as he professed to be. I quickly became convinced that I was smarter and better than him at most things. My determination from a young age to leave the village and attend university made it even more difficult for us to connect. And now it is clear to me that Candy manages his insecurities about going nowhere and doing nothing by mocking people like me who want to make something of themselves. As infuriating as he is, I know that Uncle Candy otherwise means well and I have come to feel more than a little sorry for him.

'This is your first reburial, isn't it, boy? You know, this is my fourth this season.'

As we weave around lorries on his wheezing old motorbike, Uncle Candy lectured me non-stop, often looking back to make sure I was listening and then thumping me on the thigh with an instructive fist.

'I'll tell you something about reburials and ancestor worship that few people dare to say. All that stuff about paying respects to our loved ones is utter bullshit! I've spoken to people in the know, fellows who've looked into this sort of thing long and deep, all the way back to China and Taiwan. And they tell me it's not about worshipping the dead at all. You know what it's about? It's about protecting *us* from *them*.'

Uncle Candy's phone rang. 'Fuck. That's probably them trying to silence me.' He reached into his trouser pocket and switched it off.

'Listen to me, boy. Why do you think all the bones have to be stripped of flesh? It's because meat and muscle is the stuff of our world. We're saying to them, "Please, please relinquish everything from this world – your money, authority, fame – and in return we'll help purify and push you across that horizon that never ends." Why do you think we give 'em all that fake gold, cars and credit cards? Everyone likes to think it's because we love them so much and want them to be warm and happy? Fuckin' bullshit! We burn all that fake crap so they don't take the real stuff from us! People are nasty and envious and when they're dead they're even worse. The dead resent us. They resent that we're living better now than they ever did. Above all they resent that we're breathing fresh air while they're choking on dirt.'

'Yes, Uncle Candy.'

'I don't want to scare you or anything. But you're old enough to know what it's all about: life, death and all that shit. I know this is hard for you to grasp. You haven't been to a reburial before. All you know about is computers. But listen to me carefully. Trust me on this. One hundred per cent. You boy, are a prime target. They want nothing more than to take your youth, talent and future. Are you listening, boy?!'

'Yes, of course I am, Uncle.'

'And believe me when I tell you this ain't gonna be a good night for anyone, living or dead. I don't like the scent in the air. Can you smell it? This morning as I left the house the first person I came across was a woman, she had a face like a monkey's arse, and then it was lady after lady until lunchtime, all of 'em arse-ugly. That's a bad omen. No doubt about it. I'll be there tonight, of course, to support you and your father. But there'll be a sizeable space between me and your ol' Gran.'

True to his word, I can see Uncle Candy standing at the back of the small crowd wearing two face masks for added protection from the cold and the malevolent spirits. With his thick poncho and pith helmet, he's better prepared than most when the specks of rain turn into splotches.

Silently I curse myself for not challenging Uncle Candy outright. My grandmother was beautiful, caring and kind when she was alive. Why would her spirit be otherwise? Why should someone who sacrificed much when she was living want to do others harm once she was gone? The purpose of the affair was apparently to defame, not remember.

I am all for commemorating people, especially my Gran, I think to myself in the icy rain. But a small gathering of people who truly knew and cared about her – isn't that enough? We could pay our respects by reflecting upon the ways she affected us and everything we had learnt from her. We could look at pictures or watch videos – in the comfort of a living room – that would revive more faithful memories than anything that could be conjured up through hours of bone washing. The costs to her descendants of the commemoration – actual and opportunity – would be minimal, and there might even be a few benefits of getting together and remembering her life now gone. Wouldn't she have appreciated this?



03:58.53

There is widespread agreement that my grandmother's spirit is pleased by the arrangement of her bones – so pleased that she has commanded the wind to die down and the rain to stop.

Gran has been cleansed – 'given a new shirt', as the saying goes – rebuilt and ready for her next journey. Her skeleton is now tightly packed in her final casket, which is about the length of my arm and two handspans wide. The leg bones are tucked under the hips and the ribs are laid out over the spine and upper arms. Her skull has been pieced together and sits on the top with the mouth closed. I can't help but be impressed by the completion of this intricate puzzle.

