

Umma

written by Guest Contributor | November 16, 2021



Image Credit: Author's brother Charlie, mother, and self

A member of my Loss of a Parent Grief Support Group told us over a Zoom meeting in July that she was marking the one year anniversary of her mother's death due to COVID. I was relieved I wasn't the one recognizing this milestone, that my mom passed away only six months and three weeks ago. I'm furious at the audacity of time, to keep moving when my mother stopped. I had to wait five months to join Group, which started a week after my mom's memorial service on the Friday of Mother's Day weekend. The demand was high, because the number of grievers during the throes of the pandemic eclipsed the number of counselors to moderate them.

My mother passed away on December 28, 2020 at 7:18 PM at a small hospital in Montclair, CA, 11 days shy of her 83rd birthday. The death certificate from Hollywood Forever contains a typo for my address and says that she died at 1955. I've always hated military time. The doctor carelessly marked her time of death as the time the pronouncement was made – the pronouncement I heard while still holding my mom's soft, cold hand. I remembered to check the clock two minutes after I witnessed her last breath: 7:20 PM. So 7:18 PM is the indelible time she passed.

I was the only person in the hospital room except for another patient, whose family I envied because she was in stable condition and cleared to leave the next day. My boyfriend, Abby, was watching us outside the window. *Thank God mom was on the ground floor of the hospital*, I thought. I don't know what I would have done if I couldn't camp outside her room for three days to be her advocate, to scream at the staff to fight for her life, and to bang on the window or door to get the nurses' attention when she pulled off her oxygen mask, making her saturation dip into the 80s, then 60s, then 50s.

My mom didn't die of COVID. I don't know why it was important for me to emphasize that to strangers or to remind my family and friends that *she was swept away with the tsunami*. When one of my friends texted me in May to suggest contacting FEMA to see whether I qualified for aid toward COVID funeral costs, I texted back "My mom DID NOT have COVID!" I haven't heard

from this friend since.

My mom passed away from aspiration pneumonia due to gross neglect and untimely medical attention at a memory care facility in Claremont, CA, which makes this senseless tragedy harder to believe and accept. The nurses and med techs at the assisted living facility consistently told me *your mother is just being lazy, she's fine, we're quarantining everyone in their rooms*. These were the verbatim reports I received after asking them why my mom was sleeping so much a week before she was rushed to the ER on December 21, 2020, with an oxygen saturation reading of 55. I was always an involved, helicopter daughter, and I don't remember a time when I wasn't worrying about my mother. She was everyday.

I visited the facility once a week to bring my mom snacks and supplies. I called multiple times a day, and, because I feared retribution for my hyper-vigilance, I showed up with donuts and cakes for the staff so they would take good care of my mother; the way her father surreptitiously gave her Japanese primary school teachers money and food during the Japanese occupation of Korea, so they would be kind to his 5-year-old daughter. My mom's Japanese name was Aiko Masuyama.

Six staff members tested positive for COVID after the Thanksgiving holiday weekend, infecting 17 residents. It didn't escape me how fucked up it was for one of the med techs to say my mom was "lazy" when she was the most ambulatory, healthy resident there. *You don't say that about a vulnerable 82 year old with advancing dementia*.

At the hospital, my mom was more alert with her saturation levels back up in the 90s due to the oxygen she received on the way there. She waved at Abby and me as we frantically ran up to the back of the ambulance where she was waiting to be admitted. "It's a six hour wait," one of the EMTs said while dozing off on the chair holding the emergency room doors open. "It would be a longer wait at a larger hospital," the second EMT chimed in. I wanted my mom to be at a larger hospital.

She wiggled her feet and smiled as I adjusted her blanket to cover her body. "Gomawoyo," my mom thanked me in Korean using the honorific while bowing her head after I handed her a small styrofoam cup of water. *She was going to make it, I thought, she's still bright and goofy*.

A doctor called me later that evening to tell me that my mom had a 70% chance of recovering. "Your mother is a tough lady. My only concern is that she already needs a moderate flow of oxygen. But her blood work is good and she's feisty." I received a report the following morning that she wiggled out of the soft restraints the nurses put on her wrists overnight to prevent her from removing her mask, and that she removed all the IV lines from her arms. Dementia was warping her cognitive abilities, making her do dangerous things to herself again. But my mom was fighting to get out; this was my only sign of hope.

