

The Stolen Goodbye

PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

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The disease didn't kill me. But it did.

I had planned for it, dreamed about it, counted the days on my fingers like a child waiting for a holiday. Shanghai. A reunion with my paternal grandparents, 爷爷 and 奶奶, after a year apart.

The anticipation had been a quiet hum in the background of my life for months, a rhythm that matched my heartbeat. I had packed with the precision of a soldier preparing for battle: my owl-print carry-on, filled to the brim with clothes, trinkets, and small gifts for my grandparents. It was supposed to be a celebration, a gift wrapped in the promise of family.

But when I ran downstairs that morning, I froze. My mother's hands were clasped tightly together, her eyes darting between the floor and the door. But it was my father's face that stopped me cold. His features were stiff, like he was trying to hold something back, but his eyes.. they were wide, bloodshot, and distant—like he wasn't really seeing anything at all. His mouth barely moved, the corners pulled down into a line that was neither angry nor sad, just.. empty. I had never seen him look like that. When he spoke, his voice was rough, as if the words had to fight their way out. The trip was cancelled.

Not postponed. Just cancelled.

COVID-19. A word I had only skimmed in the headlines suddenly became the thief of everything I'd been waiting for.

The planes to China? Gone. Grounded. Forever, it seemed, as time blurred into an endless stretch of uncertainty.

At eleven, I felt the raw sting of anger—anger at the virus, at fate, at the helplessness I couldn't name. But in my childish naivety, I assumed the delay would be brief. No big deal.

But time, it seems, is a river that doesn't wait.

Two weeks later, my dad got a call from his sister. My grandfather, 爷爷, had been admitted to the

hospital. They said it was nothing serious—just a day, or two, and he would be fine. The relief we felt was brittle. We weren't ready for what came next.

Then the phone rang again.

This time, it was the sound of everything breaking.

爷爷 was gone. He died quietly, while we—while I—were still thousands of miles away.

I couldn't describe that moment. It wasn't just the weight of grief pressing in; it was something sharper, deeper—a recognition that the last time I saw him, he was nothing more than a blur behind a screen. That our final exchange was a half-spoken sentence, a last effort at connection lost in the airwaves.

His voice, raspy from age and illness, asking me to repeat myself so his impaired hearing could catch the words, had always made me laugh. But I'll never hear it again. His hands, so worn from years of work, that I once found comfort in, were never meant to be still. I still see him in the kitchen, leaning over the bubbling pot, the sharp scent of pork belly mingling with bamboo shoots, the rich, golden broth steaming as he ladled it into my bowl. I will never taste his 腌笃鲜 (yān dǔ xiān) again—the one dish no one else could replicate, not even close.

COVID-19 didn't kill me. But it robbed me of everything I never said. My final words to him are like shadows at dusk, fading into the dark before they ever had the chance to exist. In that painful silence, I realized this loss wasn't just mine—it was a fracture felt by millions. The cruelty of the virus wasn't just in the illness—it was in the walls built between us, walls we couldn't cross. A separation that left so many holding grief in the hollow space where goodbyes should have been.

For weeks, I couldn't speak in Chinese. The language felt heavy in my mouth, each word a reminder of him. I couldn't tell my parents how much it hurt, how much I wished we had made it in time, so I curled up in silence. Guilt consumed me. My last memory of him would always be from

a screen. My last message was one he may not have even heard.

The world I had known—the one where my grandfather was alive—felt like it had cracked open. And in the stillness of this new world, his void was permanent.

I remember the first time I tried to make his 腌笃鲜 after he was gone. I stood in the kitchen, unsure if I could replicate the recipe he'd made a thousand times. The ingredients were the same, but something was missing. The smell in the air wasn't right, and the taste wasn't the same either. That moment—stirring a pot that seemed to lack its soul—was when I understood just how much he had shaped everything I did, even the smallest details.

I thought I might be getting used to the quiet, to the space he had left behind. But then, the phone rang again. This time, it was my grandmother. 奶奶 had fallen.

At first, falling seemed so inconsequential—not like the kind of thing that could alter everything again.

But by the time I heard the next call, that fragile sense of stability I'd just started to claim was gone. The fall wasn't just a fall. It was the start of something else.

I hadn't even begun to understand how one loss could live inside me when the threat of another arrived—unasked for, but impossible to ignore.

My sister and I screamed “奶奶! It's me! It's us!” But the only response was the rhythmic beeping of hospital machines. Her eyes remained closed. Her voice was silent. There was not even a flutter of her eyelids or a whisper of a word.

After ten minutes of just us, screaming our hearts out, tears flooding the tiny phone screen, the doctor came back.

She was gone.

I had promised her I would visit. We'd talked about sitting on the balcony of her fourteenth-floor apartment, watching Shanghai glimmer under the night sky. We'd planned to share peach smoothies from my favorite shop. We'd laugh over cards, and I'd read her English stories, ones she couldn't understand but I could translate.

But I broke that promise.

The pandemic exposed more than our vulnerabilities to a virus—it laid bare the cracks in our ability to stay connected when it mattered most.

My grandparents weren't the only ones whose final moments were spent behind glass walls or glitchy screens.

Everywhere, I saw the toll of isolation. COVID-19 deepened the divides that had always been there: between the healthy and the vulnerable, the connected and the stranded. My grandparents were caught in that gap, on the wrong side of an invisible line.

It's been five years now. Five years since I lost both of them. Five years since I lost the chance to be with them, to hold their hands one last time.

My father hasn't been able to return to China, to the land where his parents breathed their last. The thought of facing their absence there—the place where they should have been—keeps him away. I understand that, but I also don't.

I haven't gone back either. Not to the place where my history began. Not to the land that taught me my first words. Not to the place where we should have made memories.

The grief has left a silence between us, like an open wound no one dares to touch. I couldn't talk to anyone—not my mother, not my sister, and certainly not my father. I don't ask him why. I don't need to. It's easier this way, to stay silent in our sorrow, though I know that silence doesn't heal.

We were all alone together, sharing loss, but not the space to mend.

Even now, I can't bring myself to speak of them in the past tense. They must still be here. Somewhere.

But time is unyielding. The world has moved on. Their house, once filled with laughter, walls cured with the aroma of 爷爷's cooking, is sold. Their ashes are scattered, but their absence lingers, clinging to my thoughts, my actions, my traditions. I live in the silence of the missed chances, where goodbye will forever remain a shadow.

And yet, as I grow, I begin to understand that their absence isn't just silence—it's space. Space that holds their love, their lessons, the parts of them that live on in me. It's in the stillness, in the moments between loss and memory, that I find them with me—as I'm making my own 腌笃鲜, reading my own English stories to no one in particular—woven into the fabric of my life. ■