

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Losing My Mother and Finding Myself

Otto Fong

On 6th Dec 2020, I heard that my mother died. I split into two halves.

The first half was all action, texting my nephew Bobby, elder sister Lydia and younger brother Mark to get the facts.

“Hi,” Bobby texted me at 6am, “Urgent. I called Uncle Han. Grandma has passed.”

Mom had complained of sleeplessness and suffered from a routine knee replacement surgery for six months, other than that her heart was strong and her mind still sharp.

I called Han, my partner for 23 years.

“I’m driving there now,” Han said, “Bobby did not tell me much.”

I called Bobby.

“What happened to Grandma?” I asked.

“She fell,” My nephew sounded distraught and distracted, and I heard sounds of others around him, “I call you back later?”

After he hung up, the first half of me scrambled to make sense of the morsels of information. The last time mom fell, I was walking with her. She had refused my hand and insisted on walking on her own. Her fall must have taken her by surprise. There was no obstacle in her path. She simply lost control of her leg and fell head-first unto the edge of a concrete island. There was a cut on her forehead, but she was calm as ever. She insisted that I drive all the way back to the neighbourhood clinic to see her doctor.

“She’s just not the kind to fall and just die,” I reasoned.

The other half of me burst out crying, “Does it matter? Mom is gone and I want go home to see her.”

I went to the balcony and bawled like a baby.

Shortly after, Han called me, “Mommy jumped. She left a note, went out the corridor early this morning, and jumped over the balcony. Bobby had to go down to identify the body with the police.”

In a flash, everything mom said to me in the past months made sense: “Don’t keep me alive with machines. I don’t want a wake. I want to be cremated the same day, and you know where I kept my will and all my documents.”

I thought she was covering all bases, in case she fell into a coma. She was planning her death, but the idea of suicide never crossed our minds. Like a skilful director who kept the final plot twist hiding in plain sight till the end, she wrote the ultimate psychological thriller in her own blood. The price was her life.

“Your brother and sister are ready to meet using Zoom.”

“Great, everybody uses a different meeting app,” I grumbled, exasperated. I just got used to Google Meet.

I wanted to throw a tantrum. Downloaded the app instead. My mind also raced to explore the possibility of rushing back to Singapore. In July, I started working as a full-time teacher in an international school in Bangkok. In March, Covid infections forced all nations, including Thailand, to close their borders and impose a 14-day quarantine for anyone returning to their homeland.

That meant that even if I flew back that day, I would be holed up in a hotel for 2 weeks. It would be impossible to hold off a cremation for that long. I wanted to run to mom but could only watch from a distance.

Bobby set up the call. Lydia and Sheng were seated. Beside them, my sister-in-law Annette and Han. In the past, mom and dad helmed our family meetings. After dad passed away, mom was sole chairperson. Our remaining anchor runner vanished in front of us, the baton fell to the ground and no one wanted to pick it up.

“Did she do or say anything out of the ordinary the last few weeks?” I asked.

“No,” Lydia replied.

“Then she planned this all along,” I said.

“How could I have not seen this?” My sister started sobbing, “I could’ve stopped her.”

“Don’t start blaming ourselves,” I assured Lydia, holding back my own tears, “None of us saw it coming. You’ve always been there for her. You know mom lah! If she wanted something done, no one could stop her.”

The three new adult-orphans shared a sob together. Three years ago, dad passed away. Father was a national figure, and his passing attracted national attention in Singapore and Malaysia. The three of us rallied behind mom to make sure the cremation and wake went smoothly. For three days from morning till night, we met with hundreds of friends and relatives. On Day 2, I gave an assembly talk in a primary school.

“We can call the school to cancel or postpone,” said my book agent, “They’ll understand.”

“No,” I said, “It will proceed as scheduled.”

I gave the talk with the usual smiles and punchlines. There was a moment in front of the students when I turned to the screen, remembered dad, and I almost lost it. I swallowed those tears and turned back to the audience with a wide smile. After wowing the hall of students, I drove back to the wake.

“Your dad’s wake ran like clockwork,” a friend who sat with us throughout the three days, “None of you shed a tear.”

“Mom lost her soul mate,” I answered proudly, “and it should be all about her.”

So it would be with mom’s cremation.

“We must carry out her instructions,” I said to Lydia and Sheng, “It is her last wish.”

“If I come back now, I’ll have to quit my job,” I said, “Also, with the Covid situation being so uncertain, I’m not sure Thailand will allow me to return.”

Covid has been raging globally since March that year. Vaccines were not expected to be ready until months later. The global economy was expected to shrink further before anything got better. It would be risky to give up a job during this time.

“Don’t come back,” Han said, “I can help Lydia and Bobby.”

“Mommy said she didn’t want an announcement,” Annette, Sheng’s wife, said, “And I don’t want my children to know how she died.”

In the back of my head, I debated whether that would be possible. There was a crowd downstairs where her body was. Police was in the house, and neighbours already knew. Dad was a historical figure.

“There would be a police investigation,” I agreed, for that moment, “And letting the public know might complicate matters.”

We agreed to give mom a private cremation once the coroner released her body back to us. The next day, I linked up with a live video feed at Mandai Crematorium. No one except immediate family members of the three siblings were there. Everyone donned masks as per Covid rules. Dad’s wake was attended by hundreds and featured in the press and online news, and there was sizeable group who chanted and bowed at his cremation. His wife, our mom, took her last journey into the furnace, and not even her closest friends were aware.

When a parent beholds a newborn, the sight is as monumental as watching a palace or a sacred temple rise in the horizon. When a child loses a parent, it feels like a childhood monument has crumbled to the ground. My inner child screamed in panic as the furnace doors opened in silence.

Han accompanied Bobby to collect the ashes that afternoon. Mom’s urn would be kept next to dad’s urn in our sitting room.

“Scatter my ashes out at sea,” Mom told me in a conversation.

“I will scatter your ashes together with dad’s,” I promised.

It was Monday the next day. I put on my work clothes and reported to school at 6:45am.

No one would know.

The students had just completed term exams. All I had to do was make it through one week before the year-end Christmas break. Even then, when I stood on front of class and looked into the students’ innocent and untroubled faces, I envied that they had no idea how hard this type of goodbye would be.

In a macabre moment, I was explaining gravity and free fall from an aeroplane.

“Acceleration due to gravity is 9.8 metres per second per second,” I said, “Usually we round it off to 10 metre per second squared for easy calculation.”

Another part of my brain quickly figured that it would take less than a few seconds to fall from the 10th storey of a building. Behind my calm façade, an epic battle between the Batman and the Joker raged.

“You know how your mom died?” The heartless Joker grinned, sharpening his choice of words for the kill.

The Batman knew the mind tricks psychopaths played. He dismissed the taunt with barely a sneer. Yet, the image of his mother falling played in slow motion in his mind.

After each class, I eagerly carried my box of books and tools back to the staffroom. I smiled and chit chat with my colleagues, then buried my face with my laptop and prepared for the next lesson. And when the tears started to flow, I strode to the bathroom to wash my face.

