

Ocean Wide, Skin Deep – Henry, Year 11, NSW

At the age of four, my mother told me that all people judge a person, first by their appearance – the outer and most vulnerable part of oneself – followed by their family, their achievements, and only then by their demeanour. She made it a priority to perfect my habits, body and etiquette before I turned eight, but had severely underestimated her ability to remould my external design, like the remorphing of misshapen clay on a potter’s wheel.

“To be filial,” she had told me, “is to show eternal gratitude for your family which comes before you. We have blessed you with a body. Please do not taint it.”

Our home was anything but humble. Though the perpetual flow of time and the unsympathetic elements had weathered its facade; my mother, within a mere two years, grew a tall elaborate garden of peonies and azaleas which clung onto the brick siding, so that the blemishes of imperishable mould and chipped bricks were hidden.

Its within – the effortful product of my mother’s immigrant struggle – were crafted to caress the bodies of toiled souls who inhabited it or graced it with their presence. The living room left almost no wall uncovered. Glass display cabinets, filled mostly with my trophies, concealed almost every vertical surface – the top of each cabinet queued with an array of Chinese dolls that my mother would casually potter. If there were imperfections in the pigmentation of the wall, they were not made visible.

At the heart of it all was the altar, grand in its mahogany composition, pristine gleam of golden-ware, and glint of burning incense that kindled during each prayer. Three large Bodhisattva statues sat on the upper platform. The lower platform gave space for a censer, two tall metal oil-candles and an arrangement of fruit offerings. Room was made for a framed photograph of my grandfather to lay between the offerings and statues on its own elevated platform.

My mother would anticipate the visits of guests, for she had spent every resting hour rehearsing how she would present the story behind each trophy, how she would persist to steer each conversation no matter which road it swayed. And when guests would visit, she would give introductions, and I would bow to the guests and serve them peeled fruit and cups of tea (but she would pour the tea – not me – because she feared I would burn my hand), and they would discuss various matters, and I would linger in the background and attend absently, and she would without fail weave her way into the topic of the trophies she was most proud of, and they would express a seemingly exaggerated jubilation for my achievements, and I would acquiesce their felicitations, and we would laugh politely about it, and then as they departed from our home, they would bow at the altar, and then, after finally noticing my mother’s dolls on the top of the trophy cabinets, they would comment on their stalkerish eyes.

“你很像这娃娃 (*You resemble this doll*),” they would tell me. They would point at a doll with glossy pale skin and a stoic expression, who rested a parasol on her shoulder and whose eyes were supposedly the least stalkerish.

Each night, after her pedantic house-cleaning regimen, my mother would prostrate herself before the altar – she would kneel down, lower her head to the floor, and unfold her hands like the blooming of a lotus flower. I would watch from the dining table. Her hands were darkened, rough and calloused.

In the midst of one summer’s wrath, my mother received a call from her sister late in the night. Her mother was hospitalised. She told me she would be staying in Guangdong – for how long, she did not know. Before she left, she stored packed meals in the refrigerator, stressing that I should stay away from the stovetop in case I burned my skin. When she finally departed, the sun’s gleam was stubbornly lingering past sundown, repressing the sky’s natural complexion and burning it with a blush of terracotta.

The following morning, I routinely applied lotion, sunscreen and my mother’s long catalogue of other creams which I had forgotten the names of, onto every square inch of my body that my skin was left saturated in slime, glowing in the fierce sun which had pierced through the living room window; only for me to cover up with a blazer and trousers.

The sun was now a stark white, that the sky’s complexion appeared more pristine and lighter than my own. I waited in the slim shadow of the bus stop sign.

A kid covered from head to toe – an anomaly in the sea of other kids who had almost every button on their clothes undone. I held my umbrella firmly over my head.