

## **The First Witch of Damansara**

by Zen Cho

Vivian's late grandmother was a witch--which is just a way of saying she was a woman of unusual insight. Vivian, in contrast, had a mind like a hi-tech blender. She was sharp and purposeful, but she did not understand magic.

This used to be a problem. Magic ran in the family. Even her mother's second cousin who was adopted did small spells on the side. She sold these from a stall in Kota Bharu. Her main wares were various types of fruit fried in batter, but if you bought five pisang or cempedak goreng, she threw in a jampi for free.

These embarrassing relatives became less of a problem after Vivian left Malaysia. In the modern Western country where she lived, the public toilets were clean, the newspapers were allowed to be as rude to the government as they liked, and nobody believed in magic except people in whom nobody believed. Even with a cooking appliance mind, Vivian understood that magic requires belief to thrive.

She called home rarely, and visited even less often. She was 28, engaged to a rational man, and employed as an accountant.

Vivian's Nai Nai would have said that she was attempting to deploy enchantments of her own--the fiance, the ordinary hobbies and the sensible office job were so many sigils to ward off chaos. It was not an ineffective magic. It worked--for a while.

There was just one moment, after she heard the news, when Vivian experienced a surge of unfilial exasperation.

"They could have call me on Skype," she said. "Call my handphone some more! What a waste of money."

"What's wrong?" said the fiance. He plays the prince in this story: beautiful, supportive, and cast in an appropriately self-effacing role--just off-screen, on a white horse.

"My grandmother's passed away," said Vivian. "I'm suppose to go back."

#

Vivian was not a woman to hold a grudge. When she turned up at KLIA in harem trousers and a tank top it was not through malice aforethought, but because she had simply forgotten.

Her parents embraced her with sportsmanlike enthusiasm, but when this was done her mother pulled back and plucked at her tank top.

"Girl, what's this? You know Nai Nai won't like it."

Nai Nai had lived by a code of rigorous propriety. She had disapproved of wearing black or navy blue at Chinese New Year, of white at weddings, and of spaghetti straps at all times. When they went out for dinner, even at the local restaurant where they sat outdoors and were accosted by stray cats requesting snacks, her grandchildren were required to change out of their ratty pasar malam T-shirts and faded shorts. She drew a delicate but significant distinction between flip-flops and sandals, singlets and strapless tops, soft cotton shorts and denim.

"Can see your bra," whispered Ma. "It's not so nice."

"That kind of pants," her dad said dubiously. "Don't know what Nai Nai will think of it."

"Nai Nai won't see them what," said Vivian, but this offended her parents. They sat in mutinous silence throughout the drive home.

Their terrace house was swarming with pregnant cats and black dogs.

"Only six dogs," said Vivian's mother when Vivian pointed this out. "Because got five cats. Your sister thought it's a good idea to have more dogs than cats."

"But why do we have so many cats?" said Vivian. "I thought you don't like to have animals in the house."

"Nai Nai collected the cats," said Vivian's sister. "She started before she passed away. Pregnant cats only."

"Wei Yi," said Vivian. "How are you?"

"I'm OK. Vivian," said Wei Yi. Her eyes glittered.

She'd stopped calling Vivian jie jie some time after Vivian left home. Vivian minded this less than the way she said 'Vivian' as though it were a bad word.

But after all, Vivian reminded herself, Wei Yi was 17. She was practically legally required to be an asshole.

"Why did Nai Nai want the pregnant cats?" Vivian tried to make her voice pleasant.

"Hai, don't need to talk so much," said their mother hastily. "Lin--Vivian so tired. Vivian, you go and change first, then we go for dinner. Papa will start complaining soon if not."

#

It was during an outing to a prayer goods store, while Vivian's mother was busy buying joss sticks, that her mother's friend turned to Vivian and said,

"So a lot of things to do in your house now ah?"

Vivian was shy to say she knew nothing about what preparations were afoot. As her mother's eldest it would only have been right for her to have been her mother's first support in sorting out the funeral arrangements.

