

Grandma Has to Go

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Going to Jones Beach, my mom's new Honda Accord found its way into a sandy ditch off Ocean Parkway. My mother didn't make a wrong turn, she certainly didn't veer off the side of the road, and she definitely wasn't distracted by her mother who bickered with her in the front seat. It just happened. You know, with the sand scattered everywhere, it was quite hard to tell exactly where the shoulder ended and the ditch began. Mom explained this to a state trooper who pulled over when he couldn't help but notice a pristine white car protruding out of some barren ditch, which happened to belong to a local private beach.

As the adults exchanged confused looks and excuses, I quietly sat in the backseat with my childhood best friend Krissy. We had known each other since we were two years old, which felt like a considerable amount of time at the age of ten. We met at a local sandbox, complimented each other's digging tools, and babbled on for hours. A toddler relationship cliché, I know, but we had so much in common. Both of us were named Kristen, thankfully we both had nicknames, and when her nanny and my Grandma Connie strolled us out of the park, we discovered that we even lived in the same building. As best friends and neighbors, Krissy and I grew up together and saw a fair amount of each other's family. However, our closeness didn't stop me from feeling mortified by the fact that my mom had unwittingly trapped us in a ditch. While I knew Krissy could handle the wait time for the tow truck, my primary concern was protecting her from Grandma. A ticking time bomb disguised as a harmless elderly Asian woman in the passenger seat.

"*Cincha! Kailangan ko ng isang tae.*" I knew enough Tagalog to understand Grandma Connie's alarming yet fundamental matter at hand. "Cynthia! I need to take a shit," she told her daughter. Mind you, that was the exact translation. Not "use the bathroom" or "go number two." Grandma did not believe in the pleasantries of euphemisms. My mom yelled at her for her inopportune timing, and my grandmother yelled back as she defended the spontaneity of sixty-six-year-old bodily functions. Meanwhile, I fidgeted in the backseat as I prayed for Krissy's ears and my own dignity that their heated discussion wouldn't switch to English. After a few loud exchanges, Mom pulled over on the side of the road by what she hoped was a public toilet. Instead she realized there was no bathroom, and her car was stuck in sand without four-wheel drive. It was the story the state trooper would never hear because both my mother and I tried our best to quarantine any sort of humiliation Grandma caused.

Whenever she was out in public, I lived with both the fear and expectation that Grandma Connie would somehow embarrass us. The woman was ambivalent as to when social decorum was necessary. "It's because she's from the province," my mom would say. Most of our family was from the Philippines's capital city of Manila, but Grandma was from a provincial area in the Visayas. Free of exaggeration and hyperbole, Mom would tell me stories about my grandmother's childhood and how she'd run from Japanese soldiers, shepherd groups of carabao, and wear a rice sack as clothing. Her upbringing made her more concerned with survival rather than etiquette. However, none of those stories about the foreign countryside ever gained my sympathy as an American child. I was more concerned with my image and the embarrassment she caused. I was ashamed of my fresh-off-the-boat Filipina grandmother.

Whenever Grandma Connie used her tongue to pry food from between her teeth, I became accustomed to the relentless sucking sound she made. Customers on line at our local Starbucks were not. The sound was more than audible as she tried her hardest to free the piece of ground beef or fried pork or boiled fish or whatever it was. When she finally managed to get it, she didn't think twice before spitting it out and launching that sucker into midair. The colorless morsel landed on a prepackaged humus platter in front of her and several other patrons who had just lost their appetites. After Mom put in her order, she maintained a polite smile while chastising Grandma in a quiet yet stern voice. It was the one she often used whenever she wanted to scold me while acting completely natural to spectators. Grandma shrugged off an apology. What did her daughter expect her to do — wait for floss to appear?

My grandmother didn't care for the parts of American culture that revolved around niceties and formalities. But, what she did value and share with Americans was her undying love for money. Cash ruled everything around Grandma Connie, which was why she never let one dollar go to waste. At a jewelry counter in Macy's, she pointed to a pair of white-gold diamond earrings and asked the sales associate for the price while repeatedly tapping her finger on the glass. The young blond woman told her how much they were and was humored when this quirky foreign woman began to haggle with her. I wanted to shake her out of complacency, "Tell the old lady 'NO!' How does she get away with this? Do you have any idea how embarrassing this is for me?" Instead, I watched helplessly as Grandma Connie treated this white woman like any other Filipina vendor in the middle of Divisoria Market. With their negotiations going nowhere, Grandma walked away saying a single phrase that suited her, "Too much." Back home, she told me American jewelry was overpriced and that her stuff was just as good. She revealed a small red zippered pouch and emptied its contents onto our dining table. I poked and prodded at her own white-gold diamond earrings, 24-karat bracelets, a few rings, and the occasional silver accessory. The details of her inventory, its origin, her suppliers, and overall knowledge about jewelry remain to be a mystery. When I asked my mom for details, she didn't say much. Just that Grandma had always been a hustler

and developed a knack for that sort of thing. I seemed to be the only one in our family who was concerned with formalities.

