

## When Mum is My Best Friend

*Mum left*

Did she really go?

That is what it says on my WhatsApp group chat, the group chat I created for my family: my dad, mum and older brother. Well, we know that she left the world 4 months ago, so WhatsApp must have deleted inactive users after 4 months with no activity. I looked at the date today and yes, today is the exact date after 4 months of mum's death. I wonder whether my dad and brother noticed that notification on WhatsApp, and I wonder how they feel. To me it feels weird, like she was still alive and intentionally left the group – or us. On the other side, it was a bitter reminder that eventually the traces of her will disappear one by one.

I had not experienced many losses in my life. There were few deaths, but most of them were people I was not so close to. Sure, I do miss them and wish I could turn back time to see them again, but losing my mum is a hard hit. There are only a few people in my life that I really care about since I do not have many close friends or close relatives. I was always aware that my mum is possibly the most important person in my life. Now that she is gone, I do not see the point of living.

You might think I am being dramatic. I am not saying you have not lost anyone important in your life, but just like any experience in life, it is unique to everyone. So I cannot help but feel that no one understands, is exactly in my shoes, actually lives my life and experiences all things that I did. Being a migrant makes everything worse too.

Growing up, this is what I remember about my mum. Even though she was twice my age, much of the time I felt like we were the same age. We used to eat, sleep, shop, and even shower together. Of course I respect her as my parent and there were times I struggled to obey, but most of the time we just happened to enjoy similar things, have very similar values and ways of thinking. Thanks to her youthful appearance, people always thought that she was my sister. She was thrifty, hardworking, logical, smart, independent, quiet but strong. She seemed like a serious person but when she told a joke it was so hilarious that I would laugh until I cried. Now, not many people can do that to me. And I know how to make her happy. She appreciated little gifts and cards. She loved beautiful writings and compliments about mothers so I always made sure every mother's day and her birthday was accompanied with a card with lots of writing. Not just a card that you buy and sign with your name at the bottom.

There were only three times I remember mum being angry at me. First was when I was really young in school, and I did not do well on a school test. I remember she was so angry that she pinched my arm whilst scolding me. The next day I got a bruise there and when she saw it she was surprised and felt very guilty, I could tell from her face.

The second time was when I was in high school. She wanted me to study overseas, so the plan was to enrol me into university in Singapore which is not too far from home. Singapore has a really high standard and I did not do so well in high school due to my extracurricular activity: drama club. Some extracurricular activities are really demanding, and

drama club is one of them. For months and months all the members were required to stay after school every day until late night to practice for shows. As a result, we were sleep-deprived, let alone had time to study. I remember we always tried to help each other doing homework during the breaks in drama club practice. My grades plummeted and my chance to be accepted to Singapore was blown. My mum was so unhappy about this and so I was sent to Australia instead. Even though she did not express it in words, she was cold to me for months. I remember it made me depressed, I could not handle it very well. Years later, she said a number of times how she performed and entertained her colleagues during work trips, thanks to watching all the drama club shows I performed back in high school. I guess she finally made peace with me and my drama club.

The last time she was angry was when I refused to date a guy that she thought was good for me. She was worried that I would not find the right guy since I have had a few breakups. So when I told her about this new guy friend who was a very nice boy, she straight away said I should date him. Although I told her I did not think he was the one for me, she kept lecturing me and seemed to be frustrated that I seem to like the bad guys and unappreciative of the good guys. All was resolved when I eventually met another guy and got married.

I lived with my parents in Indonesia for 18 years of my life, until I moved to Australia to study at university. I went by myself, and that was a tough time for both my mum and I. My dad used to tell me how sad my mum was for months. I was sad too and was really homesick. Imagine moving to an unknown country with a significant race, culture, and language difference, with no one that you knew beforehand. It was really bad at the beginning especially because the host mother I lived with was mean. I also had to adjust to how different the school system was compared to my home country. It became easier as I started to make friends, shared a home with other girls and learned about places to hang out and shop within a student budget. Despite the distance, my mum and I emailed each other every day, exchanging every little detail of our lives, that would centre mostly around my struggles. She always tried to cheer me up and gave me humble advice to never give up. Eventually the frequency of emailing was reduced as the less homesick I became, and the busier I became with study. We got used to living away from each other, having our own lives and it was fine. I still say that my parents, especially my mum, were my rock. Every time and anytime I needed to chat, they would always make time. Friends come and go, but my parents were always there, giving constant love. Their love was strong, so generous that I could survive for years in a country where I knew no one.

A holiday from university was such a special time for us, as I would always fly back to see them. My dad said every time it's my time to go back to Australia my mum cried, and she waited for me to go first so I could not see her cry. Whenever I visited a nice place, I always think of my parents, of how I would like to take them there so they can enjoy it. When I saw something nice, I would consider buying it for her. I spent a lot of time trying to make her happy, and it was natural for me, it became like a purpose of life for me.