In a war movie, a group of refugees hid inside an underground cave while enemy soldiers marched nearby. A baby in their midst started crying. Knowing that everyone would be doomed if the cries alerted the soldiers, the mother held the baby’s mouth so tight it suffocated.

That was how I felt like: throttling a part of me so that no one around me would know. I imagined Lydia and Sheng doing the same in front of their children back in Singapore. Why do living things go to such lengths to hide ourselves, even if it meant smothering a part of us forever? Perhaps that is part of survival: there is always something out there searching for us, ready to devour us at the first sign of weakness.

That was the Dark Forest Postulates from Liu Cixin, renowned science fiction master: “The universe is a dark forest. Every civilization is a hunter with a gun. They pass quietly through the forest like a ghost. They must be extremely cautious and try their best to keep silence, because they know there are any number of hunters out there. And if a hunter discovers another, no matter if he is an angel or a demon, an old or a young civilisation, the only thing he can do is to kill it. In this forest, other hunters are the eternal threat. Any civilisation that reveals its location will be destroyed.”

By the end of each day, I rushed home and either swam laps or took to the treadmill in the condo gym.

“Uh-oh, running out of breath, but I

Oh, I, I got stamina

Uh-oh, I see another mountain to climb

But I, I, I got stamina'

Sia's 'The Greatest' looped in my Airpod Pro.

Two other colleagues in my staffroom lost their mothers in the same period. They were given days off and looked visibly devastated. Not I. Not someone carrying the DNAs of Fong Swee Suan and Chen Poh Chang!

Mom did not cry when a snatch thief rode past in his motorcycle and tried to make off with her handbag. He dragged mom along the tar road, the rough surface cut into her flesh. She held on and yelled for the neighbours until he let go.

Dad did not cry when he was imprisoned for six years. Dad did not moan or groan when he had to fight back the pain of kidney stones. We would not have known if mom had not told us. Mom did not hang her head in defeat when I was running a high fever as a baby. There was a curfew after dark during the Kuala Lumpur racial riot that began on May 13th, 1969. The Malays and Chinese were killing each other. She stole me through the back alleys, a lone Chinese woman and her helpless baby burning up, to see a doctor and saved my brain from frying.

I bowed my head and steepened the slope on the treadmill belt. Sweat flowed. Not tears.

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A few days later, the charade was over. Mercifully, I did not have to face my students and colleagues for the Christmas break. That was the second wave of Covid infections in Bangkok. As the infection numbers remained lower in Pattaya, I took a few days of retreat from the city.

Choo, a close local friend, went with me.

In one sense, it was easier for me to grieve from such a long distance. I did not have to be reminded of the tragedy by familiar settings, nor be questioned by the police when they carried out mandatory investigation into the suicide. I did not have uncomprehending children asking questions about grandma's sudden departure.

It was impossible to engage with other family members in proximity, and thus I could potentially sort out my own grief and trauma without my siblings' emotions complicating the process. I did not have to question myself if I could have caught the signs and possibly prevented mom's premature death.

Choo and I spent the afternoon sitting in lawn chairs under giant umbrellas at a largely tourist-free beach. At a local 7-Eleven, I found a forgotten merchandise: a giant sippy cup with a plastic figure of Asia's favourite childhood robot cat Doraemon. Such merchandise was quickly snapped up by Thais and tourists, and hard to find in mint condition.

I bought the cup and brought it to the beach.

I proudly posed it under the ample sunshine on the sun-kissed sand, then took a few good shots to post on Facebook. The message to my friends back home following me on social media was this: Otto was fine. Nothing out of the ordinary happened and we were enjoying a much-needed break. It was also a silent 'Thank You' to Han, my partner. I bought the cup for him. Doraemon was his favourite fictional character.

In my place, Han had rushed down to Lydia's HDB flat to help my family. He kept me connected to the events and filmed the cremation ceremony so that I could 'be there'. He followed Bobby to collect my mother's ashes, having done so for both my dad and his own mother's cremation a while back. When dad passed away, Lydia and mom thoughtfully acknowledged Han as 'adopted son' in the newspaper obituary. When Han's mother had cancer, my mom went to visit her at the hospital.

At the beach, hopeful vendors sauntered past us. Despite the economic hardship brought on by the lack of tourists, they were smiling and not pushy. I was in no mood for a massage, stale fried meat or a pedicure. Choo politely sent them on their way. I got up occasionally to refill my cup with ice and beer, then laid back searching for regrets.

"I had nothing." This used to be mom's recurring complaint.

I used to roll my eyes at the finality of her argument, "Stop it, mom! All your children graduated and are professionals like you wanted to! You have beautiful healthy grandkids and are spending retirement with all of us. What more do you want?"

Maybe you're just my mother, a Prince lyric flashed in my mind, she's never satisfied!

One fine day, and perhaps by chance some brain cells worked differently, I really got what mom meant: All her life, this woman was asked to sacrifice. Grandmother made her give up her studies because there was only enough to send one child to school, and her brother, being a boy, got priority. Then she married dad. With dad drawing a decent salary as secretary for a union, she thought she finally had the chance to sing professionally. Dad's colleagues reminded him that his image and career might be affected if mom did not play the good shadow. And thus, again, she gave up that dream for good.

When dad was labelled as a communist and thrown into prison, she had to find ways to keep Lydia and herself financially afloat. After dad was released, she moved the family to Malaysia so that we could grow up with happy memories of our dad. She also insisted we study in Singapore because of the better education system offered. Since Dad was not allowed back in Singapore for many years, mom shouldered all our schooling demands in Singapore.

When mom said she had nothing, that was by no measure an exaggeration. Dad made history. The three children had better lives and careers. Why should a person be defined by her husband and children's achievement? I would never forget that moment of clarity. In that moment, I was not just hearing. I really listened and I saw the enormity of a human being subjugated simply because of her gender.

I cried in front of mom. She knew her son finally understood. I knew 'getting it' would not be enough. I had to do something about it. I called up Kok Heng Luen, artistic director of Drama Box, a Mandarin theatre group who produced and staged my first theatre script "Another Tribe".

"Heng Luen, I want to write a story for my mom," I said. It had been 12 years since our last collaboration. Heng Luen listened. I was not a skilled or patient writer. I had two joyous years being the top English Literature student in secondary school, after which I was cajoled into engineering by my family's economic circumstances and nation-building policies to produce more engineers.

But my parent's lives were noteworthy.

Eight months later, the play originally titled "The Black Peony" was staged in the Singapore Arts Festival. The title was my mother's nickname in her textile factory where she fought for workers' rights. The beautiful and talented Li Xie played the role of my mother. She presented a bouquet of flowers to mom to standing ovation. Since then, my relationship with mom was no longer one of regret and resentment.

I accompanied mom often on our regular trip to the temple in Sun Min, where grandmother's ashes were kept. As usual, we bought grandmother's favourite milk tea, a pack of chicken rice in a white foam container, joss sticks and paper offerings of clothes. We then lay out the food and offerings on the metal benches in front of the temple. Mom would 'ask' grandma to take lunch. Then we sat aside to 'wait' for grandma to eat. Pigeons flew down from the roof whenever the humans were further away. I sighed at the irony of birds pecking at chicken, reminded myself that carnivorous dinosaurs feasted on herbivorous dinosaurs too, and shooed their feathered descendants away.