"No, we are having a very simple funeral," said Vivian. "Nai Nai didn't believe in religion so much."

This was not a lie. The brutal fact was that Nai Nai had been an atheist with animist leanings, in common with most witches. Vivian's mother preferred not to let this be known, less out of a concern that her mother would be outed as a witch, than because of the stale leftover fear that she would be considered a Communist.

"But what about the dog cat all that?" said Auntie Wendy. "Did it work? Did your sister manage to keep her in the coffin?"

Vivian's mind whirred to a stop. Then it started up again, buzzing louder than ever.

Ma was righteously indignant when Vivian reproached her.

"You live so long overseas, why you need to know?" said Ma. "Don't worry. Yi Yi is handling it. Probably Nai Nai was not serious anyway."

"Not serious about what?"

"Hai, these old people have their ideas," said Ma. "Nai Nai live in KL so long, she still want to go home. Not that I don't want to please her. If it was anything else ... but even if she doesn't have pride for herself, I am her daughter. I have pride for her!"

"Nai Nai wanted to be buried in China?" said Vivian, puzzled.

"China what China! Your Nai Nai is from Penang lah," said Ma. "Your Yeh Yeh is also buried in Bukit Tambun there. But even if he's my father, the way he treat my mother, I don't think they should be buried together."

Vivian began to understand. "But Ma, if she said she wanted to be with him--"

"It's not what she wants! It's just her idea of propriety," said Ma. "She thinks woman must always stay by the husband no matter what. I don't believe that! Nai Nai

will be buried here and when her children pass on we will be buried with her. It's more comfortable for her, right? To have her loved ones around her?"

"But if Nai Nai didn't think so?"

Ma's painted eyebrows drew together.

"Nai Nai is a very stubborn woman," she said.

#

Wei Yi was being especially teenaged that week. She went around with lightning frizzing her hair and stormclouds rumbling about her ears. Her clothes stood away from her body, stiff with electricity. The cats hissed and the dogs whined when she passed.

When she saw the paper offerings their mother had bought for Nai Nai, she threw a massive tantrum.

"What's this?" she said, picking up a paper polo shirt. "Where got Nai Nai wear this kind of thing?"

Ma looked embarrassed.

"The shop only had that," she said. "Don't be angry, girl. I bought some bag and shoe also. But you know Nai Nai was never the dressy kind."

"That's because she like to keep all her nice clothes," said Wei Yi. She cast a look of burning contempt at the paper handbag, printed in heedless disregard of intellectual property rights with the Gucci logo. "Looks like the pasar malam bag. And this slippers is like old man slippers. Nai Nai could put two of her feet in one slipper!"

"Like that she's less likely to hop away," Ma said thoughtlessly.

"Is that what you call respecting your mother?" shouted Wei Yi. "Hah, you wait until it's your turn! I'll know how to treat you then."

"Wei Yi, how can you talk to Ma like that?" said Vivian.

"You shut up your face!" Wei Yi snapped. She flounced out of the room.

"She never even see the house yet," sighed Ma. She had bought an elaborate palace fashioned out of gilt-edged pink paper, with embellished roofs and shuttered windows, and two dolls dressed in Tang dynasty attire prancing on a balcony. "Got two servants some more."

"She shouldn't talk to you like that," said Vivian.

She hadn't noticed any change in Ma's appearance before, but now the soft wrinkly skin under her chin and the pale brown spots on her arms reminded Vivian that she was getting old. Old people should be cared for.

She touched her mother on the arm. "I'll go scold her. Never mind, Ma. Girls this age are always one kind."

Ma smiled at Vivian.

"You were OK," she said. She tucked a lock of Vivian's hair behind her ear.

Old people should be grateful for affection. The sudden disturbing thought occurred to Vivian that no one had liked Nai Nai very much because she'd never submitted to being looked after.

#

Wei Yi was trying to free the dogs. She stood by the gate, holding it open and gesturing with one hand at the great outdoors.

