



Good Read

A Change of Heart

WHEN HER ADOPTIVE GRANDMA USED A RACIAL SLUR, NICOLE CHUNG WAS CRUSHED. BUT OVER TIME, THE WOMEN WOULD FIND COMMON GROUND.

I WAS 12, MAYBE 13, WHEN I SHOWED my grandmother how to use her first computer, opening a window so she could type a letter to a friend back in Ohio. "It's easier than using your electric typewriter," I said. I watched as she typed the first few sentences, pointing out the backspace key when she made a mistake.

"The kids thought it was time I got with the times so they bought me this computer," she wrote. "I'll give it a try. My granddaughter is helping me. She is Grandma's girl. I can do no wrong."

As her only local grandchild, I was the one Grandma knew best, the one she spoiled most. She took me shopping



Photographs by Brian Henn

CHILDHOOD PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF NICOLE CHUNG



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and cooked my favorite foods, just like any grandmother, but she also taught me how to roller-skate, plant a garden, can peaches and green beans, ride a bicycle, bait a hook, belt out showtunes with gusto. She loved adventure and encouraged me to run free in her neighborhood at the base of the mountains, in the woods we both loved, over sand dunes on the Oregon coast. Strange things always seemed to happen when I was with her—like the time I got lost at the marina and the coast guard found me, or the time the tide stole our boat away while we hunted for clams on a sandy bank and we were stranded until some friendly fishermen brought it back to us. One evening, when we saw two teenage boys fishing crabs right out of the crashing high-tide surf, she grabbed my hand and hauled me into the waves up to my waist, then up to my chest, and soon we had our own sack filled with Dungeness crabs she had plucked out of the ocean. “I knew it would work,” Grandma told me as we walked up the beach. “You have to know about the phases of the moon, you see? The tides were on our side tonight.”

If I didn’t adore her so much, if we hadn’t been so close, maybe I wouldn’t have flinched that one evening, after showing her how to use her computer, when I heard her say the word “Jap.” “You shouldn’t say that,” I said immediately, without thinking.

Silence fell at the dinner table. I’d interrupted one of Grandma’s stories about her life during World War II. She often broke down during these accounts, especially when she talked about the years my grandfather had spent fighting far from home. She had spent the war years with her

aunt and uncle in Seattle, working during the day, dancing at the USO at night, trying not to think about the possible Japanese threat to the West Coast.

“They were the enemy, Nicole,” Grandma said.

“It was war,” my father added.

My mother pointed out that I wasn’t Japanese. “You know, Japanese and Korean people don’t even like each other.”

Had anyone in my adoptive family ever used an Asian slur in my presence? I couldn’t be sure. As a preteen, I was newly aware of some of the ways my perspective differed from that of my adoptive white relatives. We rarely discussed race. With their distant Eastern European and Scandinavian and more recent blue-collar Ohio roots, my parents and grandparents gave me a proximity to whiteness we all took for granted: Though I was born to Korean parents, I had been with my adoptive family since I was 2½ months old, and I believe they often thought of me as white—just like them.

But at school, my differences couldn’t be overlooked. My grade-school classmates called me names, adopted fake Asian accents, pretended they couldn’t understand me. “Speak English!” they’d shout. That word my grandmother had used reminded me of so many other words I’d heard at school, on the playground, at the bus stop, thrown my way by white kids I had known for years.

I knew Grandma didn’t associate those terms with me. I didn’t want to associate them with her. But I didn’t yet have the ability to speak eloquently about how they were used to dehumanize people, justify cruelty and violence. I could have tried to argue with my parents—but my beloved grandmother? My idol? I had no framework, no foundation for talking back to her.

I wondered whether any of my relatives would feel embarrassed using that word in my presence if they actually saw me as Asian. Suddenly I wanted them to see that truth, to understand and acknowledge that we did not experience the world in the same way. Still, sitting at my grandmother’s high-polished table, the steak and potatoes she’d cooked for me heaped on my plate, I understood that this was my family—the only family I’d ever known. I owed them everything. And I knew that any of them would have lain down on railroad tracks for me.

Eventually someone changed the subject. I was left to eat and ponder my own failure. Not only had I not convinced anyone by speaking up, I suspected I had upset them with the reminder that we were not, in the end, the same.

A FEW YEARS LATER, when my grandmother was newly widowed, another widow around her age moved into her neighborhood. At 73, her hair dyed the reddish blond it had been in her youth, Grandma was still vivacious and

adventurous, traveling whenever she could, happiest when her social calendar was full. Tiny Sadie, with her cropped salt-and-pepper hair, was eminently practical, was a bit of a homebody, and had to raise her quiet yet firm voice for my increasingly hard-of-hearing grandmother. They seemed unlikely friends at first.

