

Mother's Passing

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Mother passed away on November 20, 2012, two weeks before my first book of memoirs came out. She had been bedridden for more than four years, afflicted with both Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases. The night before she breathed her last, she was coughing relentlessly and I prayed to God, commending her spirit to Him. I whispered that it was okay with me if she had to go. She had suffered tremendously during those four years, and I prayed that she should go with dignity, the silent dignity that she had exuded in her eighty-four years of existence. She had been both a mother and a father to me and my three older siblings, never had a stable job, and never entertained a lover or a "volunteer" father for us.

She had been having difficulty breathing in the last two weeks, but my tight schedule did not permit me to take her to the hospital for a check-up. That afternoon, I had to first attend the two-day seminar on management planning, a requirement for all UST administrators, since it would be necessary for operational planning for the coming academic year. After all this, I thought, I would definitely have the time for her.

On the second day of the seminar, I was feeling uncomfortable as I went through the papers before me. It was a workshop and we were tasked to identify the objectives of our respective departments and relate them to our mission/vision for the next school year. I was on edge thinking about the voluminous tasks ahead of me. I couldn't concentrate. I looked at my colleagues seated at the other tables. They were busy brainstorming and

preparing their powerpoint presentations. I thought about Mother and her scheduled check-up at the hospital. I was distracted. I silently put my laptop into its bag and gathered my papers.

I looked at my watch. It was quarter past three. I stood up and whispered to the usher that I would use the rest room. Without blinking or turning around, I hailed a cab and headed home.

I was about to get off the cab when my phone rang. It was Marlon, my boy helper.

"Kuya, bilisan mo. Hindi na yata humihinga si Lola," he nervously cried.

I dashed to the lobby of our condominium and ordered the guards to hail a cab immediately. I was so shook up that I forgot to tell the cab driver who brought me home to wait for me.

The ride in the elevator was a very slow climb. My neck was perspiring so profusely that a drop or two must have dripped on the blouse of the lady beside me. She brushed it off and gave me an annoyed look. I wanted to tell her that if this was not an emergency, I would have given her a piece of my mind. But no, not today. Not at this time when Mother needed me the most.

When I opened the door, Glo, Marlon's mom, who had been Mother's chief caregiver for almost seven years, was crying interminably. *"Sabi ko naman sa iyo, 'wag ka nang papasok kasi masama na ang kalagayan ni Nanay, kagabi pa,"* she sobbed and then covered her face with her damp hankie. *"Wala na si Nanay."*

I wanted to punch her for her impertinence, but I restrained myself. I tried to wake Mother up, who was lying stiffly on her bed. *"Ma, ma, naririnig mo ba ako?"* I placed her on the wheelchair, and hollered at the guards, who were standing by the door, to help us.

When we were inside the taxi—Glo and Marlon, with my mother on their lap in the back seat, and I in front beside the driver—Glo, in between sobs and in a shrill voice, recounted what happened that afternoon. She said she had fed Mother with *sopas* and they had gone on to watch an afternoon program on TV. Moments later, Mother bowed her head. Just like that. I was not paying much attention to the details because my mind was whirling with thoughts—*Is this what it will be from now on? I am now*

a full-fledged orphan. Please God, I didn't mean what I prayed for last night. Don't take her yet. Not yet.

My thoughts were sidetracked by the driver's telling us that it would be difficult to make it to the UST Hospital because the traffic was incredible along Bonifacio Street. It was almost five in the afternoon and this was an emergency. I instructed the driver to take us to the emergency room of the Mandaluyong Medical Center instead.

With me carrying Mother, we banged open the door to the emergency room. Two nurses quickly rolled the stretcher toward us and the doctor on duty began rapidly pumping Mother's chest while asking me multiple questions. While I lamely answered her questions, I realized that we were at the center of the room and all eyes were directed toward us. Several people came closer and in whispers asked my helpers what had happened.

