

The Left-Behind Wife and Her Migrant Daughter

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Mama Peding was born 14 years before the Philippines was invaded by Japan in the mid-40s. When the Japanese came, Mama had to retreat to the jungle and eat cassava, banana, or sweet potatoes for survival. She recalled: “We were not supposed to cry or speak for fear that the Japanese army might hear us.” Silent whispers echoed through the lush forest vegetation as she and her uncle’s extended family treaded the narrow path to what she considered a road to nowhere. Yet, she revealed that she did not encounter any Japanese during the war. She only knew that they needed to evade the Japanese troops.

Mama’s mother, Susana, was a busy market seller and often, she and Honorata, her only sibling, were left at home. Susana would tie her and Honorata onto the house pillar so they would not go anywhere while she worked at the market. On one occasion, the girls were “nursed” by a lactating dog while their mother was away. No one babysat the sisters.

It was clear in those days that women must perform a balancing act between being a mother and a provider in order to keep the family afloat. Looking back on it, the fact that a mother must nurture her children on top of being able to provide for her family was no mean feat and was often glossed over and ignored.

Mama was only three years old when her mother passed away. That she and Honorata survived their infancy and teenage life without Susana was a great achievement indeed.

I sensed that aside from their mother who single-handedly nurtured the two orphaned sisters, there were other strong women surrounding Mama's formative years. One of them was the wife of her uncle who accepted Mama as her own daughter. The uncle's wife was a generous, loving, and God-fearing woman who quietly nurtured her big family of 10 by doing farm work and operating a small merchandise shop in the local community. This perhaps shaped Mama's understanding of her world and her future. At an early age, Mama was responsible for taking care of her uncle's big family as well as her aunt's small convenience store. She was not able to continue her primary studies because of this. Also, because she was living with relatives, to demand that she be sent to school would be rather outrageous. Although she was not one to complain that she did not have a good education back then, it still seemed like a tremendous waste of opportunity for her. Mama was well loved by her uncle, aunt, and cousins and she remained their *Manang Peding* even after she got married to Pisto at the age of 18.

As soon as they got married in 1953, they found a piece of land to lease. They built their modest home about three kilometers from the poblacion. Mama then became a full-time housewife and she remained as such throughout her married life, which was a far cry from her life before she got married. She used to sell tuba (a local wine from coconut) while living at her uncle's house, but when she got married, she became busy doing all the household chores for her nine children. I am the seventh in this big family.

My father, Pisto, started as a policeman in the 1950s and was known as a brave young man who carried a gun. Mama's uncle and aunt, who she considered as parents, advised her not to marry my father as he was rumored to have dalliances with several women and has made drinking a habit, always spending time at Mama's tuba stall. She, however, did not listen to all that advice. In fact, she and Pisto eloped, and stayed with Papa's family in another province. She only resurfaced when her father Filomeno and other relatives realized that they could not stop her from

marrying the man she loved. She was already pregnant with her first child when they finally got married on May 6, 1953.

Mama and Papa took good care of the land they leased from an earlier settler. Since settling there, Mama had been the one to supervise what fruit trees and cash crops to plant. My siblings and relatives planted coconuts, mangoes, jackfruits, corn, sweet potatoes, and cassava in the 70s through the 90s. In the 70s, the remaining siblings each had to cultivate a vegetable plot as part of our training for farm life. Mama saw this as an opportunity for small livelihood. She also acquired pigs and raised them to be sold and slaughtered for town fiestas and birthdays. She knew how to convert harvests of our fruit orchard into cash or, at the very least, to be exchanged with other goods. Papa constantly acknowledged her ability to strategically augment the family income. “Kung dili pa sa inyong mama, nah, dili jud mo makatapos” (“Without your mother’s help, you all would not have been able to finish your studies”), my father had always said.

Married life must have impacted Papa in an unforeseeable way, in a manner that encouraged him to change careers. How did Mama convince Pisto to change his promising vocation in the police force? Had Mama wanted prestige in the local community, then certainly she would have gotten it by being a policeman’s wife. Yet, she must have had reservations about Papa being a policeman that he moved to another government agency. He began as a letter carrier and worked his way up to a senior position as an assistant regional inspector, which was his profession until his death in 1993. That the wife’s influence was pertinent even in a highly patriarchal Philippines is of great note.