But with their husbands gone, they found in each other a source of commiseration and support. Hardly a day passed without Grandma walking her two tiny dogs to Sadie’s house, or Sadie bringing her even smaller dog to Grandma’s. Sadie’s eyesight was failing and she could no longer drive, so Grandma—who still motored all over town in her enormous red Cadillac—would pick up her friend to run to the store or medical appointments, to visit mutual friends and play cards. Together they rode senior-center-chartered buses to Reno, where Sadie nearly always won money and Grandma always lost. They had a standing biweekly manicure appointment and spent many “girls’ weekends” at the beach, walking their dogs together on a bluff overlooking the bay.

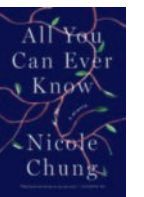
Sadie was second-generation Japanese American and

had grown up in Hawaii before marrying and moving to the mainland. Sadie and I bonded almost immediately, and while neither of us ever said so, I’m sure one reason was that we were both Asian American women in an overwhelmingly white town. As Sadie’s own family lived far away, she joined ours for every birthday and holiday celebration. When I turned 16, she gave me a tiny white-gold ring, dainty and set with a diamond chip, that her own mother had made. I’d lost my grandfather, but in her I gained a second grandmother.

It wasn’t until Grandma was in her late 80s—newly diagnosed with dementia, though she still had many good days—that I heard her say, “You know, I never thought my best friend in the world would be Japanese.”

We still didn’t talk much about race, the two of us, but I figured by now we could probably laugh about it. “Bet you didn’t think your granddaughter would be Korean either,” I said.

“No, I didn’t!” She patted my hand, her eyes crinkled with the laughter I’d hoped to draw out of her, and the two of us finished our lunch.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicole Chung’s memoir, *All You Can Ever Know*, was published in October. Her work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *GQ*, and *Longreads*, among other publications. She is the editor in chief of *Catapult* magazine. She lives in the Washington, D.C., area with her family.

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WHEN MY PARENTS adopted me in the early 1980s, no one in either of their families questioned their choice—Grandma least of all. She knew how badly they wanted to be parents. They informed her I was Korean, and all she said was, “Oh, that doesn’t matter!” I know, just from seeing the two of us together in old photos, that those weren’t idle words; she loved me from the beginning. I can’t remember a time in my childhood when we weren’t close confidants, when she wasn’t the relative I most wanted to be like.

As I grew older, I began speaking up, attempting to change my relatives’ minds—or at least offer a different viewpoint—when they made comments about immigrants or people they perceived to be unlike them. By college, I was much quicker to point out that I too was a child of immigrants, that we would not be a family at all if my birth parents hadn’t come here from Korea. I rarely had the heart to argue with my grandmother, especially as she got older and her memories grew more muddled. But even without my advocacy of other viewpoints, she could still surprise me.

On one of my visits home, in another conversation about the war, a relative tried to argue that the internment of Japanese Americans was understandable in wartime. This time I didn’t hesitate to raise my voice in disagreement—and to my surprise, my grandmother joined me. “I remember when all the Japanese people went to camps,” she said. “At the time, you know, we didn’t question it. But it wasn’t right, what happened to them.”

She and I had never talked about the word she’d casually dropped at that family dinner years before. But afterward, and after Sadie entered our lives and became part of our family, I never heard her use it again.

GRANDMA’S DEMENTIA is now quite advanced. Her world is smaller than it once was, her experiences a jumble of past and present tense. She’ll wake up one day feeling certain she’s needed at her aunt’s old farmhouse in Jamestown, New York; the next day, she might think she’s cooking dinner for a crowd in my grandparents’ first house in Cleveland or burying her beloved sister in Northern California.

She’s unable to hold on to many memories these days, even long-cherished ones. But she still clings to her memories of me—and all the adventures we had together—with the fierce, unapologetic stubbornness she is known for. They’re among the last memories she can easily call to mind, without any confusion or hesitation. “Remember that day we caught all those big crabs in the ocean, Nicole?” she’ll say when I see her. “Remember the time the boat got stuck in the kelp and we had to hack our way out?”

I always tell her, “Yes, I remember, Grandma.” She encourages me to write it all down: “When are you going to write a book about us?”

Grandma still remembers Sadie as well. Her best friend passed away a year ago, at the age of 92. “My sister Mary died too young,” Grandma says, “but I’m happy to have had Sadie as my sister too.”



Dream job popped up online
 Pulled an all-nighter updating résumé
 Went in for assistant
 Came out a boss

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 the day



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