I scanned the room. There was deep gloom on the faces of the people. One patient was complaining about her swollen leg, and her companion, presumably her daughter, was tirelessly fixing a pillow beneath it. The daughter was good-naturedly telling her that the doctor would be coming to see her any minute now. A kid, who was sitting on a wheelchair and whose head was bleeding, was given a cold compress by one of the nurse aides. His parents were in a corner, arguing in hushed tones. Across Mother's bed, a pale, unattended, old man was clutching a rosary. Two doctors, followed by a number of interns with their notes and stethoscopes, shifted from bed to bed, the former briefing the latter on the patients' histories. I felt numb. I just stood there like a passive observer.

I learned that we were supposed to be transferred to the ICU but there was still no space, and one patient had a serious illness, so the doctor requested us to stay in the emergency room a while longer. The nurses brought the ventilator and painstakingly set it up, despite the cramped space in the emergency room. I was instructed to continue pumping the bag manually to inject air into Mother's lungs.

We stayed in the emergency room for another three hours, and, my sister *Ate* Beth and nephew Christian, who came eventually after I had called them, had to take turns at the manual pump. Afterwards, we were moved to the ICU. Since it was a public hospital, I had to buy practically all the medicines outside, especially the boosters to be injected into Mother's system. She had no pulse yet and her blood pressure was failing. I was given

a thick wad of prescriptions and was directed to specific drugstores. Eventually, the doctor informed us happily that she had a pulse. But they would still be monitoring her blood pressure through out the night. Since it was almost midnight, my sister told me to go home and get some rest while they would watch over Mother at the hospital. She said she would take care of calling our brother in the US, informing him of Mother's condition, and convincing him to book the most immediate flight back to the Philippines. No need to worry about that, she whispered.

In the jeepney, I wondered whether my last prayer to God would prove to be a powerful one. *Oh God, I'm taking it all back*, I fervently whispered. *Please, keep my mother alive. I am willing to do all I can just to have her back. Please, don't take her yet.*

Thoughts of my kindergarten graduation came to me. I was six, and I remember Mother, so excited that I was graduating valedictorian of the class, as she was fixing her hair in front of the mirror. "You are really special, Jack. I am so proud to be your mother. Even though you didn't know your American father, and he doesn't know of this, I am sure he would also be proud of you if he did. *Sayang at hindi kayo nagkakilala*," she said. I just stood there as she turned around and hugged me tightly. I wished I could've done more then. I wished I could've done more now. I fell asleep with a splitting headache.

Early the next morning, I was roused by a telephone call from *Ate* Beth. "Please come to the hospital, it's urgent."

"I hope it's nothing serious, *Ate*," I responded fretfully.

"Just come here, quick."

When I entered the ICU, I saw *Ate* Beth talking to the resident doctor. Her eyes were red and her cheeks, puffy.

"Oh, it's good that you are here," the doctor said. "Listen, your mother had a seizure a few minutes ago. And since last night, her BP hasn't gone up. I suspect that the reason she had a pulse last night was the booster medicines that we injected into her." He escorted us out of the ICU and in between pauses, he remarked, "I am really sorry to tell you this, but I am afraid you and your sister have to make a crucial decision about this now."

"What decision?" I inquired blankly.

“That we have to pull the plugs. Mother is not getting better,” *Ate* Beth sniffed.

“But our brother is coming home from San Diego,” I turned to the doctor. “Can this wait?”

“Her blood pressure is way too low. The machine is the only thing that is keeping her alive,” the doctor replied. “In fact, I had sensed this since yesterday, but I figured that you still didn’t want to give up. A patient can only survive without air for about five minutes. I saw your mother’s records and learned that she collapsed, and was only revived after almost thirty minutes. She must have been brain-dead since yesterday. I am sorry. But it is still your choice.”

Glo burst into sobs in a corner upon hearing this. The doctor went back inside the ICU. I made a tense call to my brother in the US. I explained to him that *Ate* Beth and I had to make that crucial decision of pulling the plugs off. He told me that he was about to board the airplane bound for Manila, and would love to see Mother alive, but if it was necessary, then we should go ahead with the decision. I nearly broke down hearing this, but I wanted to sound strong on the phone. Tin, my niece, arranged for the burial in Pampanga. In the hospital, the doctor said that we had to finally say goodbye to Mother.