Papa was a figure of authority in the family, a strict father who would not restrain himself from using physical force to instill discipline in his children. Mama was, however, a very patient, kind, and caring parent, and was known to be very generous to our neighbors and friends. While she would sometimes have raging fits, it would never escalate to verbal abuse. When pressured to instill discipline, she would just take a very thin guava twig and show it to her children, just to remind us of the pain that it could cause us. She only wielded the twig as a stage prop, waved around for dramatic value.

Though Mama did not have a lot of opinions about public issues nor did she decide on things outside the home, within it, she was the decision-maker. Since the beginning of their marriage, Papa lived in different cities for many years. He came home every weekend when he was working in the provincial area. When he was the postmaster of a city in the early 70s, he came home fortnightly. Despite this marital arrangement, Mama never travelled, claiming that she was unused to the rigors of rural travel. But the marriage endured despite the emergence of another challenge. Papa was transferred to another city, much further than the one he stayed at in his previous post. Intermittent visits to him took place and I also got to travel with Mama to that city when I was in Grade 6.

Mama always felt uneasy when in the company of Papa's friends and colleagues, I observed. There were rounds of jokes about challenging her to stay with her husband in the city rather than leaving him alone because he might find another wife. Mama never took the joke seriously and instead stayed with her children in our town. Her ability to make decisions in matters related to food, health, academic progress of the children, or farmland issues became more prominent since her husband's absence.

After marriage, Mama never went back to selling tuba in the market. Instead, she kept the whole family comfortable financially, especially with her husband working in another city after the birth of their sixth child. Mama harnessed her agricultural skills by tending to the fruit orchard planted with bananas, mangoes, jackfruits, chicos, santol, tisa (golden cheese), and many others. She also maintained an endless supply of pigs and chickens for birthdays, feasts, and other celebrations, and even had cows and carabaos as farm animals. These resources were socially significant in a town where job opportunities were limited. These fruits and animals saved us from hunger and deprivation, and, certainly, provided us with a good and healthy diet. When harvests were abundant, Mama would bring bananas and mangoes to the market, but she always ended up giving a large part of the produce to her friends, especially the children she met on the road.

My favorite pastime when I was a school kid was to sell boiled bananas, ripe mangoes as well as stacks of banana leaves in the market.

Saturday afternoons were the best times when I prepared the banana leaves and sent them to the fish and vegetable section in the market. I also sold coconut firewood, together with my brothers and younger sister. Mama would happily help us collect the coconut palms, clean them, cut them in specific lengths, and tie them together. Although this was a good way to earn extra, it was also a bit tedious and repetitive. I preferred selling ripe bananas to make money. Buyers became familiar faces, since I always went with Mama to the market. I usually visited her friends' stalls and showed whatever items I had for the day.

My weekend rendezvous in the market made me an instant moneyed pupil when the school week began. The money I earned was sufficient to buy snacks, writing papers, and pencils. Mama never asked me to give her a share of the sale. In fact, she encouraged me to keep it.

There were times however that cash was scarce. Papa would come home every two weeks and the money given to Mama was not adequate to buy rice, fish, sugar, and meat to last the weeks. Poor people never bring their wallets to the market, I always thought, because I never saw Mama holding one. She would either put the paper money and coins in her palm or wrapped them in paper. What I remember the most was when she only had coins and repeatedly stared at it in the palm of her hand, maybe mentally calculating if she had enough money for the family needs. If not, she would go to the market stall where she could get the items on credit.

Later in life, Papa confided that they wanted the children to realize that farming is a laborious and tiring job, and that if we were to falter in our studies, we would end up grinding in the hot sun. Incidentally, none of us ever picked up farming, and the land was never as productive as it used to be in the past.

Papa's word was the law in the family although he bent it when dealing with non-family members and neighbors. He was the breadwinner for our large family, as well as his first- and second-degree cousins at home whom he also supported during their high school years. Feeding a dozen mouths with a fixed income is hard to imagine, but the regular supply of rice from my father's parents, and sometimes his siblings, pulled us through those tough times. Interestingly, in my childhood days, my

parents, especially my father, preferred that we play with our own siblings rather than to spend time with children in the neighborhood. I believe my parents intended for us to be surrounded with well-educated children and to excel together with the children of my parents' friends.

Mama was living in a society where men apparently wielded more authority than women. Her husband held a prominent position in the hierarchy of power both at home and outside. He was outgoing, outspoken, a tennis and chess player, and possessed a strong leadership quality in the community while Mama did not have the qualifications to match his. On this score, it may be seen that Papa held all the strings of decision-making affecting the family and children. However, while my father may have had the regular income for the family, it was my mother's sharp skill in finding alternative sources of family income that put us through difficult times. At the same time, she positioned herself as a woman who was in control of a large family since the husband was what one would call an internal migrant worker. She was empowered to make decisions that affected her family and to find schemes to maintain the family's financial situation.

