

# Hanging on the

## Cherry Blossom

Writer

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I was just three years old when my parents separated. I have little to no memories of them together – or to put it more bluntly, of us as a family. This is common, as I have many friends whose parents also separated when they were young. My complication with this, however, is that my parents' separation meant growing up as a half-Chinese girl without the presence of my heritage.

My father is Chinese, and my mother is English. When they separated, my father moved back to China, to the luminous city of Beijing, whilst I was raised by my mother in a mundane, little village in England with my half-siblings. The love I have for them is unconditional, but the older I grew, the more othered I felt in my surroundings. A couple of years following my parents' separation, my mother changed my surname from 'Ma' to 'Haywood' – her maiden name. I understood why she wanted to do this. She was raising me alone, so she felt it was right for me to bear the same name as her. As I was only six years old, I had no say in this decision, but I'd begin to feel that pieces of my heritage and identity were quickly being taken from me, and I had no control over it.

My father left a few things for me before his return to China – possessions that I've held onto dearly, in an attempt to feel closer to my culture. Those things included: a very old, black and white photo album of my Chinese grandparents, a jade bi disc (a family heirloom), three tiny ivory portraitures, a box of little China dolls, a beautiful pink cheongsam with silver embroidery and many sets of silk pyjamas. All of those objects were, and still are, of much value to me but what I cherished most was the photo album of my grandparents.

The photographs were my way of connecting to my Chinese heritage. Although I didn't have the physical presence of any of these people in my life, the images gave me insight into who they were. Looking at them gave me comfort. I was especially captivated by photographs of my grandmother as she was the only female Chinese figure I had to look up to. From brightly coloured silk suits to traditional qipaos, she'd be dressed in the most beautiful, elegant attire in every photo. Her style was graceful and indicative of her personality.

Like a child and their first cuddly toy, I am attached to the photographs of her. They make me feel as though I did know her and that she was a part of my life. Through them, I've been able to narrate my own story as to who she was, even imagining how she'd speak – in a soft, calm voice.

At 21, there are still many parts of my heritage that I'm not familiar with. I wasn't born in China, nor have I ever visited the country, nor do I speak the language. I've lived a...



...typically confusing, bi-racial life by the hybridity of my diasporic identity. Displaced in every sense of belonging. Where do I call "home"? Am I more Chinese or more British? Do I need to be more of either?

