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Bay Alarm Medical Scholarship Entry 2016

“May 24th.” This is the fifth time I’ve said this.

It was a dry February day that made Grandpa’s house a bit too warm for comfort, a hot ninety-plus degrees outside--typical California weather. There was a lot of shuffling and wheezing until Grandpa asked again, “When is your graduation date, sweetheart?” I sighed. “May 24th,” I said again.

My grandparents used to know me like the backs of their hands. Ever since I was an infant, they babysat me while my parents went to work. They knew my nap times, my favorite foods, and would often sing my favorite lullabies. I wish I could say I know them the same way.

I’m older now and my grandparents don’t spend as much time with me as they used to. It is in occasional visits like these that I try to tell them what’s going on with my life, as I moved from middle school to high school to college in five years, while they have been doing the old typical grandparent things for the past twenty. I used to think my grandparents were immortal and that they’ve always looked old, but I notice the details now. They look *older* than old. My grandpa’s hair is falling off, his frame is getting thin. There were random patches of black hair from when he used to dye it, but now he looks like a bald snowman. Those wrinkles that hold over eighty years of experience set in deeper.

Those wrinkles. They sat upon skin that existed before World War II, and are still here, moving up and down as Grandpa tries to orient his iPad. Imprints of farming life, a war, and a family life with eight children are wrapped up all in that little man I call “Ong Ngoai.” He’s three inches shorter and thirty pounds lighter, but wisdom-wise? Infinitely larger. “When is your graduation date, sweetheart?” He smiles, wrinkles there too. “May 24th,” I replied. I know he’ll ask again in five minutes.

It doesn’t take much to make him smile. He asks me to visit whenever I can, and smiles even before I park the car. He smiles when he peels me a banana, when he waters his plants, when he sings his hymns. Compared to me, he never needs much to feel excited and happy. After raising his eight kids, and watching those eight kids raise their own kids, I think he feels generally at peace. There isn’t anything to chase after anymore. What do the rest of us feel like we need to accomplish? College. Work. House. Car. Grandpa never had those, but still, he feels peace. I think that’s the biggest lesson I learned from him--how to find contentment in a hectic world.

It’s not just him. Friends’ grandparents, older mentors, teachers, folks at the nursing home can all teach the younger generation a thing or two. Viewing life from their perspective is so radically different, it’s like a reality check. Working with seniors inspires me constantly. With them, time slows down. They are living life to the fullest without the chase of a material item or some idea

to find what's *enough*. Later on, *enough* may never be reached. It always changes to fit a newer standard, once you realize *enough* was never really *enough*. And seniors understand that; they've lived through it.

I visit my grandparents very much, or at least, a lot less than I probably should. There's always a math test to study for, a textbook to read, an essay to finish... But when I go to my grandparents' house, time stands still. I'm four years old again and Barney is playing on TV. An orange is already peeled for me on the table. All the stuff that I've been busy with loses meaning when I'm with my grandparents.

As I've grown older, it's a shame that I've lost significant knowledge of my native language. I view seniors as comparable to a treasure chest, filled with countless stories with lessons that can only be gained through experience. I used to view Grandpa as someone who was just a grandpa his whole life, like maybe he was born wrinkly and white-haired and a particular taste for gospel music. Now he's another person who I'd like to get to know better. What was it like growing up in the fields? What did you think of on your wedding night? How was life during the war? Honestly I'm interested in any of the answers from other elders, but hearing the story of my grandpa, just thinking about how it could've changed the existences of everyone I've known, makes it personal. I strongly encourage kids my age to interact with seniors because they are exceptionally valuable in wisdom and knowledge. Who's there that's better to get advice from than a primary source? Even if it's an hour a week, a bond will be created that's invaluable.

"Ong Ngoai... I'm going to college in a few months. It's a 4-hour drive," I say, raising my voice so he could hear me. He turns his head. "What? When is your graduation day, sweetheart? You are getting so big and leaving me and Grandma behind."

I smile. "Actually, can you sing that lullaby again?"