"Go! Blackie, Guinness, Ah Hei, Si Hitam, Jackie, Bobby! Go, go!"

The dogs didn't seem that interested in the great outdoors. Ah Hei took a couple of tentative steps towards the gate, looked back at Wei Yi, changed her mind and sat down again.

"Jackie and Bobby?" said Vivian.

Wei Yi shot her a glare. "I ran out of ideas." The *so what?* was unspoken, but it didn't need to be said.

"Why these stupid dogs don't want to go," Wei Yi muttered. "When you open the gate to drive in or out, they go running everywhere. When you want them to *chau*, they don't want."

"They can tell you won't let them back in again," said Vivian.

She remembered when Wei Yi had been cute--as a little girl, with those pure single-lidded eyes and the doll-like lacquered bowl of hair. When had she turned into this creature? Hair at sevens and eights, the uneven fringe falling into malevolent eyes. Inappropriately tight Bermuda shorts worn below an unflatteringly loose plaid shirt.

At seven Wei Yi had been a being perfect in herself. At 17 there was nothing that wasn't wrong about the way she moved in the world.

Vivian had been planning to tell her sister off, but the memory of that lovely child softened her voice. "Why you don't want the dogs anymore?"

"I want Nai Nai to win." Wei Yi slammed the gate shut.

"What, by having nice clothes when she's passed away?" said Vivian.

"Winning or losing, doesn't matter for Nai Nai anymore. What does it matter if she wears a polo shirt in the afterlife?"

Wei Yi's face crumpled. She clutched her fists in agony. The words broke from her in a roar.

"You're so stupid! You don't know anything!" She kicked the gate to relieve her feelings. "Nai Nai's brain works more than yours and she's dead! Do you even belong to this family?"

This was why Vivian had left. Magic lent itself to temperament.

"Maybe not," said Vivian.

#

When Vivian was angry she did it with the same single-minded energy she did everything else. This was why she decided to go wedding dress shopping in the week of her grandmother's funeral.

There were numerous practical justifications, actually. She went through them in her head as she drove past bridal studios where faceless mannequins struck poses in clouds of tulle.

"Cheaper to get it here than overseas. Not like I'm helping much at home what. Not like I was so close to Nai Nai."

She ended up staring mournfully at herself in the mirror, weighted down by satin and rhinestones. Did she want a veil? Did she like lace? Ball gown or mermaid shape?

She'd imagined her wedding dress as being white and long. She hadn't expected there to be so many permutations on a theme. She felt pinned in place by the choices available to her.

The shop assistant could tell her heart wasn't in it.

"Some ladies like other colour better," said the shop assistant. "You want to try? We have blue, pink, peach, yellow--very nice colour, very feminine."

"I thought usually white?"

"Some ladies don't like white because--you know--" the shop assistant lowered her voice, but she was too superstitious to say it outright. "It's related to a not so nice subject."

The words clanged in Vivian's ears. Briefly light-headed, she clutched at the back of a chair for balance. Her hands were freezing. In the mirror the white dress



looked like a shroud. Her face hovering above it was the face of a mourner, or a ghost.

"Now that I've tried it, I'm not sure I like Western gown so much," said Vivian, speaking with difficulty.

"We have cheongsam or qun kua," said the shop assistant. "Very nice, very traditional. Miss is so slim, will suit the cheongsam."

The jolt of red brocade was a relief. Vivian took a dress with gold trimmings, the highest of high collars and an even higher slit along the sides. It was as red as a blare of trumpets, as red as the pop of fireworks.

This fresh chilli red had never suited her. In it she looked paler than ever, washed out by the vibrant shade. But the colour was a protective charm. It laid monsters to rest. It shut out hungry ghosts. It frightened shadows back into the corners where they belonged.

Vivian crept home with her spoils. That night she slept and did not dream of anything.

#

The next morning she regretted the purchase. Her fiance would think it was ridiculous. She couldn't wear a cheongsam down the aisle of an Anglican church. She would take it back to the boutique and return it. After all the white satin mermaid dress had suited her. The sweetheart neckline was so much more flattering than a mandarin collar.

