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## Love Is Never Easy

“Beep, beep, beep!” The vital signs monitor wailed like a siren. I can still hear how its piercing whine encircled the ward. It was four o’clock in the afternoon in January 2020, when the glittering sun reflected its illumination from the adjacent buildings into the room, yet the chilly breeze slipped in through the opened windowpanes. Our family were all numb to the weather, crying and fussing around. He had been moved from the personal ward to a ward of six patients. A man laying opposite to my grandfather had Alzheimer’s disease, looking like an eager child when we were wailing over my grandfather’s plummeting vitals. Another man laid closest to the windows had passed away a week before my grandfather’s death, thickening and distressing the atmosphere of the entire ward. The other three patients were either sleeping or watching the soundless television.

My grandfather laid on the bed, intubated and oxygenated, blinking his half-opened eyes with his ebbing strength. He was fading away with the pale sunken cheeks, wrinkled face, greyish white hair, bony figure and freezing rough hands. “His metastasis of cancer has deteriorated, and his bowel has ruptured, so he may well pass away in a few days,” the doctor told us on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November in 2019, the day he was sent to hospital. The news was an atomic bomb to our family, especially to my grandmother, who did not expect that it was severe and irretrievable since we went on a family excursion to Japan four months ago, being clueless of his deteriorating conditions. We kept this from my grandfather, even till his last moments of death. He didn’t know he was going to die, at least we did not confide to him. However, my grandfather had somehow felt that was nearly the end of his life, exhorting us to live well a month before his death, and we denied without doubt.

Before my grandfather’s death, my mother searched online for ways to save him in early December 2019. My mother never admitted nor subjugated to fate’s control, and she denied the reality that my grandfather could not wrestle against cancer any longer. In fact, our bookshelves at home were filled with an array of books, ranging from Chinese medicine and

therapy for cancer to diets for cancer patients, from cancer management with Western and Chinese medicine to lengthy passages of sharing from cured cancer patients. Stuck with tags of a palette of colors, scribbled with words that were written in haste, folded pages that thicken the already thick books--- I thought my mother was a genius. She even printed out online or cut out newspaper snippets, collaging them into a collection, to show that her father could be cured with myriads of ways. Not only was she showing these to the doctors, but also somehow to herself, constantly reminding herself not to lose hope. The more she rummaged up information from all sorts of sources, the more security she felt, the fewer nights she would stay up crying. She was doing her routine everyday back then, searching. She was silent in a peculiar way, plunging herself into her phone and scrolling up and down for hours outside the ward on the eighth floor in the Prince of Wales Hospital. Sitting in one of those chairs behind the walls of the ward, I could hear how she mumbled something under her breath when she found bits and pieces of information useful, but she suppressed her breathing under her chest, her shoulders were tightened up, her eyebrows were frowning, her lips pressed. The more she researched, the more I feared that she would collapse if there were no solutions to my grandfather's situation, she would waste away if she kept on fasting when she was researching, she would keep our family's false hopes up if she looked like she could find a solution. As my nerves twitched, I could not help but to break the silence.

“Mom, could he not die? Could we help him?” I asked with my beady eyes wide open, searching for answers in my mother's eyes.

“The doctor said surgery would be too big a risk. He's too old for it. He would probably die on the surgery table,” said my mother.

“But he will still die if he doesn't do the surgery, so why not take a risk?” I asked.

“Honey, it isn't as simple as taking a risk. It may cost your grandfather's life,” said my mother while retaining her composure, revealing tinges of sobs.

“Then what should we do? We can’t let him die!” I stamped my feet hard onto the creamy-white colored varnished floor, holding my tears in my sockets.

“Okay sweetie, can you just leave me alone? I want to do some research in silence to help your grandfather,” said my mother, being melancholic than perturbed.

“What if your solutions don’t work?” I couldn’t suppress myself.

“I’ll keep finding until something works,” my mother insisted.

I was left in silence again. Rummaging my backpack, I took out my Geography textbook and revised, eyeing my mother who was plunged into her phone for potential methods of healing. I knew that healing was not possible, and you could tell it when looking at my grandfather’s pale face with his droopy eyes. I tried not to be greedy and never said “healing” to anyone, but “helping”, a false hope to sustain his life a little longer. However, I now know that the “helping” I was referring to wasn’t genuine help either, it was helping us to feel better if he subsisted his life, but was that what my grandfather wanted anyway?

“I feel fine with everything in my life. No regrets,” said my grandfather in a voice that was nearly inaudible, showing an okay signal with his fingers. It was mid-December 2019, a month before he died.

“Don’t ever say that,” I said.

