

Stigmata

by Angela Lam

1981

I'm ten years old, home alone with my sisters.

Five-year-old Elizabeth grabs seven-year-old Cynthia's ballerina doll.

"Give her back!" Cynthia yells.

Elizabeth tugs so hard, she twists off the doll's arm.

Cynthia screams. "You're trying to kill her!"

I burst into the bedroom.

Elizabeth drops the doll and scales the shelves of the corner bookcase. Her eyes peer over the ledge like a cat ready to pounce.

"Make her get down," Cynthia says, cradling her broken doll.

I'm not about to climb. But my mom is still working at the bank for another half hour. Fifteen minutes ago, my father left for work at the grocery store. I tell Cynthia to wait until Mom gets home. "She's not going anywhere," I say, tilting my chin toward the towering bookcase.

Thirty-five minutes later, the door between the kitchen and the garage opens.

Cynthia scuttles down the hallway. "Mom-mee! Elizabeth broke my ballerina."

My mom hustles back to the bedroom and glances around. "I don't see her," she says.

I point. "Up there."

My mom's gaze travels up the length of the floor-to-ceiling bookcase. "My word, Lizzy, how did you get up there?"

"I'm not coming down," she says.

My mom shrugs. "Go ahead. Stay up there." She leaves to change out of her power suit and heels. But instead of making dinner, my mom calls my father at the grocery store. "Elizabeth climbed the bookcase. She won't get down. I'm telling you something's wrong

with her. She doesn't think like the other girls. We need to get her help." My mom listens. She purses her lips and curls her free hand into a fist. "No, you don't understand. She's troubled. She needs to see a psychologist." She slams down the phone. A moment later, it rings. She picks it up. "I'll take her. You don't have to go. It's not a shame on the family. She needs help. We're her parents. We need to help her."

Elizabeth comes down from the bookcase while the rest of us eat dinner. The next day my father lectures us about playing nicely with one another and not getting into dangerous situations by climbing furniture. The peace lasts for less than a week. But no matter what Elizabeth does—draws on a doll's face with a permanent marker, steals our clothes and hides them under her bed, or rips pages out of books we are reading—no one takes her to see a psychologist.

1990

I get a call from my mom during the week. I answer in the living room of my apartment that I share with my boyfriend.

"Do you have a minute?" my mom asks.

I do. It's late in the afternoon before my boyfriend comes home from work and I leave for my night class. I take a seat on the day bed, one of the only pieces of furniture in the room. "What's wrong?" My mom only calls when something is the matter. My father calls all the time. Just to talk. To see how I'm doing. Because he misses me.

"Do you know who called Child Protective Services?"

I gasp, and my lower back tightens. "What happened to make someone call?"

My mom launches into a story about how my six-year-old sister, Sylvia, was making a sandwich and Elizabeth took the knife out of her hand and accidentally cut her. I know I will get a different version of the story if I ask either Sylvia or Elizabeth.

"Someone named Fran reported abuse," my mom says. "Isn't that your best friend's mother's name?"

Why would Laura's mom call Child Protective Services? I never talk about my family with anyone. I know better. Save face, as my father always says. Not even my boyfriend knows how violent Elizabeth can be. "Laura's mom doesn't know anything. I don't know who Fran is."

Hours later, as I sit in my English class, the truth surfaces. Fran is the first name of the psychologist who treats my insomnia. An uneasy feeling tingles in my toes. I will have to cancel my next appointment and find someone else who can help relieve my night terrors.

2002

Elizabeth drives my parents two hours to attend my daughter's second birthday party. After most of the guests have left, Elizabeth tells my mom and my father it is time to go home.

My father wants to stay a little longer. "One more piggyback ride," he tells her, as he hoists my daughter onto his back. He trots down the hall and my daughter giggles.

"Let me use the bathroom first," my mom says, waiting for my sister-in-law to finish using the facilities.

A muscle twitches in Elizabeth's jaw, but she does not say anything.

Later, my mother-in-law watches the three of them leave the house. They are parked down the street. "Did you see that?" my mother-in-law asks, pointing to the window. "Your sister pushed your dad into the car."