"What if grandmother came in the form of a pigeon?" I jested to mom, "Then I shooed her away and she stayed hungry?"

Mom laughed.

“One time, I went with a friend to collect her husband’s ashes,” Mom told me a story to pass the time, “The ashes were laid out from head to toe, and the priest came into the collection room with the urn. He was holding a rod with a big, round ball at one end. He told us to scoop the ashes from the toes into the urn. Then the knees and hips. The ashes from the head must go into the urn last. That way, he explained solemnly, the whole person is complete from head to toe. We did so slowly and carefully, and when we finished, we asked him about the bone bits strewn all over that did not completely crumble to ashes.”

“That’s when he raised his rod and started hammering the bones into powder. After he was done, he told us to scoop them into the urn,” Mom started laughing, “I thought to myself: then what’s the point of all our work? The bones were from head to toe, and if what he told us was true, then wasn’t the man walking around in Hell with parts of his legs, hands and body on top of his head?”

I shared a hearty laugh with mom. It was moments like these that I knew my sense of humour came from her and not dad.

As my mind replayed that memory, my eyes and ears observed the Pattaya beach chanting a constant rhythm. Watery crowns glittered across the ocean surface. My back was getting warm from lying down, so I decided to go for a pee. After returning from the toilet, I tried out the time-lapse photography in my camera phone. I nestled the phone on its supporting stand and let it sit facing the sea for 20 minutes.

When I played the video back, I noticed something: the waves were constantly in motion. The sand shifted as people and animals disturbed them. The clouds sailed across the blue sky. Yet, the lines between the sky and sea, between the sea and sand, had remained the same. The sand, water and clouds could move as much they have energy to, but they would never have enough energy to cross the lines without catastrophic changes to their molecular makeup. The sand will remain on the beach. The water would stay in the sea and the clouds could never descend to the ground.

Like the shifting grains of sand or the rolling waves, humanity moves in frenzied activity amongst us. We laugh, cry, fight, flight, invent, destroy, fuck, reproduce, surrender and when it is time, we end. The richest, brightest, luckiest and most beautiful amongst us never crossed above that line, just as the poorest, dimmest, most unfortunate and deformed humans never seeped below the other line.

After dinner, Choo and I strode about. The crowd was a far cry from pre-Covid days, with pockets of locals and retired farangs scattered along the beach front.

Mom did not hang out in the common areas for old folks in her neighbourhood. Between working with dad and taking care of our needs daily, there was hardly any time for her to socialise with others of her generation. She was also scarred by dad's imprisonment, when almost everyone in Singapore was too frightened to interact with them for fear of being labelled 'pro-communist' or 'anti-government'.

"There was a brief glimmer of hope when Singapore and Hong Kong pondered a travel bubble in October," I said to Choo as we shared a Korean *bingsu* for dessert, "Then we could bring her to Hong Kong to see her best friend Auntie Sharon. That might have delayed her plan. Then Delta dashed the hope." Delta was the main villain variant which caused the third wave of lockdown.

Choo did not want to visit the local gay pub, so I went alone.

The once-bustling street, with almost a dozen pubs, a cabaret club and pool tables, was also mostly closed. The ones remaining opened entertained a couple of tables of regular customers. The mama-san recognised me from my previous visit months before, and insisted that his server – the one I took a fancy to – sit with me for chat and drink.

"You can bring him back to hotel if you like," said the mama-san in a calm, even tone much like RuPaul on Drag Race. "His name is Lucky."

Lucky gamely sat with me.

"What kind of man you like?" I asked.

"I like older men," Lucky smiled.

Unlike most of the bar/money/waiter boys, he knew his appeal laid amongst the newer generation of Asian gay retirees looking to settle in Pattaya. Once the toxic cloud of Covid pall cleared, the new wave of Hong Kong and Chinese retirees might be larger than the previous generation of farang pioneers, snapping up properties with their financial clout.

Lucky played the part well. His hair style resembled the Taiwanese or Hong Kong leading men of the 80s, and he wore a t-shirt and jeans over his bearish frame. He reminded this older customer about the days of my youthful crushes.

Kudos for the mama-san for invoking nostalgia! She was ready for the future! Lucky worked hard, cleaned tables, DJ-ed for the pub and drank dutifully with the customers. His voice was deeper, and his mannerism understated. While the older farangs gravitated towards the more flamboyant

and sinewy guys, their Asian successors, now in our 50s and 60s, preferred the quieter and masculine kind.

He raised his glass in-between our conversation, mindful to strike a balance between keeping the drink tab running but not so pushy as to annoy this customer. I was happy to play along. Lucky had successfully distracted me from thinking about mom. For once, my mind was busy undressing the 31-year-old and entertaining an afternoon alone with him in the hotel room rather than being reminded about mom's passing.

Alas, we were but little players in a world of giants. Well before the projected closing time of midnight, the waiters began calmly but efficiently clearing the emptied tables. Lucky excused himself and assisted around the pub.

"I'm so sorry," the mama-san approached me, "We have to close soon, but you can stay and finish your drinks."

I saw some older customers vacating the premise, and the two other pub workers hurriedly stacking the chairs. I sensed it could be information about early police patrols approaching. Officially the closing hours were 9 pm.

I raised my hand for the bill in Thai, "*Kit tang!*"

I would not like to be appear on local news as a wayward foreigner. Lucky came by and said goodbye. I slipped a generous tip, content to feel him up during the hug. He was warm and his muscles firm. As I walked back towards my hotel, I turned around and saw that the entire gay pub street had turned as dark as a mountain train tunnel. It was as if the evening was a mirage.

The next evening, the pubs did not open. No drinks, no raunchy Thai songs, no mama-san and no Lucky. The morning after that, Choo and I boarded a bus back to Bangkok.

On the bus, I texted Selena, our family lawyer.

"Hi Selena, has the police investigation been concluded?"

The police were still interviewing family members. As I was in Bangkok since January 2020, they did not ask to interview me.

"Not yet," Selena answered, "In cases of unnatural deaths, it usually takes longer."

“Wow,” I texted back, “Then when can we deal with the will?”

Mom had sold the family home back in Malaysia a few years back. She put the amount in a joint account with me. The money was to be distributed to siblings and grandchildren.

She had shown me where she put her bank book.

“After I died, get Selena to carry out my will. Everyone will get a share according to the will. Don’t quarrel about it, ok?” Mom said.

“Lydia and I already collected the will from your mother’s safe deposit box last week. Haven’t you seen it?”

Selena added, ““Your mom appointed Lydia and you as Executors for her will.”

“Wait, what? The will is already opened?”

“I thought Lydia already sent it to you?”

“She did not,” I was confused, “I was under the impression that we had to wait till after the investigation for you to read the will to all of us?”

“Oh no,” Selena explained, “the will can proceed already.”

“Why would Lydia withhold the will from me?”

“I’m so sorry!” Selena hurriedly sent me her scan of the will.

