

Grandmother Number Two

My grandmother is a peculiar woman.

Whenever we meet, she knocks her forehead against mine. She does it when we say goodbye, too.

If age was measured by the distance between a parent and child, she is old. She insists upon it, too, and we know that it's true, even though we believe her body is lying to nobody but herself. Her face is smooth and jade, and only wrinkles when she feels the need to do so.

My six-foot brother has to bow down whenever they meet. I think he's a little afraid of crushing her, despite the fact that she is indestructible. She knows how to fall down the stairs and only bruise an elbow and nose.

When we try to convince her that her body is a liar, she blames all the fish she ate. She grew up next to the sea, and whenever her father had the time, he would go to the market and buy fish. They had fish three times a day, and she'd count her meals in eyeballs. She was her sister's shadow, and her relatives used to joke about how she'd remain that way until her sister got married. They were wrong: she married the same man. I believe she was lucky. She knew what she wanted and did it, so now I have three grandmothers and one grandfather.

Her husband died when I was three, and she had no great-grandchildren. He died with his eyes closed in two bearded smiles, and she stayed, even after her sister left to live in Toronto. I think she did it for her son, my father, and because she didn't want to leave her home. Eventually, she left for Vancouver. It was when she realised that no matter how much she cleaned the house, dust would return to linger as long as she was there.

She is slightly obsessive-compulsive. She wages a daily war against anything and everything dirty, dusty and unclean, measured by her standards. I used to slip numerous times on the wooden floor, and she'd chastise me before giving me a pair of slippers. The apartment she lives in now is carpeted, but I have no doubt that she still polishes the floor with a vacuum cleaner. She has scrubbed tables, chairs, windows, rags and cloths until her hands shone, and now she complains about the permanent calluses formed like cooled lava. All I see are six hands on each arm, and my hands feel like a baby. If I did what she does, I would burn 1470 calories a day. She burns 1103 calories.

Apart from dirt, my grandmother also hates plastic bags and polystyrene. The former is a necessary evil, while the latter is just evil. She collects plastic bags in her dishwasher, and they spill out whenever someone tries to wash the dishes for her. They follow her wherever she goes, just in case she decides to buy something, or someone with her buys something. Bringing Tupperware to restaurants solves her polystyrene dilemma, and when she forgets, she berates herself before reciting her environmentalist talk. I think she has rubbed off on me.

Nowadays, I phone her about once a week. She shares numerous recipes with me while we talk, but I usually forget them. Except the egg one, because it was simple. She also shares her day with me, but I don't because by the time we talk, she has already heard third-hand about what I've been doing.

I phoned her yesterday. She was glad to hear from me as always, even though she had already heard about the engagement party I'll be attending, the food I've been eating and the projects I've been doing. In turn, she went on and on about making a dish I've already forgotten, and how much fun she had with her friends and relatives during their dining experience at a local Chinese restaurant. After another complaint about people polluting the environment, and how she's getting so much older because she keeps misplacing her glasses, she lingers awhile before we say goodbye.

I like to think that our final goodbye would consist of pressed foreheads, sending her to a world without dust, dirt, and plastic bags.