

Grandma,

Weren't expecting to hear from me, were you? The last time I spoke to you, you were laying in the hospital bed. The doctors said that you could still hear us but couldn't respond, so we each said our goodbyes. The next morning, I walked into the kitchen to find Mum, teary-eyed, holding the phone with both hands.

I'm sorry that I speak to you in English, but my mother tongue feels more like an infant tongue. I ask of whatever high power is listening in, in all their divinity, to convey everything I say in a way that you will understand. Because I need you to understand.

Sometimes I look back at my former self and feel as though I'm watching a character in a movie. The character makes bad choices and says idiotic things, which frustrates me, as the viewer. In this case, though, the only difference between the character and the viewer is time. A passage of time filled with introspection.

I remember when your casket was lowered into the ground. Prayers lingered in the air and mingled with the scent of incense. The altar was crammed with fruit. The jolly face of a gold Buddha statue beamed at me, almost mockingly, as if he knew that I was feeling ambivalent about your death. I could sense the hole that you left, but it was admittedly not filled with sadness at the time.

We then went to Uncle Duy's house to eat.

'Look,' Aunty Binh pointed her chin at the altar. 'The incense is curling. It means that Ba is here, she's watching us eat.'

'That's fake.' It came out colder than I meant it to.

Aunty twisted her face. 'What you mean, fake?' She switched back to her shrill Vietnamese. 'You disrespectful child. Why haven't you cried?'

Why hadn't I cried? I had no answer.

I know that this story, our story, starts long before your death, perhaps during the fall of Saigon. For the sake of time, let me start with the fourth grade. During this time, most of us kids would spend our lunchtimes playing downball. To anyone else, it might just look like an innocent game where kids bounce a little ball into squares, but I can assure you that it's a very competitive sport among the Australian youth. Lame insults were constantly thrown between the girls and boys to undermine their opponents.

'Hey Ruby, you're Vietnamese, yeah?' One of the boys asked, passing the ball to me.

'Yeah.'

'My neighbours are Vietnamese. This is what you guys sound like.' He proceeded to make high-pitched and gurgling sounds from the back of the throat. The other boys laughed.

My face flushed, and I was stumped. There was no equivalent remark I could respond with. I didn't feel like I could tell him it was offensive, because I'd just made a rather scathing remark comparing his face to that of a rat. Maybe a part of me also believed him, that our language was not something to be embraced but to reject and laugh at.

I had grown up with Mum and Dad speaking Vietnamese to me. I would mindlessly slip into English at times, my dialogue a mosaic of competing influences, as it often is for children of immigrants. That night, though, I realised that I could speak however I wanted.

There at the dinner table, I actively chose to reply in English for the first time, but definitely not the last.

Then in high school, the family business became the bane of my existence. Everyone else who was looking to work part-time would apply for a job at Coles or Target or The Reject Shop. Meanwhile, I was made to work for less than minimum wage as an act of filial piety at an excessively ethnic restaurant in a predominantly white neighbourhood. The aroma of phở broth, the oil paintings of the farmers labouring away in rice paddies. I never really talked about my weekend job at school, except that one time in Literature class. We were put into groups to analyse an assigned chapter of *Frankenstein*. It's cute how teachers think that randomly grouping together students to work together will make for a good bonding activity. I guess we got the work done quickly, but then it was just awkward. It was one of those awkward silences that actually become more awkward once broken.

'Hey, you work at that Vietnamese restaurant, right?' Stacey asked. I was once friends with Stacey, back in primary school, before she climbed the social ladder.

'Uh, which one?' It was a stupid question used only to delay the conversation.

'The one across the street from that nail salon, 'cause I was, like, there the other day and I think I saw you.'

For a split second I considered pulling the 'you must have mistaken me for another Asian' card but I thought better of it.

'Oh yeah, I work there.'

'Oh cool,' she says, nodding. 'Is the food good?'

In hindsight, she was probably just asking to make small talk, but I had feared that saying that praising our food would mean having to serve my classmates on weekends. 'Ahh, nah, not really.'

We let out perfunctory chuckles to fill the space.

I would sell myself out in such ways.

Do you remember when you yelled at Sandra and I for going downstairs to play on the playground by ourselves? She was my favourite out of the cousins and we were always up to mischief, at least in our parents' eyes. I made good use of the knowledge that she would copy me and do whatever I asked because I was older. We had come to visit you that day and our mums had gone out to buy lunch. I was intent on making the most out of my Sunday afternoon, so I convinced Sandra to come outside with me to play on the playground across the street, which we weren't meant to do unsupervised. I obviously exercised very little foresight and had a good fifteen minutes on that swing set before Mum and Aunty Binh came back and found us playing outside. They weren't very happy with us outside, to say the least. We were dragged back into the house and asked to explain ourselves.

'I was bored, Grandma was hogging the TV!'

As punishment, you made me stand by the wall and hold my ears in silence while you guys ate lunch first. Not Sandra, just me, because I was the one with a big mouth.

The embarrassment wore off pretty soon though. Months later, we took your cane while you were napping. Immersed in our Harry Potter phase, we waved your cane in the air. The balcony was hardly spacious, but it was better than hitting the cane against the popcorn

ceiling. You woke up to find handle of your cane wrapped with copious layers of tape at the collar. I was actually quite proud of myself for having done the job of a handyman, fixing that cane. Besides, the tape gave it character. Except that's not how you saw it. I decided then that I hated you.

