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Grandmother

Anne Hawkinson
Western Michigan University

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Grandmother
Anne Hawkinson

I learned about being Japanese from visiting my grandmother. She didn’t live far away, just across town, on the North Side. We would take the Dan Ryan expressway to her house. But really, the Dan Ryan took us to another world.

My grandparent’s house was so close to the expressway that we could see it as we approached, before we got off at the exit and doubled back at the International House of Pancakes. Although my grandparent’s house was on display for a constant stream of traffic, I don’t think anyone noticed it. It was as if my grandparents had purposely chosen the most small, gray and obscure house in the most noisy and public location to prove their invisibility in America. My grandparent’s house was a secret only our family knew about. That’s how it seemed when I was young.

When I was very little, I thought my grandparent’s house was a Japanese house. The fact that we were in Chicago, not Japan, didn’t matter, of course, since we had obviously experienced some magical leap in space on the expressway. And since the house was invisible from the outside, why, anything could be contained within.

The smell of Japan was the smell of that house. Incense, lacquered wood, shoyu and rice vinegar mingled with my grandfather’s tobacco in the dark smoky living room. My grandfather sat silently puffing his pipe on the ratty brown couch, his English forgotten in old age. Pine incense came from a small shrine in the corner of the room, where Japanese characters on a tiny box inconspicuously honored my deceased uncle. The incense seeped into the American furniture and floated into my grandparent’s bedroom, where I once saw my grandmother, through door ajar, sleeping straight and still as a corpse on the wooden platform bed. Even her pillow was made of wood, covered with an embroidered cloth.
My tiny grandmother shuffled into the smoky room with a smile and soft exclamations. "Harro Ang, Harro Cheurya!" "Harro Rucy, Harro Jong!" My grandfather, when he was young and in love with America, had given my mother, Lucy, a name that my grandmother could never pronounce. My mother had grown into her name well, with a broad, flashing smile and a quick swing to her walk. When she had children she gave them names from a world of crisp curtains and white picket fences. But now our names on my grandmother’s tongue were transformed to blend in with the surroundings, and we let them become Japanese.

My grandmother ushered us into her kitchen, where the Japanese smell was even stronger, despite the American appliances. My grandmother’s formica kitchen table was large and rectangular. It sat heavily in the center of the space, taking up way too much room. This custom of "kitchen table" was not Japanese. My grandmother skittered around the large foreign table where her daughter and grandchildren comfortably sat. She steeped green tea and served it to us in small round cups without handles. The kind she liked best had puffed rice mixed in with the tea leaves. My grandmother let my sister and I poke our fingers in the tea jar and pull out rice puffs while the tea was brewing. She would ask if we were hungry: "Ang, Cheurya, you wanga snack-u?" She offered us flat papery-thin sheets of nori seaweed, toasted over the gas burner of the stove. The nutty, salty smell of the roasted seaweed and the sharp green tea filled the kitchen as my mother and grandmother talked, their Japanese softening the hard table.