

Behind the Curtain

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I am in St. Bonaventure, outside Savannah, Georgia. I can see that the little burial site I stand on only plays a minute part in these endless entanglements of graves. There is not much here but live oak trees and Spanish moss and some occasional visitors. These are the places where we will all rest. My mother rests there now. I 'was seven 'when it happened; she was 42.

I was five when my parents found out that my mother had cancer. I didn't know 'what the C -word was. They just told me that my mother -was sick and that she needed to go to the hospital for a while. She did this going back and forth to the hospital for several months. Then there was a stretch of time when she was gone for two whole months. My dad said that she was still sick and was getting better in the hospital and that the surgery went -well. "What surgery?" I thought to myself. I didn't know and I didn't ask any questions. I never did.

Passing the endless rows of tombstones, I read the family names out loud. "NICHOLAS - SPENCER - SMITH - BALL - LAWTON." There are so many of them and I want to ask all of them how they lived their lives. I am clueless as to who they are; I have no idea as to their favorite food or song. I just want to know simple things, the things that we sometimes forget to ask.

After my mom had come home from the two months that she was in the hospital, she was weak and couldn't go up the stairs to their room, so my father turned our dining room, which comfortably sits 40 people, into my mother's bedroom. My mom slept alone for several weeks; she didn't want anyone next to her when she slept, not even my dad. She said that it hurt her too much when someone would move; her wounds were so sensitive. It was several weeks before I was able to sleep with her. I had just gone home from school and my mom was taking a nap -when I joined her in bed with my dad's permission. I 'was leaning over the bed when I kissed my mom's forehead and said, "kamusta," "hello" in Tagalog. My mom didn't wake up, so slowly I sat on the bed caressing her forehead. As I caressed her forehead hairs fell out; they were entangled between my fingers. First it was just a couple, but as I continued to caress her head more and more came out. I thought that this 'was the coolest thing. My hair doesn't fall out, not even if I pull it hard. I was intrigued. I continued running my fingers through her hair until my dad walked in the room and saw a clump of hair on the floor. He quickly grabbed my hands and started to laugh. My mom had awakened by this time and ■was confused until she saw the clump of hair on her chest. My dad, still laughing, pointed to the floor and then to her head as he gave her a hug and explained "what I had done. My mom grabbed her head and started to laugh. I wasn't really sure if she "was laughing because she thought it was funny, or if she was laughing to prevent herself from crying. All I know is that by dinner, it "was a funny story and my mom, wearing a wig, was telling everyone 'what had happened.

In each family plot at Bonaventure the -words 'In Perpetual Care' are etched on the border entrance of the square. Some are covered "with dirt;

others have grass and vines crawling on the words, making the place seem like a forgotten, beautiful garden. Most of the tombs have crucifixes, reminding me of how my mother, when she was ill, always made me go to mass with my aunt. I grew up attending Catholic masses every Sunday morning at 7:30; my mom said that it was good for me. I didn't really know how, because I never really understood what the priest was preaching about; I was too young and too naive to know. All I can remember was that when everyone stood up to get the bread, it was almost time to go home.

My mom died when I was seven. She is buried in the Philippines, in a small square plot beside my grandma, my aunt, and my mother's twin sister. Overgrown trees and wildflowers accent the ground covered with dead leaves from the previous season. I visit the cemetery twice a week -whenever I'm home; it gives me a calm, relaxed feeling. The cemetery allows me to have that deep breath at the end of the day, the breath that takes all the hassle of the day away from you. I like being there, especially when it rains; the noise the rain makes is soothing to me. When I'm there I try to remember things, like when my mom would cook me breakfast every morning. She would cook me fried rice that had chicken and eggs with hot dogs on the side. There was nothing like waking up to my mother's fried rice and her voice calling me to get ready for school. I could never get ready on time. My mom blamed my lateness on the "way I kept my room, reminding me that, "your bedroom is the true representation of yourself." But I was six, the age when sweeping it under the rug or stuffing it in the closet was cleaning. I just figured that she wanted me ready in the morning so that I didn't have to eat my hot dog on my way to school.

My friends are heading back towards the van, time for us to go. I look at the tombs one more time, trying to fix the image of this place in my mind. One particular tomb captures my attention. It is the burial site of someone—I can't make out her name—all that I can decipher is the -word "mother" engraved on her tombstone. The cemetery is closing. I "wish I had more time here. I wish I had more time "with everything.

I remember the day that she passed away. It was in the middle of the afternoon. My mom called me in from playing outside; I was climbing the chico tree next to our house. She wanted me to get her sister, "who was next door. I did as my mother wanted and went to my aunt's house to tell her that my mother wanted to speak to her. She came not long after I told her. They were sitting on my mother's bed in our dining room. I couldn't hear what they were talking about; I was at the other end of the room peeking through the curtains. They talked for several minutes and after hugging they started to cry. I was there behind the curtain, sitting on a chair not understanding what was happening. I tried to figure it out but I couldn't, I just stared and "wondered. It "was not long until they hugged again, but this time neither one of them let go until my aunt laid her sister down on her back. I remember being pulled away from the commotion and being told to stay in the chapel.

A few hours after my mother's funeral, "which was a week after her passing, I "walked in on my father in the living room. He "was sitting on the couch in front of the stereo, listening to their "wedding song that had been

played during the funeral. I had come to say good night; it was my bedtime and I wanted to hug him. I was at the corner of the stairs, by the doorway of the chapel we had in our house, when I called out, "Dad." He was holding a glass, a small one with several ice cubes in it. My dad lifted the glass to his mouth and tilted his head back, gulping down the contents. I stood in the middle of the living room and called out to him once more. There was no response. I figured he didn't -want to talk to me; after all, it had been a long day for all of us. I decided to go to bed without giving him a goodnight kiss or hug. I walked towards the stairs and started my "way up. I was almost stomping on the stairs to make them squeak so that my dad would hear me and realize that I was headed for bed.

"Good night," my father said. I was half way up the stairs. There was a smile on my face when I heard his goodnight.

"I love you," I said in response. That was what I always said. I glanced back at my father, he wasn't looking my way, but another reflection from the glass ran over my shoulders. He was still clenching it; he held the glass like he wanted it crushed. I left him there that night, alone with their song.

I glance back at the cemetery to say goodbye as we drive through the entrance. The caretakers are already preparing to lock the gates. They have their pad locks in hand and by the time I glance back the gates are locked. They will lock the cemetery tonight like it is a treasure, and it is. It is not tangible wealth that fills that place but rather the memories. It's been two years since I visited my mom's grave, and there in Bonaventure is something that makes me think of her hidden beauty.