

## OH, JOSEFINA!

I write this in a dehydrated fatigue, doing anything necessary to record the events of the day so that I might put a shape, flow or narration to it all, facilitating perpetual recollection of the concentrated hours of strenuous splendor. And though I'm confident I could never forget this signpost in my life, I am currently fighting the seduction of the hospital's cot (and the cot's pillow) to spill words on paper in an attempt to assure integrity of my memory. Also, despite my fatigue, I don't think I could rest my head before draining some of this from it.

Today was the memorial service for my paternal grandmother and the day's essence seemed to be rustic, in a sense, and surreal, in every sense. As with any important event, one naturally builds a projected agenda and setting to anticipate how the affair will play out, like a director builds a storyboard.

None of my expectations were realized.

For example, **the weather**: the traditional sun and sky associated with Puerto Rican Decembers were replaced by a tropical downpour that was stretched from its traditional twenty minute deluge to a twenty hour shower, as if mother nature grew distracted with her finger on the Latin Morse Code transmitter and the clouds were commanded to sustain the wet note instead of transmitting the short bursts they were accustomed to.

**The setting.** Fresh from errands, a quick shower and sticky with spray adhesive, my father, sister and I arrived early at the reception area. It took a bit to find the building's unlocked entrance in the back. We were greeted by a monotone hum from a pack of yogalites who were interspersing Catholic prayers with their pitch. I resisted looking between the metal gates through the glass wall into their congregation, and instead studied the building itself, which was far from the traditional church I had expected. It's outside appearance reminded me of a squat Spanish Lower School where the patio we were waiting on was the children's recess space. It was a lesser-dutiful Catholic Center on the college campus my grandmother taught at for decades, which was delightfully closer to home for her.

The chanting and humming died at the turn of the hour and we entered the Center. I was struck by the space that we would be saying goodbye to my grandmother in. It was far from beautiful. I noticed the lack of stained-glass windows. I noticed the lack of traditional wooden pews I had seen in every church from small towns in Portugal to large cathedrals in Manhattan. As yogalites collected their gear, we discovered, and revealed, a small altar behind a firm, stained curtain. I noticed the lack of conventional candelabra and crucifix, replaced by a cheap candle set drilled into the wall and an asymmetric metal piece mounted behind the altar with a red sash falling from it. The walls behind the altar were concrete, painted peach. On the right side there was a large section of wall painted bright green. On the left side of the room there was a window opening to a kitchen area, yet the floor seemed primed for children's play with bouncing, rubber balls and model cars.

The eccentricity of the room, the lack of coordination of it all, seemed to be a fusion to me, like a recipe for a bizarre cocktail: one part cafeteria, one part church and one part lower school

hallway. We got right to work, bringing in the Costco fruits of our labor and setting out chairs, how many we had no idea. We settled at 70, and it proved too few.

Unsure how to pass the time as the first guests began arriving early, I aligned the rows of chairs and tried to wrap my mind around the day, from the weather to the location. It was far from the storyboard I had sketched. Moreover, this Center was like a needle in a haystack and locals were forced to take to the cell phone to tell other locals how to get there. And once there, it was hard to find the unlocked entrance that would lead to this room that was one part cafeteria, one part church and one part lower-school hallway. In addition, one of the yogalites had had their car broken into not an hour before. This place was far from what I expected it would be. And yet what was to happen in that room... I could never have expected either.

**My identity.** My sister and I found ourselves in the now-light rain directing guests to the appropriate entrance. Guests were mostly family, and they came straight to me with opens arms, though some of them I had never met! I entered their embraces, and under their breath they muttered about my grandmother as if she was my mother and asked me how my wife and children were. At first I attributed it to their confusion at trying to find this needle in a haystack, but eventually realized these people thought I was my father! It particularly shocking because I think, minus the gray, my father may look younger than me. The consistency of the mistaken identity was universal and made my head spin slightly... though I must also attribute that to wearing a tie and sport coat in the humid tropical storm. The hour before the mass, therefore, dissolved to me deflecting confusion and pointing to my father saying, “you may be thinking I’m him. I’m his son, John.”

**The intimacy.** Eventually settled for mass, the priest welcomed us, standing on that makeshift altar that was surrounded by a curved peach wall with modern metal crucifix hanging from it. He talked of God and Jesus in Spanish, the language of choice today, and I already feel my eyes welling up because this man is talking of my grandmother like the good friend she was to him. I felt I was pulled into a vortex, the room almost spun around me completely and now I saw it all from a different tilt. I wasn’t even thinking of stained glass windows and the wooden pews. Now I noticed this room had an added dimension of “gymnasium” to it, and I loved it. The raw intimacy this space provided, in its spontaneity (were there not a pack of chanting yogalites in here not an hour ago?), a stage where honesty would flow like lectures and wine at the Last Supper. In this chameleonic room, hidden in high-crime Puerto Rican neighborhood, I was presented with such honesty, I think I know the power that might distract the realities of the Universe, like Mother Nature herself.

The mass ran intimately and smoothly (despite the jumble in the reader’s stage directions), and I held it together very well until the mass encouraged us to offer each other the sign of peace. The room seem to transform into an altered anthill, each of us lethargic insects (for there was nothing rushed about the process) as we reached towards each other hoping to connect and communicate a short phrase, any phrase, and received one in return, then move on to the next soul and connect, and the next soul and connect, and the next soul and connect, and the next soul and connect, and the next soul and connect, and the next soul and connect...

