



Completed in December 1959 under the title "Wo yu Jiali po" 我與假黎婆 (The Gari woman and me). First published under the present title in January 1960.

## 1. My Grandma from the Mountains

### 假黎婆

#### I

One day my eldest brother, returning from the trip he made to our native village every year at the spring equinox, said he had run into our grandma's younger brother. He said this brother of Grandma's really missed us and hoped to come here for a visit sometime soon. This news excited me, and at the same time, for some reason I could not put a name to, it brought feelings of both sadness and nostalgia.

This grandma of ours was not the blood grandmother who gave birth to our father; she was our grandfather's second wife. Our blood grandmother died very young, leaving us no impressions of her at all. Whenever we mentioned "Grandma" we always meant this stepgrandmother of ours. In fact, this grandma had truly replaced the one we never knew, not only in terms of status and name, but also emotionally. She was fully worthy to be called "Grandma." She loved and looked after us, especially me, according to the ways of her race; the others were often jealous of her favoritism toward me.

She was a "Gari"—our Hakka word for aboriginal. When I talk about being loved and cared for "according to the ways of her race," I certainly don't want to imply that anything was lacking. She couldn't tell us the story of the Ox Herd and the Spinning Maid, nor could she teach us to chant "Moonlight so bright, plant ginger tonight." But she compensated with other things, and these other things were so beautiful, precious, and, for most people, difficult to come by.

As far as I know she never told lies to us children and she never lost patience with us. She was always even-tempered and her face was tranquil, sober, and calm; she always seemed to be smiling a profound, almost imperceptible smile. This expression of hers imparted a feeling of serenity and peace. I only once saw her lose her habitual calm. During the winter rice harvest one year, early one morning she went into

the fields to hull rice. Suddenly the others saw her leaping about in the paddy, crying out loudly and waving her arms wildly in the air. Eventually she started howling and weeping. It was as if she were bewitched. When the other adults went over to her they found worms crawling all over the ground, so many that every footstep would trample seven or eight. Earthworms were what Grandma feared most all her life. Her elder daughter laughed so much that she had to squat down, but in the end she was the one who took Grandma on her back and carried her all the way home.

Grandma was very short, with a sharp chin, slender, and dark of complexion. She always braided her hair and coiled it all round her head Gari-style. Her wrists and the backs of her hands bore beautiful tattoos. It wasn't until I was a bit older that I learned that she was a Gari, and even then I found that it had no significance at all for me. Whether intellectually or emotionally, I simply couldn't accept this as a basis for looking at her, thinking about her, or evaluating her. It would have been too confusing for me. Even with her Gari hairstyle and tattooed hands, all I knew was that she was my grandma, nothing more. This was the only basis for me to know her, be close to her, remember her.

## 2

I don't know when or how I latched on to Grandma. I really wanted to know, so I often asked her to tell me. If she was in the mood she would smilingly but perfectly seriously agree to my request. This is how it went: she said that one morning she went to the river to do the washing and saw a Hoklo<sup>1</sup> woman abandoning a child under a stand of bamboo. She waited until the Hoklo woman had gone some distance

1. Apart from "Grandma," who belonged to the Paiwan 排灣 aboriginal people of south Taiwan, Zhong Lihe's family were Hakka Chinese. The Hoklo or Hokkien Chinese, otherwise known as Minnanren 閩南人 (South Fujianese), were, and still are, the large-majority ethno-linguistic group in Taiwan. At the time of the setting of this story the Hoklo accounted for over 75 percent of Taiwan's population; the Hakka were, and still are, the second-largest ethno-linguistic group, with nearly 20 percent. The Hakka of Taiwan, like their kin in Mainland China, are scattered across the islands in enclaves surrounded by Hoklo settlement. Often these Hakka townships occupy hillier terrain that is more remote from the larger cities. Meinong is a good example of this, as one of Kaohsiung's more remote districts, with Hakkas still today accounting for over 80 percent of the population.

away, then went and picked up the child, put it in her basket with the washing, and took it home. That baby grew up to be me.

Later, when I was bigger, I learned that every mother told her little darling this story about finding him abandoned and taking him home. However, in those other narratives the woman abandoning her baby was always a "Gari," whereas my grandma made her a Hoklo woman.