As I became more and more independent, the frequency of flying back home was reduced. When I finished university study and started to work, annual leave was limited and I wanted to travel to other places instead of always going back home. I flew home every two years. They mentioned a few times how they actually wished that as a daughter I would stay at home with them and my brother to be the one away, but the reality was the opposite. They also used to dream of migrating to Australia but realised they loved living in Indonesia, having access to their friend network and activities there. We both enjoyed our separate lives but still keeping in touch. Then in 2014 all that happiness fell apart.

I saw some signs in 2013. When I moved towns and my parents came to Australia to help me to move my things, my mum kept spitting everywhere, and I told her off for doing that. She just said she has a lot of phlegm that was annoying her if not coughed out. She was also physically unfit. She struggled to walk a distance that I did not feel was far. But then again, she lived in a country where exercise was not a part of her lifestyle, where everyone drives everywhere. I did not think much about all these things back then. Then in 2014 I saw her again, bringing my new boyfriend (now husband) to introduce to her. I was surprised with how skinny she was. I asked if she was on a diet, but she said she did not even try to lose weight, she just had no appetite. Towards the end of that trip she decided to see a GP as she felt exhausted all the time. After a lot of tests, she was diagnosed with lung cancer. That was something that was unimaginable.

Then I remembered what one of my aunts told me a long time ago. She, just like many people in Asian countries, is superstitious. She apparently went to psychic/shaman a few times (it is apparently common practice) and asked for readings for my family and relatives. One of the things that the shaman said was if my mum does not look after her health, she would not live until sixty years of age. My mum was fifty-three years old when she was diagnosed. That reading suddenly felt it was possibly right.

I am a Christian and I know we are not supposed to believe readings of psychics and shamans. I also believe God can heal anyone of anything if it's His will. However, the doubt was always there: what if He does not wish to heal her? What if like most things in life, bad things still happen to you no matter how good of a Christian you are? I was so devastated and I imagined the worst all the time: my mum's death. I know everyone will die, and of course my parents will die most likely before me, but maybe deep in my heart I wish it would never happen. Well, not that soon at least.

When she was diagnosed, it was already stage four cancer, which means it was in a late stage. Apparently for most people when they are diagnosed with stage four cancer, their life is predicted to end in about a year. She went through chemotherapy and other alternative treatments. I could not imagine how she must have felt; the fear and the crazy amount of information from every single friend or person about what to do and not to do, what to eat and not to eat. The chemo had heavy side effects on her too, with minimal to no positive results. Unfortunately, it seems like the medical world is still so behind with curing cancer and much of it is just trial and error.

We were hopeful that she would get cured, and yet every year her general health declined more and more. You could say we were still lucky that she could live five years after she was diagnosed, which was much longer than most people diagnosed with the same thing. It was a very bittersweet five years. I had this heaviness in me, the doomed feeling that her death was coming, and I knew I would not cope well at all with it. I was lucky that she managed to come to my wedding in Australia in between chemotherapy. We also made more memories knowing her time in this world was precious and so we managed to travel a bit. She loved travelling, even though the sickness did limit what she could do, but I knew she enjoyed the travelling activities that I planned for her.

When I was younger I imagined that when my parents were sick and dying, that I would look after them and I would be by their side. It doesn't matter if it will take months of my time, I would even quit my job to look after them. In reality, it did not happen. Other than being married to an Australian, I was in the middle of trying to develop a business on the side of my part time job. I probably put a lot of pressure on myself to succeed in the business within a short timeframe, so I was stressed and felt like the frequent going back to Indonesia was slowing my business down (I went twice a year towards the end of her life). Also with my part time job, I actually quite like it and I do not really want to lose the job.

The last time I spent time with my mum was in January, it was sort of a sudden trip for me as my employer encouraged people to take a leave in January when work is quiet. My mum was weak, and hardly went out of the house, but she still somehow put me as priority, she even tried to help me buy traditional clothes that I wished to have. I do not know whether she knew that her death was near, that it was going to be the last time she was ever going to spend with me, but during that stay, she always kissed and hugged me goodnight before I went to bed, every single night without fail. I mean, she sometimes did it in the past but not that religiously.

Then in March I was told her condition deteriorated pretty quickly. I was kind of annoyed that I had to fly back again after just being back less than two months ago. I did not fly straight away, but took a day before flying since I thought she would live for at least one to two weeks more. I still talked to her briefly on the phone, and she was going home from the hospital so she must not have been that bad. I had this image that when someone is dying, they would lie in bed unconsciously for a long time before they would die. I was wrong. When I landed in Indonesia, my dad told me on the phone that she had passed away an hour prior. I do not have many regrets in my life, but if I could turn back time, I would have loved to see my mum before she passed. I always wonder if it would change anything if she saw me before she died, or what would she said to me. In that five years of being sick, she never left a will, a message for anyone, nothing. I wish that she did, because just as her WhatsApp account disappeared, her leaving felt so strangely quiet, leaving this dark hole inside of me.