

The Memory of My Grandmother

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Grandmother couldn't write any words except her own name. People say: "Illiterate people are savages." But that wasn't my grandmother. In my small city in China, with all the young people gone to that eerie revolution, throughout those long afternoons and countless weekends, my grandmother was to my 5-year-old eyes an enlightened teacher, safeguard, and playmate.

I grew up in China in the '70s in the shadows of a so-called "Cultural Revolution." The Cultural Revolution had swept up all: books were burned and pencils weren't seen by me as a five-year-old child. The revolution put my uncle to death due to his position of politician; snatched my father to a jail because of his published critical articles; forced my mother, because of her teaching, to a remote village to do a farm job. That left me living alone with my grandmother in a small city. I was five. Knowing nothing about this revolution, and with the desire to see my parents, I decided to go across the city to a dock to see if my parents had come home. The dock had its own small waiting room with only two dim light bulbs and a few benches. When a ship approached, the small waiting room was crowded. And soon, the people would leave and the room would be silent. I waited and waited until sunset. When I tiredly dragged my legs home with tears in my eyes, I saw my grandmother in front of the door smiling at me. She cooed to me soothingly: "They have been doing some important things. Let us start eating dinner." I was disappointed, but I wasn't upset after her explanation. "It is a normal weekend," I always told myself while we were doing chores after dinner. The same things happened every weekend. My parents never appeared in this waiting room. After my uncle died, his two sons were dismissed from school. We were in the center of the trouble, but my grandmother was never gloomy or anxious, even once, in front of me. Almost every family had their own problems at that particular time. But, luckily, nestled deep in my grandmother's caring with her elderly wisdom, I was cut off from the outside world.

My parents' room was always locked. My grandmother cleaned the room once a week. She told me I was too little to be in the room. It made me always think of a mystery behind the door. After growing up a little, I was allowed to go into my parents' room with her. When the door opened, a small room was in front of me. "Don't touch anything, Lily," she called my name with a soft voice. I stood there and saw a big desk on my left side and an empty bookshelf. Along the wall was a bed. Four sides of white walls didn't have any decoration, except a notebook-sized picture hanging high on one hard wall. The edges of this picture were worn. Someone put up tape to try to fix it flat. It was a picture of the Mona Lisa. I was too little to realize that it was a remarkable moment for me to encounter this masterpiece of art in China, where Western culture was a poison and education was a sin.

“Material of the clothes is mosquito-net like, and the brown color of her clothes looks dirty. She must be poor,” Grandmother, who was illiterate, whispered. I turned my head up to the picture, and noted that only the dark-green mounts behind her were familiar. Mona Lisa wasn’t smiling. We were both lost. Why was this poor woman in my parents’ room? After cleaning up the room, we locked the door quickly. The next week, when the door was opened, we both were in front of the Mona Lisa again. “She doesn’t have eyebrows. Do you think she is sick?” my grandmother asked. I tip-toed to try to get a closer look. I looked and looked, but couldn’t get an answer. I found her eye color similar to mine. Her fingers were flesh and her hands were comfortably relaxed on her legs. She didn’t look like a sick woman. The next week came. We gazed at her again, even longer. “Don’t you think she is smiling, Lily?” my grandmother turned her face around to me and asked. I looked back to my grandmother. She left me doing her dusting job. I was full of questions. I was trying to find answers, but the answers never came for a 5-year-old child. During those long afternoons, I learned a very important lesson from my grandmother, and it must be a seed buried deeply in my mind. The initial cognition of aesthetics is always started by asking questions with intuition, and then coming back to the work again and again with curiosity.

By now, as a woman with an art and design background, I can analyze Mona Lisa professionally, not with jargon and scholarship, but with my heart. It is all about memories: a warm memory of two illiterate women who were sixty years apart standing in front of the Mona Lisa wanting their confusion to be understood and their curiosity to be expanded.

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