

Things I Didn't Say To You

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My mother used to say that the blood of the covenant is thicker than water. Family is the rule and it laid down the law. Nothing comes before family except for God. She and I often had interesting conversations; sometimes it would lead to us strengthening our mother-daughter bond, but more often than not it would highlight the growing cracks in our ever-fragile relationship. She and I were atoms, built on opposite charges and yet co-existing at the same space despite an imbalance.

“Rose! Come here!” my mother’s voice roared through the hallway, reaching the room I was in at the opposite of the hallway. I dashed through the corridor, almost tripping on my scattered books on the floor.

“Yes, ma?” I stood by the doorway of my parents’ room; my disheveled form a contrast to hers whereas everything, even the dust, was in place.

She peeked at me over the glasses that sat on her nose. “It says in the newspaper that playing musical instruments can help you with high school admissions— I’m signing you up for piano lessons.”

My body ran cold. “Ma, I already have swimming lessons, student council and poetry—”

“No buts.” She interrupted. “If I were you, I’d be grateful that your mother is so invested in your future. Not every family has a hands-on mom.”

“I am grateful...”

“It’s not enough.” Her piercing gaze softened when my eyes finally met hers. “Do it for me, will you? You’d do anything for me, right?”

“I... okay I’ll do it.” but the weight on my shoulders told me a different thing.

When I was four, I would often watch her get ready for church on Sunday mornings. The way she tinted her lips rouge reminded me of how slow time moved as a young child; our eyes would meet each other through the mirror and her mouth would tilt slowly upwards, like we shared a secret only the both of us knew. I always wanted to be just like her. With my father working overseas, it was always just me and mom. Two peas in a pod. Like rice and beans. A carbon-copy of each other, as other people would say it. It was moments like those that made me realize the softness of living; how every touch and movement could be gentle and forgiving. And yet, as I grew up, delicate moments with my mother disappeared like a teardrop running down one’s cheek.

“Stop crying.”

I tried to stop the sobs escaping my mouth, but the pain just kept coming and coming. The moment my third-grade teacher gave us back our final exam papers, I knew I had to be prepared for my mother’s reprimand— I knew my A- could never be enough. To most people, it’s more than enough, but with my mother? It screams mediocrity.

“I told you to stop crying!” my mother’s cane swished through the air, straight onto my behind. “This is the consequence of your actions. Didn’t I tell you to study enough? Why didn’t you study enough?!”

“But I did!” I pushed the words out of my mouth amidst the ongoing sting from the steel cane. “I did! I promise I did! Why don’t you believe me?”

My mother grabbed the back of my head to lift my eyes up to hers. Her stare always penetrated my soul— she’s often complimented to be a beautiful woman, but to me she looked like a monster.

“You...” she mumbled in an ice-cold voice. “You will become my first failure if I don’t do anything about it.”

Her steel cane glimmered under the fluorescent light, an image I knew all too well. I live with the pain she inflicts on me every single day, and this one is no different. “*It’s okay,*” I tell myself as my backside bears the brunt of the heavy cane, “*It will eventually be okay.*”

I forgot when she and I started drifting apart. I don’t know whether it started when I turned 9 and made more mistakes than you can count with your hands and toes, or if it began when I started questioning whether perfection was the only way through a mother’s heart. The cleanliness of my pink-themed room was what I would say, polished. Every Barbie doll was lined up in a complete straight line, exercise books were always filled with answers even before school started and the large expanse of the marble flooring was always free of crumbs and droplets.

“*I only did that because I loved you*” is something she often told a young me after a beating session. Her manicured nails would rake against the softness of my tear-stained face. Being comforted by the very person who hurt me is conflicting. There’s so much fear towards her that lives within me, the thought of her makes me go numb that sometimes I bite my nails and pick at my skin in unease. Yet despite the constant dread her existence gives me, I reach towards her outstretched hands when I fall apart. Her validation is what keeps me hard and strong. I needed to know if I had love in my life as a kid, and my mother ingrained in me from a very young age that the people who love you will hurt you. It’s simply how the world

functions. That's the reason why despite my scarlet cheeks and hands trembling from fear, I would always welcome the punishment that came from her after I did something wrong. Sometimes, it would be about how my grades are slipping and other times, it would be about small things like being late to piano lessons. I saw it coming almost every time and as a Catholic, penance was mandatory. I guess basic values and a black and white perspective came with its own thorns. I don't think I ever blamed her, she grew up under the same corporal household and it was the only thing she knew. It was a cycle; a pattern that formed its own roots, sowed and watered by every generation that came and left.

