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An excerpt from “Gone Case ” by Dave Chua. Published by SNP Publishers Pte Ltd, 1997, pages 1 – 22.

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## O N E

THE SHOUTING starts again while I am looking after the washing machine, which as always drips water and rust from its bottom onto a thin metal pan like an old man whose plumbing has given way. The voice crying is that of a young girl; the voice that shouts is a man's, loud and furious. The girl, I think, is six or eight or ten. I don't know. I am not able to tell how old someone is by their voice. I just know the person shouting drowns out all the other noises, noises of televisions spitting out, mahjong tiles crackling like static, cars and motorcycles starting up and coughing on the roads below.

I get off the stool and walk over to the grill, trying to tell where the voices come from. The man is telling the girl to shut up, so loud his lungs must explode. It is eight pm now and almost all the flats on the other side are lit. I could see families having dinner, or gathered about the television, or hanging their laundry out. At one flat there is a child staring out, a girl who is gripping the grill of the window, her face hidden by the half-drawn curtains. There is no clue, no sign of where the noise is coming from. Eventually my eyes rest on a flat where a single dress

hanging from a clothes-pole sways in the wind, a flat whose glazed windows reflect back the lights from this block. I try to hear it again, but I am not sure if it comes from there. Noise echoes around the flats and it is impossible to tell.

Ah Por calls for me from the living room. She has been watching the television serial but as usual, she has difficulties following.

– Ah Yong, come here see, she calls in Cantonese. She points to the television. – What's going on now?

I sit down and flip open the television weekly and try to figure everything out from the story summary and the subtitles.

– Uh...this man in white shirt is trying to get money from the black shirt man. He...has photos. He knows about the other guy's past.

Grandma nods, not that she understands, but to show that she is listening. The television is loud, and the shouting and weeping from the other block becomes lost.

I try my best to translate what is happening from the television magazine, sometimes flipping my head back to check that the pan under the washing machine has not overflowed. But it is well behaved today. Maybe like a wound, the hole at the bottom is gradually healing over time.

My parents aren't back yet. They are out but not together. Ti is with Ma, buying another pair of shoes for his quickly growing feet. Pa is probably out with some friends. I am left at home because of Grandma but she does not know that. She is old so we are very careful. There are cheats and liars and something could happen to her if no one is around. Somebody stuck his hand through the grill and tore the necklace off a woman here a few

months ago, running off down the stairs before she could even scream for help. It is like that here.

Ma comes back after about an hour and Ti rushes around the room waving his shoes.

– Ha! You don't have! He pushes them at me.

– Wanna die. Nike some more. Wahleow. I give him a hard pat on his head.

Grandma examines the shoes carefully, flipping them from every angle as if she is trying to understand what makes them so special.

– How much? she asks.

– Aiyah, Ma replies. – Once in a while. Last longer also, I hope. His feet grow like watermelon. She throws the unused umbrella behind the shoe rack.

Ti sits in front of the television and becomes silent at once.

– Still watch TV? Ma says. She is still in her work clothes, which smell thickly of the creams she has to use at work.

– Aunt wants you two to go to church tomorrow, Grandmother says, patting my brother's head.

– Aiyah. Again. We have stopped going for two weeks. Only Ah Por and my aunt go now, to a church not too far from here. If you lean out the window you can see the neon cross at night, glaring green in the darkness. We thought she would stop asking us to go. To us it is like having a rash that finally goes away and now you find it coming back.

– Tell her they two cannot go. Have to tidy up the house, Ma says, saving us, even though Grandma keeps the flat spotless anyhow, but Ah Por doesn't question Ma's statement. She is only asking us to go because Aunt has told her to.

We are not very religious, unlike the neighbours to the left. They have a red cloth banner above their house and outside their flat there are two red braziers, with rollers at the bottom and holes running down the sides in the shape of chrysanthemums and hearts. Ma and Pa have never been to church, and go to temples once in a while.

– Pa coming back late? Ma asks.

– Don't know. He never call, I say. – Don't wait tonight, Ma.

She shakes her head and goes to her room. Ti keeps on putting and taking off his shoes, running around with them as if he has just discovered his feet. When Ma returns she has taken her make-up off. Her eyes are clearer instead of being hidden by the dark eye-shadow she wears to work, and she looks older. She goes to the kitchen and I follow her just in case the washing machine decided to do something terrible while I was watching TV.

– Lots of water spill out?

– No. Bit better today. The pan is only half full.

