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the right to grieve (not that i have it)

My grandfather died two days before my birthday in 2014. Mom said his heart just stopped working, and I never got the details of how it all happened. I only knew this: congestive heart failure. On September 14th, in a hospital somewhere in California, some 6000 miles away from home, Sun Hong Gaw died of congestive heart failure after a long battle. He was 94. In 2018, he will have been dead four years.

According to the web, Nearly 5 million Americans are currently living with CHF. Approximately 550,000 new cases are diagnosed in the U.S. each year.

My grandfather was not American. Fleetingly, I sometimes wonder if those people that are in charge of statistics (are they called statisticians? I can't be sure. How do you know if statisticians are what they are? How do you ever know they exist? When did you learn this word? When did I? I have accepted the fact that the origins of my English are mysterious and I will never know how I know), those statisticians, did they count him in the 550,000?

On Sundays, my family would make the twenty-minute drive to my grandfather's house. The one that was alive after 2014, that is. That's how I know what day of the week September 14th is exactly. This is something my brain has informed me I should remember, and I have no recollection of my birthday that year, only the event two days before. My (living) grandfather's house was a condo, with two rooms branching to the left in one of the hallways. The first room was "sa-ko and di-ko's room" and the second was 'a-ko's room." In English, this meant: the third aunt and the second aunt's room ; the first aunt's room. To me, this meant: the playroom ; the dining room.

In Hokkien kinship, family members are referred to differently depending on order of birth. You call your father pa and your mother mama, and then it gets confusing. Your father's sisters are *a-ko*, *di-ko*, *sa-ko*. His brother is *a-chak*, being the only brother. Your mother does not teach you these words for this side of the family correctly. Instead, you imitate what she calls them and uncomfortably find yourself in Santa Clarita, California in 2017, awkwardly calling your mother's eldest sister *achi*, which typically means eldest sister. Your aunt, who has breast cancer but who you chose not to visit, is called *dichi*, meaning second sister. You have made a mistake.

I can still see it in my head, oddly sharpened into focus. Everything happens so cinematically, in brief flashes of almost montage-like images. I remember racing past the dining room in an effort to make it as fast as possible to *sa-ko*'s room to play, taking a peek and seeing Mom on the phone leaning out the window. She could be crying.

According to the Linguistic Society of America, "Many linguists now say that a newborn's brain is already programmed to learn language, and in fact that when a baby is born he or she already instinctively knows a lot about language. This means that it's as natural for a human being to talk as it is for a bird to sing or for a spider to spin a web. In this sense, language may be like walking: The ability to walk is genetic, and children develop the ability to walk whether or not anybody tries to teach them to do so. In the same way, children develop the ability to talk whether or not anybody tries to teach them. For this reason, many linguists believe that language ability is genetic."

Sitting on a stool, I will be ignoring the world around me as I always have done, when my cousin Nicole will interrupt my session of *Sims*. She will say, "Achi Champy, your grandpa died." I will look up. "Okay," I'll say, and I'll look back down to resume my game. I never speak of this moment of indifference, and I am not so sure if Nicole remembers. I think, *so he's gone*. *Okay*. I don't quite internalize it until later. In the midst of my indifference, I will remember that this means things are not right. I stand up suddenly, walk out the room full of screaming children

watching television and throwing pillows at each other-- children whose lives will not be affected by this death.

I remember having my right arm wrapped around the iPad 2, staring up at Mom who gives me a shove and shakes her head without looking at me to tell me to move away. "Edwin," she will say, in a loud, broken voice, calling for my father. I will look at her stoic face, frozen somewhere in between emotionlessness and horror. I stand off to the side and follow them quietly to the balcony, where they yell at each other.

I do not hear any of the words.

We go home. Mom calls Nancy, whose life is also fucked up because she is not legally divorced and is jobless and almost homeless and goes ahead and gets a boyfriend and has a fifteen-year-old kid that will become suicidal in the next four years, although Nancy doesn't know this yet. She had another kid recently, a newer one, and she didn't-doesn't- know what to do with that one either, but my mother calls Nancy anyway. My brother stares out the window in silence. He is fourteen and sometimes I wonder what he was thinking then. Did he live in his head as much as I always have?

Hokkien is not a written language. It is a dialect, passed down from generation to generation. Once a generation loses the dialect, I suppose it is gone forever.

