



Ngin Ngin

I don't remember the pictures I used to draw for my Ngin Ngin. I do remember my dad sitting at his old wood desk writing letters and paying the bills. It was the kind of desk that had all sorts of compartments and a fold-down panel for writing on. I used to love opening the miniature door, pulling out the little drawers, and taking out the secret compartments that were disguised as columns on each side of the door.

Whenever Dad wrote a letter to his mother, he would ask us to draw something for "Ngin Ngin" too. At that time, I wasn't really sure who Ngin Ngin was. Dad, a reticent type of person, never talked about Ngin Ngin, at least not to us. Years later, I finally did meet Ngin Ngin when she came to live with us.

In the beginning when Ngin Ngin lived with us, she seemed almost as distant as the person that we used to draw for. She was a tiny woman with bound feet. She had a dignified and stern demeanor that came with years of being an authoritarian mother-in-law in China.

I would have loved hearing Ngin Ngin talk of her life, her history. She was born before the turn of the century so there would have been much to tell, but Ngin Ngin was not a storyteller.

Ngin Ngin stayed in her room most of the time. It was a small cozy room that filled with sunshine. It had a #4 on the door, a remnant of a time when we had boarders. As we walked past her room to go down the stairs, we always saw her sitting, forming a silhouette against the window of light. She liked to sew and mend clothes so I used to bring her all my skirts that needed to be shortened as the mini skirt was popular at that time.

When my friends visited, they were always curious about the occupant of room #4. But my friends were as much an oddity to Ngin Ngin as she was to them. She would ask if I really understood what they were saying, or if their hair was real, it was so light and curly.

As the years went by, a certain amount of affection developed between Ngin Ngin and us. We called her "Grumps" and tried to make her laugh. She returned our affection with an art that my mom said only one with bound feet would have time to create in China. One afternoon we discovered in her room, beautiful, intricate paper cutouts of butterflies. We were delighted with them; they were so extraordinary! She cut endless varieties of shapes and patterns-- spiders, butterflies that turned into masks, snowflakes, water lilies, classic Chinese symbols, symmetrical designs, and organic patterns that looked like creatures. She cut them out of any type of paper she could find. She mainly used newspaper, but we also found patterns cut into junk mail advertisements, magazine pages, and even our old homework assignments.

Then one morning, Ngin Ngin fell from her bed. She became paralyzed and had to go into a rest home. She quietly died a few years later. She was 98 years old. She had spent a fraction of her life with us, but she had left a legacy for us to remember.

