

1782 words

Blessing

Our deaths are chosen for us the moment we're born, while our parents hold our bodies to the sun and ask the gods for our ends. It's an elaborate ceremony where our parents crush Snowflake Crisps into milk powder studded with the greens and reds of pistachios and jujubes, then dust our lumpy, shapeless faces so the gods can peer into our fledgling souls and formulate an expiration window.

Our graves are prepared the moment we're born, lined in rows from earliest deaths to latest deaths. Mine is in the middle, between the graves of my sister's friend and a retired man who used to puff rice with a popcorn cannon. The time until my death is neither long nor short, neither blessed nor cursed, a length typical of souls swept up with the masses. But my sister possesses the blessings of the sun, her grave at the tail end of the queue in the dense forests of the mountains where we've not yet cleared space to construct more gravestones. Gravestones require significant labor, and even though all families participate in carving and polishing and transporting them, most children won't have graves ready until their teens. Those who die before their teens are left to sleep below a mound of dirt like the gap of a missing tooth.

Our ages are expressed in how much time we have left. I am five. Five years left. My sister is fifty. Fifty years left. She has coddled me since I was a baby and told me I didn't need to work or earn money since she'd do all that. She had the time for it. She owns a jewelry store with a team of craftsmen who weld and shape gold into bracelets and necklaces. The craftsmen work twelve-hour, uninterrupted shifts to ensure no one steals gold during their breaks. Only those

with long lifespans can afford to build capital and open businesses. People like me who live too short to properly learn anything and too long to discard life with an unbridled recklessness tend to prefer working the orchards, a mindless activity in constant need of labor, spent soaking in the sun and the many shades of orange that dance across persimmon tree leaves. I tell my sister I am content to live like this, but she doesn't believe me. As a child, I used to pine about visiting the cities connected by vehicles that levitated above ground using magnetic forces. Now, I laugh at persimmons that resemble misshapen body parts, call a day's work done when I've sweat through my t-shirt, return home hours before my sister, and spend my time drying the overripe persimmons along the window sill and shaping flaky pastries filled with lotus seed paste. My niece and nephew love to eat them when my sister isn't watching. She thinks sweets will form stones in her children's stomachs. Bezoars are a problem of the long lived.

Our parents both died young. They had my older sister and me early, convinced they needed to leave a mark beyond their headstones. All I remember at that age is the constant scent of burnt flowers and cedar drifting through our home, a practice said to attract blessings to extend your life expectancy. There has not been a single case of anyone postponing their death date. We stopped with the burning nonsense three years ago, after I told my sister that the scent caused my migraines.

I suspect my sister ate up all the blessings meant to be shared with me. Her children both will live long lives, their gravestones even further out from hers. But she spends more time and money trying to sign me up for annual expeditions into the cities than on teaching her kids.

"They have plenty of time," she says.

"They have the potential to do so much," I reply.

I've taught them to dance at our annual ceremonies for the dead, to sweep the tombs of their grandparents and properly place mantou and apples at the stones' feet, to pour Maotai in a row of tiny glasses without spilling, to kowtow deeply and slowly so they have time to formulate their prayers and so my parents have time to take them in. Both of my sister's children are smarter than me. They attend a school that teaches skills honed over years of practice and apprenticeships, while I attended school long enough to learn to read and write and then began working to make the most of the energy left in my body.

My sister's children love the orchards where I work, but more than the orchards, they love the neighboring geese and chicken coops where the fowl cluck and squawk whenever they get too close. They haven't seen me twist the heads off chickens yet. I do that after they go back to school for evening study sessions, while the sun sets and an orange glow illuminates my hands as I work quickly before the sun completely disappears. There are so many chickens that you hardly notice when some get wrung and sold as dinner. I even leave a few eggs to hatch so the kids have a steady supply of chicks to feed worms they dig up from the soil. They used to dig with their hands, but after smearing their homework assignments with mud, my sister refused to let them near the animals unless they wore gloves. Her kids don't wear gloves. Instead, I make sure they wash away the evidence before they leave, digging deep under their fingernails to rinse off the grime.

