

Yellow Mellow

a personal essay by Jennifer Kim

I always wanted family sayings – those sage things parents and grandparents say that guide their children through life. Like my friend Steve’s mom who said, “Be like a duck, let the water roll off your back,” for when times were distressing.

Whenever I was bothered, neither of my parents could say anything so relaxing and wise. Instead, I watched sitcoms and Mister Rogers for my emotional well-being. I adored how everyone on TV could effortlessly say what was troubling them and how simply resolutions or compromises came about. Perhaps my parents had sayings in Korean, but since they raised me as an English speaker, those gems never reached me.

As I grew older, I put aside my dreams of TV parents and family slogans. I went to college and took on professors as surrogate parents. That lasted only for a while. A college counselor called it “intellectual seduction” and warned young me of its dangers. Admittedly, a friend and I once giddily followed – at a distance – our mysterious film professor as he walked home like a forlorn Charlie Chaplain. We stopped at the edge of campus, afraid we had gone too far.

Then I found myself at age 25 working at a Los Angeles TV station as a production assistant. I was in surrogate papa land, working with a bunch of TV engineers, all older men, who liked to share their wisdom all day. They told many stories of various wars and tours through Asian countries. One man, Cal, kept telling me how much I resembled his son who was half Japanese and half white. The son was born to a Japanese woman Cal met while serving in Asia. Cal showed me his son’s picture and gave me updates on “my brother” who lived in Japan. Some might have been offended by this kindly old man’s stories, but I wasn’t. I always wanted a brother.

Cal and I had many quick chats as I ran around delivering and fetching tapes. As an engineer, he manned the tape decks and always seemed to have time for a talk. I remember once telling Cal that my father passed away when I was young and that I always wanted to be part of a large family. This is something that Cal would not forget.

When Cal’s mother died, I gave him a sympathy card. The card really touched him and inadvertently became my ticket into his world. Cal invited me to have dinner with him and his wife at the Bavarian Inn in San Gabriel. The reason – he wanted to officially adopt me into his family. Now at 25, I thought I was a little too old to be adopted and besides, what would my mother and sister think? But Cal thought he could provide me with a family, the kind I always wanted, and I wondered if I’d get my family sayings.

Cal thought I would be a good role model for his other children. I didn't feel so awesome being 25 and a production assistant, but in Cal's eyes, I was making it. That's the kind of family support I needed. My biological, out-of-state family had no concept of the kind of TV career I was trying to forge for myself. Korean parents' minds are limited to traditional professions: doctor, lawyer, engineer, or professor.

At the Bavarian Inn, Cal had his white hair, freshly washed, and pulled back into a wispy ponytail. He was wearing a bolo tie, looking like a spiffy but thin cowboy. He was nervous and I thought that was sweet. He introduced me to his wife, who was maybe 15 years younger than him, Mexican, and radiated kindness. She looked maternal, and I imagined sitcom-like, mother-daughter chats at her kitchen table after washing the dishes together.

Over our delicious meal of pot roast, potatoes, and peas, Cal outlined my new presence in their lives. He offered me a key to their house and money if I needed it. I'd always have a place to stay, a computer to play with, and a family to love. I also had a teenage sister waiting for me back at home.

I don't know why, maybe because I was in a lonely time of my life – unfulfilling, Gen X job, a wasted advanced degree, and a very busy director boyfriend – but it all sounded good to me, so I went along with this.

At “home” in West Covina, my new little sister bounded out of the house, slamming into me and giving me such a big bear hug that I lost my breath. I asked to go to the bathroom, and as I was relieving myself, I was greeted with my first family saying.

“If it's yellow, let it mellow. If it's brown, flush it down!” yelled Cal. “We do that to conserve water.” So this is it, I thought – a real family saying – I felt strangely pleased as I sat on the commode.

Cal informed me that members of my extended family wanted to meet me, too. We went to a large gathering of Mexican Americans in Orange County. I met my new cousins and other family members. One of the young cousins looked at me and asked, “Dad, what is she doing here?” The dad tried to explain I was the new cousin, but the little girl continued to eye me suspiciously.

Cal went out on the back porch and started drinking with my tios. I felt uncomfortable being in a room full of people who thought I was a weird foreign exchange student. The women were laughing in the kitchen and making food. Dinner was delicious.

I just kept getting sucked further and further in.

Cal got drunk and needed someone to drive him back home. Bleary-eyed, he looked to me.

“Sure,” I said and hoisted myself into his Ford truck.

Ah, the happiness in his eyes: “My younger daughter can’t drive yet.” And pride: “I knew this would be a good thing.”

I needed that pride in me. It was difficult maneuvering such a large truck. Many times I thought I’d bounce off the road. I could never imagine myself in a situation like this with my real father, who never drank or smoked. Now I was transporting a white drunk man. The San Gabriel Mountains before us were beautiful and ice-capped.

As I told my friends about my weekend jaunts into family land, I realized how strange this was. I was not enjoying nuclear and extended family life as much as I thought I would. I felt stifled and obligated.

When I went over to Cal’s for dinner, I was not allowed to leave right after and was always encouraged to spend the night. Before dinner, everyone had to pull a prayer out of the prayer card box, read it aloud, and sign their name on the back with the date. I listened to “dad” and all his business ventures that he wanted my help in.

The holidays were approaching, I wanted out but didn’t know how. I wanted to be back with my real family who virtually ignored the holidays and just sent each other money for presents, our checks crisscrossing in the mail, voiding each other out. I missed the unobtrusive ways of my small family – the communication of love through silence and food. I finally ended up quitting my job but not for this reason.

I hadn’t talked to Cal in many years and looked him up on the internet. I found out through comments that he had passed away. I regretted losing touch with this man who just had the best intentions for me.

But sometimes when I’m in the bathroom, I remember the first family saying he gave me – and I let it mellow.

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