Briefly, before the casket is closed for good, my mother summons my younger sister to see our Gran one last time.

I have not had the chance to speak to Linh since returning to the village. As my sister makes her way past the mourners, I notice that her sandals elevate her to my line of vision. I can see her long lashes and glittery pink-and-purple nail polish under the dim fluorescent light. She is wearing a body-hugging cardigan that barely buttons up that my mother had threatened to throw out.

'You look like you're heading out to a karaoke club in the city rather than sending off Gran', I tell her.

Linh's pouty bottom lip suggests she is in no mood to be lectured. I ruffle her cola-coloured hair, 'It's good to see you, *em*.'

Linh and her entourage arrived late, a little after 02:00. They had been sipping green tea and energy drinks at a café in town before playing cards and losing track of time. Linh commonly stays up until the early hours of the morning, so if the exhumation is testing for her it is not because of the timing.

She and her gang kept their distance from the gravesite, their mood seeming to sway between mild curiosity and repulsion. After about half an hour they could no longer tolerate the wintry gales and the tedium and retreated to a nearby gravesite surrounded by a low white wall. There they rolled themselves up in rattan mats, using a wool blanket for the innermost layer. With the wall as a buffer against the gale, the young 20-somethings have managed to rest and even sleep. Whenever the wind swirled from that direction, I heard the faint sound of snoring along with a tinny pop song playing from someone's mobile phone.

Linh certainly lacks decorum. Yet no one who knows what she has been through could rebuke her. It is enough that she is here. When it comes to loving and caring for Gran, she has proven herself many times over. Indeed, Linh has had more affectionate and challenging times with Gran than anyone.

As a young child Linh adored Gran, who in turn treasured her only granddaughter. Gran listened to her make up tales about princesses, swans and fairies with boundless patience and interest. The young girl slept more nights in Gran's bed than she did her own. They shopped and chatted with a natural easiness even after Linh became a teenager whose primary concerns were clothes, music, movies and boys.

This all changed when Linh was 17 and Gran suffered her first stroke. Gran survived and recovered physically within weeks, but her mind was mush. Whereas before, Gran's poignancy and wisdom was only occasionally punctuated by senseless blather, now the opposite was true. It was not long before her condition deteriorated to the point that, when no one was watching, she would wander out of the house and into the fields. The first time we found her sitting in the mud cackling at a toad. The second time she made it much further and was fortunately rescued by a passing motorist who found her half-dressed cowering by the freeway.

It was clear that Gran would need full-time care. My mother was busy in the fields and my aunts had factory jobs and families to look after. Our cousins had either moved away or were deemed unsuitable for such duties because they were boys. Linh was the first and only candidate for the job.

The fact that Linh had seen this coming did not lessen her despair. She had only just finished high school and made it clear to all that tending to Gran would prohibit her from going to university – it would ruin her life.

My mother responded with a callousness peculiar to mothers and their daughters. 'What's all this talk about university now? You never cared about your studies before. You've never even expressed a desire to do anything but watch movies and listen to music. So here's a chance for you to help your family, at least until you find a calling, or until it finds you. If you really want to attend university, you can always apply next year or the year after. Think of it this way. You need to have someone to look after to help you stop thinking about yourself so much. It will make you a better woman and prepare you for motherhood. It will be good for you.'

At the time, I thought it only fair that Linh should look after Gran in the same way that Gran had once looked after her. However, I didn't say this to my sister, who was inconsolable. My parents did not know then, but for the first time in her life she had started seeing a boy. Much later she would confess to me

that such was their grief that they considered catching a bus to Hai Phong and finding someone who would marry them. Then, like so many others, they would leap off the Bai Chay Bridge and forever be wedded together in the waters 50 metres below.