"Do you feel that you've accomplished enough?" My sister asks me during our evening tea. "That you can leave satisfied with what you've done?"

I've been brewing ginger tea, the roots grown from rhizomes I tossed into a clay pot of earth. My sister prefers ginger tea over my preferred pu-erh tea which she claims tastes like moldy wine.

"I'm content," I say. "You say that like I'm going to fall over any moment. I still have five years. That's a long time."

I distract my sister with questions about her business—the annoying lady who keeps asking her to remold a bracelet for free, the young, handsome craftsman whom all the ladies demand as their jeweler, the fluctuating price of gold these days due to the discovery of a new gold ore cluster. She tells me of the metallogenic belt and the potential of deep-seated gold ores with bismuth. It will be years until they finish digging a mine through the main fracture plane and granite, its completion scheduled for long after I die.

During the summer, my sister's children leave for their apprenticeships. They've decided to follow in my sister's footsteps in the jewelry industry, the only consistently lucrative occupation in a village like ours. I have begun to harvest the strawberry fields. The benefit of dying around my age is my back still fully bends and I easily pick the strawberries that hug the ground.

My sister probes me to take the first trip of this week to the city where she's now convinced I'll find my first love, build a family, and achieve familial fulfillment. "And because there are absolutely no good single men here, all vegetables with ginkgo nuts for brains," she

adds. I refuse. I'd rather use the money to buy her kids tickets, a suggestion my sister waves off because "they can buy their own after they've got their act together."

I lug home a crate of strawberries that have fallen off the plant, unfit for selling but perfectly fine for us to eat. My sister sits at the table, scrutinizing microscopic stones under the light with a pair of tweezers. I begin boiling a pot of milk, crushed almonds, and gelatin and let it set until it hardens. Then I slice away the mushy bits of strawberries and their leaves, my fingers cushioning the underside of the berry, catching the blade as it moves through the fruit. We like strawberry almond tofu because it requires no chewing and our teeth have been thinning like limestone worn down by wind. She and I eat from the same bowl, each holding different-sized spoons, a more ladle-like one for her so she can scoop up the sweet soup and a sharp one for me so I can pick out the berries.

"I'm going to clean the graves," I tell her after we've emptied the bowl.

"Again?" She asks.

"All the loose dust makes them dirty quickly." And I enjoy the stretch of a walk from my stone to hers. Despite the number of treks I've made, I always lose my breath while traveling from my grave to my sister's grave, the distance never-ending, as though I'd sooner see the other side of the mountain. I always finish the journey in under a day though, the distance never longer than what my legs can travel.

She sighs. From across the table, she pulls my hands away from the bowl, my fingers leaving ghost imprints on the porcelain sides. Then she places a slip of paper in my palms. I stare at the rectangular ticket and feel the edge where punctured holes write out its number. "You should at least consider it," she says.

"I will."

Although our deaths are chosen for us, our births are not. Our births are neither blessings nor curses, but rather a random sequence of occurrences through which we manifest from the empty shell created to contain us. My sister filled her shell quickly, her body circulating with blessings and energy only days after she learned to cry. I, on the other hand, remained a doll-like figure until a full year after my birth at which point my parents had nearly given up on me. But the moment I latched onto a soul, I became more lively than my sister—climbing trees and chasing red foxes who'd try to steal the curing meat we'd hang on a clothespin outside. People always assumed I was the one with a later death date since I had so much life to spend.

As I head toward the stones with a rag and broom, I turn around to watch the sunrise over the town and the sole road that leads through the gates. From here, I can see the road wind left and right until it fades into the twilight, further than any amount of distance we can travel. I turn back toward the rows of stones, a few new, blank slates padding the tail end of the cluster. My sister and her children's gravestones appear much closer from here.