

Snapshots

[gallery_apologies].jpeg

The clicks of the camera echoed throughout the quiet gallery. I looked behind me. My own reflection stared back at me through the dark camera lens. Click. I pointed to the “no photo” sign hung above the large canvas. The lens lowered and behind it was my grandpa, looking towards the sign. He nodded slowly and hung the camera around his neck, eyes crinkling as he smiled apologetically.

He always apologizes—apologizes for not understanding the cultural norms, for not knowing the language of the people around him, for not being able to hear so clearly anymore. He’s always met with the judgemental glances of others. He never says “sorry” explicitly; he’s learned to transcend the boundaries of language. It’s always a smile and a simple head nod, an action that is universally understood. There’s no need for him to speak—his voice too loud and the words incomprehensible to those around him.

I stared as he walked away towards an oil painting of a forest, inspecting it, looking at the explanation despite being unable to read English. I knew how much he wanted to document this, how much he wanted to make this memory permanent. He smiled at the painting.

[two_smiles].jpeg

The heat of the Nanjing summer was getting to me. I felt my skin slowly stick to my T-shirt and my hair dampen with sweat. I laid on the bamboo bed, the covers having been ripped off and on

the ground. The fan on the ceiling whirred quietly as I stared blankly at its metallic center. The sound of footsteps approached the room as my grandpa entered, gripping his brand new camera.

The weather's nice today. Let's go outside.

His native dialect peeked through despite his best efforts to conceal it, knowing that a foreign-raised child like me wouldn't understand it so easily. I sat up and nodded.

As we stepped outside, my grandfather greeted the neighbor. He was hunched over on his wooden stool, wearing a stained white tank with a cigarette in hand. He smiled at me, his remaining teeth already blackened from the bad habit. I hid behind my grandfather and he laughed, looking down at me. His thick lenses glinted underneath the sunlight.

Why don't you take a photo of us?

My grandfather handed me his camera, instructing me to click the black button on the right-hand side. As they posed beside each other, I looked into the viewfinder and pointed the camera lens at them. They both smiled, toothy grins wide as their eyes curled into crescents.

[video_message].jpeg

My phone screen lit up. I opened the message and saw that my grandfather had sent me yet another short video. I clicked on it and a slideshow of flower pictures appeared: a closeup of a

lotus flower, a panoramic picture of a flower bed, another closeup of the purple bellflowers he had planted a few years back. The Chinese lyrics floated across the screen in a bright red hue as the frames changed every few seconds. Evidently, my grandfather had created this himself. I clicked the 'x' icon at the top left corner and closed my phone.

[reunion_tears].jpeg

The airport was crowded. From my seat, I saw swarms of people—some that had just arrived, faces weary but brightening as soon as they spotted their loved ones waving at them, and those who were still waiting, signs and flowers in hand. I hadn't seen my grandfather in many years, our only interactions being infrequent Facetime calls and short videos sent but rarely replied to. I could barely recognize him as he walked through the doors. He was hunched over, his steps less steady and his hair completely white. The wrinkles on his timeworn face were more prominent—darker and deeper, running throughout his face like a maze. Behind his foggy glasses, his eyes glistened as tears ran through, sliding into the folds of his visage. He smiled as they escaped him, no matter how hard he tried to contain them.

[tradition_of_burning].jpeg

My grandmother passed two months before my grandfather arrived. None of us could attend her funeral in person, my parents and I being an ocean away and my grandpa hospitalized due to COVID only a week prior. In a strange way, we were all together, watching the broadcast on a screen as the ceremony was carried out.

A month after his arrival, I found my grandpa at the dinner table, gold origami paper sprawled out before him. The rough pads of his fingers masterfully folded one after another into *yuanbao*—traditional Chinese gold nuggets. The red paper bag beside him was already half-full. I inquired about their usage.

We're burning them tonight. It's tradition.

Every hundred days, a red bag of folded *yuanbao* is ceremoniously burned. In Chinese culture, paper *yuanbao* is money for the afterlife—for the spirits of your ancestors and passed loved ones to use in their world. The practice has been around for longer than anyone could remember; it is ingrained in our culture. It is tradition.

As the sun receded and the moon rose up to take its place, we gathered on our front porch. The red bag was placed inside an old terracotta pot. With the flick of a lighter, the bag caught fire. The flames grew quickly, engulfing the red bag and leaving behind only flakes of ash that fluttered to the ground. The smoke floated up into the dark night sky, dissipating into the void. Soon, the red and gold turned to gray and black. My grandpa urged us all back inside, stating that he would stay out here a bit longer. We went back in the house and I went back into my room. From the window, I watched my grandfather slowly sweep the ash. Then, he just stood there idly, looking up into the night sky. His mouth opened and closed as he uttered secret words to the moon and stars, unheard by anyone else. Under the dim light, he smiled to the sky and slowly made his way back to the house.

[by_the_shore].jpeg

My grandfather and I sat together on a bench as we watched the waves crash relentlessly against the rocky shore. As my grandpa took photos of the view, I focused on him instead. Despite being more than seventy years old, he is still willing to adapt. Camera in hand, he continues to explore this world with never-ending curiosity. Even with all the changes, he continues to preserve the things he values most: his memories and his traditions. Behind every photograph is a story, a treasured memory preserved in a jpeg file. With each ceremony, a piece of culture is retained despite being in a foreign land. As the wind picked up, I suggested going back home. He insists on taking one last photo. Turning the camera around, he pointed it at me.

Smile.

I smiled.

Click.