

“He looks exactly like my son. Have you seen him?”

Waving a photograph of an elderly Chinese man, my father questioned the man on the corner of Mulberry and Canal Street. A confused look, the man shook his head dismissively. We moved onto the next street. The metroplex of Chinatown seemed small after a while, the streets of red paper lanterns becoming all too familiar. Hours had passed, our spirits were exhausted, and desperation consumed us. His brown fedora that he wore religiously wasn't seen for the whole day, and it was getting late. Dad and I trudged to the car in silence—even the man who taught me perseverance my whole life was giving up. But, by some stroke of a miracle, there he was. Rummaging through the trash heaps and reeking of spoiled food, the man with the brown fedora, who I mistook for a homeless man, was there in his purest form: Grandpa.

Of course, Grandpa was never like this. From my days as a little boy, the grandfather I always knew was a stubborn man who began his day's work at 5 A.M., and anyone who didn't was, in his eyes, lazy. Times of hardship of escaping communist persecution and restarting life as a low-paid line cook in an industrious New York City instilled a ferocious work ethic in him. And, it made him a perfectionist in disguise. He would mutter incomprehensible complaints underneath his breath in broken English all the time about anything and everything, from the neighbor's uncut lawn to my mother's "bad" cooking. He strived to teach others *his* way of doing things, and truthfully, his way always seemed to be the right way. Yet, despite his insistent, and sometimes overbearing, attitude, he loved and treasured his family more than anything else in the world. Eloquent feasts with piled-high plates were prepared every Saturday for *all* of the family, and Grandpa's love could be tasted through his food. Grandpa's cooking allowed the family to become inseparable at the dinner table, even if he was in the kitchen the whole time. Though, when he *was* at the dinner table, he would be the last to sit down but the first to get up and wash the dishes in the sink.

And so, Grandpa loved me in this same, unconventional way. Due to Grandpa's incapability of expressing thoughts precisely in the English language, our relationship was not based off spoken words—Grandpa showed his love rather than expressed it. Never would Grandpa ask me “How was your day?” Instead, our time together would consist of activities such as walking in the park or feeding the fish in the pond (though the park signs disagreed with this). My earliest memory with Grandpa was taking a strenuous journey on foot from my house to his. I remember gripping onto his hand so tightly, fearful that my tiny toddler feet would give out from fatigue. And, upon arriving, I also remember being so out of breath that I immediately pressed my face up against his fish tank to cool myself, seeing vibrant, plump orange fish teem with life.

But, when we weren't scaling the hills of our neighborhood or illegally feeding animals, we would sit by the television and watch documentaries about China, another place that Grandpa called "home." Lines of terracotta soldiers and vast green mountain ranges left me speechless, wondering why Grandpa would leave such a place and imagining if such a place even existed. What captivated me even more was the fact that, according to him, I, too, was from that place, despite my being born in America. It was not only the first time I was directly exposed to a part of my culture, but I also realized this was how Grandpa showed his love towards me: He intended to become a teacher of sorts, spreading the values and morals within the Chinese culture to me. One of these values was education, which he, ironically, never had. So, whenever Grandpa could, he would say phrases to encourage me, such as "You smart" or "Do good in school." I still laugh whenever I think of his favorite saying, "I may not be smart, but I have common sense." I will never be able to thank him enough for his "common sense" of teaching me everything he knew because it was Grandpa's relentless way of saying, "I love you."

Then, everything stopped as abruptly as he was persistent because Grandpa became a statistic: One of the 5.7 million Americans living with Alzheimer's dementia. When it began exactly is unknown to me, but I do remember that summer day when the phone rang. Mom answered immediately, her voice full of confusion and dismay, and it was the first time I heard Grandma cry. Grandpa had left. Where he went exactly is still also unknown to me, but eventually, he found his way home, and sporadic episodes like these became all too common. Soon, phone calls at 3 P.M. became what I dreaded most. It was a vicious cycle. Dad and I would hop into the car, travelling to a place to find somebody who didn't even know he was lost.

We were all fighting a war that could never be won, even if the battles were. Naturally, the whole family became involved. We would find Grandpa in all types of places—the bank, the schoolyard, even a stranger's house—but he would venture most frequently to his old stomping grounds, Chinatown, New York City, located 23 miles from home. Attempts at placing a tracker on his clothing were futile, as he never wore the same shoes two days in a row or pair of pants more than once a week. Sometimes, I felt as though Grandpa abandoned us without saying goodbye, and I admit that I questioned what difference it would have made to just let him stay in the streets. I knew it was selfish thinking, but I quickly discovered I was wrong. One time on a rescue mission, Grandpa apologized. It wasn't his sincerity that got to me but what I saw: A man whose tan face was creased with years of struggle and plight, truly and utterly confused. A man who I admired my whole life there, but not there. A man of few words who managed to say the most: "I'm sorry, everybody."

They say the person you love dies twice, first mentally then physically. Though Grandpa may have experienced only the first, there is no way of sugarcoating that death is death. My strained heart is witness to this phenomenon. Yet, there is a silver lining to everything in this world. Strangely, Grandpa's deterioration has only allowed me to treasure his presence and recognize the simple gifts he has given me. If he were here and saw the state in which I compose this tribute, my tribute, to him, he would've definitely scolded me, "Why you sad?! Why you give up?!" And maybe that's why I keep fighting for Grandpa because he would've never stopped fighting for me.

I will be defeated in the war, but the fight in me will never end. I have taken my skirmishes to various battlefields, one of them being the field of science. I wanted to contribute in any way possible to the field, regardless of what I did. So, this past summer, I was a researcher at Columbia University, where I conducted projects that take steps in developing treatments to halt the progression of Alzheimer's. Words cannot express how grateful I am for such an opportunity, and to share my findings with the world, I spoke to the public about the future of Alzheimer's research at a neuroscience outreach event. In the future, I plan to become a science educator not only to bring light to this ruthless disease, but also to share my experiences with others. If there will ever be a solution to Alzheimer's, I sure will be on the forefront.

Away from the battlefield, I like to reflect, especially on those cool autumn days by the pond. I walk through the same paths of oak trees and dirt roads that were once mazes Grandpa led me through, and I think about how times were long ago. I am not particularly sad, though, and I smile while throwing pieces of bread for the fish in the pond. Maybe I'm not sad because Grandpa isn't completely gone; I have found him within myself—his persistence, his culture, his legacy. Yes, I will miss Grandpa's cooking, and I will miss those Saturdays at the dinner table with all the family. But, when I look into the peaceful surface of the pond, I see my reflection, and in my own reflection, I see Grandpa—and he's smiling.