

# TRUTHFULNESS AND TRAGEDY: NOTES FROM AN IMMIGRANT'S SON<sup>1</sup>

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A bad lie hides the person telling the lie. Working in layers, it covers the person from head to toe so that you can only see through the dry cracks a sliver of what is left. A good lie is different. A good lie strips a person naked and unveils the deepest parts of their being, disclosing their cares, wants, desires, and loves. These lies are truth-telling lies.

## I.

In the spring of 2012, my uncle was notified that he had stage four pancreatic cancer. My uncle was a healthy man, lithe and well built. As an immigrant from China in the '80s, he arrived in New York and started a Chinese restaurant, working long, grueling hours in the kitchen. It was no glorious chef's life. As a kid I would watch from the corner of the kitchen during rush hours. He would stand in front of several blazing woks splashing with oil, tickets and orders moving back and forth in a relentless blaze. *Three broccoli chicken! Two pork fried rice! Four General Tso's!* Meats and sauces were stirred together in a calculated and precise fury. When the lights turned off and the tables were wiped, he would go upstairs to the tiny flat above the restaurant, skin musty with soy sauce and oil. He would brew some tea, light a cigarette, sit down next to my father, and in rugged Fujianese banter talk late into the night about their youthful days in China.

My dad had three brothers, and family was everything. Amidst the social upheaval of the Cultural Revolution, the family drew together tightly to survive the stormy chaos. When relatives were accused of bourgeois intellectualism and thrown in jail, the family went hungry to

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bring rice to the jail cell and collected scrap metal on the streets to sell for bail money. My great-grandfather would lie to Mao's Red Guards about who was home and give patriotic lip service to the regime at the local political meetings. At school, the siblings would watch out for each other, tipping one another off to escape the school bullies that strutted through the playground.

In the 1970s, my great-grandfather was falsely accused of being a Nationalist sympathizer. The local guards burst into the house and dragged him to the local schoolhouse, locking him in a small room. When he refused to falsely confess, the local guards made it a point to interrogate him daily, attempting to coerce a confession by finding tiny cracks in his story.

Word spread in the village about my great-grandfather, and the gossip produced a deep and horrified blush of shame among the family. Village members would avoid talking to them; neighbors and shopkeepers now seemed distant, leering, and suspicious. The village kids constantly teased my dad and uncle at school. *Your grandpa is a capitalist liar!* Once, my father, sick of shame, almost beat his tormentor to death in the schoolyard; he stopped only when his malnourished arms could punch no more. My uncle walked my father's limping body home and bandaged his bloodied knuckles to keep it a secret from the rest of the family.

Weekly, my grandfather pressured my great-grandfather to falsely confess. He had heard stories of local villages where people had failed to produce the "right" confession and were beaten to death with belts and sticks. My grandpa insisted that, for my great-grandfather's safety, he ought to produce a false confession. Moreover, it would be better for the family to be together again: it would be better for us to be shamed together than apart, he said.

It was this latter reason that drove my great-grandfather to the edge of suicide. As a grandfather, it was unbearable to hear of the public shame and physical abuse heaped upon his family, and he held the trigger in his hand to end their suffering. Every morning the guard handed him a blank paper to write his confession. But he refused to lie and again and again told the same story—he did not work for the Nationalists and was an innocent man. When a new guard cycled in who knew my great-grandfather, he took great sympathy upon him. "You could just write a couple of sentences, you know, and this will be over for all of us." My great-grandfather refused and solemnly gave him the same answer he had told his son: "If they take away my integrity, I will have

nothing left in my family name.” Out of both suicides placed before him, my great-grandfather stubbornly chose neither.

He was released after seven months. When the doors of China finally opened in 1979, the family made the daunting decision to leave the home of their ancestors. The village they left was one that had seen much of world history: my ancestors had lived there before the bloody World Wars, before the Western powers demanded China to open their gates, before the rise of colonies and empires. It was a humble village by the sea with thick roots of tradition that bore deep into Chinese soil. But in the present moment, like refugees, one by one each member untethered himself from home and struck out for America, hoping for a life with less tyranny and more freedom. The brothers arrived first and worked hard to survive. Eventually, they brought my grandparents over and the family was reunited. In the early 2000s, they lost the first family member when my grandmother passed away from cancer. The grieving was raw and fierce, with depth. By the time my uncle was diagnosed with cancer, it was thirty years since he had left China, and he was in a doctor’s office in Queens, New York.

