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My Grandmother is Dying, and No One is Talking About It

in fact, none of us are talking at all: a case study of filial piety and authority

by hsz

Today, I am not speaking to my mother. She, on the other hand, is speaking to me. She came into the TV room, where I slept on the couch, and asked me where her credit card was. I told her, I don't have it: she took it yesterday morning when she took my grandmother to the hospital. She didn't believe me: what did I use to pay for those gifts, then, the ones that caused this whole dispute in the first place? It was my own money, I said. She checks her bag again—finds the card, resigned, says nothing else, leaves. She's not allowed to apologize to me. It isn't what we know. No one ever apologized to her, after all.

The thing is that my grandmother is dying and we're not talking about it. If you don't believe the universe's will can be bent, then you have never attempted to keep an eighty-five-year-old Chinese woman alive. The entire house—heavy, ghostly house—is ablaze with frenetic, panicked energy: intent on beating death back at all costs. Day after day, we leave all our problems behind to focus on our war effort. I cannot bring inside my mental illness, or my recent heartbreaks, or my politics. We are required to be selfless, which is difficult, and only makes us all the more selfish. Filial piety requires us to be loyal to our elders, to be respectful. Take this as the defining rule. I have flaunted and broken it in every possible way—checked all the boxes of bad daughter. I am not respectful to my mother the way she is respectful to hers. She does not understand how her mother is dying, and I do not understand how my mother is dying, and I do not understand how my mother can cast aside her own issues—but maybe it's the easiest thing to do. There is no path, even in such a hierarchical scheme, towards getting love. Never taught to understand the limitations of emotional labor, we are all drowning in unresolved pain—maybe some that was not ours to feel in the first place.

What caused my mother and I to fight: I slept all day, to begin with, and that was a bad start. If I wanted to sleep, I should have stayed home, she told me. I could not get my body to leave the bed, because it hurt and I hurt and I felt everything. When I got up, I did not want to leave. When I left the house, it was sunset, and I was dazed. My

mother asked me if I had purchased the gifts she wanted. I said, no, I have just now left the house. She was disappointed: she had a long and hard day, and I was getting to do the easy and fun stuff—was it so hard for me to complete one simple task? How disappointing—I better not argue with her. Instead of doing what I was required to do, which was to say, I'm sorry, I'm getting those gifts now, I'm sorry to have added another stress to your day, I did not. I said, *why do you think this is easy for me?*

Fatal mistake. The thing is, I'd still do whatever my mother asked, the same way she will do whatever her mother asks.

Filial piety does not understand the concept of emotional labor—take that as your defining rule number two. Filial piety is all about burden, in fact, it requires us to take on so much emotional labor that it ruins us. There is no such thing as saying no, or saying that you cannot take any more. Instead, break your back. This is what family does.

From the mall, I took a car up to 9th and Irving and pretended to enjoy the conversation I had with the driver. I bought the gifts my mother wanted. I walked to the edge of the park and contemplated for a long time, riding the bus down to the ocean. A fantasy of being weightless, of

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being fog. I boarded the bus and rode it home and I did not speak to my mother. What is important: my mother's idea of an apology is to act as if nothing happened. There are never words involved—there's no such thing as being wrong. When I make a mistake, my instinct is to look for ways that it wasn't my fault. This is what we do. If you question that rule, you will fall into self-despair—because if something is your fault, it means you aren't good enough, or you didn't do it right, or you failed. My mother tried to talk to me normally, once she'd seen I'd purchased the gifts, but I did not speak to her. That is how I broke the rules. I ignored her, and I brought my grandmother her medicine and her apron and ate with her upstairs in front of the TV in some attempt to say that, I may not be a good daughter, but I am trying hard to be a good granddaughter.

If ever there was a case study for how emotional labor goes unpaid, look here.

The consequence of these rules: you will seek the validation you will never receive. If ever there was a case study for how emotional labor goes unpaid, look here. We receive nothing for our efforts, and we should expect nothing for our efforts (of course, we all secretly do. We all crave that someone will praise us, thank us, tell us to rest). Keep trying, though—so obvious it's painful. Squash others down in this unattainable goal. Fight brutally, cheaply, bitterly, to be the person doing the least damage.

My grandmother is dying, but no one is talking about it. Also dying: my mother, my aunt, my grandfather, my uncle. Further on this list: all of us. We do not discuss—we make vague euphemisms, or we share meaningful looks. We let our sentences dangle off into dangerous interstitial spaces. All bound to this contract, this filial mania, we do not deal with the inevitable head-on. When my grandmother dies, my heart will break again, but I will place it aside so that I may hold my mother's heart instead. This is what good daughters do.

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Für unseren Aufenthalt in Serbien
hatten wir bei der Verleihfirma ein
Auto vorreserviert. Als ich und mei-
ne Freundin schliesslich dort an-
kommen und nach dem Auto fra-
gen, scheint der Angestellte auf
eine dritte (männliche?) Person zu
warten. Als er realisiert, dass es bei
uns zwei bleiben wird, mustert er
mich kurz. «You are the driver? For
you I have an automatic.»
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