



MANDALA

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WHEN I WAS TEN, I FOUND MY GRANDMOTHER'S TRUNK IN THE ATTIC. I wasn't supposed to be in the attic because, according to Mom, it was too messy, but to my ten-year-old way of thinking, all that mess was mysterious and exciting, particularly the stuff from my grandparents' house that had been stored up there since Grandma moved into a small apartment.

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One summer afternoon while Mom was napping, I tiptoed up the steep, rickety stairs, stepping carefully around the clutter of old sweaters, shoes, and *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* to do some exploring. At the top of the stairs, the air under the unfinished wood frame was hot and dusty with an earthy smell. There was no shelving, only piles of discarded clothing and one jury-rigged clothes hanger that held an old pink Sunday-school dress stained with silly putty, a black fur cape, and some of Grandma's clothes. I worked my way from one corner of the attic to the other, inspecting the piles, and in the middle of the room, buried beneath a mountain of my brother's old clothes, I found an old, battered, metal-clad steamer trunk. I knew that trunk with a dome top, wood straps, and leather handles! It was Grandma's, the one she brought back from China. Grandpa had been in China working with his chemical engineering colleagues to make soda ash from salt at what would become China's first chemical plant, Yungli Chemical Industries. My dad (who was a baby when they arrived) and his three older siblings spent seven years in China before Grandpa settled Grandma and all four children back in the states around 1928. Grandpa followed several years later. I never asked Grandma why she came back to the states before Grandpa, but I now know the reason was a combination

of the Sino-Japanese War, Chinese politics, and the education needs of four children. After settling his family in Virginia, Grandpa worked in China for long stretches, leaving Grandma to run the house and raise their children, until 1948, when his work kept him closer to home. I also never asked Grandma if she missed him while he was gone. Now, I wish I'd asked her.



Born in 1885, Grandma transformed her life as a farm girl from Washington County, Virginia, to a college-educated woman who taught school, married a chemical engineer, lived in Kansas and New York, and traveled to China with four young children. She then returned to Virginia with three teenagers and my dad. While working abroad without her, Grandpa was accidentally struck on the head by a piece of equipment at the plant and suffered amnesia for over a year. He apparently knew his work but did not recall his family or life before China. The plant director kept Grandma apprised of his condition until, luckily, he regained his memory. Despite such dramatic challenges, Grandma always played bridge, read, sewed, mothered, went to church, practiced yoga, canned fresh food, paid her bills, and cooked silver dollar-sized pancakes. She grandmothered my cousins, siblings, and me by creating conditions that generated joy.

Grandma kept the trunk in the closet of her spare bedroom where I spent many weekends. I loved the treasures she had brought back from China. My favorite was the mahjong set. We played mahjong with those smooth bone and bamboo pieces stored neatly on trays in a brass-fitted wooden case inlaid with abalone.

tiny, talkative, and capricious mother, Grandma was tall, silver-haired, and gentle. Though she rarely grinned, she exuded contentment. Grandma was curious about me and eager to teach me whatever I wanted to know. She loved to cook, and I loved to watch her cook and can. She pulled a smock over her clothes when she was in the



Grandpa always said, "mahjong is Chinese poker" as he set out the tiles.

I loved being at my grandparents' home. In those days, I wanted to spend time at their house because they actually paid attention to me. Being the introverted middle child with two older and two younger siblings, I often invited myself to their house because it was so peaceful. Plus, unlike my

kitchen, and when I was there, she put one over my clothes too.



That afternoon in our attic, as I stood over the trunk, my heart raced. When I opened the trunk, its patterned paper lining fell like confetti inside the trunk. The contents smelled part musty, part savory. On top were