## II.

There is good reason to think the story of my great-grandfather has a happy ending. He avoided lying, was able to reunite with family, and eventually escaped China. Yet we may be tempted to ignore the story’s tragic character, as if the ethical dilemma my great-grandfather faced was not really a dilemma because of its happy ending. Alasdair MacIntyre once observed, “The true genre of life is neither hagiography nor saga, but tragedy.” Here tragedy does not simply mean lamentable or sad. The sense of tragedy we are reaching for is closer to the stories told by Sophocles: a drama wherein the actors are motivated by fundamentally conflicting cares and loves that inevitably lead to some demise. Thus Oedipus’s blindness or Antigone’s defiance led to some tragic ending for each, not because they are more foolish than us, but because each person’s cares and loves led them to a certain ending that seems, from the outside, at once fated and free.

The immigrant life in particular embodies this tragic quality. Leaving one world for another, the immigrant is always in conflict with the world because the world inside of them is carved in too deep. Sometimes this inner world can be erased, as in the case of small children; their pliability allows the carvings of one home to be filled in by another. But even they may find traces of a world they do not remember in their adult minds. Like homeless Adams and Eves, immigrants and their families carry within them the sharp sense of a fragmented world; their worlds are constantly being revised and negotiated, interrogated and destroyed, built and constructed. Children of immigrants who know their family stories intuitively know this because our stories are so different from those of the dominant culture. The roots of our homes trail behind us in our moral decisions; they form the shape of the ethical life we desire, even if it is a life obsessed with weeding out the roots that gave it life. The rebel too is a tragic character.

Moral philosophers are often guilty of attempting to rid life of these tragic qualities. Tidy moral systems with rationally weighted variables, moral syllogisms, and technical terminology often fail to capture the thick dramatic sense of life embodied in the stories we inherit from our parents. Stories are like tapestries, and some moral philosophers spend too much time on one thread, as if a single thread could show us the entire picture.

Some moralists insist on thinking of the ethical life as a set of rules: “do not steal,” “do not cheat,” or “do not lie.” This last rule—“do not lie”—is particularly interesting in light of the complex tapestry of narrative. In the story of my great-grandfather, several intertwined threads of lying occur from various perspectives: my family’s false patriotism, my father’s lying about his bleeding knuckles, the lying Communist accuser who insisted day after day that my great-grandfather was a liar. Deception is thick and interwoven in a story; it causes and is caused by other deception. Because there are various moral actors in a story, each action opens up the possibility for other decisions to occur. Without the false accusation, my great-grandfather could not have been truthful, nor would my father have been able to lie about his hands.

But the ending of this story, the moralist may point out, is not tragic. My great-grandfather is freed without harm, and the family escapes to America. Is this not a happy ending? There is a sense in which one is right to say that this is happy; we are glad that he escapes with his integrity. But does not a happy ending presume that there is an *ending* to

a story, as if our life had a clear viewpoint from which we could reflect, a finish line from which we can see the rest of the track? Death is the only true ending of the stories we live. We cannot, as it were, maneuver behind life to get the sort of perspective to say, “Now *this* is a happy ending to my life.” We cannot be God and declare over our stories, “Now *that* was a good decision.” Our moral speech is not God’s; it is a mere airy puff over the chaos of the deep. We may be able to speak a sure word but certainly not the final one.

The immigrant is especially used to speaking sure words and being challenged of their surety. The world around them and the world inside constantly clash—there are no neat systems here, no one simple story to tell. They must navigate various forms of life that tell them their conception of life is not worthy; it is awkward, quirky, or downright disgusting. And yet, I have observed a strange dignity about the immigrant. It is similar to the dignity my great-grandfather had when he refused to falsely confess. When I imagine him locked away in that small, lonely schoolroom, I do not think he was thinking about gritting his teeth and following a rule. He was not thinking, “Lying is always wrong. I will not do what is wrong; therefore, I won’t lie,” out of respect for the law of truth telling. Instead the various moral choices available hung around him like various threads; some were nooses and others were escape ropes.