The best I could do was ignore my grandmother's antics, which proved to be more difficult than one would think. Unlike her actions in public, all bets were off when she was around family. Almost every year, she'd fly from the Philippines to live with mom and me for a few months while making her rounds and visiting relatives in the States. Although my mom found it helpful to have someone watch me while she worked the night shift, Grandma Connie's presence came with certain consequences. For starters, my daily schedule was reduced to nothing but food. Grandma's maternal concerns revolved around what I've eaten, what I'm eating, and what I will eat. Every morning she'd announced herself with the same demand for me to follow, "KC! You eat." Her limited English left her with curt phrases that skipped the minutiae of "Good morning!", "How did you sleep?", and "Would you like some breakfast?" But as a child, I so badly yearned for the normalcy of American niceties and pleasantries. I wanted a typical white grandmother who wore an apron and oven mitts as she took homemade chocolate chip cookies out of the oven. Instead, I got a Filipina grandmother who wore a tropical print duster (or what Americans affectionately call a "muumuu") as she plopped a slice of torta onto a Styrofoam plate for me. While I grumbled over my ground beef omelet, Grandma Connie would shuffle to the bathroom to do her business. She'd hike up her duster — not once she got into the bathroom and closed the door, which she never did either — but on her way there. This ensured that I'd kick off my day with a view of her granny panties and maybe even a glimpse of her elderly butt.

When the tow truck arrived, Mom got out of the car to handle the logistics which left Krissy and I in the car alone with Grandma Connie. I feared for Krissy's innocence and thought of all the ways Grandma could embarrass me. My mind immediately went to a Black comment. From the comfort of her folded beach chair, she would typically scold me for tanning too much and tell me to sit beneath an umbrella. Otherwise I'd become — oh dear God, wait for it — Black! My best friend's ethnicity made her a prime target for a slip of the old-world racist tongue. But, it seemed unlikely as Grandma was too preoccupied with her need to go to the bathroom. I then considered her inability to control her urges and announcing her bodily functions in English. Due to her limited vocabulary, I imagined it coming out as, "I need to poo poo now!" or "I'm going to shit right here!" I even contemplated the possibility of her defecating in the front seat while shrugging off an apology and not understanding what she could have possibly done differently. Then, Grandma Connie turned around to speak to us from the front seat. I held my breath for the inescapable embarrassment that awaited. I begged from the depths of my adolescent brain, "Take me! Take me! Krissy doesn't deserve this!"

"You drink. Very hot," she said as she handed us bottled waters. Wrapped up in my concerns for shame, I barely thought about the sweltering heat in the middle of a New York

City summer and the fact that my guest must be dehydrated. But Grandma Connie never lost sight of us. What she lacked in courtesy and presentation, she made up for in quick thinking and maternal instincts. Because as much as she needed to relieve herself, my grandmother was still focused on her primary role in life, which was a mother who took care of her young. But while watching us gulp down the water, she took it a step too far as she motioned toward our prepacked beach snacks saying, "Your friend big girl. You two eat!"

My grandmother's grammatically incorrect words hung in the overwhelmingly dense air. I knew this moment would come, and yet I had no idea what to say. Neither did Krissy. She was stunned silent as she stared at the old woman in disbelief while wondering exactly how offended she should be. I replied to my grandmother with a quiet yet stern, "Not hungry," as to avoid drawing more attention to her insult. She returned back to her seat, and because she refused to wear her hearing aid, she didn't have to hear or deal with Krissy's reaction.

"Did Grandma Connie just call me fat?" she asked.

"I'm so sorry," I pleaded, "She doesn't mean it. She just says things and..." Before I could continue, my mom signaled for everyone to get out of the car so the tow truck could yank us out. Salvation came in the form of a hook and chain that day as it saved my mom's car, distracted Krissy from a mindless comment, and helped get Grandma to a bathroom.

As soon as the tow truck left, Mom went back to shouting at her mother in Tagalog as she complained about her \$300 worth of shit. It didn't help when Grandma Connie revealed that, amidst the commotion of state troopers and tow trucks, she was literally scared shitless and lost the urge to go. Their tirade came to an end once we finally arrived at the beach. When our feet touched the sand, all of us were silently committed to salvaging the remaining hours of daylight and making the most of our little beach trip that we could. While Krissy and I built sandcastles beneath the umbrella, my grandmother got up from her foldable chair and silently walked toward the ocean. With no announcement, she headed toward the sound of crashing waves ready to immerse herself as the sun began to set on the horizon. She laughed as the cool, crisp water hit the sand and rolled up to the very tips of her toes only to cower back toward the ocean. Then, without an ounce of fear or pretense, Grandma Connie lowered her shorts revealing her underwear as she walked toward the abyss. I looked at Krissy to gauge her reaction. "Your grandma is nuts," she laughed. I was relieved by her amusement. Then I laughed, and together we couldn't help but watch. We stared at the old and fearless woman as she walked toward the waves. And while I was fairly certain Grandma was peeing in the ocean, I couldn't quite bring myself to imagine her doing anything more than that.