I was confused. I'd read books and watched shows where the grandmothers baked cookies and knitted ugly but ultimately adorable Christmas sweaters. You weren't like that though. If I were asked to describe you, I would think of how you perpetually smelt of Tiger Balm. How I would make myself a bowl of oatmeal garnished with blueberries for breakfast, and you'd scrunch your face up and ask me what the hell I was eating. How you would randomly start singing the folk songs that you learnt as a child in Vietnam, while demonstrating no control over your volume or pitch as I tried to watch *The Simpsons*. What I would not think of were the acts of affection that I refused to acknowledge as being such. How you would cut fruit and make sure we ate it because you had seen what scurvy could do to a person. How you would tell me to wear a jacket even if it were only moderately cold because you believed that a cold child would grow to be a weak adult.

Then there was that time when we all went to the city to watch the fireworks in the city. I think I was eleven at the time. The parents decided that we should take the train into the city because parking would be hard to find on a night like this. When the fireworks went off, I remember thinking that they looked beautiful, like flowers exploding against a starry backdrop. Among gasps of wonder, I noticed the sound of concerned murmuring from the parents and distressed cries coming from you. I remember feeling surprised because I didn't know that you could cry, in the way that kids often think grownups are impenetrable. Yet you, my steely grandmother, could fall apart under a sky filled with exploding flowers. On the train ride home, I would watch people turn to look at you as the parents tried to soothe you into silence. I remember feeling more embarrassment than sympathy for you.

'Why is Grandma crying?'

'Shush, Ruby.'

There are dark things that can float on a child's consciousness but do not sink without the fermentation that comes with maturity.

After taking a shower that night, I remember walking past the kitchen to get to my room. I stopped in the hallway when I overheard Mum and Dad reconciling that incident. I listened to them talk about the distinctive sound of bombs flying overhead, how some parts of war never leave a person even after the war is over. A celebratory crackling in the sky is perhaps not so different from the destructive crackling of demolished villages in Saigon.

I remember the black and white photo in the glass cabinet in your living room. I once pointed at the photo and asked Mum who these people were, the two women in their late 20s or early 30s. It was as if an artist had drawn your twin sister's face by trying to draw yours from memory. Mum then told me about the story about the journey to Bidong Island, the Malaysian refugee camp the family stayed at before being allowed in Australia. In retrospect, I believe that her rendition excluded details deemed too gory or horrific for the ears of a child.

I see it in my mind, dozens of people crammed onto a boat like a can of sardines. Mum recalls befriending a pregnant woman who was a decade her senior on that boat ride. Seeking asylum was not a time to make friends, you would tell her, but I guess the heart reaches for happiness during times of hardship, and these boatloads knew of much hardship - hunger, fatigue, seasickness, and the pervasive fear of being discovered and attacked by pirates. Months later, that very woman passed away shortly following childbirth, a death surrounded by many other deaths. Among confined spaces with unsanitary living conditions, many people became ill on Bidong Island. Your sister contracted hepatitis, though the name meant little to you. All you knew was that there wasn't enough medication to go around. Your sister, already malnourished, became washed over in a yellow hue and experienced bouts of diarrhea. She didn't make it to Australia.

I've known all this since I was eight, but I never really gave it much thought. For me, it was just another story from far away, one that I did not really understand. Perhaps I will never fully understand, because I don't know if I'll ever have to watch my best friend lose her life while clinging to my own.

There are dark things that we can grasp at but not hold onto.

Do you remember when we had Christmas dinner at Uncle Duy's house? The power cut out that evening, and we lounged around fanning ourselves with newspapers folded into accordions. The sunset looked like the sky had been sliced open to reveal the flesh of a tangerine. The heat of the day pressed down on us and quickly dispelled any coolness lingering from the air conditioner.

'Someone, open the window.' Your voice croaked with dehydration.

Ethan, sitting on the couch by the window, turned to do as you asked.

You smiled a toothy grin. 'White boy knows Vietnamese.' The setting sun streaked your grey hairs with gold.

It wasn't until then that I realised how much I yearned for your approval. I know that you perceived my relationship with Ethan as yet another sign that I had betrayed the culture that you spent the rest of your life trying to preserve, but it was very much the opposite.

I have no recollection of ever speaking to Ethan during high school. Our social circles just didn't overlap. If we had a class together, there had never been any need to speak to him. After taking a gap year in Vietnam, Ethan had become an avid consumer of our cuisine. Well, as avid as you can be when opting for the fork.

One day, at the cashier, he nodded at the television screen above the counter playing a slideshow of scenic landscapes which carried no more significance to me than default desktop wallpapers.

'Ha Long Bay. Great place to hike,' he said.

I turned to catch the image on the screen before it dissolved, small islands jutting out of an unrealistically blue body of water. 'I've never actually been to Vietnam, so ...'

A small pause followed by a nod. 'Oh. Well, you might want to go sometime, it's a beautiful place.'

I was rather taken aback. I had never heard anyone describe Vietnam as beautiful. I would later explain all of this to Ethan, who was shocked to learn that I had ever been so ashamed of my heritage when it is rooted in such a rich and resilient culture.

Why hadn't I been to Vietnam? Most of our family had fled to Australia or USA. Mum and Dad had gone back once to visit their relatives and childhood friends who remained there. I had little to no motivation to see Vietnam for myself. Why would I? I didn't particularly enjoy being Vietnamese, or even just Asian.

If I've learnt anything, it's that unlearning is harder than learning. I know that your sorrows from Saigon never left you, and that we were collateral damage. The further I distanced myself from the culture, the further I distanced myself from you. Is it possible to cross that distance even though you're gone? I can only try.

It took eight and a half hours to cross over a span of 6,705 km to get here, though there are distances that cannot be quantified. I look out the plane window and take in the scenery of a country that seems foreign to my eyes but familiar to my soul. Rocky landscapes emerging from aquamarine waters and lush fields painting green to the horizon. It is nothing less than beautiful, but you know this already. Maybe I just feel the need to tell you so that I can tell myself.