Living With My Grandmother

When I was nine years old, my grandmother took over my room and my house. She moved in with my family, because, at 82 years old, she could not care for herself anymore. She seemed like a nuisance to me. With her arrival, I went back to sharing a room with my two brothers, though I had had my own room since kindergarten. My brothers and I had to escort her everywhere. This task was made difficult because she was always trying to correct us, as if we were still toddlers. Her broken speech was often hard to understand, and I was often embarrassed by it. At breakfast, she made me so uncomfortable that I would put a cereal box between her and me so I would not have to look at or talk to her. Alzheimer’s disease, which causes the degeneration of memory, had made her confused. In fits and starts over the past five years, I have come to accept that Abu is part of my family, and I have learned lessons from living with her.

It helped to have a sense of humor when getting to know my grandmother. Because she was used to being in charge of the house, she was always moving other people’s things. This peculiarity of hers was made worse now that she had Alzheimer’s. She would move something and forget where she put it, or simply place objects in absurd places. For example, one morning my mother came down to make breakfast and found my pajamas in the refrigerator. Abu’s problem got steadily worse; it got to the point that anything within her reach would disappear to points unknown. Any place Abu passed was dubbed “The Abu Zone” for we knew in this region, much like the Bermuda Triangle, all things disappeared without a trace. Whenever something was lost, my brothers and I would mockingly hum the background music from “The
Twilight Zone. It would be years before I understood where my grandmother was coming from.

Chi Ching Lee Chen (or Abu) was born amidst comfort and luxury in 1913 in Amoy, a large seaport in southeast China, a great distance from modern day America in space and time. Shortly before the outbreak of World War II she married Shih Jui Chen. When he had departed to fight the Japanese, she made a promise to Buddha: if Shih Jui made it home from the war, she would never eat meat again. She did not just stay in the security of her home, however, and wait for his return. Shih Jui crossed the Himalayas and eventually became a master spy in Burma, while feigning to be the owner of a noodle factory. Through all this she was at his side. She crossed the monstrous Himalayas; she endured several Japanese raids while she serving as the factory’s cook; and she even rescued her two sons from Japanese kidnappers - all while she could have been at home knitting. Chi Ching Lee and Shih Jui efforts soon produced results: they thwarted several Japanese attacks in the area and Shih Jui was promoted to the rank of brigadier general. After the war, he represented his region in the Chinese National Assembly, China’s equivalent to the United States Senate.

But when the communist regime took power in 1949, they made Chi Ching Lee and her husband targets of their prosecution. Chi Ching Lee led her family out of China into Taiwan and her husband soon followed. Throughout their exile, she supported her husband in his various endeavors, from being editor of “Free China Monthly” to being appointed the head of the Chinese CIA (an appointment he turned down). During this dangerous period, Chi Ching took the time to provide food for over forty jobless people, who seemed to find their way to her doorstep every day.
In 1974 the couple moved to Houston, Texas, smack dab on the other side of the world, so that Shih Jui could pursue his writing in semi-retirement. In 1988 Chi Ching was widowed, and in 1995 she moved in with us. At this time, I knew not of her glorious and noble past, instead I viewed her with the naive eyes of a ten year old. When I looked at her all I saw was a face full of wrinkles, a withered body and a threat to life as I knew it.

It is hard to say just when my view of Abu started to change. She still is unnerving at times, but to me she doesn’t seem like the same person she was five years ago.

One day, a few years after Abu moved in, my parents invited some friends over for a dinner party. This event was one of those formal adult parties, which kids detest, but are inevitably forced to sit through for some endless amount of time. I sat on a cushy chair in the living room, squirming in my loafers, khaki pants and collared shirt, too full of starch. It seems to me that these clothes are only dragged out on occasions where must one sit quietly, and still, and listen to interminable talk- like in church or in school. So there I sat, every part of my body itching to move or simply itching. Abu joined us for this occasion, listening mostly. At one point, when the conversation drifted to my mother’s life in China, Abu began to speak. I couldn’t believe it; here, in front of all these smart, civilized people my grandmother was going to open her mouth and embarrass my family. I put my head in my hands and awaited my doomed fate. But somewhere in my musings I began to hear what she was saying. She was using no broken English; she was speaking rather eloquently and with dignity. She was even throwing in a few jokes. I looked to her audience to see if they had the same reaction as I. By their faces and the leaning of their bodies I could tell they were captivated. This was a side of
my grandmother I had never seen before. I guess someone high above must have, for those few precious hours, decided to lift up the curtain that Alzheimer’s had cast over my grandmother.

My attitude of my grandmother would change further after this. Several winters ago, I trudged home from school under the yoke of my heavy backpack. When I reached my back door, I realized I didn’t have my house key. I quickly estimated that I was going to be left out in the cold for several hours (until my parents came home). Luckily, my grandmother was home. She let me into her apartment, which is adjacent to our house but separated by a door, which at this point was locked from the side of the house. For the next two and half hours I worked steadily on my homework. In the meantime my grandmother fussed over me. She tried to warm me up and she fed me various snacks to quench my hunger. And while I was at work she was quiet as a mouse, scurrying from place to place to retrieve things she wanted to give me. It felt good to know that while the weather outside was harsh and unfriendly, I had comfort and warmth inside. She was so good to me that, when my parents came home and opened the door to let me in to the rest of the house, I was somewhat reluctant to leave my new found home.

Looking back on my parent’s decision to welcome Abu into our home, I feel very lucky. The easy, and seemingly more practical decision for them to make would have been to keep her away from us, so that Alzheimer’s would not rear its head and problems in our home. Indeed, if I, with my nine year old brain, had been the person making this decision, I would not have wanted to bring her into our home. At the time I would never have been willing to deal with a person, who could be anywhere and do anything without knowing or remembering anything. For Alzheimer’s is a truly horrible disease. But there are rewards about being with
my grandmother whose virtues surpass this disease’s malice. For one, I am thankful that we did not have to relegate my sweet grandmother to a place far away from her family, the most sustaining thing in her life. I also enjoyed learning about the totally different world my grandmother comes from. Sharing time with someone who has learned so much over the span of a century has truly opened my mind. Interacting with Abu has taught me that a disease is not what a person really is, it is just a pale reflection in a twisted mirror.

Today, despite her wrinkles and failing memory Abu seems like a strong person to me. Last summer, I was astonished when, having relaxed my grip, while escorting Abu over uneven ground, she lost her balance and fell. I had begun to think of her as an almost invincible being, undeterred by the shots she has taken from life. In my heart I will always know that behind the wrinkles of my grandmother, lurks a powerful, dignified and caring woman.