The first three months took a heavy toll on the household. Gran screamed and slapped the dour young stranger with whom she was, once again, sharing a bed. She did not recognise her granddaughter or occasionally thought she was one of her daughters-in-law. Both of them were cranky and prone to hysteria. Linh rough-handed her grandmother as she changed her clothes, a task that had to be carried out after every meal and mistimed toilet trip. If Gran couldn't sleep, then neither could Linh. To make matters worse, the neighbours complained about the hollering, hooting and old revolutionary songs that Gran sang in the middle of the night, standing in her nightgown with her fist up in the air as if it was 1954 again.

After a few weeks, Gran's large wooden bed was moved into the living room to give her a little more sunlight and space. This also brought her closer to the bathroom and made it easier for guests to visit her. The drawback for Linh, however, was that she had even less privacy than before. So when my father erected a swinging metal gate over the front doorway to prevent Gran from darting out, it was Linh who felt she was at once on display and imprisoned.

Gran aged years in a matter of weeks. Her skin had the texture of jerky, yet it was as translucent as sago jelly, with every vein and sinew visible. Her back became heavily bowed and the left side of her face ceased to function. The family's fear that she would wander away quickly dissolved as Gran lost all motivation to leave her bed.

Linh was at best uncaring and at worst cruel. There were times when Grandma refused to eat or take her medicine and Linh too easily relented. She allowed children in the village to come inside and gawk at the ancient figure who was, for them, more dead than alive. When young boys concocted stories about all the horrible things Gran must have done to deserve such a fate, Linh said nothing. The children especially liked it when the old woman sat up after lying on her side, as it took several seconds for gravity to restore shape to the flattened edge of her face. Under Linh's watch, the village boys dared one another to touch the old woman's limbs, shoulders, hair, and even her dangling earlobes.

I had just started university and was distressed by my parents' reports of events at home. Linh had hardly spoken to me since I left. But then, about five months into her ordeal, I was surprised to get a call from her. She asked me how I was

going and what it was like living in the city. Linh told me that both she and Gran were doing better and revealed an astounding incident that had taken place late one evening as she was changing Gran's underwear.

'I don't know who you are', the elderly woman pronounced, 'but I know that I love you.' Upon hearing this confession an exhausted Linh hugged her grandmother and sobbed, not out of self-pity, but from affection. Gran put her arms around her granddaughter and lightly patted her on the back, and stroked her head and said, 'Don't worry. Everything is going to be fine, little girl.'

Gradually, the relationship between the two women was restored and even developed. While there was no miraculous change to Gran's condition, her posture and energy improved. She regained her appetite, in part because of a game Linh devised in which she hid food in and around the house for her grandmother to find.

Before I returned home for the summer, I told Linh I was eager to spend time with Gran so that she could have some respite. I expected her to run out the door as soon as I arrived and head straight for the newly constructed shopping mall. This she did, but not before carefully explaining to me how Gran liked to be fed, how she needed to be turned over now and then, and how to calm her if she woke up and was frightened to see me instead of her. Fortunately my grandmother slept peacefully that night. I, on the other hand, hardly slept at all. Throughout the evening I stared at Gran's face lying centimetres from mine. I was petrified by the prospect of being the last person to see her alive. Each cough and wheeze seemed terminal, and the silences were worse because I thought she would never make another sound. It occurred to me that this must be what it was like to have a newborn and concluded that I was not ready for parenthood.

The following morning, wearing her new jeans, Linh said to me, '*Anh oi*, I'm used to looking after Gran now. You've been studying hard and rarely come home. Go see your friends and spend some time with our family. Leave Gran to me.' At that moment, I felt the greatest admiration for my little sister, while also suspecting that she didn't fully trust me.

That summer I witnessed an astonishing tenderness between Linh and Gran. Now, it was the granddaughter who sat and listened to her grandmother's stories with uncommon patience. And while Gran was utterly dependent upon Linh, she gave her granddaughter an impalpable yet precious gift: a sense of purpose and perspective, perhaps something to believe in.

