2023 Ben Strauss Youth Program

High School

Teen Essay Contest

Honorable Mention 4

Ai-Linh Nguyen

Ông Nội

July 4th, 2017 was the day my world changed. It was the day my Ông Nội, my beloved grandfather, passed away after a long, painful battle with cancer. Even now, years later, signs of him are everywhere. From the stuffed animals he gave us, to the wildflowers that grew back around his grave, to the plastic cardinal, his favorite bird, that sits on our altar. We still celebrate his birthday and drive by the house where he lived; the house where my dad grew up, and where the memories of Ông Nội rest.

I remember being woken up by my mom, in Chú Thong's room, stuffed animal clutched in my grasp. He had Bà Nội, my grandmother, give me a cardinal on his behalf, since he wasn't allowed to leave the hospital. My mom leaned over me, her face illuminated by the sunlight pouring in through the open curtains. The light reflected off the four rosy walls, tinting her face a light pink. Rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I scooted over to make space for her on the twin bed. I watched her struggle to find the words she needed. How do you explain death to a child for the first time? I refused to accept it when she told me. When someone you know has been there for your whole life, they seem like a constant -- something that will always be there. Losing Ông Nội felt jarring. It changed everything.

 My whole world came crashing down when I was told. As time progressed, I mourned the gap in my life he left behind, only discovering more and more emptiness as I got older. It felt like being knocked over by a wave, time and time again, with no time to get back up before being swept back under. I felt that if I went on like this for too long, I'd drown.

 Ông Nội's fight began long before that summer; we never knew how long he'd been battling with lung cancer before he was diagnosed. He never complained, not wanting to worry us. His resilience was how the cancer had developed so far. At times I felt frustrated with his strength; if only he'd mentioned the dull pain in his ribs, or the way he'd wheeze when he carried the laundry upstairs, we could've seen it sooner, and he might still be here. When diagnosed early, the five-year survival rate is 56%. Had he been diagnosed, he would've at least been here until I got to high school.

 After the diagnosis, the orange pill bottles on the window illuminated the kitchen table, casting a warm glow that disguised how chilling they really were. We drove down weekend after weekend to see him, the news getting worse and worse each time. The only option we had left was to take every lasting moment we had with him and hold it tightly. I recall passing the time in the waiting room, playing Minecraft with my older cousins and younger brother. We'd build statues of our grandparents, plant gardens, and make replicas of their house together. Our parents always left us be, discussing quietly at a coffee table. On our last visit, a priest came into his room with us. I found it strange that he was here today, since we'd never brought Sunday Mass to Ông Nội before. At the time I just thought he'd missed being able to attend Mass. The priest led a short service for us and, as I held my father and my cousin's hand, I prayed that Ông Nội would get better, just as I had every day before that. I was too late.

Shortly after we'd all made the sign of the cross, a long, monotone noise rang out. I followed my aunt's gaze to the heart rate monitor where an unchanging, apathetic green line stared back at me. Unable to look at it any longer, I focused my eyes on the floor beneath me. Teardrops splattered across the tiles as my cousin cried. I watched my Bà Nội shakily make her way towards the hospital bed and put her hand to his chest. She held his hand, bowed her head, and began to sob. The pond of tears on the ground grew as I joined my cousin and grandmother.

 The funeral was held on the 15th. In the same room where I'd been told the news not two weeks ago, I got changed into the little black funeral dress my mom always ensured she packed. Waiting downstairs to leave, I noticed the void left by Ông Nội -- the bellowing laugh I'd never hear again, the aromatic smells of his cooking, and the happiness that followed him wherever he went. How could a house feel so empty, yet so suffocating? On the drive, the car's engine was the only thing that spoke on the way to the viewing, the rest of us engulfed in stony silence. Entering the funeral home, I was met with a sea of black, save for the island of bright flowers by the casket. I approached the altar with my dad and, looking between the casket and the picture of Ông Nội standing next to it, I began to cry again as I realized how much weight he'd lost in his fight for life. I felt sick and scrambled to sit down. My mom soon joined me, and we listened to my dad, Bà Nội, and aunt honor him. Bà Nội delivered her speech in Vietnamese, and although I couldn't understand all of it, I felt the emotion and love in her conviction. That feeling is universal, synonymous in all languages. After the speeches, I then watched as my dad carried his

away down the aisle. It was the first and only time I'd ever seen him cry. Only yesterday he'd carried me upstairs to bed, and today, he carried his father to rest too.

 I sobbed as I watched Ông Nội be lowered into the ground. The dirt cascading over the casket felt overwhelmingly final, like the period at the end of a long sentence. From afar I watched my dad stand by the grave, alone, as the last man left in his family. Ông Nội was buried next to Chú Thong, his son, who'd passed 10 years before. As my Bà Nội approached us, I couldn't help but wonder how she was dealing with it all. She'd outlived her sister, husband, and son. Together we bowed to the two graves, five big bows and three small ones, then walked back to the car, minding the many moving boxes strewn about. Bà Nội was moving into a care home; she couldn't bear to live in that empty house anymore, since it only emphasized the loneliness she felt. All of her loved ones who moved into that house with her slowly left her there, alone. One by one, they left, either to grow up, or because they stopped growing up.

As I helped pack the boxes, I began to notice all of the little things Ông Nội left behind in that house. From the newspapers he used to pretend to hit us with, to the many toys he gifted to us, to his office chair he pushed us around in, I realized that he wouldn’t ever be gone. As his last gift of the many he’d given us over the years, he'd given us all his love, and cancer couldn't take that away.