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The Gentle Death of Carmelita Bagalayos

Here is how Carmelita Bagalayos knew she was dying: She heard the sad and heavy voices of her daughters. She felt her son's fingertips against the skin of her hand, which had become as thin as paper. She no longer tasted the grit of medicine on her tongue. For the past thirty years, her senses had slowly escaped her, but they were all back now, and that was how she knew her soul was ready.

Carmelita had lived almost eight decades as a willful and unyielding woman, but today she was still, more still than she'd ever been, even in her sleep. Her eyes were focused everywhere and nowhere at once—on her two grown daughters, who were crying softly into their tissues; on the flower arrangement in the corner; on the pink robe she had laid across her antique chair just a few days before she got sick for the last time; and on her son, who smiled and stroked her. He had not cried at all, and she knew he never would. He had a compassionate but strong soul, like her.

“Shhh,” he whispered, though she hadn't said a word.

She had always liked her son best, although she would never admit it out loud. Thinking about it now, she felt the familiar wrench of guilt and moved her eyes away from his face and toward his fingers on her wrist, discovering for the first time that his hand was spotted and wrinkled with age and that soon enough, his senses would escape him too. She discovered also that her son wore a nickel-plated watch that she'd never seen, or noticed, before. The watch had a single dial on the side and a third-hand to count off the seconds. Tick, tick, tick, tick.

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Carmelita wondered what time it was; she couldn't really tell. Somewhere between three and four o'clock in the afternoon, she thought, but in the haze, she couldn't get her mind situated enough to figure it out. Her eyelids became weighted and tired, so she closed them and felt her heart murmur. Tick, tick, tick, tick. The touch of her son's fingertips and the sounds of her daughters slowly drifted. The thick cotton of the bed sheet fell away and instead there was a tickle of grass against her ankles, the smell of water in the air, and the sound of waves lapping over one another toward the rocky shore. She was home—not home to her Heavenly Father, not yet—but home in the Philippines of her childhood, where nipa huts dotted the closest horizon and mountain cliffs and peaks dotted the furthest.

A young girl stepped through the grass, looking downward between her toes, and Carmelita immediately recognized the girl's skinny legs, pocked with mosquito bites, and her hair, tied into a knot, as being her own. She recognized, too, the small nipa hut behind the girl and the man sitting on the bamboo doormat. She and her papa were, by far, the smallest family in the village. Most of the other families had grandmothers and brothers and sisters, but Carmelita's mother and grandmother had died of malaria years before and her father had never remarried, much to the discontent of the people in the village, especially the elders.

Carmelita was called "Ming" then, because all Filipino children had nicknames and that was the one her father had given her. As she stepped through the grass, Carmelita knew that Ming was searching for an amber rock. Bernadette Rios had found one the day before and all the other children wanted one just like it.

Her father called for her now, saying, "Ming, halika!" as he turned something over in his hands. Carmelita thought he might have found an amber rock for her, but when she reached him, she saw that he was holding his secondhand pocket watch, the one he had bought in Manila months before. Tita Helena, the woman who cared for her, had muttered many times to Ming that the watch was a piece of junk and he should have spent his money on something useful, like pork.

"If Herminio had a wife, he would know not to throw his money away," Tita Helena said, in their dialect. She was the village midwife, a grouchy woman who lived in a nipa hut by herself, nestled between those of her children and grandchildren. *"Imagine wasting money on American junk when he can buy pork or bread so you don't have to eat fish and rice every day."*

"But I like fish and rice," Ming replied.

“You are a child. You don’t know what you like yet,” Tita Helena said. “In a few days that watch will be broken. The sun will say midnight and his pocket will say noon. You watch, Ming.”

Ming watched her father pull his threadbare handkerchief from his pocket daily to wipe down the face of the watch and she smiled widely every time he put it to his ear and nodded because it still tick-tocked. Sometimes he would scoot her close to him, show her the first and second hand, and ask, “Anong oras na, Ming?” Two o’clock, she would answer. Four-fifteen. Nine-thirty. *“You are smart like your mother, Ming,”* her father would say, and kiss her nose. She watched him carve his initials into the watch’s nickel plate with his pocketknife. *“Now everyone will know that this watch belongs to Herminio Bagalayos,”* he told her. *“And if it belongs to Herminio Bagalayos, then it too belongs to Ming Bagalayos.”*

So this was what her father held that day, as he sat on the doormat. Not an amber rock.

“Sit next to your papa,” he said, and she did. *“I have something very important to tell you.”*

She rested her chin on her knees and watched his hands turn the watch around and around. He was the darkest Filipino in the village and he told her all the time that he was pleased she looked like her mother, whose skin was pale and soft. He said dark skin could be a curse. She studied the dark skin of his fingers now, as she waited for the important news.

“Tomorrow I am leaving, but I will come back. You will have to stay with Tita Helena for a while.”

“But I don’t like Tita Helena.”

“Tita Helena is stern, but she will take good care of you.”

“Where are you going? Manila?”

“No, not Manila.” He paused. *“I am going to join the American soldiers.”*

“Why, papa?”

“To help them fight the Japanese.”

“But there aren’t any Japanese here.”