That was the only difference.

From what I heard I eventually figured out that it must have been during the year of my little brother's birth that I first latched on to Grandma. With this baby even littler than me at her breast, Ma couldn't look after me as well. And yet, I still had to drink milk, so what was to be done? This is how my grandma came to be responsible for feeding me condensed milk. In those days thermos flasks were still unknown to ordinary folk, and so for my every meal Grandma had to light the stove and boil water for the condensed milk. She really had quite a job of it back then, for two years of my life, until I was weaned around the age of three.

I know very little of this earliest period of my life. I should begin my narrative with my earliest memory, but that too is far from clear. I only remember a very dark room and patiently lying in bed pretending to sleep. Ma was humming tunelessly in a very nasal voice as she caressed my little brother. She hummed and hummed, then gradually fell silent, leaving only the sound of even, peaceful breathing. That was when I softly, quietly slipped down from my bed and tiptoed, feeling my way through the darkness, into my grandma's room. Grandma was clearly startled to see me, but she didn't scold me. I told her the smell of pee in Ma's room was very strong, and I couldn't get to sleep. Grandma sighed and let me lie down beside her.

Before long, Ma came looking for me.

"I knew he'd sneak into your room. He can't sleep soundly anywhere else." I heard her saying this to Grandma, then calling my name: "A-He, A-He."

I didn't answer, didn't move.

"He must be asleep." This was Grandma's voice.

"He's got to be kidding us! How could he fall asleep so quickly?" Ma spoke again, and then she called to me again, now shaking me at the same time: "A-He, A-He."

Still I didn't answer, and didn't move.

"Let him be!" said Grandma. "Just let him sleep here."

"But you haven't been all that well," said Ma guiltily. "He'll bother you with all his nonsense."

At this I felt I had to say something, so I said, "I won't bother Grandma."

I heard both Ma and Grandma laugh, and then in a little while Ma left the room.

So that's how I latched on to my grandma, and stayed attached to her right up until I grew up and left home to go a-wandering. In the story of my life she was the person I was closest to, clung to, ahead of my parents and siblings. I almost monopolized her love—even her two natural-born children, my two aunts, got a lesser share than me.

### 3

But back then I still didn't know Grandma was a Gari.

One day, Ma was chatting with a neighbor when suddenly something she said flew into my ear. Ma said, "Garis don't understand about years of age, all they know is that when the mangoes are in flower again another year has passed." This sentence particularly caught my attention because I had the feeling that it somehow had to do with my grandma. However, I wasn't at all sure that this was really the case, so when I saw Grandma I asked her if she was a Gari.

"You're not, are you?" I asked tentatively.

"How could you doubt it?" Grandma replied, smiling sweetly. Her warm, loving nature shone out from her face in a soft radiance. She stretched out her right hand toward me, asking, "Does your ma have tattoos like these?"

I had known those tattoos all my short life but didn't know they had any special meaning. Only now did I understand the meaning, but even so I still couldn't make out whether or not Grandma was a Gari. I looked at her face, and then I looked at her long gown. Her face was smiling; her gown was the same one she had always worn, as long as I could remember. I realized how muddleheaded I had been.

"Now that you know Grandma's a Gari," Grandma cupped my chin to make me look up at her, "do you still like Grandma?"

Clearly she had never troubled herself about the matter, which was a good thing for both of us.

I dived into her arms. "I like Grandma."

"That's right!" Grandma stroked my head. "That's Grandma's Little Puppydog!"

"Little Puppydog" was Grandma's pet name for me.

I knew that Grandma had two older brothers back home, one of whom had died, leaving a son. She also had a younger brother, who had spent a few years living with us, feeding our oxen, so he spoke good Hakka. Moreover, he had an honest, amiable face, lacking the mountain people's fierce warlike appearance. If not for the *guba*<sup>2</sup> at his waist and the turban on his head I wouldn't have known he was a Gari. He and I were really close; we really got on well together.

