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English 1301 Mon.-Thurs. 2:30-5:00PM

Essay 2

27 June 2013

At Grandmother’s House

Warm; welcoming; safe - these are the words that come to my mind when I think of my grandmother’s house. As in the essay “More Room” by Judith Ortiz Cofer, my grandmother’s house is the “place of [my family’s] origin, the stage for our memories and dreams” (par. 1). Because of the strong resemblance between my grandmother and Cofer’s Mamá, I want to take the reader on a journey depicting the importance of a loving home, as with the two grandmothers.

My family’s history originates in the small, but beautiful country of Cambodia, nudged right in between Vietnam and Thailand. My grandmother is of Chinese descent but was born in Phnom Penh, Cambodia in the year of 1920. During this time, Cambodia was a place of wonder and happiness. It was still a young country, like a lotus flower peeking up from the muddy waters of a pond, ready for the rest of the world to witness its outstanding progress and growth. During this time of peace and felicity, my grandmother met my grandfather, who “every year or so . . . planted a baby seed in [her] fertile body” just as Cofer’s grandfather impregnated her grandmother (par. 8). With her husband’s “saintly, soft spoken presence,” they happily raised “[nine] children,” seven of whom were boys and the remaining two, girls (pars. 2, 8).

The reign of Pol Pot, an extremist leader, during the Khmer Rouge in 1975 ruined the feeling of security that Cambodia had offered to its people. He imagined an ideal country of unified farm laborers. This forced all the city folk to move to the country. My grandmother, her husband, and their nine children had to evacuate. There was a lack of food, and starvation led to many deaths. This was what took my own grandfather, leaving my grandmother to raise nine children by herself. With his death, she “lamented her burdens,” as the women did for other reasons in Cofer’s account, and with every day came a loss in “heart and energy” (pars. 8-9). Unlike Cofer’s Mamá, my grandmother weakened day by day, not from having too many children, but by the anguish she felt for not having the love and support of a husband.

The Khmer Rouge lasted “three years, three months, and sixty-five days,” my grandmother recalls. In order to escape the ruins of Cambodia, she and her family had to find salvation in a refugee camp in Thailand. She knew the importance of moving to a country where “her dreams and plans” for a better future could become a reality (par. 9). There they found a sponsor that helped them come to the US.

They arrived in Houston, Texas in the fall of 1987. My grandmother was able to purchase a house with the help of the government, and she, along with her nine children and their families, moved into a “chambered nautilus” of a home with different rooms (par. 1). That house soon became a safe haven for my family as its “small and simple design” greatly contrasted to the poverty stricken, wooden homes on “stilts” back in Cambodia (par. 1). This house symbolized a new start for my family, away from the cruel torture they faced in Cambodia. We could now live to achieve the “American Dream” and expand our horizons.

I can remember growing up in my grandmother’s house as a child vividly. The house had bright red bricks, big glass windows, and a looming tangerine tree that had ripened small fruit that neighboring kids would pick and snack on during the spring. The house did not have “many rooms”; in fact it only had a total of four bedrooms, two bathrooms, a small kitchen, but best of all, a swimming pool (par. 1). The house was “not a mansion,” but it was big enough to satisfy the “needs of its inhabitants,” as Cofer puts it. It kept our family very close-knit, like the interlaced thread combined to form a warm sweater (par. 1). We were practically inseparable.

During this time, six of my uncles had already married and began to expand their own families as they kept having more and more children. “[L]ike the rings of a tree,” my family grew, and I still don’t know how so many people could manage to live in such a confined space (par. 2). I never minded living with such a big family, because to me, it meant I was never alone or neglected. I truly felt the love emitting from everyone, especially from my grandmother.

My family, along with my uncles’ families, all had to share three rooms while my grandmother had her own room. It was not the master bedroom, but it was the room to the far left, near the front of the house. Perhaps she chose this room for its position. Perhaps, like Mamá, she felt like the “queen” in her chamber, a small woman looming large, watching over her children and grandchildren residing in the rooms towards the back of the house. Nevertheless, her room, like that of Cofer’s Mamá, was and still is “the heart of the house” (par. 3). This is the room where her children confide in her. This is where the gossip begins, where all the sad Cambodian tales are told. But this is where the comfort is.

I remember during my childhood, our grandmother would watch my cousins and me while our parents worked. Our favorite thing to do was to go into our grandmother’s room. To us, it was like a hidden treasure, waiting for us to uncover the hidden mysteries that lay beneath the surface. Her room had a walk-in closet with a full-length mirror hanging on the door for my grandmother to view herself while she tried on her gorgeous silk gowns I wanted to wear as a little girl (par. 5). There was also a massive ebony chest of drawers that seemed to be as tall as the house itself. Now, as with the author, age has “changed the perspective of my eyes,” and what appeared to be so colossal and frightening is not so menacing (par. 3). Cofer’s Mamá and my grandmother are both very religious. “Having taken care of the obligatory religious decoration” with Buddha statues on her wall, my grandmother would often pray for my family’s safety and well-being (par. 6). The house never lost the familiar, sheltered quality I remember.

In her drawer, she hid some of her very expensive “jars filled with herbs” (par. 4). Like Mamá, my grandmother had her own collection of medicinal herbs. Walking into her room, I recall smelling unusual and sometimes pungent scents of Cambodian ointments. It was as if I was in one of those herbal shops in Cambodia. The potions created in the various scenes of *Harry Potter* would, I imagine, smell like my grandmother’s room. Still, these were more precious to her than her jewelry or even her money. My cousins and I never dared to “reach for that little key” to unlock the drawers that possessed the magical herbs (par. 5). It was too precious to grandmother, and we had too much respect for her.

As the family tree kept expanding, my uncles, along with their families moved out; eventually, it was just grandmother left in the house. After many years, “the paint did not exactly match, nor the materials” in the house (par. 2). Wear and tear from the many active children that played and beat against the walls caused crevices and a discoloration to form on the once newly white walls. I remember myself writing on the walls and being harshly scolded. I do not regret it though, because looking back, it is like a piece of history I left behind at my grandmother’s house.

Though my grandmother did not have to exile her husband from her room, as Cofer’s Mamá did, she still managed to find time for herself when her children left the house to live with their own families, and enjoyed the new personal freedom she had (pars. 8-9). One similarity that my grandmother and Cofer’s Mamá had in common was their “sacrifice” (par. 11). Cofer’s Mamá “gave up the comfort of Papá’s sexual love for something she deemed greater,” and my own grandmother gave up her time and energy to raise her family (par. 11). These selfless acts “still [emanate] the kind of joy that can only be achieved” by providing a loving home wherever family is (par. 11). Like Mamá, my grandmother was able to give reign to her own heart and do what she loved, which is providing and caring for her family.

When I go back to visit my grandmother, my favorite thing to do is not to scavenge around her room, looking for new treasure as I did as a kid. I now enjoy lying down on the “middle of her mattress where her body’s impression takes me in like a mother’s lap” (par. 6). Lying there, I am able to recall all the precious memories that I had with my loving family, because after all, family is the only thing we have until the end.

Work Cited

Cofer, Judith Ortiz. “More Room.” 1990. *The Norton Reader: An Anthology of Nonfiction.* Ed. Linda H. Peterson, et al. 13th ed. New York: Norton, 2012. 116-19. Print.