How could Lydia neglect to show me the will? What was she up to? I quickly instructed Han to update mom’s bank book at an automated bank book printing station. When I reached back to my condo, Han called me.

“I updated the bank book,” Han e-mailed, “There is only two thousand in the account.”

Mom had sold the family home back in Malaysia a few years back. She put the amount in a joint account with me. The money was to be distributed to siblings and grandchildren.

“What happened to the money?” I emailed Lydia.

“I don’t know,” Lydia replied, “I did not touch it!”

“You borrowed money from mom,” I accused her, “Where is it now?”

“I don’t know!” Lydia asserted.

I texted Sheng, “There was money from the sales of the JB home. Han and I spent a lot of time driving mom in and out of Malaysia making sure the money gets into the joint account. Now it is almost completely missing. I didn’t touch the money, and I’m quite sure you did not.”

“Lydia was the one staying with mom, so who else could have taken the money?”

“Maybe the account book was not updated?” Sheng suggested, trying to stay neutral.

“Why would mom withdraw so much money?” I reasoned, “Her lifestyle was simple and she would not even spend extra for restaurant food!”

Mom had repeatedly reminded me that the money must be distributed according to her will, but there was nothing in the account.

Selena and Han tried to calm me down.

“Wait for the paperwork so that we can access the bank records,” Selena advised.

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A few days passed. We waited for Selena’s update on the matter. I ran through each scenario in my head, like a mouse stuck inside a maze, always reaching the same conclusion: *Lydia was up to something*. I struggled to get some sleep. One night, after I drifted into dreamland, I met mom.

“Hi mom!” I excitedly greeted her.

“Your dad and I are on vacation,” She said, “But I was nearby so I dropped by. How are you?”

“Not good, mom,” I said, “I don’t know where the money went. Can you and dad help me?”

“Alright!” Mom agreed, “Let’s go see him now!”

I followed mom along some corridor or alley. After turning a few corners, there was dad, sitting in a sofa reading his newspaper.

“Hello!” Dad looked up and greeted me with his usual hearty chuckle, “How are you?”

“The kids have a problem,” Mom said to him, “Want our advice.”

I told dad what happened to the will. Dad started speaking. His lips moved but I heard nothing.

“Dad, can you speak up?” I asked before I woke up.

The next day, Selena sent me a prepared Power of Attorney. It would appoint Han as my attorney and give him the legal right to carry out mom’s will on my behalf.

“Sign a printed copy of this POA at the Singapore Embassy in front of an embassy officer,” Selena instructed, “Then send it back to me via courier service.”

The new school term started. I went to my principal Soong to ask for an afternoon off.

“Something catastrophic just happened,” I said to him, “So I’ll need to take an afternoon out of school to go to the embassy.”

“Could you tell me what happened?”

“I can’t,” I said, and suppressed a sob, “I’m not ready to share it with anyone yet. But, instead of letting me off at 2:30 pm, can you let me off at 2 pm? My lessons end at 1:30, and I don’t want to risk the possible waiting in case there are too many people there.”

Soong signed the approval form quickly, “Sure! Bring to admin. Tell them that I approve the 30 minutes earlier release.”

The staff in the admin was more rigid.

“I’m sorry, if it is before 2:30 pm, we must count it as half-day leave.”

“Mr Soong already approved it as off,” I explained, “I am just accounting for the travel time and possible delays. The embassy closes at 4 pm. If I am late, I might have to go back again the next day.”

“We have to follow the rules,” said the staff.

“Then let me speak to your boss.”

“He’s not here,” the staff said helplessly.

She handed the form to a colleague, “Change it to half-day leave.”

“NO!” My voice erupted, catching me by surprise. Everyone in that office looked up. I had always been polite and friendly when I visited, because I believe respect must be given to everyone who serves us. This was a different me.

A third staff laughed nervously. I turned to her immediately.

“What is so funny?” I snapped at her, “You think I am joking?”

“You better not change that to the half-day leave,” I raised my finger (index, not middle) at the first two admins, “When I come back, I will speak to your boss directly.”

I stalked out.

“How DARE she laugh! My mom just killed herself!” Triggered, my emotion and logic began their impromptu battle, *“But she didn’t know that now, does she?”*

Aware that a crack had broken through my calm façade, I hid in the toilet and counted the minutes to 2 pm. On the dot, I slipped out of school. I completed the task at the embassy and found a courier service a few stations further to send off the signed POA to Selena. I was right: half an hour could have made the difference between a single trip or two. The sense of vindication washed off most of my guilt about the outburst in the school admin office. The document reached Selena one day later. By then, school admin has approved my off quietly without further question.

When Selena called that evening, I had calmed down considerably.

“Now we can ask the bank to release your mother’s account details,” Selena explained patiently, “I’m sorry about not showing you the will earlier.”

“It’s ok,” I answered, “You assumed that Lydia would show it to me. But she did not.”

“I know this must be very frustrating for you,” Selena said, “I don’t know what’s going on too.”

“How will I explain this to everyone?” I asked, “Why didn’t mom just leave the money in the account?”

“We don’t know. All we can do is to take it one step at a time.”

“You’re right,” I said, taking another deep breath, “We don’t have enough information yet.”

I was not just indignant that I could not carry out mom’s instructions and could not give Sheng and the grandchildren their fair share, I was concerned about my own share too. I thought about

the very public rift between the children of Lee Kwan Yew on carrying out his will to demolish his old home. Power and wealth, a court of eunuchs and generals waiting in the wings, a bevy of special interest groups waiting in the shadows growing their tendrils for decades, biding their time for when the old man was visited by the inevitable.

We ordinary folks watched in glee at the public family feud between the Lees. Compared to what was at stake with the Lee family, mom's bank account was a drop to a pond. Yet, there we were. Was everything our parents stood for and fought for in vain? Do we all bow down to our baser instincts and greed for resources?

"Selena," I finally texted Selena, "You're right. Look at us: we reverted to our childhood dynamics. We were fighting like we were small, calling for mom and dad to rescue us. No wonder mom told me to listen to you. You're like an older sister guiding us through this difficult time."

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Over the next few days, I found some semblance of normality. School hours were long and exhausting, as I continuously juggled diverse roles: form teachership in the form of a surrogate parent dealing with cases of bullying and managing a multitude of student personalities, math teacher making sure he knew every question and answer posed, physics teacher lining up the myriad of theoretical and practical using printed material and online platforms, and even CCA teacher supervising every minute detail of video filming on sets.

Without fail, I exercised in the gym before winding down the day and chatting with Han online before retiring for the night's rest. The peace was shattered by a text message from one of mom's oldest friends, Auntie Tessa.

"Otto," Tessa texted, "I have not heard from your mother for two months."

That text came 10 minutes before my next lesson in school.

"I went to her resident but only saw a few suitcases left inside. Then I asked the neighbours. They told me your mother had passed on. I told Auntie Belle, and we both cried. Please text me back. Is this true?"

By then, Lydia had moved to another apartment. It had become difficult to live in the same place with all that memory.

"We must not let anyone know!" I recalled the conversation with the siblings.

“Hi Auntie Tessa,” I texted back, “Mom is fine. But I am at work now. Can we chat this evening?”

