

Around the Table

I sat there looking at the small swollen lines, thinking about my grandma in the seat next to me and the lingering scent of a ginger candy she was sucking. The character was written in a thick black marker. The pen bleeding through the back of the paper so that little dots seeped on to the placemat too. Instead of matching my gaze of the characters, Ama kept her eyes fixed on me. It was a kind of stare I could feel, could sense burning like a laser gun. I narrowed my eyes at the chubby Chinese lettering. While her image next to me vanished, I was confronted by her heritage, glaring, judging me. It knew I was American, speaking English in the house and English at school. It knew my favorite meal was dad's steak and mashed potatoes. It read me and knew that I couldn't read it.

Clumps of minutes went by until Ama with her fat black marker in hand, wiggled in her chair. Bubbles formed at the bottom of my stomach. The closer her pen got, the faster my insides expanded, the bubbles swirling to the top of my throat. "What does this look like?" she said, pointing to two little lines that formed a window in the center of the character. I understood what she was trying to do but didn't want to concede. My brother who sat at the other side of the table quietly scribbled down his translation with fluidity. He never once asked for help. In my head, I swore I was close, that I could figure it out on my own, like he had done. I furrowed my brow to show I was thinking, hard. It wasn't fair.

"See? It looks like a door," her shriveled fingers circled a little window.

The bubbles inside me gathered together, swelling until they burst, leaving my throat dry and my stomach desperately empty. The first teardrop turned the character into an inky blob, lines connecting where they shouldn't connect. The second, third, fourth tears

left the room blurry. I curled my face into my chest, not wanting my brother to notice. I could still feel the laser gun eyes on me, expecting me to come out of my shell, to iron this wrinkle we had made. Instead I turned around as fast as I could and darted away to the bedroom.

Ama never tried to teach me Mandarin again.

She did, however, continue to teach my brother, who had a natural gift for the language. Over one summer spent at “Ama’s Camp,” the two of them sat every morning at the kitchen table, her saying words, him repeating them diligently, intelligently. When he got something right, she smiled. When he got something wrong, he twisted his lips until it was right, and she smiled even bigger. I watched them from the other end of the table as I spooned mouthfuls of Trix cereal. Ama had insisted at the grocery store that Trix was “best deal as we get most flavors every dollar.” I tried to tell her that all of the colors - green, blue, red, purple, orange, they all tasted the same, like a cube of sugar. She still didn’t get it.

“How’s the blue-berry tasting?” she said while Ryan was busy translating a sentence.

I chewed with my mouth open, letting bits of green and orange trickle on to the placemat. My milk had turned a shade of light brown.

“Good,” I replied, not in the mood to repeat how it wasn’t blue-berry it was blueberry, and it didn’t taste like that, it was just sweet. I moved the box in front of me, blocking my image of them. I tried to do the maze on the backside of the box by moving my finger along the trail where it was allowed. Their voices were still soft in the background. “Hǎoo. Jǐǔ. Hǎo Jiǔ. Hǎojiǔ,” my brother repeated over and over again until he was content. I poured more cereal into the brown milk.

“Hǎojiǔ bùjiàn,” Ama said, the words floating off her tongue.

“HǎoJiǔ bùjiàn!” Ryan said back, adopting her form of pronunciation. I chewed louder to block out their conversation. The Trix grinding in my mouth, the colors meshing, pulverizing into a wad of rainbow and saliva. I swallowed it down.

“HǎoJiǔ bùjiàn!” Ryan said picking up the box to reveal my cover. His eager eyes looked back at me. I wanted to rip his lips off or grab his tongue - to do something that could silence him forever.

“Ehh look at that!” Ama said while clasping her hands together in one great applaud, “Long time no see, Allison!”

“What does that even mean?” I asked, the words coming out so small my mouth barely moved.

“Long time no see!” Ryan said. His triumph was radiant. With such excitement standing over me, I was inclined to scoot my chair in the opposite direction.

“I see you plenty,” I said as an excuse to go to another room and watch TV.

