

My Mother's last words to me by Sohaib Alvi

I wrote this a few days after my mother passed away today on October 2, 1989. I have carried it with me since not knowing if what I wrote was meant only for me.

As the memories of that night flood me again, I feel that the heaviness of carrying it for so long has made me weak. I also don't know when I might join her (and my dad), and this true story will go down with me. I suppose by sharing this with you I can tell you what a fine woman she was, and how all she had in her heart and on her mind, was the other person.

Perhaps my mom's last words deserve a wider audience...especially of sons for we have no idea what goes on in a mother's heart, even when we think we understand her feelings for us; actually we can never.

-Sohaib Alvi, a son too late.

What was it she had said?

The sun was setting as I entered the ICU cabin where she lay on her back looking at my elder sister and brother, who had been with her for the afternoon. She had turned her head immediately as I entered and as I bent down to kiss her she had looked into my eyes and said something. It was one of those moments where you have caught the words but you can't unscramble them immediately. Like that nanosecond when the bullet has hit you but the pain has not yet begun.

She couldn't speak audibly anymore for the last few days and only make an effort, with shortness of breath pulling down her words. She would gulp for air every few seconds and yet would want to speak to us. Her mouth would open and half a whisper would come out or none at all. I would never hear her voice again for the few days left for her with us.

I had hushed her down to save her the effort to speak. It happens when you are in too much of a hurry to quieten someone in pain. But I knew the words had parked themselves in my mind subliminally. Like the music you heard in passing without noticing it and yet you know you could hum it if you kept delving into the moment before it would perish forever.

I knew she was dying and very close to leaving us. After a long hard struggle over nine years with cancerous peptic ulcer and a range of other complications, my mother had become too fragile to continue her fight. Frail and weak, she nevertheless kept her smile, and her tenacity with which she had brought us up against so many odds showed still.

But I could tell she was scared; she didn't want to die and not only because she loved us

all so much. She was someone who enjoyed life and talking with people. She had battled cancerous tumor enough to see all of us married, and held and hugged all her grandchildren during her illness, except my next two sons who would be born later.

What was it she had said? Did she want the pain to stop?

Being the youngest I had spent least time with her, and my brother and sister were fortunate to have grown up with her when she was stronger. She had battled the post independence blues of settling down in a small two room flat plus courtyard in Sadder in the morphing city of Karachi, along with my uncle and his family and the young relatives in transit, finding their feet before moving on into the world.

Daughter of a senior bureaucrat in the British Raj, she had been schooled in Lucknow, Delhi and Simla (the summer capital where her father would move with the government). She was fond of the arts from childhood, loved classical dance and played the sitar.

But as my father struggled to find work without compromising his integrity for he had been a pre partition journalist, well educated and strong on values, my mother ensured she was there in every way for her two children, teaching and schooling them in the best missionary schools.

I arrived in her world late and never once did I hear her complain despite a near princely upbringing. She had fallen in love with my father who had a dashing personality and loved him till her end, standing by him all through even as his world crumbled around him.

My earliest memory of her was the ever smiling and cheerful woman who found something good in everything and everyone. By then my father had ensured a separate flat for us halfway between Tariq Road and the famous Cheel Wali Kothi. He had started work in Morning News and Radio Pakistan but what he knew was not what the people in power and media then wanted to hear. In an effort to bring forward the truth much of his work would be shelved, and my mother would live through his hurt.

The memories flashed by me as I watched her trying to catch her breath, which would come often with a pause and pulled up with effort. She spoke as much with her eyes as her lips, but gasping for breath, her mouth was seldom closed for the whisper. At that moment her eyes had become alive, and all but came out to ask me what she wanted.

What was it she had said? Glass of water? Another pain killing injection?

I can't remember her asking anything from me ever except to fetch something from the market downstairs. She would do all her shopping herself, leaving her children to pursue their education in the mornings and afternoons. On Sunday mornings there would be a chorus in the house as I woke up late. She was so popular among the family that there would always be someone who would come up to laugh with her and have tea as they would come that side to do their shopping.

She would help my cousins whichever way she could, especially teaching, and one of them always said he owed his passing of high school to her. She was the confidant of all wives in the small building, called Baji by all. She would listen to their intimate fears and sorrows and laughingly tell her of everything funny that would happen in their household and personal lives. It seemed they drew their happiness from just her company alone, for she never once commented on their personal lives or passed it on. Perhaps that is why they trusted her so much. She would never speak anyone's secret.

What was it she had said? Did she want to tell me something that had to be done for her?

It had grown dark by the time I was alone with her. I watched the soft moonlight filter through the darkish glassed window and rest quietly on her closed eyelids. I remembered her love for me in every way. Walking me back from school as a toddler, Reading stories with me, breaking her nap to cook a warm meal for me at odd hours in the afternoon and when I had fever to stay up most of the night.

I leaned back on the chair and thought how little I had repaid her, other than to be with her physically to drive her somewhere, or eat a meal with her when I was not studying or roaming with friends. I watched her face resting uneasily on the pillow, the slightest of twitch in her brows to indicate she wasn't comfortable inside.

Then I lived a moment that would stay with me till eternity. In that stillness of the night her words had come out clearly all of a sudden, as if the darkest hour of the night had transformed itself into the midday sun in a flash. I just sat there and watched her face. My chest filled up and then went numb. I was too stunned to shed a tear, let alone cry.

To this day I see her making that effort to say what she did. To this day the words she wished to say but wouldn't come out, live with me eternally. To this day I can read her mouth and eyes. To this day I see the worry in her drained eyes.

I see now that after a long days work with little sleep over the past few days, I must have looked disheveled, tired, and fatigued. She had not wanted anything from me.

What she had asked was, is and will remain at the heart of every mother's love for her child, no matter how grown up we are...

I cry inside for what she asked that evening. Tears will never come out for they are too stunned. Perhaps some feelings are best left frozen in time for them to retain their shape till eternity.

You see, in all her excruciating pain, down to her very last few breaths and strength, she had seen me walking in and with all the concern she had shown every time I had entered the house looking tired, had asked again:

"Son, have you had anything to eat?"