

ANGELS OF TIBURON

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I gently brushed my hand across the Chinese calligraphy on the marble tombstone spelling out the name of my beloved grandmother. Her name was Lao Lao, meaning “maternal grandmother.”

I was melancholy knowing that Lao Lao would never know her great-granddaughter, soon to be my first child. Judging from the swift kick within my abdomen from my daughter, she, too, was disappointed not to be able to meet her great-grandmother. I would make certain the gift of cultural pride instilled in me by Lao Lao would be passed on to my daughter. As I traced the lines of her name, I was reminded of a cathartic moment in my life occurring not too many years ago.

I leaned over the railing of the Golden Gate Bridge staring at the choppy waters below and wondered about the many poor souls who jumped to their deaths. I tried to relate to the pain they suffered. At the time, I was disappointed because, despite all my hard work, I didn’t gain admittance to any of the professional schools to which I applied. It was the first time I knew failure, but it wasn’t worth jumping to my death.

I looked to my right towards San Francisco, imagining the many opportunities the beautiful city would afford me if I had achieved my professional school dream. I looked to my left towards Marin County, admiring the comfortable homes of its educated population to which I may never become a member. My position in the middle of the bridge, deciding whether to turn back to San Francisco or travel to Marin was a metaphor for my straddling two cultures, Chinese and American. My thoughts were interrupted by a family of Chinese tourists speaking Mandarin Chinese to me, but I couldn’t understand what they were saying. Only through hand gestures could I figure out that they wanted

me to take a picture of the family on the Bridge with the Bay in the background. I obliged. Afterward, a little Chinese boy, in perfect English, said, “My parents thank you for taking the picture and hope you visit Angel Island and learn the history lesson of Chinese immigrants there!” He pointed to the small island adjacent to Alcatraz and just off the coast of Tiburon. I decided to check it out, needing a distraction from my disappointment and sorrow. I left my BMW on the San Francisco side of the bridge and walked across the bridge to Sausalito where I summoned a ride share to take me into the town of Tiburon. From there I caught the ferry boat to Angel Island.

Just an hour before arriving at the bridge, I had been presiding over the Senior Awards Brunch I organized at the beautiful Claremont Hotel and Spa in Berkeley. As president of the sorority, it was my responsibility to organize and officiate at the awards brunch honoring the senior class for their four years of hard work at the University of California, Berkeley, which included mention of their postgraduate plans. I was the only Asian member of the sorority and the first Asian president of the elite sorority house comprised mostly of Caucasian daughters from elite Bay Area families.

Over the previous four years together, my sorority sisters and I partied hard, but while my sisters slept, I kept the midnight oil burning, putting in the lost hours of study time. I successfully completed a double major in U.S. history and biology at Berkeley and set my sights on a career as a patent lawyer, specializing in medical related intellectual

property. My father was a physician and my mother a patent lawyer. Both my parents graduated from Berkeley. Completing both law and medical school would make them proud of me. Berkeley is a competitive and rigorous university where A grades are awarded sparingly. My guidance counselor assured me that my GPA of 3.95, LSAT and MCAT test scores placing me within the 95th percentile were consistent with students admitted to the professional schools to which I was applying. I completed applications to the prestigious law school at Berkeley known as “Boalt Hall,” Stanford Law School, and Stanford Medical School, in addition to the other schools comprising the top ten law and medical schools in the United States. It didn’t matter to me whether I was accepted first to law school or medical school. I would complete a degree at the first school admitting me.

As I read the names of my sorority sisters, I was surprised to learn of their postgraduate plans. Brenda was the daughter of the founder of a Silicon Valley tech giant; she was accepted to Stanford Business School. I was surprised because Brenda slept in rather than attending the grueling courses associated with an economics major at Berkeley. I was always happy to lend Brenda my notes and tutor her on the nuances of supply and demand curves, although I’m not certain she grasped the concepts. Jacqueline’s father was president of a pharmaceutical company. She was beautiful and a member of the cheerleading squad. Jacqueline’s premedical courses always took a back seat to the demands of cheerleading. Jacqueline was my lab partner, and I was always ready to complete her lab work when

the demands of cheerleading called. She was admitted to Stanford Medical School where her father had a research laboratory named after his company. Amber was an ambitious, hardworking, African American girl from Oakland who beat the odds of her tough neighborhood and was admitted to Berkeley. Amber’s goal was to attend Harvard Law School but needed a top notch senior honors thesis to make her application stand out. Over the course of our senior year, I spent hours with Amber, honing her thesis topic on the stereotypes of upwardly mobile minority groups and the discrimination they encountered. The honors thesis was awarded *summa cum laude* honors. Amber was accepted to Harvard Law School. When it came time to announce my name, I was humiliated to say, “Amy Lum, undecided,” which the sisters knew was code for “didn’t get accepted to the schools of my choice.”