She shoved the cheongsam in a bag and tried to sneak out, but Wei Yi was sitting on the floor of the laundry room, in the way of her exit. She was surrounded by webs of filigreed red paper.

"What's this?" said Vivian.

"It's called paper cutting," said Wei Yi, not looking up. "You never see before meh?"

On the floor the paper cuttings unfurled. Some were disasters: a mutilated fish floated past like tumbleweed; a pair of flirtatious girls had been torn apart by an overly enthusiastic slash. But some of the pieces were astounding.

"Kwan Yin," said Vivian.

The folds in the goddess's robes had been rendered with extraordinary delicacy. Her eyes were gentle, her face double-chinned. Her halo was a red moon circled by ornate clouds.

"It's for Nai Nai," said Wei Yi. "Maybe Kwan Yin will have mercy on her even though she's so blasphemous."

"Shouldn't talk like that about the dead," said Vivian.

Wei Yi rolled her eyes, but the effort of her craft seemed to absorbing all her evil energies. Her response was mild: "It's not disrespectful if it's true."

Her devotion touched Vivian. Surely not many 17-year-olds would spend so much time on so laborious a task. The sleet of impermanent art piled around her must have taken hours to produce.

"Did Nai Nai teach you how to do that?" Vivian said, trying to get back on friendlier ground.

Wei Yi's face spasmed.

"Nai Nai was a rubber tapper with seven children," she said. "She can't even read! You think what, she was so free she can do all these hobbies, is it? I learnt it from YouTube lah!"

She crumpled the paper she was working on and flung it down on the floor to join the flickering red mass.

"Oh, whatever!" said Vivian in the fullness of her heart.

She bought the whitest, fluffiest, sheeniest, most beaded dress she could find in the boutique. It was strapless and low-backed to boot. Nai Nai would have hated it.

#

That night Vivian dreamt of her grandmother.

Nai Nai had climbed out of her coffin where she had been lying in the living room. She was wearing a kebaya, with a white baju and a batik sarong wrapped around her hips. No modern creation this--the blouse was fastened not with buttons but with kerongsang, ornate gold brooches studded with pearls and rhinestones.

Nai Nai was struggling with the kerongsang. In her dream Vivian reached out to help her.

"I can do!" said Nai Nai crossly. "Don't so sibuk." She batted at the kerongsang with the slim brown hands that had been so deft in life.

"What's the matter? You want to take it off for what?" said Vivian in Hokkien.

"It's too nice to wear outside," Nai Nai complained. "When I was alive I used safety pins and it was enough. All this hassle just because I am like this. I didn't save Yeh Yeh's pension so you can spend on a carcass!"

"Why do you want to go outside?" Vivian took the bony arm. "Nai Nai, come, let's go back to sleep. It's so late already. Everybody is sleeping."

Nai Nai was a tiny old lady with a dandelion fluff of white hair standing out from her head. She looked nothing like the spotty, tubby, furiously awkward Wei Yi, but her expression suddenly showed Vivian what her sister would look like when she was old. The contemptuous exasperation was exactly the same.

"If it's not late, how can I go outside?" she said. "I have a long way to go. Hai!" She flung up her hands. "After they bury me, ask the priest to give you back the kerongsang."

She started hopping towards the door, her arms held rod-straight out in front of her. The sight was comic and horrible.

This was the secret the family had been hiding from Vivian. Nai Nai had become a *kuang shi*.

"Nai Nai," choked Vivian. "Please rest. You're so old already, shouldn't run around so much."

"Don't answer back!" shouted Nai Nai from the foyer. "Come and open the door for Nai Nai! Yeh Yeh will be angry. He cannot stand when people are late."

