

Euihae Cecilia Chung's story of

Rosa



My mother, Rosa Han, was born in the small town of Buyeo, in the Southern Choongchung Province of South Korea on June 15th, 1946.

Although the Korean war broke out when Rosa was four, and lasted for three bloody years, my mother's life in the country side was largely unaffected by the fighting. That is not to say that her early years were free of conflict, or that she bears no scars from that time.

Rosa found out early, at age seven, that her father had a mistress, a woman with whom he fathered four kids. She didn't know exactly what 'mistress' meant at that time but clearly remembers the strange certainty her father had betrayed them all. When Rosa was fourteen, she lost her mom to cancer. In her grief, a part of her was sure that the sadness and shame of her father's infidelity had killed her mother.

Rosa's father married his mistress almost immediately after the death of her mother. From that moment, her Cinderella-esque life began. Her stepmother, a woman much younger than my grandfather, unfortunately had no love for her stepchildren. My mother, being the oldest, quietly assumed the role of mother and protector to her two younger siblings.

Rosa remembers many harsh words spoken against her and her siblings. They were discriminated against nearly constantly. Their school tuition, for example, although always paid, was always the last to be paid. And they were forced to leave home in their mid-teens by their step-mother.

Despite all this, my mother never speaks bitterly of the past.

Instead, she empathized with what her then-young stepmother had herself endured. She guesses that this woman must have been lonely and unfulfilled. She had married a dapper but busy man who was always on the campaign trail and who took no interest in family life. She understands that for her stepmother, who was barely in her thirties, raising four kids of her own, as well as three step-children must have been difficult.

As an adult, Rosa maintained cordial relations with her stepmother and even financially supported her until she passed away last year. On her deathbed, Rosa's stepmother apologized to her stepchildren for not being a good stepmother to them. "I was so young," she said. "And didn't know better."

Despite all that was going on at home, my mother excelled at school, graduating with honours from the best girl's high school in the country and going on to major in French at the best women's university in Korea.

Perhaps it was her way of coping with all the unhappiness in her life.

In college, she was the brightest in her class, and was offered scholarships to study in Paris. In her Junior year, Rosa met the man she was going to marry, a shy, lanky boy two years her senior. After a few months, he went off for three years for his compulsory military service. But for my mother, there was no need to write a Dear John letter. She patiently waited for him, working as an anchorwoman at the Christian Peace Radio Broadcasting Station.

My parents married in 1971. After they had my brother, two years later, my mother quit her job to become a full-time homemaker. I came along two years after that.

Although Rosa had been happy and in demand at her job, she had no qualms about giving up her career or her academic pursuits to become a full-time mom. And what a mom she became. Unlike some of our friends, my brother and I cannot recall ever coming back from school to an empty house.

I think being there for her kids was her way of making up for the happy childhood she had never gotten to have with her own mother. I like to think that, in a way, it was a healing experience for her. In those days, there were no shrinks to walk you through your childhood traumas. Life was hard and you had to learn to get on with whatever cards life dealt you.

Here is a thing about my mother; she is not a talkative person. I am told that she inherited this characteristic from her mother, a simple woman with no formal education (which was typical for Korean women in those times) but whose inner strength and kindness stemmed from her Catholic faith.

My mother's earliest memories are of being woken at the crack of dawn every Sunday to walk for hours with her mother to attend Mass that was conducted in Latin. No doubt this shaped her own faith, and consequently, our entire family's.

Here is another thing about my mother: I have never seen her flustered and agitated. Come what may, Rosa has this incredible sense of peace about her; so much so her younger sister once remarked that she should have been a Buddhist nun. I have often wondered about the source of her quiet strength and calm.

I once asked about it, and my mother, who had, at fourteen, endured the unimaginable grief of losing her own mother to cancer, was characteristically stoic.

"After the sky has fallen," she said, "Nothing worse can happen, and you know life will go on no matter what."

When my mother was forty, we moved to Singapore, and then to Myanmar for my dad's work. My mom calls these the golden years of her life. She was financially comfortable. She finally got to see her husband, who had worked like a maniac back in Korea. And she learned to play golf. Our days were filled with endless barbecues and family trips to Europe. In every one of photographs taken during those eight years, my mother looks radiantly happy.

And young.

Looking at those pictures, I realize that my mother was not much older than I am right now when we first started living abroad.

After my dad retired, my parents hit a rough patch. For the first time in their entire married lives, they were suddenly thrust together, just the two of them, and they had to get to know each other all over again. Unfortunately, I think they discovered how shockingly different and to an extent, incompatible they were; my dad is the world's most talkative extrovert and my mother would be at home in a Trappist monastery upholding a lifetime vow of silence.

After I got married, my daily phone calls with my mom turned into me listening to her and agreeing with her what an insensitive, garrulous old man my father really was, and by God, how could she not have known this for so long? There were times when I wasn't sure their marriage would make it. But in the end, my mother always came back to the conclusion that she would have to do it on humanitarian grounds.

If not her, who else could put up with him?

My parents have lived and travelled with me since I had my daughter six years ago. They have been with us in New York and now, in Dili. My mother, who enjoyed operas and concerts in New York, has, with her characteristically stoic and cheerful take on life, declared that Dili is not all that bad. She says she has never had so much spare time for reading. That's her, ever the optimist, always looking at a half-full glass.

Of course, I took her passport away after she arrived in Dili so she wouldn't leave us.

Nowadays, Rosa's days are filled with my daughter, Shiyon. She is ever-so-patient with her, often in ways that I could never be. My daughter has the most loving grandmother in the world.

Rosa Han was born on June 15, 1946. She is the most wonderful, loving mother in the world.