

## The Passing

Undismissed guilt, put away the hangman's noose, my mother was dying and there was nothing I could do.

How does a man seek redemption for the sins of the boy? He can't, so I live with regrets. They linger like the smell of rotting debris; no matter how many times I try to disguise the scent, it remains. Regrets over being powerless, regrets over ignorance, and regrets over poverty. I should have stayed home and done more. I ran away because I was tired of our way of life.

I left home at 18. I visit but never stay. Leaving was an attempt to escape misery, something the poor are rarely able to do.

I was 20 when she died. What chance at life or happiness did she really have? Born into migrant life, an on-again, off-again education. And while still bright eyed and full of dreams, she marries a wetback. That's what her family called the man she chose to run away with. Run to where? Shattered dreams and migrant shacks. She bore ten children who she could barely clothe and feed. The children were the consequence of indulging in the one thing still not denied the poor—sexual intimacy. But none of us complain about our shot at life.

Earlier that day she sent for me. She needed money to buy cough medicine; some bureaucratic quack in the name of expediency prescribed it for her condition. An autopsy would later reveal she died of congestive heart failure complicated by pneumonia. The hospital's cruel response, "Why didn't you get her here sooner?" We were children. We depended on her. We followed her lead. She endured the discomfort because she feared another bill she couldn't pay. It was only desperation that made her ask for outside help. It was too late, so I say she died of poverty.

She had reached out to me in a failed attempt to find relief. I had none to give. Mama is sick, all she wants is cough medicine to ease her breathing. And I can't help cos I'm broke.

I'm not broke now, but it's too late, and I'm left knowing her death could have been prevented if the times were gentler.

More often than not, I imagine what it feels like to slip away, to drown bit by bit in fluids too difficult to dispel. How horrible it is to suffer as she did. She must have anguished over what life would be like for those she would leave behind if she died; children who still depend on her for protection. She knows that poor children, especially her kind, have few champions or heroes. In the end it would be children aiding children, clinging to any scraps the American dream would toss under the table.

The morning of that fateful day I went to her side. I walked into the same rundown house I ran away from. There, Mother sits in a chair huddled in a blanket, surrounded by the worried faces of children. She shows me the prescription and asks, "Can you pay for the medicine?" I have no choice but to look down into her tired brown eyes; I want to tell her the truth, instead I say, "I'll see what I can do." It's easier than saying no. She is silent and has nothing more to say. Maybe it's to conserve her strength, or maybe it's because she knows the truth. I'm as familiar to her as her kitchen. She knows what it's like to open a pantry that's empty, yet she needs to check one more time, just to see if there is something hidden behind an empty jar. She understands scarcity and the word no, it's as common to her as mending worn-out clothes. Most of her life is plagued by rejection and disappointment. She's grown accustomed to the word no—I can't utter it. But she knows no relief will come from me.

After I left, I know she must have shed tears, not for herself, but for the children nestling at her side. I can imagine her gently caressing their hair, comforting them the way she used to comfort me.

The tender pecks on the cheeks will forever be gone. No time to get it right or explain why life is the way it is. She begins to slip into darkness and I'm not there.

On the night she passed away, it was up to my little sister to find a phone and call for the ambulance. Inside the howling hearse, Mom is scared, so my sister reads a Psalm to her. The one that talks about valleys, shadows and death. Mom believes in God and always travels with a Bible. So my little sister sits as close to mother as she can, and reads to her over the cry of the siren, holding a tear stained bible that marks my sister's grief. Brave little girl. Scared, crying little girl. Mama knows she's dying and needs to hear from her God, and there is no better sound than the innocent, angel like voice of her daughter. My mother, the one who held my hand in the dark, might have been reaching out for mine, and it wasn't there.

