

Blinked A River

The gloomy clouds were shifting to reveal the two-days-old crescent moon that floated high in the inky sky. It was 9:00 PM on the third day of Ramadan. The ear-piercing racket of ambulance sirens still resonated throughout my neighborhood, and my deranged downstairs neighbor still howled. If he yelled less, I might have never known the names of the 12 people that lived downstairs. After the long-drawn day, my joints ached, and my stomach twinged from eating.

I was productive before breaking my fast. I completed most of my homework, scrolled through Reddit, and took care of my grandmother. My bloodshot eyes were a testament to the exhausting day. My tired, strained eyes fluttered, trying to resist the gushing, overflowing river of emotions inside of me. At the kitchen table, I opened a Google Doc and began writing:

The loud, coarse knocks coming from the front door displaced the piercing ticks of the chrome-plated clock in the living room. Thoughts flooded my mind. I had not swept the floor, made the beds, or dusted the furniture. My belly rumbled from emptiness. I spent the entire day by the landline, answering the calls of unfamiliar relatives. They gave my family their thoughts and prayers. They wished for my grandma to get better. My relatives are always there for us; even if I only invite my uncles to my wedding, 500 people will turn up.

My older brother opened the door as I was still praying. The knocks disappeared, only to be superseded by my sobbing mother.

Had she died? I thought.

My brother entered the living room with my mother's face buried in his arms. She finally raised her head. She had red, watery eyes and faint streams of tears on her cheeks. Right away, my sister broke her prayer and embraced my mother.

"What happened?" she asked. My mom swayed her head, and her mouth increasingly trembled.

Should I break my prayer? I thought. I continued praying for a few more minutes.

After finishing my prayer, I raised my hands and positioned them together, such that my hands created a valley. I lowered my gaze on to my hands and begged. "Oh Allah, help my grandmother. Keep her safe. Keep all of us healthy during this time. Please cure our sicknesses. Please forgive us for our sins. Help my grandmother. Help my grandma. Help my nana."

Then, I folded the soft, bright red praying mat and trudged along to my grandma's room, where my family stored the prayer mats. My mom's cries grew louder as I stepped closer to the room. She sat on my grandma's bed. My mom's wet palms masked her face. Tears rolled off her palms onto her clothes, arms, and the wooden floor like water dripping off the petal of a delicate flower on a stormy day.

Two days ago, my grandma started struggling to breathe. The rumbling sound of mucus in her airway echoed throughout her room. She soon developed a fever. The sounds of her pain reached the living room. She grew exhausted from each breath.

My grandma suffers from COPD, a chronic lung disease. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, my parents had taken her to the hospital without hesitation. Now, my parents worried; she could develop pneumonia, and if they take her to the hospital, she could contract a fatal disease.

My grandma's condition only got worse; she could not sleep, and her breathing only grew louder. The next day, my parents called her physician again, and he recommended that my parents take my grandma to a private urgent care. So, my parents drove her there.

I was not there for the rest of what happened, but I can tell you my mom's narrative.

My mama and grandma waited inside the car until they called my grandma's number. Right when my grandma entered, the nurses, concerned because of her dangerously low oxygen levels, called 911.

My mama stood in shock and started sobbing. She begged the paramedics not to take my grandma. My mama told them she would buy everything necessary regardless of the cost.

At home, my ma cried, "I did all that so she wouldn't have to go to the hospital. All that was pointless."

For the rest of the day, whenever I entered my nana's room, I felt a void inside of me. I no longer saw her sitting in her room, cracking betel nuts, and quarreling with my sister. It reminded me of when she left to go to Dubai. I grieved every time I did not see her in her room. For the first two weeks since her departure, when everyone was asleep, I pressed my face onto my pillow and cried myself to sleep.

I stood up, left my Google Doc open, and went to the bathroom. I locked the bathroom door, turned on the faucet, pressed my hands onto the marble basin, and leaned towards the mirror. I examined my red eyes and the reflective water in my tear ducts. A bump formed on my throat. Then, I took a deep breath and sighed. I blinked a tear that rolled across my cheek, down into the running water, and swirled away. Only a faint trace of emotion remained on my face.

Note: She is recovering.