

Family motto

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My grandfather was but a teenager when he fled Hok Saan in order to escape the Japanese invasion. He kept on going south, past the grey smoke, gunpower, skies and land, until he reached the end of the continent where the British held the small island and the nearby lands. The Japanese kept pushing south and ended up taking over Hong Kong for three years and eight months. During that time my grandfather was stuck in a place away from home, witnessing atrocities, surviving. But there was a new world out there that he had never seen before. He had lived in the village up until now, and for the first time this is a home away from home. When the war was over, he went back to Hok Saan. But much to his family's surprise, he married my grandmother and decided to leave the village with her in tow. My great-grandfather was furious. This son is not the eldest, sure. But why go live in the territories of the white men? Why submit to the invaders? Why run? He was so furious, in fact, he said this to his son: "If you are leaving, leave. No matter how hard life turns out to be over there, don't turn tail and run back here. This is your choice and you shall walk until the end of this path you paved yourself." My grandfather therefore only went back to Hok Saan once, in his very last years in a wheelchair. His father already buried deep under, his relatives do not know him, his home from home now dilapidated beyond recognition. But it was a good life. He lived as a goldsmith, not poor, but certainly not a rich household. Hardships were endured, and yet he has his loving family, numerous sons and daughters. This home called Hong Kong thus became the new roots of our family.

My father, originally studied carpentry and metalworking, was unsure if he liked the life in front of him. Businesses were booming, sure, but living as a woodworker or better yet, an interior designer still does not seem speak to him well. The income is relatively low, and the work is tiring. He asked his brothers about his future, who are all adults and working at that point. The eldest brother, Uncle Wing, is a train operator for MTR. The other, Uncle Fat, a decorator. Perhaps it was Uncle Fat's suggestion, or Uncle Wing knowing his brother well, they suggested my father to try for the police force and enroll in the Police Academy in Wong Cheuk Haang. It was a weird suggestion in that era of Hong Kong. Corruption, bribery, rotten. These were the words that were synonymous with the police force during the sixties and seventies. ICAC would not be established until a few years later. My grandfather knew

how rotten and corrupt the police were, and when his eldest son suggested sending his youngest son to the Police Academy, he was naturally furious. No parent will hand their child willingly to the forces of evil. And yet my uncle must have finally convinced grandfather one way or another, in a way not even my father knew about, and at the end the old man allowed his son to enroll in Wong Cheuk Haang. Grudgingly.

But nobody told my father how grueling the Police Academy would be for the few years ahead. Foot drills by five in the morning. Five minutes of breakfast, and they trashed whatever could not be shoved into their mouths like a hamster into the bins. Classes for hours on end. Pistol firing exercises. Physical exercises. Cold water showers in a jam packed shower room. Insects. Crawlies. Packed bunk beds. Five to three hours of sleep. Wake and repeat. This shall continue on for five more years. My father bemoaned his choices. It was a not lie. He knew it was going to be years of hard work, but nothing could have prepared him for this almost army like lifestyle.

One night during summer, he vaulted the wired fence, caught the bus, and sneaked back to home in Tiu Keng Leng. For the first time in months the air of freedom filled his lungs, but also the air of shame. He ran. He turned back on his choices. When he opened the door to his loving home however, the first thing that welcomed him back was a slap to the face, and the angry grandfather shouting, throwing him back out to the hallways with the same sentence his father said to him long ago: “No matter how hard life turns out to be over there, don't turn tail and run back here. This is your choice and you shall walk until the end of this path you paved yourself.” My father watched as the door slammed shut in front of him. But as if the words of blame had empowering magic, his legs moved. He ran. Again, back to the bus station, back to the wired fence. The sun was rising over the hills, piercing the dark dusk, but the life he has now taught him how to be a man, with the air of shame expelled along with the searing slap on his cheeks.

The day DSE results were released I bolted straight to enroll in a Higher Diploma in Animation. I got poor marks, and the requirements were not reached for a proper Jupas entry anyways. Nobody would question my choices in going for something this niche. My family did, actually. It would be a world of unknown future especially in Hong Kong where the only viable jobs left for a “good” life are education, law, medical, and civil servants along with businesses. Art in this city are generally emphasized, but the truth is nobody would look upon

artists, especially ones without a stable income. Money is the only language people have in common. But after much deliberation, my father agreed to my plan. “It was your dream, so I will try to support it.”

Little did I know, animation is not inherently an art. It is a skill. Like all skills in the world, it is repetition, practice, and dull. The only moment it turns into art is only achieved after years and years of passion and trials. I had none. All my previous eighteen years were devoted to school, words, knowledge I would not use much, numbers and arithmetics and formulas that made no sense to me. Drawing is but a pipe dream that I envisioned, and animation was but a hobby of mine. There was no place for a green apple, especially not for a young adult now. I threw the stylus on the table, finally ending the last frames of work. It was the work of ugly, though coloured in by yours truly, I could not find enjoyment in the mediocre, bland, uninspiring work I locked myself into. The thought of quitting passed my mind time and over again, but the memory of my father repeating the motto over once more in my mind made me question myself. How much more can I escape my duties and not be a reliant human being? And yet I broke down. This path I chose for myself is of my doing, and my undoing. I talked to my father about quitting, and about the way forward. The surprising thing is, he expected it, and he let me quit there and then. It was mere weeks away before graduation, even though it was known I could not get a proper degree by then, and two years of blank history would exist on my resume going forward. But perhaps it was for the best.

Yet, whenever I think back on these series of incidents, from my great-grandfather, to my grandfather, to my father, and to me, I was lucky. So lucky in fact the chain of the motto was broken by my father. I do not think it was because my father was a victim of the motto, but rather he understood I will be the victim of the motto. The motto forged my grandfather and my father into responsible people. I too, think of myself as being responsible. Maybe sometimes a tad too much, but what is taking responsibility without the burden? And from these burdens we doubt our choices. We crack. I was but a fragile person, though the fragility was from so many cracks that came before. It honestly puts me to shame, knowing the people before me faced war, faced stress, faced the unpredictability of the future, and continued on with what life gave them, and I was there on the other side of the river, safe in a moat, but going nowhere.

If somehow, I got a son in the far future, I think I would still pass this motto down. In the form of written stories, that is. I sincerely was bored by my father's verbal rambling for hours on end. I do not know how far my imaginary son can walk on his chosen path, but if there is anything I learned from my family motto, it is not because we chose our paths, therefore we stay by our choices, but because we are willing by our choices, so we stay true to it until the end.

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04/11/2024