

(Insert Her Silence Here)

By Shakira Sison

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Inside my mother was the sea. I used to lie on her belly as a child and press my ear against her soft, warm, and Chinese-white skin. When asked, I would say that I was listening to the baby, although I was the youngest of four and I knew there wouldn't be any more. I was the last.

Mama would watch TV or read a book, and I would close my eyes to what I thought was the sound of water in her gut, trying to make out its tiny grumbles, imagining the passage of rice grains after the evening's meal. More often than not I would end up falling asleep to the sound of its waves as her stomach churned and intestines moved, creating the borborygmi that became my lullaby.

She was a woman of few words. Like my father, she grew up during the war, and being a child of two survivors, one simply learned to let stories that are untold remain so. But unlike my father, she didn't overcompensate with stories of Northern games and ghosts, beached whales, pretty classmates, and the right shoes to wear to reflect their undergarments. While my father told tales of his past, my mother said nothing. It was as if she carved out the space that created a venue for his words.

I ached for the stories of my mother, as her life before me remained a void. She left Samar for Manila as a young lady and never returned, or if she did she never told me about it or about her life in that Southern town.

One of these unintentional secrets was a story I had to wait for adolescence to hear, and still from someone else. Lolo Tanggol, my great uncle, came home one year after retiring from his job as an architect in Guam. He brought with him a three-panel sketch of my mother's childhood homes. Written on the back of each in drafting ink was a short description of each house from his memory, including the details of Mama's family running from the Japanese soldiers who burned a couple of these houses down.

Mama was as stingy about her childhood as much as my father indulged in immortalizing his. My mother never spoke of her life as a child, what it was like as the oldest of a brood of five Chinese-Filipinos with a Spanish surname Cinco, a name whose origin I heard from a visiting aunt. Tita Rose said that my great grandfather's last name was actually Tanseco but the Spaniards gathered all the natives and named families by number, and our ancestors just happened to be fifth in line.

My mother saved her sentiments so well that it became a valued currency, and it became foolish to offer ours in exchange. She never said whether she was happy or sad, disappointed or mad. One just had to know. In bed with her as I listened to her belly, my face felt like it was part of her skin. I pretended I knew from her subtle vibe or hinted whimper how she felt about things, guessing even harder how she actually felt about me.

But I knew better than to ask.

Mama grew up in a world so different from mine. Twice before my adulthood I witnessed a revolution led by a woman who would then become president, in a country where men still said that a woman's purpose was in the bedroom. I came to age at a time when women started finding voices and leading their homes, when a pregnancy without a husband was no longer a societal death sentence or a financial disaster.

Mama had said that in her time, it was the parents' duty to return their daughter to her husband if she happened to become upset at him and leave for whatever reason. There were many reasons to leave. My father was not a saint in the way that coffee is not white, no matter how much her milky silence whitewashed it. Mama was an intelligent, glamorous, and educated career woman, but in that day it was the common expectation for women to stand by their men no matter how much they erred, so long as they provided for the home.

"As long as he still comes home to you, it's fine," was a common sentiment I heard among my aunts. To be a woman was to endure, and my mother was not alone in her generation to do so without complaint. She did it so skillfully that to the untrained eye there was nothing peculiar above the calm, behind the straight face, and past that mysterious smile. An intact family was everything during that time.

I cannot speak for my mother and what life must have been like for her. I can only say

what it was for me who listened for cues through her body, waiting for a whimper or a story of hurt she never told, and likely for my own benefit. I must have sensed cries, or even hidden laughs, buried deep behind stomach and liver and bile, when what she was

reading or watching caught her off-guard and I hadn't yet fallen asleep to the wavy, musical sounds of her belly that probably reminded me of my first home.

I wanted to be perfect for my mother. I wanted to be good and not add to the sadness in her silence when she sat on the couch and thumbed her rosary beads late into the night. When she complained about my sisters borrowing her possessions without her permission, I started leaving her notes whenever I took a few pumps of lotion from her nightstand. I sent her love letters from my college dormitory. I wrote her a poem when a lump was found in her breast and she had to go in for surgery. She didn't say much, but she framed my poem and hung it in her room. I wanted to be Mama's hero, or at least some kind of pal. But when I wrote her a letter that I wished she and I could be friends, she said that because she was my mother first, she had to decline.

I learned pretty quickly that my mother's silence had nothing to do with me, nor could I do anything to erase the ambient noise around her that had become a fact. I collected her stories from other people instead. For example, I learned from another visiting aunt that my great-grandmother was of pure Chinese descent and arrived in Manila from the mainland with bound feet. I remember wondering if that was the reason my mother had such small, childlike feet that I outgrew her hand-me-down shoes as early as fifth grade.

Was it with these feet she danced gracefully as part of the dance troupe whose pictures I once unearthed? In them she's dressed in a traditional Maria Clara, my father holding a bouquet of flowers at her side.

"They called her The Belle of Catbalogan," my father said, and I first thought she was metaphorically likened to a church bell because of her resonating beauty. Now that was a glaring fact that Mama never needed to verbalize. In photos, her beauty just jumped out and grabbed you in the chest, prompting questions about who she was and what she was thinking. Her face gripped you and wouldn't let go until you sought her out to learn what was behind those eyes. Except that she would never tell you.

In one of these photos she's posing by the water, her eyes partially closed by accident or caught in mid-thought. I assume it was taken by my father, then a budding photographer, then also a young man and the recipient of Mama's affections. The wind had set a few strands of hair away from her face and formed the shape of layered feathers, the rest draping her shoulder and framing an expression that spoke both pleasure as it did mystery.