Vivian envisioned Nai Nai hopping out of the house--past the neighbourhood park with its rustling bushes and creaking swings, past the neighbours' Myvis and Peroduas, through the toll while the attendant slumbered. She saw Nai Nai hopping along the curves of the Titiwangsa Mountains, her halo of hair white against the bleeding red of the hills where the forests had peeled away to show the limestone. She saw Nai Nai passing oil palm plantations, their leaves dark glossy green under the brassy glare of sunshine--sleepy water buffalo flicking their tails in wide hot fields--empty new terrace houses standing in white rows on bare hillsides. Up the long North-South Expressway, to her final home.

"Nai Nai," said Vivian. *Don't leave us*, she wanted to say.

"Complain, complain!" Nai Nai was slapping at the doorknob with her useless stiff hands.

"You can't go all that way," said Vivian. She had an inspiration. "Your sarong will come undone."

Whoever had laid Nai Nai out had dressed her like a true nyonya. The sarong was wound around her hips and tucked in at the waist, with no fastenings to hold it up.

"At my age, who cares," said Nai Nai, but this had clearly given her pause.

"Come back to sleep," coaxed Vivian. "I'll tell Mummy. Bukit Tambun, right? I'll sort it out for you."

Nai Nai gave her a sharp look. "Can talk so sweetly but what does she do? Grandmother is being buried and she goes to buy a wedding dress!"

Vivian winced.

"The dress is not nice also," said Nai Nai. "What happened to the first dress? That was nice. Red is a happy colour."

"I know Nai Nai feels it's pantang, but--"

"Pantang what pantang," snapped Nai Nai. Like all witches, she hated to be accused of superstition. "White is a boring colour! Ah, when I got married everybody wanted to celebrate. We had two hundred guests and they all had chicken to eat. I looked so beautiful in my photo. And Yeh Yeh .... "

Nai Nai sank into reminiscence.

"What about Yeh Yeh?" prompted Vivian.

"Yeh Yeh looked the same as always. Like a useless playboy," said Nai Nai. "He could only look nice and court girls."

"Then you want to be buried with him for what?"

"That's different," said Nai Nai. "Whether I'm a good wife doesn't have anything to do with what he was like."

As if galvanised by Vivian's resistance, she turned and made to hit the door again.

"If you listen to me, I'll take the dress back to the shop," said Vivian, driven by desperation.

Nai Nai paused. "You'll buy the pretty cheongsam?"

"If you want also I'll wear the kua," said Vivian recklessly.

She tried not to imagine what her fiance would say when he saw the loose red jacket and long skirt, embroidered in gold and silver with bug-eyed dragons and insectoid phoenixes. And the three-quarter bell sleeves, all the better to show the wealth of the family in the gold bracelets stacked on the bride's wrists! How that would impress her future in-laws.

To her relief, Nai Nai said, "No lah! So old-fashioned. Cheongsam is nicer."

She started hopping back towards the living room.

Vivian trailed behind, feeling somehow as if she had been outmaneuvered.

"Nai Nai, do you really want to be buried in Penang?"

Nai Nai peered up with suspicion in her reddened eyes as Vivian helped her back into the coffin.

"You want to change your mind, is it?"

"No, no, I'll get the cheongsam. It'll be in my room by tomorrow, I promise."

Nai Nai smiled.

"You know why I wanted you all to call me Nai Nai?" she said before Vivian closed the coffin. "Even though Hokkien people call their grandmother Ah Ma?"

Vivian paused with her hand on the lid.

"In the movies, Nai Nai is always bad!"

Vivian woke up with her grandmother's growly cackle in her ears.

#

Wei Yi was in the middle of a meltdown when Vivian came downstairs for breakfast. Ma bristled with relief:

"Ah, your sister is here. She'll talk to you."

Wei Yi was sitting enthroned in incandescence, clutching a bread knife. A charred hunk of what used to be kaya toast sat on her plate. The *Star* newspaper next to it was crisping at the edges.

Vivian began to sweat. She thought about turning on the ceiling fan, but that might stoke the flames.

She pulled out a chair and picked up the jar of kaya as if nothing was happening. "What's up?"

