A Real Family

"Kids, come in! It's almost time to leave now!"

My grandmother's warm voice called out to us, drifting across the courtyard as serene and tranquil as the sweltering hot summer's day. My brother, cousin, and I looked up from our tricycles where we were parked in the middle of the little garden path. The summer air was stifling, and I could almost taste the dust clogging the air. My other cousin was standing in front of us, holding a plump red grape in her palm. She paused dramatically, and then picked a green grape (of the mouth-wateringly sour variety) from a nearby plant to hold up, yelling "Green light!" before popping it into her mouth.

Giggling, the four of us made our way to the dusty brick one-story that was our grandmother's house. On the opposite side of the courtyard, to our backs, was a skinny brick building with a large rusty metal door faded red set in the center, like the entrance to a castle. This front section of the house served as my grandma's workplace, since she was a doctor that operated at home. Patients would come and be treated here in her "office".

The property, consisting of a courtyard with the gate and house flanking it on either side, was the perfect place of carefree happiness for my brother, cousins, and I. None of us lived here with our grandmother, though; in fact, my brother and I lived on the other side of the globe. We lived in America while all of our relatives lived in Inner Mongolia, China. My mom, brother, and I were here visiting our extended family for the summer. But it wasn't just an ordinary family visit. It was the first time that my brother and I were actually meeting our family. So far, my brother and I had warmed up to our newfound grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins rather well. However, we were still a little shy and felt like guests, not family.

As us kids approached the living room in which the rest of the family were gathered, we breathed in the heavenly smells of my grandmother's cooking that would await us after we came back from our outing. I was greeted with a shout from my mother.

"Joanna, do you want to wear the dress Grandma bought for you to the pictures?"

Pictures. The plan for today was to go get family portraits taken; symbolizing, I suppose, the unity of the family and us, the Americans. I was all for posing for pictures, but I was less than thrilled about the dress.

My grandmother had bought me this frilly cream-colored frock adorned with pink flowers and lace. Even then as a small child I was not a big fan of lacy pink flowers, and I did not like it a whole lot (though I didn't say this to my grandmother). The prospect of wearing an overly flowered, scratchy lace dress to get pictures taken was repulsive to me.

"Nah. I don't really want to wear that dress," I told my mother quietly. She nodded and ran off to grab me a different outfit that would be more appropriate to take pictures in than my current ensemble of a dusty pink T-shirt and worn denim shorts. I dodged between people – not particularly caring that we were in a rush and that we might leave in the next few minutes – and made my way to the bedroom off to the side where there was some peace and quiet.

To my surprise, I found my cousin standing in the small room, gazing at the previously mentioned dress (which happened to be hanging on the wardrobe still in its plastic white bag).

"What are you doing?" I questioned, sitting down on the worn robin's egg blue bedspread.

She motioned to the dress. "If you're not going to wear your dress, I will," she announced boldly. She crossed the room and made a grab for the dress, but springing up from my spot on the bed, I stopped her. Despite my not-so-warm feelings towards the dress, jealousy and indignation had flared up in me at once, and I was angry.

“NO! You can’t wear it! It’s MINE! And I’M wearing it!” Practically snarling, I grabbed the dress from my cousin’s reach and bolted to the door.

I don’t exactly remember the details from then on, but I definitely know that I did end up wearing the dress I hated so much to the photo shoot. I also know that my cousin and I were angry with each other for a short period of time after that.

Looking back, I can clearly see that the whole incident was very childish and immature. Being selfish little girls, my cousin and I both acted foolishly. However, I realize that it shows – for the first time – my cousin and me as true family members that aren’t afraid to bicker and have disagreements. Even in a family, members naturally have disputes and fight, however old or young they may be. I think that this particular incident is the first time that I broke free of my little shell of comfort and really considered my cousin as kin, not just a friend I had to be polite to. Friends do argue, but it’s different than with family. And as with what happens a lot with children, my cousin and I didn’t hold grudges against each other for long. Pretty soon we were back to being carefree playmates, but with a subtle change: we accepted and loved each other as family.

This memory shows how in my trip to China, I grew close to an extended family that I had previously not known due to the thousands of miles between us. The weeks that we spent together that summer long ago bridged that distance. I’d say that we have been since then united as one.