

The Reporter and the Reporter's Mother

by J. Malcolm Garcia

The reporter sat in the living room and waited for the coroner to arrive and pick up his mother's body. A hospice nurse had checked her blood pressure and listened to her heart just forty-eight hours earlier and had told him she was fine. One-twenty over eighty, the nurse had said. She then asked his mother if she knew the day's date. His mother stared across the room at the pink clay tiles of the patio, upended by burrowing chipmunks and now barely discernible in the overcast evening, and the look on her face reminded the reporter of a moment in sixth grade when he had not done his math homework and his teacher, Miss Fowler, asked him questions he could not answer and gave him an F. After a long silence, his mother replied, February 19, 1917, her birthday. I'm ninety-eight, old, old, old, she said. No, the nurse replied, it's November 24, 2015. The reporter's mother said nothing. Do you know where you are? The street you live on? Home, his mother answered, I'm home, her voice flat and distant, a fearful look in her eyes as if she knew this, too, was incorrect.

This morning, just two days after the nurse's visit, the reporter's mother had felt nauseated and a home healthcare assistant, Cathy, helped her into a wheelchair and took her to the bathroom. Once there, she said she'd like to lie down and Cathy helped her to her room. She got into bed and fell instantly to sleep. Her breathing became labored and Cathy called the reporter, who had been reading in another room. He hurried in and Cathy suggested he call the nurse and when he got off the phone he saw his mother had stopped breathing. He swallowed and the noise in his throat sounded very loud and he just stared at her and called her name three times and Cathy started crying. When the nurse arrived, the reporter told her his mother was gone and she followed him to the bedroom with its flowered wallpaper and faded photographs of New York and Puerto Rico and pressed a stethoscope against her chest. Tree branches

clattered against a window by a rocking chair. She's gone, the nurse said as if the reporter had not told her. Folding the stethoscope, she dropped it in the pocket of her white jacket and shook her head. Her vitals were fine when I was here the other day, she said. She must have experienced some kind of event. The reporter almost asked what she meant by that but didn't. It no longer mattered. His mother had grown slower in recent weeks, like a clock winding down. She had slept increasingly throughout the day. I'll call the coroner for you, the nurse said. There's no need for an ambulance unless you want one. No, he said. This is what happens, Cathy said, no longer crying. All of a sudden they're gone. Every elderly client of mine. Just like that. He listened to her speak, a middle-aged Irishwoman with a thick brogue, the rhythms of her speech something his mother had loved. He couldn't move. Rooted to the floor, he felt vacant and heavy and stared at his mother curled on her side, eyes closed, seemingly asleep. The nurse rolled her on her back and her eyes popped open like someone surprised and the look upset him and he reached over and closed them with the palm of his right hand. Muscles relax when a person dies, the nurse said. She may emit gas. You should leave the room when the coroner arrives, she continued. He'll put her in a body bag. It would be very disturbing, I would think, to see that. There may be fluids. The reporter nodded, annoyed that his mother had been reduced to an explanation of how a body begins to decompose. He walked the nurse and Cathy to the front door hoping they'd leave without saying another word. Cathy hugged him and the nurse said, I'm sorry for your loss, and then they left and he shut the door behind them, leaning into it because it was a heavy wood door, and the noise of closing it passed through the hall like a wave flattening into quiet and he returned to his mother's room and stood by her bed unsure of what he should do other than wait. He thought to call his cousins but he didn't feel like talking. My mother's dead, he whispered to himself, my mother's dead. He said it several times, his voice catching, and he realized he would break down if he told anyone so he decided to wait. She was three months shy of her ninety-ninth birthday and had outlived her older sister, brother and friends. The reporter felt hollow. The abrupt silence of the house rushed through him. In some ways, he had said goodbye to her when he came home to care for her five years ago, the role of child and parent reversed, but he had never prepared himself for her being completely gone. Fifty-eight

years of having a mother, done.