I was rejected by all of the professional schools to which I applied. My guidance counselor was surprised and suggested I may have been the victim of admission discrimination against the large number of highly qualified Asian students applying to professional schools. As a history student, I studied the discrimination that Jewish students encountered as they applied to Ivy League colleges in the twentieth century; at the time, schools were intentionally limiting the number of highly competitive Jewish students admitted.

I never knew failure and refused to believe the rumors of Asian discrimination at top graduate schools; I didn’t think that was possible in the twenty-first century. Instead, I accepted the fact that “I didn’t try hard enough” or “I wasn’t

good enough.” My parents suggested I try again in a year after an internship at Mom’s law firm or Dad’s pathology lab; then they would arrange for glowing recommendations from my mentors. I believed reapplication would be futile and was humiliating.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, the sisters gathered in cliques, and I felt shunned by them. I remained stoic and congratulated each of them before discretely exiting the ballroom and summoning my BMW from the valet. The BMW was a gift from my parents and my pride and joy. It was white with a tan interior. The personalized license plate read, “Amy No1.” I drove toward San Francisco, wanting to leave the pain of Berkeley behind me. Just inside San Francisco, I pulled over and cried. I wiped the tears from my eyes, looked up, and saw the familiar Golden Gate Bridge. I drove toward the beautiful landmark, parked my car on the San Francisco side, and walked across the bridge. I thought about calling my boyfriend, Teddy, but knew he wouldn’t be in the mood to hear his girlfriend cry, so I waited for him to call me.

I grew up within the affluent city of Burlingame on the San Francisco Peninsula about twenty minutes from downtown San Francisco. I was the only daughter of successful Chinese American parents. Both parents were overachievers and expected the same from their daughter. I didn’t disappoint them. When I set a goal, I never failed to attain it. I felt invincible and believed anything was possible if I put my mind to it. I was a leader of my girl scout troop, earning more badges than my fellow scouts. I was class officer in both middle

and high school. I attended the Burlingame primary, middle, and high school where I was a standout student, valedictorian, captain of the badminton team and debate teams. My high school yearbook named me “most likely to succeed.” I was one of only a few Asian students within the prestigious primary and secondary schools of Burlingame. I made friends with children of the affluent from kindergarten through high school and wanted to fit in with my Caucasian friends. My friends’ mothers were affluent “stay at home” moms despite holding prestigious university degrees. They chose to stay at home to devote time and energy to their daughters after-school activities. Because my parents were managing demanding careers, my grandmother, Lao Lao, was always eager to pick me up and deliver me to school or play dates. Lao Lao was my most loyal fan. On more than one occasion, I was asked, “Who is that funny looking old Chinese woman who comes to watch you, Amy?” I sheepishly answered, “She’s my grandmother.” At times, I would get upset and tell Lao Lao to stay home, but Lao Lao simply smiled with love, pride, and admiration for her only granddaughter.

Teddy was my childhood friend. He was a natural athlete and enjoyed baseball. Teddy developed quite a fast ball, change up, and curve ball, making him a standout baseball recruit by colleges. Teddy’s family was old San Francisco wealthy. His father and grandfather were partners in a prestigious law firm. We were cute toddlers sharing play dates. Teddy’s parents often referred to me as “Teddy bear’s cute little Panda cub playmate.” Teddy and I

became sweethearts in high school. I never understood why the gracious invitations to visit Teddy's beautiful home stopped and Teddy was never home when I called the house. My parents told me it was likely that Teddy's WASP parents could accept a cute Asian play date for their son but wouldn't tolerate an interracial romance. I refused to believe them. My family embraced Teddy as a "good boy from a good family." Lao Lao also embraced Teddy, telling him stories of China and preparing Chinese food for us. Teddy loved her won ton soup.

I was admitted to my first college choice—Berkeley. I joined an elite sorority—Chi Nu Album—also known as CNA, which consisted of the daughters of Bay Area elite. I was a devoted and reliable sorority sister rising to the prominent position of president within CNA because I always got things done.

CNA was instrumental in welcoming me into the privileged Caucasian lives of my sorority sisters, but it also made me distance myself from my Chinese cultural roots. It may have been self-loathing but I just didn't want to feel different.

Teddy earned a full athletic scholarship to attend Berkeley and play baseball. He was a member of a fraternity, and he enjoyed playing frat boy more than studying. We dated and were study mates. Teddy wasn't my intellectual equal and relied on me for tutoring. It was his goal to attend Bolt Hall Law School at Berkeley like his father and grandfather.

