

Ka Yin (Wendy) Lam

Copper Stream

10/22/22

An old woman was walking on the road with several cracks caused by high temperatures at the fastest speed that she could. Her face flushed from the almost 50-degree Celsius temperature and then continued moving. She breathed heavily, breathed in the oxygen, and breathed out the carbon dioxide through her mouth and nose. Her back slightly curved, and she carefully hugged a plastic bag with a few things. Her long, dull brown hair swayed slightly between right and left as she was walking. Her brown eyes, with a few thin broken red vessels showing in the white of her eyes, looked carefully at the road. She walked and walked, hugging the bag tightly against her ragged T-shirt, which was sweaty and had a strange smell. She didn't want to let anyone notice the things inside the bag.

Suddenly, a small force pushed against her bony back. The force broke her balance and caused her body to fall to the ground. The force she maintained on the bag loosened and a can of the bag flew out of the bag. A ragged kid with long untrimmed hair ran out and picked up the can with his small hands and ran into an alley quickly. She turned her upper body to find the person who had pushed her, but he had already disappeared. Apparently, that person knew the kid, and they planned this action.

She looked around. There weren't many people on the street, because most of the people were still working to survive. The few people were walking quickly. No one was willing to stop to help her. She was not surprised about that and stood up by herself. She used her hands to sweep off the ash and little rocks on her clothes. She stared in the direction where they went, wanting to chase the kid to get back her food. But she gave up after a few steps, thinking they

must have finished the can and it was useless to chase them. She bent down slowly to pick up her bag, hugged it preciously, and turned in the right direction toward her home and her grandson, who was waiting for her.

As she continued on her way home, she looked at the bag and remembered the can she had lost. She sighed. One can was her wages for about half a day. But it was useless to continue thinking about it, besides... The boy seemed to be only ten years old, the same age as William... Emma took her mind back as she stood in front of the door of a small house. It was a small house, which was made of concrete. There were a few slight cracks on the outside wall of the house. The door was old and had a few cracks on its blue surface.

With a "click", after the key and keyhole made a crisp sound, she pushed the door and walked into the house. A little boy ran out, standing in front of her with a slight smile. He had brown hair and brown eyes like Emma, and a body size that was smaller and not suitable for his age. Suddenly, as he looked at her, he wrinkled his eyebrow.

"Grandma, are you okay?" a weak voice sounded.

"Yes, of course," she replied, with a smile on her face, which was covered by ash and sweat.

"But... your knee is bleeding," he said worriedly, taking a step forward with his little foot, and looking at the wound carefully with eyes that were full of worry.

Emma looked at her knee, bright red blood covering a part of her skin. She started to feel pain at the time she discovered the wound.

"I'm okay, it's not a big deal. Don't worry," she paused, "how is school going?"

"Everything is fine..." he said, with a hesitant tone.

Emma picked up the bag she had been carrying and showed it to her grandson. William took the bag with both hands. There were some cans and bottles of water inside it.

William straightened his back.

"Food!" he exclaimed, with a happy expression on his face.

"Yes, and water too. These are our resources this month," Emma said.

She gave two cans and two bottles of water to William, and put the bag in her space in their bedroom, hiding the bag on the floor next to her sleeping space, which contained the food and water that she had just bought from an upper-class person. William was sitting on the chair in the kitchen, waiting for Emma. The cans and water were placed on the table. Emma sat down, opened the cans, and gave one to William. William picked up some food from his can and put it into Emma's can.

"I am fine. You don't need to give me your food. "

But William continued his actions and didn't stop because of Emma's words. He knew Emma was hungry too.

Emma woke up in the morning at 6 o'clock, opened a can and pulled out a little of the food from the can onto a plate for breakfast for her grandson, and prepared to carry him to school. William put up his ragged clothes and shoes, which were covered with ash, the traces on them proved their old history. He was carrying a schoolbag that was kind of big for him. William was a little silent this morning. He used his brown eyes to stare at the door while waiting for his grandma. His mind was flying away somewhere else. Emma could say that he had often been absent-minded since his dad died. She sighed, took a step forward, and opened the door. It was time to go to school.

