

He wove a story no one ever told. He was the one who was destined to change the world—

“Come down to wash the dishes.” My mom’s voice, suddenly that of a stranger, usurped my inner thoughts.

Just like that, eight-year-old me was snapped out of my reverie. Did I have to? I was busy becoming a wizard, about to cast a reality-warping spell, wand in hand.

When I went to my grandfather’s house, their voices felt even more foreign.

While I sat at the dining table, clad in pajamas and chewing on egg rolls, they looked at me with gummy smiles and whispered in Vietnamese. Whenever they spoke in English, it was stilted. Broken. Try as I might to communicate with them, they always felt an ocean away.

That night, instead of going out, I crept downstairs to relax on the sofa with my iPad. My grandfather, being down there, beckoned me with a glance.

Sitting alone with my grandfather forced me to truly listen to him. Beyond his words, listening to the rise and fall of his chest, listening to the soft rasp of his nails as they gently scratched my back. Then back to his words, which began to resonate with me.

He told a story about immigration, about family values, and about moving here. About serving as a major in the Air Force during the Vietnam War. I could smell gunpowder in the air and hear the rat-tat-tat of bullets as he spoke.

Suddenly, I understood my father’s fear of water. It came from hiding behind bushes and under sand as Vietnamese searchlights snaked across their beaches, hunting for anybody who tried to escape. My grandfather’s refusal to return to Vietnam happened because he rejected communist ideals.

The choices that those who came before us made and the voices they shared with the world shape our lives. I often imagine what-if—what if my father hadn’t been on that train, coming home from work, a freshly minted emergency medicine physician, and had never met my mom?

Without my grandfather’s sacrifice, I would not exist. He had changed my world, and I didn’t even know it.

When we forget the cost of freedom, we risk repeating its loss.

Around us, there exist hundreds, thousands of stories that are left unsaid. If I hadn’t gone down with my iPad during that fateful night, I would never have known how I came to be. The voices of our past shape our world in unseen ways—even when they go unheard.

Now, we must speak before silence claims us.

So that our descendants sit with us, feeling the softness of our fingers playing with their hair,
and choose to understand.