

REMEMBERING LOLO

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My Lolo had collapsed. Chest pains, they said.

That was on one of the first days of December in 2006. I was nine. I felt no panic. I didn't even worry about how things began happening all at once.

Mother and I had gone out that afternoon to visit a relative in Antipolo. We had been served *sinampalukang manok*. I was finishing my *caldo*, when father phoned us the news that sent us rushing to the village's taxi bay. The ride to UST in España turned my stomach upside down. I think we hurried past every vehicle, and violated almost all traffic rules.

In the hospital, nurses were shouting; stretchers were being pulled here and there. Mother cupped my face in her hands, and told me Lolo was going to be okay. She was lying. He was coughing up blood the last time I saw him. Mother said it was tooth decay, that his gums had bled from eating too much candy. I was worried about his his cigars. He called them his *tabako*. His *tabako* was his talisman. He wasn't himself without it. Had he sneaked in a couple of cigars? Was he even physically strong enough to wake up and light one after collapsing?

I saw a dead body for the first time that night. It wasn't my Lolo. It was a boy of maybe sixteen. There were what looked like nail scratches and bruises on his face, and dried blood smeared over his cheeks and down his chin. I thought that maybe he had fallen down the stairs face first, or run into a pole while he was playing. I didn't know anything about human violence back then. I didn't understand what "*napaaway*" meant. He was wheeled in on a creaky stretcher slowly in front of me. A thin white sheet was draped over his body, but not over his face. I watched silently.

The second dead body I saw was my Lolo's. They pulled his stretcher out of the emergency room, and I recognized his black Islander slippers, with thumb tacks stuck under each sole. He seemed to have shrunk. There was a thin white sheet covering his frail body, and his feet in their slippers peeked out from under it. I watched it roll past me like a grocery cart.

The rest of it is a heavy blur. Somebody told me that he would be taken to a cold place to wait to be picked up by a funeral parlor. I felt very tired.

There weren't many words on our way home. I rolled down the window and felt the whistling wind whipping against my skin. We drove past a crowd of faceless people, and then out into the quiet and empty highway, illuminated by reflectors and warning signs about speed limits. I think there was a full moon.

It was strangely quiet inside the car. I don't remember a single trip with Dad in his red Pajero, without the Eraserheads or Parokya ni Edgar blasting through the speakers. Not this time, though.

And then something seemed to burst deep inside me. It was pain, but the kind of pain I had never felt before. It came in waves of needles, jabbing into my chest. My heart was thudding. I could almost hear it: *thud-thud-thud*, growing louder. Then it gradually ceased, until the only sound was the roar of the Pajero's engine.

I was riding shotgun for the first time. Mother sat in the backseat. I could hear her muffled sobs. I glanced at the foggy side mirror to my right and saw the convoy of vehicles behind us. I wondered if it was silent inside those cars too.

Once, after shifting gears, my father glanced at the rearview mirror. I knew he saw my mother. I knew he was feeling what she was feeling. But he had not shed a single tear. I could tell that he wanted to speak to her. But maybe he couldn't.

In the house the pain in my chest came back. Intense physical pain. Needles of pain, slowly crushing my heart. Then, black out.

The morning after Lolo's passing was eerily quiet. I wondered why Lolo's death didn't seem to matter much to my family. We sat down to the

usual breakfast of eggs, sunny-side up, *pandesal*, piping hot *Batangas Barako*. Nobody spoke of yesterday.

It was only after my father had finished his coffee that he began to speak of plans for Lolo's funeral. He mentioned a gold-plated mahogany casket, 6-foot tall floral stands, chrysanthemums, pink and white carnations, Lola's garden orchids, *Diptyque* candles, a 64-square meter lot for a mausoleum. My sisters sat, still and silent, faces blank with dismay. Nobody spoke but my dad.

Then, suddenly, the house phone rang. It was the morgue calling to say that Lolo's body was ready for pick-up, to be delivered for embalming at the funeral parlor, a few streets away from our home. Only then did I finally take a bite of my *pandesal*.

I know Lolo hadn't dreamt of a grand wake or a burial. Lolo never wanted a mahogany casket. He would have poked fun at his children, for purchasing an overly expensive coffin which would only to be devoured by termites and infested by worms. Lolo would have loved a Romblon marble urn, but not a big one. He would tell me about the time when the government assigned him in Corcuera, and he found that people made souvenirs out of hard marble—vases, jars, garden figurines, toy cars, urns. Lolo would always joke about being cremated, his remains put into tiny urns which would be spread throughout the house. He said playfully that he would very much prefer for people to turn his ashes into home decorations. We'd laugh at the idea for hours, saying to each other, "*Ashes maryosep*."

He never liked flowers, either. He thought their smell was a scent left by bees during pollination. "Bees are sweet" he said, "and they make flowers smell so good." I didn't believe him, though, because he never left the house or read books about bees. I bet he never even knew we had a garden, let alone a hive of bees in the backyard.