She gives a satisfied nod and starts to get some food, digging out the barely warm rice from the rice cooker.

– School starts when?

– Three more weeks.

She nods, looking serious. I pour some water out of an old whisky bottle into a yellow plastic cup and pass it to her.

– Guai.

She stays up very late. In the bedroom, I wait a long time for the line of light beneath the door to the living room to go out, but I fall asleep before it does.

I see Pa in the morning when I wake up. He is in the

bathroom brushing his teeth. His stomach hangs down from him and his moustache sits like a caterpillar on his lip.

– Zhao an, he says. He is trying to smile through the shaving foam.

– Went where last night? I ask.

– Just for a drink.

He makes a rasping sound and spits into the basin.

– Bought some pao for you all. Go eat, he says, wiping the foam off his face with a towel.

– OK. I sit down with him on the dining-room table and lay my hand on a pao. It has meat inside, which I don't like, but I eat it anyway even though it is very salty. Pa has about three cups of coffee, thick and black the way Ah Por makes it. Ma is still sleeping in the room. I could hear her through the slit of the door. We eat in silence, watching the sun emerge from behind some flats in front of us. The dawn light shines on Pa's face, showing the scars and pockmarks. The orange light seems to be trapped in his moustache.

– How are studies?

– School not started yet.

– Orrh. Oh yah yah. He nods, and continues to drink the coffee. He is forcing the food into his mouth, eating impatiently, his cheeks bulging.

My being around seems to make him take a longer time in the house than he usually does. He sits down on the sofa, flipping through the papers but doesn't really read them. He just seems to be waiting to leave. After about ten minutes he puts down the papers and goes to the bedroom, opening the door quietly. When he comes out he is putting on his shirt and fingering his keys.

– Not going to wait for Ma to wake up? I ask.

– No, got things to do. Got to meet friends, he says, jangling his keys.

He unlocks the gate and leaves, taking slow heavy steps as he goes downstairs to the floor where the lift stops.

– Wahleow. Mr Goh again. Every year music also Mr Goh, says Liang.

– Yalor, Sian man.

– Getting fatter and more deaf every year. Hitting the keys so loud. Piang piang piang. He going to destroy that old piano.

– Like shouting every time, then wave his arms around like conductor. Think he Choo Hoey.

Liang gets onto the swing in the playground. He puts his feet on the slide of the seat and starts to spin around. We are at the playground below my flat. Around us, mattresses are draped out of windows like multicoloured tongues and someone is singing badly to a karaoke machine. I hope whoever it is would be done by evening.

– Wait break then you know, I say to Liang as he continues to spin.

– Idiot know my face. First class sure get scolded, always. Lucky next year final year. Buey tahan him. He stops turning the swing and starts spinning back.

– My sister says next year our English teacher strict. Turn in anything late sure to get scolding. But lenient with marks.

– So? Copying your sister homework again? I get on the other swing.

– No lah. Don't dare. Anyway, teachers change. Maybe this year, she not so good.

Liang has a sister who would be in Secondary Four next year. He goes to the same primary school she did so he inherits the teachers, assignments and homework from her. She used to be a very good student but her grades have been falling very badly.

Liang got into trouble last year when he turned in her four-year-old work for the final art project, scrubbing away the old grade marks with ink erasers and passing it in, but the teacher found out and made him do a new one.

He jumps over to the monkey bar and hangs there, swaying slightly.

– You heard about what happened at block 257?

– No, what?

– Wahleow. You never read papers one. Someone died in his flat, third floor, then they just discover when the neighbours smell something weird. He there almost two weeks liao. When they find him, there got maggots crawling all over him, and flies flying around. His stomach bloated.

– OK OK. Enough lah. I can imagine.

– Ha ha. Yah man...dead for two weeks and no one knows.

– How come? He don't have a family?

– All in Malaysia. Later we go see, want?

– No, don't want.

– Why, scared ah?

I try to change the subject. – So the flat now how?

– I also don't know. You want to buy?

– Of course not. I swing myself down from the monkey bar and try to do a pull-up. – But someone will stay there anyway?

– Yah, of course. Don't know if you're supposed to tell people if you sell your flat.

- Why?

- Bad spirits. He picks up a playing card somebody has left on the ground. He turns it around in his fingers quickly, like a gambler on a TV show. - Don't know. Who would buy? He jumps to the swing again and starts hurling himself higher, shouting out loud, his boasting voice lost in the rectangular sky.