When I got home, I took a deep breath and called Tessa.

“Hi Auntie Tessa.”

Tessa’s voice was distraught. Mom’s friends were intelligent, educated women. It would not be an easy coverup.

“Mom is just very tired and upset with moving house,” I lied, trying to sound as nonchalant as I could, “She did not want to move, and the phone was not installed at the new apartment.”

“But Otto,” Tessa said, “The neighbours told me she jumped!”

“I don’t know why they said that,” I was making things up on the fly, “Maybe they had some issues with us?”

Tessa was silent, likely filled with disbelief.

“Mom is alright. She was very unhappy with moving. Maybe as she unpacked and got used to the new place, she would calm down? I’ll tell her to call you when she is ready.”

“She really gave us a fright,” Tessa finally said, “Please ask her to call us soon. Auntie Belle couldn’t sleep.”

“I will, thanks for calling, Auntie,” I ended the call. I hated lying to Tessa. In times like these, instead of drawing closer to mom’s good friends, I pushed them further away. I found the dirty feeling of twisting facts oddly familiar, a long-lost acquaintance I did not like was knocking on my door. At the same time, I was surprised I lied so effortlessly.

I swam laps around the condo pool. For some reason, the chlorine content was poisonously high. After 30 minutes, I would emerge like a dried-up prune, my skin dehydrated. As I dived into the condo swimming pool, I scrolled my memory for when I had to fabricate on a regular basis. A few laps later, I found it. I had to lie to my colleagues about where I went in the weekends. I lied to my family about what I did on my free time. I lied to the nieces and nephews about who Uncle Han was.

“This is like when I was in the closet!”

Being gay, and more significantly, being a gay man who experienced a dramatic, public outing, I was keenly aware of the limiting effects of subtle half-truths and white lies. I remembered the first

moments when I had to lie to my parents. For a kid whose basic mission was to please them, that was devastating.

Before I realised I was gay, I brought home my tests and homework with innocent pride and confidence.

“Look at your brother!” Mom would bark at Sheng, “Why can’t you come home on time and study like him?”

After I suspected I was homosexual, my first thoughts became, “On mom, if only you knew your golden boy is a monster.” The pride became tainted with shame and regret, and over time that turned into resentment and blame.

“Maybe if you aren’t such a control freak and more like the submissive, gentle moms in *The Cosby Show* or *Leave It to Beaver*, I might have been straight,” I bought into the narrative wholesale, neglecting the evidence against it: Sheng and Lydia were happily heterosexual.

Not only did I accept that gay people were perverts and molesters, I also believed the unscientific claim that gay people were the products of weak fathers and domineering mothers. I turned from the sweet child who adored his mom into another misogynist that resented and blamed her for his own issues. The word ‘closet’ was such a well-chosen metaphor for living in the shadows. Everything was hidden either partially or completely, and we groped about gingerly, fearfully. Where there were only shadows, we saw ghosts.

Coming out publicly at 39 was huge leap of faith, but the light I let in helped me see everything clearer. When my parents finally saw me for who I really was, I was also able to remove my own binders to see them clearer. It was like wiping a mirror dusty with years and looking afresh at my parents reflected. That clarity allowed me to find my way back into my parents’ arms, loving each other the same as the day I was born.

Maintaining this silence surrounding my mother’s death felt like closet walls closing in around me again. I thought I had burned down my closet completely. Yet there I was, pushing away close friends, lying to the public and shutting out the older folks who loved and respected my parents. I thought about Auntie Tessa’s concerned voice. I also thought of Auntie Belle and Auntie Sharon, two more of mom’s closest sisters.

“Not hearing from mom for two months is not typical,” I wondered as I left the pool and returned to my condo, “They must be very worried. Surely this is not what mom wanted!”

“No choice,” I justified keeping them in the dark, “If they knew, others might know quickly too.”

At home, I looked into the mirror before my shower. Sure enough, my skin had dehydrated and I looked 5 years older. The muscles under my right eye had begun twitching involuntarily. The condition continued daily for the next few weeks as February drew to a close.

Finally, another Friday!

“One more last duty,” I told myself, worn out but hopeful, “I make it to 4 pm, and I’ll get some rest over the weekend.”

The duty was my CCA. The students huddled inside the assembly hall rushing another scene for the annual video production.

“Pun Pun!” I looked into the iPad screen, “Get some lights to shine on the back of the actors’ hair. That will give the heads some outline.”

Everything was finally ready for the shot. We had 10 minutes to complete it.

“And ‘ACTION!’”, said the student director.

In the middle of the shoot, loud screams came in from outside the hall. Another CCA was practicing across the hallway. They were rehearsing for their annual theatre piece. They had been loud for an hour since we started shooting.

I sighed and got up, “I’ll ask them to give us 5 minutes of silence.”

I looked into the classroom when I got there. A young teacher was leading her students in vocal practice. I knocked on the door before opening it, poking my head inside.

“Hi,” I said, “May I speak to the teacher-in-charge?”

The young teacher looked at me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, not bothering to hide my annoyance, “You have been screaming for an hour. Can we have 5 minutes of silence for the last shot?”

Taken aback by my sudden intrusion, the teacher stared straight into my eyes and smiled.

“No.”

It was my turn to be taken aback. The muscle below my eye began twitching right then.

“No?” I asked, “Why not?”

“Because you barged in without knocking.”

“I did. You were screaming so loud, no one heard me.”

“And you did not use the word ‘please’,” she replied, still smiling.

I looked at the students. I recognised three from my classes. They were smiling too.

Why were none of them wearing masks? I thought to myself. 5 minutes before school ended. I controlled my rage.

“Can we PLEASE have 5 minutes of silence?” I said in an exaggerated tone of politeness, but did not mask my hostility.

I shot the teacher a look, thinking, “I’ll deal with this next week.”

We completed the shot. I dismissed the crew, went down to my staffroom, collected my bag and left school. I went for a massage in Silom.

My usual masseurs of the last decade had all gone back to their hometowns. The repeated opening and closing of massage parlours meant months without pay, and they could no longer afford the high rental and daily expenses of living in Bangkok. The few available were mediocre. After the massage, I sat down outdoors in my usual pub. By February, few people were visiting the Soi. I chose a seat furthest from the other patrons.

“How are you?” Chai, the Thai owner of the pub, came by to greet me.

I smiled and shrugged, “Still very quiet here.”

“Yes, we are losing so much money,” Chai sighed, “I have seen many low periods and high periods for this pub, but never something like this.”

“Where are the rest of the waiters?” I counted three.

“They had to find work elsewhere,” Chai said, “When the pub close, there is no pay. Every time the Covid infections rise, they tell us to close.”

After Chai left to attend to the pub, my jug of local beer and I sat forlornly. It had been more than a year since I sat down with any Singaporean visitors. When I went home, I could not sleep. I looped the images of the theatre teacher and my students grinning at me without their masks on. The eye muscles throbbed, and my heart pounded against my rib cage like a fist. I sent text messages to colleagues and a few students, and eventually found out that the CCA teacher was a teaching assistant named Jasmine.

