

SONGS FOR OUR FATHERS

by Eric Tseng

It's strange when you close and seal the lid of a jar containing your grandfather's ashes, wondering if the crunching is what remained of his skull. It's strange walking out, escorted by umbrellas on either side as you carry that jar. You glance at your father, staring off into the ground. You see him adjust his fake teeth, causing you to remember your fight in snippets and flashes. It makes you wonder if he had such struggles with the man you're carrying now and whether or not you could ever imagine the pain and regret he might be feeling at the time. I couldn't.

We got in my uncle's black Mercedes and drove down the mountain past the crops of miniature temples and over the bridge at the foothill. I glanced out the window, watching the cracked, concrete houses pass by. I watched half-naked children walking toward a juice stand and an old woman struggling along the rough road. I remembered Taiwan to be more lush, more green, more exotic, with clouds barely hanging above a mountain in the near horizon. Fields of rice paddies would extend in either direction. The beauty made me want to run out there. It made me want to explore that valley in the distance, hidden between the green spires towards the clear skyline. Now, the sky lay overcast, and the mountains didn't seem like an exotic dream--just lost in smog and haze. We drove over rivers and named off landmarks my grandfather would have recognized. They talked to him as if he was alive; I didn't have much to say. I wondered how my father was feeling.

My grandfather was healthy for his age. At 90, he still walked up the family mountain more than 3 miles away to tend the farm and property. He'd clean the irrigation channels which provided water to the crops and families below. Further up the mountain, he'd clean the family burial site, where the ashes of our ancestors reside. Now, he was going to join the ancestors in

the family mountain.

When my father was young, he farmed the crops on that very mountain and ran to school a couple miles away. He earned a full scholarship to the University of Idaho and tended rice paddies in 110 degree weather to pay for the plane ticket over. He eventually made enough money to buy a house and provide for a family. As his sons grew older, he instilled the same type of strict discipline his father had used to great effect. Little did he know, the mix of tradition and contemporary American culture would not blend well.

In preschool, I was asked to draw a picture of family events. I drew a picture of my father punching me as blood sprayed from my mouth in colorful crayon. My parents would be asked to explain why I would draw such a picture. I didn't understand the issue at the time. Later, as I began to speak to my peers, I learned that being hit as a child wasn't the norm. I viewed myself as a victim. A hatred for my father and our family traditions began to brew deep within. From then on, whenever punishment was certain, I would run from home or into the comfort of either my brother's room or the bathroom, both fit with a lock. But I soon learned that the lock in the bathroom was weak and my brother's door-frame could not take the force of my father's repeated kicks. I also learned that if I ran, my father would grow in anger. The punishment would be more severe.

As my brother and I grew in size, our constraint also grew. He was a star of his varsity high-school baseball team, and, later, I would be a fairly good varsity high-school wrestler. We could have easily defended ourselves--fought back, even. However, we accepted the punishment. I would witness my brother crippled on the ground by repeated hits from a baseball bat for simply not practicing the SATs. I watched him curl into a protective ball as my father beat his legs. I felt his pain. I recalled the times I'd been beaten until I couldn't stand--until I lost all control over my legs. I would be left alone, crying on the ground, unable to rise. I would be too much of a coward to open my eyes. I knew the strength of my brother then, both mentally and

physically. I looked up to him. Together, we understood the shared torment. We cursed tradition. We cursed the deliberate actions of my father in molding us into *his* perfect children. My brother would succumb to my father's wants. I continued to rebel.

A couple years later, my father would chase me down with a golf-club in hand. A few weeks into summer, I failed to buy school books for next year. I ran to my brother's room, crying, "I don't want to hurt him." I cried not because of the pending physical punishment, but rather the extreme constraint I had to practice. I wrestled against the state champion who benched more than twice my weight and held my own. I could have easily wrestled my father to the ground and protected myself. I sobbed the phrase as my brother held me and attempted to give comfort. My knuckles were white as I clenched my fists. My tears dribbled down my face as my father kicked open my brother's door.

In Taiwan, these methods were considered normal. If we had lived there, my brother and I would have accepted this form of discipline and perhaps been healthier mentally. Instead, we contained our frustrations for tradition. We both began to see the depression that swelled within each of us. We were different from other children, and we couldn't accept it. We wanted to be normal. We wanted to be *American*, spoiled by accepting, loving parents. Love seemed so foreign.