Liang is a strange child, in many ways. He collects stones, though I call it stealing. Sometimes he shows them to me like they are precious jewels, but I cannot see what it is he likes about them. There are a few which are beautiful - deep black stones with bands of grey and sand running around them, shiny blue marble tiles and a stone which has veins of green that glow in the dark. Others seem to be just plain red brick or small pebbles. Once we were at a teacher's house for Chinese New Year, and when no one was looking he stuck his hand into a fish-tank and grabbed a small white rock.

- Thief, I whispered to him.

- He give so little money for his angpao, so it's OK, he said, rubbing his arm dry on his shirt.

The stones he keeps in the bottom drawer of his cupboard. When he opens it the whole collection would shake and give a heavy rattling sound. The stones are placed so they don't touch one another, like jewellery at a shop, on top of clear sheets of old mahjong paper.

- What you collect for? I ask.

- Just because...they are nice. Anyway, stones are free. That's why nobody miss them even if I take.

- You should be a geologist.

- What's that?

– Somebody who study rocks and stone.

– Don't want lah. You know what I want to be.

He wants to be a pilot, and is very serious about it. He has perfect eyesight, and he tries to keep his eyes closed whenever he could, to save his eyes, he says. He knows a bunch of eye exercises he made the PE teachers teach him, and he would run through the exercises after recess, locking himself in a stall in the toilet so the others in class would not know.

Aunt has come to get Grandma to church again.

– You sure you don't want to go? She makes it sound like it is a trip to a sweet shop.

– Yah, I say. – Very sure. She doesn't show any disappointment, which is what I was hoping for.

On our first trip to church she placed us right in front of the pastor, but my brother kept fidgeting which distracted the people around us. Aunt had bought us these nice shirts and ties to go with black important shoes which Ma was not happy about. She never likes people spending money on us. Both my brother and I had talcum powder on us. Our necks were streaked with white and it made us uncomfortable. My hair was combed to one side and Brylcreemed until it shone. During the service Ti and I kept pinching each other and since the pastor spoke in Mandarin, we were not able to understand much. Aunt seemed quite embarrassed but she would not give up so easily.

The next time around she placed us further back, but that didn't help much as I yawned through most of the service, having stayed up late for the last show the night before. After that it was upstairs, but Ti accidentally

dropped a bible and almost hit a bald-headed man down the row. He cursed at us in Hokkien, and the other people in church looked around in shock. Aunt leaned over and had to keep on apologising, and we left early. Later it was right at the back upstairs for us, but when Ah Por saw how bored we were she asked my aunt to let us off. Aunt wasn't too happy about it but she was satisfied with having just Ah Por go. So we have gradually been moved out of the church – going from the very front to the back until we are finally out.

She asks Ma and Pa, as usual, and Ma just shakes her head and says no tiredly. This would not stop Aunt from asking the next time, I am sure. She always asks. But we are always kind to her, because she is unmarried and in her mid-thirties. Once Ma said I was rude to her, even though all I did was not reply to her question, and made me apologise to her.

Aunt is hard to like. She always ends up doing the wrong things. She cooks dinner even though we hate it because she puts too much salt in everything, and she leaves us books – thick Enid Blyton books or Christian comics about the size of matchboxes – which we put away and place in shoe boxes when she isn't around, just in case one day she would ask for them. When we aren't around she would go to our room and put our books of Greek legends, NeZha, the Water Margin, the Monkey King and the Journey West below while her books take over the highest levels of the bookshelf.

She is kind but in a way that makes you afraid of her, like those salespeople in shops who smile too much. My brother and I make fun of her, saying how many wrinkles she has and what thick glasses she wears over her small eyes.

– Big four eyes. Big four eyes, we would say when she isn't around.

Ma would shake her head at us if she hears us. It seems that being unmarried makes anything she does forgivable.

– Grandma is going to be in a performance! Aunt says. She has rushed back from church and is wearing one of her bright dresses, with birds and musical notes printed on it.

– Is it? I say, not very interested.

– Yah ya. She will be performing for Christmas. So you all must come down and watch. She takes a deep breath. – And you know what she going to be dressed as?

– An angel? Ma says. She breaks open the cucumber and starts to slice it quickly into thin slices.

– So bu liao. Your aunt, really.

My grandmother does not seem to mind. She returns with a large plastic bag under her arm the week after.

– Inside is what?

– Come into the room. I'll show you.

She turns over the bag and lets two pieces of styrofoam spill onto the bed. They are shaped like large wings, with the edges trimmed in purple ink to look like feathers.

