

My grandfather

Family



I always used to dread Sunday mornings. It was the day that my father would call my grandparents long distance to Korea. My father had a rule that my brother, sister, and I each had to talk to our grandfather and practice speaking Korean. I remember turning over in my bed to face the wall so that my father couldn't see that I was awake. Even though I tried my best to feign a deep slumber, his stern voice commanded me to wake up and set a good example for my younger siblings. Groaning, I would stumble over to the telephone and mumble a couple of memorized phrases, knowing that my grandfather always said the same thing to me: " Work hard at your studies and learn to speak Korean." And for many years, when I thought of my grandfather, I pictured a man far away who always had boring things to say and who prevented me from sleeping in on Sunday mornings. However, in 1993, the rather fuzzy mental picture was replaced with a tall, intimidating figure, with surprisingly alert eyes that seemed to chisel through to your innermost thoughts. That was the year of the Big Trip. My family set aside the summer to travel back to the " homeland," Korea. For me, meeting my grandparents was the farthest thing from my mind. Visiting Seoul was more exciting. But it was just my luck that my grandparents lived in the small city of Chunju, all the way down the peninsula, and hours away from fun. At first, it was awkward, I really didn't say much to my grandfather because he seemed like a stranger. I had assumed that he played no role my life and so didn't bother trying to start a conversation. Instead, my brother, sister, and I made my grandparents' newly built house our new playground. We purposely spoke in English, blasted the radio, and used the intercom as a toy, singing songs into it while pressing the talk button. I thought that my grandfather was ashamed of us because he always had this disapproving

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look on his face. I was surprised to find out from my mother that the contrary was true. Apparently, when the neighbors had asked about the sudden noise next door, my grandfather had replied, with a proud smile, " My grandchildren from America are here." The summer passed uneventfully and one night, a couple of days before we were to leave, I found myself sitting with my grandfather in his room, watching the news on television. My grandmother was asleep nearby on a mat on the floor and the only source of brightness came from the TV set which was making shadows in the long, darkened room. We sat there for awhile in companionable silence, me on the floor and him on the couch. I felt oddly comfortable sitting there and I suddenly felt a little sad that we were leaving so soon. Impulsively, I turned toward him and commented on the news program in Korean. He seemed to have a ghost of a smile on his face, but it was hidden by his stern features, as he said to me that my Korean was improving but still far from perfect. I think I laughed or maybe smiled. Soon after, I quietly stood up and left the room after murmuring a respectful greeting. That night, I felt closer to my grandfather and I think I finally began to understand him. I knew that he was proud of me, although he never would say it directly. On the plane ride home, I realized that the person that I am now is due to the tradition that my grandfather started and passed on. I smiled in memory as I thought about how he had insisted on following us to the airport. He missed us already. At home I carefully opened a package that contained a delicate scroll of white rice-paper with my family's household principles, authored by my grandfather. The deft brushstrokes of ebony ink read (in Korean): Health, Cooperation, and Diligence. It wasn't a surprise that I have followed these

same principles throughout my life. I don't dread Sunday mornings anymore.

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