Letting Go, Or Not

At Chinese New Year my mother-in-law opens her twisted mouth. One of her incisors sticks out buck-toothed from the dark void where most of her teeth had been. A gold-filled molar lurks in shadow. My little Jennifer asks, "What Gamma doing in chair with wheels?" She hesitates before touching the wrinkled wrist draped over the armrest.

"Lift her up so she can give grandma a kiss," says Mei-lan, my wife.

I wrap my arms around Jennifer's waist and lift her almost nose to nose with her Taiwanese grandmother. She reaches out and touches the gold protrusion.

"Why this tooth different color?"

Grandma unleashes a flood of tears.

"Can we go play now, daddy?"

Mei-lan's mother taught second grade in rural Taiwan for forty years, but all through these holidays she sits expressionless at the table, while her six children, their spouses and a dozen grandchildren cross chopsticks, chatter away and drink themselves silly at the Wang family homestead. Maybe she has said everything she was ever going to say to the those who will

worship her ghost. Yet Jennifer, not quite four, with wide-open Caucasian blue eyes, clearly is her favorite.

At goodbye time, my mother-in-law's parchment skin scratches my face. She shows no resentment that I am a foreigner intruding upon her family, but she etches warning that I too will someday be mostly vegetable.

Back home in Taipei, Mei-lan sheds a tear or two at odd times of day and night. Here and now aren't quite real. We pretend to be cheerful. Mei-lan's mother is dying for the fourth time. Mei-lan tells me, "Mother is better."

I bite my tongue. Mei-lan has already flown back twice this week to the Intensive Care Unit at the Buddhist hospital in her hometown. Maybe too forcefully, I tell her, "Just go back and stay with her in Hualien. She needs you more than I do right now."

"I need to take care of Jennifer and Hank."

"You still don't trust me to do that?"

"Of course I trust you, but I miss my children."

"They're my children too. Your mother gets worse every time you leave her."

The next day Mei-lan is on a plane again for another death alarm. I want to tell her that she commutes like this because she can't stand to see her mom on a respirator for more than a day at a time. So she comes home again and we wait for the next emergency.

"Order for me," says Mei-lan.

Once we determine who is going to make the decisions, it is easy between us. At our favorite outdoor café I order General Tso's Chicken, The Buddha Jumps Over the Wall, and *Dong Po Rou.* That's braised pork belly, the edible version of the carved jade treasure in the National Palace Museum. "It's romantic out here," she says. "There's a singer coming on at eight."

Some guy with a pink streak bleached into his hair diddles with a sound box almost as big as the tiny stage. The guitarist tests the volume, intent on drowning out all conversation. I check my watch. It is already past eight and the singer is nowhere in sight. Mei-lan turns toward me, her face darkening. "I have to make a telephone call."

"Do you have to do that?"

"Yes. You know I do."

"Then use the phone in the alcove off the lobby."

Mei-lan didn't have to say that she was calling the sister who visits her mother every day and bawls past bedtime. She too had been in the hospital with a fluttering heart. Eldest Sister's

shoulders stoop with the burden of guilt for Mama's ailments. The weight of all the pills Mama was supposed to take every day crushes her.

"Let go," I whisper as Mei-lan walks off. "Just let go."

When Mei-lan comes back, her ashen smile must be love desperate to overcome death. "Mama's weakening. The doctors put her back on the machine that breathes for her. They said her lungs are giving out, and her liver."

I don't have it in me to tell Mei-lan anything.

Our night out promised to be such a relief from all this. Why did Mei-lan have to interrupt it to hear for the umpteenth time that her mother can't breathe, can't eat, can't pee? Save for her ears and that passage for her six children, her every orifice is hooked up to tubes. Anybody who can't see she is already dead has to be blind. The doctor warned, "Get prepared," as if his version of the Boy Scout motto would make death easier to take.