The next day, I shot an email to my Principal, “Mr Benson, on Friday, I asked Ms Jasmine, the CCA teacher in charge of Theatre, to give us five minutes of silence for a video shoot. When I saw that some of her students and herself were not wearing masks but in close proximity, I must have looked irritated but said nothing. She saw that as me being rude and told me ‘no’ in front of the students, giving the excuse that I did not use the word ‘please’.”

“I want her to apologise for not following Covid safety measures.”

Monday morning, Mr Benson called Jasmine and I to his office.

“It is Mr Otto who was being rude, and it was HE who did not wear his mask!” Jasmine was not backing off, “My students and I were all wearing masks!”

I was taken aback. I was a stickler for mask safety, so why would she stoop so low as to make things up to bolster her defence? *This teacher had no integrity!*

“I saw you and the students smiling at me,” I retorted, “So how can I see that unless you’re really wearing your masks as you claimed?”

I reminded myself that I was a man of science and facts, so the facts would speak for themselves. I would not be swayed by Jasmine’s use of emotions.

“Everyone calm down,” Mr Benson stayed objective, “Right now it is a You-say, I-say situation. It looks like we can only access the video footage on that day to ascertain the facts.”

The school had installed video cameras in most corners of the compound. While we were uncomfortable that the cameras could be used by the administrations to monitor teachers at all times, it had become common for students to bring expensive handphones and notebooks to school, and recent gun-related incidents in Thailand, including a shootout at a shopping centre only 4 km from our school’s sister campus, balanced out the argument of installing the cameras.

“That’s great,” I said, as Spock-like as I could muster, “Let’s wait for the video footage.”

For the rest of the morning, I was strangely calmer. Was it because I was sure that I would be vindicated again? Or was it because I finally found an outlet to vent?

“Why do I need to vent?” I started asking myself.

A few hours later, Mr Benson called me, “Meet me at the IT department. I’ve seen the footage and I want you to see it too.” I went downstairs to the IT room. Mr Benson gave me a look that said all was what he expected.

“Otto,” he said, “Before we go in to watch the footage, I want you to know that I was quite sure you were right at first. Afterall, you are a science and maths teacher, and you have conducted yourself reasonably since you joined the school.”

“However, I saw the footage,” he said, “All of you were wearing your masks.” He let me let that sink in for a while.

“What?” I reeled, “That’s not possible. I saw them smile!”

“Let’s go in and you can see for yourself.”

We went into the IT room. Mr Benson asked the IT staff to pull out and play the video. Sure enough, everyone in the rehearsal in the video was masked. *I was so sure I saw them without their masks!* I followed Mr Benson outside.

“Otto,” my principal said softly, “What happened?”

“My mind played tricks with me,” I struggled momentarily, “I only see this in movies but I never experienced anything like this.”

“You aren’t taking any medication, are you?”

“No,” I said, “Not even Panadol.”

“People hallucinate when they are very tired or in great stress,” Mr Benson reasoned, “Does this have anything to do with the catastrophic event you mentioned?”

“I think it does,” I replied, “But I do not know how yet. But the facts have spoken, and I am in the wrong. I need to apologise to Jasmine.”

“Are you sure you don’t want wait a day or two first?”

“No,” I said, “I have done enough damage.”

I thanked Mr Benson, and headed back towards the staffroom. I was surprised by my own reaction. I was at once ashamed and excited. A big piece of a puzzle was solidifying, still somewhat formless. This was not the first time I was mysteriously excited by a lead that had not taken shape. I remembered the day when I attended training on blogging, as a way of teaching teachers new skills. It was easy to register for a blog name, and easier to post texts and photos. A blog is like a diary that everyone could read, and it could potentially reach millions while bypassing the usual checks set up in traditional media such as the newspaper and television.

“This is so dangerous,” a fellow teacher and parent said as she sat next to me, “A kid could share so much about himself and herself, and no one could stop or erase that information from the internet. We must teach our children about the dangers of blogging.”

Having encountered censorship when I was writing theatre plays and doing press interviews, I was frustrated by the subtle web that ensured that only negative gay stereotypes made it to the printed pages and national broadcasts. Positive portrayals were restricted to the theatre, and thus all the effort by writers and artists were preaching to the converted.

People loved to look at the negative side of new events, technology and ideas. There were always two sides. A blog, being a new platform, would easily and quickly circumvent the old road blocks. The rise of the blog became my ticket out of the closet.

The excitement I felt birthing that idea of using a blog to come out felt similar to how I felt as I sat down at my table in the staffroom. Before I move forward, I needed to clean up the current mess I made. It would be easier to chase after a new scent when unburdened.

I typed out an email:

Dear Jasmine,

Mr Benson had shown me the CCTV footage.

You and your students were all wearing masks. For some reason, I had hallucinated. That is no excuse for my behaviour. I unreservedly apologise to you for causing you undue distress, and hope that you will forgive me.

I will also apologise to your students who were in my classes as soon as I see them this week.

Something had not been right in my life at the moment, and I will need to reflect and correct for that so that this will not happen again.

Yours sincerely,

Otto.

I sent it to Jasmine and Mr Benson.

I was lucky to run into Jasmine at the corridor when I was heading to the cafeteria. Her demeanour was almost as apologetic as mine, almost as if she knew what was really happening to me. Perhaps Mr Benson spoke to her and hinted about my unspoken tragedy. I repeated my apology and promised I would clear things up with the students too. She accepted my apology, and that was that.

That same evening, I chatted with Han from home. Han listened to my recount of the events.

“What do you think happened?” He asked, almost as if he knew the answer.

“I was trying to prove how strong I was,” I said, “I wanted to show everyone that I was as tough as my parents. But I was hurting myself and harming those around me instead.”

News from Selena, our family lawyer, brought further confirmation that denial of mom’s death had been harmful.

“Hi Otto,” Selena wrote in an email, “Good news! The bank accepted the POA and released your mom’s bank record.”

I opened up the PDF file: mom had transferred the amount from our joint account into another account under her own name. It was not that she did not trust me to distribute the money fairly, but more likely she wanted to show fairness to all her children. Lydia was as much in the dark about the money as I had been, but I had falsely accused her earlier. After the call, I texted Lydia and Sheng.

“Brother, sis,” I typed, “Now that the mystery of the lost money had been cleared, we should not keep mom’s death from her close friends for too long. Mom has been sent off quietly. We gave her a quiet wake and cremation as promised. So let’s start with Auntie Belle, Auntie Tessa and Auntie Sharon.”

“I’m not ready to speak to them,” Lydia replied.

“I’ll talk to these three,” I answered, “But you need to tell mom’s sister and brother. They are old and likely do not use smartphones well. So I can’t call them from Thailand and incur large overseas phone charges.”

It’s no secret that a friend is someone who lets you help. It’s no secret that a liar won’t believe anyone else, I thought of a famous U2 song, They say a secret is something you tell one other person.

“Human beings are community creatures,” I once told my class a month back, “We build communities and forge friendships by being vulnerable, by sharing things important to us to friends. Of course, being vulnerable means we are taking a risk: we risk that we will be hurt. But if we can build a community, we stand together stronger.”