The observations in our particular situation may not be far from what is happening in other Filipino homes where the husband is seen as the provider of the family while the wife is in charge of managing what the husband gives at the end of the month. Filipino women are viewed as the controller of the purse strings, but it is also interesting to note just how much is inside the wife's purse. While Mama may seem powerless in the sense that she could not openly ask for a bigger share of the salary to be able to feed her family, she was in a position to make household decisions and nobody seemed to question that—not even her own husband. This narrative of empowerment is supported in many occasions when Papa reminds the family members, friends, and relatives that it was Mama who was keeping the family together. She did all that she could and made critical decisions for her children's welfare to provide a semblance of normalcy at home. This sense of responsibility was embedded in Mama's everyday activities, which enabled her children to live a normal, comfortable life. Significantly, my mother's strength and empowerment influenced my own ideas of strategically empowering one's self.

It was not only through keeping us economically afloat that Mama exhibited empowerment. The tensions between husband and wife existed in many ways. Mama defended her children from her husband's penchant for drinking whenever he was home. One night, my father came home drunk while all the children were asleep. He woke all of us and wanted us to sing, dance, or perform. Although my father succeeded in asking us to sing and dance while we were half-asleep, Mama was so furious that she kept on asking Papa to stop, as he had disturbed our rest.

One major marital argument that I witnessed was when she accused her husband of having dalliances with other women. The anger she showed reached a climax when Mama took out the .45 caliber pistol, placed it on the dining table, and said, "There are two bullets inside: one for you and one for me." I became quite scared upon hearing this and quickly left the dining table. I suppose it was my older siblings who pacified the angry couple.

On happy occasions though, when my father was in the mood for entertaining us, he would narrate the anecdote of my mother advancing to a dance party and literally disarming my father of his service weapon in full view of the public. My father pleaded with her to refrain from creating a scandal. This story reminds me of the fact that Mama knew how to disassemble a firearm and could handle it with ease, a skill that other women in the community did not have or were too scared to acquire. On hindsight, maybe the incident at the dance party was the turning point for Papa to change careers.

Mama was a fair-skinned, petite woman with naturally wavy hair and a walking speed that resembled a constant marathon. Interestingly, her strides reflect her emotions: the slow and small strides express a moment's happiness and the fast and big strides express the urgency and tension within her heart. I can imagine her walking to my father, with a furious tempo that exhibited her anger, and giving him a dressing down.

My mother was functionally literate, which meant being able to read simple English words, write, and sign her name. She might not have been capable in helping me in my studies, but her other ways of supporting me was overwhelming. There were instances when she had to borrow money in order to buy me a new dress, so that I would be able to participate in

a school competition. Sometimes, she would surprise me at a school event; on many occasions, she would appear in the crowd and soon after, disappear to return to her duties. I knew she was proud of me for as soon as I passed by the local market, her friends became my enthusiasts and complimented me for my educational accomplishments, bringing me instant fame. For her, being poor was not a factor to be denied achievement in education. And because she never had the opportunity to finish her own education, she strived to give us ours and inspired us to finish college.

The drive to excel academically during my early years of education seemed to be endless. In retrospect, claims of success and achievement seemed to fit in very well with that of their parents' ability to sustain the support for their children's. In many situations, Mama and Papa pushed me to excel. For them, excellence leads to new opportunities in the form of scholarships, which furthered my studies outside of the local community. Like any other Filipino family, my parents impressed upon me that getting into a prestigious university in the country is a passport to success later in life.

I started as a student migrant when I was 12 years old, when I received a high school government scholarship. Luckily enough, I was the only one in my municipality to have passed the entrance examination in high school which carried a free tuition fee for the entire program. My migration to the city in 1976 was the first phase in a series of "little migrations." The departure from home was a hard pill to swallow; nonetheless, it was an opportune time to see the world beyond my town. My father successfully persuaded me to accept a more challenging school environment, but my mother remained quiet during this conversation.

Mama's last words before I left home were, "Do you have enough money for bus fare and food?" Then, she started to dig into her pocket and there, as lucky as I was, passed to me three nicely-folded 10 peso bills.

As I started one of the countless journeys of my life, a rickety bus liner stopped right in front of me, and I hopped into a crowded space of young mothers with children, elderly women with their wares, and young fathers who may have been travelling to reconnect with their loved ones. This was the longest travel I've ever had to make to seek a better future outside of my comfort zone.

