

The Box in the Garden

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Ten or so years ago, when I was a child, I helped my mother bury a box in the garden. I say “helped”, but all I did was sit on the dirt with my sister, and watch our mother cry, clutching a tiny shoebox in her arms. My father dug the hole, not even a foot deep, and as the sun began to set we said our goodbyes.

It was a short funeral. “Kawawa naman ang kapatid nyo,” was all our father said. As eulogies go, it wasn’t the best, but we were running out of daylight, and there was dinner to prepare. There was no more time to cry.

Our parents told us it was a miscarriage. I understood the word well enough, but didn’t understand the painful feelings that came with it. All I knew was that for five months my mother was pregnant, and then one day she came home delicately clutching something wrapped in a piece of dirty cloth, and she was pregnant no more.

They showed us the body, such as it was, before we buried it – a blob of flesh barely an inch long, with vague protrusions for arms and legs. Much too small for five months, now that I think about it, but my curiosity that day went no further, and I didn’t bother to ask. To my mind, burying that shoebox was more a curiosity than a tragedy, no more sad than burying a puppy that was just too weak to live. To anyone else, the box weighed almost nothing. To my mother, it weighed so much more than she could say.

It wasn’t until years later that I learned the truth, that there never was a miscarriage, and that my mother bore the weight of her guilt alone for many years. I asked her yesterday about what happened that day, and she was more than willing to share her story, and more than happy that someone asked.

My mother was in her early 40’s, and her marriage was falling apart. She had seven children, all within a year of each other, the youngest still breastfeeding, and an unemployed husband. We were poor, living in a house that barely had a roof, and shared a single room between us where we huddled in a corner when it began to rain. Seven children was enough, she decided.

Financially and emotionally, she could not bear another child, and so, two months into this pregnancy, she decided to go to church. There she found the woman who sold the pills.

She had done this twice before, buying the pills, following the woman's instructions, and terminating her pregnancy. Her first two abortions went smoothly – just a little bleeding and it was done – so she had no reason to doubt that this would be any different. The bleeding came, and the bleeding went, and that was that, she thought, until the bleeding came again.

For weeks she bled, unsure at first if it was an irregular menstruation, or if the abortion had failed partway, until she noticed her belly begin to swell. The baby clung to life, she thought, suddenly guilty. If it survived her sin, she decided, then she had to keep it.

More weeks passed, and the bleeding wouldn't stop, but still her belly grew. She was worried, yes, but a visit to the doctor was out of the question, so she did what she could, and prayed. She prayed, and worked, and prayed, and bled, until, five months into the pregnancy, the blood took on a darker color, and had begun to smell of death.

She was feverish and pale by the time our father took her to the woman, an old nurse who ran a "Hilot" center out of her home. Two other women were waiting their turn, but the men who stood guard outside rushed my mother in when they saw her barely able to stand. The woman gave her medicine for the fever and the bleeding, and to induce labor to get the poison out. She labored over my mother for hours, as she slipped in and out of consciousness, reeling from the pain of having her insides scraped clean without a drop of anaesthetic. When it was over, the old woman wiped the fetus clean, wrapped it in a piece of cloth, and gave it to my mother. She needed to rest, the old woman said, but my mother insisted on going home. "I've been gone all day," she said. "The children have been alone for too long."

That was the last abortion my mother ever had. She left our father soon after, and found a better life. And the last time she saw the woman who saved her life was years later, on TV, being led away in handcuffs.