Wei Yi turned hot coal eyes on Vivian.

"She doesn't want to kill the dogs wor," said Ma. "Angry already."

"So? Who ask you to kill the dogs in the first place?" said Vivian.

"Stupid," said Wei Yi. Her face was very pale, but her lips had the dull orange glow of heated metal. Fire breathed in her hair. A layer of ash lay on the crown of her head.

"Because of Nai Nai," Ma explained. "Wei Yi heard the blood of a black dog is good for Nai Nai's ... condition."

"It's not right," said Wei Yi. "It's better for Nai Nai if--but you won't understand one."

Vivian spread a layer of kaya on her piece of bread before she answered. Her hands were shaking, but her voice was steady when she spoke.

"I think Ma is right. There's no need to kill any dogs. Nai Nai is not serious about being a kuang shi. She's just using it as an emotional blackmail." She paused for

reflection. "And I think she's enjoying it also lah. You know Nai Nai was always very active. She likes to be up and about."

Wei Yi dropped her butter knife.

"Eh, how you know?" said Ma.

"She talked to me in my dream last night because she didn't like the wedding dress I bought," said Vivian.

Ma's eyes widened. "You went to buy your wedding dress when Nai Nai just pass away?"

"You saw Nai Nai?" cried Wei Yi. "What did she say?"

"She likes cheongsam better, and she wants to be buried in Penang," said Vivian. "So I'm going to buy cheongsam. Ma, should think about sending her back to Penang. When she got nothing to complain about she will settle down."

"Why she didn't talk to me?" said Wei Yi. Beads of molten metal ran down her face, leaving silver trails. "I do so many jampi and she never talk to me! It's not fair!"

Ma was torn between an urge to scold Vivian and the necessity of comforting Wei Yi. "Girl, don't cry--Vivian, so disrespectful, I'm surprise Nai Nai never scold you--"

"Yi Yi," said Vivian. "She didn't talk to you because in Nai Nai's eyes you are perfect already." As she said this, she realised it was true.

Wei Yi--awkward, furious and objectionable in every way--was Nai Nai's ideal grandchild. There was no need to monitor or reprimand such a perfect heir. The surprise was that Nai Nai even thought it necessary to rise from the grave to order Vivian around, rather than just leaving the job to the next witch.



Of course, Nai Nai probably hadn't had the chance to train Wei Yi in the standards expected of a wedding in Nai Nai's family. The finer points of bridal fashion would certainly escape Wei Yi.

"Nai Nai only came back to scold people," said Vivian. "She doesn't need to scold you for anything."

The unnatural metallic sheen of Wei Yi's face went away. Her hair and eyes dimmed. Her mouth trembled.

Vivian expected a roar. Instead Wei Yi shoved her kaya toast away and laid her head on the table.

"I miss Nai Nai," she sobbed.

Ma got up and touched Vivian on the shoulder.

"I have to go buy thing," she whispered. "You cheer up your sister."

Wei Yi's skin was still hot when Vivian put her arm around her, but as Vivian held her Wei Yi's temperature declined, until she felt merely feverish. Her tears went from scalding to lukewarm.

"Nai Nai, Nai Nai," she wailed in that screechy show-off way Vivian had always hated. When they were growing up Vivian had not believed in Wei Yi's tears--they seemed no more than a show, put on to impress the grown-ups.

Vivian now realised that the grief was as real as the volume deliberate. Wei Yi did not cry like that simply because she was sad, but because she wanted someone to listen to her.

In the old days it had been a parent or a teacher's attention that she had sought. These howls were aimed directly at the all-too-responsive ears of their late grandmother.

"Wei Yi," said Vivian. "I've thought of what you can do for Nai Nai."

#

For once Wei Yi did not put Vivian's ideas to scorn. She seemed to have gone up in her sister's estimation for having seen Nai Nai's importunate spectre.

Vivian had a feeling Nai Nai's witchery had gone into Wei Yi's paper cutting skills. YouTube couldn't explain the unreal speed with which she did it.