I was travelling with my older sister who was already familiar with the city. She left me afterwards to fend for myself. Summer and Christmas vacations were the only times I could reconnect with my siblings and parents.

Mama knew very well my living conditions in the city: I had to cook my own meal, wash my clothes, and study hard until the end of high school. She prepared all the things that I had to bring back to the city during these seasonal visits such as heaps of firewood, big combs of ripe bananas, kilos of rice, vegetables, and salted anchovies. These were my favorites. But Mama never visited me in the city, as far as I can remember. I did not question that. However, that fact was sufficient enough to merit a nagging question from my landlady: “Asa diay imo mama, wala na?” (“Where is your mother, has she gone?”).

She was absent, too, during my high school graduation—a highly valued social event. Though I was a bit disappointed, I understood her predicament.

In 1989, after almost half a decade of teaching in Mindanao, I took another big leap by moving across a sea. The second phase of my journey was to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia upon receiving a fellowship to pursue a master’s degree. In retrospect, there was never any intention to leave my home country and I pleaded with the scholarship funder to allow me to continue my studies in Manila. But as fate would have it, I had to stay in Malaysia, which eventually became my second home. This is where I honed my interest in studying migrant mothers from the Philippines.

Without hesitation, I plunged myself into dealing with a myriad of issues affecting women workers, which in turn, led me to my advocacy on domestic worker’s rights and protection against structural abuses. I feel a connection between my mother’s struggle to control one’s income amidst the hard work and that of domestic workers who are vastly unorganized, fragmented, isolated, and remain exploited on so many levels. I see my mother in the faces of these older women who have pushed hard to earn as much money as they can, so they can send their children to school and to provide food on the table. I also find connections in the fact that these domestic workers often share stories of unemployed

husbands who only rely on their monthly remittances, find younger wives or sex partners, or resort to alcoholism.

As my migrant life turned a new leaf, I got married and moved to Moscow, then to Hong Kong and Beijing in a span of 15 years, to be with my husband and two daughters. In each of these places, I was conscious of my own position as a migrant wife and mother. Years of living far away from my loved ones have strengthened my resolve to maintain a connection to my siblings, nieces and nephews, and friends to create this sense of community and belonging. Migration has taught me that in spite of attempts to recreate a space of home in the places that I was fortunate to have lived in, there is a constant calling to visit my ancestral home in Mindanao.

Sometime in the 1990s, Mama was chosen as one of the best mothers of the year, the best accolade she had ever received. The recognition by her community was given because of her enduring and indomitable spirit. I did not learn about this until I saw a photo of her receiving the award. In moments of contemplation, I would always ask myself how I could have ever missed this opportunity to be with her and to congratulate her. The pre-Internet years and expensive long-distance communication certainly did not make it easier for us to connect. I could have prepared the best gown and adorned her hair with flower blooms, but I did not. It was ironic that my mother was given an award by the community, an achievement only a few women receive, but there was a conspicuous absence of her own children during the awarding who, without her support, would not have climbed to greater heights themselves.

I often asked myself: what did Mama leave me with? How did she influence me in the way I view life, love, career, family, and marriage? Did her experiences in life affect my decisions to face a world full of contradictions? Also, did it ever occur to me to question Papa's demonstration of love and responsibility to his partner and family, much in the same way I contemplate Mama's?

To begin answering these questions, since my youth, I do not remember Mama picking an issue to argue against me. As a young girl, and before I left home, I experienced a normal family life and it did not even occur to me that Papa was always out and away. Perhaps the mothering role was executed so well that little tensions only arose when

both of them were together for a prolonged period. Perhaps by being a left-behind wife, she was provided with respite from the mundane work of a subservient wife? If they were constantly together, Mama would prepare Papa's bath to his preference, go to the market to buy food and cook the meals because Papa preferred to eat Mama's cooking, give Papa the opportunity to partake of the first bite and serve him the best piece of meat, and, more than anything, to be there with him at the dining table while he eats, just like what happens when Papa is in town. My young mind was never in a position to question this or even consider it as wife subordination. But the fact that this past observation remains vivid in my memory means it deserves a certain examination. Only later in life, when I seriously began to study the place of women and mothers and the extent to which they are located in a subordinate position aided by patriarchy and male domination that a strong urgency surfaced and an overt consciousness to subvert this experience in my own social world—as a wife of a foreign spouse, mother of two young daughters, a migrant worker, and an advocate of human rights and social justice.

