

Hey mum, do you remember that Wednesday afternoon? I was five years old and you came to pick me up from art class. You asked me to show you my artwork, only to find a torn, crumpled piece of what was an A3 craft paper.

“I don’t want grandpa to laugh at my drawing” I would say.

My dad has five sisters and I have two. I am the sole, direct successor of my grandfather’s legacy and surname. Maybe that was why family politics was such a longstanding issue. You needed your kids to excel in absolutely everything to prove your worth as an Asian mother.

Surely you must have felt the brunt of it. If not, why was my schedule packed to the brim by seven years old? Why was I not given the right to play, to make mistakes, to cry when I felt down, to be consoled when I could not make sense of things?

Growing up in Taipei, you went through the Tiger Mum’s culture. In a competitive East Asian society, tuition is a given, piano is expected, ending primary 1 school work at 11pm was normal, and the cane probably touched my palm more than your hand did. Yet I know it is for my good.



Municipal Guangfu Primary School in Taipei, where I had my first two years of formal education. Like many others, I started on math, piano and English before primary school began. Classes will end around 2pm and tuition starts at 3:30pm. I would then have dinner, then head for another tuition class or go home to do school work. Lights out is at 11pm, or later if I could not finish my school work. This was not uncommon for a primary one student then. Photo from Wikipedia.

It was another Wednesday afternoon. I was seven. My teacher pulled me aside to check on me and asked me why my palm was swollen. In retrospect, it was clear why they were concerned: My grubby hands were purple and red and difficult to grip a pencil with. I told them I made two

mistakes on the math homework yesterday, which probably made them more confused if anything. Yet I know it is for my good. I know you love me and I love you all the same.

In every victim in these dramas we saw a shadow of our mother.

It was around this period that you first told my sisters and I your troubles. The troubles you faced, the infighting between your in laws, the unkind world that faced you simply because you married an only son of a somewhat successful local businessman. If only my father did not have to work overseas. Surely you missed him so much more than I could comprehend.

To others, the arguments over possessions remain a cliché in Taiwanese drama, but to my siblings and I, it was a documentary. Yes, it was dramatised, it was over the top, it was made to entertain, but in every victim in these dramas we saw a shadow of our mother. A victim, a perpetrator, a young woman under so much pressure that drove her mental wellbeing to a dark corner.

Into the Lion City

It was a Wednesday afternoon. I was nine. We were on our first family trip overseas in Singapore. I squealed in delight as a pink dolphin plunges into the tank, lifting a wave of water over us in the splash zone.

“Do you like Singapore?” you asked. “Yeah! Of course we do!” I said,

“How about we move here?”

You knew this meant you cannot be there to see your father on his deathbed. Yet you did it for my good.

I thought you were joking, but my sisters and I did not know you brought us here on a mission. You needed space, you needed a way out, you needed distance from your in laws for your sake and for ours. The timing was perfect: Taipei was swamped in protests against then-President Chen Shui-bian. For the future of your kids, you would pitch to my grandparents, we should move to Singapore.

You knew this meant you cannot be there to see your father on his deathbed, you knew this meant another twelve arduous years before you can stay with the love of your life who just returned to Taiwan, you knew this meant you had to survive in an English speaking island without even knowing where the markets are. Yet you did it for my good.

I gave you the false impression that everything is fine. I never cried in front of you when you broke the news to us that we are moving. I was told all along that men cannot cry. It was also a lot harder for you than it was for me. With quick goodbyes, we flew to a new place, far from where we called home.

Whenever I am feeling low

Soon, I learnt the slang, I made friends, I joined CCAs, and as per your expectations, I studied hard every day. I did not know any other way to please you. Yet somehow you did not get better. You did not find happiness. You scrolled through Facebook everyday, and when you speak you speak only of school work. I stopped sharing about school, about my friends, about my problems. At the end of the day, you wanted results.

You were depressed, but you did not know. I was depressed, and neither did I.

It did not help that my older sister scored so ridiculously well in PSLE: A flashy 279 points ranking her 13th in her cohort nation-wide. Chicken essence brands rang our phones. You had no idea how much pressure that was for me to live up to.

It was a Wednesday night and I was in my room. I could not sleep because the preliminary exams were starting soon. I was not fearful, I was not worried, nor was I sad. I was numb. What good is it that I walk through the gates of that prestigious school? What good is it that I have a high paying career? What good is it that I gain all this but lose the mother I once knew?

Did you know the only reason I stopped was because I did not want to make you cry?

Hey ma, did you know that I went to the kitchen that day and held a knife in my hand for the first time? Did you know for how many more times I would contemplate suicide? Did you know the only reason I stopped was because I did not want to make you cry?

We stopped talking. For the whole of primary 5 to 6, when we talk, we argue. When I woke up, I was either studying or getting ready to go study. You would pick fights over the smallest things, and I would constantly do my best to study in school to avoid contact with you. I recalled one music class around National Day when I heard the song “Home”. I went to the toilet and cried because it hit me what was missing in my life the whole time.

Home that is yet to come

It was a Saturday afternoon, and I went to church because a senior invited me for Christmas. I went there cynically, and left there with a renewed heart. There is something about this message of forgiveness that heals that struck a chord with me, even if I could not wrap my head around it fully.

On the bus home I eagerly emptied the new believer pack that I received, and in that one bus ride I devoured the book of John. I read and found the verse I heard before I went up to pray:

The life I so eagerly casted aside, now a gift for me; the life God so eagerly casted aside, now a gift to my family and more.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” John 3:16-17.

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Of course, my grandparents would be furious if they found out that I wanted to be a Christian. They would blame you for snuffing out the incense of their altar, leading astray their only direct grandson. You screamed at me, took away any semblance of that message, and told me no without telling me why. I knew it was difficult for you. I knew you did what you did out of love. I just wanted to know you are on my side for once.

But God saw you as your parent too.

Hey ma, did you know that I prayed for you? God showed me the burdens that weighed you down. God showed me the hurts that you had to go through. God showed me that you cared not for the things I thought you cared about: All you really wanted is to have your home back with you. God showed me that you, too, feel the same.



Me (left) with my grandfather (right) in a *yakiniku* place when my grandfather came over to Singapore for vacation years ago. I have yet to talk to him about my faith yet. On his trip, he would wake me up at 5am for

morning walks at East Coast Park, which was near where I used to stay.

For the first time, I saw you as a fellow victim, and I understood that it is up to the forgiveness God gave me to heal you. God wants you to know that you are forgiven and loved. God wants you to know that He mourns your pain with me.

It was a Wednesday afternoon and I was sitting in the hawker centre near my school slurping down some *tau huey*, dreading to head home knowing you just argued with my sister. This time, I prayed for you. God placed in me empathy, tenderness, forgiveness. I wanted to care for you but I did not know how, after all we have not spoken like family members in a good few years. I headed to the bus stop, planting in my fourteen year old heart a mustard seed of faith.

“Eh? What did you buy?” as I cracked the door open, you quickly spotted the plastic bag in my hand.

“There’s this new type of *tau huey* that’s been going around recently and there was some near school...” I blurted out as naturally as I could, pretending that I did not rehearse this over and over again on the bus: “... thought I should buy some back for you all to try.”

It was a Wednesday afternoon, and for the first time in a good few years, a smile on your face. In my home.