The last time she said that to me was when I broke a pencil sharpener. Details are difficult to remember, but on that particular day I was rushing to finish a school project that had been due the next day. If I close my eyes and think hard enough, I'll remember bits and pieces of me enclosing the tip of the pencil through the sharp edges. I think I grabbed the handle bar and turned it too hard, breaking it into pieces.

“What did you do?”

At the sharp and ominous tone of her voice, I stiffened up and slowly turned around to face my mom. As usual, her hair was tied in a low bun resting against the pulse of her neck base. Her face was void of emotion, not a single clue telling me what I needed to expect. The calm before the storm.

Once her heavy palm met the softness of my cheek, I knew I wanted to stop the cycle. The realization of abuse is never easy; it hits you with the weight of a thousand boulders. Your foundation cracks, and no amount of cement will fix the amount of loathing—for yourself

and the abuser—that comes after the years and years of maltreatment. Fragmented memories aren't the most reliant, but intense emotions are something that clamps onto you. I believe recollections and physical pain are something that disappears. I heard somewhere that the body renews itself every seven years, that a cell's lifespan is short and all the skin that has been touched and broken replaces itself with something new. In a similar sense, all the physical pain that one has experienced disappears—or is pushed to the back of your mind—with every cell that regenerates. How one feels or reacts to the pain is a different thing; depending on how painful it is to carry, you either embrace it or you keep it in a box. I buried mine in a dusting pink box, decorated with childlike scribbles penned in rouge.

The more I picked up on being self-sufficient, the more I felt the distance between my mother and I. During the ten summers I had lived through, it was at the eleventh when I finally found the recipe to being the poster child of perfection. I pursued academic excellence to avoid disappointing my mother, thrived in extra-curricular activities to appease her expectations and was the quiet daughter, never complaining and always understanding. I unknowingly was stuck in another cycle; this time a pattern that I started. There was only one victim and perpetrator, and all signs and clues pointed to me. In order to avoid my mother's punishments, I punished myself. I was living not for myself, but for self-preservation. The need for perfection came from within me, and not from external sources.

One seemingly normal morning, I woke up to the sound of birds chirping. It was a weekend and I was allowed to sleep in, and I chose to keep my eyes open instead of drifting back to dreamland. My favourite thing about my day happens in the morning. The silhouette of the sun rays dancing with a window's stained glass created these swirling blue and yellow patterns on the marble floor. They form contours that change with the direction of the sun's

glare, showing me all these beautiful combinations— sometimes they can even look like Paddington the Bear. It reminds me that with every morning I wake up, I get closer and closer to the day wherein I can finally breathe— the day when I can finally leave my mother's graveyard of buried hopes and choking love.

I got out of bed and went downstairs to greet my mom good morning when I saw an unfamiliar figure sitting by our dining table. The old man looked tired, wrinkles lining his face in different directions. He had a hat on, hiding his greying hair that stopped right below his ears. I recognised him after a few moments— he's my grandfather's brother who lived in Manila and worked as a farmer. I saw him a few times a year when we would fly back to my mother's hometown; I never actually spoke to him because he kind of intimidated me. He always had a smile on his face. I was not drawn to people who looked nice— they always seemed to be hiding something dark within them.

“Rose! Good thing you finally decided to get out of bed. Our guest has been waiting to see you all morning” said my mother who was still in her pajamas.

I glanced at my great-uncle who was staring at me with a wide smile on his kind face. He was missing a tooth (several, actually) and I couldn't help but think of him as someone who didn't fit the house. He looked as if he wasn't bound by anything, going by his own rules in life and just vibrantly existing. I could tell by the way he ate with his hands, bellowing in laughter even as his mouth was filled with rice. What was it like to be that carefree?

“He's going to stay with us from now on. I'm leaving Davao for a few months so he'll be taking care of you— be a good girl okay? He's family.” I should be surprised by this, but my

mother often leaves me with relatives when she leaves the country. I never got close with any of them, they never stayed long enough for them to be a constant figure in my life.

My mom left the Philippines soon after that, and I was left under the care of my great-uncle. Even with my mother out of the house I did what I was supposed to do: I went to school, piano lessons and sometimes on the weekends I went to swimming lessons. The only difference is that when I wake up in the morning, I am welcomed by the delicious waft of traditional Filipino dishes that would make my tummy rumble. My great-uncle—whom I now call Lolo— would always greet me with a soft smile on his face. Sometimes when I'm scarfing down my breakfast, he would gently comb through my unruly wet hair, which I found weird at first, but eventually I found myself eagerly sitting by the dining table with a hairbrush next to me. About two months into being taken care of by him, I started wondering when he was going to leave. I was getting used to a source of warmth; he gave me love without asking for anything in return.