I glance outside. "Maybe he tripped."

"No, she clearly pushed him," she says.

My husband touches his mother's hand. "Don't get involved."

"But someone needs to do something." She strides toward the front door.

By the time she reaches the parked car, Elizabeth has pulled away from the curb.

My mother-in-law does not chase the vehicle.

Elizabeth is the only sister who still lives at home. She wants to dedicate her life to God, but she can't pass the psychological tests to become a nun. She won't share her results with anyone. It is a secret she keeps.

After the birthday party, Elizabeth quits her job as a nurse and enrolls in the police academy. A photo of her graduation ceremony graces the mantle in my parents' house. Whenever I see it during a visit, I wonder what tests she had to pass and why they weren't as stringent as the ones administered by the church, but I know better. I don't ask.

2010

The call comes while I am sitting at my desk, reviewing a loan file at work. My youngest sister, Sylvia, breathes into the phone. "Dad broke his back. Lizzy pushed him down the stairs in the garage. He's in the hospital. They won't release him until they have someone at home who can care for him full-time. Can you take time off? I'm working and going to school, and I can't quit either right now. And Cynthia lives in Texas. She doesn't want anything to do with us. She's never forgiven Dad for kicking her out after high school." Sylvia's voice breaks into a sob.

My father has Parkinson's disease. He falls all the time. Why does Sylvia insist he was pushed?

Sylvia gulps so much air she starts to hiccup. "Mom needs help. She's addicted to this video game called Second Life where she flirts with young men and spends money buying clothes and houses. I need you. Will you come?"

When I arrive at my parents' house, I am alone. I use the key my father sent me years ago to unlock the front door. But the key doesn't fit. I call Sylvia at work. She says, "Elizabeth changed the locks."

A half hour later, Elizabeth pulls up in her car with my parents. I help them into the house. My dad hobbles using a walker. He is stooped and silent and suddenly older than I've ever seen him. I don't comment. I just help however I can. Making meals. Keeping my mom company while my father sleeps. Leaving Elizabeth alone as she dresses in her police uniform for her beat.

A few years ago, Elizabeth bought a house, but she spends most of her time here with my parents. I believe that she needs to control them like they once tried to control her. But she will never admit it. No one will admit anything. We are complicit in a painful silence that aches to be broken open.

Over the next few weeks, I set things in motion. First, I arrange for a nurse to visit part-time for my father. Next, I arrange for a respite worker to visit every day to give my mom a couple of hours to relax.

By the end of the twelve weeks, my father's back has healed, my mom's time at the computer has decreased, and Elizabeth's temper has lowered to a simmer.

Sylvia clutches my hands and tells me I can't go. "I don't trust things will stay this good," she says.

But I have a family waiting for me. A son who can't talk. A daughter who talks constantly. A husband who loves me too much. Who will take care of my life if I stay?

So, with trepidation, I hug my father and my mother goodbye. I promise to call once a week and bring my family every other weekend to visit.

Elizabeth is sleeping in after a late shift. I let her sleep rather than wake her to say goodbye. She looks so peaceful when she rests.

2015

My life is unraveling as quickly as my father's body is falling apart.

After twenty-three years of marriage, I am getting a divorce.

When I call my mother to tell her the news, she reprimands me. "Who will take care of you when you're older if you're all alone?"

I ask to speak to my father. He'll understand.

But when he gets on the phone, his voice is so faint, I can't make out the words. I know it's a symptom of his Parkinson's, which is only getting worse. He needs help with the tasks of daily life. My mom and Elizabeth do the best they can, but the twenty-four-hour care is exhausting.

I'm stuck, two hours away, battling through mediation to avoid divorce court. I am distilling my life into the essentials, leaving everything behind except what I can haul in one truck—my clothes, my books, and my art supplies. Each day, I find myself unspooling. Sometimes I fear I'll snap. My ex has custody of the children. I wonder if I will ever see them again.

When I get the call from Elizabeth that my father has fallen in the bathroom in the middle of the night, I drive to see him in the convalescent home. The nursing staff have forgotten to change him. Elizabeth says he's in a lot of pain between the broken bones, the urinary tract infection, and bedsores the size of golf balls.