Emma held William's hand while walking. They walked on the cracked road, past the fallen houses and the few houses that didn't break in the earthquake from last year, and carefully avoided the utility pole and line on the road, as well as the crack in the road. The sky was dyed a deep blue with a little orange at the bottom. The gradual change between the two colors was a little bit weird. These two colors are so distinct and obvious, they couldn't mix. But finally, the blue would overcome its opposite and return to the beautiful and perfect blue. The sky was the only thing that didn't change throughout the years. Emma recalls memories of her youth. When she was twenty-two years old, the sky was a clear azure. A breeze blew past her, cooling her in the warm surroundings. The leaves in the tree next to her rustled, and the sunlight shined on the tree, bringing energy to them to produce food. She stood in the backyard, stepping on the trimmed grass on the ground. Her husband was hugging their year-old son, saying something to him, and they both laughed.

Emma took her gaze from the air. She lowered her head and glanced at William's face.

"We would all be okay..." Emma murmured, with a bitter smile on her wrinkled face.

Emma's eyes became clear again, occupied with a strong belief. She knew the assumption was the only thing that could support her in the world of continuing tired, seemingly never-ending work and endless life-threatening situations. She strengthened the force in the hand that was holding William's small hand. The hand was small and skinny, but it was so warm. It is the thing I want to protect, my only family in the world. Her wandering thoughts were dragged back by an anxious voice.

"Grandma! Grandma! Look! Is there an upper-class person? Are we supposed to avoid him?" William whispered to Emma, "would he think we disrespect him and don't let us buy food if he saw us ignore him?"

Emma followed the direction William looked at, and saw a young man who was wearing a suit and had something reflected by the sun that seemed to cover his whole body. Is it the so-called protective layer? The one that is expensive but can regulate the surrounding temperature. A surge of admiration and respect came over her. The man was standing next to the dead tree, which was the only plant in the community that hadn't been taken away by the government. He was holding a cigarette that was lit and had a bright red tip at its end. He just held it but didn't take any action with it. When the cigarette was shortened to half, he noticed it and threw it to the ground. He walked away to a man who had just arrived. They all walked away but left the lit cigarette on the ground.

"Grandma, what is it?" William pointed to the cigarette and asked.

"It is something that can hurt your body."

Emma turned her body in William's direction and leaned down to see his eyes.

"Grandma needs to pick it up because it is dangerous. Stay here and shout if you have danger."

William nodded. But as he looked back to the tree, he widened his mouth and stared at the tree, with a scared and unknown sadness surrounding his heart. Emma noticed his expression and turned toward the tree suspiciously and nervously. The leaves of the tree were all off a few years ago. The only color she was supposed to see was brown, which is the color of its body. But now, the tree was covered with brutal colors, mixed with red, orange, yellow, and white. It is fire, Emma thought. The fire climbed up the tree, grew bigger, covered the wood, and ate its body. It was irregular and didn't have volume, started on from a small flame and grew rapidly, so you didn't have any time to react as it grew bigger and became uncontrollable. Once it happened, you couldn't do anything but regret that you didn't notice it earlier. Emma stood still. She had seen

this kind of scene many times before, with the wildfire burning trees, plants, crops, people, and everything. Then and now, she couldn't do anything. People were screaming, running, and escaping to where they believed were safe. Even though they had all experienced a more hopeless situation in some natural disasters, they couldn't stop being scared. Emma turned and took a look in the direction of the upper-class person just gone. She could only see the back of him, and he walked casually and didn't even take a look back at the tree.

Suddenly, William ran to the burning tree, leaned down, and picked something up.

"William!" cried Emma in a panicked voice.

She ran towards him and took him from that place.

"Look! Grandma," William said, showing Emma the object he was holding in his hand.

It was a sprout, with two small yellow leaves. William picked it up carefully, so its root was still there. Emma widened her eyes. She had not seen a fresh life for a long time since the food and plants were held by the government for better production. Plants couldn't survive in those hot and dry conditions naturally. All plants should be given to the government. She knew the rule. But she looked at William's smile. She hadn't seen his smile for a long time since his dad died.

"Do you like it?" Emma asked.

"Yes, it is beautiful. Is it what you call a plant?" William said excitedly.

Emma looked at him. Maybe we could keep it a little longer, she thought.

"Hide it, William, don't let anyone see it. We will be in danger if anyone discovers it. You can keep it for now, but you need to turn it in to the government next week. Do you understand?"

"Yes!" William hesitated a little when he heard they would be dangerous, but decided to protect this little sprout before turning it in.