These days I compare my life before my mom's passing to the life after. Everything provokes. Now I go to my gynecologist's office remembering the

last time I was there was when my mom was still alive. When I go to Gelson's, I walk by the chips and crackers aisle greeted with a reminder of the PopCorners I used to buy for her so she could snack on them while lying down in bed. I know this because I installed Wyze cameras in her house to monitor her caregivers and to catch her before she wandered out. Wyze Cam was illuminating like that, it was a portal to my mom's brain. At Trader Joe's, I turn the corner from the produce department and glance at the bags of nuts and berries with small chunks of dark chocolate that I used to buy for her. Wyze Cam was a snitch too and revealed that she ate only the small chunks of dark chocolate.

Trauma pins itself to memory and body. I stopped going to Korean grocery stores because they're synonymous with my mother. We used to pick the largest and juiciest Fuji apples and stock up on packages of udon, fish cakes, rice cakes, mung bean pancakes, and anko ban (bread filled with treacly red bean paste). It's too soon.

For 10 years, I drove once a week from my house in Los Angeles to my mom's apartment in Rancho Cucamonga, an hour east in the Inland Empire, to take her to multiple doctors' appointments and fill her pantry and refrigerator to the brim with food and supplies. I dreaded the 45 mile commute, but nostalgia is ironic and unkind to me these days that I helplessly wish she were still there surrounded by lush sycamore trees, lemon trees, star jasmine plants, and scattered benches to rest on. I've been told that Koreans keep their elders at home, a sign of the highest respect. But then some of my aunts urged me to place my mother in a nursing home after her dementia diagnosis. She was the quintessential homebody – I couldn't take away something so vital to her existence. I held on to "no" for as long as I could.

I'm beaten down by guilt and regret a lot, too: the remorse for not buying a house with her because I didn't want my brother, Charlie, to move in with us as she requested. Charlie has a gambling addiction and my mom was his lifelong enabler. He was chronically homeless so my mom let him live with her anytime, anywhere. To say Korean mothers spoil and dote on their oldest sons is a colossal understatement; my mom wanted Charlie back in her womb. If I had just bought a house with my mother, she wouldn't have gotten dementia because I would have engaged her mind by talking with her, listening to her, cooking with her, and going to Kim's Cheon Gi (Kim's Home Center) with her. Kim's Cheon Gi is a two-story mega chain store illuminated by fluorescent lighting; a mecca for Asian delights like TVs, rice cookers, appliances that became flotsam in our garage, vacuums, hangover tea, creams, plush pink blankets. It was crack cocaine for Korean homemakers who needed to have the latest gadgets to help make their lives more tidy and efficient. Kim's Cheon Gi was my mother's second church.

My most tidal regret is placing my mom in a facility when I kept her safe at home for 10 years with advancing dementia. I'm aware that my guilt and regret are really feelings of shame, which is cultural and makes the disgrace that much harder to forgive, because culture is also a discipline – a discipline I failed. My friends say I sound irrational but this is the derangement that reveals itself after a loss so unbearable.

I hated my mom's dementia. I fucking hated it. I was driven to madness with stress and fear that something disastrous was going to happen to her every second of the day. Most people are addicted to social media, but I was addicted to home protection products to watch my mother's every move when her caregivers were and weren't there: to see whether she was climbing on a chair to close the vents in the kitchen and bedroom on summer days to block the cold air from blowing since she forgot how to use the thermostat; whether she was letting the water run in the sinks; whether she was moving all the perishables in the refrigerator to kitchen cabinets. Sometimes I slept with the Wyze Cam app on in case she opened the door at 3 AM to an imagined old friend.

My mother was diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment in 2012, which transformed into full-blown dementia by 2016. I didn't think much of it at the time because I thought cognitive impairment was forgetting to turn off the hallway light or the names of extended family; age-related memory loss, rather than the dementia that robs its host of their memory, cognitive functioning, and communication skills. Or the dementia that's a serious, terminal disease that eventually leads to a person's death. I was naïve, in denial, because I took my mom's elasticity for granted. She always came through for us and survived her illnesses, like the series of ischemic strokes that blindsided her when she was 53; the same strokes my father said she "made up for attention" while we waited for her to wake up in the emergency room after she collapsed at the entrance of the crawl space under our house. Or the time my mom became extremely dehydrated, at the age of 67, and was admitted to the hospital for three days so her potassium levels could catch up. She always came through for us, except for when she didn't.

It's a hopeless feeling being in a state of limbo while grieving the loss of my mother, the only person who made sense of this world, when she was still alive, but the vibrant, energetic woman I once knew was straying. Her distant eyes drifting farther away and searching for a home in her new reality. I've learned that this disease reveals people's inherent nature, and hers was joyful and sweet. My mother's observations were always immediate like a child, and dementia introduced a tactile sense, which made her connect more specifically with nature. She remarked on the way the sunlight danced through the leaves of a tree *and it felt tingly*, or the way snow accumulated on the foothills behind her house *that it was so delicious*.