I noticed that when her brothers came to visit Grandma seemed very wary, keeping a watchful eye on everything they did: at meals she wouldn't let them drink too much; she wouldn't let them go wherever they liked; at night she spread straw on the floor of her room for them. It was plain to see how painstakingly Grandma dealt with her brothers' visits. Her aim was to manage things just so, neither showing favoritism toward her family nor lowering its dignity. Only when she'd achieved this state of irreproachability would she be wholly satisfied. Once, when one of her brothers was leaving, our family gave him a bag of salt and a peck of rice. Grandma let him take the salt but told him to leave the rice behind. Afterward, when I had an opportunity to ask her about this, she stared at me unhappily for a long moment, as if displeased at my question. So then I asked her, didn't my ma give presents to her brothers when they visited?

"We may be Gari," Grandma said, sounding not so much sad as indignant, "but we're not beggars!"

2. *Guba* 孤拔: this is presumably Zhong Lihe's transliteration of an aboriginal word for the machete-like large knives that Paiwan males traditionally carried as cultural and/or status symbols. Such knives, sometimes called "head-hunting" knives [guódāo 藏刀] (but in reality multipurpose), are usually curved, but some types are straight or curved only near the tip. In such various forms they are common among Taiwan's different aboriginal peoples (the so-called Nine Tribes). The *laraw* (Mandarin *lāo* 拉路) of the Atayal people of north Taiwan is particularly famous.

Another time, Grandma's younger brother and his wife came to visit her, bringing the orphaned nephew. It happened to be a holiday—the Dragon Boat Festival, I think. That night, ignoring Grandma's instructions, my family encouraged the visitors to drink as much as they liked. The result was that the boy got roaring drunk; he wouldn't sit still but charged wildly about spouting nonsense. Somehow he managed to break a bowl. His uncle grabbed hold of him and dragged him into Grandma's room.

My grandma was weeping, speechless with rage. She picked up a net bag—her nephew's, I suppose—and flung it down in front of him. As she did so she said over and over, in a dull roar but clearly and distinctly, "You black donkey! You black donkey!"

"Auntie, Auntie," said my ma, who came in and did her best to placate Grandma. "It's our fault for plying him with drink. Today's a holiday, there's no harm in getting a bit tipsy! It's already dark, let him stay until morning."

It took quite some soothing before Grandma went quiet again. And still her tears fell silently.

Next morning I awoke to find the young man had disappeared. When Grandma was out of the room I softly asked her brother where he was.

"He's gone," he answered in a low voice, as though there were something asleep in the room and he was afraid to awaken it.

"When?" I asked.

"Last night."

I felt surprised. But actually I was more surprised about my grandma than about her nephew. I had never seen her so angry.

Grandma's brother gave me a nudge—I heard Grandma's footsteps approaching.

"Don't say anything." His voice was even lower than before, and he shook his head as he spoke.

## 4

One time I fell ill, probably with heatstroke, and was delirious for three days and nights. Everyone gave up hope for me. They wanted to move me from the bed onto the ground, but Grandma would not allow it. She insisted that I was going to get better, apparently perfectly convinced.

To this day it seems strange to me how accurate and reliable her judgment was, as though the line between life and death was visible to her eyes. I wonder whether this had anything to do with the experiences peculiar to her race.

Sure enough, under her day-and-night care, I finally came round on the afternoon of the fourth day. Later Grandma told me that another younger brother of hers—not the one my brother had run into, but another who is dead now—had once been bedridden for five days and nights without being able to eat or drink a single thing, but had got better in the end. She said it was the same with me as with that little brother of hers. She believed that if someone was still alive after days of illness like that, it was a sure sign that they would live. This seemed to be an article of faith with her.

It was toward evening that I began to feel as if I were floating in midair, levitating. Suddenly I heard a sound that seemed to come from the floor beneath me and at the same time from far, far away. Gradually the sound grew clearer and clearer, as I came closer to the floor. It was so familiar, and eventually I recognized it as my grandma's voice: she was singing, singing an aboriginal song.

By now I felt that I had come back down to earth, and was surrounded by solid things again; I no longer felt weightless but could feel my body, arms, and legs. My head felt so heavy and unwieldy, and even my eyelids were too heavy to open. Summoning up all my strength, I finally managed to open them, to find that I was lying in bed. The room was very dimly lit, and my eyes encountered only the gray-white of the mosquito net.

At that moment the singing came to an abrupt halt and Grandma entered my field of vision.

