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Thanks Grandma

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When my grandmother passed away in 1999, my world was shattered. She raised me and had the most profound influence on me. I couldn't go back to China to attend her funeral at the time. In May 2005, it was first time I went to visit her tomb. It was overwhelming, yet I gained some inner peace from the trip. I believe that she is in a good place. She will always be with me in spirit.

I was born in the far north of China, Bei Da Huang--the Great Northern Wilderness--or China's version of Siberia. The temperature could drop to Celsius 50 degrees below in winter and half of the year the land was frozen. In 1947, the government decided to cultivate the wild land. Across the country, hundreds of thousands of young people were sent to the region. Many of them were from politically incorrect families; among them my mother and father. In my mom's case, my grandfather worked closely with late Chairman Mao Ze-dong in the Politburo. In mid 50s, Mao accused my grandfather and the governing body of the North East Region of being an anti-communist circle. (My grandfather was reinstated in the 80s with the beginning of the historical Reform and Open-up policy. His autobiography was published in 2007 in China). After mom graduated from university, she was sent to Bei Da Huang. My father's family background

was not much better than my mom's. His father was a rich and powerful warlord. When the Liberation Army came, his father was taken into prison and died years later. So there they were in Bei Da Huang, being remolded. Together with many others, they were the pioneers of Bei Da Huang and the founders of an Agricultural Science Research Institute. Two of them met, fell in love, had me, and named me Keyi (meaning the first child of the Science Institute). This year, as the region celebrated its 61st anniversary of its reclamation, my parents celebrate their 50th anniversary.

In those days, a bad family background was viewed as a genetic disease. A person could be deemed to be correct or incorrect from birth. For many years that followed, their family backgrounds would affect not only them but also us, the next generation.

After I was born, my grandma came to join us so my mother could continue to work. Back in her hometown, grandma had raised her three children by herself after my grandfather was imprisoned. For the next 20 years, she raised me and my brother. She was the pillar of the family during the hard times, and the light for all of us during the dark days of the Cultural Revolution, one of the most turbulent times in China's history. Divided into different classes by late chairman Mao's ideology, people fought with one another. Many were killed or killed themselves, among them, my best friend's parents and my beloved daycare teacher. When doing chores, my grandma often prayed intensely for my parents' safe return at the end of the day. Thank God we survived

I spent much of my school years receiving "reeducation". I worked on farms and construction sites, dug trenches, practiced gun shots, and searched for Russian spies in the mountains-- that was my favourite. We never found one.

When I graduated from high school, there was no university—all the universities had been closed down during the Cultural Revolution. I was sent to work at a railway station transporting construction materials. Machines were not available and everything—from heavy, 50 kilogram cement bags to steel and iron bars-- was carried to and from the train by human labor. I was 16 years old at the time, thin as a pencil. When the 120 pound cement bag was put on my shoulder the first time, I lost my footing and fell. I got up, asked to put it on my shoulder again. I fell again. I got up and tried the third

time. I made my first step. A few months later, I became the head of the team. Then, I began to suffer from severe back pain.

God must have been watching because an opportunity came. The local radio station needed a host and announcer; I went for the interview and got the job. One day, I found a package in the mail. It was BBC Lingophone with records and textbooks. I hardly studied any English at school but I knew instantly that this would change my life and take me far away. With nobody to help me with English at the small place, I taught myself. I got up every morning at 4 o'clock, studied till I had to go to work. I studied at night till I could not keep my eyes open and fell to sleep with my day time clothes on. I imitated the strange but pleasant sounds, followed the strong rhythms, and repeated the phrases and sentences: "Stand up and fight", "Workers of the world unite"!

After a year of study and preparation while working, I passed the national university entrance exam and was accepted by a teachers' university to study English as my major. Universities had just restarted after the Cultural Revolution.

After I graduated, I became a university teacher teaching English. Then I wanted to further my study in an English speaking country. My dream came true when the University of Guelph offered me a scholarship for a Master's degree in English Literature. With the Tiananmen massacre, I decided to stay in Canada after I graduated from Guelph.

