

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Ojichan's Fish Van

Eka Sonksen · Monday, August 17th, 2026

Ojichan wakes up, brushes his teeth, and goes to the fish market at 5:30 in the morning.

My grandpa buys: he barbers, he smiles at the vendors without speaking more than a lick of English, and he buys fish. Obachan owns the sushi restaurant down the street. She employs many workers, including my young mother who helps out and the young Japanese people from my church. Every single day, Ojichan brings fish to the restaurant so that customers can eat.

Truthfully, what I have just written shouldn't be in the present tense. That restaurant is owned by another family now; I went there on my birthday with my best friend. I revisit and realize it is no longer ours, and we no longer own that van.

That van has long been gone by now, but it will constantly smell like fish—a stubborn scent of fish that I will never get to smell, never fading. It's not anything unpleasant since that's him lingering, the evidence that Ojichan was a real man, a Japanese immigrant trying to live in America too. And whatever junkyard that Chevrolet lies in, I imagine that he stays stubbornly attached.

Either way, beyond the morning, Ojichan pursued. The pattern on his clothes was sometimes a stylistic fish swimming through water. He still owned a sweatshirt from one of the fish vendors by the time I knew him.

I knew him when his tanned skin was wrinkled and pruned, his fingers stocky, when his hearing was already muted, and his back ached. He never failed to tell me that he had been a swimmer like me, or that his TV volume was too low, or that he failed to remember Obachan's passing and deflated every time he was reminded.

He didn't back down, not even on his deathbed, where he survived his stroke, leaving him incapacitated and wasting, unable to speak in that loud and mumbly voice of his. In the weeks before that stroke, he survived pneumonia, and Ojichan ripped the IV out of his arm repeatedly, his skin growing blue, bruised and angry.

Ojichan makes an investment every day of his life and doesn't know if it will pay off. He does it anyway. He tries to feed people old fish, and Obachan has to get mad at him. He tries to buy and serve fugu, a blowfish, not realizing that's something you can only do in Japan. Loud. Abrasive. Rude. A stark contrast to my loving and sweet Obachan who owns the sushi restaurant, the one that everyone likes even when her brain gets lost to dementia.

Admittedly, not even the dog liked Ojichan. Every day, a battle broke out: my grandpa yelling and my dog barking.

No, but the dog did like Ojichan, didn't she? The dog pushed Ojichan back through the doors of his room, but Ojichan pulled the dog in with his cane. And once in his room they lay friendly, my grandpa temporarily forgetting the man he was and falling for that sweet dog who did not seem to hate him as much there. The dog let herself be pet by the little boy who seemed to take the place of Ojichan, the boy blooming underneath wrinkled skin and weary bones.

When Ojichan blooms, he truly blooms. I remember him grinning in his room, me, 13, sitting alongside him watching Japanese TV. Before that, when I was 11, he would sit in the living room with my Obachan on our old brown couch, and we would play with my toys. Like the stubborn perennials who never close their petals, a tiny new bud always hidden in the bush below it, unnoticeable but alive. Obachan always liked flowers, so maybe this was why she could put up with him for so long.

Ojichan would sing loudly in the shower, despite the fact that we used to have the bath in the very back of our house—separated from the main room where no one should be able to know. He was funny and easy to rile. Joy radiates from his smile and through his sunglasses, lingering like the scent of fish in his van, sticking out like the IV in his arm he tried so hard to rip out.

The husk of a man on his deathbed did not feel like him at first.

I adjusted my view. I was, back then, about 15 or 16. But I knew what 22 meant. There was a 22 on the wall, written on some sort of maintenance whiteboard, sandwiched between a few other numbers. By chance, 22 is the number following my family.

22 follows us. My Psychology class called it the frequency illusion or the confirmation bias, but I called it a sign. My mother's side of the family: everyone close by is born on the 22nd or the 23rd—my mother, my grandma, and then my two cousins and me. When my grandma passed, she, too, was followed by 22: on the inspection date of her hospital bed is 22, the ICU number is 22. My mother found a tiny paper cutout from a magazine that has 22 written on it by my altar the days after my grandpa passed.

And then all of a sudden I felt him, felt the stubborn air of life clinging to his cold, emaciated body, the hardy perennial fighting against his wilted petals. I saw a flower bloom on its deathbed despite what we had to do.

Ojichan endures the sickly smell of fish every day. He smiles. He pushes back against my dog knowing she would only bark back louder. Annoying my mother constantly, he asks for beers to no end, knowing it causes many health repercussions and had done so in the past already. He was stubborn, so deeply stubborn—doing things to his own detriment simply because he needed to. It made so much sense that this couldn't knock him.

But Ojichan, did you truly want to live, to bloom, stuck in this catatonic body no longer able to think or speak or move? Did you want to rot any longer in that hospital room, in your room back at home watching TV too loudly? Did you want your vibrant spirit to remain tethered to a body unable to match it any longer?

The perspective of the youth is so, so much different from the perspective of the elderly. I know

this. I am constantly reminded of this over and over again. To this day, I don't know what he would have wanted.

Was his stubbornness at fault here, digging himself into the hole for the mere traditional practice of never backing down? Despite his blooming flower, there was no vibrance. He was stuck in a wilting form, rotting, fading, ultimately in so much pain. Inhumane, I thought. Immoral, I thought, to let him live like this with no way to consent or communicate anything. We knew that we had to let him go.

But I wish that just once, even though I hadn't been anywhere near alive, that maybe I could've driven that fish van for him just once and endured the stench alongside him. He wouldn't have liked it if I had tried to take over. He would laugh once, maybe not take it seriously, then have me sit in the passenger seat. But I would insist, and then he would tell me to go inside and let him do his job. He liked enduring it, after all. He liked endurance.

When he didn't look, I would've snuck off into the van anyway, pushing back against him and his stubbornness, against the smell haunting the car, just so he wouldn't have to that day.

(Featured image from [Pexels](#))

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