His father's father had died before the reporter was born but he remembered when his paternal grandmother died in her home in Tampa. His father's sister Jo called with the news. When his father hung up, he said matter-of-factly, Your granny's dead, and then he walked into the dining room and closed the door behind him. The reporter's mother arrived home minutes later from the supermarket and after he helped her with the grocery bags the reporter said, Aunt Jo called. Granny died. His mother hurried from the kitchen and called his father's name. Chuck! Chuck! The reporter presumed she found him in their bedroom, maybe sitting on the edge of his bed, crying, although it was hard to imagine his father crying. Eyes brimmed with tears, perhaps, but not crying. He was not someone to show emotion unless he was angry. Then he threw things and shouted. The reporter wondered how comforting his mother had been to him. She had never liked his mother but the reporter felt sure she would have put aside her animosity at that moment. Years later, his mother's sister, Aunt Elvira, told him that his grandmother had often visited his father and mother for months at a time in the first years of their marriage and tried, as Elvira put it, to rule the roost. The reporter's father was the youngest of four and perhaps she had a hard time letting him go. Whatever her reasons, she irritated the reporter's mother, who eventually had enough. It's your mother or me, she told his father, and she left and spent the summer in New Jersey with friends and did not return for twelve weeks. His grandmother visited only rarely after that. The day after his father died, the reporter's mother removed a photograph of her mother-in-law from his father's night table and tossed it in the trash.

The reporter walked upstairs, the green shag carpet beneath his feet more than thirty years old but in remarkably good condition, and he entered his parent's bedroom and sat on his father's side of the bed and tried to think of his father and mother with him now but he felt nothing other than himself alone in the darkness of their room, photos of his maternal grandparents, aunt and uncle on his mother's chest of drawers, and he went back downstairs to the dining room and sat at the table, and his dog came to him and rested his head in his lap, and he patted the dog and fingered a bowl of tangerines. His mother always had a tangerine with her breakfast. Two pieces of wheat toast, no butter, and a tangerine. Eggs on Saturday and Sunday. She used to say

breakfast was the most important meal of the day. I eat better than you, she scolded when he moved back home. I'm better looking than you, he replied. They both laughed. He called this their vaudeville skit, a routine they engaged in at least once a week as they learned to live together again.



The reporter's mother had just turned ninety-two when his ninety-four-year-old father died in 2009. He drove until the end. The last time he got behind the wheel was on a February afternoon. He drove to Mariano's Supermarket in Northfield, Illinois, near the reporter's old high school. Clutching a shopping bag after he made his purchases, he slipped in the parking lot, fell, and broke his right hip. Someone called an ambulance and medics arrived in a wail of sirens and lifted him onto a gurney. As they pushed him past his car, his father said, You can let me off here.

This would be the most expensive cab ride you ever took, one of the medics told him.

His father's hip healed remarkably well for a man his age but he caught an infection while he was in rehab and died two months later.



Three days after he returned home, the reporter sat with his mother on the couch in the living room. He got up for a glass of water and asked if she wanted anything. No, honey, she said. When he left for the kitchen, she forgot what he had asked and where he had gone. She was only aware of his sudden absence. Chuck, she said, calling the reporter's father. Chuck, I don't know where anybody is. I lay awake at night listening to you, listening to you breathe. Your breath rattles. I wonder if you'll wake up. I wonder if I'll wake up after I fall back to sleep. We're so old, Chuck, and I don't know where anyone is. Can you hear me where you are, Chuck? Are you there?

Mom!

Her head jerked, eyes wide.

Who's that? she asked

Mom! the reporter said again walking into the room. He hated to shout but she could no longer hear and refused to wear hearing aids because she found them a nuisance.

Oh, honey! She laughed. I didn't see you.

He laid a hand on her shoulder. I was in the kitchen. I thought I heard you.

No, I didn't say anything, she said. I'm fine.



