

The Last Farewell
By Russell Axon

*“My dreams, when life first opened to me,
My dreams, when the hopes of youth beat high,
Were to see thy lov’d face ... ”*

—Mi Ultimo Adios
José Rizal

My Lola Darna passed away when I was 11. Two months before my 12th birthday. Three months before martial law was declared. Eight months before we fled the Philippines for America. She was my *Lola*—grandmother, my father’s mom—but a lot of other people also called her that as a sign of respect and endearment. My parents took my siblings and I to visit her occasionally when we were growing up: we lived just outside of Manila, while she resided in Palayan, about three hours north. But after she was diagnosed with dementia in the spring of 1971, my parents moved her in with us. I remember being upset because she stole my bedroom.

The house I grew up in had a single room on the third floor, an old attic space that my father had converted into his study. It was wide but short. My dad could sit comfortably at his desk, but he would have to hunch over or bend his knees to move around. When I was 8 and just under four feet tall, I could jump up and sometimes brush my fingers against the ceiling. My dad kept two shelves of medical and personal books against one wall; his desk neatly organized with papers, pencils and his pipe in the middle; and at the other end was a large bay window with a postcard view of the Manila skyline. I loved going up there. I would take a book off his shelf, sit at the window, then spend hours taking in the words, the crisp pages, the distant bustle of the city, the warm, sweet aroma mixed from the leather book covers and remnants of my father’s cherry tobacco. It was the perfect space for when everything else just felt overwhelming.

I had to share a room with my sister, Maribel. She was four years younger, yet people constantly asked if we were twins. We had the same shade of brown for our eyes, the same rounded chins and high cheeks, the same shiny black hair, even the same tiny moles behind our left earlobes. But I thought we were easy to tell apart. Maribel was always half my size, her hair was wavier like it wanted to curl but couldn't quite figure it out, and she had a curved nose that protruded farther from her face than it should have. I called her *daga*, or mouse, because of that and how she always scurried behind me, struggling to keep pace.

When my father was promoted to chief of staff at Santo Tomas Hospital, he was home less often, and my mother was more likely to find me in the study than him. I eventually approached my parents with a proposition to make it my bedroom. I would move my bed and belongings in, and my father would only have to move out his medical books; everything else could stay.

“*Ay nako*, you drive a hard bargain, Analyn Papa,” he said. “Only if you are the one to pack up my books and give me my desk lamp. *Sige?*”

“*Sige.*” *All right.* We shook hands.

The day after fifth grade ended for the summer was devoted to cleaning and packing. The medical books were heavier than they looked, and Maribel whined the entire time that she didn't want to be alone at night in her bedroom, but thankfully my mother was able to get her nursing shift covered so she could supervise me and distract Maribel. We had just wedged my mattress through the slim doorway when my father called. My mom spoke with him for a few minutes, hung up, then told us that we needed to come with her to pick up Lola Darna. She was quiet for most of the drive, only telling us that our Lola wasn't feeling well and needed to stay with us for

awhile. She kept sighing and biting the corners of her mouth, the same way she did a few years ago when Maribel had come down with a bad case of pneumonia.

When we arrived, Lola Darna was waiting at the front door to greet us. We had last visited her during Christmas, and she didn't look any different to me from then. She was skinny, and her back curved slightly toward the ground like a banana tree. But her arms were bulky from years of carrying children and nets of fish. Her two front teeth peeked out as she smiled, and her dark hair was beginning to fade and thin. She was lighter-skinned than most Filipinas, but I always thought it made her dark brown eyes shine.

“*Chiquita*, little girl, come over here,” my Lola said. She pointed her lips at me, making a soft click, lassoing me with some invisible Filipino magic that all the elders had mastered, pulling me toward her with the turn of her head. Her voice was soft and playful, rippling from her like petals touching down on a pond. My father was already there, packing several of Lola's bags. My mother went to help him finish, while Lola made *tsokolate*—Filipino hot chocolate—for Maribel and me.