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At home on an autumn night, my brother and I set the table. I got the plates, he the silverware and napkins. He showed me how to make a napkin crane something he “taught himself.” He folded the edges with a mechanical rhythm, holding up his finished product like an easy A. I tried to follow the same crease and fold technique but, in the end, I gave up. I showed him how I could make a trash ball instead. We all sat around the table in our usual seats. My dad had cooked our favorite garlicky chicken and my mom contributed with a hodgepodge bowl of vegetables that I assumed as table decoration. It was Sunday, so we served ourselves then bowed our heads.

“Dear god, thank you for this good food and our wonderful friends and family.”

Dad’s voice was the loudest, Mom’s second loudest, Ryan and I mumbled quietly.

“Amen.”

“It’s a feast!” My mom exclaimed.

“You say that every time...” I said.

“It’s a feast!” My dad repeated jokingly.

We ate in silence for a while, forks jabbing, knives scratching, mouths chewing.

The phone rang.

“Call from...” the automated voice filled the room, “Ah-mah.”

I smiled from the funny pronunciation.

“I’ll call her back after,” my dad said.

“Call from...Ah-mah” the voice repeated again.

“Dad, how many languages does Ama know?” I asked, reminded of how I told Julie my Ama spoke eleven languages, but honestly wasn’t sure.

He paused, his fork suspended in the air.

“While she spoke Taiwanese at home, at the time the country was under Japanese rule, so all of her classes were taught in Japanese.”

I watched the food on his fork hover near his mouth. I wondered how long it would be until he would take the bite.

“After World War II however, the Chinese took over.”

“In high school your Ama had to learn Mandarin, you know? Just like that.” My mom intervened.

My dad nodded, then continued about how Ama had fled to America after the invasion of the ROC. I didn't know what that meant but I nodded my head and he kept going. She went to Boston University. There she had to learn not only English, but *bawston* English. My dad chuckled, amused by his accent.

"So how many languages does she know?" I asked, growing impatient. He put his fork of food down. I slumped lower in my chair.

"Well she went back to Taiwan after college. After she had me and Aunt Welli, we were sent back to America. I was four or five? at the time."

"Dad's first language was Taiwanese, you know." my mom added.

"Yes, I was pretty intelligent back then."

"You were four," I pointed out

"Exactly!"

"Did you know Ryan's first language was Chinese?" my mom pointed her fork at my brother whose head was bent, immersed by his plate of food.

"No, I didn't," I looked over at him, imagining how excited my parents must have been when he picked up a toy cow and said both its Chinese and English word.

"I did?" Ryan said, lifting his eyes for the first time.

"What about me?" I asked.

"Yea, you were more of a toe biter Al," my dad said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know you would just nibble at your toes all the time, like a little rat. It was cute."

"What does that have to do with me not knowing Chinese?"

My question remained suspended in the air. Everyone resumed eating, forks jabbing, knives scratching, mouths chewing until the lingering echo of my voice fizzled out.

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In her one-story house in Northampton Massachusetts, Ama only had seven channels on her cable network. She said as long as there was PBS, no problem. When she came to visit us in New York she was appalled by the 1500 channels to choose from. “Where is PBS?” she asked in the morning, struggling to figure out the remote-control features. The screen went from bright to dark, the volume loud to soft.

“Ma, you should start streaming your shows,” my dad yelled from the kitchen.

“What stream?” she said in a small tone talking only to me.

I shrugged my shoulders. Back then all I knew was 49 – Disney Channel and 6 – Nickelodeon.

“Can you believe it?” she mumbled as she continued to search for PBS by shifting the settings on the screen.

In Ama’s living room, I sat in a rocking chair meant for a kindergarten classroom. She took delight in her small things. Pointing to her one cup rice cooker, “Look! See? Ha! So small!” she would exclaim like a child with a new toy. Even her trash bin was miniature. She was 4’9 and her feet were size five. Ama showed me them once, up close. We sat at the table, her foot propped up on my lap, and she pointed with her fingers where they had been bound, which areas were scrunched, which bones forced together. I looked at my feet then, at the time, size eight. They were smooth, stretched, the skin was taught. I was still buying shoes one size too big, *for room to grow* my mom would say. “Can you believe it?” she asked, wiggling her stubbed toes at me.