During the reporter's first few months home his mother would listen to Rush Limbaugh because, she said, Rush told the truth. That was something his father would have said, the reporter thought. He assumed he had listened to Limbaugh and now his mother listened to him seeking security in his father's habits. They had married in 1947 and remained together for more than sixty years. What would that be like? The reporter couldn't imagine. In the 1990s, he lived with a woman, Jean, for eight years in San Francisco and had assumed it would last forever but it didn't. She had wanted children, wanted him to get a job that would support a family. He didn't know how he'd find a job that paid that much and wasn't sure he wanted to be encumbered with a family. In fact, he knew he didn't. His father had done that, worked in sales his entire life, provided for his family but hated his work and dreamed of owning a ranch, a wish that got no further than requesting property listings from Colorado rural real estate agents. The reporter had ambitions to work overseas and did not want his father's life of unfulfilled desires. Children, he knew, didn't figure into his future, and when Jean understood this she left him on a Wednesday evening in April 1995 when the weather that day felt more like summer than spring. They were in Sonoma, California, forty minutes outside San Francisco and had stopped at a Mexican restaurant for dinner and drinks. A waitress brought them taco chips and hot sauce and they ordered burritos. What about us? Jean had asked him as they waited for their food. She just said it. Nothing led into it. What about us? I think about us, he said but he knew what she was getting at. I don't want kids, he said. He had told her this many times before but there was a finality in his

voice, or perhaps a finality in the moment, a shift in emphasis that had not existed before. He was willing to accept the consequences, had anticipated this moment, he realized, without knowing it until now. Jean began crying. They finished their drinks and walked outside without waiting for their meal. Do you want to separate? he asked. I guess so, she answered in a shaky voice. He stayed at a friend's house that night. To this day, he wished he had never asked, Do you want to separate? He wished he had remained with her and put up with her anger until he got her to see things his way but that probably never would have happened. His first Christmas without Jean, the reporter called his parents. His mother asked, Who will you get together with today? I don't know, Mom, he said and broke down and hung up. He was thirty-eight and cried so hard his eyes swelled and after he regained control he swore he'd never allow himself to be so vulnerable again. He worked for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The Kansas City Star*. After 9/11, he left the *Star* and reported from Afghanistan and Pakistan as a freelance writer. On a whim, after he moved in with his mother, he looked up Jean on Facebook and sent her a message. She responded and after exchanging a few messages he called her. She was married and had a daughter.

I'm caring for my mother, he told her.



Twice a week the reporter drove his mother to the supermarket and doctor appointments. She had macular degeneration that required injections into her eyes, curvature of the spine, high blood pressure and a host of other ailments. He hated shopping with her and felt bad for hating it. Because of her back she leaned heavily on the shopping cart and walked up and down each aisle horribly slowly, driving him to distraction. She became obsessed with bread and bottled water and bought large quantities of both. When they returned home, he saw her to the living room and then brought the bags in from the car, unpacked them and put most of the bread in a basement freezer and kept the cases of water in the garage. He made her lunch, a half turkey sandwich with lettuce and cheese, no tomato and half of an avocado on the side. He remembered coming home from school and she'd sit him down in the breakfast nook

and make a snack. He had collected bugs in jars, especially inchworms, and they lined the window sill. Except for the fact that he was the one preparing meals and the bugs were long gone everything felt as it did then. The house had never been upgraded. The bathroom appliances, the tiled floors, the wallpaper, all of it untouched from the day it was built in 1957, the year of his birth, in Winnetka, Illinois, a fashionable North Shore suburb of Chicago. Worn and scuffed but standing.

When he was a boy, his street consisted mostly of Irish families in sprawling, two-story homes like his parent's on an acre or more of land. Private security patrolled the streets and there were no Black or Brown people other than those who held jobs as domestic workers or landscapers. Jews lived in nearby neighborhoods and were known to be politically liberal and therefore spoken of with derision by those who were more well-off, mostly Protestant or Catholic, Republican and not Jewish.

During the week, his mother shopped at Jewel Foods in Hubbard Woods, a small town about a ten-minute drive from their house, and she would take him with her after he got home from school. He remained outside collecting shopping carts scattered around the parking lot and pushed them to the front of the store. An elderly Black man in a white apron worked outside loading groceries into cars. Every time the reporter brought in a cart, the man would thank him and smile. Years later, the reporter would wonder what the man thought watching him, a well-off White child, treating his job as a game.