– What for?

– For performance. They want me to wear it.

She touches the wings and places them aside carefully. Ti looks at them with a sense of disappointment, hoping

for something more interesting. He jumps back to the sofa to watch television.

– For Christmas? I ask.

– Yah. You and the rest have to go see you know? she says. She has been listening too much to Aunt, I think.

My grandmother practises her singing at home now. We close the door behind us when she sings. When no one is around, I press my ear to the door and listen to her sing. Her voice trips over the words. She can't seem to connect them. Occasionally she runs out of the room to look for me, points to a word and asks me how to read it, but I cannot figure it out as well. We would then flip through the dictionary, and if we can't find the word we would call my aunt who left us her pager number just for that purpose.

– Don't be afraid to call, she had said. – Don't care what time.

I come back from school and find Ah Por in the kitchen chopping green onions. She has those styrofoam wings attached on her back and is wearing a white nightgown and the red-and-yellow clogs we use in the kitchen. I ask her why she has not taken the wings down.

– No time. Got rehearsal tonight and I forgot the time. She turns slowly, trying to avoid hitting the wings on the side tables.

– I help you remove, I say.

– It is OK lah, she says.

She throws the broccoli and the beef into the pot. It crackles, spitting oil and churning up smoke. I pass her the corn powder, trying to help her to move as little as possible. The kitchen feels warm, not just from the

cooking heat but from the evening sun coming in through the back windows.

– Take off your wings, I say

– Doesn't matter. Just a while. Just a while only.

Eventually she sits down on one of the stools and I reach over, carefully pulling the strap back while her hands go to the back. I place them carefully on the dining-room table, afraid that they would break. Already white flakes are falling all over the floor, as the styrofoam seems to slowly disintegrate in my hands. I push it away.

She continues with her cooking without a word. When Ma comes back and sees the wings on the table she moves them to the sofa.

– So big. So troublesome. She sighs and but lays them on large pieces of clear plastic. I don't think she wants Grandma to hear her complain.

Someone from the church comes and drives her to the rehearsal. Ah Por clutches her wings as she leaves the flat.

After that my aunt comes to check on my grandmother occasionally. My father does not like it, but he never says anything in front of Aunt. Only when she is gone and Grandmother is not around.

– She come here do all this for what? Ah Ma so old liao.

– Nothing to do at home, I say, trying to sound helpful.

– No, nothing for her to do, Pa says.

Sometimes during the holidays, we would drag Grandma down to play ping pong. It is the only sport that Grandma would do, and after watching all those TV programmes about heart disease and cancer we think it would be good

for her to exercise just so she would be around longer. We use slow, thick paddles, and sometimes we drag Ma along so we can play doubles. Ma is pretty good and could beat me, even though I was on the school reserve team.

Grandma plays with her paddle almost flat and tends to hit the ball almost vertically, so it comes up to you in a volley, hitting the table almost at the edge and bouncing far behind so you have to run after it. She does this several times, which makes me almost want to swear at her. I don't smash against her, though Ti tries to but his smashes aren't powerful at all.

– Ball an egg you also cannot break, I say. He tries to hit harder but the ball is barely able to get across the table.

Ma is good. She folds her body up and could serve the ball in a curve, and you couldn't be sure where it would spin. She always gives me tips on what to do and makes me practise in front of a wall. The others would just watch.

– You know fat Andrew? Liang asks, as he swings his body on the monkey bar.

– Yah, why?

– He already studying for PSLE liao.

– Holidays also study? Xiao.

– Fucking xiao.

– He got tuition teacher right?

– Yah, every day. Got computer quiz, got mother, got assessment. Kiasi. Kiasu.

– Kiasi, Kiasu. You? Got study or not?

– Don't have lah. Don't even know what the books look like. You?

- A bit
- Wahleow. Your ma make you?
- Yah.
- OK OK. Means I must also start.
- No need lah.
- See how man.

He sighs and drops down from the monkey bar. I let go of the old metal too. There are thick spots of paint flakes on my palms.

- Tomorrow they'll be upgrading this playground.
- For what?
- Better things.
- It's OK already. What for?
- You tell them lah.
- So last time to play here.

- Yah. So better enjoy it while you can. Things don't last long here, he says. Then he becomes quiet as he goes from swing to bar to slide.