That first morning after my mother-in-law was rushed to the hospital, a different doctor extolled the virtues of a stent. She was on a gurney, and he was looking at a corpse on wheels and a juicy $8,500 fee before she is pronounced dead. The doctor cajoled, "Only about 3% of our patients die from the procedure. If you approve, we'll wheel her into the operating room right now." I barely resisted the urge to tell him that the patient was dead and he knew it.

"He was so eager," Mei-lan told me, "and national health insurance doesn't cover any of it. When I explained it, Mama's face turned black."

"She can talk now?" Impossible, I thought.

"Not with those tubes taped to her mouth, but she can communicate. She didn't want it. I'm sure. And the doctor was too pushy. Maybe thinking of the money."

Mei-lan went to the Confucius temple with her three sisters. The monk went into a trance and said their father is telling him it is very difficult in the netherworld. He needs money. He cannot support mama. She will have to decide for herself whether she wants to join him. Mei-lan told me afterwards, "We burned thirty million in temple money to send to him."

Eldest Brother A-Po blew a fit when the sisters returned to the family compound. "Superstitious nonsense. Waste a fortune to keep Papa's charred bones in a jar at the temple. Those pious-looking bastards who call themselves monks are the biggest scam artists in Taiwan."

Mei-lan doesn't have to remind me that money defines love in this family. There's never enough, but the daughters spend generously to burn paper for the dead and A-Po burns the real stuff he borrows from other people. "He thinks loans are gifts," said Mei-lan. "He wasn't back a week from his failed restaurant in Botswana when he raided Mama's pension account. Mama had her first heart attack the day she discovered it. My big brother dumped her at the Emergency Room and left. I hate him for that. You won't find *him* waiting outside the ICU to visit. He's out throwing our savings at another dumb business deal. He's the most wretched creature on earth."

Mei-lan conjures images of A-Po at the funeral, bowing to Buddha and scouring Mother's ashes for the gold crown on her tooth. "He won't even apologize for emptying Mama's retirement account of everything she had." Anger rolls from her eyes, streaking her face.

Mei-lan tells me the obvious. Mother's weakening. Eldest Sister said we have to arrange to bring her home to die." Mei-lan rubs tears from her cheeks. "It's much more complicated getting her spirit to the netherworld if she dies in the hospital."

I'm tempted to ask why Mother threatens to die each visit, but when death offers welcome with open arms, she slaps it in the face.

"I have to go back to say goodbye," says Mei-lan.

"I'll take you to the airport. You can still make the last flight. Better you should go now. Just in case."

"Arriving in the middle of the night will just get everybody more upset."

We are not sharing the whole truth. Facing death is bad enough in the daytime. Worse if it's your Mother at night.

"Hard to pull the plug on her. When should we do it?" A new tear rolls down Mei-lan's cheek.

Now. "Not when she's conscious." My hand seeks hers.

"Eldest Sister said she opens her eyes sometimes and cries. She tells Mama over and over again how much she loves her. Mama cries louder, so I guess she's conscious."

"Then you'll have to wait. Those doctors can keep someone alive for a long time."
Raw truth wants to wail that Mother-in-law has not lived for a long time. Deeper inside, a scream.

A whisper in this turmoil recalls when we first met. Mei-lan's father invited me to dinner at a cozy family restaurant. He sat me facing him at a round table filled with his six children, and asked what my intentions were toward Third Daughter. My future mother-in-law sat through the dinner rigid as rigor mortis, and that was before the stroke. She stared right past me as if I was not a person at all.

Early next morning I'm up getting ready to take Mei-lan to the airport. She tells me, "I keep going back to give Mama all my love. Her eyes flutter when I talk to her."

"Why don't you just stay with your mother until she passes on? You're costing us a fortune in plane fare."

"How can you say that?" Mei-lan curls her thumb and fingers tight, as if she's going to strangle me. "Mother will live a long time. When I asked whether she wants the triple bypass, she does for sure."

"But she hasn't been conscious for the last three weeks."