It haunts me whenever I choose to stare at it because that image of her is so far from what I've known. It prompts my questions of what she was thinking, at what point she was in her young life, and if she had any idea how beautiful she was. Did she already have children, and if so, were they not around? Was it the sole company of my father that allowed her to savor the sea breeze and let it manifest her ecstasy ever so subtly behind

those closed eyes? It's impossible for anyone to tell now, and it would definitely be strange if anyone were to ask.

I've been told I've inherited this, the character that never reveals everything and keeps secrets without the intention of doing so. I've been accused of an opacity that's prevented others from knowing for sure if I'm pleased or having a miserable time. I've taken a back seat in most of my relationships and have even been referred to as an appendage of my lovers. I've been told that I'm too forgiving of my partners, which I just shrug off without comment. Like Mama, I always let my better half shine.

I run away from these characteristics that liken me to her, thinking myself different, more verbal, and more emotionally competent. I make myself believe I am stronger, more articulate, and more self-aware. Yet I know that the truth is I've also taken her resilience in tragedy, her faith and patience that in silence there is a peace in knowing that only a better day could possibly come.

It must have been our difference in age or the necessities of marriage and motherhood that prevented her from saying more. She must have spoken to other people or let out her sentiments in some way. I hope, but I don't really know.

One thing I do know is that she spent entire days in her garden, digging up plants and putting in new ones, caring for shrubs and talking to everything that took root under her care. I always believed her garden gave her the satisfaction of raising living things and

seeing them flourish, singing songs to them and watching them thrive, all in some kind of secret club of silence in our backyard.

The story I heard is that she discovered as a teenager that she had a green thumb when she learned that she could tend to the roses in their yard. She transplanted mature branches into new pots, sheltering each from excessive rain and sun using empty glass jars, finding great joy in creating life where there was once just dirt. Turning empty plots into small forests was her art.

I never could understand this obsession. Our garden was overgrown with plants. The only ones of interest to me were the fruit trees like the casuy we climbed for its seeds we roasted, and the Indian mango tree for which we fashioned a crook to pull their bright green fruit from their stems using a mastered swift technique. Mama grew everything from shrubs to reeds to every imaginable flowering crop, the half dozen fir trees along our sidewalk that turned the sky flame red in the summer, to the bougainvillea vines she trained to crawl an arch that draped our gateway with their papery crimson petals.

In the middle of the green was always my mother, squatting on the ground with garden gloves and a shovel, or sitting on a stool digging her nails into dirt and cutting stems off plants expertly with a pair of clippers nobody else was allowed to touch. She disappeared into that jungle for hours on end, never sharing with anyone her horticulture secrets or the stories she must have told them, not even the songs she sang. Although when I think about it now, I don't think anybody ever asked.

I knew behind those eyes were stories of joy and disaster. Mama always gave my father the floor and he gladly hogged mealtime discussions with the details of his adventures. Mama was never a storyteller, at least not to me, although I know for certain that there are many tales that would only require a question to bring to light.

I never ask her these questions. Our relationship has always been a mutual respect that is often misconstrued as indifference on either end. I have no recollection of ever asking my mother how she felt about anything, nor have I any memory of her volunteering that fact.

Mama celebrates seventy-two years this year, and the last ten I've spent far from her, in another country that has inevitably created secrets of my own. In between us must be a garden overgrown with each other's untold stories, and I wouldn't know where to begin if I'm told it's not too late to start.

It's been over thirty years since I spent evenings with my face pressed on her belly. The "baby" I was listening for has grown into a busy jungle of memories and untold stories like plants we have no luxury of choosing. Some are intricately ornamented and fragrant, some are downright ugly and serve only as shelter for dark, unwanted creatures.

I don't know how to approach this bag of stories and sentiments that to me feels like a full belly or an over-inflated balloon. So I glaze over it, dodging its protruding presence like an overweight stranger in our very rare and already crowded room. I do it so well that when I visit her, time passes quickly and Mama and I part ways without much more

than a photograph together.

In it, we're both looking at the camera and we never hesitate to smile. The unspoken sea we share is only visible upon fervent observation of our eyes.

"There was always something about your eyes," an old lover once said to me as an indication of how I was never completely present, my thoughts often said to always be running away. Mama's expression seems that way too, and I wonder how many of our acquaintances have accused us of keeping secrets based on the appearance of our eyes.

And then I wonder why I even bother with strangers or even care about their thoughts? As years pass and the voiceless ocean grows, Mama and I should at least tell each other our own.

I could start with one that recurs often in my mind:

When I was a child I loved to swim, and many of our summers were spent by the ocean. In the water, Mama would stand a few feet away from me and ask me to swim to her. Every time I'd come close she'd take a few steps back so I couldn't reach her. I became frustrated and exhausted myself chasing her, trying to reach her before she was able to step back. As years passed, I learned to swim so well that there wouldn't be a place for her to move fast enough without the water becoming too deep. Mama didn't know how to

swim, but she watched over me until the day that I learned. Soon after that, the chase ended and there would be no more swimming drills. I went on to swim in bigger and deeper oceans, ones Mama never even dreamed of visiting, nor probably imagined I would ever reach. I don't know if she knows I've found happiness, or that I've discovered my voice. I don't know if she knows that I've finally found love.

Whenever I think about my mother, there is a gap in my chest where our relationship should be, as if I was still swimming towards her, never reaching her and never meeting her cheers and praise. I knew she looked over me from a distance and never let anything happen to me, but somehow I still feel she remains unreached, a choppy ocean forever between us. What I would like is to find her back there as the blurry water stings my eyes. Stirring with the current, her feet on shifting sandy ground, I'll kick furiously until I touch her. I would ask her how she's feeling, or even something simple, like, "What's your favorite color, Mama?"

She'll stand there with open arms that will say to me, "Come and put your head on my belly, baby. I want to tell you that even in my silence, you have always, always been loved."