My rideshare driver to Tiburon was a student from South Korea who was driving part-time while studying full-time at San Francisco State to become an engineer. I didn't have to work

as an undergraduate and couldn't imagine working part-time while completing my studies. I admired his resolve.

I arrived in Tiburon and boarded the ferry. I looked towards San Francisco and imagined the immigrant experiences of my parents, George and Margaret, who were first-generation Chinese whose parents emigrated from China. George's parents owned a hand laundry frequented by the housekeepers delivering the fine garments and linens of the San Francisco's elite. George and his parents lived in a two bedroom apartment above the laundry. Margaret's parents, Lao Lao, and my grandfather, who died when I was a child, owned and operated a neighborhood market on the same block and also lived above the market.

Margaret and George were prodigal children working within their parents' businesses after school and weekends while studying profusely. Both of my parents graduated from high school and attended Berkeley where they were standout undergraduates. George went on to graduate from Stanford Medical School and became a renowned pathologist and clinical professor of pathology. Margaret graduated from Berkeley's prestigious law school, Boalt Hall. She joined a high-powered patent law firm representing Silicon Valley's most famous tech giants. My parents married after completing their graduate studies, and I was born two years later. Lao Lao moved in to take care of me after her chain-smoking husband died from lung cancer, and she sold the laundry. George's parents were deceased.

My parents were caught up in the grind of daily life of American professionals and abandoned their cultural identity, unable to pass on Chinese traditions to me, leaving it to Lao Lao. They felt guilty for being too busy to be hands-on parents and showered me with gifts and money to assuage their guilt.

Growing up, I was embarrassed by Lao Lao's thick Chinese accent and difficulty speaking English. Lao Lao was an excellent cook, but I was reluctant to invite my friends over to visit because of the strong aromas filling our home. My friends teased me for smelling like "garlic" and always rejected Lao Lao's gracious invitations to join our family for dinner. I grew distant from Lao Lao. My parents were aware of it as was Lao Lao, but they remained silent, attributing it to "growing pains." Lao Lao always attempted to engage me in conversation, but I sat silently staring at the television, my cell phone, or lap top. I felt like an American kid and wasn't uninterested in Lao Lao's stories of growing up in China and immigrating to the U.S. from Shanghai as a young newlywed. Lao Lao cultivated a small group of friends who played mahjong once a week. She was always talking about her beautiful and brilliant granddaughter with her friends who were always eager to see me. They were old and very Chinese. I didn't want to spend time with them. She attempted to instill in me our rich heritage and teaching me to speak Chinese. I didn't understand the language and the traditions were strange and unfamiliar to me, so I gravitated away from my heritage, choosing to "fit in" with my Caucasian friends.

The ferry arrived at Angel Island and I got off the boat following the signs to the

"Immigration Station." I enjoyed a panoramic view of San Francisco and the East Bay. In the distance, I saw Sather Tower on the Berkeley campus. I began the scenic walk up towards the immigration station buildings. Between 1910 and 1940, approximately 175,000 Chinese immigrants passed through Angel Island under the "Chinese Exclusion Act." It resembled a detention and deportation center as opposed to an immigrant processing center, a prison-like atmosphere where the Chinese immigrants were detained for weeks, months, or years. Daily life was humiliating and demoralizing. The immigrants lived in crowded barracks—one thousand square feet with one hundred immigrants sleeping in bunk beds placed three high in columns.

Inside the barracks, I received a text from Teddy. I was eager to hear from him, hoping we would be meeting soon, and I could seek solace from him. His text message read, "Thank you, Amy. I couldn't have done it without you! You'll always be my panda cub. Let's stay in touch."

It was a cruel blow to my heart after a terrible day. I felt rejected, stereotyped, and reduced to a cartoon caricature. I learned that Teddy was admitted to Boalt Hall despite having lower grades and test scores than mine. My parents weren't surprised and told me Teddy was a "legacy" admittance—a privilege of having a father and grandfather who attended Boalt.

I looked out the window and saw Asian people of all nationalities sitting underneath the flag pole enjoying the beautiful day, the American flag proudly blowing in the breeze. I found a concealed place within the barracks, buried my

head, and cried myself to sleep. I awoke to hear the Park Ranger shout, “Locking up. Last call for the ferry!” Before I could gather my belongings, rise, and head for the exit, the door slammed shut and was locked. Fearing I broke the law, I refrained from calling for help. I stayed the night until the doors were opened in the morning.

I was frightened being in the dark, cold barracks overnight. I heard creeks and imagined the barking of the guards frustrated with not understanding the language of the inmates. I walked throughout the barracks and came upon poems written in Mandarin that were carved into the wooden walls by the detainees. I ran my hand across the intricate carvings of Chinese calligraphy. Since I always carry a phone charger, I was able to use my phone’s flashlight during the night to find the translations to the poems.