"I know she wants it. I can feel it in her hand." Mei-lan's glare burns my forehead.

"Three years in a wheelchair. Hardly a word out of her and she still runs your life."
"You just shut your mouth. Just once and listen. Mother raised us. Can't you understand we Chinese have to give her all our love now?"

"Then stay there and help her let go. And stop breaking the bank because you can't stand to see her dying more than a day at a time."

Mei-lan rushes for my throat. I grab her wrists and pull hard. “Go ahead and have a good cry. Sorry I said that.”

“You really know how to be cruel. I had to come back for you and the children.”

My hands tighten around her wrists. “Shit. How many times have I told you I’ll take care of the children.”

“I came back because Mother’s getting better.”

“Sure. Twenty-three days since she last took a breath on her own. Stay with her. It’s inevitable.”

“Get your mind off the money. Do you think we wouldn’t pay any price for Mother to live?” Mei-lan pulls hard. I lose my balance.

We crumple on the rug, locked in each other and immobile for the longest time. Mei-lan won’t even look at me. It was forever before she broke the silence. “That other call last night was my brother. He asked for a loan.”

I looked straight over Mei-lan’s head and out the window. “Now you’re going to tell me how much you love me.”

“No, I’m not. I asked him if he needed the money for Mother’s hospital expenses. You know what he said? ‘That’s your responsibility.’”

My throat chokes on words asking why delay the day when flames will lick at the coffin and the crematorium tenders will summon the family to comb through the ashes. I cannot utter that death

overtook coherent thought even before the stroke three years ago. Nor could I suggest that if her brain were still functioning, Mother would be worse than hopelessly psychotic to want to prolong this torment.

Mother-in-law never wanted the gas station that A-Po built on the road frontage just a stone's throw from the house. She didn't want to see First Son force Younger Brother to run it when he'd rather struggle against poverty as a piano teacher. But A-Po got the support of Father, who knew nothing about the economics of selling gasoline in a town that had sprouted fifty-seven failing gas stations after the first one succeeded. All four daughters supported Mama. She lost. Arguing about building a gas station right in front of her porch sent her to the Emergency Room.

Mei-lan tells me how all four sisters begged A-Po to go to Mother in the hospital and apologize for all the grief he caused her. "He refuses," she says, counting out emergency room episodes since the stroke. "Six I know. Maybe more. When he isn't taking Mama's money, he rages at speeding cars that don't stop to buy gas. Then he yells at his wife. Their arguments barely stop long enough to get Mama to the hospital."

"A-Po isn't about to apologize for a fatal heart attack." I say it as gently as I know how.

"Too much history of blaming each other," whispers Mei-lan. She takes a tissue from her purse.

We talk softly about life support, letting the universe be, and allowing the netherworld its due. She's calm, but voices are screaming inside my skull. One yells louder, *Face it*. You wanted her to die from the very beginning. So you don't have to look at her and see what will happen to you.

Then a whisper into my dizzy guilt, *Face it*. When *you* die, not a dozen people will miss breakfast because of it.

In dreams, other voices bellow that I will not become a vegetable in a wheelchair waiting for children and grandchildren to arrive. I will not hold court and cry whenever family shows up, tears without words, dead limbs, mouth wide open, gaping space save for a few rotted teeth that protrude as a reminder of loss.

Nor will I watch A-Po scowl another day, or allow Eldest Sister to stagger home with palpitations where a quiet pump should be. How dare I drown my children in a cesspool of worry that sends them to emergency rooms where doctors dole out tranquilizers.

Mother-in-law speaks nothing, but she dominates this family of obligatory love and tears our lives apart. How many times was I eyeing every movement of Mei-lan's body; how she turns her head back and forth as she comes higher; the extraordinary smile that brightens the whole room when I tell her how much I love her; how she pulls my right leg all the way up to her shoulder – until the phone rings. Mother-in-law must sense exactly when we explode. At precisely that moment her call kills ecstasy with the certainty of an assassin's bullet.