When the reporter returned home, the two Black movers who transported his furniture and bookshelves and clothes and dishes and scores of other things he had been carting around since God knew when and then left in boxes in a closet, stood in his driveway and stared open-mouthed at the size of his parents' house and the homes around them.

This is paradise, one of the movers, said.

Did you watch "Good Times?" asked the second mover, referring to a 1970s Black sitcom that took place in an unnamed Chicago housing project.

The reporter had never watched it but he knew not to admit that. He did not live like his parents, did not have his father's income but he understood none of that would matter to the mover. He had experienced privileges this man could not imagine.

Of course I watched it, he lied.

What did you think when you saw how the people in the show lived?

I thought it was a good TV, he replied.

He knew that was not the answer the mover was looking for but that was all he could give him.



The reporter was ten in the spring of 1968 when he and his parents flew to Tampa to visit his father's mother and his older brother, Manuel, his sister Jo and her husband, Clyde. The reporter remembered Jo as very thin but with thick brunette hair cut short. She made wonderful cakes and pastries. Clyde was a big, jolly man who entertained the reporter by teaching him card games.

The reporter's grandmother lived in a house more than one hundred years old on Delaware Street. An RCA radio from the 1930s stood in the front room across from bay windows that opened to a wide porch with rattan rocking chairs shaded by palm trees. Stray cats rubbed against wood pillars and sparrows carried twigs into the narrow spaces between the pillars and the roof for nests. At night, the reporter's parents asked him to keep his grandmother company as she watched "The Lawrence Welk Show." She would tap a foot to the music and the living room light reflected off her dome of white hair.

One night, the reporter and his family watched Martin Luther King Jr. give his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech on television the night before his assassination. When King stopped talking, Aunt Jo muttered, nigras. The reporter's parents did not comment on the speech or object to Jo's slur. The next day, when news of King's assassination spread, the reporter's father and his family agreed that he had been asking to get shot. They expressed no regret he had been killed. Neither did his mother. After he moved home, the reporter reminded her of that trip to Florida one night after dinner.

I don't know, I just didn't like him, his mother said of King. I didn't like his marches. It bothered me to see all those people being attacked like that by the police

and not fighting back. It was wrong. King should have done things differently.

The reporter didn't argue. If civil rights protestors had resorted to violence his mother could have dismissed them as thugs. He assumed their peaceful demonstrations had raised questions about her own privilege that she chose to reject rather than confront. Instead she criticized King. The reporter doubted he could convince her to reconsider, not at her age. As her son, he had experienced similar advantages. Better, he thought, to examine his own values than to criticize her.



The reporter took his mother to Mass every morning and picked her up thirty minutes later. One morning she didn't wait for him and decided to walk home, about a mile. He found her on the street, arms outstretched to either side for balance, stooped forward and all but stumbling, exhausted. His distress amused her. It was as if she had to prove something, he thought later, and assert herself against the losses in her life. It animated her and she talked about the shocked look on his face when he found her for weeks, laughing and turning her head toward where his father had always sat on the sofa as if she was sharing the moment with him.

Sometimes after church, as the reporter and his mother ate breakfast together, she would recall her childhood in New York. A girl named Ruth was her closest friend. One afternoon, they sat on the roof of the apartment building where Ruth lived on East 76th Street. The clear day carried the noise of traffic below them. Ruth produced a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes. The reporter's mother looked at it. He imagined her ruffled by a breeze. He imagined her brown hair down to her shoulders, the shape of her nose, the mischief in her face. Neither she nor Ruth had smoked before.

Let's do it, his mother said.

She laughed recounting that moment.

I miss your father, she said. I miss Ruth. I miss all my friends.