I talked the talk. But was I walking that walk? The idea of the Dark Forest Postulates hovered above too, but my experience with coming out of the closet was positive overall. Why should my sexuality be considered a shame? By that extension, why should I be ashamed of my mother’s suicide? We keep our silence for fear of being devoured by external forces, but maintaining that silence seemed to be eating us up inside.

Sheng took on the task of informing mom’s siblings.

In the back of my head, I still felt that the dam of silence would break eventually. I chose to test the waters with Auntie Sharon and her daughter Veronica. Veronica was my age, which made connecting via wifi easier, and them living in Hong Kong meant the news would not leak out in Singapore.

“Veronica,” I texted, “There is something I need to tell you and Auntie Sharon. But please keep this to yourself and your mom for the moment. Also, please don’t be too upset.”

“My mom passed away in December. She jumped from her floor in the early morning. We believe it is because her knee surgery did not go well, and she also feared that she might have the onset of dementia. We kept it from everyone because she wanted no wake and a quiet cremation. Also, the publicity might have complicated the police investigation.”

“I apologise on behalf of my family for keeping this from you and Auntie. The two of you are one of her dearest friends, and I think it is only fair that I tell you about this first.”

Veronica texted back almost immediately, “I am very sad and at a loss for words.”

“I’ll let you decide how to break this news to your mom. It is important that the shock and sadness do not harm her health. Once she is ready, we can chat face-to-face using an app,” I replied, “Don’t contact Lydia. She is too emotional to talk about this.”

“How are you holding up?” Veronica asked, “You are still in Thailand, right?”

“It was not easy the last few months,” I told her about being unable to attend the wake in person, and keeping the secret from almost everyone. Veronica asked me about Lydia and the children.

“They are managing best they could,” I replied, grateful for the safe space Veronica had offered me in her listening, “We were all just hiding from everyone to maintain the secrecy.”

“And now we only communicate about mom’s will,” I said. That was the first time I thought of this, because finally these thoughts left my head and I heard my voice reflected from someone else.

Why did it feel so good to be able to talk to someone other than family? Because while family is a source of comfort, it was also an echo chamber. We know more or less what to expect. We constantly scuttled between the safety of family and the allure of the society at large, and the choice of staying in the comfort zone or stepping out into the forest keep us biting our nails. Why can’t we just keep it within the family?

Because ‘family’ was also impermanent. Because eventually, the children must start their own family. Because eventually, the old families will be swallowed by time.

Because mom had her own family. There was grandma, mother's elder brother, mom's younger sister who was adopted. But I know her family was the one she started with dad.

Dad's family was his father and mother back in Batu Pahat. His father and mother in turn had their own families back in China.

Lydia knew her family: it was the one with her children. Sheng knew his family: the one with my sister-in-law, my nephew and niece.

I always insisted that Han was my family. We committed to each other for 23 years, but we were denied most of the Wow-we-are-committed moments our straight siblings could expect. We had no ceremonies witnessed by family and friends. We had no legal papers to sign together, and we did not have that powerful moment where we held our child for the first time. I cried at Sheng and Annette's church wedding. I drew and published my first comic book when my nephew Bobby was born. I was in the peripheral of those events, but I knew how powerful and defining those moments were.

The lines between family and friends were less well-defined for my community. It was only after I came out publicly that I could draw upon the insights and wisdom of others. I could only arrive at better clarity when I take a risk and open my heart.

A couple of days later, Veronica texted me, "My mom is ready for a video chat this evening."

That evening, I shared a mini-wake with two of my mother's best friends. There was immense comfort to see those who were dear to mom.

"Your mother has always been very strong," Auntie Sharon assured me, "I am sure she thought through this carefully. She would want you and your siblings to take good care of yourself."

"If she knew she could visit you in Hong Kong again," I recalled the Hong Kong/Macau trip Han and I brought mom on a few years ago, "She might not have left so soon. I think she knew the Covid situation would not get better before her condition got worse." We shared a sigh at the global pandemic wreaking havoc on countries and families.

"You are alone, Otto," Auntie Sharon reminded me, "So you must take good care of yourself."

“You know,” I thought of smartphones and the internet that enabled me to stay connected to Han nightly despite being trapped in Bangkok, “This pandemic would have been much worse if it happened 15 years ago.”

We took comfort in that, then bid each other good night. As I laid in bed, I noticed that my eye muscle stopped twitching.

The next day, I texted Auntie Belle’s son, Thomas. After the initial exchange of information and condolences, we talked about the subject of euthanasia.

“My lover and I discussed this issue too,” Thomas texted, “We did not intend to have children, so we discussed everything, including end-of-life issues.”

“This is not something we can discuss openly in Asia,” I said, “With religion still wielding such a big influence in the region, no politicians would broach the topic.”

“Yes, we’re still decades behind some of the western countries on the subject, amongst many other subjects.”

“What was your conclusion?” I asked.

“I would not have the balls to do what your mom did,” He replied, “So we would fly to one of those countries where assisted euthanasia is legal.”

“If such an option is available here,” I speculated, “Mom might not have left so soon. The doctors would be able to assess her condition openly, and we would have the opportunity to be by her side should she decide to end her life at the onset of dementia.”

Again, the next generation of my parents’ good friends became a source of strength and support. We felt we have reaffirmed our parents’ friendship, and ours too. I only hoped Sheng had the similarly-affirming experience talking to mom’s siblings.

I shared with Han my experience with Thomas and Veronica the same night.

“Dear, you remember when I wrote that blog and put my sexuality out for everyone to see?” I asked Han.

“What about it?”

“If I told mom and dad, they would give me a hundred and one reason not to,” I said, “Because they only saw the negative side of being open. It’s the same thing with mom’s suicide. My brother, sister and I are so afraid of the negative opinions that other people might have, we are living in fear instead of dealing with it. My heart rate is up, and I got into fights because of my frame of mind.”

“I don’t think it is possible to keep this from the public much longer, I’m sure mom’s friends won’t tell others. But the longer we stay silent, the more people will speculate.”

“Why not just say mom died peacefully in her sleep?” Han suggested.

“There was as a crowd when the police and ambulance were there. You know people are like that: only the worst rumours spread,” I considered the possibility, “Also, I think the truth is better than half-lies. Why carry bullshit with us?”

“Many won’t think like you one lah,” Han replied, “Some think suicide is wrong no matter what.”

“Yes, but by hiding the fact, it’s like we’re ashamed and agree with those people. I had always been proud of mom, and I am not about to start feeling otherwise.”

“And what about your nieces and nephews?” Han reminded me.

Think of the children! Where have we heard this before?

Ah yes, when people tried to keep gay teachers like myself from teaching or appearing in Questions and Answers session at the National Library. My nieces and nephews grew up knowing Uncle Han and I were a couple. None of them seemed traumatised by that knowledge. I had, however, seen children grow up distrusting their own parents because the parents avoided discussing issues such as sex, STDs, birth control, abusive behaviour, rape and drugs. The impact when such events

actually landed upon the unfortunate did not just include the harm, but also came from the fact that they had no idea how to recognise, defuse or react to the situation better.