I was concerned with the financial issues affecting the family. I may have wanted to visit her regularly but the long travel from the city to the village incurred some expenses. I, however, miss those times when she would procure big combs of bananas, ripe mangoes and madang from the farm, and crabs and shrimps from the local market when she knew that I would be coming home. In return, since I started working at the age of 20, I would come home with bags of goodies for the whole family. Mama never demanded anything from me nor from any of my siblings who were already gainfully employed. Despite her difficulty in making ends meet, she never failed to ask whether I had enough money to tide me over until the next payday. She taught me independence in thinking and the art of surviving in a world without potential support from parents. Although her second parents, her uncle Tatay Eking and aunt Nanay Taling, were around to help her, I surmise she faced the world and its challenges all by herself. Sure, she had friends in the neighborhood but she did not ask them for anything beyond friendship.

My life also revolved around a family that is living far away from me. As a migrant daughter, I learned how to survive without my parents

looking after me, learned where to find food for my next meal, and learned how to tell right from wrong. And I became this person because Mama was instrumental in forming my values as a woman of dignity and respect. She was an independent woman and wanted her children to finish university, to avoid following her experience of spending only a year in school. She wanted her children to be somebody someday and to live in comfort and to be respected by society. All I remember was a woman who was a source of strength for other women in the community, not because she was successful by the usual standards. They admired her because she was able to bring up her children despite her circumstance and sent them to the best universities.

Yet behind the happy facade lie her sorrows. My conversation with her on many occasions before and after my father's death demonstrated a sense of anxiety in living alone without my father. Papa died in 1993, around the same time my siblings started leaving the ancestral home to build their own families elsewhere. After that, Mama became more withdrawn. She must have felt the sheer loneliness of living in a house now only surrounded by trees and only kept company by her dogs and cats. The lack of a regular income to sustain her everyday needs must have pushed her further into anxiety and angst, to the point that she started telling everyone that she should have left this world ahead of my father. She could not deny the fact that although she had nine surviving children, she would be living all by herself, and for her, that was perhaps as good as it gets.

Meanwhile, I was travelling and living in different places away from my home country. Mama never dreamed of living anywhere other than the home that she gracefully helped to build. She never left home, no matter how hard I tried to convince her when I already had the economic means to support her handsomely. She had bouts of ailments for months and I learned that, since her children were living somewhat far from the ancestral home, she had not been given the best attention a mother would have expected from her children. This reality during her last months affected me tremendously and still, quietly, I shed tears when this sad memory sets in.

She once said that she will only travel with me once she dies and that her spirit will guide me wherever I go. As if foreseeing what was going

to happen to Mama, even before I received the sad news that she passed on, I felt a breeze and heard the sound of a door closing inside a well-insulated house one winter afternoon in Moscow. That was April 20, 2000. She was 69 and nobody thought she would leave this world early.

My sojourn in different parts of the world, which any traveler would tell you is a study of contrasts, reminds me of my mother. Mama has left me with a deep sense of life's purpose and direction in its simplest form. She never demanded any material or financial resources from me even when I thought she was already in her darkest days of destitution. She never demanded attention in the midst of her challenging position as a left-behind wife but continued to steer the family compass until we were capable of fending for ourselves. This is the reason why I claim that there is only one Mama in my emotional and psychological world. In my own imagined universe, to utter her full name is to sow disrespect. Her special name is *Mama*. Regardless of the multitude of mothers I meet everywhere, I have never called anyone that sacred word, "Mama," because it is only meant for her. This realization has only become much clearer as I started writing this piece in memory of her passing almost 20 years ago. Mama is irreplaceable. She is special. She is ever present.

Earlier in this passage, I talked about Mama's lifelong close connection with dogs. Throughout her life, she domesticated tens of dogs: they came and died, were stolen or poisoned. She whispered to them as if she were talking to her own children. She recounted that one time, she berated her dog because it seemed to be constantly begging for food. Mama was furious and told the dog, that, "You don't even provide me anything." That day, the dog accompanied her to the market where she later found it carrying a chunk of meat it took from the market stall, seemingly as a way of paying her back.

Our own strange encounter with her dogs occurred during her funeral procession to the church that afternoon. Her dogs and the neighbors' joined the flanks of people. These dogs walked her to the church and then to the cemetery and I only realized they were all there, saying goodbye, when we were about to leave the gravesite.

Her passing left a void in me and I still think about all the places I have been to, places I would have, should have taken her.