I thought each time I took Mei-lan to the airport would be the last, but Mother-in-law is a master at setting off false alarms. Every episode convinces her four daughters that she would die because they do not love her enough. The sisters never complain that the Emergency Room is Mother's way of drawing them closer. They rush back from all over Taiwan to pay their debt one last time.

I'm trapped in the family nightmare when Jennifer comes skipping into the bedroom and jumps on my belly. "Come play with me daddy. Come on." She tugs my arm. "I want to show you something."

"Not right now, Sweet Pea. We have to get up and get going."

"Why can't you play with me, Daddy?" Sadness spreads across Jennifer's face like life draining away.

"We have to catch a plane and go see grandma. She's sick in the hospital."

"Play with me first, Daddy." Jennifer pleads. "Gamma would let us play."

I grab my pillow and put it over my head. "I wish she would."

Between visits to the Intensive Care Unit, the descendants wait at Eldest Sister's place. Her home sits in a row of identical houses whose cement walls grow mold. Inside is mosquito heaven and bodies of visiting family sprawling to sleep on any floor space they can find. The living room boasts sofas with cushions so thin you feel the wood frame pressing against your butt. I squeeze in between Mei-lan and Second Sister. Youngest Sister's hips press against Mei-lan's. The two of them are leaning over a blue sheet of paper on the tea table in front of the sofa. Mei-lan has two NT$1000 notes in her hand. She gives the equivalent of $60 to her sister.
"What's this all about?" I ask.

"A ceremony. Each sister has her own way of helping Mother recover. Youngest sister will go to a famous temple not far from Taipei. There's a strong medical Buddha there, so the monks will

call on the Buddha to cleanse Mother's spirit of the evil deed that brought this heart attack on her."

"What evil deed? Your Mother has been paralyzed for years." I bite the tip of my tongue.

"Chau Yuo." Blue sheet lying on the table. Vaguely familiar Chinese characters, but meaning is shrouded in mystery.

"The evil deed doesn't have to be recent," says Mei-lan. "Something that Mother did in some other life has to be cleansed from her soul so she can recover. Maybe in a past life, maybe even a future life. We pay our share. Youngest Sister goes back for the ceremony."

Mei-lan picks up the blue paper and explains the required preparations:

Eat no meat until the person is better.

Bring three hairs from the afflicted person.

Bring one of the person's fingernails.

Bring the last dress she wore before becoming ill.

Pay in advance NT$ 8965.

"I already cut Mother's fingernails and hair strands," announces Mei-lan.

No doubt the monks will pound the drums and gongs until the evil spirits flee Mother-in-law's inert body; they will chant mantras and taunt the witch doctors who say it is time to take this helpless old woman home to die. They will scour heaven, earth, and quantum theory for the evil she perpetrates in future if not in past lives. Exorcise sin, defeat mortality; bury guilt, for a price.

Youngest Sister's husband has been still as a Buddha on the other sofa, legs crossed on the thin cushion, hands open on his knees, eyes staring somewhere off in space. His wife affirms that she will go to the temple tomorrow. He lashes out from the lotus position and kicks the tea table. "That's the stupidest thing I ever heard. You won't go there." He snatches the money out of her hand.

She bows her head. "Husband. I must. For Mother."

Raging Husband grabs the blue sheet off the table and rips it to pieces. "Idiocy. You go and you will regret it forever." He stalks out, slamming the sliding glass door.

Younger Sister does not go to the ceremony. Raging Husband stays away from home for three days. He's the same man who gets on a plane to beat his wife to the hospital and kowtow before his Mother-in-law, but he swats his children and abuses his wife. Mei-lan doesn't have to tell me all the details. "He cried out his love and swore he would commit suicide if Youngest Sister didn't marry him. She wed and bit into cyanide peach pits."