"A-He," Grandma's voice trembled with startled delight. "A-He, you're awake, oh!"

"Grandma!" I cried out feebly.

Slowly I turned my head, then my sight came to rest on her hand.

"Grandma, you . . ." I said, after gazing for a while, but a wave of dizziness made me hurriedly close my eyes. But I was happy. I think I even cracked my mouth in a little smile.

"Look!" Grandma raised the thing in her hand to a place where I could see it more easily.

It was a chopstick wound round with homespun ramie thread, the kind I used for my kite. In the past I was always bugging Grandma to spin some for me, but she had many other things to do and could only spin a little at a time, sometimes only going through the motions to humor me. As a result, I could never fly my kite very high. But now she had spun a bulging coil around the chopstick. She must really have spun a lot this time.

"A-He, hurry and get better and I'll spin you some more," said Grandma, smiling all over her face. "Your kite's sure to fly very high this year."

My aunt came over from her bed to stand behind Grandma at the head of mine.

"Your grandma was spinning for three days and nights." Her bantering tone seemed very deliberate, but I could tell she was just as happy as Grandma. "She never left the foot of the bed while you lay there; she just spun away, really working hard." Then she turned to her mother, saying, "You should sleep now. I'll take over from you."

"I'm not tired," said Grandma.

"Oh, come on!" said Auntie. "If you don't get some rest you might get ill, and then who'll spin kite thread for your Little Puppydog!"

Grandma looked at her daughter and blinked a couple of times as she pondered, apparently still not sure whether she should rest or not, but in the end she went off to bed.

"Well then, A-He," she said to me with a smile. "Grandma's going to lie down for a bit." I saw that her eyes were bloodshot and ringed with dark circles.

"Your grandma hasn't slept for three nights," said Auntie after she had gone. "She wouldn't let anyone else watch over you!"

Then my ma came in from outside.

## 5

One time an ox belonging to Grandma's younger daughter went missing. The next day Grandma took me up the valley to help look for it. It was late summer or early autumn: the sky seemed big and bright and fresh; the trees harbored a profound tranquility and a soft warmth; and the mountains were lightly veiled in mauve mists. We crossed the

"Barbarian Line"<sup>3</sup> and went deep into the heart of the mountains. Now we would be penetrating deep into a densely forested valley; now we would be climbing high up toward the peaks. Although these are actually quite small hills, they looked tall enough to me. When I looked down from up there, the rivers and hills were spread out as if on the palm of my hand. It was the first time I had penetrated so deep or climbed so high in the mountains, and I was terribly happy. I kept flinging my arms in the air.

My grandma seemed very familiar with these places, as if she'd been here only yesterday. She seemed to see nothing special, nothing alarming in those valleys with their towering sides swathed in jungle, and the climbing was nothing to her. When we reached the top she asked me if I was happy, and then she pointed to a col off to the north and told me that was her home. One day she'd take me to visit the place where she grew up.

The col she had pointed to was dim and shady. I saw nothing apart from a cloud lightly floating above it.

Grandma kept singing aboriginal songs. The tunes were soft and mild, full of feeling, novel, and different from the songs the other grownups sang. As she sang she kept walking vigorously; her face bore a bewitching radiance, her eyes flickered animatedly in all directions, and her whole body gave off a brisk vivacity. She seemed much younger than usual.

She kept singing, louder and louder, although you still couldn't really call it loud. Her singing was full of her inner joy and passion, as if something that had been sleeping for a very long time, something jubilant, had suddenly been reawakened. Sometimes she would suddenly stop and fix me with her gaze, as if she wanted to know my

3. From early in the eighteenth century the (Manchu/Chinese) rulers of Taiwan designated districts, mostly above 300-400 meters in altitude, as "barbarian" areas that Han Chinese were forbidden to enter. This system, which arose out of concerns regarding the defense of settlers against the aboriginal tribes, was continued with modifications into the period of Japanese rule, including the time of this story. In the later Japanese period and after the return of Taiwan to Chinese rule in 1945 a revised system of "reservations" was promulgated, with a theoretical emphasis on preserving traditional aboriginal lands.

feelings. She smiled, but then the moment passed and she continued her singing.

