

## In the ticks and talks

I carry a broken watch in my backpack. The metal strap is thin and silver. It was once held together by a now broken clasp. At the midpoint of the length is a circular glass pendant that tells the time. It oddly reminds me of a world squashed into a cake pan, the volume of time squeezed down to the area swept out by layers upon layers of pi r squared—seconds become minutes become hours become half-days, repeated and repeated over and over again. It has been worn through the tick tocks of many seasons and transitions. Its gilded silver has been stained with the tears of life's tribulations. The watch itself hangs heavy with the weight of my grandmother's time.

When it broke last summer, I thought I felt something break with it.

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My grandmother got the watch in 1970. She was making a trip to the Guangdong province of China to visit relatives and, for some reason, made a stop in Hong Kong. When she described the place to me, with its rising skyscrapers, elegant fashion, and intellectual graffiti, I detected the faint tone of enchantment beneath her nostalgia. I think she must have been a young girl charmed by the glamour of the city then.

It was a natural, serendipitous moment. She saw the watch in a shop somewhere and, perhaps propelled by the promising energy of the city, splurged. To this day, she insists with uncharacteristic pride and eagerness that the watch is made of real white gold, a metal so strong it will surely stand the test of time.

I imagine her in 1970, a young woman in her thirties, trying on the watch. I see the timepiece glimmer with the girlish excitement in her eyes. The silly exhilaration of

having such a classy piece of jewelry from Hong Kong fills her with optimism and the naïve faith that, despite the war raging on at home, she can take on the world. She thinks of her two eldest sons serving in the South Vietnamese army and feels her worries subsiding. The troubles of raising a family in Saigon, the heart of the anti-communist effort, don't disquiet her for a moment. She knows something greater than war. She believes in a better life. She has seen it there in Hong Kong, still glimmering on the silver surface of the timepiece. She buys the watch and seizes her time.

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I never knew my grandmother when she bought the watch she could barely afford. I knew her after the war, after she had moved her family to America, after life had hardened her. But as a child, I knew her as just a mean old lady. And I hated her.

Demanding, insensitive, and extremely critical, she never had a kind thing to say. Her vocabulary was saturated with undertones of resentment towards American culture and desperation to hold onto Chinese traditions; and her words were aimed at us, her family. Whenever there was a family gathering, she would criticize all of us kids relentlessly, speaking of how spoiled we were, how bad our Chinese was, how our skin was too dark, how the boys should eat more, how the girls should start watching their weight. Back then, it seemed to me that she was the spoiled one, having all of us at the beck of her command.

We brought her food, we waited for her to eat first, we cleared the tables. We did whatever she asked. But what we all hated most was walking with her. She was old, but still capable. Nevertheless, she would grasp our arms for balance. Like a scar, it is engrained in my memory how tightly she clawed at my arm, her nails sinking painfully

into my skin. I would complain to my father, but she would yell at me and demand that he discipline me for being disrespectful. So I continued to stare resentfully at her arm as she continued to use me for support. I don't remember ever seeing a watch on her wrist.

Regardless of her flaws, she was always a tough character. All of us kids secretly thought she was cool because we sometimes caught her smoking a cigarette, and we only respected her more when she decided to quit smoking for the children. Her powerful presence intimidated my young cousins and siblings. While our parents and her husband spanked us for misbehaving, she never raised her hand. She had a force about her that never required physical fruition. The look on her face was enough. She was a stubborn mule who acted as if she didn't carry the weight of a life really lived. This was all I saw her as, and maybe I figured she could handle my childish resentments.

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One day during my senior year of high school, my father asked me, "Why don't you visit your grandmother more?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, surprised. My grandmother lived next door. "I see her everyday when I come home from school, and I always say hi." It had become a conditioned habit since childhood to pay respectful greetings to my elders; I'd get in trouble otherwise.

"That's not enough. You should make her tea and talk." His voice then softened. "She gets lonely, you know."

Sensing a talk about familial obligations coming on, and feeling obliged anyway, I went to see her. I wasn't prepared.

I thought I could just go in, say hi, make tea instead of small talk with my limited Chinese, and leave. But she asked me about school, she asked me about America, she asked me why I didn't visit her more even though she lived just next door. When I tried to answer, she broke into sobs.

Suddenly, she was crying for her dead husband, who had passed before I entered middle school, mourning his death and sulking in her loneliness all at the same violently heart-wrenching moment.

Then, in complicated Cantonese I could barely understand, she cursed her children who were all too busy with their jobs to take her out more often. Because of her Asian culture, she felt entitled to be cared for into her old age, and she angrily regretted coming to America. She felt the culture destroyed her children's sense of familial obligation.