In the hospital, a television monitor hangs like a monstrous spy camera above the double sliding doors, projecting anxiety on family and friends huddled outside. Patients and their status appear in little boxes on the screen, data bits in the Excel program that houses them. Every few seconds the full-screen macro shrinks, until the images disappear. Another few seconds and the names appear again full screen, like some flashing neon sign touting a show on the strip in Las Vegas. Too early on Saturday morning, there are already three people in the operating theater and one in the recovery room.

Now Mother-in-law is the only name on the screen, and the incessant flashing gives no hint whether the machines and men that sustain her stilled heart hold promise of life after surgery. Second Sister has been mumbling mantras from a book of Buddhist comfort for hours. Her chin is buried in her chest, like it was when she sat by the coffin of her father for two days before the brothers carried her outside.

Eldest Sister is too agitated to expose her palpitating heart to torture at the hospital. She writhes at home in bed, wondering whether Mother lived for her daily visits or she lived for Mother.

Mei-lan does an energy dance with her hands, weaving them through invisible fields, back to her breasts to gather more of the force, then extending arm's length to transmit healing. "I'm more western," she tells me. "I use my Reike, positive thinking, always sending healing energy to my Mother."

Youngest Sister arrives by train late in the afternoon after teaching violin all morning. She takes a seat as far from Raging Husband as she can get. He has been playing Bodhisattva all day, holy lotus posed on a molded plastic seat.

A-Po saunters in and asks when the doctors will be finished. Mei-lan stands up right in his face. "Are you finally ready to beg Mother's forgiveness for all the grief you caused?" He turns apoplectic red and stalks out. Second Sister chants louder. Youngest Brother whispers in my ear that A-Po can be arrogant at times.

The grandchildren busy themselves chasing each other in the corridor. Sisterly love paired them up. No sooner was one sister pregnant than the others matched her prowess. Pairs of cousins from kindergarten to college share gossip and giggles at a discreet distance from their parents.

If my nieces and nephews are thinking about death, they are not showing it. I move away from the somber row of relatives lined up against the wall facing the operating room door, fidgeting on plastic chairs. My Jennifer spots me practicing tai chi in the vacant space by the elevators. She runs me down and smacks my butt with great glee. *You-me*, the shyest niece, follows her and whacks with the force of a kindergarten poltergeist. I dance around to avoid their joyful blows, make monkey faces, chase them down, lift them up, twirl them around, and revel in their laughter as the surgeons stitch arteries into their grandmother's scarred heart.

A nurse summons the sisters. "We need fresh blood. A-positive. Now. Someone has to sign here and fingerprint to authorize the transfusions."

Mother-in-law's name grows smaller on the monitor and disappears. I see an image of her strapped in a wheelchair, glaring into space, demanding attention with inchoate tears. Logic pleads for a merciful death, but flees in panic. Some unknown force compels me to rush to the nurses' counter to be the first to give blood. The ancestor spirits seem to be shouting that need to be part of this family trumps certitude that it is long past time for the matriarch to leave it.

Would Mother-in-law accept the blood of a foreigner? Our worlds are so far apart that she should reject me just as surely as I think she should die for her own good. I tremble as the plastic bag slowly fills with more of me than I had given in a lifetime. This is me, skirting the umbra of death seeping through her cuts.

In the ICU that had become home, Mother-in-law is still, but this is not quite a funeral viewing. The doctors and their machines will not let her die. They force air into her lungs, press her heart to beat sixty-four times a minute, monitor every function. Her body, less hers than theirs, is hooked up to plumbing you might imagine in a submarine; oxygen pipe, tubes to aspirate, more piping leading from bags of blood and nutrients, containers at bedside for food, waste, and drainage from her bilges. She could want for nothing except to leave all this behind.

I take her swollen hand and wish her a speedy recovery. “Next week you’ll be jogging.” There seems to be a slight twitch. My sister-in-law wastes no time telling the story of this conversation to family members waiting their turn to spend a few minutes in the presence of the immobile dowager. That seems to spread cheer, but one never knows, even with the people closest to you. The smiles and giggles could just as well be a cloak for embarrassment and fear.