For the drive home, my father asked me to ride with him. When we reached the highway, he explained to me that Lola Darna's brain was sick, that it was slowing down, so she would start forgetting how to do things and would need a lot of help. And because of that, she was moving in with us, so that him and mom and me and Maribel could take care of her. And the only way he could get her to agree to move in was if she had her own room.

I pleaded with him, shouted and cried that it wasn't fair, that he promised it was my room, that we shook hands, wasn't there another arrangement, something else we could do, that I had already moved my bed up there. He listened to my tirade, not angry or upset, just patiently

waiting for me to finish. He only spoke a terse “No” when I suggested we put her in a nursing home. When I finally stopped, he put his hand on my shoulder and gently squeezed it.

“Analyn, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I broke our agreement. It’s not easy, and it’s not going to get easier. Everything is only going to get more hectic, more difficult. Your mother and I are needed at the hospital more and more each day. But your Lola needs us to help her. It’s our responsibility to help her. Not anyone else. So I need your help, *ayos*? I need you to help your mother and me look out for your Lola and your sister. I need you to be strong and be there for them. Can you do that? Can you help us out?”

I sighed and bit my lip. I gave my dad a brusque nod of agreement, then wiped away the leftover tears on my cheeks with his hand. It was warm and had the same cherry scent as the room.

“*Malakas*. So strong,” he said.

The first few months were exciting. Lola Darna remained sharp and energetic. Although I was upset about still sharing a room with Maribel (who was elated about the reversal), I didn’t have much time to dwell on it with everything Lola was teaching us: we helped her clean and garden; we learned how to cook fresh banana paste and *pancit* noodles; she let me climb the coconut trees in the backyard; we’d walk to the market for *halo-halo* ice cream; she showed us how to tie a thread to the legs of a monkey beetle so that when you twirled it around it buzzed like a tiny lawn mower. And she was always reading. Books, poems, newspapers, comics, whatever she could find. If I got up early enough, she would cook me *longanisa* sausage and rice for breakfast while I read the newspaper to her. She would always scoff at stories about President

Ferdinand Marcos or the student protests against him, using Tagalog curses that I learned not to repeat in front of my mother.

Once Maribel and I were back in school, though, Lola's disease caught up with her. It was gradual: she would stay in bed late or forget to add an ingredient to a dish; we took less trips outside of the house; she had a tougher time looping the petite knots around the legs of the beetles we caught; she started forgetting English words, falling back her old Tagalog; she would ask me to read for her more often, even though more and more coverage was devoted to Marcos warning about the Communist threat and protests becoming more violent. By the start of 1972, she could still take care of herself, but she preferred to sit either in front of the television or at the bay window in her room.

Maribel began cooking more often, while I took over the gardening. One weekend in March, I found a wasp's nest in our backyard coconut tree. My father told me not to go near it. He would hire someone to come and take it down safely. I wanted to show that I could handle it myself. The next morning, I helped my Lola to the living room sofa, turned on the television for her, then tried several tactics to bring down the nest. Small rocks, long sticks, slightly bigger rocks; nothing was strong enough to knock it loose. I needed more power. So I ran to the garden hose wrapped up by the patio door and unfurled it.

"What are you doing?" I turned around. Maibel was rubbing her sleepy eyes, sporting frazzled hair from a nap.

"Getting rid of the wasps," I said.

"Dad said not to touch the wasps!"

"I know, that's why I'm using the hose and not my hands."

“Oh. Can I help?”

Before I could say anything, she grabbed the hose and ran to the base of the tree. I thought about switching roles for a second. Did she even know how to work the nozzle attachment? But I reasoned that if she wanted to put herself in harm’s way, that was her choice. I twisted the knob, releasing the max amount of water pressure. The hose expanded, slithering swiftly all the way to Maribel.

“Okay, now!”

