

WAIT

Do you remember how your grandmother would wait for your grandfather? She would be kneeling on the sofa, her body pressed against the cushions, her hands folded on top of the backrest, peering out the window. She was like a child waiting for Santa Claus. He'd be out collecting cans and bottles for recycling, or maybe selling his lemons in the parking lot of Seafood Ranch Market, while she would've spent the earlier part of the day scrubbing the kitchen floor that was already sparkling from the day before. At the end of every day, he came home to her.

He made her coffee and breakfast every morning, woke her up, and while she'd be sipping her coffee at the kitchen table, he'd sneak off to get dressed for his can collecting. You imagine her worry when their morning routine was broken as he was taking longer than usual. She sat waiting for him to emerge from the bedroom when she knew exactly how long it took him to get dressed. She'd go and check up on him, only to find him on the floor, eyes closed, thinking he had fallen asleep. Luckily, their grandniece had been living with them and knew it was more serious than him falling asleep on the floor.

At the hospital, he would be nestled under white sheets. She would ask him if he was hungry. He wouldn't stir, not

even flicker his eyelids or mutter a word in response. His eyes would remain closed. Locked. “A stroke and brain aneurysm,” the doctor told the children. You imagine if no one had been there, she would’ve snuck rice into the room and tried feeding him herself subu-subu style—sticky rice balled up in one hand, forcing it behind his locked lips. “These tubes are feeding him, Ina,” one of her children would explain. She would stand there, not believing them and swore he just needed to eat.

His mother had gone the same way, while chopping firewood in the morning at the age of ninety-three. Your grandfather had been getting dressed for his day of collecting recyclables at the age of ninety. Off they went to perform their morning routine when a stroke and brain aneurysm would permanently interrupt their morning. Not that it mattered for your great-grandmother as she went quickly and quietly without any fuss. But her son would not. You wonder if you will go the same way, while getting ready for your day at the age of ninety, maybe while brushing your teeth. You briefly imagine yourself on the floor, drooling toothpaste.

His wife talked to him as if he were asleep, not understanding comas, not understanding how IVs worked. Hospitals were foreign countries to her. Doctors were like strange gods who worked magic, but they would not save him.

A stereo for music would be brought in while the old man lay in the middle of the room, surrounded by his chattering children and grandchildren. His hospital room would never be empty of visitors. There was always someone waiting. In this adopted country, your family does not use hospital waiting rooms. They sit in the hospital room with the patient and play music from the stereo.

That’s how you see a loved one off—with presence, storytelling, and music. As you were once given the grandest

celebration at birth, you were given the grandest farewell party, a despedida.



You had been in New York while it was happening in California.

It was President's Day weekend and your best friend had flown from California to visit you in New York. Your plan was to spend a crazy weekend in Manhattan, clubbing and being tourists. You both were twenty-three. Her visit had been a lovely break from a lonely first year at law school where you struggled to make friends with students who preferred to poke fun at your California accent and your California style of spaghetti strap tank tops and how you couldn't help saying "Dude" in your sentences. It pains you to think that while you were touring the Met and walking about Manhattan in zero degree weather that your grandfather was lying in a hospital bed. Dying.

Distant relatives were always passing away. Funerals seemed as frequent as birthday parties, but at the age of twenty-three, it was the first time you lost someone you loved. You weren't his favorite. No grandchild was. He had cherished and nurtured each one. He had grandchildren in the old country and in the adopted one, but it was the grandchildren in the adopted country, all of them except for you, who had surrounded him in the hospital room, waiting and watching their nurturer, more their father than their grandfather, slowly slip away.

Your little sister, the beloved youngest grandchild, had wanted to deliver the news of his stroke sooner, but your father prohibited her from contacting you. He felt, as your father, it was his ultimate authority to inform you, while she is convinced that if you had been contacted sooner, you

might have made it back in time for your goodbye. There is still bitterness in her voice as she recalls those last remaining hours of those last days.

You would get the phone call late Monday night after your four-hour drive back from Manhattan to Upstate New York. In your father's gentle delivery and strong Ilocano accent, he would enunciate each word clearly and slowly, "Your Lilong suffered a stroke. The doctor says he might not make it. Pray for him." You wouldn't have much to say in return, except you knew that you had to fly home. Be there. In the back of your mind, your father's word "might" made you think there was still a fighting chance for him to live, and yet, you questioned whether it was selfish of you to even think that way. He had suffered a stroke. He wouldn't be the same. He was ninety. It wouldn't be fair to want him to live, and yet it was your instinct to want it anyway.

You would have to wait another day before jumping on a plane Wednesday morning. You'd rather have jumped on the next plane back to California with your best friend, but the formalities of law school, of having to notify each professor, stopped you from acting sooner. On Tuesday morning, you had the chance to personally inform your Property Law professor in her office. It surprised you how compassionate and gentle she could be despite being relentless and brash during the Socratic method in the classroom. She was the one who suggested that you contact the Assistant Dean who would take care of informing all of your professors. It was the best suggestion you could have gotten as you cried in her office while she poured you a cup of tea.

At his bedside, his youngest grandchild squeezed his hand, begging him to wait until you were there to say goodbye. She'd wait for a sign. He'd squeeze her hand gently and force his lips open as he mumbled an incoherent response. His eyelids would flutter that only she would no-

tice in the hospital room full of grandchildren. He would wait, though his body could not. He never should've had to wait. In this new country he had adopted at the age of sixty-seven, there were such things as machines and living wills, but he was from the old country and never had to worry about those things. And now, there was a fight among his children to keep him alive.

It was his daughter who ultimately decided. The eldest daughter who petitioned your grandparents to the adopted country and led the Exodus. Utang na loob. An indebtedness that will never, can never, be repaid. She claims she had given everyone the kind of life they would've never had in the old country. Steered us into a new destiny. We all had college degrees. Lived in suburbs. Lived in cities. Had careers. Took hot showers. Owned homes. Owned cars. Had medical insurance. Now, she had a hand in steering our ending as well. She wanted to hold onto him, to the very last heartbeat, the very last breath, regardless of everyone else willing to let him go without the machines. Utang na loob. She decided to keep him alive. Longer than what he thought possible. Longer than what God would have allowed possible. This was how we repaid her. This was how he repaid her. Some of you argued, especially the grandchildren who could be skeptical of modern medicine, where the prolonging of life might also mean the prolonging of pain, but those who argued were reluctantly shut down by the elders citing utang na loob. No one is allowed to argue with this woman. This was our debt. To honor her wishes no matter how unreasonable and selfish those wishes might be.

But you weren't there. You can't say what the tubes were. Feeding tubes? Morphine drip? No one wants to talk about it anymore. No one wants to remember. The stories fall apart as you inquire the specifics, when to name