We passed minutes connecting and holding each other.

The mass then moved to the most intimate part of the ceremony, where the priest imitates Christ sharing his body and blood with his disciples on their final meal.

I will never forget the chaste magnificence of the next moment.

It was so subtle, I think it would need my particular angle to notice it. Or my particular mindset. My father instinctively stepped up to the altar and assisted the priest. An altar boy. Still his mother's son as he wished her goodbye. And he did it naturally, placing towel on his hand and holding the water and chalice so the priest could cleanse his hands without hesitation and my father looked like a six-year-old who knew to play the part perfectly because he had studied it and hoped to be flawless because his parents were watching. Now, I'm not a religious person, but good God, do I hope his mother was watching him. An altar boy. Still his mother's son.

It was so beautiful because I don't think I could pinpoint a time that better embodied my father than this one. It was the epitome of his benevolence. He assumed that role on the altar unsolicited, with nothing but good intentions, confidently (as if he was meant to be there), and not demanding any credit for the actions. He only ever aimed to help and to improve lives of those he loved and the processes demanded of it. Damn, he was a good man, and I wept like a child as I saw him assume the position that would make his mother most proud. Most proud.

And so was I.

I couldn't help but realize how symbolic it was that he was easing the process of wishing her well in Heaven. His selfless actions were making the goodbye easier for all of us. It created a vortex of love and pride I couldn't quite comprehend because it seemed to collapse upon itself and grow more dense with every additional second I analyze it. Goose bumps screamed up and down by back and legs and neck.

The mass resolved nicely and we were then invited to address the congregation from this simple stage that lacked ornament and expense. It was as if the scenery had been cleared from the stage, and nothing but a bare stage light lit the space, but the amateur dancer continued practicing her routine. It was so far removed from stereotype and production, that I couldn't imagine a camera angle that could do the gestures of love justice. There was no way two dimension film could capture the moment and replay it, because these stories and confessions carried five dimensions of width, girth, height, time and tenderness that were contained in a bare honesty hidden in a nook of the city.

The fact that there was nothing standard about the day meant there were no expectations, no script and no confines.

My grandfather was the first to speak and he kept his composure much better than I did. His sight has been slipping from him for a while, so I imagine he could only see blotches of colors against the blotches of orange that were the plastic chairs filling the room. And with every pause he took to compose himself, my heart sank to new depths of compassion and empathy I had never seen explored.

I couldn't help but jump back to my father's participation in the mass and how my family had all confused me for him, and again, I entered a dynamic collapsing universe of support and pride in this gymnasium, cafeteria, lower school hallway, church.

There were eulogies. My sister swallowed her fear of public speaking. My father swallowed his tears. Friends swallowed their memories...

I barely noticed the room empty slightly as time passed with sorrowful remembrance.

There was a piano in the room we had placed photos on in the side of the room. As the ceremony progressed, I built up more confidence that I should honor my grandmother somehow.

My turn.

I stepped to the podium and looked out on the crowd, mind blank. As my decision to participate was minutes fresh, I had prepared nothing to say. It spoke off the cuff. I spoke about my grandmother, taking long breaks between sentences to control the quivering in my voice, and talked about how I linked her with New York and that she embodied the comfort of the narrator in the song *New York State of Mind*. She loved that city, as did I. She also wanted me to be happy, and would want me to live wherever made me happy. It was a strange rambling, but made sense to me.

I also wanted to tell a story about my grandparents. At the rate I was talking, though, with forced breaks for composure, we would have been there for hours as Mother Nature continued to hold her monotone, extended wet dash. I decided to keep it for later, and I walked over to the piano to give a the best version of *New York State of Mind* my worn throat would allow.

I think I was last to honor my grandmother that day, because the next thing I remember is us gathering for food and sweets in adjoining section of complex. The wine began flowing and I took my time to get my grandfather alone. He thanked me for the song, and I thanked him for, well, everything. And it was he I retold this story to: I visited them once in San Juan with my younger brother. The four of us, grandchildren and grandparents, were walking in old San Juan and either my brother or me noticed a beautiful flower and commented on it. We weren't used to tropical flora. My grandparents were walking behind us, holding hands, and my grandfather looked at that flower in the tree and said, "Y la flor mas bella del mundo esta aquí, a mi lado." Then he kissed her on the lips.

And I'll never forget it. Ever. That sense of adoration for each other, like newlyweds, must be genetic, not taught, because it is the very foundation of what I stand for. And I see it in my father, in the magical way he handles my mother to convey to everyone that she is his flower, the most beautiful flower in the world, and though they may not hold hands during their walks, I know my father glows at her side, as he glowed on the altar aiding the priest. It may be the single most important thing one could ever learn: how to love someone. And I can't help but feel it as it echoes through the generations of my family.

We both wept and he thanked me for the story. He thanked me for reminding him of it. Him, thanking me? Him, thanking me?

It was quite a night, and on it went with tears and stories in this most bizarre location and I finally felt comfortable snapping some photos to record the day. I only hope this less colorful prose could record the day as effectively.

John de Guzmán  
moi@alum.mit.edu  
2003