Vivian tried picking up Wei Yi's scissors and dropped them, yelping.

"What the--!" It had felt like an electric shock.

Wei Yi grabbed the scissors. "These are no good. I give you other ones to use."

Vivian got the task of cutting out the sarong--a large rectangular piece of paper to which Wei Yi would add the batik motifs later. When she was done Wei Yi took a look and pursed her lips. The last time Vivian had felt this small was when she failed her first driving test two minutes after getting into the car.

"OK ah?"

"Not bad," said Wei Yi unconvincingly. "Eh, you go help Ma do her whatever thing lah. I'll work on this first."

A couple of hours later she barged into Vivian's room. "Why you're here? Why you take so long? Come and see!"

Vivian got up sheepishly. "I thought you need some time to finish mah."

"Nonsense. Nai Nai going to be buried tomorrow, where got time to dilly-dally?" Wei Yi grasped her hand.

The paper dress was laid in crisp folds on the dining table. Wei Yi's scissors had rendered the delicate lace of the kebaya blouse with marvellous skill. Peacocks with uplifted wings and princely crowns draped their tails along the hems, strutted up

the lapels, and curled coyly around the ends of the sleeves. The paper was chiffon-thin. A breath set it fluttering.

The skirt was made from a thicker, heavier cream paper. Wei Yi had cut blowsy peonies into the front and a contrasting grid pattern on the reverse. Vivian touched it in wonder, feeling the nubby texture of the paper under her fingertips.

"Do you think Nai Nai will like it?" said Wei Yi.

Vivian had to be honest. "The top is a bit see-through, no?"

"She'll have a singlet to wear underneath," said Wei Yi. "I left that for you to do. Very simple one. Just cut along the line only."

This was kindness, Wei Yi style.

"It's beautiful, Yi Yi," said Vivian. She felt awkward--they were not a family given to compliments--but once she'd started it was easy to go on. "It's so nice. Nai Nai will love it."

"Ah, don't need to say so much lah," Wei Yi scoffed. "'OK' enough already. I still haven't done shoe yet."

#

They burnt the beautiful cream kebaya as an offering to Nai Nai. It didn't go alone--Wei Yi had created four other outfits, working through the night. Samfu for everyday wear; an old-fashioned loose, long-sleeved cheongsam ("Nicer for older lady. Nai Nai is not a Shanghai cabaret singer"); a sarong for sleeping in; and a Punjabi suit of all things.

"Nai Nai used to like wearing it," said Wei Yi when Vivian expressed surprise. "Comfortable mah. Nai Nai likes this simple kind of thing to wear for every day."

"Four is not a good number," said Vivian. "Maybe should make extra sarong?"

"You forgot the kebaya. That's five," Wei Yi retorted. "Anyway she die already. What is there to be pantang about?"

They threw in the more usual hell gold and paper mansion into the bonfire as well. The doll servants didn't burn well, but melted dramatically and stuck afterwards.

Since they were doing the bonfire outside the house, on the public road, this concerned Vivian. She chipped doubtfully away at the mess of plastic.

"Don't worry," said Ma. "The servants have gone to Nai Nai already."

"I'm not worried about that," said Vivian. "I'm worried about MPPJ." She couldn't imagine the local authorities would be particularly pleased about the extra work they'd made for them.

"They're used to it lah," said Ma, dismissing the civil service with a wave of the hand.

They even burnt the fake Gucci bag and the polo shirt in the end.

"Nai Nai will find some use for it," said Wei Yi. "Maybe turn out she like that kind of style also."

She could afford to be magnanimous. Making the kebaya had relieved something in Wei Yi's heart. As she'd stood watch over the flames to make sure the demons didn't get their offerings to Nai Nai, there had been a serenity in her face.

As they moved back to the house, Vivian put her arm around her sister, wincing at the snap and hiss when her skin touched Wei Yi's. It felt like a static shock, only intensified by several orders of magnitude.

"OK?"