Three weeks after he returned home, the reporter hired a home healthcare giver named Alma, a Mexican woman. He told her his mother had some physical disabilities and would need help around the house. In addition, Alma would cook and drive her to doctor appointments. His mother could be difficult, the reporter cautioned. She did not believe she needed assistance and did not want to be treated as if she did. Never offer to help her unless she asks, he told Alma. Be subtle. If she walks into the kitchen, follow her but pretend you need something from your purse or whatever. Don't feel you have to talk to her all day. Let her start the conversations. Give her space.

On her first day, Alma walked into the living room, hugged the reporter's mother and kissed her on both cheeks. His mother, raised in New York but born in Puerto Rico, chuckled. She's greeting me like a Latin, she said, pleased. Alma, however, didn't last. The reporter's mother grew to dislike her with the intensity of a thunderstorm. It wasn't Alma's behavior that bothered her but her life. She lived on the South Side, in what his mother believed to be a crime-infested neighborhood because it was mostly Black and poor. She had two children from different fathers. The reporter's mother suspected she had never married. She never asked, and Alma never offered details. Her son had dropped out of high school, and, Alma worried, was involved with gangs. She lived in a world that his mother could not fathom, a world in her mind that existed without order or values, a world she had begun to fear as far back as 1945 when her Upper East Side New York apartment, paid for by her lawyer father, was burglarized. She returned home from an outing with Ruth to find it in upheaval, kitchen cabinet doors flung open, plates broken, furniture overturned, the bedroom ransacked. Her universe had been breached, and Alma's stories about her life and children and their absent fathers were another breach. She didn't understand how people like Alma turned out as they did. How could they have children outside of marriage? How could they allow their children to quit school? How could they live where they lived? How could their lives descend into such chaos? She became increasingly agitated with Alma, and perhaps, the reporter would think later, even afraid. I don't want her here, she told him one night. When he objected, she shouted, I don't want her here!

He fired Alma on a Friday morning. I'm not surprised, she told him. I could tell your mother didn't like me. Then she embraced him, kissed him on both cheeks and

wished him and his mother well. He walked her to her car and said he was sorry. That's all right, Alma replied. The morning had opened up and the sun shined through a canopy of elms whose low-slung branches shielded the house from the road and the sound of Alma's car as she turned right out of the driveway and drove to Lake Street and I-94 east to Chicago.

The reporter hired Cathy a few months later. She worked half-days and then the reporter brought on two more caregivers, all of their hours increasing over time as his mother's infirmities became more pronounced. Like Cathy, the other two women were White and Irish. His mother liked them. Between their shifts, when it was just the reporter and his mother in the living room, a newspaper open on her lap, he would notice her staring straight ahead not focused on anything in particular, adrift in thoughts he knew had nothing to do with him or the day, immersed, he assumed, in memories of people no longer alive like Ruth. And then something would interrupt her, a breeze through an open window rustling the newspaper, and she would look down at the headlines and then across at him, a surprised look on her face. Did you say something? she would ask. No, he said, nothing, and she would shift, tug at her sweater and look around as if she'd lost something. What were you thinking? he asked her.

Nothing, she answered.

Just a moment ago, he persisted. She shook her head. I don't know, she said finally. Whatever it was, it's gone. Honey, you don't have to watch me. Do your work. I'm fine.

Mom, I'm just reading.

I don't need to be watched over.

I'm not watching over you.

I'm not helpless, you know.

I know.

Then she stopped talking and resumed staring again.



The reporter's work at times required him to travel abroad to Afghanistan and cover the war. He told his mother he would be visiting friends for a few weeks and caregivers arranged their schedules so that one of them would always be with her. He'd call and make up stories about being on a beach in Florida or skiing in Colorado. If he forgot to call, Cathy would send him frantic emails to get in touch. Your mother's asking where you are, she scolded.