My Lolo had lived in this same house nearly all his life and loved the energy of it. The only time he stepped out was when he wanted to sneak a few puffs of his *tabako* in the back porch. After retiring, he had turned into a caveman. He told me he had been in the military for almost 35 years, to serve the country, and to feed his family. The last thing he wanted to do was leave the house again, when half his life he he had already spent away from home.

Lolo dreamed of a wake held in a small room, with incense lit in every corner. We *aren't* Chinese. He simply loved the smell of burning

incense. He particularly loved Citronella, a popular incense fragrance, known to be a good insect repellent. He didn't like bugs. When he would run out of incense, my Lolo and I would sneak off together to Binondo—the only time that Lolo wanted to leave the house. But we would be caught by my Lola who was strictly against incense burning. My Lola hated aromatic objects. She only liked the smell of smell of detergent and cheap department-store hand soaps. But Lolo placated her by bringing back packs of *Eng Bee Tin Hopia* for Lola. And it always worked.

I loved those days. Sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the night, and light one incense stick for him. I waited for a stick to burn out and watched the smoke envelop my whole room.

I know Lolo wanted a wake with only a few relatives, and not a single army veteran. I see my Lolo wincing at the thought of a 21-gun salute at his own funeral. He had told me that sometimes it was just a fake honor bestowed upon soldiers, who really had done nothing but cower during the war. He told me about generals who were generals because of who they knew, and about wars we could have won if only we had fought in the proper way. He never told these stories at the dinner table, never to any of his children. I used to think that he told them to me because I was his favorite *apo*. And if I had stood next to his bed in the emergency room, he would have lived longer, to light another stick of incense, or smoke his favorite *tabako*.

Early that December morning, two lanky guys wheeled in his mahogany casket through the two-door entrance of St. Mark's Funeral Home. The chapel was actually a foyer, with the sunlight streaming in over the wooden benches carefully lined up, and over the red carpet laid flat on the marbled floor. The four corners of the big space were filled with flowers arranged on tall bamboo frames, with names written on pink and white ribbons tied around them. Above his casket was a crucifix, and a statue of Mother Mary to the right. At 7 A.M. people started filling the hall, each dressed in white or black, mostly gentlemen in their 60s, together with their wives. I chose to wear my favorite blue Superman tee, a pair of khaki shorts and rubber shoes. By 9 A.M., a swarm of visitors began appearing like toadstools out of nowhere.

By evening, I found myself nestled against a bench's hard wood, waking up from a long nap. It was almost midnight, but people still kept

coming. The next 5 nights were crazily packed with his *kumpares* from Nueva Ecija, relatives I didn't recognize, but was forced to kiss on the cheek. All I wanted was to sleep. I had grown crabby from lack of sleep. I was told that the Filipino tradition requires you to keep your eyes open for the dead, to watch over the body during its last hours on earth; to skip showers...

It took me a while to realize I still had not looked at Lolo in his coffin. I wondered what he looked like. I heard people say that the embalmer had done a pretty good job. I didn't know what that meant. I never looked at him during his wake. I could have been the first *apo* to see him finally at rest, but maybe he did not permit it. I made sure I didn't go near his coffin until the day of his burial.

But he was trying to tell me something.

It was getting late. My mother had gathered us kids in one corner, to wait for the driver.

The minute I got inside the vehicle that was to take us home. I perfectly understood what my Lolo was trying to say. It was the joke only he and I shared. "*H'wag kang magpapakita sa akin hangga't wala kang dalang tabako!*" For the first time since his death, I managed to crack a smile.

I skipped my shower when I got back home after the first night of the wake. My movements were almost automatic. I stormed into my grandfather's room and headed straight to his closet. My Lolo's closet was a cheap, brown, two-door cabinet bought at a Puregold sale. A full-length mirror was attached to one door. Luckily for me, Lolo never put locks on any of his possessions. I opened the closet door carefully. He never locked his door, either. He was not secretive. The only secrets he kept were those he told me—about the bees, his *tabako*, and his love for incense burning.

I was his favorite and he was mine. With me, he was open, and generous, and calm. I was beginning to understand why I admired him so much. He wanted to make sure I grew up to be just like him. But at that time I was his opposite. Lolo was patient, and I was always irritable. He loved the outdoors, but I didn't.

His closet was surprisingly neat and organized. White *kamisetas* were stacked on one side; colored polo shirts on the other. The cabinet was divided into four sections, clothes shelved like books on a stand. On the top section were his favorites: 2 pairs of khaki pants from the military, a Chinese collared white polo, and his regular *puruntong* shorts.

Lolo and I had talked about things, little things and big things. We had talked about his favorite outfit—*chino* shorts, paired with any collared shirt he found in his closet. I never saw him in a *barong* or *amerikana*. I never saw him in his military uniform. But he wanted to be hip and aware of trends. I'd like to think he revived the *puruntong* madness in our generation, and that he did it with flair.