“I have already lived enough, my sweetheart,” said my grandfather. I could tell he was smiling even though he had his oxygen mask on.

In fact, my grandfather fought against cancer for seven years, undergoing chemotherapy, radiotherapy, targeted therapy and even methods to coexist with cancer. “He looked healthier than expected after all these years,” these were always the words of encouragement spoken by countless doctors. This might give us false hope, yet it was also the anchor that kept my grandfather optimistically alive. It was important for us to count on these words because we were all standing near the edge of the cliff, hanging on to the wisps of grass on the boulder and trying hard not to fall straight down towards the valley.

During his days in the hospital in December 2019, I pressed at the acupuncture points on his hands that my mother taught me and looked into my grandfather’s droopy eyes. I recalled how his eyes were large and round and lively before entering the hospital, especially when he was talking about food, the topic that he loved. There were many times that my memories with my grandfather lingered in the supermarket, his favorite place to wander. He was a fanatic of food and ingredients; he could talk about it for hours incessantly. “Did you know that stone basses live deep down the water caves and wrecks?” asked my grandfather, his arms leaning across the handles of the shopping cart and pushing it forward in the supermarket. I said I didn’t. My grandfather was good at talking about foods, and eating them, he often waved his hands in the air to imitate the ways of cooking it, even though he never cooked. I allowed him to ramble for how long he wanted, and that was something I learnt. My mother had once scolded me for being inconsiderate, chopping off the lines my grandfather was saying when I was around nine years old. I could not withstand the boredom and chose not to listen, yet it seemed to be disrespectful. Although I never understood everything he said, I still listened and remembered as much as I could, because I knew that I would not be able to listen to it if he passed away one day, that was when I was in secondary school in 2017, a little older, a little more mature, and he had been diagnosed with cancer.

“Not only were there stone basses, but also cods and haddocks and halibuts and herrings and many more! Look at that,” he exuberantly indicated with his finger the types of fish laid on the ice of the fish counter, and enjoyed being the “food expert”. We stood there for exactly fifteen minutes. My grandmother was busily having her pick at the counter of oranges, choosing fifteen oranges and then ten out of the fifteen, and then taking five home, it was like an audition of oranges. I shot the salesman who oversaw the fish counter an

apologetic and embarrassed look, and the salesman became less infuriated as we were somehow obstructing others to have their pick.

“That’s your grandmother, picking oranges all day long until the sun rises from the east. But your grandmother married me in three months,” he managed not to giggle when he was trying to be humorous. I felt a little bit embarrassed, though I was giggling a little, because he was staging a drama in the supermarket, treating the other customers as the audience and making them listen to how ridiculous his wife was.

“Where are you? Come and pick the oranges!” my grandmother yelled at my grandfather from the opposite side of the supermarket.

“Coming, my queen!” he replied to her on the instant as he blinked an eye at me and strolled past the crowd to keep my grandmother from yelling.

There was another time in the same year of 2017 that I was strolling down the Ma On Shan Waterfront Promenade with him. Before going there he told me that he would be doing sports or stretching. However, his bag was very heavy and I couldn’t help asking what was in it. “There were oranges that we could eat later,” said my grandfather in a matter-of-fact tone. “Aren’t we supposed to stretch out or do some exercise? It’s like we’re having a picnic,” I said. “Well, stretching out was always something minor, but most importantly is to eat and feel the breeze...” he continued explaining. I humped his bag for him and I looked at him while he was stretching, pulling the rope that he brought from one side to another. He said that the rope was given to him from the doctor at the community clinic, and he believed in whatever the doctor told him about the boons of the rope. After all the stretching, he took some oranges out of his bag and started peeling them.

“Your grandmother chose them from the supermarket. Guess how long it took her to choose these out of the whole box of oranges? Three hours!” he exclaimed.

“Last time it took her four hours, she has improved,” I scoffed.

“You’ll have to try some of these since she picked them for three hours,” he peeled its skin with his hands and allowed the juice to drip over his fingers. I gave him a piece of tissue and ate some of the slices he gave me.

After finishing the oranges, he stooped down and picked up a fallen leaf from the ground. It was a habit of his, yet I didn’t know back then what was the purpose of picking up a leaf which might be bitten up and crawled upon by worms. “It could be used for bookmarks, silly!” he replied to my naïve question. The leaf was in its complete shape, green with a perfect symmetry, idiosyncratic. I squinted my eyes and checked for potential holes that the worms previously might have bitten up. Taking a piece of tissue, I wrapped it up and placed it into my bag after checking for holes. After this, he gave me some leaves as well, and they are now inserted into some books of mine. When I open the books, I can’t help but touch and feel the texture of the leaf, constantly sticking my nose to it and smelling nothing but the memories of the times with my grandfather.