Ultimately, I think my great-grandfather did not lie because he was attempting to be true to himself. He was not trying merely to tell the truth, but rather *be* the sort of person that is a truth-teller, a person with coherence, with integrity. And fundamental to him being truthful was his moral awareness that his most basic loves compelled him to defend and protect the family name, which only lying could destroy.

The dignity of the immigrant is similar. Knowing that he or she will be thrown into a world rife with conflict, the immigrant attempts to maintain a sense of self-coherence. In negotiating with their new world, the immigrant is forced to clarify and identify her deepest loves, to hold on to that which is most precious because she knows to lose it is synonymous to losing herself. Yet she must act with the limited and contingent options provided by the world in which she now stands. The immigrant thus knows in a distinct way what it means to be “condemned to action,” as philosopher Christine Korsgaard puts it. Perhaps the immigrant’s ethic is an ethic that a world constantly in conflict should ruminate over in respectful silence.

Yet in offering this portrait of the immigrant, I do not want anyone to think it rosy or quaint. It is a picture of survival amidst a tragic world. And the story of my uncle with cancer in Queens, New York, might show us how this wish for self-coherence, for authenticity, is sometimes odd, or even downright strange. It may drive us to do what seems most contrary to our loves, even if it is to tell a lie that can never be revoked.

### III.

My uncle was well known among the Chinese immigrants in Queens. After he sold his restaurant, he spent most of his time working at organizations that helped fresh Chinese immigrants survive in New York. My uncle would arrange for jobs and housing, connect friends, arrange dates, and lend money to those in a financial pinch. I did not realize how loved he was by the local community until several hundred people crammed into the church sanctuary for his funeral service. There I heard person after person praise him for his kindness and benevolence. One person told a wonderful story about how my uncle helped him get a job when he was homeless. Another person testified to my uncle's remarkable warmth and charisma. Many admitted they did not know he had gotten cancer and were surprised to find out he died.

There was one person who was never given the chance to be surprised at my uncle's death: my grandfather. Nobody told him that his son had stage four pancreatic cancer. Nor was he told his son was critically ill. We buried my uncle at a local cemetery later that day, and my grandfather was not there. He had simply not been told anything, and while we laid flowers on the casket, my grandfather spent the day reading newspapers in an apartment two blocks from where his son once lived.

Several months before the funeral, my father and the brothers gathered at the apartment to discuss my uncle's cancer. At that point, the doctor had notified them that my uncle had little time left, and so the siblings sought to make preparations for his death. As they discussed details about the coming funeral, my father raised the awkward question: "So, when do we tell Dad about this?" The brothers looked to my uncle pensively. "We don't," was my uncle's reply.

A verbal fight broke out. On the one hand, my uncle had hid his cancer treatment from his father out of concern for his health. My grandfather was in his late nineties and was hard of hearing. He could

not walk very much and was often sick. He spent most of his time reading Chinese newspapers and writing little notes to his grandchildren between long pauses of staring out the window. My uncle said that if he told his father he had terminal cancer he would unnecessarily worry his father. A Chinese son must always honor his father, and to burden the father with the son's weaknesses and sufferings is dishonorable. Even worse was the possibility that the news might shock him to death: there is no greater way to shame the family than by killing your own father because of your suffering. It is better to die unnoticed than to dishonor the person who brought you into the world.

My father insisted that there was something untruthful about this. "Shouldn't dad know if his son is going to die? Can't we at least invite him to the funeral?" Yet my uncle's arguments prevailed. The closer he was to death, the more shock he would bring to his father; dishonor grew as death drew near. "I think it is better for all of us if we kept this a secret," he concluded firmly. The other brothers nodded their heads. My dad uncomfortably agreed. He was a younger brother and could always be overridden by the oldest brother's authority; there was no use in protesting. So the funeral took place without my grandfather's knowledge, and for the next several weeks, the remaining brothers were careful to make sure my grandfather never found out. They switched out his newspapers so he would not see the lengthy obituaries and updated his visitors about his poor health. Occasionally, my grandfather would ask about my uncle's whereabouts, and my uncle would always be mildly sick, or away on a business trip, or busy with his newborn grandchildren. On my grandfather's 95<sup>th</sup> birthday, my uncle sent his sincerest apologies through one of the brothers—he was at a dear friend's funeral and would not be back in time for the party. To this day my grandfather still does not know his son is dead.