In Filipino society, having a male figure as your primary caretaker was often frowned upon. I lived in a somewhat matriarchal town where women were viewed with more importance. It's different now, but back then females ran the area. Whenever my lolo would pick me up from school, I would tell him to wait for me a street away from school grounds; there was this sense of shame that came with it, as if I was being ungrateful for his presence. In all honesty, I think I just wanted to avoid questions from overbearing and inquisitive strangers. I remember walking out of the school gates, permit in hand and head held high as I walked with a purpose to where my great-uncle was waiting for me.

He would always be in the same spot: hiding from the blaring heat under the shade of a street food vendor. The image of an ailing 60-year-old standing by a worn-out pavement did little to ease the guilt that I felt. Despite lolo being loving and caring towards me, I was ashamed that an old man was taking care of me. I never told my friends about him, and I never asked him to wait for me inside the school grounds. I didn't know how to accept love— after a constant experience of brutality, how does one welcome goodness when you know it'll eventually disappear? I think a part of him knew that I didn't want to be seen in public with him. Nevertheless, he would always be waving erratically to capture my attention, while his other hand was busy carrying a plastic bag that had my favourite ice cream cone in it. Hot summer days were year-long in Davao, not a day passed by when my back would be damp from the sweat. My Lolo countered this by always having a face towel with him. While waiting for our ride home, he would wipe my face dry with a gentleness that warmed my heart— a contrast to his ageing and perspiration-filled face.

To my surprise, lolo never left even when my mother came back from her trip. Over the next few years, lolo and I would develop the same after school routine. Despite the endless tirade of strict teachers and my mother's academic expectations weighing on me, I found something to look forward to in the afternoons. The ice cream cone, the smell of the polluted and warm air, the sound of fishballs being fried into golden crisps next to us— all these things were sacred to me. When the clock hits 4:30 pm, I run towards my lolo's usual spot and I tire him with childish gossip and the recent early 2010s trends; and he would always just listen with a tender smile on his face.

“Oh, apo? Why the long face?” he asked after picking me up from school one afternoon.

“Lolo...” I mumbled. “I didn't get a perfect mark on my quiz...”

He stared at me for a bit then reached out to tuck a stray hair behind my ear.

“Are you scared of your mom?” he whispered tenderly.

“What am I going to do?” I replied with a trembling voice, eyes already swelling with tears from the image of my mother’s daunting figure.

He smiled back. It was comforting. “Don’t worry, I’ll talk to your mom okay? Then I’ll cook your favourite dish to make you feel better” he said as he grabbed my hand and we continued walking home.

—

“She’s just a kid, Mary”

I huddled closer to my parents’ door so I could hear my lolo’s conversation with my mother. My heart was racing from the expectancy of another beating.

“If I don’t teach her a lesson, she’s never going to learn! What would the family think of me if I can’t get my own daughter to be successful?” my mother shrieked, as I cringed away from the door.

“You’re going to lose her if this continues” my Lolo’s loud voice trembled through the walls, and it reached my no longer wavering heart.

Looking back now, I realize that the sun visor was too small for both him and I, so half of his body would always be baking under the heat while I stayed completely hidden from the burning sun. The day when I told lol about my grade was the first time my mom didn’t beat me up for having an imperfect mark. I had another mediocre grade after that, and I received nothing from her— not even a slap to the cheek. The difference from before and after lolo appeared in my life was glaring: for the first time, someone was actually shielding me from the biggest source of anxiety in my life.

When I was seventeen, my lolo passed away from a stroke. I had already moved to Hong Kong by that time, and with the hustle and bustle of daily life, I wasn't able to communicate with him often— maybe, two to three conversations every few months. I often missed his long-distance calls because I was too caught up with school. I remember how the news was delivered to me: tired from school after a long day, I was standing by my bedroom door ready to pass out from exhaustion when I felt my phone vibrate, waking me from my reverie.

“I think you need to sit down for this,” said my dad through the phone. His voice sounded particularly grim, every syllable was stretched out as if he was biding his time. He continued speaking, but my confused mind could only make out words like “gone”, “direct flight”, “funeral” and “goodbye”. Thinking about it now, it had to be my dad to make the call. My mother wasn't taking the news of Lolo's death well, breaking the news to her estranged daughter was the least of her worries.

Every time I try to remember what exactly happened on that day, my memory would fail me. I don't remember how I reacted either, it was like I pushed every emotion into a box and shoved it at the back of my closet. With the growing mountain of memories and feelings stashed away, one would assume I was a master at avoiding emotions; but when your immediate response to heaviness was avoidance, it's a telling sign of the collapse looming over you.

