

The Beginning: Halia's perspective

Fork clangs on the floor, "Ah! You're so clumsy, this is why I can't take you anywhere," said Mother as she quickly stood up and snatched the fork on the floor right underneath my reaching hand.

I sighed as I stood up holding my plate and approached the sink where Mother was washing my fork. I put the plate in the sink and was waiting for Mother to go back to her seat so I could wash them myself.

Then Mother sighed and said, "Why can't you do anything for yourself. I don't remember raising you like this."

"YOU didn't raise me. Nana did," I snapped back, and before Mother could say anything back to me, I rushed to my room and slammed the door.

I knew I shouldn't have chosen to come back here, I should have looked for somewhere else to stay during quarantine, I thought to myself. I sat there, all alone in my room, on my bed, thinking about Nana.

Then suddenly, I remembered how Nana and I used to write to each other letters and how I had kept them somewhere in my room. So I started rummaging through my closet and found the cardboard boxes that I had left here when I left for college.

From all the cardboard boxes filled with random objects, I was finally able to find the one with all the letters I had kept from Nana. Tears came rushing down my cheeks as soon as I read Nana's handwriting on the letters.

But, as I went through the box filled with many letters, I found one that had my handwriting. The date was marked *October 31st, 2018. That's strange*, I thought. October 31st of 2018 was the day when I hosted the memorial service for Nana, and the day I gave her the last letter to bury with the casket.

Feeling a little strange and scared, I carefully opened the letter and read that the content hasn't changed, that the letter is the actual letter I had given Nana 4 years ago.

Why is this letter here? How did it get here? I thought to myself. Then, I decided to try to write one, a "first letter" to my Nana in heaven, thinking that maybe this letter is telling me to revisit that tradition of writing letters with Nana.

Dear Pen-Pal,

It's been more than 4 years Nana, I miss you so much. There isn't a day that goes by without thinking of you. I wish you were here with me to spend these long days in quarantine. Though the first few years of college were fun and have so much to tell you about. Oh, I guess I should tell you a belated happy birthday, shouldn't I. Happy Birthday! I wish you were here in real life to celebrate it. I miss you so dearly, and I have so much that I want to tell you about. But I'll keep them for future letters.

Love you to the moon and back,

Halia

The Beginning: Mother's perspective

I heard the echoes of heavy footsteps and then a door slamming down like a hammer. The sound penetrated through my ears, triggering the repetition of Halia's words.

YOU didn't raise me. Nana did. YOU didn't raise me. Nana did.

Just like that, Pandora's box had been flung open. I could feel all of the pain, grief, and secrets that had been repressed for years seeping through. I stood there for a minute, frozen in time because deep down I knew that there was truth within Halia's words. I couldn't stand myself, without at least trying to be there for Halia.

I spoke gently, "Halia, please open the door. We need to talk. I'm sorry, I didn't know you felt that way. Please Halia, please open up..." I knocked once more, waiting for an answer.

"Leave me alone, mom. I don't want to. No, I don't need to talk to you. I'm an adult now, so I'm making my own decisions. I thought that I could come back home, I really did for what it's worth," Halia replied firmly.

I was at a loss for words. My only daughter didn't feel at home. Not for any other reason than me. Nana had warned me before and I was in denial of believing her words: but she was right. That was the last time I talked to her. I reminisced on her wise words.

I'm proud of how far you have gotten, especially as a single mother. But, if all you do is work, you'll miss out on everything. All Halia needs is for you to be there. That is all a mother can ever do. Be there. Even when they think they don't need you anymore. Be there.

Be there. Those two words pushed me off of my feet and before I knew it, I was standing in front of her bedroom door. I was about to knock when I noticed that the door was open.

“Halia, are you still up?” I whispered under my breath. No answer.

I stepped into the room to find that she had fallen asleep on her desk. She looked so peaceful and serene, so I didn’t wake her up. I placed Nana’s handmade quilt on her, to keep her warm. I was about to walk away when my eyes caught a glimpse of something familiar.

The paper. The envelope, and pen. Could it be? The letters Halia used to write to her Nana, all those years ago. She must have found the last letter she gave to her Nana at the funeral, not knowing that I had kept it safe for her.

Without hesitation, I carefully took hold of the envelope, stealthily left the room, and read the letter. Moments after reading it, I knew what I needed to do. Be there, I thought. Be there...

Dear Halia,

I don’t know how or why, but this letter has found me. In short, I was moved by your love for Nana and couldn’t fathom not responding. So here I am writing this letter. I cannot reveal my identity, but I am also someone who has lost a loved one. I miss them every day, but especially on their birthdays too. I may not be your Nana, but I’m glad to hear that you are doing well in school and life. I know how hard it can be to see the future when someone has tethered you to the past. Believe me when I say that you will always, always miss them. At the same time, every day, slowly but surely your grief will fade, as your love will prevail. Hang in there Halia. I’m here if you need someone to talk to.

