



initially saw her as a threat.

A personal indictment of my “American-ness.” A representation of my intense shame at not being Korean enough. A few weeks before that final Christmas, I braved the crowds at Costco to find her a gift. I had considered money or a gift card, but that seemed offensive and wrong.

I decided on a comically large gift basket, teeming with novelty coffee and fancy crackers that demand to be paired with a discerning cheese of equal stature. But still I knew this gesture fell short.

What do you get for a stranger who became the daughter your dying father desperately needed?

An insidious cancer invaded my dad’s liver and upended everything we knew. In addition to the 1,808 miles separating my dad and me — he on the West Coast and I in the Midwest — we had to contend with the cultural distance between us. Despite immigrating to the United States from Korea nearly 40 years ago, my father never became a fluent English speaker. I was far from proficient in Korean. But our enduring bond had always been based on a deeper, implicit grammar that had been enough — until it wasn’t.

Geographically distant and culturally inept, I became a liability whose inability to advocate for my dad was costing us too much.

In short order, a stranger became my more suitable proxy.

All I knew about Christina was that we were close in age, and she worked for my dad’s business partner. She had known my father for just a year or so; long enough to appreciate his paternal, affable spirit that endeared him to so many. Along with her home field advantage, she

The Proxy Daughter

BY MIUN GLEESON

was already a member of the dreaded Parents with Cancer Club, which gave her a leg up on the dense vocabulary of disease. But her biggest asset was that she was more Korean, possessing a fluency of both languages and an easy command of cultural nuances that had always escaped me.

I’m so sorry to have to tell you this



I quickly learned why she was better, and realized that giving my dad what he needed the most meant stepping aside.

Christina and I handled the business of managing his illness through phone and text when I couldn’t be in town. But even when I

was, she was a constant, comforting presence for him — and me. Her messages got down to business: “Confirming I’ll take care of tomorrow’s appointment” reflected the sheer scope of her roles as social worker, scheduler, and chauffeur in my absence. She delicately bookended her texts when it came to bad news, prefacing with “I’m so sorry to have to tell you this” and closing with a sincere request to “Please have a good day.” As translator, she skillfully facilitated patient-physician Q&As regarding awkward topics such as intestinal distress, night sweats, and other looming indignities of disease. The nurses assumed she was my father’s daughter. I stopped correcting them because there was fundamentally no time for my wounded pride.

As we neared the end, Christina graciously bowed out, close as we were now to the type of farewell requiring no translation.

For the first time, I was the one with the news to deliver when my dad died. She never responded and I haven’t heard from her since. Despite barely knowing each other, I understand this must have been heartbreaking for her, too. In a different way, to a different degree, but still. I imagine the experience of helping shepherd another human being as their life ends can render the most profound quietude.

We couldn’t save my dad, but she was a saving grace nonetheless. She didn’t have to do any of it. I’ll never know why someone with their own family, life, and job so generously made my family her life and her job during those months.

But I hope my stand-in truly knows how her selflessness and decency helped lessen the unmooring that is mourning a parent.

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