“Not yet, Ming. That’s why the Filipinos and the Americans need to fight them. To keep them from coming here.”

She had heard many stories about the Japanese from the other children, and the thought of her father fighting them made her stomach knot.

“How do you know you will win the fight?” Ming asked.

“I have God.”

“How long will you be away?”

“I don’t know.”

She thought of all the American and Filipino soldiers, and of Father Philippe, the priest who visited their village once a week.

“What if God is too busy listening to other people’s prayers?” Ming asked.

“God is never too busy.”

Ming looked away and watched a group of children pick up an old fishing rope. She wondered if their fathers were leaving them to fight the Japanese, too. When she heard their laughter, she felt a lump in her throat. Even if their fathers left them, they still had mothers and brothers and sisters. She only had Tita Helena, and she didn’t really have Tita Helena at all.

“Will you be gone a long time or a short time?”

“I don’t know.”

“But what does your mind say?” That was a question her father had taught her. When she wasn’t sure what she should do, he would ask her, in English, What does your mind say? And somehow, she figured it out.

“My mind says a long time,” he replied.

Ming swallowed the lump and focused on the watch instead of the children. Her father once told her that tears should only be shed on behalf of others or for God’s mercy. Use faith instead of tears, he would say.

“What if you forget me while you’re gone?” Ming asked.

He scooted her closer to him and kissed the top of her head. For a moment she thought he was going to ask her to tell the time, but he read it for her.

“It is four-nineteen,” he said. *“Do you see?”*

She said she did.

He pulled a tiny dial and both hands stopped in the middle of their tick-tocking.

“What happened?” she asked, afraid that it was broken. Ever since he brought the watch home, she prayed every night that it would keep time because she knew how much her father loved it and how much Tita Helena didn’t. *“Is it broken?”*

“No. I am keeping it on four-nineteen because this is the time that I make a promise to you—the promise that I will think of you every day. My watch will stay on four-nineteen until the day I come back to you. When that day comes, we will reset the time.” He kissed the top of her head again. *“Do you feel better now, Ming?”*

“What if, though?”

“What if what?”

“What if you never come back?” The lump was there again. She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes to push the tears away.

“I told you, I have God.”

“What if, though?”

“If something happens to me, you will know.”

“How will I know?”

“Do you remember the story of Saint Therese? The story Father Philippe told us?” Ming didn’t answer, so her father continued. *“Saint Therese said that when she died, she would send a shower of roses from Heaven. If something happens to me, I will do the same for you, as a message that I’ve gone home to Him.”*

Her father left the next day with the watch in his pocket and for weeks, then months, Ming waited for the shower of roses. She lived not as Tita Helena's daughter and not as her servant, but just as what she was—a child who needed looking after. There were days when she played with friends and swam in the bay and she didn't wonder where her father was or what he was doing, and then there were other times, especially at night, when her heart pounded and her mind raced with thoughts of her papa, wondering what he was doing. Sometimes she brought her blanket to her chin and waited in agony for the roses to come. On those nights, she pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes and concentrated instead on the sound of the mosquitoes buzzing outside.

The roses never came. Instead, Tita Helena did. She came on one of those afternoons that Ming wasn't afraid—one of those afternoons when she was just playing alone quietly in the grass.

Tita Helena told the news as curtly as she told everything else.

"Your father is dead," she said.

Ming stared back at her with a thousand questions, but not a single one made it across her lips. If she spoke, she would crumble.

"They killed him in Bataan," Tita Helena said.

Ming expected something to happen at that moment—she wasn't sure what—but there was nothing. Only the deeply lined face of Tita Helena, looking down at her.

"What about his watch?" Ming asked.

"His watch?"

"The pocket watch. Did anyone find his pocket watch?"

Tita Helena's eyebrows furrowed, forcing even more lines to branch their way across her forehead.

"Your father is dead, and you care only about his silly American toy?" she said. *"The Japanese threw him the ditch like he was a gutted fish! And the only words you have for him are, 'Where is his watch?'"*

Ming did not know what to say, so she said nothing. She thought about her father in the ditch. She imagined a Japanese soldier checking his pockets for money, and finding only a secondhand watch, stopped on four-nineteen.

Tita Helena sent her away soon after that, to cousins she had never known, who lived in Cebu City. When her new relatives opened the door, they did not see the orphan of her dead mother; they saw a girl who needed looking after. Instead of warm hugs and welcomes, they said “*Hello, Ming,*” in weary voices, and she quickly replied that her name was Carmelita, not Ming.

“*We were told that your family calls you Ming,*” they said, and again she pictured her father in the dirt.

“*My name is Carmelita,*” she told them, as sternly as Tita Helena had told her about Bataan. “*That’s what I should be called.*”

“O sige, Carmelita.” They nodded, opened the door wide, then stepped aside.

When she stepped inside the house, there was an overwhelming scent of roses, and this is how Carmelita knew she had died. The earth under her feet grew invisible wings and flew away, and standing in the empty distance was Herminio Bagalayos, pulling a beaten handkerchief from his back pocket. When he saw her, he smiled and showed her the face of his watch.

“Ming,” he said. He stood still, but motioned to her. “Halika, Ming. Halika.”

He put his finger on the dial, and she walked.