I returned one evening from a night out with friends to see Linh sound asleep, but Gran sitting up with her tiny withered feet hanging out of the mosquito net and her hands resting on her rotund belly. Through the net I could see

her ancient face flecked by the moonlight. Gran turned to me but looked right through me. She had no idea who I was but at the same time seemed to perceive much more. It was as if the son of her eldest son was a fleeting speck in a cosmos within a cosmos, a reality that she, in her final days on earth, was starting to fathom. I scuttled off to bed, awestruck by what the elderly can achieve and wondering how many of these encounters my sister must have been privy to.

When Gran died, two strokes and almost a year later, Linh was desolate. It happened quietly at night, while she was lying by Linh's side. The village awoke the next morning to Linh's wailing, which overwhelmed the loudspeakers broadcasting the news and regulations.

On the day of Gran's funeral my sister remained inside the house, the gate over the front door recently removed. My parents thought her grief was so great that she would faint or fall ill during the ceremony.

Now, more than 1,000 days later, Linh has come to look in on Gran one last time.

'Are you okay?' I ask my sister.

'That time's over, Gran's gone. I don't need no ceremony to tell me that.'

04:42.44

The mourning of my grandmother is almost over. The casket has been transferred to the final resting place beside my paternal ancestors. Now the men sit around the fire, which has been stoked to a roaring height. All of our white sashes are cast into the flames. The incense sticks that we maintained throughout the night have all burnt out. Once again bottles of rice wine are brought out. This time the wine is not to garner fortitude, but to be drunk in celebration.

My weary father encourages the men to have a drink with him. Because I don't have a family of my own, I am not offered any wine. Father is flanked by his brothers and Uncle Candy, who is now pleased to be the centre of attention. Uncle Candy tells them about the recent reburials he has been to and of others in the distant past. He recollects how there were times after the American War when the government looked down on all banquets and ceremonies as distractions from the material needs of the workers and peasants.

‘But they could never stamp out reburials. In a country where so many soldiers have lost their lives and have not yet come home, it’s impossible to sever the living from the dead’, he says.

Without a hint of fatigue, Uncle Candy recites a poem by Tu Nguyen Tinh he has learnt by heart.

Who dares step out in this month?
This month of rain and shivering cold,
This month reserved for reburial ceremonies.
Who dares return to the countryside?
To move loved ones to new homes,
Where incessant pain goes hand-in-hand,
With a sense of life powerless.
Together we take the plunge,
But in those final moments, we drift apart.

‘That’s enough, Candy’, says my father. ‘It’s time for all of us to go home.’

We thank everyone for coming. My sister and mother leave to prepare the morning banquet.

There is one remaining sacrifice, one further exhibition of discomfort in this world so that my grandmother might be more comfortable in hers. My father and I must sleep at the foot of her new grave. At this stage I’m so exhausted that the prospect of resting anywhere is inviting.

Together, my father and I gather all the tarpaulins and lay them wet-side-down. He finishes a bottle of rice wine before falling to the ground. ‘Say farewell to your Gran’, he murmurs. ‘And remember this when the time comes to farewell me.’

I am not one for dramatic conversions, yet Father’s appeal has a powerful impact on me. Whereas before I felt detached from the reburial ceremony, suddenly I begin to fathom its significance. I understand that much of this night is about me.

And I start to see how entire epochs have converged upon the spot that I occupy. The smouldering fire; the surrounding rice paddy; the factory lights on the horizon; the layer of concrete dust that covers everything in my village; the mobile phone in my coat pocket constantly sending and receiving signals that connect me to billions of people. I also apprehend the efforts of those close to me to harmonise these criss-crossing worlds with a sense of the transcendent.

The soul callers, fake money, incense smoke, spring water and white sashes are all there to help me grasp that I will someday be in my father's place, and then in my grandmother's.

Entombed within layers of plastic I place my arm around my father, who lies soaked in icy perspiration, shuddering in a half-foetal position. I close my eyes and allow sleep to come to me just as night begins to drain from the sky.

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