Three months before his mother died, he reported from Kabul. Toward the end of the trip, he met with a mullah whose son had recently died. The reporter and a translator went to the mullah's mud-brick house and sat on red carpets and drank green tea. Through a window he saw chickens scurry behind the house on the hard clay ground and a breeze blew burqas drying on a line. The mullah's son, a police officer, had been traveling to Kabul on a bus with civilians when a NATO plane bombed the bus, killing the mullah's son and seventeen other passengers. The mullah asked the reporter if he had a family. No, the reporter said. There was a woman once but not now. I live with my mother. My father died and I care for her. The mullah reached over and touched him on the shoulder and commended him.

But you should marry and have children and carry on your family's good name.

His mother greeted him full of enthusiasm when he got back. Did you have a good time? she'd ask, and he told her stories about body surfing in Miami. The caregivers did not seem interested in his trips, or if they were, they never asked about them, perhaps, he thought, because they were fearful his mother might overhear. He spoke to friends but they all thought he was crazy to work in Afghanistan so he said nothing to them, either. He felt detached from everyone his first weeks home. Nothing made him feel whole until he traveled again and became consumed in the frantic movement of airports, too preoccupied to dwell on his solitude and the lies he would tell his mother.

Resettled at home, he resumed cooking for her and after dinner he would sit beside her as he always did. A reading lamp would cast a soft light across a magazine she had open on her lap and that she glanced at but mostly treated as a prop. She would ask him the time and he would tell her and she would say, Well, I won't retire before ten. That's when your poppy and I always went to bed. More often than not,

however, she fell asleep long before ten. He'd wake her and lie about the time so she'd go to her room.



When his work slowed the reporter took whatever jobs he could find. He lived with his mother during the Great Recession when many publications weren't hiring freelancers. One spring, he accepted a temporary job as a groundskeeper at the Park Ridge Country Club, twenty minutes from his mother's house. He worked from five in the morning to two in the afternoon five days a week. He and his nine coworkers, all of them Mexican, were responsible for maintaining the club's golf course. The Mexicans called him güero, or pale. Their supervisor, Joel, and his assistants, Kyle and Bill, were also White and spoke little Spanish.

One afternoon while he was trimming bushes, the reporter overheard a club member complain to Joel that few of the maintenance crew spoke English.

Well, if the board would allow us to pay more than minimum wage we'd be able to hire more than Mexicans, Joel told him.

Every morning the reporter and the Mexicans gathered in what had been the family room of a house built sometime in the 1940s while Joel, Bill, and Kyle sat in another room and discussed what work had to be done that day. The aging wood floors buckled underfoot and bees collected in warped paneling.

Buenos días, Joel said walking out of the office one morning a few minutes after five.

Buenos días, the reporter and the Mexicans responded together, reminding the reporter of a classroom of children greeting their teacher.

Kyle had recently graduated from college. He wore glasses and didn't smile, giving the impression he was trying to assume the look of what he thought someone with authority should have. He rattled off the day's assignments: Miguel, Antonio, and Anarbal, rope off dead patches of grass. Santos and Miguel, pick up fallen tree branches. Jose, Raul, Ramon, and Nacho, lay sod. The reporter, tee service.

Any questions?

Silence. Then Kyle said that the club mechanic, Oscar, was missing some tools. If you need something, ask, don't steal, Kyle, said facing the Mexicans. He asked one of them, Raul, who spoke English, to translate. When Raul finished, Kyle said, I'm not saying you did steal, I'm just saying don't steal.

Raul translated again. The Mexicans said nothing. They got up and went outside to begin work. Out of earshot of Joel, Bill, and Kyle, they expressed their anger at being accused of stealing. The reporter stood among them but said nothing. Kyle had not directed his comments at him although he knew if he fit the stereotype people have of someone with the last name of Garcia—brown skin, black hair, English spoken with an accent—Kyle would have looked at him, too. And his first name, Malcolm, defied the stereotype even further. It made him angry at Kyle and at himself for not saying anything.

The reporter got in a cart and drove to the first tee to begin tee service. He had to fill divots on all eighteen tees with a mixture of grass seed and sand and rotate the tee markers, fill ball washers and wipe down benches before the club opened. The morning grew lighter, the sky brightening to a pale blue. Squirrels loped across the rough, their erect tails like periscopes poking through parting mist. He watched the clubhouse staff park in the lot by the practice tee. Two teenage boys put out baskets filled with yellow balls by wooden stands for golf bags.

