

My mother was dying, and she was tired of everyone rubbing it in her face with their tears and words of endearment. That's what she told me anyway, but I guess you would tell a kid anything to get them to stop crying. It worked, and she made me promise that we wouldn't speak or make noise when we were alone together or I'd never get to visit her again; she called it The Rule. On a rainy day, all you could hear from our room was the pitter-patter of raindrops hitting the hospital room window, the metronomic beeping of a heart rate monitor, and the slow, steady wisps from a respirator they kept over her mouth.

Some days were better than others, as time passed I, incredibly, grew accustomed to the couple of hours I was left alone with my mother while my father dealt with "adult stuff." There were days that we would stare at each other and just laugh like crazy, interrupting the silence and letting in a ray of light into a dark world. Other days weren't so good; those were the days that made me quiet, even outside the hospital. It was like if the water from my denied, unshed tears had somehow filled up my mouth and drowned out my lungs so even my breathing sounded like sobbing. Eventually, chemotherapy had made her weak; she was now just the shell of the woman who gave me life. As she got worse, I could spend a week without muttering a single sound.

Since I couldn't say anything to her, I wrote to her. I wrote poems and short stories, both sad and silly, and had her read them. She would smile and laugh at some of them, her respirator blowing in staccato huffs. Even after she couldn't read the words anymore, I still wrote to her, and wrote and wrote and wrote. I guess that's where my love of writing came from, from making her happy. I wished I could have read them to her, but then there was The Rule.

This lasted approximately ten months, until one day.

The silence erupted into a hundred hundred sirens, tens of thousands of bells, a million symphonies, all playing Rapsodia Cubana (her favorite piece), all exploding into my head with the force of a hydrogen bomb.

It was a Monday, and was sitting at the desk inside the hospital doing homework. I heard an indistinguishable voice, more like half a voice, coming from my mother's bed. I didn't believe it could be her. Not after so long. Again, the same voice called, and it was my *mother* producing the sound.

I ran outside the room to search for my father, to let him know that she was saying something, but he was nowhere to be found. Going back in, my mother beckoned me again in voice that now, after going so long without hearing it, sounded alien and static-like.

This was a test. She was testing to see if I would say anything. We were playing the quiet game in the car, back when she was okay. We were silently laughing at each other's faces. She was reading my story and smiling.

I stood next to her and moved my face closer to hers, and her voice, perfectly clear now, was asking me to let her go. It was but a ghost of a whisper, but it was enough to deafen me.

But it was a test, I reminded myself, a test to see how long I could go without speaking to her. She was testing my resilience and determination, and I had plenty of both, so I said nothing in return. *Momi* would not beat me this time, no sir!

A week later, the cancer had won. Her heart fell limp, and she was done.

How sorely I felt, then, that I had won.