

Standing on Ceremony

by Christine Yu Saturday, April 15, 2017

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Even if there was a misunderstanding, we were supposed to stick together. No matter what. We were family.



A-ma and me.

When my 88-year-old paternal grandmother A-Ma died, we didn't share a heartfelt farewell. It wasn't because I didn't make it to her bedside before she passed. I did. But I couldn't forgive A-Ma for a 14-year-old financial feud between my mother and my dad's side of the family. While we weren't wealthy, money clawed its way into our relationships and this underlying financial tension—coupled with a dose of Chinese honor—ultimately tore my family apart.

Growing up, I adored A-Ma. Her short frame, dangling cheeks and ample bosom seemed like a caricature but when she'd envelop me in her arms for a hug, there was no denying that she was solid and real. She'd visit her four sons and one daughter, staying with each for several months. It was the embodiment of Chinese filial responsibility—the duty of children to care for their parents. When I was seven, I took this idea of respect one step further: I begged my mom for a perm. When I looked in the mirror, tight curls covered my head like an old Chinese lady. I gushed. I looked just like A-Ma. Other nights when I couldn't doze off, I went to my grandmother's room in our suburban Connecticut house and asked her to rub my back. She sang a silly Shanghainese song—about eating rice and going poop—that soothed me to sleep.

When I was eight, my father died of a heart attack. Yet, my dad made sure his mother was cared for even after his death. In his will, he planned monthly payments to A-Ma. We continued to welcome her into our home. But, the summer after I graduated from high school, there was a dispute over the financial support from my father's estate to my grandmother.

My mom sent the checks on time—even early, if requested. Yet when Mom was late on a payment 10 years after my dad passed, she received an attorney's letter from A-Ma. Mom never delved into details but her pursed lips revealed her distress. My sister and I pieced together what we could from the bits she shared with us in separate conversations. In our culture, matters between kin stayed in the family. Calling on an outsider—a lawyer, no less—was a humiliating snub.

While my mother never asked us to pick sides, my siblings and I circled around her. It was inconceivable that money could dilute the bonds of flesh and blood. Even if there was a misunderstanding between Mom and A-Ma, we were supposed to stick together. No matter what. We were family.

Yet the dispute drove a wedge between those I loved, fueling a history of resentment I didn't realize simmered just below the surface. Phone calls trickled to a slow drip. A-Ma stopped visiting us. Ties were slashed and I lost half of my relatives.

My grandmother, aunts, uncles and cousins connected me to my dad, not just because of their blood but also their physical appearance. I saw shimmers of my dad come to life in A-Ma's profile and her drooping cheeks, in the tenor of my aunt's voice, in the way my uncle's belly jiggled when he laughed. It was like losing my father all over again.

My sophomore year in college, my aunt sent me a card, a cheery image and note meant as an apology. Tucked inside the envelope was \$100. In my dorm, I sat on the edge of my bed. I longed to reconcile. I assumed our families would eventually patch things up but would it take money, the thing that tore us apart? However, I didn't want to betray my mom. I stuffed the bills into an envelope and returned them to her saying that I couldn't accept her gift.

So when my siblings and I heard A-Ma was at the end stages of pancreatic cancer and family gathered to pay their respects, I didn't want to go. "Are you going? Should we go?" I asked when I called my brother and sister. "Did you tell Mom?"

In the end, we decided to visit our grandmother in LA (where A-Ma lived), driven by a mix of obligation, curiosity, hurt and love. I slipped out of my apartment on an early February morning and into a waiting black town car for the trip to JFK. I placed my black purse on my lap—the only bag I brought, since I planned to return to New York on the red-eye that night.

Walking into her apartment, I inhaled metallic air, a combination of antiseptic and decay. I sat on the couch next to my siblings and across from my uncles, aunts and cousins. Previously, I wouldn't hesitate to talk about Mom or my life back on the East Coast. However, I hadn't spoken with these relatives in over a decade. I picked at my nails and searched for something to move us past this awkward moment.

As I approached A-Ma to say goodbye, my face flushed hot. She lay in a bed in what used to be the dining room. Unable to speak, her eyes were barely open and swaths of skin folded over each other. I wanted to yell at her for breaking up our family. To tell her how hurt and disappointed I was when she and my relatives pulled away from Mom. To say it was crazy that money came between us. To hug her. To say I was sorry.

"Hello. It's been a long time," I said. There was no response and those were the only words I could muster. Seeing her again didn't bring closure. As her grandchild, I was supposed to honor and love her, but I couldn't forgive or grieve her.

It's been nine years since A-Ma died. I miss her. Mostly, I regret not saying I was sorry, taking sides and playing along with outdated notions of family honor. Standing at her bedside, I wish I had the courage to break through the polite appearances and bruised egos and ask my family to make amends. I wonder if my family could have stayed together if we just talked to each other.

A-Ma never met my two sons but she would be amused by how much my kids look like my dad and proud to know that my oldest son carries on my father's memory in his middle name. When I look at my kids, I see my father and grandmother flickering behind their eyes and hug them a little closer, knowing I won't let this cycle repeat itself with them or my mother.

I say "I love you," often with the disclaimer "even when you drive me crazy." I want them to know that fighting and disagreements won't tear us apart. They will always be my children. They will always be my flesh and blood. They respond, "We love you, Mommy, even when you drive us crazy."

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