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Dear 嬷嬷,

I've written to you before, on your birthday card— in Chinese of course. You couldn't read it otherwise. But I've never written a postcard, or a letter to you. Maybe it's because I don't travel as much as Marisa and Melinda. We see each other often. I refill your medicine on Wednesdays, talk with Dad to make sure you have enough Furosemide for the next week. I'm supposed to massage you each night, but I haven't been the best at that, I admit, much to 姐姐's chagrin. She expects me to do it nightly, so I assume she wants me to visit everyday, which I know you wouldn't complain about (your favoritism is pretty obvious, mama).

That's difficult to do though, now. My schedule is packed, and I tend to change into my pajamas and curl up in bed as soon as I come home. It's hard to pull myself out and visit you, even though you're only five or so blocks away. I can't imagine how we managed to visit you everyday pre-quarantine. Is it me who's changed?

I have my own life now. I take public transport all over the city, and am involved in the dual enrollment program for SFUSD & CCSF. I've gotten better at taking time for myself. But you still feel like my responsibility.

I know 姐姐 thinks that way. She expects me to make the same sacrifices she had to make— is making right now. She practically spends half her time down here in SF, a four to five hour drive from her home in Auburn. It's hard to upkeep her own house when she's away from there so often. I've heard her talk about golf competitions she's had to miss, or hangouts with friends.

There's no right answer here, but she's managing it better now— I think. She goes out with friends, communicates— we even played Banagrams together. It's still a sacrifice, though. And I'm thankful for her help with you, but that doesn't necessarily mean I should have to follow in her footsteps. At least more than I already am. Breaking the cycle— isn't that what it's called?

It all comes back to childhood, in the end. Although Dad's side of the family— you included, 麻麻— are famous for dodging emotional reckoning and tough topics, I've managed to piece together rough pictures of your children's childhoods. Some of it you might know, most I think you don't. You were busy, working two dead-end jobs. Another situation with no right answer. And you had your own stuff going on. Not that either of those things are an excuse, but life was hard for you. But it was hard for your children, too.

Sometimes it's hard to see outside the sphere of our own hurt and trauma.

Mama, I love you, but I'm glad you aren't my mom.

Still, your kids love you. Alright, I'm not sure about 叔叔, but he does take your blood pressure everyday— even though it's never at a regular time, which 姐姐 always harps about. (She has points, it does change the outcome and it is better to do it at a regular time— but he does it, and that's an accomplishment in and of itself, considering how he struggles to take care of his own body.)

They also all have their issues with you, that don't seem to be going away any time soon.

But this letter isn't for them. This letter is for you, although I know you'll never read it.

Because, 嬷嬷, your 90th birthday is coming soon, and there's still so many unanswered questions I have this family. They can pretty much all be summed up with this one question:

What Happened to You?

Because we got that generational trauma bad, 嬷嬷, all of us. And it's ironic— I know more about 爷爷's past, his parents, his trauma, then I do yours— and he's six feet in the ground, while you sit next to me, only a few feet away. Thank god for those immigration papers and refugee documents, although I mourn the letters you threw away. But I have managed to piece together bits of your life, even asked you straight on about some of them.

I know you say I'm young, and it's no good to think about the past and the challenges you had to face. But it's important to know where you came from, especially as I navigate the framework of this generational trauma. And I've always been a curious child.

I would recount the events of your life, and all the questions I have, but that's too long a story for this letter. And it feels disingenuous, typing this in English. My words fail me when I try to speak to you in Cantonese. This is the only way I know how.

Your 90th birthday is coming up, and as your memory gets worse, I am afraid I am losing the opportunity to get to know your side of the story.

Please. Talk to me. Don't let your story be another unanswered question in my life.

Your grandchild,

Micheal