My grandfather loved reading the newspaper and developed a habit of cutting out snippets of newspaper headlines or articles, sticking them into his scrapbook. Evidently, my mother inherited this habit from my grandfather and began cutting out newspaper about possible therapies of cancer. Not only did my grandfather take interest in politics, but also economics. His scrapbooks were quite messy, and bits and pieces would just jut out from the boundaries of the book. He took fancy in not just writing calligraphy, but also writing sequels or commentaries of the articles chosen. “The diplomatic relations of China and the US are getting tense...”, “The warships of China can help safeguard China’s sovereignty over the island...”, “The government should enact laws to protect children from domestic abuse” and “The working hours in Hong Kong are too long”, these were only some snippets of his comments on the news.

“Please take a look to check if there are any mistakes,” said my grandfather with a sober look, giving me his scrapbook of calligraphed commentaries written by him. It was the first day of the Chinese New Year holiday in 2018. I squinted at every single word, ready to pick out the mistakes.

“He is just fooling you around, silly! He wants you to read the whole thing,” said my grandmother, who was washing the vegetables in the sink at the kitchen. Watching my grandfather’s cunning smile that broke out from his previous sober look, I was glad that my grandfather had the sharp wit to joke with me. Paying reverence to my grandfather, I put down my books that I was studying and read the whole piece of commentary, feeling blissed at the fact that he made no mistakes in his writing. Not only was I glad that he had no Alzheimer’s disease, but also that he was capable for writing so long as he was only graduated from primary school. After he passed away, I took all his scrapbooks and placed it into a paper bag, taking it home with me. Taking him home with me.

I could still remember the moment of going to church with my grandfather during Easter in 2018. He was always sitting on the pews at the back of the hall, singing hymns. My grandfather was always the one who liked to shake hands or nod his head to others near the end of the worship.

“May the peace be with you!” said my grandfather, shaking another old man’s hand.

“May the peace be with you too, my brother,” the old man replied.

After church I accompanied my grandfather to a Chinese restaurant with his friends. While I was returning to the room where they were seated, I saw my grandfather stuff a one-hundred-dollar note into the pocket of an old friend of his, who was known to be impoverished. The penniless friend kept on rejecting my grandfather who was insisting to give him the bill. It was because all of them had to pay for their share for the meal. My grandfather knew that his friend had no money to pay for himself and stuffed him the note. I

could not see my grandfather's face as his back was faced towards me, watching the scene I saw his friend's face, his eyes gleaming with gratitude. Looking back and forth was my grandfather, I hid at the stacked up piles of chairs, and they returned to the room as if nothing had happened. Confirming that they had left the scene, I broke into a smile and returned to the room.

It was the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 2019. "Your mother called me. Your grandfather fainted this morning and he's in hospital now. Tonight might be his last night," my father messaged me on the phone. I just got off school and was standing at the school entrance amidst a crowd of students. Feeling the push from the back of the crowd, my feet were glued to the ground, unmoving. My hands turned cold and numb when I was holding my phone, my eyes were stuck onto the messages sent from my father. Our family including me, my mother, my father and my grandparents just went on an excursion to Japan in that year's summer. My grandfather was fine all the way, and there was no clue that he would faint and lose consciousness after four months. "We're on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor in the Prince of Wales Hospital, come here after school," that was my father's second message. I leapt from the staircase at the school entrance and ran to the bus stop, humping my bulky bag with me.

Sitting on the benches outside the medical ward in the Prince of Wales, my tears flowed out of my sockets, and I began sobbing incessantly under the dim yellow light casted upon me from the ceiling. I could not stand the composure and calmness that my mother managed to retain, her face was translucent of her underlying melancholy, yet she managed to put up a face to conceal her ambivalent emotions. Running to the toilet that was at the opposite side of the medical ward where my grandfather was lying, I slammed the door while my mother had kept up my pace and we were in the same pungent space of the lavatory altogether, caught up in the same fate. There was only the two of us.

I unleashed my undisciplined array of grief and mournfulness, crying in not just an audible voice but a cry that echoed in the universe. I am not exaggerating here because I wanted God to hear my voice. I felt rejected, defeated and forsaken by God. We had obeyed, submitted and subjugated to God as a typical Christian family. Why was hail falling upon us



and hitting us to death even though we were not Egyptians from the Ten Plagues? I remember that I complained vehemently in front of my mother, who acted like a saint even when she got the opportunity to defy and rebel against God like I did at that point. As a timid and inhibited girl, I broke through the barricades that shaped my dispositions and became a rebellious girl who asked myriads of questions, not questioning the reason why my grandfather was in the state that he was in but why God has forsaken us.