Emma held William's hand again and walked quietly away to the tree and crowds. She went to the factory she worked in after taking William to school. As usual, people focused on work and kept silent. Emma walked to her position and started to do her work also. She didn't want to lose her job, because it was the only way to let them get food and survive.

It was 8:30 p.m. Her job was finally finished, and her colleagues were all gone. Emma stood up and packed up her things. Her hands and back were exhausted after a long time working and staying in the same place. Her eyes couldn't function as well as they did when she was twenty. The view in front of her was blurry because of the unpaused concentration. As her stomach cramped, she remembered that she hadn't eaten any food today.

When she was ready to go, she heard a voice from the room of the factory manager. She didn't care at first but saw the man who caused the fire in the morning enter the room. She wanted to go out but stopped in front of the door. The door didn't close completely, leaving little space. Curiosity was fighting with guilt in her heart. But the fear wins the battle and leads her to decide to leave. But as she tried her best to not make a sound and go forward, she heard a little of their conversation.

"...Lower-class? Ha, they're all our slaves. They have to work if they want to survive. If they want to resist, the only end is death. They don't have any other choice as long as we control all food," the manager said.

"The food supply is stable now. The period is perfect for us. We can raise the price of food, so they need to do more work..." a strange voice sounded.

"When could we move to another planet? I can't bear to wear the protective layer anymore. It is annoying," the manager said.

"We still need about half of the year..."

Emma walked silently away, afraid to be discovered. Her face was pale, her lips opened and shaking slightly. Her eyes seemed bigger than usual, and her eyelid was shivering. The new information was like a flood to her, there was too much for her, and she didn't know how to deal with it. Something in her heart was broken. Would they bring us to the new planet? When could we end this kind of life? No one could answer these questions. I keep believing the government will protect us and follow its promise. But what did they do? Cause the tree to catch fire and go directly without an apology? Keep increasing the price of food to an incredible price? The emotion that was stored in Emma's heart almost spilled over. Great depression and fear went to Emma, but now, she didn't have anything to hope for. What should I do next to protect William? She walked slowly home and put her key in the keyhole, but no one was there.

"William? William? Where are you?!" Emma called, but no one answered.

She walked around the small house, but no one was there either. Her brain blanked, her feet lost their force to stand, and she fell and didn't know what to do next.

"School... he must be in school..." Emma murmured, running out of the house without closing the door.

She remembered her son and her son's wife, William's dad and mom, who died in a wildfire. On the morning of that day, they were excitedly talking about their plan for the trip. But they didn't come back that day. The only things they left for her and William were the things they used and their photos. She couldn't imagine if William died or had been kidnapped or eaten by someone or animals, or if any bad thing happened to him.

The school was surrounded by a lot of lower-class people. The place, where there was originally a school, was displaced by a fallen building with dirt and rock on it. A landslide just



happened there. There was a mountain next to the school. There were no trees or plants. They were either burned by wildfire or removed by the government.

Emma ran, yelling her grandson's name. She moves her frail and old body toward the school. She kept calling William's name and bent her back to dig in the dirt with her hands, which could clearly show bones. She didn't stop, even with her voice hoarse and her hands full of blood and cuts caused by sharp rocks in the dirt.

"Grandma...grandma... I am here..." a faint voice sounded.

"William! Are you here?" Emma surprised, leaned her body down to hear the voice.

"...I am here..."

She dug in the dirt and moved the pieces of the wall until she saw William, who was under a table with the other two kids.

"William!" Emma exclaimed, hugging William with her hands, which were full of blood and dirt.

She couldn't hold her tears anymore, with a complex emotion mixed with despair and sadness at the fact that she couldn't return to her 'normal' life anymore, couldn't let William live a life full of happiness and safety; angry with the government and upper-class people; lost and confused about the future; grateful and happy that William was still alive.

"Grandma... look!" William showed the sprout that was protected and held in his hand, with eyes full of tears.

"I am fine, don't worry..." William said, putting his hand on her back and trying to comfort her with his best.

"Yes... as soon as you are here, we will be okay," Emma said, wiping her tears.

"William...do you like our life right now? What would you do if we didn't have food anymore?" Emma asked hesitantly.

"...We can plant! We can use the sprout to plant a lot of food!" William whispered to her, still remembering the promise of not letting other people discover the sprout.

Emma was amazed for a moment, then smiled. There must be a way to handle it. Maybe this way could work if we tried it. Maybe it would be our hope.