She clenched the trigger and a column of water jetted into the air. Her aim was impressive. The pulpy nest broke apart instantly. An army of airborne, angry needles poured out, soaked and seeking revenge. Maribel dropped the hose and covered her head with her arms. The wasps converged on her. She crouched down and screamed as the first wave of stings hit.

I ran over but stopped a few feet away. I needed to grab her, but I couldn’t. There were so many wasps. So much noise. So many things that could go wrong. Maribel cried out. My feet were boulders in the grass. I shouted, “Run, Mari! Move!” She couldn’t hear me over herself. My sister was in trouble, and I was trapped behind a wall of fear.

Lola Darna ran past me. She could move only at a slow jog, but she reached Maribel quickly. She held one of the knitted living room blankets like a matador, wrapped it around my sister, then pushed her toward me. I picked up Maribel and ran toward the patio door. Lola followed us into the living room, then slammed the screen door shut.

Maribel was still screaming and crying. I felt two welts starting to form on her arms, and I counted at least three more around her neck and face. I kneeled down to Maribel’s level and

tried to comfort her, but all I could say was “I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” Lola grabbed Maribel’s hand and quietly led her into the kitchen.

“*Chiquita*, get vinegar and ice,” Lola said.

I did as ordered. Lola sat Maribel on the counter next to the sink and examined the stings. She grabbed a dish towel, lathered it in soap and water, then started washing the marks. I brought over the bottle of vinegar and a bowl of ice. Lola made me wash the rest of Maribel’s stings while she grabbed a few more ingredients. She mixed everything into the bowl. Maribel and I had both calmed down, mesmerized by her movements. She grabbed another clean cloth and dabbed it in the clear liquid.

“Will hurt for second. *Ayos?*” *Okay?* she asked.

Maribel sniffed a sliver of snot back into her nose and shook her head up and down. Lola placed the cloth on the sting near her shoulder. Maribel grabbed my arm so tight that I thought my bones would be crushed. Lola ran her thumb along Maribel’s cheek. She gradually relaxed.

“*Mabuti,*” Lola said. *Good job.*

She cleaned out the rest of her stings, then cradled her in the living room until she fell asleep. I cleaned everything else up, then laid with them. I apologized to Lola for not waiting to knock down the wasp’s nest, for letting Maribel take the hose, for just standing there, for everything; but she said there was nothing to apologize for. I thanked her for taking care of Maribel.

“*Gagawin mo ang parehong,*” she said. *You would do the same.*

Lola stayed with us until May. By then, her condition had worsened to where she didn't even get out of bed to use the bathroom. My father arranged a private care unit for her at the hospital, and she passed away peacefully in June. I moved into her room in August. Maribel was upset but not vocal about it. The desk and city view were still there, but the room now smelled of my Lola's jasmine perfume and dried mango snacks. I had trouble reading there, but I tried to keep up with the few newspapers still being published.

We were about a month into school when President Marcos ordered Proclamation 1081, effectively seizing total control of the government and declaring all of the Philippines under martial law for the next eight years. I was in English class, reading a poem by José Rizal, when the soldiers cut the power and toppled everything into a dark morning.

My classroom was at the bottom of the school building, partially underground. Sister Jessa, after expertly shushing a room full of panicked 11 and 12-year-olds girls, had us quietly file out the door and up the stairs where there were windows. I had to block the late morning light with my hand for a second while my eyes adjusted from the darkness, then I saw all the other school girls silently filing out of their classrooms. Sister Ida, who my classmates and I estimated to be three days older than dirt, moved with surprising swiftness to Sister Jessa, who was just behind me. The old nun whispered, but the bass of her voice had enough strength to reach my nearby ears.

"Sundalo, Jessamine," she said. Soldiers.

I heard a few more words between them—"radio static," "phones silent," "parents outside"—but I became more focused on finding Maribel.

As the second graders flew down the stairs from the upper floor, I easily spotted her. Every other student's white and gray uniform dress was pristine; Maribel always had grass stains or tiny tears in it, despite our mother's best efforts. I called out to her and she immediately ran over and hugged me. There were the makings of tears in her eyes, and she was still slightly pale from the fever she had just broken less than a day ago.