What my mother said just didn't help.

"I opened the Bible this morning and I turned to a page randomly. What I first had in sight was 'A time to be born, // And a time to die; // A time to plant, // And a time to pluck up what is planted.' I don't want to accept this either but that's what I saw today," she pretended in a matter-of-fact tone.

"It's just a random verse, mom," I nearly begged her to say something different.

"You know your grandfather's condition," she said with a great effort to retain composure.

"No, I don't! I didn't know he is going to die," I exclaimed.

"I didn't know either until this morning when he fainted and was taken to hospital," my mother was pushed to the verge of tears.

"Then what should we do?" my voice wobbled out of tune.

"Pray," my mother replied after a few seconds of contemplation.

“He’s not listening,” I refuted sternly.

“Yes, He is but in a different way,” my mother attempted to calm herself.

“Going to let him die? And see us cry? Is that so?” my voice became louder.

“Let’s just don’t discuss this,” my mother broke down and squatted on the floor, her face buried in her cupped hands.

My infuriation gushed to my head, and I felt my heart tearing apart, burning in helplessness. I could not concede nor resign this time as God was taking away something that was too valuable to be forgone. I prayed to God that my grandfather could live, and all I said afterwards was amen because I found myself without words. I took for granted that my grandfather would live and coexist with his tumor forever, or it might be because I was innocent when I was young and didn’t know that his cancer could have taken him away at any point in his life. However, the guilt of taking things for granted did not surpass the infuriation I had to God. All along I knew my grandfather had cancer since I was in primary school, but this moment was too abrupt to take him away.

Praying multiple times with the same lines over and over again outside the ward, I was aware that the clock was ticking, and three hours had passed. I wasn’t using my heart to pray as I always did, I was just mumbling the lines like chanting incantations. My heart was blocked with a knot of grudge and disbelief, feeling that God wasn’t there. No matter how long I prayed for my grandfather to be cured for all these years, the cancer just stuck with him and tormented him. No matter how long I prayed that recurrences of cancer would never happen, they still happened. No matter how hard I prayed that my grandfather could live, there was not a single piece of news from the doctor after three hours of incessant praying.

“We managed to save him from the critical stage for now and he would gain his consciousness back in a moment. However, I advise you all to be psychologically prepared that he would pass away in a couple of days or weeks,” the doctor reported to my grandmother. Four hours had passed and what I heard was that he was going to die. The color drained from my grandfather’s face, his eyes were half-closed as if the slits were dysfunctional, lying on the hospital bed in lethargy. When I returned home, I kneeled on my sofa, pressing my head against its leather and suppressing my breath. I prayed so hard that my tears extruded my closed eyes, and I kept returning to the flashback of his pale face in the hospital. Why wasn’t God listening? Why was God listening to my prayers for my exams and not for my grandfather’s life? Why should I even pray when I needed to forgo my false hopes? Why were my hopes false anyway? Couldn’t it come true?

However, the more I questioned, the more I thought about my mother’s “coincidental” read of that scripture, “And a time to die” from the Ecclesiastes of the Bible. Urging God to give me an answer, I heard nothing but this line whirling in my head. I knew that God had saved him countless times, ranging from the recurrences of cancer to this moment of emergency. He could have slept forever after he fainted. I was paralyzed by the reasonableness of the idea that my grandfather should live until I graduated from secondary school and university, until I got married and had my own children to be his great-grandchildren. Taking his health for granted during these seven years of his cancer, I dwelt on the deliberateness to shut myself from the cruelty that he would leave me one day. Hoping that he could witness my different stages of life, I neglected that he was going through his stages of life as well. Flashing back to the pale face of my grandfather, I couldn’t help but to prop up with another series of questions. What if my grandfather was suffering on the hospital bed, being intubated and swallowing sludgy care food? What if he felt terrible with his abdomen swollen because of his ruptured bowel? What if he continued to subsist but lost the freedom and liberation that was core to his dignity?

After cropping up with several questions, my heart was tangled into knots not only because of the premonition of my grandfather’s death, but also the warring tendency of relief provoked. At first, I was ashamed of my relief and doubted my own conscience. However, I found out that I never felt this way before praying to God, who seemed to help me perceive a

tragedy in different lens, and bestowing me faith and security that I would meet my grandfather again in Heaven. It would never be an eternal separation, but a temporary farewell until we meet again, taking up a different form than our mortal flesh and spirits renewed with unfading exuberance.