I arrive at the hospital. I soon stare at the woman who bore me, fought with me, and loved me. She is unconscious; the white pillow that supports her head serves as contrast for the dark black hair that cries out—I'm still young! A plastic mask covers the beautiful brownness that reveals her heritage. Plastic tubes and wires make themselves part of her being what surrounds her are expensive mechanical symbols of a wealthy society. There for her death, but not for her life.

The blue apron that bares the stains of flour and the scent of fresh tortillas, is replaced by a sanitized death shroud in the guise of the hospital gown. Then a crash-cart wheels into the room and we are ushered out. A little later the death masks file out in funereal like procession; mama's struggle is over—death has won.

The nurse cleans her up, and says, "Take as long as you need". What we need is unattainable—our mother. Instead, what lays before us are the remains of a frail body on a stainless-steel gurney with white sheets neatly tucked around it. No way to say I'm sorry, no way to say goodbye, no way to be redeemed. She has run out of time and so have I.

My father touches her cheek, and in a choked, childlike voice, says, "She's still warm, she can't be dead." The disbelief wells up in the green eyes that must have enslaved my mother's heart and made her stay with him, even though he drank too much and made too little. He is driven to

tears. This is the second time I ever see him cry. The first time was when my grandfather died. He felt helpless then too. He grieved his father's passing from a million miles away. He was in a country that didn't want him. He was saddled with debt. He had a family he tried to support with a dead-end job that left little means at the end of a long week. All his misery and anguish must have been building up in his heart. I watched as he grabbed his shotgun and went outside into the darkness and pointed it to heaven and had each shell speak his mind to an absent God. The thunderous booms of the shotgun covered his cries, and when the gun spoke no more, he fell to his knees and cried. Now, my mother is dead, and I understand the painful helplessness that death thrusts on a soul.

But this night, this painful night, I shed no tears. There is no time; I have a pauper's funeral to plan.

The funeral director was nice enough to accept what the county was willing to pay. Their service included a coffin made of pine covered in grey velour; I placed my hand on the coffin, I can still feel the coarse texture of the cloth. We managed a large flower arrangement of palm fronds and white lilies. We placed it on her casket, hoping to hide the shame of poverty that was the grey coffin. I am the second of ten, and at twenty I buried my mother.

Back then I believed in a God, so for the funeral I find a holy man to speak the words that are meant to comfort and appease. I don't recall his words, but I can still see my little sisters cling to mother's coffin, wailing as if somehow the intensity of their cries will penetrate the veil of death and summon back our mother. I stand silent as others pull my sisters off the anchor of their existence so mom's coffin can be lowered into the cold ground. They resist, clinging to the one person who truly loved them. They cry out, "Please God, don't take my mother." They still expect some divine presence to change the laws of the universe and give our mother back to us. But mama never wakes; yet their cries still echo in my mind.

With my sisters restrained, they lower the coffin. I watch as mother's remains descend. There is a large pile of sandy soil beside her grave. I know that soon she will lie beneath its weight. I hear a thump rise from below signaling her arrival. I know that what will come next, is the pound, pound, pound of sand that will forever entomb her inside that wooden box.

My eyes are tearless, even though my heart swells with grief at the realization that her body will rest in the bowels of a grave that can never be warmed, even by a million eternities of sunlight. No longer would she share the warm embrace of mother and child.

Painful regrets are all that remain from Mother's passing. But at least she no longer fears eviction or how to feed her children. She is in the one place the poor always manage to find peace—the grave.

The tearless angry boy that didn't cry then, is the man who now weeps when he relives the hardships that befell his sisters after Mama died. I am the one who was absent while my sisters suffered humiliations dealt them by ravenous wolves; men who stole their innocence while my sisters suffered in the secretive silence the poor are so familiar with. The memory shames me.

We buried Mama in a pauper's grave; no headstone to herald her existence. I hear that the rich and the poor are on equal footing at death—it's a lie. The rich are regarded, and the poor forsaken. I know we are all born to die, and from our first breath we begin to pass. But why can't the passing be more pleasant for everyone?