

The Night Grandpa Died

Original Story by [Yoga Palwaguna](#)

Translated with permission by Gita Astari

It was Ramadan. I was sleeping alone in my room. The lights were still off when I heard crying.

Finally, I thought.

They say that death is a mystery, but there was nothing secret about the death of an old man who had not risen from his bed for days. Even the me who was in sixth grade knew that soon, people would gather in the house not to visit the sick, but to mourn the dead and pray for fortitude for the ones left behind.

Including me, one of them.

Nothing was a secret about the death of Mr. Mahmud, my grandpa. Three days prior, his children, especially his daughters, had already gathered at his house to take turns taking care of him. Feeding him food and water, one spoon at a time. Changing his pants that were sometimes wet with pee, sometimes soiled. Also taking turns reading him the holy Quran and reciting prayers.

That night, a few hours before Suhoor, the women who would usually bicker became a unified voice that tore through the night's silence with their cries. Among the cries, there were two that I easily recognized. My grandma's and my mom's. They cried the hardest, almost like a competition.

It wasn't until years after that I finally understood that their tears weren't only formed of loss and grief—there was also guilt. Mom and Grandma asked a shaman once, "When will he die?"

Mom told me the story when I was in my last year of high school. The shaman said, "Soon." The fatigue they had built up taking care of Grandpa was relieved.

The relief turned into guilt when he really left the mortal plane.

On the night Grandpa died, perhaps they were imagining how empty their days would be with no one to embarrass them for walking to the patio without so much as underpants. Perhaps they remembered how many times they lost their patience reminding Grandpa to do his business in the bathroom, not on the patio, so they'd pinch his thin arms and belly. Perhaps they remembered the days they would have a row over whose turn it was to wash his soiled pants.

I turned on the lights and walked towards the source of the crying. The house we lived in was shaped like a rectangle juxtaposed with a smaller square. I slept in the small square. The crying voices came from the middle room within the rectangle.

So this is how your house is when a family member dies at night, I told myself. I stood in the doorway for I don't know how long, watching the elders be busy with their own affairs. Some cried, some recited prayers, one called the Ustad, some discussed the time for the funeral, making the tombstone, and who would take the shroud and coffin from the mosque.

In the midst of the elders, I saw Grandpa's body covered by a cloth. It had been days that Grandpa lied at the exact same place he was lying now, but of course, it was different. He wouldn't be there the next morning.

Grandpa lost his memories not long after I lost the sight from one of my eyes. My left eye was struck by a pointy stick when I was playing pretend darts with other kids when we just became elementary school students. The operation and postoperative control sessions every Monday that I went through for months didn't bring my eyesight back. At least, everyone knew how my left eye went blind. At least, I was brought to the city for medication.

Nobody knew how Grandpa lost his memories. No one brought him to a doctor, let alone a hospital. The adults that took care of Grandpa were satisfied with the answer from the shaman they went to: that Grandpa's spirit no longer dwelled in his body. Maybe he was cursed by his rival from when he was still working at the field.

They said that it all started when I was being treated in the hospital. He would go to the wrong patient room, time and again. Only, nobody thought that he would eventually forget absolutely everything. He forgot how to button up his clothes, put on pants, and where he should defecate.

Our originally peaceful family life changed. Everything became complicated. There was suddenly a 65-year-old kid who required our full attention. Maybe it was due to that, that after a long time of being patient, Grandma and Mom finally came to the question: when would Grandpa pass away? They were even suspicious that Grandpa was just pretending to be senile so he wouldn't have to work. At least, nobody ever accused me of pretending to be half-blind.

That was why I couldn't bring myself to be angry when he forgot me and my name. Even though before that, every time I came to visit, he would lift me up high on the side patio. He would greet me before I even stepped through the door. But after that, Grandpa and I had a new game. A game made by my aunts, mother, and grandmother.

A guessing game. He would guess what my name was, and I would guess what color his shirt was while closing my good eye. We never guessed right.

When Grandpa finally died, I felt that he had already been long gone even before that. Maybe that was why I didn't cry. I had grieved when he would just stand on the side patio. I called him many times. "I'm the first in my class again," I'd say. But when he finally looked at me, his eyes were empty and his hands were limp, unwelcoming.

Someone told me to go back to the room. I thought I wouldn't be able to sleep after what happened. But, as a matter of fact, I thought wrong. I only woke up the next day when the sun was already up. Forget Suhoor, I even skipped the Fajr prayer. Nobody prepared the food for Suhoor, anyway. All the adults were busy preparing for the funeral procession.

The atmosphere in the middle room was more orderly compared to the previous dawn. Mom's and Grandma's eyes were still wet, but they were no longer wailing. Mom, who was sitting right beside Grandpa's head, called me over. She then told me to apologize to Grandpa. This was my final chance, she said.

Like a dubber of Sunday morning cartoons, Mom uttered an apology on my behalf. I didn't quite understand what she said. I just wanted to say sorry because I had gone to see him less and less. I had perceived him as a stranger. I had forgotten him, even though my memories were fine. My spirit had still been in me.

That afternoon, I broke my fast due to dizziness. Other than skipping Suhoor, the way to the grave was also far, scorching hot, and uphill. Mom said, "It's okay." I wanted to ask, if Grandpa's spirit had no longer been in his body, then after he was buried, would his spirit find his way home?

I hoped so.

I had only started living in the same house as Grandpa in the last three years, after his conditions worsened and Grandma could no longer take care of him by herself, so Mom asked me to stay here to help her. Before that, after each school exam, I would only come to Grandpa's to spend my holiday time.

If it's true what they say that life is like a test, then what comes after life should be a holiday. I hope I can finish all my exams soon and be on a holiday like Grandpa.

I'd come to his house, and say that I got first place. He would hold me and lift me up towards the ceiling with laughter. There would be no more guessing. My name would be home to his memories, and my eye would recognize the color of his shirt.

Then I would ask him to tell me a story, just like when I was a kid.

He would ask, "What kind of story would you like?"

I would answer, "Any kind, as long as there's a princess."

And because the next life is immortal, that means I'd be able to spend an unending holiday with Grandpa. We wouldn't be bored because of course, in Heaven, Grandpa would never run out of stories. He'd remember everything.

Memories of Grandpa come back to me every time I face a particularly hard test, just like right now.

"Jamal! Jamal!" Mom calls from the living room.

"Yeah, Mom!" I call back.

Again, she calls me with the wrong name.

And she has just soiled her pants.

Gang Kopi, 20 February 2021

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