I flipped through the channels, getting all the way to seven then flipping back down to one, then back up to seven again. I thought about how useful it would be if I could cut off someone like how I did with a channel. Click. And they would disappear. I stopped the screen at a man painting trees, watching his monotonous strokes until I fell asleep in the small chair, my head slung back.

I once dreamt that Ama was in a pit in the ground and I was trying to get her out. The pit was in her backyard and our cousin's dog was running in circles around it, barking. I bent over reaching my arm out for her to grab. Ryan was there also trying to help. He decided we could dig a hole instead. We put on these rain boots, big black and clunky to dig the hole. Once we got down there Ryan and Ama started whispering to each other. I kept leaning my ear in to listen but couldn't make out anything they were saying. I crawled out of the hole.

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I watched as she took out a tub of yogurt my dad had bought from her fridge. We were in her new house in California ten years later, where it is was warm and never rained. She held the tub up to the light, twisting it around like an excavated fossil. With a baby spoon, she scooped a little lump and ate it. She made a sour face then spit it back out on the spoon.

"It's greek yogurt Ama."

"I don't like it," she said putting it back in the fridge, "I don't know why your dad thinks this is good. It's *baaad*."

"It's good for you though," I pointed out, "There's lots of protein in it."

“Noo I don’t believe it,” she said, making my suggestion sound crazy, “I only eat yummy yogurt.”

“You mean like frozen yogurt?”

“Ah! Yes! Frozen yogurt! So yummy no?”

“But they are different. Frozen yogurt is pretty much ice cream Ama.”

She shook her head, I was being preposterous.

“You know the first time I had frozen yogurt? What a treat!” she said clasping her hands together, “It was when your Agong was in the hospital. He was very very sick. I had been waiting with him by his bed for the whole day. His heart was going like this,” she tapped her hand slowly against the table, “I just watched that beat like the best TV show ever.”

“Like PBS?” I smiled.

“Hah! Yes like PBS! No commercials either! By the end of the day, I hadn’t eaten a single thing! Can you imagine? Not one snack! I was too busy watching the TV.”

She tapped her hand again to the memorized beat. “The nurse who came in, so sweet, she told me ‘Ruth,’ I didn’t move, ‘Ruth, the cafeteria is closing soon, why don’t you get some food?’ I was like a zombie, so I followed her downstairs where they had a little café area. And I was so sad, so sad you know? but I got a cup of the frozen yogurt and boy! It made me so happy!”

I imagined Ama, shriveled and tired, smiling into her bowl of frozen yogurt while next to her my grandpa lay, with an IV and maybe one of those oxygen masks.

My grandpa died when I was young, and I don’t remember the funeral. I do remember when Ama moved to California, we were in charge of Agong’s ashes. His urn sat

between me and Ryan in the backseat of the car. When we hit a bump and he fell over, Ryan and I shared a glance both unsure if there were rules to what an urn should or should not do.

“Yes, sometimes the best cure is the yummy yogurt,” she said. I watched her smile slowly disintegrate and crumple in her skin.

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I sigh when the Asian man at the bodega asks.

“No, I don’t speak Chinese,” I say.

He had identified my half-Asian appearance like I was a piece in *Guess Who?*

“Been to China though, right?” he says.

The carton of milk still rests on the counter between us. I think about my brother who lived in China for three months. I think about how excited this man would have been to talk to him instead.

“No, I’ve never been to Asia at all.”

“No?”

“No,” I force a smile, “How much?” I point to the milk he has yet to ring up.

“Ah you must go some time. Where in China is your family? Four seventy-five.”

I sift through my wallet for the exact change in an urge leave the conversation.

“Taiwan, actually,” I say in a surprisingly upbeat tone.

“Even better. You must go some time. Okay?”

“Okay.”

I grab the carton and head back home. We are having sukiyaki for dinner to celebrate Ryan's visiting and I want to show him how after six years of training I can finally fold the perfect napkin crane.