Bewitching as this singing grandma was, my inner feelings were of confusion and fear; it was as if this grandma was no longer my own dearest, beloved grandma. This exhilaration of hers seemed to generate a pervasive atmosphere that belonged to her alone, an atmosphere that completely enveloped her and cast me alone and lonely on the outside. This consciousness made me sad and created a distance between us. Sometimes Grandma seemed to notice my dejection; several times when we stopped to rest she pulled me toward her and with surprise and concern in her voice asked me why I was unhappy. Was I not feeling well? At first I stayed silent, but in the end I could contain the feeling of loneliness in my heart no longer and I threw myself into Grandma's arms:

"Stop singing, Grandma! Stop singing, Grandma!" I cried, fervently, agitatedly.

Grandma was startled and completely thrown by my frenzied outburst, and just kept saying, "What's the matter? What's the matter?" Cupping my face with her hands, she made me look up into hers. Looking into my eyes in surprise, she said, "You're crying, A-He? What's the matter with you?"

"Don't sing, Grandma . . .," I bawled again.

Grandma stared at me wonderingly, and then, forcing a smile, she said, "Did Grandma frighten her Little Puppydog with her singing?"

Grandma stopped singing. All the way home she silently trod the path ahead. Her face seemed sad. But as soon as we got home, all these strange feelings vanished. Grandma was Grandma again: serene, quiet and easy, sober and calm.

## 6

From the age of twelve when I left home for school, and later, after graduation, when I traveled around looking for my place in the world, many new things demanded my attention, and my devotion to Grandma imperceptibly diminished, especially as I wouldn't see her for months on end. But Grandma's feelings for me never changed. On the contrary, my absence may actually have deepened her love for me. Whenever I returned home after a lengthy absence she would sit down

with me and have a good long look at me. Sometimes she would lift a hand and move it from the top of my head right down to my heels, as she murmured, "My Little Puppydog's all grown up! My Little Puppydog's all grown up!" From the tone of her voice and the look in her eyes I understood that she was trying to convince herself of this marvel: by some miracle her Little Puppydog had grown up.

Later still my travels took me far across the sea, and for years I never even wrote home. Grandma died at the height of the war, two years before Taiwan became part of China again. In her last illness she kept moaning my name, and on her deathbed she repeatedly asked if there had been any letter from me.

When I returned, guava trees and lush green grass had grown all over Grandma's grave. As I held the burning incense sticks I felt a cold, cold sorrow in my heart.

## 7

Not long after my brother had mentioned it, Grandma's younger brother came to visit. Had he not introduced himself, however, I almost would not have recognized him. This was not just because he had aged, but because his clothing and appearance had changed greatly. No longer did a *guba* hang at his waist; now he wore an old Japanese army uniform. He had cut his hair, so that he no longer wore a turban. His close-cropped hair was already white, and his cheeks were deeply sunken around his toothless gums. The only things that hadn't changed were the gentle, kindhearted look in his eyes and his fluency in Hakka.

I took him to Grandma's grave, where we burned incense and paid our respects. That night we talked until the small hours before going to bed. I noticed that every time he spoke he first shook his head, from which I gathered that things must be pretty tough for him in his old age.

"Hah!" he sighed when I enquired after that nephew of his. "He's no better than a beast."

He told me his nephew was a drunkard, a whoremonger, a layabout, and a good-for-nothing. Apparently these days there were "bad women" (by which he presumably meant prostitutes) in their mountain communities, which there had never been before.

He also said his eldest brother had only had the one son; who'd have known he'd turn out like this? He was all washed up now. As for

his second elder brother, he was childless, and he himself had only a daughter, who was already married.

He shook his head again and said, "It's all because my grandpa took too many heads,<sup>4</sup> that's why we've ended up in this state!"

The next day when he was ready to leave we went to Grandma's grave again and burned a thick stick of incense. As he walked silently ahead of me I suddenly noticed that he was slightly hunchbacked. This discovery intensified my fond, cherished memories of Grandma. I truly felt that I had lost the most important and beloved person in my life.

4. The Paiwan people were, like most other Taiwan "mountain" aboriginal peoples, headhunters. The practice was eradicated during the period of Japanese rule (1895-1945).