When I sit beside my father's hospital bed, he tells me he was wrong about telling us when we were children to put him in a nursing facility when his body started to fail. "I

want to go home,” he says, squeezing my hand. “Lizzy takes better care of me than this.” His eyes are blurry with tears.

I know Elizabeth has a violent temper, but I also know my father has learned to navigate her moods, speaking up and being quiet at the right time, the master of nonconfrontation. I think of my own life, the handful of times I’ve voiced my concerns, and how everything fell apart as a consequence of my assertion, from my career to my marriage. I marvel at my father’s ability to toe the line to get his needs met while staying safe and wonder if it is a gift or just an act because I’m not around him enough to know the difference.

2018

My father is diagnosed with lymphoma. The oncologist says it is too advanced to treat.

On the morning of my father’s death, Elizabeth calls. Her voice is shaky and hard to understand. “He passed in the middle of the night,” she says between sobs. “He sat up and looked at the bedroom doorway. I followed his gaze. Someone was beckoning, then he was gone.”

I am shocked. Not by the apparition, but by the depth of Elizabeth’s grieving. I worry how she will go on living when the one she has been living for is no longer with us.

What shocks me more is Elizabeth doesn’t attend the funeral although she wrote the eulogy printed in the pamphlet my sisters and I hand out to guests.

“She doesn’t want anyone to see her,” my mother says when my sisters and I ask.

“Why not?” Cynthia asks.

“She’s not feeling well,” my mother says.

“That’s too bad,” Sylvia says.

Later, after my father’s casket is lowered into the ground and my sisters and I toss roses into the gaping maw of earth, I drive my mother home. My sisters follow in their rental cars.

Inside the house we grew up in, we gather around the kitchen table. I brew a pot of coffee although it is late afternoon. I fill each mug to the brim and bring them to the table. Sylvia removes the creamer from the refrigerator, and Cynthia stretches on her toes

to reach the sugar in the pantry. We sit and sip and reminisce, sharing our favorite stories about the man who loved us.

In the midst of our conversation, I hear the garage door rattle on its hinges.

My mother jumps, almost spilling her half-full cup of coffee. “You guys need to leave.”

“Why?” Sylvia asks, topping off her mug of coffee.

“Elizabeth is home.”

“I thought she wasn’t feeling well,” Cynthia says, narrowing her eyes.

My mother gulps, backing toward the door that separates the kitchen from the garage.

As she opens her mouth, the door opens, and Elizabeth strides into the room.

A collective gasp emits from us. Elizabeth is gaunt, bone-thin and weary, with a haunted look in her too large brown eyes. She dumps her bag of groceries on the tiled counter and glowers at my mother. “What are they doing here?” she demands. “I told you I didn’t want anyone seeing me.”

My mother takes two steps back and lifts her hands in surrender. “I didn’t think you were here.”

“I told you I was going grocery shopping. You want dinner tonight, don’t you?”

Cynthia slips between my mother and Elizabeth. “Calm down,” she says. “We were just having a cup of coffee and talking.”

Elizabeth grabs the nearest coffee mug and slams it against the floor. The ceramic shatters. Milky brown coffee puddles around the jagged pieces. She points to the front door. “Go, or I’ll break every one of them.”

“You can’t make us leave,” Sylvia says, standing. “It’s not your house.”

Elizabeth puffs out her birdcage chest. “What are you going to do about it?”

Sylvia removes a cell phone from her purse. “I’m calling the police.”

“Go ahead,” Elizabeth scoffs. “I’m in charge of the department. Your complaint will go nowhere.”

Cynthia tugs on my mother’s arm. “Do something.”

My mother trembles. “Sylvia, get off the phone. Right now.” My mother nods toward the front door. “Everyone, please go.”

Speechless, my sisters and I gather our purses and leave.

My mother locks the door behind us.

Standing in the searing afternoon heat, my sisters and I stare wide-eyed and worried.

“What just happened?” Cynthia asks.

Sylvia lowers the phone from her ear. “The dispatcher won’t send anyone.”