“Sheng and Annette are both smart parents,” I reasoned, “They can manage the kids. Lydia’s children are already adults.”

Han agreed, “I know you will want to make an announcement, and I think it is the right thing to do too. But let Sheng know, at least.”

“OK, I will,” I said.

The next few days proceeded calmly. I taught classes, found the time to take the theatre students aside and apologise to them about my behaviour with Jasmine. In the evenings, I drafted a few paragraphs about the announcement:

Dear friends,

My mother, Mdm Chen Poh Chang passed away in the early morning of Dec 6th 2020. She was 84.

While her death was a shock to my family, she had told her children in the past about what she wanted for her funeral: no wake, same-day cremation and no send-off. Despite our grief and trauma of losing her, my sister Lydia, my younger brother Sheng and I agreed to honour her wishes.

The circumstances of her passing were also why we kept the news from even close family friends. My mother had been quietly planning her death. Around 4 am Sunday morning, she left a couple of notes for us and slipped out to the corridor of her HDB flat on the 10th storey. There, she stepped onto a neighbour’s chair and threw herself over the corridor ledge.

Because it was an 'unnatural death', the police had to investigate. We kept the public out of it, as she was also the spouse of our father: Fong Swee Suan, founder of PAP and famous for Operation Coldstore. We did not want public speculation to complicate the cremation or investigation.

After the police released her body to us, we held a simple ceremony at Mandai Crematorium. Mom was sent off by her children and grandchildren. We only began sharing about our mother's passing after Chinese New Year, starting with her closest friends first.

On behalf of my family, we apologise to friends for our silence. We hope you will extend your kind understanding. As my brother and sister's families both do not wish to speak to the

public, this Facebook post will be the only announcement between my family and everyone else. I also request that you do not contact anyone in the family other than myself should you have any further questions.

My parents were well-known in Singapore to the older generations, and thus it would be natural that people would have different opinions or claim to know different versions of their stories. But my parents lived their lives in integrity and dignity, and thus I have a few more things to share about my mother's life and passing.

My mother had always been fearless. She was already a leader within the textile factory she worked for, and earned the fond nickname 'Black Peony' on account of her sun-baked skin. She helped lead a peaceful negotiation with the factory owner to improve workers' welfare before meeting and falling in love with my father. After Operation Coldstore threw my father into detention and exile in Malaysia, my mom moved the family to Johor Bahru so that the children would not grow up without daily interaction with dad. While it was a difficult time for us kids, who had to cross two customs daily for our education back in Singapore, it was the right choice and we nevertheless shared many happy memories as a family.

Mom worked the hardest, woke up the earliest, and had to help both dad in their little machinery company and the children in our education. She was proud of her spirit, resourcefulness and - as always - independence.

Once, she carried me - I was a one-year-old baby with high fever - through the back alleys during Kuala Lumpur's May 13th Racial Riots to see a doctor. Another time, a snatch thief on motorbike dragged her along a tar road trying to make off with her handbag. Mom clung on until the thief gave up and rode off.

Through economic crisis and better times, she helped dad pull us - their three rabbits - out from university graduate hats. An education was something she was denied when she was young and poor.

Even in her old age, she remained ever concerned with her children and grandchildren. Her advice and care were something we were very fortunate to receive.

Mom remained sharp and clear-minded towards the end. When her knee got worse after a routine knee replacement, she began to fear the loss of her mobility. She knew her body was failing slowly. She did not want a fate like her own mother: suffering from dementia but stuck in the same bed for more than two years.

'I don't want that fate. It will only burden myself and others' was what she wrote. She dreamed of dad calling to her. Since he passed away in 2017, she had been missing her soulmate terribly.

Perhaps she might have delayed her move a little longer, had Covid not isolated her friends from her for extended periods. There was a brief glimmer of hope that she could visit her old friend in Hong Kong last year, when Singapore and Hong Kong were considering a travel bubble between the two countries. But that hope was quickly extinguished when another fresh batch of infection happened and borders remained closed.

In my mind, there was no doubt that my mother made her last decision as she had made every decision in her life: based on the cold-hard facts and consideration for her family's overall well-being. To her, what laid ahead was a few unpleasant paths. My grandmother's last years haunted her and perhaps she was unwilling to put us and herself through that again.

I attended mom's farewell via a live feed, as rushing home would mean a 14-day quarantine. For the last three months, I grieved alone in Bangkok. Mom visited me in my dreams thrice. She looked younger and stronger. As always, she was humorous and cheerful. We cried together as my mind's way of saying farewell. My family shared our grief by texting each other.

In the last week, we informed mom's closer friends first before we make this small announcement. I again ask that you respect my family's privacy and not contact anyone other than myself.

Rest in peace, our dearest mother. Rest in peace, Black Peony.

Your sons, daughter, in-laws and grandchildren will miss you, but we will keep the lessons you taught us close in our hearts and minds.

After I completed the write up, my rational half invited my emotional half out for good cry. Both sides were no longer at war trying to keep one another at bay. I was finally ready to begin the grieving process fully.

I sent a copy to Sheng, informing him that I would post it on Facebook in 3 days' time. Three days later, I uploaded a few photos of mom: one when she was young and posing with us as children, one with her and dad, and a recent one with me. Once I pasted what I wrote as text, I clicked 'post'.

The reaction was swift. Within a day, the post garnered more than 1,000 Likes and was shared many times. The news broke in several of the major newspapers in Singapore and Malaysia. I was glad all were directly transcribed from my original post. Most who contacted me told me that they could understand where my mother was coming from. I received my friends' show of support and condolences gratefully.

Only one relative slyly suggested that mom's decision was 'not fair to all (the children).' It was a phone call and he did not see me roll my eyes.

"Mom had always made decisions after careful consideration. Every decision she and dad made throughout their lives had been for the good of our family," I politely countered, "In this case, she only had bad options to choose from."

Lydia was hurt that I did not consult her.

“Would you have agreed if I had told you?” I asked. She did not answer. I grew silent momentarily too, because that was obviously what mom would have said to us about her final plan.

“When dad passed away, we did not allow ourselves to mourn fully because we knew it was mom who was in the greatest pain. We carried out the wake and cremation efficiently and put up a brave front so that mom would feel supported,” I texted.

“This is our mother who died,” I asked her, “If we do not cry for her, who will cry for her?”

“Sheng’s children? Bobby?” Lydia asked, “What do we tell them?”

“They will deal with it, with our guidance. They will be fine. Remind them about how great their grandparents were. Show them how we grieve for loved ones, so that they know what to do when it is our turn. And if anyone else make fun of mom’s approach, then you know they are not real friends and it’s a good time to cut ties with them.”

I shared with my family a paragraph I learnt from Literature class in secondary school:

Sorrow is better than fear. Fear is a journey, a terrible journey, but sorrow is at least an arrival.

When the storm threatens, a man is afraid for his house. But when the house is destroyed, there is something to do.

About a storm he can do nothing, but he can rebuild a house.

– Alan Paton, *Cry, The Beloved Country*

If my original family members still believed that my public outing was a foolish mistake, I hope that my new act of going public would shed new light for them.

This time, the whole family has come out.