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DEATH IS WHAT YOU MAKE OF IT

STORY BY JOE HAN

Baker Beach in Golden Gate National Park
San Francisco, CA | September 19, 2016
Photo captured on the same day and beach as Joe’s grandmother’s funeral.
August of exhaustion hits me as the bus drives off. I am standing at the edge of a secluded village, ready to explore the hills of La Cumbrecita. A stray horse trots down the street. After spending the day hiking to a nearby waterfall, I return to the only Internet café in the village. There, I receive an onslaught of notifications from my family: my 92-year-old grandmother is in critical condition, and she is being rushed to the emergency room. Later that day, she dies.

At first, I was unsure if I would be financially able to return for the funeral. I was half through my 6-months abroad in Argentina, and my parents, four older siblings and I were living in four time zones around the world: Honolulu, Chicago, Brooklyn and Córdoba. But to commemorate my grandmother’s death, I posted to Facebook one of my favorite memories with her: a video of her rapping while I beat-boxed. After seeing the post, a Richmond alumna informed me that Richmond’s insurance would pay for my round-trip flight, enabling me to reunite with my family for the funeral.

My grandmother was the first member to die in our family, and her funeral was only shared between my parents, siblings, and uncle. She left us a legacy in the United States, and her death made us especially reflective on our lives, and her impact upon them. She and my father were born in Seoul, Korea, and they moved to San Francisco when my father was 6. She was a single mother who didn’t speak English, and she worked as a hairdresser while taking English classes at night. My father learned English in kindergarten and started playing the trumpet in San Francisco’s nightclubs when he was 14.

Life is what you make it; my grandmother seized control of her life and paved her own destiny. She pinched pennies, invested frugally in property, and persevered daily to provide my family with opportunities and a standard of living most first-generation Americans could only dream of. Her determination runs through our veins, and the results of her work are extraordinary: her son is now a U.S. Federal Judge, and her five grandchildren are involved in everything from a PhD program at University of Chicago to piloting in Hawaii. The summer before my semester abroad, she was alive to see her first grandchild walk down the aisle. She was 91 at the time, and my sister’s wedding was the last time the whole family was together. I remember her beaming with pride and relaxing with a glass of red wine, saying, “live a little” in her Korean accent.

When a family member dies, many people feel grief and sorrow. But the emotions I felt weren’t overwhelming sadness. Instead, I felt a troubling absence of emotion — I just went numb. I wasn’t in denial; I understood that I would never see my grandmother again. But besides the melancholy fog that would come and go, my daily emotions remained motionless.

A lot of spiraling questions came to my head: Is my grandmother watching over us from above? Is she stuck in Hell for eternity because she didn’t declare the Christian Jesus as her Savior? Questioning my grandmother’s afterlife prompted me to reflect upon my own life and ask similar questions: Does my opportunity of songs we would play for her on piano. Sometimes, these memories pierce my numb emotions, and it hurts. But experiencing emotions, even depressing ones, makes me feel normal because it is the appropriate emotional response. Numbness is painless, but the pain has become reassuring.

Reuniting with my close-knit family for the funeral helped to warm the numbness and bandage the pain. San Francisco will always be our second home, as growing up we visited our grandmother in the city at least twice a year. Traditional Korean barbeque, In-N-Out Burger and milkshakes at the Ghirardelli Square are our second home, as growing up we visited our grandmother in the city at least twice a year. Traditional Korean barbeque, In-N-Out Burger and milkshakes at the Ghirardelli Square...
delli Chocolate Factory were perfect comfort food in a difficult time. Being in the city again brought back memories of our family trips and evoked childhood nostalgia.

After my trip to San Francisco, I returned to Argentina with red solo cups for my host brother and Nike shoes for my host dad. Death was nothing new to my host family. They understood the complex slew of emotions that accompany death and greeted me with empathetic arms upon my return. Throughout the 20th century, military dictators controlled Argentina’s government, and they kidnapped, jailed and killed thousands of the country’s citizens. My host dad’s sister was one of the citizens that was kidnapped and killed, and my host dad spent 6.5 years of his life in prison for opposing the military government. The country was so dangerous that his wife and daughters were forced to seek refuge in Spain, where they still reside.

During my host dad’s time in prison, he spent countless hours playing chess and reading. Chess is also one of my pastimes — I founded my high school’s chess club — and we played at least twice a day. Besides the word “eat,” and the phrase “I go to bed,” my host dad only spoke Spanish, and his heavy Argentinian accent made communicating difficult. But the quiet, analytical nature of chess enabled us to connect in a non-verbal way and develop a unique friendship. During our games, I would contemplate the meaning of my host dad’s tragedies. External powers split his family, deprived them of their liberty, and stole his sister’s life. But like a good chess player who knows how to adjust to unforeseen encounters, my host father persevered through adversity and found ways to bounce back. Even with all the tragic events in his life, he continued to find goodness in the world. He selflessly opens his house to students from around the world, and I am the 58th international student to live in his home and experience his hospitality. Life is what you make it, and my host dad found a way to regain control of his.

Now that I am back on campus, I am reminded of how grateful I am every time I walk through the International Center. I was born into a loving family, raised in a safe, first-world country, and am provided with opportunities that my grandmother, host family and many others never had. I attend a prestigious university that fosters personal relationships between alumni and students, and I was placed in a compassionate host family that has broadened my perspectives on life.

Death happens. For some, it comes after 92 years, and for others comes much sooner. The lessons I learned from my grandmother are to seize control of my life and never surrender to fate. At Richmond, we learn in class about systematic poverty, the widening gap between the upper and lower classes, and the crumbling idea of the American Dream. We see on TV the threat of another economic recession and the struggles of living on minimum wage. But kings can get trapped in corners, and pawns can turn into queens. It’s not a matter of faith in the system; it’s a blend of hard work, self-control, purpose, and passion. Henry Ford once said, “Whether you think you can, or you think you can’t, you’re right.” Any non-English speaking, single mother immigrating from Korea would have reason to view herself as a pawn on an unfamiliar board. But my grandmother seized control of the game of life. She braved the streets of San Francisco, climbed the socioeconomic ladder, and left a legacy in a foreign country that later became her home. Because of her, I stand here today with the world on a string. I don’t know why I am fortunate enough to be part of her heritage, but I do know that I owe her a duty of making the most of my life, and the most of her death.

Rest in peace, Grandma.