

The Jade Comb - Chloe, Year 6, NSW

番茄鸡蛋面

Tomato and egg noodles.

The slightly saccharine and salty aroma of fried tomatoes and eggs wafted through the small, cluttered kitchen where Waipo was busily cooking. Wiping perspiration off her glistening forehead with the back of her palm, her hair was streaked with grey and pinned up into a messy bun which was held up with an exquisite jade comb, an heirloom passed down from the ancestors. Patiently, she continued to watch the noodles cook. The beams of morning sun were a spotlight on her face, revealing her wrinkles that were etched with love.

“Waipo, do you need any help?” Meilin asked, concerned.

“Mei Mei, you focus on your homework. Make our family proud,” she replied, as she peered at Meilin over her red rimmed glasses with piercing brown eyes that were brimming with love.

Meilin nodded obediently and headed back to her books. Waipo was her grandmother, full of zest despite her age and with a heart overflowing with kindness, passion and affection. She always had time to comfort Meilin and wore a permanent bright smile that would always light up the room like a candle brightening a dark, eerie cave. Capering up the stairs to her room, Meilin knew that as long as Waipo was with her, she would always be content.

Just as Meilin was completing the last maths equation, she heard a shriek followed by a thud. With haste, she scrambled down the stairs. Meilin froze in horror. Her eyes ballooned in shock!

“Waipo!” she half shrieked, and half sobbed.

Sprawled in a collapsed heap on the marble tiled floor of the kitchen, her grandmother was as still as death. Meilin threw open cabinet doors, scavenging for anything she could use to call for help. Finally, in the far corner of the cupboard she spotted an old phone sandwiched in between bags of jasmine rice. She grabbed it and prayed, prayed that it would still have charge.

Pressing the circular power button, it lit up, displaying the Apple logo. She dialled triple zero and waited.

"You have dialled emergency Triple Zero. Your call is being connected," a recorded message announced.

The message ended, leaving the only sound in the house to be an echoing 'ring' of the phone and Meilin's heavy breathing. Each 'ring' felt like a second wasted. A second Waipo didn't have time for.

"Hello, this is Triple Zero. Do you need police, fire or ambulance?" a man replied on the other end of the phone.

"Ambulance please," Meilin replied, her voice cracking

Five minutes later, Meilin was riding in the back of an ambulance, tears cascading down her tired face.

"Is she going to be alright?" she asked a paramedic who donned a dark blue uniform in a strained voice.

"She most likely had a stroke. She may not have much time left," the paramedic replied, face grim.

In the hospital, Meilin sat silently on the vinyl chairs in the waiting room. Caressing Waipo's jade comb in her hands, the only thing that connected Meilin to her now. A rivulet of tears escaped from her bloodshot eyes, and she remembered how Waipo used to wipe it away.

Would she ever see her beloved grandmother again?

"Meilin Lee?" a nurse called from behind the door of Waipo's recovery room.

Meilin leaped out of her seat, almost dropping the comb, and rushed to the nurse's side.

"Is she going to be okay?" she paused as she endeavoured to read the nurse's name tag through tears, "Emily?"

Emily smiled kindly, the way Waipo used to.

"Your Waipo is an extraordinarily strong woman. We suspect that she will be awake in a few hours."

Meilin embraced her, profusely thanking her over and over. Emily led her into the room and sat her down in an overstuffed armchair. Just as the chair sucked her into its plush comfort, Emily told her to call her if she needed anything. Meilin nodded and let the constant "beeping" of the machines hooked up to Waipo lull her into a peaceful sleep.

Meilin woke up disorientated and confused. Then it all came gushing back to her like a cascading waterfall. Waipo's fall. The ambulance. The hospital. The jade comb. Meilin gasped. *No, no no NO!* she thought. Where was the comb? Meilin cupped her head in her

hands as the thought of losing her grandma's most precious possession ricocheted in her mind. She desperately called for Emily, hoping she could help her find it.

After almost an hour of searching the whole hospital quarter, Meilin was certain she had lost her grandmother and the only thing that connected her to Waipo.

"Meilin!" Emily called from Waipo's room, "She's awake!"

Meilin rushed in after the nurse, face hot with tears.

"Waipo!" she sobbed.

Waipo stroked her face as Meilin leaned closer, she realised that her grandma's eyes had clouded over. Those once clear, wise, piercing eyes were now gone. Meilin wept for what seemed like hours sitting beside Waipo's bed.

"I lost it," she murmured dully. "I lost the jade comb."

Meilin's heart raced in her ribcage like a prisoner pounding at the bars of their cell at the thought of Waipo's answer and her disappointed face.

Waipo comprehended that for a minute and Meilin could almost see the cogs turning in her mind.

"Darling," Waipo replied, her voice soft and wispy like a cloud of cotton candy, "the real treasure is not the jade comb, it is you, my sweet child."

A few days later, back at home Meilin noticed the 番茄鸡蛋面, egg and tomato noodles sitting on the counter, untouched. She ambled over and curiously caressed the white porcelain bowl adorned with delicate cobalt blue flowers and scenery. It was as icy as a winter's morning.

Sometimes you need to enjoy the noodles while it's still warm.