There, in the midst of her antique shawls, the old ancestral calligraphy and multicoloured embroidered hangings, beneath the mysterious shelves of sweet herbs and bitter potions, we would continue doing what we had started that morning, the elaborate wind chime for her death.

“Can’t last forever,” she declared, when she let me in on the secret of this one. “It will sing and dance and glitter,” her long fingers stretched into the air, pantomiming the waving motion of her ghost chimes. “My spirit will hear its sounds and see its lights and return to this house and say goodbye to you.”

Deftly she reached into the grocery carton she had placed on the chair beside me. She picked out a fish-shaped amber piece, and with a long needle-like tool and a steel ruler, she scored it. Pressing the blade of a cleaver against the line, with the fingers of her other hand, she lifted up the glass until it cleanly snapped into the exact shape she required. Her hand began to tremble, the tips of her fingers to shiver, like rippling water.

“You see that, Little One?” She held her hand up. “That is my body fighting with Death. He is in this room now.”

My eyes darted in panic, but Grandmama remained calm, undisturbed, and went on with her work. Then I remembered the glue and uncorked the jar for her. Soon the graceful ritual movements of her hand returned to her, and I became lost in the magic of her task: she dabbed a cabalistic* mixture of glue on one end and skillfully dropped the braided end of a silk thread into it. This part always amazed me: the braiding would slowly, very slowly, unknotted, fanning out like a prized fishtail. In a few seconds the clear, homemade glue began to harden as I blew lightly over it, welding to itself each separate silk strand.

Each jam-sized pot of glue was precious; each large cork had been wrapped with a fragment of pink silk. I remember this part vividly, because each cork was treated to a special rite. First we went shopping in the best silk stores in Chinatown for the perfect square of silk she required. It had to be a deep pink, a shade of colour blushing toward red. And the tone had to match—as closely as possible—her most precious jade carving, the small peony of white and light-red jade, her most lucky possession. In the centre of this semi-translucent carving, no more than two and a half centimetres wide, was a pool of pink light, its veins swirling out into the petals of the flower.

“This colour is the colour of my spirit,” she said, holding it up to the window so I could see the delicate pastel against the broad strokes of sunlight. She dropped her voice, and I held my breath at the wonder of the

* cabalistic: having a mystical meaning, secret.

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