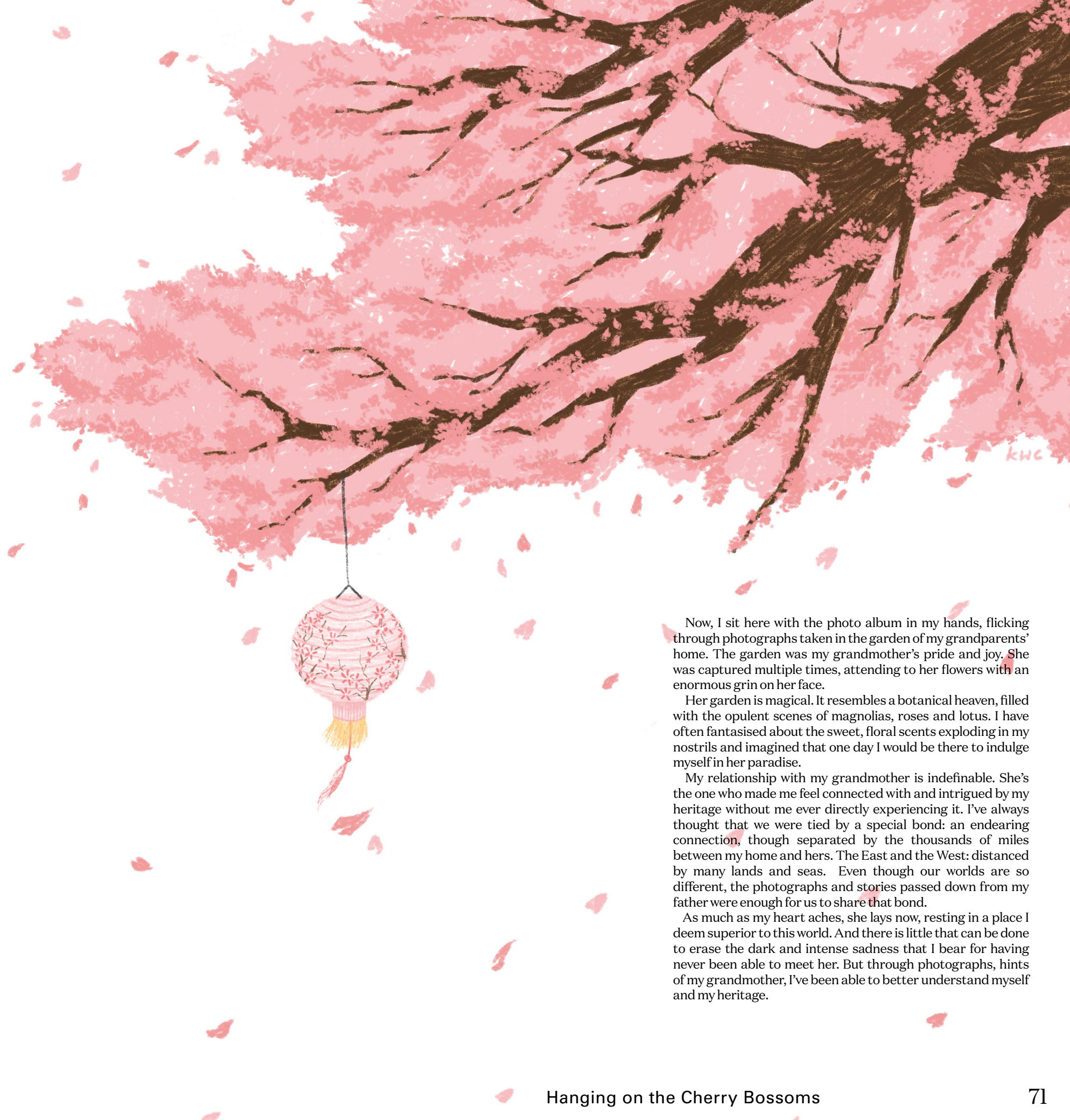
I always feared that if I were to visit China, I would be ridiculed, considered too white-washed and not a part of the culture. But in the West, my otherness feels so overt - here is where I'm not white enough. However now, that fear has diminished. I yearn to travel there and be able to witness my heritage first-hand, and that overrides any of the concerns I previously had.

With the absence of my Chinese family in my day-to-day life but a yearning to connect with them, I decided to research them, and I did so, intensely, for many years by browsing the internet and various other sources to find out as much as I could about them. I already had a little to begin with: things my father told me through letters and stories passed down from my mother. Not much, but enough to go by.

My grandmother was a university lecturer teaching in Xi'an specialising in English, and my grandfather was a renowned, grandmaster of martial arts. He has quite a rich and interesting history. From a humble Hui Muslim family, he descended from a line of martial arts masters, which has since continued to my father as well as his brother. They practised their own style of Wushu, called Tongbeiquan. My father, having taught the likes of Muhammed Ali and Jet Li, is one of the few people in the 21st Century to have reached the highest level awarded within Chinese martial arts, the 9th duan, otherwise known as the "Gold Dragon".

I was fascinated to learn these things about my family. I'd already known that my father was a master of martial arts, as his Tai Chi classes were how he and my mother met, but I was oblivious to the extent of my family's achievements in this realm. I am still in awe today.

In one of the later letters from my father, he wrote to me about my grandmother. He told me that on my birthday, she would place a small lantern upon a branch of her cherry blossom tree every year until she passed.



Now, I sit here with the photo album in my hands, flicking through photographs taken in the garden of my grandparents' home. The garden was my grandmother's pride and joy. She was captured multiple times, attending to her flowers with an enormous grin on her face.

Her garden is magical. It resembles a botanical heaven, filled with the opulent scenes of magnolias, roses and lotus. I have often fantasised about the sweet, floral scents exploding in my nostrils and imagined that one day I would be there to indulge myself in her paradise.

My relationship with my grandmother is indefinable. She's the one who made me feel connected with and intrigued by my heritage without me ever directly experiencing it. I've always thought that we were tied by a special bond: an endearing connection, though separated by the thousands of miles between my home and hers. The East and the West: distanced by many lands and seas. Even though our worlds are so different, the photographs and stories passed down from my father were enough for us to share that bond.

As much as my heart aches, she lays now, resting in a place I deem superior to this world. And there is little that can be done to erase the dark and intense sadness that I bear for having never been able to meet her. But through photographs, hints of my grandmother, I've been able to better understand myself and my heritage.