On Christmas Day, Abby and I brought warm coats, sleeping bags, and directors chairs whose legs drowned in the puddles formed by the rain outside my mother's hospital room window. I don't remember eating or sleeping much during this time, but when we did, we subsisted on overripe, bruised bananas, three-day-old pastries, and the occasional hot meal. I'm not a religious person like my mother was, but since it was Christmas, I prayed. I prayed to my mom's Presbyterian Christ to allow me to switch roles with her, so I could be the one on the hospital bed fighting the infection. In exchange, I promised to return to church and give generous offerings like my mother did. I prayed to Buddha to help relieve myself of my attachment to her. I tried to follow the deliberate breathing exercises I learned during the last 15 years of practicing Ashtanga yoga, but my fantasy of fighting my mother's pneumonia

and my attachment to her distracted me.

My mother was born in the Chinese zodiac animal sign of the tiger, but she was no Tiger Mom. She was more creative than that; she led by instinct and encouragement: "You buy house and if your husband like me, I move in and take care of your children." The hope in her voice palpable as she established the foundation of filial piety in me when I was 22.

My parents were tenacious immigrants and worked multiple jobs so they weren't home very much, but when they were, they fought all the time. My father could be belligerent and always threatened to hurt my mom, then actually did, but she was congenitally stubborn and never gave in. She fought back with a sharp tongue and wit and wasn't going to be bullied by a fool.

My father eventually left the house in the early aughts, and I was thrilled: "I prayed for you and dad to divorce since I was 5. He never took you traveling like you wanted, he abused you. He was a terrible husband and father. Why didn't he move out sooner? Why did he make us suffer with him for so long?"

My mother sat on the couch in tears and laughter that I inserted my self-involved narrative into her open grieving. She was left with the regret and shame for not leaving the relationship first and being abandoned by her husband for another woman.

"Let's celebrate freedom, umma!" It was a brisk fall day and we craved something bold and spicy. Kimchi kalguksu sounded appropriate. Kalguksu is a noodle dish made with handmade, knife-cut wheat flour noodles. My mom made seafood kalguksu in the winter from scratch: creating the dough, rolling it, then cutting it into chunky, perfectly imperfect slices. I've always loved that kalguksu noodle slices looked undulating, meandering, novice-rendered. The broth is thick and consists of anchovies, clams, water, seaweed, zucchini, onion, green onion, carrots, garlic, and salt, which supported the dense, chewy noodles. I wasn't a vegetarian on the days my mom made clam kalguksu – I slurped up the noodles and when there were no more, I methodically picked up the large bowl of broth and gulped it all down as a chaser.

We drove to a clamoring kalguksu house in Garden Grove where I made sure they served soju for toasting. While we negotiated the unimpeachably hot, slippery noodles, I encouraged my mom to take small sips of her soju. She never smoked cigarettes or drank alcohol, so the two tiny sips of soju made her loquacious, turned her face a muted poppy, and gave her endless chortles.

"After you born, I get pregnant again and had *botion*," my mom said while drowning her noodles in broth with her chopsticks.

My mom had an abortion that she didn't tell me about until I was sitting in front of her at a busy kalguksu house at the age of 27. I sat stupefied. My mom kept her secrets in a tightly sealed vault never to see the light of day; the same way she kept her secret, until I was 32, about a woman my father impregnated when my mother was nine months pregnant with Charlie. I stared

straight into her eyes searching for tears, but she sat tall and undaunted.

“Did you want the baby?” I asked wide-eyed, nearly catatonic, trying to recover from the heat of the soup with sweat beads on my nose and forehead and the same Asian flush.

“No, your daddy say another baby is too expensive and we not happily married,” my mom responded nonchalantly, like she was telling me to get the check.

“I’m glad you made the decision that was right for you, umma. I know it must have been a difficult one, you’re so strong.” I assured my mom, impressed by her self restraint.

“It’s not big deal, baby would have a hard life maybe.” My mother smiled while she picked out a piece of spice between her teeth with the toothpicks every Korean restaurant seems to supply, like they know *you’re going to need this*.

We bickered about who was going to pay. In the Korean culture, the eldest always foots the bill. Like *beware, I love the most*. But the occasion was bittersweet and I wanted to celebrate in honor of my mother, to treat her when she felt uncertain. My mom prioritized Charlie and me in every situation that it caused quakes in my heart when I felt like we didn’t live up to her ideals. I needed to pay because I unequivocally loved *the most* that day.