Sometimes I lie awake and look down upon Grandma sleeping. Her hair is almost gone now. I cannot remember a time when it was not grey, or if it ever covered her head fully. She always sleeps very near to the side, leaving most of the bed unwrinkled when she wakes up. I ask Ma about that, and she says Ah Por sleeps that way because Grandfather was a big man, who took up a large space on the bed. I ask her if there are any photos of Grandpa, and she says she would check but she always forgets.

All I remember of Ah Gong is a man cradling me, holding my head with one hand and my small body with the other. His hands felt large and his fingers thick and

strong, a cold metal ring pressing into the back of my head while the rest of his hand felt like old leather. It felt both frightening and safe to be in his hands, which were strong and protective but if they closed in tightly they would crush my head as easily as a peanut shell. Still, they were kind hands and if he seemed to be shifting me around, it's because he was not holding me properly.

Ah Por tells me that Ah Gong had always been an angry man. He had fought against the Japanese during the war, the Communists after that during the Emergency, and even the British. He fought with whoever came along, she says. Always coming back with large bruises, like he had dipped his body in ink. After the war, he earned a living as a bus driver and an accountant. Once, during a riot, students tried to overturn his bus, and he ran out and using a stick single-handedly bashed five of them and scared the rest away.

– He tried to teach all of us martial arts. Donno what kungfu.

I beg her to show me.

– No, she laughs. – So old liao, can't remember any of it. Your uncle was the best, but now too bad. Can't even stand properly now. His stomach sure pull him down forward. She laughs.

Grandmother's memory isn't bad, just slow. You could ask her something, and she would have a worried look on her face if she couldn't remember it at once, but once she knows the answer, she would shout it out suddenly at you. Some things she could remember immediately, but some of the most obvious things not at all, like where she has placed the knives even though she cleans them every day. Sometimes, a week after you asked her something, she would come to you and tell you.

When things arrive at the house, she would know where to put them. We didn't have much space, so she would look at the object and figure out where it should be placed. Plates and cups she stores away, and I think for those things which do not fit in the house she throws them away or accidentally breaks them. There was a large purple vase my uncle bought for us, which we put on the living-room table but it got in the way of everything. One day she knocked it down, breaking it and she just apologised, even though we were glad to see it gone. Uncle didn't make much of a fuss about it, and wanted to buy us a replacement but Pa protested.

She keeps things in order. I've watched her tidy up the house in the morning, putting things back to where they were before. Even if we have messed it up – mudprints all over the floor and dust everywhere – by the afternoon the flat would be clean.

The only trouble she has is when it rains, because you couldn't really hear it from our floor, or notice it. Sometimes she couldn't tell and the clothes will get wet. Our neighbours would knock on the door and tell her about the rain. She is always very grateful, thanking them again and again. There are other things she could not get used to, like automatic doors, which button to press for the lift door to open or close, which bus to take. Sometimes she would just take the stairs, or walk all the way to wherever she needs to go. She hates to trouble us and she never complains though she would just shake her head sometimes. I don't think she ever gets angry. It seems anger is an emotion she is not capable of letting go.

It is the week before Ah Por's performance and a young

woman from her church comes in to help with her singing. The number of songs she is supposed to sing has been cut down from five to two and then to one, and this woman tries to help her with that one song. Ah Por keeps forgetting the words or mispronouncing them.

– Again, she says and rewinds the tape to play the same muffled piano tune. The woman smiles in an enthusiastic manner. She sings in a very powerful way, making the notes shiver. I try not to be in when they are practising but sometimes it's raining and I'm trapped inside. I don't want to hide in the master bedroom as I'm afraid of offending Ah Por, so I just wait and watch them practise.

Ah Por tries very hard, but does not seem to be able to reach the notes. Her throat is going dry, and I have to make trips to the kitchen to keep her cups filled. Still she struggles on, her voice becoming softer as the singing continues.

– Good good, the woman always says in encouragement. Wiping the sweat off her brow, she continues to coach Grandma who just tries her best.

The day of the performance is Christmas eve. We never celebrate Christmas, even though we are getting more and more Christmas cards every year. These we hang from the grill of our window or place on the side table next to the couch. This seems to give my aunt great pleasure – she must be thinking that there is hope for us after all.

The crowd at the church is larger than usual. There are teenagers standing outside, shielding the sun with files and

leaflets while people stream in and children cry in the heat.

My grandmother came earlier. She has to wear thick sunglasses because of the scorching sun, rectangles of black that makes her look as if she is blind. She wears her white gown and underneath, a white shirt and long pants.

– So hot, Ma.

– OK lah. If not everything also can see. So embarrassing. She was sweating feverishly. – Just two performances. But her smile was small and worried.

