

“Life is for Living”

by

Paulina Rael Jaramillo

“Mom, I’m here,” I whispered, barely able to force the words past the lump in my throat. The only response was the harsh sound of labored breathing as she struggled to force air in and out of her lungs. “Mom.” I leaned closer and gently stroked her face. Her eyes stared past me as if focused on a future event that I could neither see nor share. I picked up the sponge tip that the nurse had left by the bedside, dipped it into the water glass and began to moisten her mouth and lips.

Throughout the day and into the night, family and friends came and went. Some cried softly, others prayed, while a few shared how their lives had been touched by the woman who lay dying. I barely heard them. My attention was focused on the struggle taking place on the bed, as well as on the less visible but equally fierce one taking place in my heart. Dip. Wipe. Dip. Wipe. Minutes turned into hours while I continued with my self-appointed task.

Being the youngest in a family of seven children had taught me many things, including when to persist and when to let go. Now, I found myself clinging fiercely to the life that was fading before my eyes. I had a myriad of questions and no answers and no intentions of letting go.

I felt a touch on my elbow. My sister reached for the sponge and took it from my hand. I stepped into the hallway, leaned my head against the wall and closed my eyes. Six weeks ago my sister had called, and in a few abrupt sentences said what we had all been dreading. “I just got off the phone with the doctor.

Mom’s cancer has returned. It’s spread throughout her body. There’s nothing they can do.” Week after week, as Mom’s health deteriorated and her strength weakened, my feelings of helplessness and dismay intensified and so did the questions. Why is life so unfair? Why did she have to endure so much

injustice? And, the most bewildering question of all—after a lifetime of struggles, why does leaving it have to be a struggle too?

“Life is for living.” A sob caught in my throat at the childhood memory of Mom’s voice saying those words to me whenever I stood scowling, hands on my hips ready to do battle. The words meant little to me then, and during my teenage years I dismissed them entirely.

I opened my eyes and looked down at my clenched fists. I sighed deeply, walked toward the hospital exit and stood gazing at the night sky. The distant stars and planets seemed to emphasize the aloneness I felt. “God, help me!” The words hung in the air like a delicate piece of crystal before falling to the ground and shattering. I turned and walked back inside. The sound of Mom’s labored breathing pulled me to her bedside. I picked up the sponge from the table where my sister had laid it and dipped it in the water glass. Dip. Wipe. Dip. Wipe. Tears flowed down my cheeks until it seemed to be my tears that moistened her lips and mouth. I closed my eyes in an effort to stop the flow.

Silence! A force more intense than Mom’s harsh breathing filled the room. My eyes flew open. I stared at her and willed her to breath while my own breath caught in my throat. Finally she drew a soft, shallow breath. Another long pause. Another shallow breath. “Mom! Mom!” Her eyes opened wide and her head moved slightly toward me. I looked at the beloved face that with quiet strength had prevailed through so many struggles—her own mother’s death at the age of twelve, loneliness, hard work, poverty and when she married, dad’s alcoholism, violence and infidelity. And now, her final enemy—the cruelest and most lethal of all—was claiming her life inch-by-inch as I watched helplessly. I leaned close and held her face between the palms of my hands while my mind raced with a new set of questions. Why does she have to leave us now? Could I have done more for her? I looked into her eyes, willing her to live. I wanted to stop time. I wanted to give her all the things that she’d missed. Instead, her eyes looked directly into mine and silently pleaded with me to let her go. “Life is for living.” Slowly I relaxed my hold and in a soft voice whispered in her ear—*Vaya con Dios.*”

Her body became limp and seemed to sink deeper into the mattress. I waited for her next breath. It didn't come. I kissed her forehead and touched her eyelids with my fingertips as I closed them for the last time.

I held her frame until the undertaker arrived. Later, as he wheeled her covered body past us, a loud and desperate sob pierced the silence while my arms reached out, grasping at the air in a futile attempt to stop him. Family and friends formed a circle around me. Their arms supported me until slowly their strength became my own.

"Life is for living." At last I understood the meaning of her words.