What use was giving birth to them anyway, she asked me through tears, to raise children just to push you away, to water plants with love just to see the wind blow them away? Feeling hurt and betrayed, she denounced her children, who, after all she's done for them, have not, in her watery eyes, repaid her enough for giving life to them and giving up her life for them.

Then, she longed for her lost, probably dead daughter. My lost aunt had sailed to America on a different ship from the rest of the family. The ship never showed up, and the girl never showed up to live out the rest of her life. Bitterly, my grandmother

wondered aloud if her daughter would have never showed up, even if she were still alive, to take care of her, or would she have rejected her mother like the rest of her siblings had?

She complained next, still in the same wailing way, about the grandchildren, my cousins and siblings, who, just like me, do little more than say hi to her out of the old obligation.

She filled me with a violent sort of guilt and sympathy. Her tears turbulently moved me to tears. I couldn't speak; the knot in my throat made me feel like I was choking on my heart.

I wanted to comfort her; yet, I was incapable. The Chinese language I grew up speaking was a fading memory to me by then. She didn't know English, and I didn't know how to speak the words to console her. Though I could make out most of what she was saying, I didn't have the grammar knowledge nor vocabulary to respond like she needed me to. So our communication was crippled. I couldn't say sorry for my parents or the aunt I had never known. I couldn't promise to visit more often to make her feel less lonely. And it wasn't in our custom to hold hands or hug. I had never done that with her before, and when I moved to in that moment, I suddenly felt too awkward that I pulled back.

So I cried next to her. I cried for her loneliness and her careless children, I cried out of guilt and remorse, and I finally cried for my dead grandfather because I understood then the value of his existence and the sorrow of his absence.

When my grandma regained her composure, she cursed herself for confiding in me and begged me to go home. I could do little more than listen to her request at that point.

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I made an effort to visit her every week after that and, almost every time, we spent the greater part of an hour crying together. I learned about how luxuriously she lived in Vietnam before the war, how the war changed that, how with a heavy heart she saw off her eldest child when the Communists forced him into a reeducation camp. I heard her heart breaking when, after laboring for ten hours, she delivered her first child, a stillborn. I heard, as if through the same shut doors and windows in Saigon that failed to damp the noise of the Viet Cong and People's Army of Vietnam in 1975, her silently wishing her children were deaf. I heard the comforting, hopeful splashing of waves against the boat get drowned out at shore when the strangeness of English took over. I heard the watch tick.

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When I came home after my first year of college, she gave me the watch. She had stumbled upon it again while cleaning out her room during Chinese New Year and was waiting until I returned to give it to me. I saw the girlish excitement in her eyes when she told me in Chinese I could barely understand that it was made of real white gold, the kind of metal so strong it will surely stand the test of time.

My father says he saw girlish excitement in my eyes when I showed it to him that night. I told him it was made of real white gold, but he said it probably wasn't. My grandmother probably got ripped off, he said. Still, I like how it glimmers in the light

and my father understands how special it makes me feel that my grandmother gave it to me, especially when I'm not even the oldest female grandchild. In Asian tradition, it's rare to get heirlooms when you're not the eldest.

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I wore the watch when I left a few days later for an internship in Singapore. Sitting on my wrist, it sparkled faithfully under the summer sunshine. Sometimes, when the excitement of life dulled and time felt slow, I'd take off the watch and admire it closely in my hands, watching it softly ticking and tocking. What life it has experienced! Often, in these moments, I'd think of my grandmother and wonder what time her demented mind might be stuck in. The good and rough old days of her childhood, the plightful journey of her motherhood, the night her husband died, the bitterness of the present day, or the imminent relief of the future-tense coupled with nonexistence? For lack of religious faith and an abundance of love, I would pray to whatever was then moving my heart that she would dwell on happier days.

Sometimes, too, I would dwell on happier days. My visits to her in the past year and a half had been so lachrymose. Where did her meanness go? At least she clutched my arms those days, fingernails clawing into my skin, leaving scars of regret for misplaced resentment in my memory. But it was easier to childishly resent her like I used to than it was to so desperately and pitifully love her then.

It was during one of these moments in the middle of the summer that I dropped the watch. The clasp broke, the time stopped ticking. My heart stopped for a second, too. I thought it must have meant something.

I left the room in a frantic worry. I called my grandmother immediately. Relief

flooded over me when I heard her voice. I didn't have the heart to tell her it didn't stand the test of time. Instead, I told her I wore the watch that day, and I lied about how my friends all loved it.