Using a plastic cup, the reporter began shaking the seed and sand mixture into divots. He moved tee markers so the grass beneath them would not die. He noticed a few divots he missed and filled those with seed. He hated himself for the satisfaction he took filling divots but he took pride in being thorough. Joel told him he took better care of the tees than anyone else. That made him feel good. Am I that desperate? he wondered. He thought of older people he had seen working at McDonald's and other fast-food joints. Guys his age. What's their story? The same as his? He should interview them, he thought. He walked past the ball washer, paused and then knocked it over. It clanged against the redbrick walk. He picked it up. Well, hell, that felt good anyway, he thought. He didn't bother refilling it with water. Joel never checked the ball washers.

The reporter drove to the second tee. Sunlight glazed the sky a searing white and the reporter felt the heat and the weight of his cotton shirt as he began to sweat. He

saw the Mexicans sweeping the edges of sand bunkers with weed whackers. The reporter wiped dew off a bench and emptied trash. He moved tee markers and filled divots before he got back in his cart and steered it to the third tee. He noticed Kyle coming toward him.

When you're done with tees, Kyle said, Joel wants you to clean sprinkler heads.

Okay.

Kyle turned to leave. The reporter called him back.

What? Kyle said.

It was wrong of you to accuse us of stealing.

I didn't accuse you, Kyle said.

Why not me?

I didn't accuse anyone. I said don't steal.

The reporter watched him drive off, listened to the barely audible sound of his cart's electric motor until he no longer heard it. He had confronted Kyle and accomplished nothing. He was a young man unaware of his biases and bigotry. The reporter lived with his mother. His freelance work would pick up again, he was sure, and he would leave here and the Mexicans would not and there was nothing he could do about that or Kyle either. His mind emptied. He drove to one tee and then the next until two hours had elapsed and he heard someone shout his name and saw one of the Mexicans waving his arms signaling it was nine o'clock and time for their fifteen-minute morning break.

The reporter parked his cart and walked to the old house where they had met that morning and poured himself a cup of coffee. Kyle walked out of Joel's office. Oscar, he announced, found his tools. They had fallen behind a shelf.



The reporter's mother often wondered why she had lived so long. I often wonder the same thing myself, he would tease, and she laughed and then stopped laughing, the question lingering between them, the mysteries of life and death beyond their understanding.

Why me? she mused.

Her mother died at thirty-nine in the 1929 influenza epidemic. She was twelve at the time and at school. Her father sent a nanny to bring her home and the reporter's mother saw a flame moving beside her and she knew without being told that her mother had died.

Your father sent a nanny?

That's just how things were done in those days.

It didn't bother you that he didn't come himself?

No.

Really?

Yes, really, she insisted.

How did you feel when the nanny told you?

I felt like anyone would feel being told their mother had died.

What was that?

Honey, I just went home.

What did you think?

Stop! she snapped. I'm not one of your interviews.

He leaned back in his chair. His mother reached for a magazine and they didn't speak of it again. In the silence that stretched between them, the reporter recalled when his father was hospitalized. A few days before he died, it became clear he would not recover. The empty look in his eyes and his refusal to eat told the reporter that he was done fighting the infection that was killing him. The reporter's mother would stand outside his room in the ICU and refuse to go in, determined, she told him later, not to cry in front of her husband and the doctors and nurses. After he died, she maintained a poised reserve. Every night when she was ready for bed, the reporter would follow her up the stairs to her room and she would enter it in the dark and the reporter would switch on his father's night table light and she would stop at her bed and look at him from a distance. Good night, honey, she would say, have a good sleep, and he would nod and respond, Good night, and then he would shut the door and walk back downstairs.

Honey, are you having lunch?

I will but not now. Why? You're hungry?

I'd like my usual.

Okay.