According to Medline Plus *Trusted Information For You*: "Heart failure is a condition in which the heart can't pump enough blood to meet the body's needs. Heart failure does not mean that your heart has stopped or is about to stop working. It means that your heart is not able to pump blood the way it should. It can affect one or both sides of the heart."

That day, at around 10 a.m., we are at the seafood market. Papa goes to buy shrimp. Just another Sunday. Mom has her last conversation with her father in the car. Later, I will learn that he said, "*Ayoko na, Jasmin. Sorry, hindi ko na kaya.*" Literally, this means, "I don't want this anymore, Jasmin. Sorry, I cannot handle this anymore." If I didn't know better, I'd have thought that it was a line out of a tragically romantic movie. In that moment, I only hear Mom offer feeble words of encouragement, clichéd enough that they fade into the background. The only thing I remember is her voice, sounding like seeing your reflection in a cracked mirror and realizing it looks exactly the same as you always have. Mom says, "Okay. I love you." She hangs up. I don't know if she knows it's the last time; maybe she doesn't quite realize it. Maybe she does.

Nancy used to buy me Christmas gifts, back when she had that money. I have seen her about two times, ever. Her ex-husband, Lot, is my father's best friend. She is my mother's. It is a story that, if it happened two thousand years ago, would be in the Bible. Or it would be a reality TV show in 2014. We'll never know.

My parents argue whose fault it was that Nancy and Lot separated. I used to worry that they would separate fighting about separation. Papa calls Nancy an idiot that gave up a perfectly good husband and life. Mom responds, "He was an alcoholic. Like you."

The first time I see a dead body, it is over Skype. Mom Skype calls her sister when we get home, and everyone sobs, but mostly my mother. I stare, and so does my brother, as my mother screams at the screen: "*Pa! Pa! Kumusta ka na Pa? Balik ka na! Ok ka lang, pa? Hindi naman masakit diba, pa?*" I could be wrong. It could be that my mother did not say these words. My brain blurred this into summary. I know she said *pa* several times, reminding herself she used to have a living father. My grandfather's face looks as if he is sleeping. "*Dumadaan parin dugo niya sa katawan niya,*" says my mother's sister- the blood is still flowing in his body! "*Shobe!*" my mother yells, even though we are right there. "Ahia! Look at him!" We look. She continues to speak to the screen. Mom has never cried this hard before, not even when my parents fight so bad you can hear them from the downstairs rooms.

The 2012 Newbery Medal was awarded to Jack Gantos's "Dead End in Norvelt." In the book, a kid named Jack Gantos gets grounded for life and is stuck doing chores for an old woman, who asks him to write obituaries.

My mother asks me to write his eulogy to be displayed at his wake. I have no idea if it is ever displayed or read and I have no idea what I actually wrote but I do know that I never want to write a eulogy ever again. I had to look it up in the Merriam-Webster dictionary: *a commendatory oration or writing especially in honor of one deceased.*

Deceased seems like the kind of word people use to avoid saying *dead*, but the kind of word people use to prove that they are not those people that say *passed* instead of dead.

I am not American, like my grandfather. If I get sick, will I be counted in the statistics? This is the type of information I do not have.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, grief is defined *as a deep and poignant distress caused by or as if by bereavement*.

My mother applies for a US Visa so that she can attend the wake. She is denied. I learn that she cried in front of that man, who simply said, “I am sorry for your loss.”

We are on the road near McKinley hill when I tell my mother that her dress would go better with the gold flats. She had the same ones in gold and black, from a trip in Europe earlier that year. “Don’t tell me what to do. I’m grieving,” she snaps me into silence.

What Medline Plus does not tell you is how congestive heart failure is the kind of thing that is too big to say, so you just say that he died. What Medline Plus does not tell you is how you will die because of this disease, and that the fact that you die old does not change anything. What Medline Plus does not tell you is how it does not only affect two sides of the heart. It affects how long people remember you for. Eventually, you will be forgotten.

In Hokkien, I make jokes about wanting death: *Gua be si ki lo*. Literally, *I want to die already*. In Mandarin, 我要死了。In Filipino, *Gusto ko na mamatay*. I don’t suppose anyone else considers the reality of it until they are in a hospital room away from home, about to die. How lonely was he? I’ll never know. As much as I have to write about the aftermath of his death, I never had a conversation long enough to find out who he was. To me, he was x-rays and phone calls and the right to grief. I do not hold this right but pretend I do.