Grandma's sewing tools: a darning egg, a yellow Whitman's candy box filled with lace removed from other garments, rolls and various lengths of new lace and rickrack, and ivory and lace fans. Beneath were clothes, family photographs, papers, an old perfume bottle, photos of Yungli Chemical plant, children's drawings

the photograph to be the same one she leaned beside the dresser in her bedroom. I never recalled seeing her open it. As I carefully opened this jewel of a find, bamboo spines held delicately painted portions of stretched silk. This lovely item of daily use enthralled me. I immediately adopted this parasol. It became



signed by my aunt, dad, and uncles. At the very bottom of the trunk was a parasol. I picked up the black lacquered handle, unhooked the clasp and was astounded to open what had to have been Grandma's sunshade from China. I had seen pictures of her holding an umbrella as she was carried on a rickshaw in China, and I always considered the umbrella in

mine—my secret treasure from China, and a gift from Grandma. I fastened its clasp, closed the trunk and quietly crept back down to my room, careful not to wake Mom. I told no one I'd removed it from the trunk.

For a while the parasol laid under my bed, then on the top closet shelf beneath my pocketbooks. In my college dorm it lived in my suitcase.

I packed it with my clothes when I moved into my first apartment for medical school. All those years, I just opened the parasol and enjoyed the symmetry of the spines, natural silk, and the rich earthy colors of red, blue, and muted greens. I twirled it round and absorbed its beauty, remembering the peaceful and grounded feeling I'd experienced with my grandparents. I always closed it carefully.

During my third year in medical school, stress from school and training exposed enough cognitive and emotional dissonance (aka family baggage) to prompt me to seek counseling. During those sessions I figured out that my mother was an alcoholic. About the same time, I noticed minuscule tears on the parasol where the silk pulled away from the bamboo. To get to my classes at the Medical College of Virginia, I either rode my bicycle or, in bad weather, the bus. The bus stop closest to my apartment in Richmond was on North Robinson Street in front of the Fan Frame Shop. Waiting for the bus, I often chatted with the owner, whose name I learned was Bill Parker. As I came or went, I sometimes encountered him outside taking in fresh air, and we became acquaintances. Bill stood tall and professional with a head full of brown hair. He was confident and friendly, and his blue eyes invited curiosity. We often talked about the uniquely framed medals, paintings, or shadowbox items

in the window and how he managed to do things with such precision.

One day, as I descended the bus steps, I thought to go into Fan Frame Shop and ask Bill if he knew of some way I could preserve my parasol. "Bring it in," he said. So, I did. The parasol was fragile, Bill told me, and recommended removing the handle to preserve its artistry and framing the open parasol flat. He'd remove the top and resecure it once the parasol was splayed on the matboard. It would need UV light protection glass. We spent days selecting the color for the back mat and finally landed on brick red. Price was never mentioned, and I did worry how I was going to pay for it, but at the same time, I knew I had to get this done, and somehow, he seemed to understand how important it was for me to frame that parasol. He was all in on my behalf. "It'll take weeks to tinker with this project," he said, "because it has to be just right."

One day, some months later, as I stepped off the bus, there it was—Grandma's parasol hanging in the window of Fan Frame Shop! It was stunning. It hung in a place of high visibility, well shaded from the sun by the awning over the front window. I slipped inside to find out what I owed him. "You pay me what you can when you can, and when you've paid for it, I'll let you know. Meanwhile, you can see it whenever you like and others will enjoy it. I've already received

several comments since I hung it this morning.”

I don’t recall the actual price for the work, but I remember the invoice he showed me some eighteen months later. On the back was a list of my payments, dates paid, all totaling the amount due on the front of the invoice. For fifty years, through births, addiction, divorce, adolescent rebellion, cancer, celebrations, and death, that parasol has influenced eleven different homes as its colors sparked warm inspiration for any new rug, couch, upholstery, or paint, and its placement always defines the heart of my home. Today, that parasol has been hanging on the wall in my study for fifteen years, and whenever I see it, I’m forever grateful to my grandmother and wonder about her attachment to that parasol and what it meant to her, propped beside her dressing table. The word *mandala*—meaning circle, wholeness, unity—comes from Sanskrit. That parasol contains all the goodness from times with my grandmother. She used the parasol and then kept it close, with its beauty and memories, beside her dresser. Once I took possession of her parasol, Grandma’s example guided me to become a vital participant in the world around me, and every so often, when I eschew external appearances on behalf of my own well-being, I catch one of her gentle smiles. ♪

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