“Ana, what's wrong? Who turned off the lights?”

“It's okay, Mari, it's okay. We're gonna go home. Hold my hand tight.”

We fell back into the flow of students heading toward the main doors. That's when I saw the first soldier. If it wasn't for his camouflage fatigues and his rifle, he would've blended in with the squared, sandy bricks of the building. He stood like a gargoyle by the entrance, moving only his eyes as we passed under his watch. I could smell sweat and oil off of him.

There were more soldiers along the driveway. Some were directing the students, others watched from their jeeps. All had rifles. The road looped at the school's front steps, then stretched about half a football field to the main gate, with manicured grass and flowers on either side. The gate was open, and I could see a growing crowd of parents pushing and shouting against a thin wall of soldiers. One of them stood in the back on top of a jeep with a megaphone. His frustrated commands—first in Tagalog, then in English—carried all the way back to Maribel and me.

“The children will be released one at a time. You will come forward to claim your child, then head directly home. Any disobedience will result in immediate punishment.”

The soldiers funneled us into another line that seemed to move like a snail in slow motion. It was hot. The sun heated up with each minute, and the students and nuns kept close to

each other. As the gate neared, some of the girls started crying and screaming for their parents. Most just kept their heads down. I peeked a few times as we got closer to see if anyone was waiting for us. Our home was about a mile away, and Maribel and I usually walked with a few neighborhood girls who also attended our school. But I shuddered at the idea of walking home by ourselves in this chaos.

“Bilisan!” A soldier yelled at the next girl. *Faster!* She was unsure, scanning the crowd for a face she recognized. Another soldier approached, his hand reaching out to grab her; thankfully, the girl’s father finally broke through the mass of parents and took her away before anyone else could.

I prayed that my parents would be waiting for us at the gate—that Santo Tomas Hospital could spare one doctor and one nurse to help their children in their time of need—but I found out later how much worse things were in the city. There were just a couple girls ahead of us, and I wondered what would happen if no one was there to claim us. Maribel’s hand suddenly slipped out of mine.

“I don’t feel so good,” she said. The skin on her face had a greenish tinge and glistened with sweat. She was slightly hunched over with one hand clutching her stomach, like she was keeping it in place. I didn’t know what to do or say except to pull her close to me. I strained to lift my feet. The shouts from the soldiers and cries from the parents and students echoed around us. What were we going to do?

“Bilisan!” Now the soldier was shouting at us. I moved forward, nudging Maribel along, but I still didn’t see anyone from our family. The air thinned around me. The sounds of parents and students calling out to one another got softer, like someone turning the volume dial down on

the radio. I didn't realize I had stopped moving until a rough, fat hand wrenched me around by the shoulder. The soldier's face was even rougher and fatter. He gathered up a rancid breath to say something.

Maribel beat him to it, projecting her breakfast directly onto his boots. The soldier flinched and glared the sharpest eyes I've ever seen at my sister and me.

I didn't move. We were going to be imprisoned for barfing on a soldier and never see our family again, and I couldn't move.

I breathed.

"I'm sorry, sir. She had the flu. I thought she was over it," I said.

The soldier didn't react.

I pulled Maribel closer to me. She was shivering.

"I see our mother over there," I lied. "Can we go home?"

He snarled. "*Lumayas.*" *Get out of here.*

I pushed Maribel toward the gate. She looked like she might wretch again, so the parents parted for us, and we walked quickly to the street. There was traffic from cars trying to get by, people clogging the road and soldiers blocking paths. I wiped the mess off her face, then picked her up.

"Hold on. I'll get you home."

I carried her the rest of the way. When we got home, I cleaned her up, made something for both of us to eat, then fell asleep next to her. The next day, I asked my dad to help me move my things back into my old room with Maribel. The attic was still empty when we left the country five months later.