

worth
writing
about

exploring
memoir
with
adolescents

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PROLOGUE

The Rice Bowl

It is the first day of our memoir unit, and I stand in front of my eighth-grade class holding the memoir of a student I taught seventeen years ago. I'm feeling the excitement I always feel when I launch this unit. Even though each year's classes are different, even though I know I can't anticipate everything that will happen as students grapple with putting their lives on paper, I know from experience that the next two months will be the most memorable, most meaningful, and most exciting work we do all year.

"I want to start today by reading a memoir that one of my past students wrote when she was in my eighth-grade class," I tell my students. "This is the end product. This is where you'll be in about two months."

I show them the title page. It has the memoir's title, *The Rice Bowl*, next to a picture of a winged creature. A caption reads: *The phoenix, a mythological female bird reborn from fire and ashes*. The bottom third of the page contains a family photograph of the writer, her three sisters, and her mother standing together and smiling.

On the next page there is a dedication to her mother and her sisters, and to the New York Asian Women's Center "as a thank you for all that you have done for us." My students are attentive, curious to hear what a past student wrote and to understand what this memoir unit is all about.

"She begins her memoir with a fifteen-sentence portrait," I say. "Remember the ones we did earlier this year in writing workshop?"

They nod, eager for me to get on with it.

I turn the page and begin to read . . .

"GRAY"

You stand there in the shadow of my mind.

Your dark brown eyes look upon me every time I think of you.

I can only imagine you with clenched fist.

You are like a hunter, and I'm the prey.

I remember when you used to hold me as a child, watching me wherever I would go and never paying attention to anyone or anything else.

I never believed this would happen.

I still remember the smell of your shirt and the yellowish green of the sweat.

I wish to see you in your grave; that would be paying for all you have done.

You are the top of the food chain, like a lion eating away at me.

You are a snake, slithering in the grass, waiting to strike at my weakness and leaving me to suffer.

You went away, leaving us to survive on our own, to die.

After you had gone the sweet smell of flowers came back, the colors brightly shone.

We are the colorful flowers, and you are the wilting petals.

I never want to see you again — only when you finally rest in peace.

The grayness of your heart shows who you really are.

The Rice Bowl

At first I didn't really know what was going on. It wasn't until I lost my father that everything else went with him — my sisters, my mom, everything. My life started to fall apart.

* *

Growing up in a household being the youngest was quite good, except for the fact that I wasn't old enough for anything. I always had my oldest sister, Anna, to watch me, as if I were her own. Jessica was always helping out Anna, and most of the time she was there to monitor me. Wendy was the one who would get jealous once in a while for attention, but she was always there to play with me. My mother, to me, was always the one running things and making sure everything was okay. My father, well, he was just there, never paying much attention to me or anyone else beside himself.

* * *

It all started over rice. Nights of waking up sweating and crying, nights of nightmares replaying in my mind. I was five years old when it happened. I don't remember much, but for many years that night replayed in my head over and over again. To think, a five-year-old, watching her horrors begin and not knowing they would follow her for the rest of her life.

I came home one night to the basement of my uncle's house from school. Even though we were my uncle's family, my spineless father was too afraid to stand up to his own brother, so we were stuck living in his cramped basement. (I can still smell the scent of wet cement and sand from the unfinished walls.)

We were all home that night — my father, my mother, my three sisters, and me.

It all started over rice.

That night my father demanded that my mother cook rice and make dinner. She was so tired of following his demands and just tired in general so she refused. My oldest sister, Anna, jumped in to help cook. She was speaking to my father in the kitchen while making dinner. My mom and Jessica were in the other room. Wendy and I were playing, but she had moved to the kitchen when it happened. I was near the staircase listening, my nightmares about to begin. Anna told my father that we shouldn't cook because every night as we were eating, our brat cousin would jump up and down on our ceiling to make

the sand fall on our table. She asked him why he wouldn't say anything and why he was afraid to stand up to his brother. Since my father was a short-tempered man he became furious. He had been raised to think that no woman could stand up to a man, and since my sister was telling him what to do, this obviously struck his ego. Not only was he an egotistical man, he was also an abusive one. He slapped my sister in the face for what she said. She was scared so she ran in the room screaming for my mother. I didn't see what was going on in the room, but I heard screaming and bangs on the wall.

My mother later told me that my father kept hitting my sister and banging her head against the wall. She told me that usually when he would hit her she would be scared, but this time he was hitting my sister. Like any person would do, my mother tried to stop him. She wrestled with him for a while and managed to push him out of the room. I peered out and saw him walking to the kitchen. I tried to cover my ears to block off the cries that shook my body. The next thing I knew there was a sharp scream from my sister Wendy who was in the kitchen, and then I saw my father walking toward the room with a meat cleaver in his hand.

Before he walked in the room I knew my mother was alert that something was wrong from the scream. He tried to kill Anna, threatening her with the knife. My mother came out of nowhere and grabbed his hand with the knife in it, then grabbed him by the throat. She grabbed him away from Anna and pushed him against the wall on the side of the stairs. I was beside the room and right in front by the stairs. I saw as my mom struggled with him and then threatened to kill him if anything were to happen to any of us. After she threatened him, she forced him to drop the knife. (Every now and then I can still hear the metal hitting the ground.) She pulled him up the stairs and pushed him out the door. He tried to push his way back in but my mom would not let him. He broke a hole in the door and ran down the stairs. Looking as if he was about to explode, he started yelling and screaming again, but this time my mom yelled back. She told him to get out once and for all, looking like a mad woman. From the look on his face, I could tell he was afraid. She escorted him out roughly and told him not to come back until he cooled down.