From,

Your Pen-Pal

The Middle: Mother's Perspective

Since my first letter under the pseudonym, Pen-Pal, I have written at least a dozen now. After Halia received the first letter by "mail" Pen-Pal has asked her to leave her letters in the post box. In the morning, before the sunrises, I discreetly go outside to retrieve the letter.

Time and space have seemed to mend the breakage that was once caused by our fight. For a while, I felt relief and believed that we were going to be okay on our own. Sadly, my hopes were short-lived and shattered before I could even reconcile with Halia.

"Hey mom, did we get any mail today?" Halia inquired skittishly.

"I don't know, but I'll go check right now!" I replied enthusiastically, knowing that she was referring to a letter from her Pen-Pal.

I briskly walked to the front porch, opened the post box, and clustered all of our mail-in one hand. As I walked back to the house, I checked to make sure that my letter was in there. I impatiently flipped through each letter.

Spam, car insurance, advertisement, wait what is this...The University of Washington! But Halia goes to Portland State, why would she be getting mail from Washington? It must be a mistake, it has to be.

Filled with nothing but anxiety, I shamefully opened the letter. The subject line read: Your transfer to UDUB has been accepted. Congratulations! We are excited for you to attend, starting from the 2nd semester. My heart dropped in an instant. I couldn't believe my own eyes.

"Halia! Halia, where are you? Come down here right now!" I cried out with fear.

"What I'm coming, I'm coming," Halia replied from a distance.

I paced back and forth. My legs trembled. My hands struggled to hold the letter. Halia came down the steps, nonchalantly and stood in front of me. Our eyes locked for a moment, she looked down, shifting her gaze to my hands: she knew.

“I can’t believe this. How could I have not seen this coming. I knew that I should have registered online. You’re always violating my privacy. I can’t belie-” Halia protested, but I interrupted.

“You? You can’t believe this? I should be the one who should be shocked and heartbroken by your actions. Young lady, you do not move back home just to transfer to a different state without ever conferring or telling me! I just, I don’t understand you Halia! I thought you and I were finally okay. Weren’t we?”

“We have never, ever been okay. Don’t you get it, Mom? We will never be okay. NEVER. At least, not since you decided to disappear on the one day I really needed you. How could you have not come to the funeral! What if I didn’t come to your funeral?” Halia wailed, out of breath.

Tears streaked down both of our faces. My eyes burned. My heart pounded in my throat. Once again I was at a loss for words. Had I failed as a mother? Had I also failed as a daughter?

“Are you gonna say something?” Halia blurted, in between breaths.

At this point, I didn’t know if there was anything I could say or do to make her stay. So, I stood there once again, not knowing how to begin to explain myself.

“I’m sorry mom, but I can’t do this anymore. I’m done. I have a few more days before the term starts, but I guess I’ll go earlier and get my dorm room setup. Goodbye.” Halia spoke softly now, as she slowly turned around and disappeared into her room.

The Middle: Halia's perspective

"Goodbye," I said as I tried to walk away, soon realizing that I hadn't brought my letters with me to my room. I quickly turned around and, quietly but with irritating tension, walked back to where I was as I saw that my mother had left all the letters in a pile on the kitchen counter.

I snatched my pile of letters from the counter and stormed into my room, infuriated by the fact that my mother had violated my privacy and my trust.

Why can't she just leave me alone?! I thought to myself as I replayed our fight in my mind. Studying the glimpses of her mother's expressions. Wishing I had a normal family, a normal mother, a normal life.

I had given up on my mother since I was little. I knew she was working hard for us and I did respect her for that; but I always wished that I could have spent more time with her, that she was there for me.

At least Nana was always there for me. But since her death, I had been alone, literally and figuratively. I had no one, no purpose in life.

Moving back to this house with Mother clearly hasn't helped; that is a part of the reason why I applied for the UW transfer. To get a fresh start. Find my purpose, my people.

I have to get out of here. This transfer is my chance, maybe from Nana. I began packing my suitcases and duffle bags, still furious about my mother, when I noticed a drop of tear streaking along the side of my cheek. I took a gasp of breath and wiped my tear with my hand as I resumed packing.

A couple of days later, I had packed all my bags and was ready to move out of this house, and from my mother. Standing outside with the smell of the near arrival of winter, the cold breeze passed through my hair as I called a taxi.

As the taxi stopped in the driveway of the house, I heard the creak of the old wooden door open. "I already said goodbye, I don't expect anything from you," I said, frankly, and tried to stroll away with all my luggage when Mother grabbed my arm.