A man from the church drove Grandma away. Brother and I watched from above as she stepped into the dull yellow van, Aunt holding her wings under her arm.

– So troublesome, my brother said.

– Yah. Aunt lor. Grandma is one of those people you could not blame for anything, so we had to pick someone else.

We manage to squeeze into the church. I use my elbow to push away a fat woman who stands blocking the church door. Aunt has reserved us some places.

– Third row from front? Can't we sit at the back? Pa says. He is wearing a shirt and a simple blue-striped tie, and I can smell his sweat mixed with his cologne. My brother and I are dressed in our church suits, Brylcreem and talcum powder all over our heads.

– No, sit in front lah, my aunt says. Before Pa could add anything she rushes behind the stage.

We sit down and Pa smiles at the people around us. The men here are in suits and ties. The women wear long flowing dresses and even the children are neatly dressed. I finger my collar. I know Ma is uncomfortable. She is looking all around the church, turning her head to look at

everything but never for very long. We feel like intruders, except for my brother, who is chewing on some sweets and sliding some number game around. Eventually we have to move in closer, squeezing in so tightly I am pressed hard against Ma and Ti. When the pastor signals for us to stand up, I pull my brother up by his collar and slap him lightly on his cheeks. He swallows his sweet and Pa places a hand on the back of his head. My brother keeps quiet after that, his hands so straight it seems he is standing at attention while all around us voices start to sing.

The woman next to my mum breathes out every note, opening her mouth wide in a circle. Ma opens the hymn book and stares at it, while the man next to Pa offers him his and Pa just leans forward to look at it. My brother and I share a book but we are not singing, our mouths just opening and closing like a fish. Behind us are a group of students who sing perfectly, shouting out the words in a way that reminds me of soldiers giving orders.

Eventually, the song ends and we sit down, relieved. Then the pastor tells us to wish the persons next to us "Merry Christmas" and we turn around and shake hands and Pa mumbles "Merry...Merry..." and Ma smiles and by now I'm sure these people know we don't come here often.

– Merry Christmas, I tell Ti before squeezing his hand hard. It makes him wince but he doesn't say anything. I smile to myself that I got away with it.

The hall is full. On either side of the bench there are people standing in the corridors. One lady has a smile so large it looks as if her round face is about to explode, her cheeks warm and red.

When the pastor starts to speak again I tug at my father's hand. He has never been to church before, and he is very uncomfortable, constantly adjusting his tie. My brother looks bored. Ma seems half asleep in the heat. The pastor is giving a long speech about the meaning of Christmas and father frowns. He starts to rub Ti's neck.

Eventually the speech ends, with Ma's head almost horizontal. I nudge her awake and she looks around embarrassed, trying to cover a yawn.

The performances begin. The man next to Pa is annoyed that Pa is not paying much attention, the man's face grumpy as he places his hands on his thighs, his moustache wiggling slightly. Everyone else is watching attentively. We seem to be adrift in a world where everyone is sure of where they're going, except us, the lost souls.

A group comes on stage and tinkles brass bells and after that a children's choir. A bunch of mothers gather around taking pictures. My eyes become cloudy with blurry spots from the flashlights.

Finally, Grandma's performance starts. It is something about three kings and Jesus and Joseph and Jesus's birth, with most of the characters wearing wigs or cloths on their heads or clothes that look warm in this weather. Grandmother just stands there most of the time, while the other singers take their turns, including the woman who coached Ah Por.

Eventually it is Grandma's turn, a moment which I am waiting for with dread for her. She starts to sing, but her voice is weak, and even from where we are we could hardly hear her. Her voice cracks over the words again and again. Still nothing. She seems to know it and there is a sad look on her face.

Then when her voice is barely louder than a whisper the other actors on the stage join in, while around us people start to sing as well, looking at the lyrics on the song sheets. Even Pa and Ma try to follow in the melody, though Pa sounds like he is grunting throughout. Ah Por's voice is gone by now. All I see are her lips moving.

Behind the curtains, I see my aunt lean over, smiling victoriously, not knowing what I know is the truth – Ah Por is singing not for herself or the church or Pa or Ma but for her – my grieved aunt – as if trying to replace some happiness lost to her unmarried daughter, as if Grandma owes her that much.

Then as the lights dim and I lean back and watch, as the crowd bring the song to its finale, as they begin to clap loudly in kindness, my grandmother waves her arms, then steps back into the darkness and is swallowed up and gone.

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