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A Letter to the Voices I Could Not Speak

PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

When I was little, silence was my punishment. It was the unspoken pause between my mother's words, sharp as the edge of a cleaver. It was my father's sigh after I brought home another B on a math test, his disappointment louder than any scolding. Silence pressed against me like a second skin, and I wore it with shame, thinking it meant I had failed, that I hadn't said or done the right thing.

My grandmother's silence was different. She hummed when she cooked, her voice threading through the clatter of the wok, the hiss of garlic hitting oil. She didn't need words to tell me when to bring the soy sauce or how to fold the dumplings. Her hands spoke in gestures—small, precise—and her silence was thick with understanding. I never questioned it; I only mirrored it, mimicking the way her fingers moved, the way she paused between folds as if to let the dough breathe.

But it was in the spaces between her stories that I began to understand what silence really meant. She told me about the village she had left behind, the river that swelled in summer and left fish stranded on the banks. She described the moon as she remembered it, fat and low, its reflection trembling in the rice paddies. But then her voice would falter, and she'd fall quiet. I would wait for her to speak again, but sometimes she wouldn't. She'd only smile, a small, private curve of her lips, and return to peeling garlic.

As I grew older, I started to hear the things she didn't say. The husband she never talked about. The war she mentioned only in fragments, as if even the memory could tear her apart. I used to want to fill those silences, to ask her questions and gather the words she seemed to drop. But then I realized her silences weren't empty. They held the weight of what couldn't be spoken, the way a closed fist holds the shape of what it once held.

Now, I think about silence differently. I think about the girl I used to be, sitting at the back of the classroom, afraid to raise her hand because her English sounded strange, like shoes scuffing on linoleum. I think about the moments I kept quiet, not because I didn't know the words, but because I didn't know how they'd land. I think about my grandmother and how her silence taught me that not everything needs to be spoken to be felt.

Sometimes, I sit with my own silences. I think of my grandmother's hands, the river she left behind, the moon she never forgot. I think of the words I never spoke to her, the questions I never asked. And I realize that silence isn't emptiness—it's memory, folded over itself, like the way she taught me to seal a dumpling so the filling wouldn't spill out. And maybe that's what silence is—a way of holding what we can't bear to lose. A language all its own. ■