What?! I'm done here, let me go, almost blurting out straight to Mother's face. Then, silently yet abruptly, Mother handed me all my letters that somehow I had forgotten to pack in my bag.

"I'm sorry," quietly she whispered as she packed them in my bag and returned home.

In the taxi, I was gazing out of the slightly open window. *Goodbye,* I said in my mind as I looked for places that reminded me of all the memories I have made in this town with my grandma.

I haven't read my Pen-Pal letter! I quickly realized as I rustled through my bag filled with the pile of unopened letters from a couple of days ago.

Then, I spotted a letter with handwritten words that said "Dear Halia." Slowly, I opened the letter and took out the paper inside.

Dear Halia,

I have not been honest with you. I am not expressive of my true thoughts and feelings, thinking that that is the only way to stay strong, especially in front of my daughter. I want to change. Change to be better, to express love, and fix our relationship.

"our relationship"? What is this? who is this? I thought to myself as I kept reading the letter hoping to find out the true identity of my Pen-Pal.

I know that I wasn't able to be there for you whenever you needed me, especially when you needed me. I am sorry if I ever made you think or feel unloved by me or supported by me. I am sorry for not being by your side on that day.

I hope for nothing but the best.

I love you to the moon and back,

Pen-Pal

P.S. There is a photograph inside the letter. I hope you understand.

I was panicking, confused, as I searched for the photograph inside the letter. The photograph showed me and a group of people gathered around Nana's casket. It also showed that I was wearing this bracelet that I had made for Nana and Mother when I was very little.

I studied the photograph closely. Eventually, I gave up and was about to put the photograph back in the letter when I saw something in the corner of the photograph.

Is that...our bracelet? I felt my heart sink in an instant.

The End: Mother's perspective

With my last shred of hope, I gave Halia the letters. My eyes followed Halia's figure, as she disappeared into the depths of the taxi. *BANG*. The sound of the door resonated with a sense of remorse. I wanted nothing more but to chase down that taxi. But, I knew it was too late. I had to let her go.

In an attempt to elude Halia's absence, I dragged my feet upstairs but incidentally found myself in her room. I stood in the doorway, looking into a now deserted and lifeless room. I had never felt more alone in my life. With Halia gone, I was reminded of my mother's absence.

I'm so sorry mom. I tried to be there for her. I guess you completed us. We weren't picture-perfect, but with you, we were somehow a family. Without you, oh mom. We are so lost.

Missing my mother, I decided to visit her resting place for the first time since the funeral. Flowers in hand, I walked toward her grave with hesitancy. The ever-changing wind brushed against my cheek, wiping away my tears. I watched as the breeze made the leaves dance and dance and dance until they slowly cascaded onto Nana's grave. I reached down, clearing the foliage to reveal the engraved words: *Nana was dearly loved by her family. She was and will always be there for them.*

Memories are meant to be carried with us. Because it's the remembrance of a loved one that keeps them alive. Halia kept Nana alive every day.

"Mom! Mom, where are you?" I heard a familiar voice, echoing from a distance.

The End: Halia's perspective

I- how- oh no. I need to go back. I panicked as I leaned forward towards the driver's seat asking, "Excuse me, could you drive back to my house, please. I forgot something important."

How could I have not seen her... How could she not tell me all these years?! I always blamed her – I thought she never cared. My mind ran wild with thoughts and snippets of memories from the funeral trying to find anything that could have resembled her being at Nana's funeral.

After what felt like an hour, on the way back, in the taxi, I jumped out of the taxi as soon as it stopped in the driveway of my house. I didn't even care to bring my bags into the house.

I rushed inside the house yelling, "Mom! Mom! Where are you?!" running around the house, checking every room in hopes of Mother sitting in a chair somewhere waiting for my return. But she wasn't there.

Where could she be? I thought to myself, trying to calm down my mind from a panicking state to think clearly.

Then suddenly, a location popped into my mind. I rushed back into the taxi, and asked, out of breath, "Could you go to Evergreen Cemetery please."

After about 5 minutes, I could see the emerald green sign with Evergreen Cemetery, written in white, from the car window.

Overwhelmed by so many emotions, I didn't realize the tears running down my cheeks. When the car stopped, I ran to Nana's grave hoping that Mother was there.

As I got closer to the grave, I could see a silhouette of Mother crouching over, placing a bouquet of flowers on Nana's grave. All the tension and breath that I had been holding released at that moment as I felt a growing warmth in my heart.

I walked towards my mother trying to think of something to say but unable to, as tears continued to run down my face. When I was a few steps away from Mother, she noticed my presence and approached me with open arms to hug me.

With Mother's arms around my shoulders, I started to sob with my head on her chest. She didn't say anything but as she gently stroked my hair, I felt at home.

-THE END-