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When I tell this story to my friends at school, they find it deeply troubling. "That's *really* weird," one said. "Why doesn't your dad just tell your grandfather?" Grasping for words, I attempt to explain the importance of honor and the special piety the son must show to the father. "You see," I conclude, "that's just not an option for them." My friends scratch their heads in confusion. *It's an option for us*, their faces say.

When I asked another friend what he thought about all this, he blurted out, “Isn’t your uncle lying to his dad?” “I guess,” I mused. “Isn’t it wrong to lie about something that is so important?” “Isn’t it worse to kill your father?” I asked. My friend looked at me strangely. He was struggling for words, and after a moment said, “I feel like that’s so wrong.” But his reasons had bottomed out.

The truth is I had wrestled with this problem many times with my father. In our heated conversations, we would go through the playbook, looking for alternative ways out. But every time we flipped through the script, we realized how little room there was to maneuver, and the only action that made sense for the characters in this story was to hide the truth from my grandfather.

The strange paradox of context is that both my great-grandfather in China and my uncle were being truthful, yet one was lying and the other refused to lie. They both sought to be authentic to their deepest loves and cares; both desired to honor family, but the context offered different possibilities for truthful action. Truth is like that: it is sometimes rigid, unnerved, inflexible, courageous; other times, out of a deep and abiding love, it seeks to relieve suffering by telling an eternal lie—a lie that denies one’s own existence for the love of the other.

I have come to see this dilemma as an illustration of the tragedy inextricably tied to the immigrant’s life and, in some ways, to all of human life. When someone moves from one world to another, they bring with them the spirit and rationality of a different form of life. When the immigrant brings these ways of thinking with them into my world, I, in my American upbringing, am always tempted to shout to them, “There’s a different way out!” as if my words could so easily expand their horizons to fuse with mine. I wanted to tell my grandfather that his son was dying and that because his son loved him too much to see him suffer, he chose to hide it from him forever with a lie. I wanted to tell my uncle that there was nothing to fear and that we had to trust my grandfather that he would not react badly to the news about cancer. But my dad said sadly, “Son, I hear you. But that won’t make sense to them.”

We would be right to think that a story such as this one is a tragedy. It ends with a father sipping a cup of tea in his flat in New York while his son lies buried. But the temptation is to think that *our* stories are not tragic because we are able to reflect from a distance on stories like the ones I have told. If we were to step inside the world of another—like that of the immigrant, sojourner, or refugee among us—then we would

see that from the other's perspective each of our lives has an inevitably tragic dimension because our loves and cares commit us to certain actions and restrain the possibilities of others. The immigrant may say to us, "There's a different way out!" And we may respond, "I hear you, but it won't make sense to the rest of them." Alternatively, we might simply not hear the immigrant at all.

Immigrants are a gift to their cultures because they bring out the tension latent within societies. Augustine, the famous North African bishop of Christianity, observed that humans are motivated by their loves. Beneath these loves, one could sense a primordial longing for a home, the final object the heart desires. Since various peoples have various senses of home, the world is rife with conflict; different loves form different ways of life.

Stepping aboard their ship, the immigrant knows full well this sense of home. It groans loudly as it is torn from its roots and cast into the sea. Arriving in a new world, the immigrant comes to us as a foreigner, an alien and wanderer, bearing a strange world to our world where different expressions of loves have commanded different forms of life. Upon arriving, they are confronted with harsh difference, and this fated encounter of worlds demands of the immigrant an ethic that will stretch them in a way that their home never had. It is an ethic that attempts to maintain a flicker of coherence amidst warring worlds and uncontrollable circumstances. It seeks to be authentic to one's own deepest loves in a world that is not always hospitable to them.

It is this ethic the immigrant brings as a gift to his or her new culture. If we are welcoming enough, we might carefully receive this gift and listen for bits of wisdom. If we are courageous enough, we might even imitate it. And if our current era is marked by the specter of an aggressive nationalism, and if various nations are baring the fangs of ugly patriotism, then we might do well to not merely defend immigrants but learn from them as well. For their ethic is one forged in the hard fires of tragedy. It offers itself as a gift for those who sense a fragmenting world and are courageous enough to strike out into the stormy future, seeking to be truthful, even if it requires telling a lie.