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One-Ply Family

My dad doesn't cry. My dad is the type of man who builds a shed in a month with his own two hands. He's the type of guy who takes apart a broken refrigerator and puts it back together in one night. He's the type that rarely loses his temper but will spit out a curse word when he has to. My dad is a man's man. That's not to say that he is emotionless or insensitive. He plants flowers that "make the yard pretty." He silently hugs my mom when she's had a tiring day. He packs my lunch and writes me "have a good day" notes, but my dad doesn't cry. My dad might shout, laugh, soothe, wink, worry, and cuss, but he never cries. So when I saw him bawling his eyes out with a roll of toilet paper in one hand and his face in the other, it was as if everything I had known about my father had been thrown out the window and shattered into a million pieces on my driveway. There was a part of my father I never knew and that I will never know. I will never forget that winter three years ago. that was the year that my grandpa died.

I cried too, but not for the same reasons my dad did. At that moment, sitting next to my dad, him with his toilet paper and me with my grandpa's picture, I realized that there was an entire half of me that I was unfamiliar with. My grandparents lived in Vietnam. I had only seen them twice; once when I was born, and another when I was visiting Vietnam in the fourth grade. I hardly knew them, but I loved them, nonetheless, because when I looked at pictures of them I only saw my dad's face staring back at me. That day, when I saw my dad cry for the first time, was the first time that I really saw my family in Vietnam. I never thought about them before, but it wasn't until I lost one of them that my eyes were open to the fact that I never even got the chance to appreciate them.

I knew so much about my father but hardly knew anything at all about his father. I will never be able to laugh and crack jokes with my paternal grandfather like I did with my *ong ngoai*, my mother's

father. I never was (or will be) able to see his reaction when I told him I got an A on my paper. I will never be able to hear directly from him how he survived the Vietnam War. I will never get to bake him my famous banana bread.

Sometimes, I feel like I know my grandpa, though. Whenever I was wasteful, my dad would remind me of him. He told me that my grandpa would always tear a two-ply paper towel in half, use one piece, and save the other piece for later. My grandpa was not rich, so he saved as much as he could. However, I knew, at most, only part of him, the part that I came to be familiar with only through stories. I knew that he liked to sleep on a hard chair and hated to use pillows, that he always had a genuine smile and perfect posture in pictures, and that he wiped his forehead when he was hot with that one piece of paper he'd saved. But I didn't know what he smelled like, how tall I was compared to him, or the way he *looked* when he was hot. My dad could describe to me all he wanted and in as much detail as he wanted, but that was his perception, not mine. My dad had his memories, but I never got to create mine.

I guess those are the sacrifices you make when you choose to become an immigrant. However, I didn't get to make that decision; it was decided for me. I was born in Vietnam, but my family moved to the United States with my maternal side of the family when I was one year old. I completely understand why my parents chose to start a new life in America, though. This was the "Land of Opportunity", where everyone had a chance to be someone. My parents wanted me to be able to do the things they couldn't do. "Our daughter's going to college," they told themselves. No, they made sure of it. They worked nine-hour-a-day jobs to put me in all the "best private schools" and made sure I was placed in advanced, pre-collegiate programs. They bought me stacks of SAT-prep books. They wanted me to have the same chance as any other American.

As a result, that is what I am, an American. I grew up just like any other American did. I played with easy-bake-ovens, watched "Arthur", and was in a little league volleyball team. I follow football

religiously, and always have my cell phone with me. I have a comfortable house with my own room and computer and was accepted to every college I applied to. I truly do have the chance to be what I want to be. I know that if I had lived in Vietnam I wouldn't have had the same opportunities, the same comfortable lifestyle, and for that I am thankful. But as I sit there watching the Broncos play on T.V. with my cell phone on the couch and my homework on the table, I realize that unlike most Americans, I only really know part of my family. There is a whole group of people linked to me by blood on the other side of the world at this very moment, and I can't help but wonder what they were doing. Were they watching their favorite soccer team play? Were they eating dinner with their family? Were they happy?

Most days that didn't bother me much. I didn't know if my dad's siblings told corny jokes or if my cousins were going through the same teenage angst I was going through, but how could I be bothered by something I couldn't control? It was on the rare days when my dad would sit at the dinner table, look at the Vietnamese spinach soup my mom made, and give out a quiet, almost unnoticeable sigh that I almost wished I lived in Vietnam. "Your grandpa loved this," my dad would say laughing a little. "He always squeezed a little lime in it. He would have this, then eat some rice, and then he would down a huge spoonful of fish sauce." It was in those moments that I was envious of my dad. I wished I knew my grandpa like he did. How can anyone drink something as fishy and overpowering as fish sauce? I wanted so eagerly to meet this superhuman I'd only heard of in my dad's stories and see him do the impossible with my own eyes, but now that he is gone, I know that could never happen.

But I still have my *ong ngaoi*, who I can see whenever I wanted. I cherish my time with him as much as I can, as if I needed to make up for the lost times I never got with my grandpa. Whenever he tells me stories of his time in the Vietnam War, I listen intently, unlike how I was when I was younger, when I didn't know how valuable my time with him was. Sometimes I just sit there and watch him type on his computer, eat some watermelon in the kitchen, or nap on the couch. Some people might not care

about the minute details of how he slouches a little at the computer, how he cuts up the watermelon into little squares, or how his head always tilts to the right when he sleeps, but I do. I lock those images into the core of my memory because not knowing part of my family helped me to be more appreciative of the family I do know and love. My maternal cousins are my best friends. I do just about everything with them and talk to them every day even if it's just a two minute phone call. Whenever my *ba ngaoi* sings, I clap along and try to memorize the lyrics. I make lame puns with my *ong ngaoi* and laugh about them with him even when no one else gets them. My grandpa from Vietnam did show me one thing then. It is the idea that when you know you are missing a part of something, you make the most of what you have. You take what you have and double it. When you are short on money, you tear your two-ply paper towel into one-ply and use it twice.

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