“Why not?” I ask. “Didn’t you tell them about what just happened?”

“I did,” Sylvia says, “but no one was hurt. They can’t do anything.”

Frustrated, I stand by my car and call Adult Protective Services. The woman who answers the phone tells me there is nothing she can do unless my mother is the one seeking help.

“But what about what we witnessed?” I ask. “Doesn’t that count?”

“I’m sorry,” the woman says. “But we can’t do anything unless the occupant of the house wants help.”

My eyes blur when I end the call. “They can’t do anything unless mom wants help.”

Cynthia throws up her arms. “She’s too afraid to get help.”

“What else can we do?” Sylvia asks.

A long moment of silence wraps around us.

I am the first to speak. “We wait until Mom decides she wants help.”

Sylvia sighs. “What if she never wants help?”

“Then we do nothing,” I say.

I’d rather be complicit in a pact of silence than risk my mother’s well-being by unintentionally provoking Elizabeth, even if nothing is resolved.

Now

This story doesn’t have an ending.

No resolution, no denouncement.

No happily-ever-after.

Once a week, I call my friend, Daniel, in North Carolina, during my six-mile run in the predawn cold. With my headset snug against my head and the phone tucked securely in my zipped jacket pocket, I steady my pace as I listen to the phone ringing. When he

answers, he tells me about his growing concern for his elderly mother who is married to a man who will cook for himself but not for her even though she is bedridden from a recent surgery. “No one can do anything,” he says. “I met with the head nurse before my mother was released to talk about my mother’s abusive husband, and do you know what she said?”

I do, but I pretend I don’t.

“She said, ‘There’s nothing we can do unless your mother wants to press charges.’” He huffs. “And you know what? She won’t. She says she loves him. Even though he treats her like shit.”

My heart pounds in my chest, not from running but from fear. My gloved hands, usually cold from the early morning mist, are warm with sweat. I could keep quiet, say nothing, like I’ve done time and time again. But I don’t. After slowing my pace to a brisk walk, I confide about Elizabeth’s erratic behavior and how it impacts the entire family, especially my mother. I tell him about how my sisters and I tried to intervene, once a long time ago, and how nothing changed. “We’ve been silent ever since,” I say, the guilt competing with the relief of breaking my silence.

For a long moment, he is quiet. “I wonder how many of us are there.”

I rattle off statistics I’ve memorized over the years: ten percent of adults sixty-five and older are subject to elder abuse with sixty percent of abusers family members. One in twenty-four cases of abuse are never reported, mainly for reasons of dependency or fear of retaliation.

“My mom’s totally dependent,” Daniel says.

I tell him I’m scared of Elizabeth. I’ve witnessed her violent outbursts over her entire life, and I’ll do anything to avoid them. Sometimes I can’t believe the sacrifices I’ve made to keep the semblance of peace. Like not seeing my mother. I call her once a week, and she always ends the call as soon as Elizabeth enters the room. I’ve stopped asking my mother when I can come visit. I’ve stopped hoping she will attend any event I’ve invited her to, from my fiftieth birthday to my daughter’s wedding.

Tears clot my throat, and my voice grows hoarse. I can’t say any more, so I say goodbye.

“Take care of yourself,” Daniel says.

After I end the call, I shorten my stride and pump my arms. As my feet pound the pavement, I feel my heartbeat settle beneath my ribcage and my breathing even out. The sun breaks through the fog, and faint yellow streaks shine through the murky gray. As I round the corner to my street, I feel the expansion of my lungs and tightening in my legs, and my burden lightens because, for a passing moment, it was shared with someone who understands.



Angela Lam is the author of several novels, two memoirs, and two short story collections. Her memoir, *Red Eggs and Good Luck*, about growing up Chinese American won both the Mary Tanenbaum Award for Creative Nonfiction and the She Writes Press Memoir Discovery Contest. *The Fool and the Magician*, a midlife memoir, was longlisted for the Memoir Magazine Book Award. Lam is also a visual artist, specializing in acrylic landscapes and mixed media abstracts. She currently teaches at Gotham Writers Workshop.