When you grieve, life stops for a moment. Grief takes a hold of you in a chokehold— it's leftover love that's misplaced, lingering aimlessly inside the expanse of your universe. When my mother and I flew back to the Philippines, I felt like I was having an out of the body experience. I didn't feel the ground against my feet and the sweat trickling down my back

didn't faze me one bit. By the time we got to the funeral service, I was already in autopilot mode. My memories with him were the only thing running through my mind: his warm hand on my trembling back as I cried from being screamed at by my mother, his smile being brighter on a hot summer's day in Davao, him peppering kisses on my arm when I come visit from Hong Kong on summer holidays. I refused to tell him that I loved him before because I didn't know how to express emotions properly. But I wished I told him I loved him, that he made my days safer when he's beside me. I wish he knew that I stopped biting my nails and picking on my skin because of him. I wish he knew that I don't know how to go on without his light.

His casket gleamed under the soft lights that escaped the curtain's attention. The swirling patterns of silver and gold were softly wrapping the white encasing. It matched how I viewed him: a glowing champion, existing as if magic was inspired by him. The small flowery details by the end of the casket made it look like sunflowers and daisies were growing over his oxford-clad feet— it reminded me of how he brought life and encouraged growth wherever he went. He was larger than life, and he gave me a childhood wrapped in tenderness and time.

I was buried in grief. The moment the taste of *Adobo* hit the tip of my tongue, I bursted out crying. You never forget the first meal you have during a funeral. I always associate food with grief; the way both factors hit all of your five senses with a full force and just the right emotion tugging on your heart. The viand was fresh out of the pot, and I didn't realize at that time that the roof of my mouth had been burnt from the scalding heat of the marinated pork. My vision was blurry and my hands weren't working properly; they were trembling, making the plain white rice go everywhere.

The only person who understood how I felt was my mother. We both would wake up at 6 in the morning to sit by the casket, it was customary to have at least one family member watching over the body. My lolo always had two, sometimes even three. In those four days, it was as if my mother and I had taken residence right next to him. We would sit in silence, but there would be an understanding that only the both of us knew. It was quiet, both of us numb to the point where I think we needed mood rings to tell us how we felt. She and I, despite our constant tug-of-wars, lived with the same experiences. She and I knew the brunt of abuse from parents. Only she and I knew about the weight of being a daughter born into a family that perpetuates the cycle of self-loathing, grief and self-inflicted perfection. We are mirrors of each other—mimicking each other's slow movements, trying to find our place in a world filled with heaviness and pain.

When nights came, I would curl up next to my mother. Our backs would always be facing each other, not knowing how to break down the cemented walls that we both have carefully built over the past few years. And yet, despite the distance, I felt closer to her on those evenings than I ever did. We both loved lolo because he brought change. He changed her just as much as he changed me. He stopped her from being the monster I once knew, and he made me believe she had the ability to let go of intergenerational abuse. There was also something about shared loss—the connectedness and comfort it offers made it easier for us to keep going. It felt as if my mother and I had something in common again. In those moments, perfection, expectations and resentments ceased to exist.

On the fifth day, we buried my great-uncle. Everyone was wearing pristine white shirts. There were flower bouquets everywhere and for the first time, the sun wasn't blazing in all its glory. The cotton-candy clouds gave us bluish hues that made everything look softer. Under

the soft breeze of March, I watched as my lolo was lowered to the ground. I felt my tears brimming over my already puffy eyes and before I could even begin sniffing, I felt a warm hand over mine. I looked to my right, and I met my mother's tear-stained face. She had a small smile on her face, and it brought me back to when she would smile at me through the mirror. She squeezed my hand and I squeezed back, and I am reminded of the pink box stashed away deep within me. There are a lot of things I wanted to tell her: I hate her and what she's done to me, she makes it hard for me to love, she made me think I was difficult to love. But all these thoughts are manifestations of who I used to be before lolo. Now, I understand that my mother also has a hard time loving. She also thinks she's a difficult person. So I let the box open on its own and I started letting go of everything that held me back from accepting and understanding her. Maybe, the only way to stop the cycle was through me. I have to take the first step towards forgiving.

My mother and I are complex creatures—the path to forgiving is never easy, but grief does something that encourages us to change for the better. My lolo would have wanted me to accept my mother's small steps towards apologizing for what she had done to me; her being a place of comfort during his death was a start. We both have to navigate how to continue living on without lolo in our lives, but that's one of his superpowers: his kindness knows no bounds and even with people such as my mom and I— whose lives began with pain and brutality— can learn how to use love to ease the pain of life.