

One Eye Open; One Eye Shut

When my parents immigrated to Dallas from China in their late sixties, they arrived with no English, no driver's licenses, and absolutely no shortage of opinions.

But the bigger adjustment was this:

After twenty years of living far away from each other, we were suddenly living close.

Which sounds heartwarming.

And it is.

Are you curious how they adapted to life in Dallas?

Story 1: (Think it is strange): My mother is fine with Dallas summer.

Because she cannot stand air conditioning. To her, the cold air from the AC is like a knife piercing into her bones.

So out of love, my father suffers. (pause, don't oversell) Shirtlessly.

He walks around the house half-naked, (slower pace) sweating like a rotisserie chicken on the grill.

After forty years of marriage, he knows the rule: if the woman you love hates air conditioning, you do not fight the thermostat.

In winter, they had the opposite problem.

In Shanghai, people wear more layers indoors. They did the same thing here until one winter a pipe burst and leaked into the neighbor's place downstairs.

That was the day they learned that in America, heating is not a luxury. It is a necessity.

Do you wonder how they spend their daytime?

Story 2: (Think it is foolish): They walk on Katy Trail every morning around 10 a.m.

My father pays special attention to the joggers. He says, "Americans are ALL so strong, in such good shape, and they wear so little clothing."

(Look out at the audience as if inviting them into your private judgment.)And I think: Dad, don't overgeneralize. Who exactly has time to run on Katy Trail at 10 a.m. on a weekday?

Story 3: (Think it is difficult): At first, I worried about how they would survive without English.

Then my father gave me his daily report.

"Today, I went to three grocery stores. And I returned something."

I said, "How?"

He said, "I told them."

"In English?"

"No. In body language."

(like a commentator, explaining a scientific fact) Apparently, in my father's world, non-verbal language is a universal language.

I imagine it involves an innocent smile, some finger pointing, and nodding "yeah, yeah" until even a Walmart associate feels called to help.

Apparently, that gets refunds.

Not every day is full of happy surprises. They also stay on my nerves.

My mother, unfiltered with age, looked me straight in the eyes and said in a very serious, very concerned tone,

"You are getting old. You have so much grey hair. You have eye bags. Do you sleep well?"

And I thought: yes, I am getting old, have grey hair and eye bags,. But are those my fault?

Well, partly.

The other part is that I am no longer a kid.

My parents still help me in ways that are not, technically, help. They still ignore instructions. They still make me feel deeply loved and mildly exhausted within the same five minutes.

So over time, I have developed a coping mechanism.

With my parents, I keep one eye open, one eye shut, one ear open, one ear shut.

Because if you pay attention to everything, you will lose your mind.

But if you ignore everything, you miss the comedy.

There is one more thing I have learned about my father.

He does not like not knowing.

So when he does not understand something, he makes up a story.

One day, after we watched a volleyball game at SMU, my dad saw a big bus on campus and said to my mother, very knowingly (confident tone), "Ah, tour bus. They send tourists to visit SMU."

(clean and clipped like a documentary) It was not a tour bus... it was a sports team coach.

Another day, he saw people paying money and lining up to see dogs and thought they were adopting dogs.

It was not dog adoption...it was a dog show.

Then my parents told me, very proudly, that they had made friends on Katy Trail.

I thought, wow, that is amazing for two people who do not speak English.

Then I realized my father did not mean actual friends.

He meant people he had seen a few times and had already decided he knew.

One neighbor, in his mind, works in a bank.

Why?

Because he leaves for work on Saturday morning.

(pause) That, to my father, is enough evidence.

I can totally imagine him seeing someone on Katy Trail and going, "Yeah, yeah," with his innocent smile, like they are old friends.

Lately, I heard a line from the musical *Kimberly Akimbo*, a story about a teenage girl whose body is aging four times faster than it should.

She wants people to see her while she is still alive.

And that hit me: maybe that is what I should do with my parents now.

To see them and hear them as they are, while they are still here.

(soft tone) So yes, today I roast them.

But I also want to accept them for who they are.

Two older immigrants in Dallas.

Walking Katy Trail.

Speaking fluent body language.

And making a life here in their own strange, stubborn, loving way.

Thank you for seeing and hearing them today, too!