I started my new life as an immigrant, learned many things, did different jobs, and gained some very valuable experiences. At the same time, I missed my family, worried about my parents, and particularly, my grandma, who was in her 80s. Though she put her three children through school, she herself never had the opportunity to learn to read and write. In her generation, women in general didn't go to school in China despite the fact that she was from a well-to-do family and married a rich man. As she was losing her sight and hearing, it became increasingly difficult for me to communicate with her. I was guilty of not being able to look after her and feared that she would leave me one day when I was in Canada.

My grandma was my role model, my angel. Despite the political turmoil outside, inside the home was a safe and warm haven thanks to grandma. I always felt loved and cared for; she was always there for me and my brother. During the day, we did many chores together after I came back from school; at night two of us shared the same "Kang",

a brick, heated bed used in Northern China. She would tell me stories and hum tunes of Henan local plays. She admired such legendary heroes such as Mu Gui-ying, an army chief, and Mu Lan, who joined army in place of her ill father. My grandma was an ordinary person; as a matter of fact, very few people even knew her name was Liu Xi Rong. But to me, she is, and will always be my hero.

Every day she worked from morning till night, cooked three meals from scratch, sewed our clothes, hand-washed them, fed chickens and ducks, among other things. On her bound feet, she gathered dried leaves and small branches that fell from the trees in the fall, and carried them back in bundles to prepare for the winter. We needed them for cooking and heating the house; many basic supplies were scarce those days.

Grandma was one of the most humble and kind people that I have known. She never raised her voice or quarreled with anyone. She often gave food to the crippled neighbor and those who had even less than us. She was also very strong. When I was very sick, with a high fever that continued for two weeks, the doctor suspected I had leukemia. It was the first time I saw my father cry. I needed to be transferred to another hospital. Before we left, my grandma came to see me. She brought me a plant bloomed with beautiful red flowers. With a smile, she said to me, “Keyi, you don’t have cancer; you will get through this”. Miraculously, my fever dropped on the way to another hospital. Grandma must have been praying for me.

It was the Chinese New Year of 1999. I spoke to her on the phone from Canada. She sounded well; as a matter of fact, she heard everything I said right away unlike before when I had to repeat many times. She asked me if I was married, something that had been her main concern over the years. I knew she was worried about my being alone in a foreign country. To ease her mind, I lied this time, “Yes”. I didn’t think she could really hear me, but she did. “Why don’t you two come back to see me”? She asked. Surprised that she heard me, I didn’t know what to say, so I mumbled something like: “We will go to see you soon”. I was grateful when my uncle took over the phone from my grandma.

The next day, I got a phone call from my dad “You grandma passed away in her sleep last night”!

That night I had a dream of her. She was flying up...up...I had never seen her so free!

I met my future husband that year, got married soon, and two beautiful children were born in the next few years. I wished Grandma had seen my family. Many a night I woke up from a dream of her. Her image was vivid; her smile real. For 6 years, I held on to the illusion that she was still alive.

In the spring of 2005, I went to visit her tomb in her hometown. As the firecrackers were lit to celebrate her life, page by page I burned all the letters that I had written to her after she passed away. After the firecrackers stopped and the ash from the papers settled, I saw in front of me a clear and soft-blue colored circle in the air, moving slowly and slowly toward the top of her tomb. I pointed it out to my father. It was a peaceful and sunny May day without a breeze. Butterflies fluttered about. As the blue airy circle landed and disappeared on grandma's tomb, I knew my heart was understood.

It is time to celebrate her life and honor what she stood for: her faith and strength, her forbearing, kindness, and compassion. Today's aggressive world needs more people like her. I have begun to feel centered and grounded again. I have come a long way. It is time to regain strength from the past and to look forward to the future. God has his plan for me; grandma is illuminating my way; I will forge on.

Thanks grandma!