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Popo

*“Maan maan sic!”*

Popo, my grandma, is serving me a bowl of wontons at her apartment in Brooklyn. She is literally telling me to eat slowly, but in Cantonese this phrase really means to enjoy my food. I am at her apartment in Brooklyn for the first time in many months; the last time I saw her was before my family and I went to Asia for summer vacation. Going to Hong Kong finally allowed me to meet the family members I had heard Popo complaining and gossiping about. The trip also allowed me to reflect on the relationship I had with her. I never realized how similar I am to her. According to my great aunts and uncles, my grandma is a person who is not afraid of speaking whatever is on her mind. “Your popo says whatever she wants to, even if it’s the hard thing and no one wants to hear it!” they told me. This is the truth. Once, when I was practicing writing my Chinese characters, she peered over my shoulder and exclaimed, “Wah! They’re so messy.” She then proceeded to make me write them correctly. I thought my characters looked nice and neat (I was even using a newly sharpened pencil), but not to her. My grandma believes that the truth, no matter how harsh it may sound, is better told straight up than sugarcoated, and my mom and I are a firm believer of this as a result of her teachings.

When I was conducting an interview with my grandparents about their life in Hong Kong and immigration experience in America, my grandma was once again being her outspoken and assertive self. Even though I was asking my grandpa (Gung Gung) about *his* life as a waiter in America, Popo would interject often, talking loudly over him, proclaiming that *she* knew better

than he did the events of his life. “He got the red marks! Everything circled in red!” she declared, referring to Gung Gung’s grades in public school. When I asked about my great-grandmother (Gung Gung’s mom, who I called Tai Po), who I knew had a bad relationship with my grandma, Popo’s face instantly darkened. “That woman didn’t do anything! She opened a laundromat and closed it within a month because she thought it was too dirty to wash other people’s dirty clothes. Then when I got married, she told me to open a laundromat, even though *she* found it to be too dirty. *Chee Seen!*” Clearly, my grandma has many strong opinions. Even though most people do not speak ill of the dead, because of the customs of Chinese reverence for our elders and deceased, Popo still speaks her mind and says what she wants about her mother-in-law.

The traits of outspokenness and assertiveness have served my grandma well in life. Her assertion has given her many job opportunities. For example, when she was forced to quit school in eighth grade because it was too expensive for her parents to send her along with six siblings to school, she worked at a factory in Hong Kong with her older sister, making \$5 an hour. She decided that she didn’t like being a machinery operator, left, and independently found another company to sew. However, because she was still underage and was only doing “baby work” that she didn’t like, she moved jobs to work as a receptionist at a doctor’s clinic, getting a good salary and opportunities to move up. I think Popo’s bosses saw her as capable of being a leader, which I attribute to her assertiveness. I also think her spunk was what attracted my taciturn, old-fashioned grandpa to her. Most Hong Kong girls still abided by “tradition” where they were subordinate to men and did not express their opinions – not my grandma. Her siblings and friends could always depend on her to say what she truly thought.

When Popo came to America, she was instantly put in factory work. Back then, almost all the Chinese immigrants in cities with established Chinese communities would wait, do factory

work, or open a laundromat. Popo balanced her job as a seamstress, where she was paid by the piece (a practice that has been illegal since 1938, but unenforced in Chinatown since owners of sweatshops routinely exploited their workers), with taking care of her family. She made sure she found a job where she could sew at home in order to raise her three children properly, refusing to sacrifice one responsibility for the other. To make ends meet, she would drive around to factories with two other friends asking if there was any work they could do; if there was, they would split it three ways. This “freelancing” of sewing was relatively unheard of at the time; almost all women would bring their children with them to the factory, where the children would also perform tasks. It was rare for mothers to work from home for the sole purpose of raising children outside the factory. Popo had to be really assertive in fighting for a job where she could sew clothes from home since it was so uncommon. However, since she was also freelancing, she became a sought-after worker, ensuring that she almost always had some job opportunities.

Over many years, Popo worked her way up to be the factory forewoman, where it was her responsibility to make sure everything from the beginning to end of production ran smoothly. At one point, she was overseeing a factory of 109 people; her boss would give her an extra *penny* for every piece of clothing the workers finished. 20,000 pieces of clothing went out a week, she would get \$200, and this man would pocket \$25,000 by underpaying the seamstresses. Popo would always tell her boss that what he was doing was wrong and unfair, but he didn't really care and continued to undercut his workers. It was common in the factory world for the workers, mostly Chinese women, to go on strike demanding better treatment and pay from their bosses. Popo protested with them to make sure the boss paid them their due amount, and being a forewoman, she had a lot more power than the regular workers she was in charge of. She also did not have to support the workers; in fact, if she didn't she would have probably been paid more as

a reward for being on the boss's side. As a working poor immigrant, the extra money was needed, yet she never supported any of her boss's malpractices.

When she finally had enough of her boss, she left that factory, and her boss's mother yelled and cursed at her. Popo, who did not let herself get treated like that by anyone, yelled right back, saying that they were unethical and exploitative. Her political involvement and outspokenness were rare back then when most women and factory workers did not think to speak up on their horrible treatment. My grandmother did not compromise on her morals and was not afraid to use her voice. She instilled this trait in my mother, who instilled it in me. This is why people comment that I'm "not like other Asian girls" – I am vocal, instead of silent; I question things and do not blindly obey the status quo. All the women in my family know the power of our voice thanks to my grandma's example. We know that we have to be assertive and create our own space in a world that still views women, especially Chinese women, as second class.

As my grandma likes to say, "If we don't speak up, who will?"