“Aygu! I’m the mom, I pay!” my mom said perturbed, her face twisted in a knot, but now a glinting coral from the soju. I could tell this was going to end up in the wrestling match I’ve seen play out many times before in public spaces with my mother and her younger sisters. It was a shameless display in packed restaurants each time the check arrived: my mom sucking in her teeth, her arms weaving into one of her sister’s arms, like a game of Twister, rabidly grabbing for the bill, shoving each other around as one sister made a breakthrough and rushed toward the cashier with the bill and cash in hand. It always ended with my mother grabbing the arm of her younger sister and pulling it – knees bent, hips at an anterior tilt, haunches back – the way I tugged at her when she dropped me off at kindergarten and I wanted her to stay. My mother always won.

The waitress started to move toward my mom to hand her the check, obviously knowing the custom, but before she got close enough, I leapt up to grab it mid air, nearly body slamming her onto the epoxy-coated floor.

“Nope, I’m paying!” I was victorious. Buzzing and laughing with my mouth wide open, spices sandwiched between each tooth, I skipped to the cashier and threw down cash, the transaction type Koreans love the most.

As I was guarding my mother through the window, I broke down seeing her small frame, alone, petite and powerful. Atomic elements in my blood identified their provenance in hers. There was nobody to carefully arrange her striking strands of silver hair across her forehead or to encourage her to inhale deeply because she was too tired. The horror of the dark, menacing bruises

all over my mom's pale arms from circuitous IV and PICC lines overwhelmed me with quiet panic attacks that I couldn't inhale myself because the air felt like lead.

My mother couldn't see or hear me screaming *umma* through the thick glass. I complained to the doctors and nurses that there was a lack of attention given to her because of her age, that they were death paneling her, and, as though reading from a script, they responded impassively, "We don't do that here. We're overwhelmed. Every hospital is like this now."

By then my mom stopped wiggling out of the soft restraints; her feistiness, the only sign of hope, was diminishing.

I clearly remember the tone of guarded optimism the doctor had for her 70% chance of full recovery. On December 27th, that tone was replaced by a sober one warning that the extreme dehydration and malnutrition, sepsis, and oxygen starvation that the facility failed to see was causing my mom's organs to fail: "Your mother has a change of condition. Her prognosis is poor. I'm so sorry. I recommend comfort care then deciding if you want to intubate, but I don't recommend that for 80 year olds, it's hard for them to come back."

My father, brother, and I went to Seoul to see my grandfather after he had a massive stroke in 1982. He was expected to die so we were going for his funeral. The day after we arrived, I walked in on my eldest aunt tenderly shaving her father's face, to remove the tiniest bit of stubble, then she slowly brushed his teeth and cleaned his hands with warm wash cloths. This was the filial piety that was stolen from me, my mother's birthright. I knew that I was never going to be able to offer her the same end-of-life rituals. I yearned to be next to her side to hold her hands, apply lotion on her body, brush her teeth and hair, and whisper things to her.

The last time I saw my mom alive was when the doctor allowed me to be with her on the evening of December 28, 2020, a full week after she was admitted to the hospital. He told me I could stay for 10 minutes. I stayed for an hour. I saw the deep indentations on her cheeks and nose left by the BIPAP mask. The nose that she was so proud of because it was slightly aquiline. For as long as I can remember, my mom gently pulled at the tip of her bridge with her right thumb and index finger to encourage growth. She did it to me too. My mother was a survivor of two wars, an abusive husband, and a series of unjust heartbreaks, but she also possessed an indomitable spirit that triumphed over the most cruel disease in that she remained brilliant, amazing. I want to be her.

I was oblivious to the other patient in the room, but fully aware of the incessant keening of my mother's oxygen machine. I was consumed by the heaviest rage that my mom was dying in such a surreal way: she couldn't be supported by her family when she needed them like a new mother might need a doula. I saw her sedated body on the bed and heard the familiar murderous screaming into the BIPAP mask, which was much more alarming and confrontational in person than the one I heard through the window. I wanted to crawl into bed with my mom and hold her, spoon her, but I couldn't because the IV and PICC lines took my place. Instead, I bent down on my knees, kissed

her cheek, and arranged the striking strands of silver hair across her forehead. I stroked her back and hands, and held her preternaturally supple face and whispered *Jjibae gacha*. Let's go home.



Sunny Pak is a writer based in Los Angeles. Her proudest accomplishment is being a full-time caregiver to her mother for 10 years. She still actively advocates for her mother by writing, calling, and pushing for assisted living reform to help other vulnerable seniors afflicted with dementia.