

A Family Tree

by Caroline Yu 🌿 Art by Kristin Sorra



“Ready to pick lychees, Hannah?” Daddy asks as we pull into my grandmother’s driveway.

“Ready.” I smile and scramble from the car.

Clunk! Daddy closes his car door. He strolls to the lychee tree in my grandmother’s front yard.

“Hello, Family Tree,” Daddy says, patting its trunk.

There Daddy goes, treating that tree like it’s a person.

I peeled
this lychee
myself!





Nāinai rhymes
with “eye-eye.”



That curved line
is a tone mark.
It means your
voice should fall
and then rise as
you say “nāi.”

I’m giggling at Daddy when the screen door opens and my grandmother pops out into the Florida sunshine. I call her “Nāinai,” a Chinese word for “Grandma.” Nāinai used to live in China, in a province called Guangdong. That’s where she learned to grow lychees.

Nāinai smiles and tugs on her baseball cap. The cap hides her short hair, which looks like the black bristles in my hairbrush. “Hungry for lychees, Hannah?” Nāinai asks.

I shake my head. I don’t want them. Lychees look different from all the fruits I like.

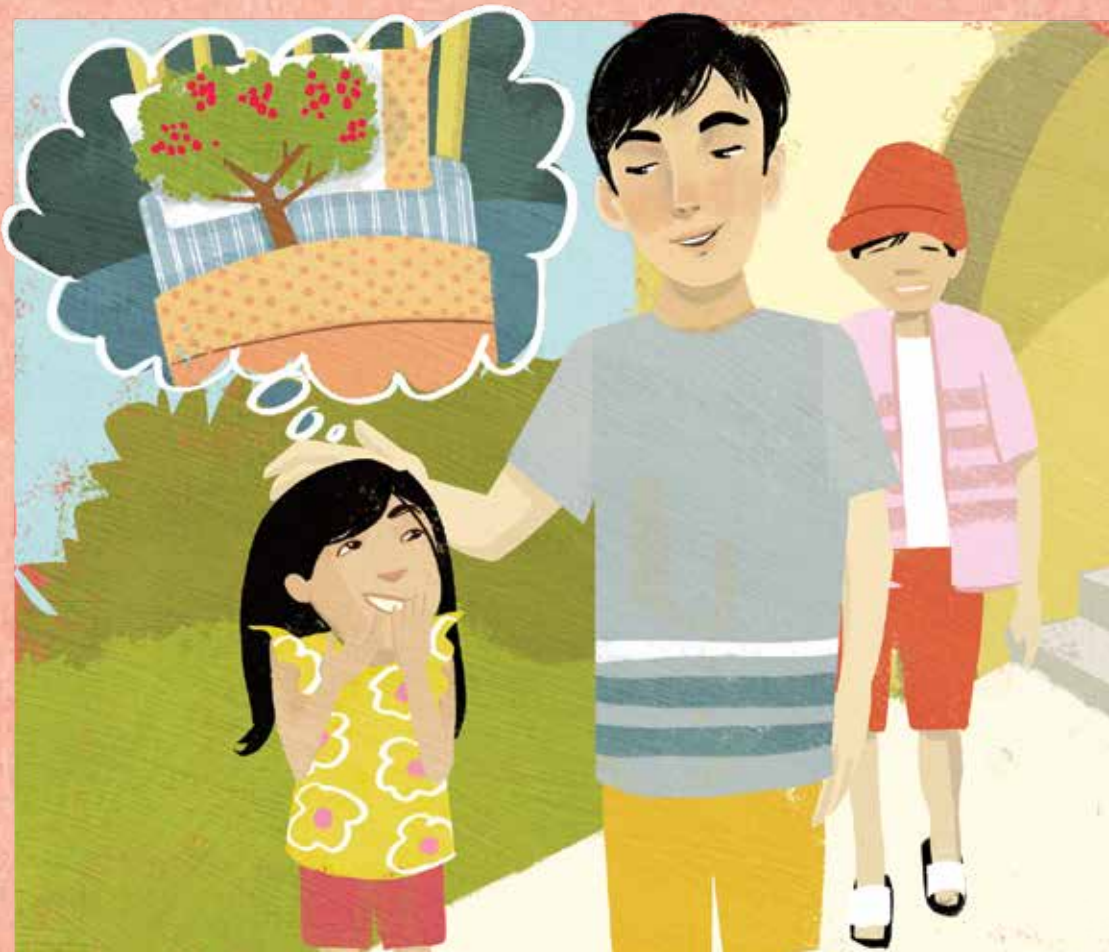
With a laugh, Năinai pulls me into a hug. “More for me, then.”

“Let’s get busy!” Daddy says, rubbing his hands together. “Family Tree’s waiting.”

There Daddy goes again, calling Năinai’s tree by name. I’m giggling as he ruffles my hair. “Laugh if you want, Hannah, but this tree really is family. On cold nights, before Family Tree was fully grown, your năinai used to take my blanket and throw it over that tree.”

I turn to Năinai. “Really?”

She winks. “I had to protect my tree from bad weather, didn’t I? How else could it become a big, strong tree and grow fruit for my family?”





I grin as Daddy clammers up the tree. The lychees grow in clusters, and most are up high. After Nǎinai passes Daddy the limb cutter, he slices through the end of a branch heavy with fruit. “Timber!” Daddy calls.

“Daddy!” I wave the branch he’s cut. “Why are you cutting the tree you love?”

Daddy chuckles. “Don’t worry. Cutting the ends of branches doesn’t hurt Family Tree. It makes her stronger.”

He cuts down more branches, and Nǎinai and I pick their fruit. Each lychee looks like a giant cherry, but the skin feels prickly, like a pineapple.

Nǎinai peels and eats a lychee. “Scrumptious!” she says, smacking her lips.

With a smile, I drop my lychees into the boxes we will take to relatives. Nǎinai shares with everyone in our family.

“Are you almost done?” I ask Daddy. Florida summers feel hotter than a pot of boiling chili. Sweat creeps down my back.

“Not yet,” Daddy says. The branch he stands on dips under his weight.

“Isn’t it dangerous up there?”

“Nonsense.” Daddy picks a lychee and kisses it.

“You won’t hurt me, will you, Family Tree?”

There Daddy goes again. And there goes my giggle.

Plunk! say the lychees when they hit the bottom of a box. The leaves whisper whenever Daddy cuts a branch.





Then I hear a loud sound: splintering wood. Nǎinai starts shouting, and I whirl around to face the tree. There's Daddy, on the ground again. Near his feet is a broken branch!



Daddy scratches his sweaty head. "How about that? The branch broke oh so slowly and lowered me right down." He points to where the low-hanging limb used to connect to the tree and laughs uneasily.

Nǎinai's speaking in Chinese, but I can tell she's worried. She's probably saying, "Be careful!"

Daddy gives a thumbs-up. "I'm dandy." He hands me a lychee. "Special delivery from Family Tree."

I'm nervous to taste the lychee, but I don't want to disappoint Daddy. I peel the lychee's prickly skin and stare at the soft, pale fruit before I nibble. Then I smack my lips, like Nǎinai does. The lychee sure tastes sweet.

Daddy leans against the tree trunk. "Like it?"

Instead of answering, I snag another lychee from a box. This time, Daddy laughs at me. "Family Tree's got a few surprises up her branches, but she always grows good lychees."

I smile as I peel my second lychee. Then I pat our tree's trunk, like Daddy does. "Yummy lychees, Family Tree." 🐾