Wei Yi was fizzling with magic, but her eyes were calm and dark and altogether human.

"OK," replied the Witch of Damansara.

#

In Vivian's dream a moth came fluttering into the room. It alighted at the end of her bed and turned into Nai Nai.

Nai Nai was wearing a green-and-white striped cotton sarong, tucked and knotted under her arms as if she were going to bed soon. Her hair smelled of Johnson & Johnson baby shampoo. Her face was white with bedak sejuk--powder moistened and spread over the face as a cooling paste.

"Tell your mother the house is very beautiful," said Nai Nai. "The servants have already run away and got married, but it's not so bad. In hell it's not so dusty. Nothing to clean also."

"Nai Nai--"

"Ah Yi is very clever now, har?" said Nai Nai. "The demons looked at my nice things but when they saw her they immediately run away."

Vivian experienced a pang. She didn't say anything, but perhaps the dead understood these things. Or perhaps it was just that Nai Nai, with 65 years of mothering behind her, did not need to be told. She reached out and patted Vivian's hand.

"You are always so guai," said Nai Nai. "I'm not so worried about you."

This was a new idea to Vivian. She was unused to thinking of herself--magicless, intransigent--as the good kid in the family.

"But I went overseas," she said stupidly.

"You're always so clever to work hard. You don't make your mother and father worried," said Nai Nai. "Ah Yi ah .... " Nai Nai shook her head. "So stubborn! So naughty! If I don't take care sekali she burn down the house. That girl doesn't use

her head. But she become a bit guai already. When she's older she won't be so free, won't have time to cause so much problems."

Vivian did not point out that age did not seem to have stopped Nai Nai. This would have been disrespectful. Instead she said,

"Nai Nai, were you really a vampire? Or were you just pretending to turn into a kuang shi?"

"Hai, you think so fun to pretend to be a kuang shi?" said Nai Nai indignantly. "When you are old, you will find out how suffering it is. You think I have time to watch all the Hong Kong movies and learn how to be a vampire?"

So that was how she did it. The pale vampirish skin had probably been bedak sejuk as well. How Nai Nai had obtained bedak sejuk in the afterlife was a question better left unasked. Vivian had questions of more immediate interest anyway.

"If you stayed because you're worried about Wei Yi, can I return the cheongsam to the shop?"

Nai Nai bridled. "Oh, like that ah? Not proud of your culture, is it? If you want to wear the white dress, like a ghost, so ugly--"

"Ma wore a white dress on her wedding day. Everyone does it."

"Nai Nai give you my bedak sejuk and red lipstick lah. Then you can pretend to be kuang shi also!"

"I'll get another cheongsam," said Vivian. "Not that I don't want to wear cheongsam. I just don't like this one so much. It's too expensive."

"How much?"

Vivian told her.

"Wah, so much ah," said Nai Nai. "Like that you should just get it tailored. Don't need to buy from shop. Tailored is cheaper and nicer some more. The seamstress's phone number is in Nai Nai's old phonebook. Madam Teoh."

"I'll look," Vivian promised.

Nai Nai got up, stretching. "Must go now. Scared the demons will don't know do what if I leave the house so long. You must look after your sister, OK?"

Vivian, doubtful about how any attempt to look after Wei Yi was likely to be received, said, "Ah."

"Nai Nai already gave Ah Yi her legacy, but I'll give you yours now," said Nai Nai. "You're a good girl, Ah Lin. Nai Nai didn't have chance to talk to you so much when you were small. But I'm proud of you. Make sure the seamstress doesn't overcharge. If you tell Madam Teoh you're my granddaughter she'll give you discount."

"Thank you, Nai Nai," said Vivian, but she spoke to an empty room. The curtains flapped in Nai Nai's wake.

On the floor lay a pile of clothes. Moonlight-sheer chiffon, brown batik, maroon silk and floral print cotton, and on top of this, glowing turquoise even in the pale light of the moon, the most gilded, spangled, intricately embroidered Punjabi suit Vivian had ever seen.

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