

What's left unsaid

When I was in Grade 5, my grandmother died. This was the mid-'70s. She came to Canada in 1972, a small, stocky 60-year-old woman who spoke little English. She stayed with us in Williams Lake for less than a year, and then found a second-storey apartment overlooking Main Street in Vancouver.

The neon from a car dealer flashed into her apartment at night. It wasn't the greatest area, but she rode the electric buses, took care of herself and waited for our visits. We were all very relieved she no longer lived with us.

At the age of 11, I believed I was the only one who understood my grandmother because my sister and I had lived with her for a year while we waited to join my parents in Canada. For some reason, the anger boiled inside her and it didn't take much for her to start pounding the floors and walls while using the most exotic of swear words. After these episodes, I would sit in my room, wondering if I should go to her, hold her hand and listen to her. But I did not.

"Your father is useless," she would yell. "He's supposed to be a minister, but he can't even take care of his poor mother!"

Something in me wants to believe that I tormented her for good reasons. They say it is easy to forget, especially when you are four years old, but I wish I could remember better. Crying in the streets, walking home with the police, being babysat by strangers, and tumbling down a long flight of stairs — the memories make me dizzy.

When she lived with us in Williams Lake, I treated her very poorly. I was older and felt there was nothing she could do to me. As a family, we were not only unsure about our feelings, but we talked about her behind her back. We talked about how loudly she chewed her food. We made fun of her broken English. We greeted her old-country cooking with mock horror. Today, there are no surviving photographs of her.

I was probably the worst, because I was so rebellious, disrespectful and spoiled. One day, she made us some soft white buns with sweet red beans inside. They were so delicious. It took her two days to make them. I gobbled them up greedily without respect or appreciation. In other ways, I was horrible and nobody stopped me. Finally, she decided to live in Vancouver.

(Whenever anyone came to visit our family, it didn't take long for us to drive that person away. Other than saying we were awful people, I do not know why. We tore people apart with petty criticisms and resentments.)

My grandmother grew up in a small peasant village on a volcanic island between Korea and Japan. She spent most of her life under Japanese occupation. Living under occupation, as most Koreans of that generation will tell you, strengthens your identity, but you pay the price because of the resentment that rots your stomach like acid. My grandmother, Bong Choon Chung, was an illiterate single parent and a born-again Christian. She survived by growing vegetables and taking them to market on weekends. She was married twice. My grandfather died shortly after my father was born. The second man she married left to work in Manchuria, after my father's half-brother was born.

When we heard grandmother had died, we drove in our Mercedes down to Vancouver. It



STAN
CHUNG
Global Citizen

rk Sunday
Apr 20
All

was a seven-hour drive that passed through many geo-climactic zones. We passed 100 Mile House, Clinton, Yale, Chilliwack and finally arrived in Vancouver, where the air was moist and faintly smelling of cedar and ocean.

She was buried in Vancouver on a cold day. The funeral service, the first for me, was attended by Korean families throughout the Lower Mainland. Today, there is a huge population of Koreans, but in those days, it seemed like we all knew each other. The day after we arrived, my father's half-brother, an electronics businessman from Chicago, burst into our hotel room and blustered promises to us.

"You kid study hard. I pay all your university. Your grandmother murdered by bad doctor, and he make big pay. Tomorrow, we go shopping and I buy you leather jackets."

My uncle's words didn't turn out to mean that much. My grandmother died as a result of gall bladder surgery complications, and my uncle didn't hire or know any hit men. I don't even know where he is now. I hear he is keeping a low profile in the Pacific Northwest after he scammed a large retailer out of a cheque large enough to retire on.

Korean funerals are a little different. First of all, there is the custom of envelope giving. People lined up at the hotel room and slipped my father thick envelopes. Afterward, I saw my father count up the stacks and stacks of cash, and to me, it seemed like a scene out of a Hollywood movie.

The next day, we sat in a long, white limousine and arrived at the church. I sat in a hard

pew beside my little sister. My parents entered behind the casket and that's when I heard the long, low and nearly hysterical cries of my father. I had never heard that sound before and I've never heard it again. Then, my mother joined in. Her cries filled the church and she collapsed. I hung my head, closed my eyes and could not understand.

Seeing our mother cry made my sister and I cry, too. I wondered if my grandmother was watching our sadness, our sorrow, our guilt. There were so many things to cry for, but who really understood what it was like for my grandmother?

Later, we drove to the cemetery. I was amazed by the long row of cars behind us. To be the centre of attention in this way was strange. People who I didn't know, bowed to my parents and embraced them. I stood in the distance. Nobody shook my hand or clapped me on the shoulder. Finally, my aunt's new husband stood beside me, and I felt better — at least someone knew me.

On that cold November day, I had no tears for my grandmother. I blinked hard and tried, but the wind cooled my eyes and I kept looking up for snow. A bit of frozen rain moved diagonally as people put up their black umbrellas. There were a lot of people there, but it was very quiet. The sleet hit the ground and bounced.

For a moment, I could see snow on Grouse Mountain and then the cloud cover came. There was a lot of mud around the casket, but the ground was hard. I waited for my uncle to do something hysterical, but he stood with his hands in his pockets and kept pushing up his glasses.

My parents wiped their eyes. We never visited my grandmother's grave except maybe once, the following year, and for some reason, all I can remember is my mother putting plastic flowers next to her bronze marker.

It has been many decades now and I have not visited my grandmother. I know her grave sits at Ocean View Cemetery, and I try not to wonder about what kind of person I was and have become. After all, I am too busy. I am a father now with young children of my own. My own parents have passed on and left us alone.

It is April, and my daughter has just turned nine. Clementine still cries when I leave town on business. She misses me. I wonder how old she will be before she stops crying. How long will she love me like this? And what, I ask myself, when I sit in that hotel room far away, have I done to deserve those beautiful tears.

I think about tears, the tears in my daughter's eyes, the tears in my own, and the frozen tear in the sky the day my grandmother was buried and I think about how it must have been for me to lose my parents for that year while they settled in a new land. And how it must have been for my little sister, who believed she'd never see her parents again. And how it must have been for my grandmother, who stayed in Korea to raise us, and love us, and who is now nearly forgotten.

Stan dedicates this column to the memory of Okanagan College Economics professor Israel Dandjo. Stan Chung is a writer and Associate Dean of Arts and Foundational Programs at Okanagan College. Reach him at stanchung@gmail.com.



Stan and his sister, Heidi