During the first few visits in early December 2019, I looked at my grandfather behind the walls of glass, where he could not see us, I saw the mist of his breath puffing and cleaning the surface of the transparent oxygen mask, yet his fragile body moved strenuously with his gas exchange. His hands were wrinkled with creases and small yet noticeable holes of past intravenous therapy. His legs and feet were swollen, his abdomen puffed up and his eyes were lethargic. I could see how his soul was entrapped in the physical manacles of his fading and immobile body which was dismantling owing to the day by day spread of cancer cells, like vines growing on walls and eventually uprooting its foundation. I didn't have the heart to see my grandfather living in a life-in-death situation, I prayed to God, "If you want to salvage him from suffering, please do according to your own will, not ours."

I didn't know whether God had heard and answered my prayers. Despite my grandfather was gradually falling apart, he managed to subsist a month longer than expected and predicted by the doctor. At first, he didn't even have the strength to open his eyes, yet he managed to speak a little in a very slow manner afterwards. As if God heard my complaint about taking him away on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November would bereave my faith forever, God gave him and us another month to be psychologically prepared. During December in 2019, my grandmother boiled some soup and poured it into a vacuum insulated steel flask for him, my mother and I pushed him around with the wheelchair in the garden, I massaged his hands and legs, read the Bible and some other books to him, told him about some recent news on TV. The doctor had said that my grandfather could have left us much earlier, blaming on our ignorance of sending him to the hospital late. His cancer cells had spread, and his bowel ruptured, yet he did not leave us immediately but subsisted for a month longer than expected, as if God knew that we would not be able to withstand the immediate grief of taking him away. He could have left us on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November, but he didn't. Until now, I still couldn't answer the question whether God had answered my prayers or not. However, I felt the knot of grudge held against God was loosened a little back then, he didn't snub my tears completely.

“Beep, beep, beep!” My grandfather’s eyes started to become lethargic, his body sank into a torpor of idleness, stiffly frozen and cold. I could still remember that it was the 21<sup>st</sup> of January 2020, four o’clock in the afternoon. His eyes stared straight into the ceiling above, his mouth agape with slight movement of the upper lip, trying to mouth some words but failed. His hands gripped my mother’s hand tightly and let go within a few seconds. When I saw how my grandfather’s vitals plummeted and heard how the vital signs monitor whined, I saw my grandfather’s eyes looking up towards the ceiling. There was a sense of tranquility in his eyes. I imagined that he saw God opening His arms, ready to embrace his tender soul.

We knew he could hear us, so we cried out our last words before letting him go, “We love you and we will live well”. Flooded with tears, my vision blurred, and tears trickled down my face. I couldn’t find any words but to grasp my grandfather’s hands. The icy-cold, rough and wrinkled hands spoke to me that he had gone, yet I warmed his hands with my sleeves. Finding this in vain, I warmed his chilly feet with my mildly warm hands, hastily rubbing them up and down. In deference to my beloved grandfather, I closed his half-opened slits of his eyes and whispered to his ears, “Rest in God’s peace”.

I could feel a gush of grief inundating my heart, which was tearing into pieces as I shrieked in my cries. However, when I saw how he looked into the ceiling, the gleam of hope in his eyes ensured and affirmed me that he was going somewhere, and God was waiting for him at the gates of Heaven. It was his gaze that unleashed me completely from my rage and grief that had suffocated me before, empowering me with a sense of security that this was not the end of everything, but marking the start of a new life above by relinquishing the physical manacles on Earth. The feeling of security was never a coincidence, never a shift of mindset, never optimism, never an illusion. It was God himself, being omnipresent. He never guaranteed to eradicate all suffering, but to grant peace that transcended all human understanding for man to straddle the dark, revealing His might.

Standing in the middle of the aisle in the mourning hall at my grandfather’s funeral, I stared at the words written on the cards that were attached onto the funeral sprays, they were

mostly “Rest in God’s Peace” and were sent to us from our family and friends. I felt a sudden sense of gratitude that warmed my heart. If he had not believed in Christ, who gave him peace despite facing death, he would have been cranky and insecure on his hospital bed. If he had not lived for another month before his death, his abrupt death would have traumatized us to abysmal depths. If I had not believed in Christ, I would not have written anything about my grandfather as I would still be gritting my teeth in grief, and I would not have acknowledged the miraculous seven years that he lived after being diagnosed with cancer, nor would I have thought that an extra month before his death was something to be thankful for. Smudging my tears onto my face, I walked down the aisle to the center of the mourning hall and went into the room behind my grandfather’s portrait, touching my grandfather’s suit that he wore in his wooden casket, and whispered to him for the very last time, “I love you”.