

## **A Letter to Nainai**

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Dear Nainai,

When I think of you, the first thing that comes to mind is that time last year, when Mom and Dad were both away on overnight business trips, and you came over to our house to drop off a large Pyrex bowl full of nuomifan 糯米饭, or sticky rice. I rushed over to you, quickly grabbed the bowl, and placed it in the microwave. My little sister, hearing that you had arrived, rushed out from our bedroom to review what you had brought, before grumpily declaring, "I hate nuomifan!" You responded by smiling warmly and patiently explaining to her that you had brought nuomifan because you knew that it was one of my favorite foods. With my little sister being a picky eater, it's not often that anyone acknowledges my own opinions on food, so I really appreciated that you knew that I loved nuomifan and took the time to make it for me.

Beyond just being an awesome grandma, you are one of the bravest people I know. You spent your childhood living with the realities of war. Shortly before you turned two, war broke out between China and Japan, and your family fled from its home in Nanchang to the wartime capital of Chongqing. I remember Dad telling me about how, as a little girl, you returned from the bomb shelter after a Japanese raid to find your home completely leveled. I can't imagine how I would react to that! Before you could even fully celebrate the end of World War II, the Chinese Civil War forced your family to move from Mainland China to Taiwan to escape the advancing Communist troops. It's hard for me to believe that when you were my age, as a teenager in Taipei, you dealt with the constant threat of invasion, living under martial law, and the tensions of a society struggling to adapt to the sudden influx of 2 million refugees from Mainland China. Then, after college, you left your home in Taiwan and flew across the globe to America for the dream of a better life in a new place. You arrived in California in the early 1960s with nothing, stranded in a new world where the only contact you had -- a family friend that your father sent

you to stay with -- was a stranger. However, you persevered because you were confident that no matter the challenges, you were journeying to a better future.

From California, you had to travel by bus to the East Coast, where you would start graduate school. You bravely approached the imposing, reflectively coated, metal bus at the Greyhound station, ready to travel nearly 3,000 miles from California to Florida, across completely unfamiliar territory -- and through some states where racial segregation laws were then still on the books. I would be utterly terrified riding a bus alone, even with the aid of my smartphone to show me where I was going, but you dauntlessly sallied forth, in a country whose language you could barely comprehend.

Your sacrifice was rewarded with attendance at a graduate school that you loved, Virginia Polytechnic University, a school with an environment full of new people. You told me how meeting all these people, most of whom were nothing like the people you had grown up with, only made you excited. You talked to me about the friends you made at Virginia Tech, all of whom had such different personalities. You shared how the only way you were able to communicate with your parents was through letters that only came once a month and could only contain so much information. I may act like a stereotypical, rebellious teen sometimes, but even I wouldn't be able to be away from my family for so long with such infrequent interactions. I don't know how you did it, how you came to an entirely different country with entirely new people and stayed so content with your life. When I asked you, you said that this had always been your dream. Getting the opportunity to earn a graduate degree in America was something you had aspired to for almost as long as you could remember. But as with many stories in life, this one didn't have an entirely happy ending. You told me about how you ran out of money and were forced to leave your studies to take on a full-time job. However, you took it in stride, getting a job in a lab first at Johns Hopkins University and then at North Carolina State University, where you spent most of your career. Even though you couldn't keep living out your graduate school dream, you were thrilled to still be in America, somewhere you could live life to its fullest.

Having lived in California my whole life, sometimes I forget that not every community is one-third Asian American. I forget that there are people who aren't as accepting of everyone. I forget that you lived most of your life in a place where and during a time when diversity and inclusion were not as celebrated as they are here. But I don't think that you've ever let discrimination embitter you. When I asked you if there were any examples of people not treating you the same because of your accent or your race, you said you couldn't remember any negative incidents and that "Americans" were perfectly nice to you all the time. When I asked Dad about his childhood, he mentioned a whole list's worth of different instances when he experienced racism. But you chose to put these types of events out of your mind, preferring to focus on the positive. I don't know how you did it, being a Chinese American, immigrant woman in the South in the decades during and after the Civil Rights Movement. But not only did you survive in a world that told you that you didn't belong, you thrived.

As privileged as I feel to have your trailblazing example always in my mind, along with that example comes the underlying pressure to live up to the standard you set. When I was walking the dog with Dad the other night, he mentioned how you looked down on some of the colleges my older brother is considering applying to. My brother was understandably upset, since he didn't think it was fair to expect that we would only go to a top 25 school. I understand why you feel this way; compared to what you went through, my and my siblings' lives are easy, since all we have to do is to get good grades and test scores so we can get into good colleges. We don't have the same financial constraints that you did, and because of the foundation you and our parents laid, we have access to a variety of resources and opportunities. But it's important for me to know that you're proud of me, and I'm just scared that if I don't get into the right college, you might not think of me the same way as you do now. As much as it is nice having someone looking out for my future interests, it's also stressful, especially when I fear I won't meet those expectations.

I am so lucky to have you as my nainai. I appreciate it when you teach me to cook

traditional Chinese food, when you help me improve my American-accented Chinese, and when you come over to help out when Mom and Dad are out of town. I'm very grateful that you moved to California after more than half a century in North Carolina so you could be closer to me and my siblings. I'm impressed by everything you accomplished as both an attentive mom (and grandma) and a working professional. I hope that you take the time to appreciate my concerns because I love you and value our relationship. But I also want you to know that I am encouraged by the knowledge that you are always supportive of me, and I know that you only want me to have a life that is as full and rewarding as yours has been.

Love,

Bethany