I waited for a while to see if it was safe. Then I ran into the room crying and saw everyone else crying too. That night I cried myself to sleep with my sisters beside me, but it wasn't over. While sleeping, the image of my father coming toward the room with a knife kept replaying. What happened to the caring father that I thought loved us? Even to this day I still wonder how a person who gave you life would be willing to take it back in a flash. For a while it was quiet, but the racket and roaring of my dreams awoke me.

Anna was so afraid she tried to leave. She called her gang over to pick her up, but my mother wouldn't let her go. She wouldn't let this take her daughter away forever. My father came home about three-in-the-morning with his family beside him. Anna was still in shock so she stayed in the room. My mother went to see what he and his family wanted. Everyone thought my mother was crazy that night, especially my father, because this was the first time she had ever fought back. His sister tried to get in the room, but my mother pushed her away. Then as everyone tried to take Wendy and me away, my mother sprung into action. She hollered at them and tried to hold them back. As she couldn't hold against them any longer, she yelled to my sister Jessica, telling her that if anyone tried to get past the door to kill them.

After everyone heard that, they knew my mother was hysterical. Eventually they all left, including my father. She saw them out the door, but as my father stepped out, he turned around and asked my mom for the medical cards. My mom guessed he planned this out with his family, because he knew that Anna needed to see the doctor, badly.

* * * *

That was the last time I saw my father. The lasting image I have of him is with a knife in his hand. I always had the chance to see him, but I never dared. What would happen if I did? That is a question I always had in mind. Would he have kidnapped me? Would he have loved me? Or would he have killed me? I try to imagine what it would be like actually to see him, but I'm afraid that if I wanted to see him, my mother would go ballistic.

* * * *

We ran away from my father but we had no place to go. Since we had just moved to the United States, my mom didn't speak a word of English. She had very little education and no job or money. Luckily, my mom got in touch with a foundation called the New York Asian Women's Center, a type of women's shelter. That was the only alternative we had. After we left, my mother started to go into depression. Hours of her just staring into space crying made me want to cry. Watching her feel sad and not being able to help made me feel helpless and pitiful. So what was I to do? For a long time, I tried to forget it and push it aside, but it didn't help. Everything around reminded me of the situation. After accepting the fact that I was fatherless, I now had to accept the fact that we were also homeless.

Eventually things became worse. My two older sisters ran away from home for many months. For a while it was just the three of us. Three bowls, three plates, and three cups. I still remember the three bowls my mom bought with blue rimming. Every time I saw those bowls I couldn't help but to think about my sisters. Almost every night my mom called the police reporting my sisters missing, but they were nowhere to be found. Those months were so horrible. My mom acted as if nothing was wrong, but I saw in her eyes that a part of her was missing.

I don't remember what happened, but all I know and really cared about was that they finally came back. After they came back, we finally moved out of the shelter and into our own apartment. Once we settled into our new apartment, things started to change again. My second oldest sister, Jessica, became very quiet and hardly spoke a word. My oldest sister, Anna, became rebellious and started many fights with my mother and Jessica. The fights got so out of hand that many times our neighbors would call the police. All night shouting and crying would make everyone crazy, especially my mom. One time I got so sick of crying and hearing them argue, I made myself throw up. That got them to stop, but they went berserk to see what was wrong with me.

For about two years the fighting occurred and for two years my mom tried to get all of us to family therapy. Every time any type of arguing or fighting would occur, my mom would blame it on my father and say my sister Anna was crazy. I always knew that wasn't true. The fighting did occur because of my father, but I never believed her when she called my sister crazy. I loved Anna even though she did so many things that I didn't understand. At that time I never understood how any of the fights started, but now I realize why they happened. All my mom wanted was to watch us grow up in a good and safe environment. She worked so hard to lead us somewhere better, she didn't want to give up. After she realized she had lost my father, she pushed even harder. I guess that was what drove Anna and Jessica away.

* * * *

Recently things have started to run smoothly. Now that everyone except me is almost old enough to live on her own, there is less friction between all of us. My mom can now accept the fact that she can't push too hard to see what she wants and can't always impose on us her expectations. Anna is now working and partially supporting the family and playing a motherly role in my life. Jessica is in college working for her degree and Wendy is about to start college, and just about to take charge in her life as an adult.

I can now accept the fact that all of us lost a father, not just me, and I'm not alone to face my fears. Hatred, forgiveness, and pity are all feelings I have toward him. Now that he has a new wife and children again, I can only feel sorrow for his new wife, who doesn't know what kind of man he really is.

Though our family has separated numerous times, there are still borders that none of us can pass to get away. Like rice in a rice bowl, it is always held together as a whole.

I look up and experience that magical moment of a room full of students, transfixed, transported, and—perhaps—transformed by what they have just heard. It is the first of many magical moments that will happen in my classroom over the next two months.

The memoir unit has begun.