There are tens of thousands of poems on these walls - They are all cries of suffering and sadness - The day I am rid of this prison and become successful I must remember that this chapter once existed - I must be frugal in my daily needs - Needless extravagance usually leads to ruin - All my compatriots should remember China - Once you have made some small gains you should return home early.

This is a message to those who live here not to worry excessively - Instead, you must cast your idle worries to the flowing stream - Experiencing a little ordeal is not hardship - Napoleon was once a prisoner on an island.

I garnered strength from the words of the detainees and was indignant at their treatment.

Their optimism in the face of their brutal conditions made my disappointments seem shallow in comparison. I began to formulate a plan for my future when the doors opened in the morning and I could return home. I spent the remainder of the long night reviewing photos and videos of my family stored on my phone. Virtually every photo and video showcased Lao Lao beaming with pride and happiness for being with her beloved family. I began to ponder the journey of Lao Lao from China to the United States and wondered about the trials and tribulations she faced along the way. It couldn’t have been easy leaving China for San Francisco as a young wife. I was resolved to make amends with Lao Lao and soak up as much of my culture as she could teach me.

I was awakened in the morning by the sounds of the Park Ranger opening the doors and turning on the lights. I immediately dialed my parents, both of whom were readying themselves for work and didn’t answer their cell phones. I was cold, hungry, and homesick. I phoned the land line to home and Lao Lao answered. I cried, “Grandma, please come get me. I spent the night on Angel Island!” Lao Lao didn’t ask questions. Without missing a beat, she said, “Don’t worry my dear granddaughter. I’ll be on the next ferry to pick you up.”

As the ferry arrived, Lao Lao was at the front of the boat with my down jacket, holding a familiar childhood thermos I knew was filled with my favorite hot cocoa. She also held a bag of Chinese pastries from the bakery we frequented when I was a child. I ran to greet Lao Lao who was helped off the boat by the Captain. For the first time in years, we hugged. No words were spoken. Love and appreciation

were communicated between the two hearts. Lao Lao and I sat closely together, covered by a blanket, as the Ferry left the pier and headed towards San Francisco. A flock of sea birds flew over the ferry boat, and Lao Lao said, “Look my dear granddaughter; it’s the Angels flying over to say good-bye and thank you for visiting.” I thought to myself that perhaps the sea birds were the souls of the immigrants I had spent the night with. As the ferry boat moved further from the island, I looked towards the Golden Gate Bridge, knowing I no longer wanted to straddle two cultures. I would embrace my Chinese ancestry with the help of Lao Lao.

I began spending more time with Lao Lao who taught me our family history, Chinese culture, and Mandarin. I was resolved to use my time wisely and not let my academic disappointments frustrate my newfound purpose. I gained strength and determination from the immigrants I met on Angel Island. I found a position as an intern at the Asian Pacific Islander Law Center where I quickly rose through the ranks into a paid position after devising a student outreach program for Asian students without a connection to their culture. I wanted to preserve and protect them from assimilation. I enlisted Lao Lao and her friends to be guest speakers, giving them a newfound purpose and pleasure in sharing their experiences. I was a fervent fundraiser, soliciting prominent Bay Area companies, including Silicon Valley behemoths. I completed an evening law school program at Golden Gate University Law School and was the editor of the Law Review. I rose to become Director of the Law Center and mingled with politicians and the city’s elite.

At one particular fundraiser, I was tapped on the shoulder. I heard a familiar voice. It was Teddy—with less hair, more of a waistline, and without a wedding band. Teddy asked, “Hi, Amy. I thought you’d be a partner by now at a big shot law firm. Where did you end up going to law school? It’s nice to see you again, my little Panda.” He leaned in to kiss me, but I pulled away, sarcastically remarking, “Let’s stay in touch.” The uncomfortable meeting was interrupted by the mayor of San Francisco saying, “Come with me, Amy. I want to introduce you to your United States senator.” Teddy headed for the bar, alone.

I’m grateful to the proud souls who shared the evening with me on Angel Island. Our Law Center arranges tours for young people throughout the year so the immigrants are never forgotten. I’m certain they would be proud to know their suffering was not in vain but, in part, a valuable teaching opportunity.

Although I can’t retrieve the many years I ignored Lao Lao, I’m grateful for reuniting with her. Before she passed, we shared several happy years together, learning from each other. What appeared to be a life changing setback for me as a young college graduate was actually an invitation to learn my heritage and discover my life’s purpose. Every year on the anniversary of Lao Lao’s death, I visit her grave, place my arms around the tombstone, and say in Mandarin,

Wǒ ài nǐ de zǔmǔ

(I love you grandmother). ❖

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