Once the doctor has said her blood pressure is up and she passed urine, her six children file out of the hospital and return home to wait for her certain recovery. Mei-lan tells me, “We were six kids and no food. I was the fourth, and Mother just wasn’t able to care for us all. She was a grade school teacher who didn’t know how to cook. At home, she wilted into silence when my father ranted about her housekeeping.”

Mei-lan insists that we go home. “I have already given Mother all the positive energy I can find in the universe. The children have school. I want to be in my own home. My freedom.”

“Don’t you think we should stay here?” I ask. “No sense in flying back and forth from Taipei to Hualien every other day.”

“My Mother will be fine.” Mei-lan leaves no room for doubt.

I veto that as forcefully as I know how. “I’ll say it again. We stay another two days. We are not leaving to turn around and come right back.”

“What about Hank and Jennifer? I don’t want them to have any more of this negative energy.”

“I’ll take care of the kids. You can go to the hospital and dispel all the negative energy you want. Mother wants you there.”

Eldest Sister is the one in-law who shares feelings with me, so I tell her. “It’s so sad that Mother never made an effort to walk again, or make a life for herself. The doctors said she could.”

“I know what the doctor said, but my Mother never knew to do anything for herself. She lives for her children.”

“What does she think she’s doing now,” I ask, “clinging to life like this for you?”

Eldest Sister frowns. I’m sorry I said it. We walk back to the family homestead in silence.

I cannot guess how long the doctors and machines will keep up this tyranny, mocking the bereaved. Unable to cry or laugh, I resist the urge to ask Eldest Sister how many prolonged deaths she thinks it would take to amortize the array of ICU machinery hooked up to her Mother.

Damning inner voices are shouting at me again, echoing back and forth across my skull. *You wanted her to die. From the very beginning. You wanted her to die.*

The doctors will not question the success of their surgery. They tell us Mrs. Wang's vital signs are normal. They do not say that no machine will make her what she isn't. Nobody says the patient is dying. I cannot say it either, not in the face of Mei-lan's optimism, but the Wang family matriarch has not drawn a breath on her own in more than four weeks. Never during that time did anybody say a word about the disaster that would bury the family in grief if she lived.

We are soon to leave for Taipei, and Mei-lan suggests that we take a walk, by ourselves for the first time. She thanks me for looking after the kids and their younger cousins, and tells how the rest of the family came to Mother's bed. "We cried, over and over again like a mantra, how much we love her, how great a Mother she is. I know Mama heard us tell all the wonderful things she did for us. Yes, even A-Po finally got down on his knees and held her hand and begged forgiveness for causing her to worry about him so much."

On the plane back she tells me more of the times she flew back and forth every other day. "All that emotional bonding became very sacred and beautiful, even that night in our house with the dog howling the death message. We pray, we ask for love and support from the universe. If she has to go, take her back to the light with calm and peace, or let her live if that's her fate."

Once back in Taipei, we go back to our favorite restaurant and take the same table and order the same dishes, but I can not shake off the premonition that Mother-in-law will choose to announce her death during our intimate dinner. "What are you thinking about?" I ask. Jennifer invented

that question almost as soon as she learned to talk. I appropriate it to break the silence when I don't know what to say next.

"There is some mystical experience in all this," says Mei-lan. "Her awesome life force and these death events brought our family a great transformation. We learned a new lesson; to tell the truth of life, to express our misunderstanding to each other, to see love flowing like sunshine into our body."

Now Mei-lan is asking me how I think Mother is doing, and all I can think of is that she will die more miserably than most. And, cursed by my parochial education, I know that no ceremony, no mixing of blood will absolve me of sin. But with a pint of my blood in her, we at last share our humanity. I mumble, "I'm sure she'll be better with us there."

"But we are here, back home in Taipei." Puzzled, Mei-lan looks up to ask what I mean. Tomorrow I must fly back to apologize.