

Paper shoes

By: Marina Liu

Laoye...

The times I sat next to him on the living room couch watching the news and listening to him tell jokes in Mandarin. We would both crack up, even if the joke wasn't really that funny and even if the news on the television was rather grim. It was good to feel him chuckling alongside me, both of us nestled into the leather cushions, soaking up our mutual sense of belonging. He was my laoye and I was his sunnu.

Laoye...

Walking hand in hand around the park in early spring in Beijing with all the flowering cherry trees, he would point to a squirrel: "Hey look, your old man can still see the squirrels running up the trees!" I would just giggle: "Clearly you have better vision than an eagle!" Other days, in the heat of summer, he would complain about how hot the weather was, and I could see that he was getting old.

Laoye...

The last time I saw him was right before I left for America. His brown eyes shone. *How can I leave this lovely man?* I gave him a long hug. Maybe it was a few seconds. Or maybe it was a minute? Or perhaps hours long. That was our last hug in person. By that time, he could barely walk. He waved at me slowly, not like the kind of wave people do when they are really sad, but the kind of wave that people do when they are too tired to wave. My eyes filled. I did not know that was the last time I would see him. Now all I can do is hug his picture.

I remember the brown, wooden chair next to my favorite sofa. It was the chair he sat on all the time, watching tv. It even smelled like him, the sweet aroma of his lavender-scented cologne. I remember him reading the local news; even if he didn't really understand what was going on in the world, he would just scratch his head and nod. I remember him counting the round, wooden beads of his mala, in Chinese. Sometimes he would go from 20 to 25; it made me giggle. The 108 beads on a mala, a Buddhist prayer bracelet, help guide people, bead by bead, through their journey of life. The heart chakra is said to be the convergence of 108 lines of energy. My *laoye* himself was a convergence of energy. So much love. Now I just look at the chair across from the sofa. It feels wrong to be here without him sitting on it. All that's left is the remembrance of this sweet, lavender-smelling man.

It's hard to live without him. But what I know for sure is that *he is still here, just in another universe*. He lives in me, my mom, my brother and sister. Sometimes, it feels like nothing ever changed. Somewhere, we are together again on the couch, watching tv, giggling at my jokes.

It was a snowy day in Killington, Vermont. I had just woken up and realized that something was wrong. There was a deathly silence in the hotel room. I stood as still as a rock, afraid to move. *Is it because my dad's leaving for China in a month? What else could be wrong?*

Trusting my instincts, I ran over to my dad who was standing near the master bedroom, and hugged him tight. He looked down at me and whispered, “你的姥爷走了。”

My grandfather had passed.

I had guessed wrong. I was wrong. I was wrong about everything, my instincts were wrong, everything was wrong! I looked from my dad to my mom and instinctively went to her.

“Everything’s going to be alright. If we stick together, then everything is going to be just fine.” Her eyes shined like stars. She swallowed hard. How could she be so strong and tough and not let anything get in her way? Her father had just passed away! My mom is the strongest person ever. It was her father, the person who raised her, the person who comforted her when she was still a child – how could she be comforting me in this moment? And stay so calm?

Now when I look at my grandpa’s picture I wonder how a healthy man could have died. If it weren’t for Covid, maybe my laoye would still be here.

Death.

We were still thinking about it four months later when we celebrated my laoye on April 5th, 2023, during the Qing Ming festival. It is a day in Chinese culture set aside to mourn our loved ones who have passed by throwing paper replicas of the things that symbolized their life into a big bonfire. When the day came, my mom came home with a huge bag of paper items: shoes, money, picture frames, food, symbolizing family, security, sustenance and happiness.

Outside on the patio, I watched my dad and my brother place twigs, one by one, inside a circle that would soon turn to fire. It felt like every twig placed on the pile ripped my heart to pieces. Love is its own torture, and losing someone you love can shatter you. Then my brother lit the fire. As I watched the flames grow bigger and bigger, I pictured my laoye in heaven.

Now six months later, sometimes I look at the sun and think to myself, maybe we’re looking at the same sun, maybe somewhere in heaven, he is looking down at me proudly. *My dearest laoye, I want you to know that I am working hard at school and getting better grades. Did you see me at Tri-state championships this year? I went from fourth place to first! You should have been there!* Even though he can no longer answer, I smile to him and know that somewhere he is still listening, chuckling alongside me and smiling back.