It took about four hours for the funeral people to arrive. They came all the way from Angeles City. The hospital personnel informed us that we had to use a different exit in bringing out the body. It is hospital policy that people should not see a dead body in the common elevators and exits. So the funeral people covered Mother with a white linen blanket and brought her to the fire exit, like some kind of spoiled delivery. Despite the disapproval of the hospital personnel, I decided to accompany Mother and the men from the funeral home. In the fire exit, I snarled at the funeral personnel to be very careful, because the body was bouncing as they carelessly descended the stairs. “This is my mother,” I told them, “and not some unknown cargo.”

I thought about the difference between the treatment of the living and the dead in hospitals. When Mother was still alive, we were warmly received in the emergency room. The doors were opened for us. Stretchers, wheelchairs and seats were offered. Everybody wanted to ask questions. Forms needed to be filled out. People were sympathetic. Now that Mother

was dead, she was just considered wasted goods. No nurses and attendants escorted us out. We had to pass through a dimly lit walkway where unused hospital equipment were haphazardly stored. I realized that this was literally the back door of the hospital. There were unused wood, defective hoses, and trash bins filled with dextrose bottles and used rubber gloves crowding the area. The floor was covered with puddles of water created by the leaks in the air-conditioner drainers. Slippery moss had thrived on them which almost caused me to slip.

Outside the hospital, I tried to find a decent hearse that would take Mother to the memorial chapel in Pampanga. I saw a white *Tamaraw* delivery van with clear windows and no air-conditioner. The funeral director said that if they had opted to bring the hearse, we would be obliged to get a permit from every town that we would be passing through and pay required fees. It was necessary to use this kind of vehicle so people won't suspect that there was a dead body in the van. I did not want to hear this. I told the funeral people that my sister and I had to go home first because we still had to get burial clothes for Mother. On the way to Angeles City, nobody spoke a word inside the vehicle.

Ate Beth and I agreed to use the elegant white dress worn by Tin during her high school graduation for Mother. I initially thought about the ecru outfit with lavender-and-rose design that I had bought for Mother some months earlier, a dress that she never got to wear. But I found it too garish for her burial. The funeral people quickly arranged the room, like skilled artisans preparing for a big exhibit. Lights were immediately switched on. Pews were arranged. The first flower arrangements were placed near the area where the coffin was to be laid.

An hour later, I was summoned by the embalmer to check Mother's make-up and appearance. I saw her lying peacefully on the drainer. Although she was neatly dressed and her make-up was all right, I realized that she had no eyebrows and her hair needed to be teased. She was also wearing the wrong lipstick. She never liked red. She said it was vulgar and loud. I requested to be allowed to redo her hair, eyebrows, and lips. The embalmer simply nodded.

I started applying the dark brown eyebrow pencil. When she was alive, I used to do this for her. "Don't darken my brows too much. I don't want people to see two fat leeches above my eyes," she would always

say. When she became sick and wheelchair-bound, she would just smile whenever I would give her the mirror. “Look, you are really beautiful with those brows, Ma,” I would tease her. “*Wala na, matanda na talaga,*” she would answer softly. I shaded her lips with the rose-colored lipstick that I had brought. It was her favorite shade. Then I curled her thin hair and combed it sideways so it would not cover her face. When I took another look at her, I saw that she was beautiful again.

My mind flew back to that distant graduation day, and the announcement: “*John Jack Wigley, valedictorian!*”

I remember climbing the stage with Mother when my name was announced. I was nervous and fidgety. I saw the principal and some of my teachers looking in our direction, smiling. Mother held my moist hand and brushed the stain off my white toga before we walked across the center of the stage. She removed my cap, flicked the sweaty hair off my forehead, and placed the medal over my head. “I am so proud of you, *anak,*” she whispered, almost like a prayer. It was like a send-off for me, a benediction certifying that in a few years, I would be in charge of my life, with her guiding me along the way.

In a few minutes, relatives and condolers would be coming. I looked at Mother for the last time, as I held her hands. I was glad that, these many years later, I was able to do for her what she had once done for me.