

A Burning Memory

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I killed you. And yet, I woke up remembering you again.

Mum, I hear your voice over and over, "Tâm hồn người không bao giờ thực sự chết." One is never truly dead. "Linh hồn ở lại để coi người sống." Their soul survives to watch the living. Please, let me rest.

It's been 369 nights since I've slept undisturbed. Nowadays, I wake up in cold sweat, my lungs crying for oxygen while goosebumps cover my arms like a long sleeve shirt. 369 days since I've seen your shell. It wasn't really you. Your face was the same colour as the hospital sheets. There was more of your thick black hair in our bathroom drain than on your head. If eyes are the window to the soul, then I could only see a ceaseless void through your muddied brown irises. Leukaemia took all of your colours and stripped them to black and white.

I will never forget the night I sat on the chair next to your hospital bed. There was a smell of medicine in the air and the torturous white light pierced my eyes.

Your fingers stroked my hair, "Liam, con đẹp trai của tôi." *Liam, my beautiful boy.*

"Nhớ rửa bát mỗi tối và dọn dẹp căn phòng bữa bộn của con." *Remember to wash the dishes every night and clean that messy room of yours when I'm gone.*

"Yes, Mum," I groaned. "Can you not remind me of these things when I'm visiting you?"

You began to tell me about how selfish I am to be lazy while you were sick. The patient monitor wouldn't stop beeping like an alarm you couldn't shut off.

Then it felt like all the air was sucked out of the room. It was hard to remember the details of that day. Some part of me wanted to forget how I walked out on you. I wanted to forget myself uttering the words *I hate you* after.

The sun hasn't shown itself, but the thought of you keeps me from sleeping. I brush my teeth. I wash my face. I look at myself in the mirror. I can see half of you in my face; the umber brown eyes and the lucky mole on your right cheek. It takes me back to you once again.

368 nights since the doctors pulled me aside. They used words like 'little to no progress' and 'here for the rest of her life', but I didn't really listen. I couldn't see you. The doctors didn't let people in when a patient is severely ill. They gave me an ultimatum. I could euthanise you like a sick animal. That, or watch you deteriorate and become buried in machines till you take your last breath. Pills would become your breakfast, lunch and dinner. You would watch yourself at the very threshold of life and death through the patient monitor. Leukaemia would eat you away till every aching muscle in your body kills itself. I didn't have any hope you would recover.

The doctors continued, "Your mother's chance of survival is close to zero percent. Liam, in our opinion, we advise you to take her off life support."

Silence.

"Okay." *Okay. O. Kay.* Your life or death boiled down to one single word. It wasn't right for them to leave a teenage boy like me to decide whether you lived or died. Everyone knows how only God can judge people, so why did the doctors bestow his power to me? What have I done to deserve it, other than be a hopeless son? I pursed my lips. The air felt dense and unbreathable as if I could grab it with my hands. There was a nauseating smell of sweat, but that might've been from me.

You died a few hours later, surrounded by people in scrubs. They knew nothing about you. Nothing about how you cook the best phở, or how you feed every homeless animal you see. How you somehow balance being a university professor, mother and woman all at the same time. A question arose in my mind. Would you have rather seen strangers who've spent months helping take care of you, or the son who stopped believing in your survival, in your last moments? So I watched the hallway dim their lights to stone grey and the grieving faces of people holding onto their dwindling glimmer of hope. I listened to your beeping monitor from outside the room. *Beep, beep.. beep...beep..* Then, it died. And you died with it.

Walking to the kitchen, I pretend not to see the build up of dishes in the sink. I plate up my breakfast. I grab a white mug. Its broken pieces are held together with super glue and there is a coffee stain on it that won't go away. I'll just have to use it until it falls apart again.

It was Night 367, and somehow I walked home without you from the hospital. I swore I heard someone mutter 'murderer', but it could've been my imagination. At home, the hallway lights are still on, and everything smells of your dusty magazines. I could almost taste the scent of your homemade phở gà, savoury and comforting. There were pictures of us framed along the burgundy walls that led to the living room. I saw you sitting in your armchair, looking up at me and giving me a gentle smile. It wasn't possible, I thought. I knew your heart stopped. I knew your blood was cold. Despite everything, you were here.

You reached your arms out for a hug, "*Mẹ tha thứ cho con.*" *I forgive you, son.* "*Vì con đã giải thoát tôi khỏi nỗi đau của mẹ.*" *Because you've freed me from my pain.*

And then I crumbled into a million fragile pieces in your arms. I crumbled because I knew I didn't free you. I killed you. I dismissed your life or death decision like it was nothing. No more than a sick animal being put down or a bug that is thoughtlessly crushed by a human. No amount of your reassurance will ease the guilt I feel. Shame became a stream of hot tears down my cheeks.

While you wiped away my endless tears, you told me of a Vietnamese tradition. Burn something, and it'll take itself to the afterlife. The living can never talk to the dead, but the dead will always be with the living. I didn't like that idea. I wanted you to be free because you deserved a son who cared about you. A son who held on hope that you would recover and visited you everyday in the hospital. Soon, I found my face pressed against your armchair and my arms were wrapped around its fabric. You were never there. Imagination can be incredible, yet so painful.

My hands become shaky as my memories form into words on this sheet of paper. I am buried alive in a pit of grief, and my decision will gnaw at me till I am bones. I flick the lighter open. The embers touch the paper leaving a smoky smell. As the paper disperses into ashes, I can only hope that this page finds you well.