



America's Newspapers

With death comes the immigrant's guilt

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She wouldn't stop crying.

My mother, petite and slender, spread on the sofa like a wounded bird. Her piercing sobs filled the glass-walled summer room. They reverberated in the entire house, slipped razorlike under the carpet and the faded wallpaper. The cries were so strong, so unstoppable, that I imagined the chandelier shaking in this first rented American house of ours.

It was less than a year before that we had arrived in the United States from communist Poland, via a short stay in France, to seek a better future. We were still getting used to daily life in Connecticut when the unexpected happened. My mother's father died.

We were 4,000 miles away from him, completely unprepared.

My mother had just spent the summer in Poland; after a brief stay at the hospital, her father was (she believed) in good condition.

She dreamed of him the day he died in the faraway country that used to be her home. Next day, she cried as if her cries could reach him across the Atlantic Ocean. She could not afford plane tickets and did not fly to the funeral.

Cry of guilt

I did not know this grandfather well. But my mother's wails sowed a fear that I continue to carry even today, 15 years later. A fear that I knew one day would materialize.

Throughout the years, I have visited my family in Poland as often as I could, hoping that death would not come when I was away. Plagued by the immigrant's guilt, which follows all those who leave their place of birth and their relatives behind, I wanted to redeem myself at least by being there at the last, crucial moment.

But it didn't happen that way. My second grandfather, my father's father - the one I was close to - died a few months ago as I was completing my studies at the University of California. I received the call from my father on my cellphone walking through the corridor to an 8 a.m. class, and broke down immediately in the arms of a school secretary I hardly knew.

How could I miss his death?

I remembered it last month, when the earth shook in Indian and Pakistani Kashmir, and thousands of people died. Many of those who perished have family members here in the United States. These American relatives, too, have had to deal with sudden, distant deaths.

Shoaib Afzal, a Richardson software engineer, lost 150 members of his extended family to the earthquake in Balakot, Pakistan. Asked how he felt about this enormous loss, he hung his head and talked of trying to collect money for the relief effort.

"I can work more effectively from here, rather than go there for the funerals," he said, his hands folded tightly on the table.

My mother told me that, when her father died, instead of spending close to \$2,000 on a plane ticket, she wired the money to a cousin, who was struggling with poverty. My father visited his father only once a year as his health deteriorated, but sent medicines by mail. As for me, sending aid wasn't enough to ease the pain of separation.

I realize I'm hardly alone. There are millions of immigrants living in the United States, who have left family members in countries all around the world. Some of the immigrants I have known were less fortunate than I - they were undocumented, and if they left the United States they might not be able to come back.

A common bond

But with or without papers, we are all plagued by the same feelings - denial, guilt and fear. We have jettisoned participation, responsibility. Far away, we don't witness the day-to-day physical changes our relatives undergo as they grow old. Death turns abstract; it's hardly real. It can come any time and we may not know, or we may not be able to go back when it does come.

My mother still regrets not going to her father's funeral. She cries when she remembers, but reminds me of how we - immigrants, nomads, travelers - can go on. "Being far away does not make it easier to forget someone," she says. "Memory is independent of distance."

So even if we miss their deaths and their funerals, if we do not pray at their graves regularly, our ancestors and friends who inhabit the land we have left behind can perhaps forgive us. As long as we don't forget. Memory can be a vessel, and sometimes it's the only one we've got.

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