But now, as I thought of my father, no semblance of hatred remained--only guilt in the one time my constraint failed. That time I knocked my father out. I kept punching until no front teeth remained. I kept punching until his face bloodied into a blurred mess. I shouldn't possess the honor in carrying my grandfather's ashes--I was the hurtful, disobedient one. I was the dishonorable choice. My brother--the stage-four cancer survivor, the medical student, the pride of the family--*he* was the honorable choice.

By the time we reached the village temple, the family was already waiting for us. We set his ashes in the temple, next to the remains of a fellow teacher. I turned to my father and asked,

"Why isn't he being put in the ancestral burial ground?"

"He has to spend a year here first."

"Who's going to move his ashes to our site?"

"We don't know."

I glanced back at my grandfather's ashes. For once, I cared about tradition. For once, I wanted to carry on that fire. My father looked the most contemplative of the brothers. I remembered him lagging behind, watching my brother comatose on the hospital bed. He looked even more defeated here. My father--soft-spoken and timid, he usually isn't like this.

"You okay, Dad?"

"I'm okay, Eric."

"I'm willing to come back with you a year later and move grandpa to the burial site."

"We can do that."

As we exited the temple, we all bowed at the entrance. My little cousin walked back to his bike, parked on the elongated steps. As he jumped on, I offered to run beside him. We both headed back to the house.

I never knew much about my father. He never told me about his life. Everything I've learned about him, I've learned through my aunts and mother. Even then, I only heard vague snippets. The day before, my cousins had told me that my father guarded my grandfather's body every night since his death. Never sleeping. They also told me a story my father never had: "Your father was much like you. He was a troublemaker. Your grandfather used to tie him up to a tree by the arms. He would hang by his arms as your grandfather whipped him until his back was covered in blood. He would leave him there overnight." They both glanced at me and concluded, "You have it easy." I never thought I did until then.

As we got back to the house, talk of tending the mountain began. None of my cousins wanted to go, so I volunteered. Soon after, my father, his older sister, her old classmate, and I

began driving toward the mountain. I glanced outside, reminiscing younger times. My brother and I biked this same route. Even as a kid, I've always wanted to film the calm rivers snaking out towards the skyline--carving through vegetation and grey, pebbled beach. We crossed the last river. "There never used to be a bridge there," my father said. "We would have to walk and swim across rivers every day to get to school. During typhoons, grandpa would have to carry me on his shoulders because the current was too strong." I wondered how he thought of me being driven to school in the serenity of California. No typhoons. No rivers. I imagined how his childhood must have been.

After we parked, we walked upwards and followed the rough trail to the old house on the mountain. The aunt and classmate offered to pick fruit as my father and I cleaned the ancestral ground. We walked to the dusty burial site through dense brush. Weeds grew from every crack. Without my grandfather, it really had gone to shit. I imagined the near future, when no one would tend the site. Names would be forgotten. I asked my father as we cleaned, "How old is this place?"

"Around 40 years old. Your grandfather designed and built it for our ancestors. Before then, our family never had a burial ground."

"How did we end up owning this mountain?"

"Your grandfather bought it. He wanted to leave something behind for his family. He and I built the irrigation channels." I always thought everything was inherited from our ancestors. Instead, every significant familial legacy stemmed from my grandfather's work. I was in awe of the man. My father pointed toward the top. "Someday, if I ever sell our company, I want to build a great house up there for the family. There will be tennis courts just for us. The mountain will be more accessible and popular for the entire family." I glanced up. I suddenly realized that this was his lifelong dream: to give something to the family. He wanted to add to the legacy. Looking back down at the temple, I thought about my progressive cousins and brother, back in the U.S.

They would not tend our ancestors. They would not build upon our mountain. I had to give something back. I had to continue our legacy, but without the horrid violence. Then I realized another thing: I am a part of the tradition I so hated before. Because of it, I grew, becoming the man I am now.

Back down the mountain, my father pointed toward his old classroom. I walked inside and tried to picture him as a kid--a troublemaker just like me. I wondered what kind of friends he had. His hobbies and interests. His adolescent dreams. I walked back out, noticing him genuinely smiling at me. I couldn't remember the last time he did that. We quietly sat in the car and drove toward the house.

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