I was enjoying rummaging through his dresser. For a moment I forgot that I was actually looking for something.

Nobody in the family knew how to light a *tabako*, but Lolo and me. Clearly, I ought to have realized there was something special about that November morning, something to do with clouds of cigar smoke, something in the way Lolo carefully explained how to light a stick. I was only a nine-year-old-boy, and the only thing I knew about cigars was that he never let me touch one expensive cigar. But that morning, I listened carefully to what he was saying about how to light one. You always look for cracks and lumps, he said. These things affect the way it smokes. Then you gently squeeze up and down the cigar's body to make sure it is firm. A quality *tabako* has a rounded end, which does not expose the tobacco inside. That is the end you should methodically cut, either with shears or a tobacco cutter. If done without care, the end of the cigar burns unevenly, which affects its quality. You must light the cigar only with matches. The fuel from lighters spoil the taste. You hold the cigar at least a half-inch from the top of the match flame, and then take a puff. *Never inhale like you'd inhale a cigarette.* Set the cigar down between puffs to avoid the draw from getting too hot. Removing the ashes by flicking is not good. This causes an uneven burn. If the cigar is down to a bit more than half of the original size, you should carefully roll the ash off the cigar, using the edge of the ashtray. This will allow you to enjoy the cigar for a few more good puffs, before putting it out, should you decide to relight the next day. All of these things were a ritual which Lolo followed religiously.

I found it at the bottom section of Lolo's closet—a long box of Antonio Gimenez Churchill Cigars, about six inches in height—resting next to a set of socks bundled up like snowballs. I felt like a child next in line for the carousel with cotton candy on one hand.

I had never held a cigar. But somehow it felt familiar. It did not worry me. I took out a 5 ½ x 42, Corona-shaped brown cigar as Lolo had shown me, and examined it for flaws and soft spots. Sitting next to the rolled-up socks, was a matchbox. Lolo's instructions were simple and easy to

remember. I sat on his bed, calmly holding one cigar and a box of matches. I had no shears nor scissors, so I bit off its end to expose the tobacco. I lit a matchstick and held it up half an inch to the end, then I waited.

I watched the first cloud of smoke emerge out of the stick. The cigar wasn't something that just occupied space. It was something else, something vivid, like memory, and emotion. I watched its smoke form into days in Binondo, red sticks of incense red as cherry bombs, bees and flowers...

With that same unfamiliar familiarity, I put the cigar in my mouth, took one good puff with much *gusto*, and watched it burn on its own.

Loyola Memorial Park in Marikina was an hour away from St. Mark's Chapel in Sampaloc. The city never really cared about the grieving. The ride was silent, much like all the breakfasts we shared ever since Lolo died. There was music from the hearse hearse moving slowly ahead of us. But it was almost inaudible.

My hands secretly slid into my trousers' left pocket. In it was Lolo's box of cigars, which I had guarded for the last 5 days. I took it with me all the time. I only ever let it go in the safety of my own room, resting on my bedside table. And, at night, I slept with my doors locked, afraid my mother would walk in and discover my secret.

Now, I was hiding it like Lolo himself did, safely in my pocket, along with other bulky things, so it wouldn't look suspicious. With the precious box of cigars with me, I knew the sharp needles would never again pierce me as they did the day Lolo died. Instead, I felt thrilled. I was going to give Lolo what he had always wanted, with no one and nothing to stop him, on his last day on Earth.

The burial happened 8 days before Christmas. There were about a hundred people under two huge tents, all holding white roses and white balloons, everyone pleasantly dressed like a bridal entourage. An Indian priest chanted litanies I can't quite remember, mainly because I never really wanted to listen. I waited patiently to look into Lolo's coffin for the first time. I tried not to think of him. I had to fight the urge to bawl my eyes out every time I thought of him. I wanted to be the *apo* who'd make him smile for the last time.

Finally, it was time for final goodbyes. Each member of the family was asked to put a white rose on top of his coffin. I was last. My knees wobbled,

but I managed to compose myself. I stood before the coffin and peered in. There he was, Lolo in a perfect, crisp *barong*, with handmade embroidery on its Chinese collar. He wasn't smiling, of course. And his eyes were closed. He looked calm. Maybe he was just asleep and would wake up once again, and live another day to see the red incense deliberately turning into grey ash, and hear the noisy merchants of Ongpin, and banter with me over hot chocolate during summer mornings, and take me for my McDonald's Happy Meals, inflated swimming pools, birthday parties, roller skates, the steam of hot *Champorado* on typhoon days... Lolo still looked beautiful lifeless.

I reached into my pocket and took out his box of cigars. Without saying a word, I looked at his closed eyes, hoping they'd open last minute... then, slowly, I placed his *tabako* near his head. At that moment I knew he was glad to see me. Then I stepped back, and buried my face in my mother's chest. They closed his casket and I began to sob violently.