But when you're ready. Do your work. I don't need it immediately. I'll make it. Or I'll ask Cathy.

I'll do it.

I'll do it. Lord, you would think I couldn't do anything. And a glass of water, too, please, she called after him.



Nine months before she died, the reporter's mother began hallucinating and was admitted to Highland Park Hospital. She thought she was in a hotel and the nurses were waiters and she saw cheese everywhere and wondered why no one picked it off the floor. The reporter visited her every day. One afternoon, a doctor walked into her room and said he had five minutes and then proceeded to talk with the speed of an auctioneer about how he wasn't sure what was going on with her, perhaps she had experienced a series of mini-strokes but brain surgery made no sense at her age and so let's hope a combination of medications will help her and if you don't have any questions I'll tell the floor nurse to get the prescriptions ready, and he left before the reporter could respond.

His mother spent one week in the hospital. She appeared much frailer to him as he drove her home with a bag full of medications. At home, her back hurt every time she stood and she could no longer walk upstairs to her room. He arranged for her to sleep in a spare room on the first floor, and he bought a wheelchair and put a ramp over the steps that led from the living room into the front hall. A black grandfather clock that had belonged to her mother stood sentry across from the stairs, its chimes long since silenced. He would help her into the chair and make a joke of it—I'm your chauffeur, madam. Where to, miss?—although he knew she hated it. They still sat together at

night but she talked less and less. When he woke her to take her to bed she would stare at him confused and then she would fall asleep and he would gently rouse her again.



Now as he waited for the coroner, the reporter marveled at all that had happened in the space of a day. He could see himself looking at her just eight hours earlier, holding her breakfast tray. She told him she wasn't hungry. I won't keep looking better than you if you don't keep eating better than me, he said. She did not laugh and he leaned forward and said, Mom, you all right? but she said nothing. He assumed she'd not slept well. He wished he had stayed with her instead of leaving her to Cathy while he read a book, and he wondered if her heart was slowing from the moment he woke her, winding down throughout the morning and afternoon until Cathy helped her into bed and it stopped beating.

A noise in the driveway interrupted his thoughts. He looked out a window and saw a white van and knew it was the coroner and he got up and walked to the front door, opened it and waited as a man in a white shirt and black suit approached pushing a stretcher. I'm sorry for your loss, he said without inflection as if he had repeated this one sentence a dozen times already that day. He asked to be shown the body. The reporter walked him to the bedroom down the dim hall. He paused, looking at his mother for what he knew would be the last time, her pale face and closed eyes. She wore a white turtleneck and blue wool sweater and a pair of blue jeans, and he touched the back of his right hand to her forehead and was surprised at how cold she had become. He pulled off her wedding ring. The coroner unzipped a black body bag. Whenever you're ready, he said. The reporter returned to the dining room. The coroner closed the door.

He emerged a few minutes later pushing the stretcher, the body bag strapped to it. The reporter got up to let him out. They both said good night at the same time. I'm sorry for your loss, the coroner said, and the reporter nodded and stood in the open door and listened to the wheels of the stretcher rattle on the brick walk. Closing the door, he went into the living room and thought again of calling someone. He had not

planned for this day. Stupid, he thought. He contemplated sending Jean a Facebook message but didn't move. He needed to arrange a memorial Mass. He could do that tomorrow or the next day. There was no urgency. His sorrow, distant and indefinable, buried so deep he didn't know how to reach it, left him lethargic to the point of paralysis. He faced the spot on the sofa where his mother had sat each night, but no flame rose before him and he lingered in her absence, the emptiness of the house becoming a kind of companion, its swarm of memories and ghosts, and he got up and checked the lock on the front door as she would have wanted, and he returned to the living room and sat back down and he waited until ten o'clock before he shut off the lights and went to bed.



As a social worker, **J. Malcolm Garcia** worked with homeless people in San Francisco for fourteen years before he made the jump into journalism. He is a recipient of the Studs Terkel Prize for writing about the working classes and the Sigma Delta Chi Award for excellence in journalism.