

A FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH:

Click. Another photograph taken, capturing a fleeting moment that has already been ushered into the cryptic chambers of time. Now, the moment is lost, a memory possessed solely by those fortunate enough to witness the moment. A story to be told for generations to come, evidenced by this photograph to be shown. The gleaming smiles, the twinkling eyes the carefree glow of youth both melts my heart with its purity and beauty yet refuses to thaw the glacial sensation of grief and nostalgia that emerges from the moment that cannot be relived. Forever a monument at the museum of our ancestors' lives, that can only be admired by a distance. Never touched. Never felt. Eternally protected by the barrier of time.

Undeniably, the laughter that is seen in the photograph can almost be heard. Though the photograph displays a muted sample of this precious moment, it preserves its vitality and through the silence I can still hear the echoes of their laughter penetrating through the paper in my hands.

I hold the picture more tightly, as I close my eyes and place myself in the moment, imagining that I have created a portal which guides me back to this memory. Then I feel a hand over mine, and opening my eyes I see her hand, almost identical to mine. Wrinkled fingers, protruding veins contrasting the stark paleness of her skin as our fingers intersect, her trembling hands, still tender and comforting despite their aged appearance. My attention shifts, and her voice brings me back to reality. 'We were inseparable' she says, as she narrates the photograph with a slight quiver in her voice. 'We lived in the same street and we would walk to school together every day, climb our favourite tree and watch as the sunset cast a golden glow onto the fields, illuminating our view of our neighbourhood as we chattered on for hours and hours on end.' She chuckles, and I can envision her laugh in the monochrome photograph, her hazel eyes still clutching onto the elation of youth, the bliss and love still prominent in her gaze even decades after it was taken.

We rarely receive these intimate moments. For as long as I can remember, my grandparents' house was always crowded with family. Ecstatically, my cousins and I would play dress up and would devise fashion shows for our family members. Our parents would photograph us, pretending to be paparazzi desperate to acquire the latest fashion trends. Amongst all of this commotion, my grandparents would sit in their armchairs with a smile etched upon their faces, not saying a word but savouring the moment, nonetheless. Funny how it feels like our childhood was just yesterday, and yet a decade has passed by unnoticed, time disguising its speed.

From what I heard, my great-grandmother always left the door open, as did the entire neighbourhood. My grandmother lived in Morphou for most of her life, which entailed a mesmerising landscape, a plethora of customs and above all a community which considered itself a family. Indeed, Cypriot gatherings are as boisterous, busy and hectic as movies portray with endless rounds of delectable traditional Cypriot foods. Weddings traditionally exceeding one thousand guests, dancing *kalamatiano* until midnight and inevitably meeting relatives,

reiterating the concept that our family tree extends to infinite proportions with uncountable second, third and fourth cousins.

Whilst these customs curate the culture of my native country and the memories that I will forever cherish, the best aspect of my culture is the perennial importance that family and hospitality holds in our lives. All the fondest memories that my grandma reminisces involve family, that is not merely limited to relatives. 'Your great-grandma used to leave the door open all day, and at lunchtime she would cook enough food for the entire neighbourhood. Every day our neighbours would walk in and out of our house, whether it was just for a coffee or a quick bite our house was always filled with so many people, that we inevitably considered everyone our family. Just as they would come to our house, I would find myself spending most of my time in my neighbours' houses. In this photograph, you can see my siblings and the children in our neighbourhood celebrating our high school graduation. We called it our sibling photograph, because we grew up together, and could not bear to go a day without talking to one another.'

My focus is once more diverted to the photograph, and as I mourn the passing of this moment my thoughts are suspended by the key unlocking the door. Bursting into the apartment, my brother and cousins' banter is heard, with a birthday cake in hand and candles to celebrate my grandmother's birthday. Upon their arrival the house once more nurtures the giggles and banter it has become accustomed to since my grandparents moved in many years ago. For the remainder of the evening, we indulged in my grandmother's decadent food, cacophonously sang her favourite songs and shared our beloved memories as children, hysterically laughing at our reenactment of our renowned fashion shows. To conclude the evening, we took a family photograph with our grandmother, knowing that in the future we would hold this picture and revisit and cherish these moments with her. The following day, she framed the photograph and welcomed it to her collection of photographs proudly residing on her nightstand.

If someone had warned me that this would be the final time I would see my grandmother, I would not have believed it. On this day, I held her hand for the final time, not realising that in the days to come I would only have memories of her to hold on to. I heard her anecdotes for the final time not comprehending that I would never hear her narrate them again, instead I would be the one accountable to narrate them in preceding family gatherings. Inadvertently, we performed our final fashion show not realising that we were losing our honorary audience member. We took our final family photograph not knowing that we captured our final moments with our grandmother...

Remarkably, this summarizes both the beauty and agony of not knowing when a moment will be your last one. Not knowing our visit would be the last she would ever receive. From a young age I was taught the value of family and the traditions and customs our Cypriot culture is comprised of. My grandmother taught me to love and treat everyone as family, as did the culture of my country. This principle was repeatedly demonstrated in the way my grandmother always cared and was compassionate for those around her, and the way in which her actions guided the path in which we led.

Today I revisited my grandmother's home expecting to be engulfed by grief in the silent apartment that nurtured all the memories I treasure with my grandparents. On the contrary, I have never felt their presence more. Their armchairs still moulded in the shape of their silhouettes, the kitchen immaculately staged just as my grandmother had set it up and the pictures on her nightstand still emulating the life that my grandparents had led and retaining their presence. First, is the picture of my grandmother's high school graduation. Next is one of our first ever fashion show conducted by my cousins and I, with our grandparents cheering for us in the background and lastly the one of my grandmother's final birthday the final picture she ever took with us.

While these photographs over the years have transformed from black and white, to colour and display loved ones that may no longer be with us, they have not changed. The perennial love for family and traditions has prevailed despite the changes occurring from one photograph to the next, thus reminding us that family is the one constant that has always been a part of us and will always be a vital component of our identity in the future.

For this reason, the Commonwealth should continue acting as a family to enhance cooperation amongst its member states and construct the future we aspire to obtain. Just as photographs have developed over several generations, so has our everchanging society. Thus, we must act and respect each country as a family to endure any hardships or conflicts that will arise. Family is at the heart of every culture of the member states and will be the core principle which will guarantee collaboration and serenity for our future generations.

Afterall, the Commonwealth much like photographs frames the values of our cultures and remind us of the importance of unity and community.

Safety, trust, love and respect.

Ασφάλεια, εμπιστοσύνη, αγάπη και σεβασμός.

Fifty-six countries. One community. One family...

'Family does not necessarily mean blood relatives, but often a description of a community, organisation or nation.'

-Queen Elizabeth II.