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“A Smile that was Once Hers”

Every time I look into a mirror, the memories all come flooding back. Memories of walking with my Bà Nội, my father’s mother, to church every Sunday. Church started at 9:30; everyone else in our household would wake up at 9, but the two of us woke up at 8. I would brush my teeth, get dressed, and then go down the stairs, hopping two-steps at a time, but doing it all as quietly as possible so not to wake everyone up.

My grandmother had the bedroom on the first floor, too old by then to climb up the stairs. She would wait for me at the bottom of the staircase in her decades-old, worn-down clothes. The clothes on her body were a constant reminder of the lifetime of labor she cursed herself with for just the possibility of her family’s freedom. The cream-colored shirt she was wearing had wrinkles on it, her black, flowy pants stopped above her ankles, and she wore the same dark red slip-on shoes that she wore every day. She was leaning on the cane that kept her body stable, looking up at me as I walked down the stairs with her warm smile. Her tan skin had sun-spots from the years of work she did outside after the war. Her hair was fully gray, the wrinkles around her eyes were even more prominent when she smiled. This was the only version of her I ever knew, and, to me, she was always beautiful.

I started skipping towards the door and stepping down the doorstep of the old red brick house that she built for her family decades ago with all the money she worked for. My grandmother’s right hand was on her cane, and the left was wrapping her warm, wrinkled fingers around my young, small ones. As we walked, she always rubbed her thumb in circles against the skin on the back of my hand, like she was feeling the smooth skin that she used to have. As the youngest of twenty-one grandchildren, I felt the palpable unfairness that, no matter what, I would always have the least amount of time with my grandmother. But I know that my youth was special to her, because it was something that she didn’t have and would never have back. The war took it all from her – her youth, her sense of safety, her life – everything was gone in an instant.

With each step, she would slip me anecdotes about her life, before, during, and after the war. Now, years later, I don’t exactly remember everything she said to me, except one day, she smiled telling me: *Khi Bà đi rồi, Bà muốn con nhớ rằng con là cháu gái của Bà. Con mang theo sức mạnh bên trong—không ai có thể lấy đi điều đó khỏi con. Hãy luôn nhớ con là ai và con sẽ thực hiện được ước mơ của mình và hơn thế nữa.* “When I am gone, I want you to remember that you are my granddaughter. You carry strength within—nobody can take that from you. Always remember who you are, and you will accomplish your dreams and so much more.” I carry her words with me and hold them close to my heart, knowing that from the moment she stepped foot in America, she surrendered her dreams so that I could live out my own.

This was our Sunday routine, walking to church hand-in-hand. It wasn’t for long though, as she passed away in 2013. My parents started driving me to church instead, insisting that I shouldn’t walk to church since my grandmother wasn’t here to walk with me anymore, compounding the loneliness I felt after her death.

Seven years after my grandmother passed away, I went to the Vietnamese market with my older sister after mass ended one day. We were in the produce aisle, laughing and smiling, when an old lady came up to me: *Con có phải là con gái của Sơn và Trần không?* “Are you Son and Tran’s daughter?” I replied yes, wondering how she recognized me. She told me, *Con có nụ cười của Bà ấy.* “You have her smile.” Through those words alone, I knew she wasn’t talking about my own mother, but my Bà Nội.

Every morning, I wake up and look in the mirror; I’m looking at myself, but looking back at me is my grandmother. Maybe I am who she used to look like, before the war, before her life completely changed, before her unending sacrifices. The woman who fought for the life I have now, who would smile up at me every Sunday morning as I walked down her staircase, who inspires strength in every step I take and love in every choice I make. I used to miss her smile, but now I’ve realized that I shouldn’t miss it because it’s not gone, it’s just on a different face. I share her legacy as much as I benefit from her gifts.

I wasn’t born into a fairytale, but my grandmother raised me to be a woman capable of creating my own. Only a woman as courageous as my grandmother could have taught me strength, and now, I live for the both of us. My favorite compliment to be told is that I have a nice smile, because it reminds me of the part of her that will always live within me, a smile that is mine, that was once hers.