

What Did La Abuela See?

By Nancy Glass

Julia's call came before 8:30 AM. She sounded panicky, atypical for this experienced hospice nurse. "Doctor, I'm sorry to call you so early, but I just got a text from Angel's mother, Arlene. He's been breathing hard overnight. She called OnCall and has been giving him the morphine every hour, just as they asked her to do. But she says it isn't working." She paused. "I'm way up in north Houston and Bonnie's attending a death on the east side. What should I tell Arlene?"

"No problem, I can go. Could you please call Arlene back and tell her I'm on my way?"

I filled my thermos with coffee, rechecked the address and headed out, my second time to visit since Angel came home from the hospital two weeks ago. There, hospitalized for a month, he was cranky and depressed, partly from the steroids meant to help with his cancer, now clearly out of control. All aspects of his care in the hospital were challenging: he refused to take medicines, refused to participate in therapy, and resisted the nurses in their efforts at every turn. Potent chemotherapy had no apparent effect on his tumor. With no other options for treatment, Angel's parents reluctantly agreed to take him home with hospice support.

Now here we were, with new changes in Angel's condition. His father, Alfredo, opened the door and escorted me into his bedroom. The cluster of women standing around the bed fluttered out of the room. His mother Arlene, with dark circles under her eyes, was on Angel's left side, her torso sheltering him like the Pieta.

"Look at him," she said. "It's been like this all night."

Angel was propped up on pillows, his face flushed, breathing forty times a minute, way too fast for an eight year old. I listened to his chest: a few rattles and wheezes but not impressive: just breathing too fast to move air effectively. His oxygen saturation was 94 percent, acceptable; his heart, racing at 180 beats per minute. He was on oxygen already, but I increased the flow.

"When was the last dose of morphine?"

"An hour ago."

"You've been giving 0.25 ml?"

"Yes."

"Let's give him 0.5 ml now. Do you want me to give it?"

“I’ll do it.” She measured the blue liquid carefully, holding up the syringe. “Is this right?”

“Yes,” I said, “Let’s give that, then I’m going to stay for a bit to see if this dose helps.”

We watched Angel’s breathing and Arlene began asking questions. It worried her that Angel wasn’t talking this morning, that he barely responded when she adjusted his position.

“I’m afraid what you’re seeing indicates his condition is progressing more rapidly now,” I began. Arlene worried that Angel wasn’t eating, that he had only taken sips of water the day before. I explained to her that children approaching death are not hungry or thirsty, that they sleep more and stop speaking. She nodded, tears flowing freely.

I explained what I was seeing on exam: Angel’s skin was warm and pink and he was breathing more comfortably. I told Arlene that her family was welcome to return to the bedside while I continued to watch him.

Just then, Angel’s La Abuela (grandmother) swept silently into the room as though powered by a celestial force, staking out her position just to my left.

La Abuela, well under five feet tall, was dressed in a straight, woven plaid skirt that ended mid-calf; her blouse was white, with intricate and colorful embroidery circling her neck and arms, extending down the front where the blouse tucked into her skirt. Her long thick braid of shiny black hair streaked with gray reached the small of her back. Her face and hands, the color of rich caramel, bore witness to her years on earth: hard labor, harsh sun, hunger, love, loss. Without a word, she began to pray, crossing herself. I bowed my head.

“En el nombre del Padre, y del Hijo, y del Espíritu Santo. Amen.”¹

I “knew” La Abuela’s Mayan heritage after traveling twenty times to Guatemala on medical missions. I had seen her huddled with her sisters in the chapel of the Franciscan hospital. I had seen her pain and witnessed her fervent faith in the face of overwhelming tragedies. What other sorrows has she borne? I wondered how her family suffered during the prolonged civil war?

“Padre nuestro, que estás en el cielo. Santificado sea tu nombre. Venga tu reino. Hágase tu voluntad en la tierra como en el cielo. Danos hoy nuestro pan de cada día. Perdona nuestras ofensas, como también nosotros perdonamos a los que nos ofenden. No nos dejes caer en tentación y líbranos del mal. Amen.”²

I looked out the corner of my eye and saw the rosary tucked into her left palm. Ohhhh, this is going to take a while—I wonder if she’s going to do the whole thing. How long does that take—45 minutes?

La Abuela fingered the next small black bead.

*“Dios te salve, María. Llena eres de gracia: El Señor es contigo. Bendita tú eres entre todas las mujeres. Y bendito es el fruto de tu vientre: Jesús. Santa María, Madre de Dios, ruega por nosotros pecadores, ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte. Amen.”*³

Hearing her prayer, others entered the room: Alfredo knelt at the foot of the bed, holding both of Angel’s feet. Two aunts and an uncle completed the solemn circle around Angel’s bed.

Ten times the Hail Mary, then another Our Father, how many repetitions? I lost count, recognizing only the most familiar phrases in Spanish, “...*ruega por nosotros pecadores, ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte.*” (“...pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death”)³. La Abuela’s voice was low, steady, rhythmic. The meditative intent of this prayer was notable. I also noted that Angel’s breathing had eased: still fast, but less frantic. Was it the morphine or La Abuela’s prayers?

I studied La Abuela’s wrinkled parchment-like skin, did the math in my head and wondered: was she *really* Angel’s La Abuela, or was she his bisabuela (great grandmother), Alfredo’s La Abuela? Were she and I the same age, or ...? I couldn’t tell. Arlene said La Abuela, so I’ll go with that.

“Y bendito es el fruto de tu vientre: Jesús.” (...And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.)³

The womb. La matriz. El útero. El vientre. I looked at La Abuela again, wondered how many children she had borne, wondered how many she’d lost? The question was not “if” but “how many.”

The sound of a heart tearing open pulled me out of my reverie. Alfredo, overcome by fear, by grief, by the tender and prayerful entreaties of his mother, was sobbing and kissing Angel’s feet. The aunts and uncle were on their knees, too, crying into their clasped hands. Arlene hugged her son tightly.

Just then, La Abuela reached the final prayer: “To thee we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this vale of tears.”

*“Dios te salve, Reina y Madre de misericordia, vida, dulzura y esperanza nuestra, Dios te salve. A ti clamamos los desterrados hijos de Eva. A ti suspiramos gimiendo y llorando en este valle de lágrimas...”*⁴.

La Abuela was silent. She crossed herself and took a step backward. I reached out my hand to her, and she embraced me in a long, fierce hug.

“Gracias,” I said. My eyes were wet and my face was red.

Everyone left the room but Arlene and Alfredo. Angel was peaceful now. We discussed what to expect: how often to give the morphine, when they should call us. I told them he had turned a corner, that we had now entered the last days of his life. I told them nurse Julia would visit

every day, that they could call us at *any* time. And finally, I reminded them that it was not in my hands to know when Angel's last day would come. They nodded solemnly.

I hugged both parents, laid my hand on Angel's chest, said farewell to the family in the living room and drove away.

Julia called me thirty minutes later. Arlene had just called to report that Angel—still peaceful—took his last breath 15 minutes after I left. I was shocked.

What had La Abuela seen? Did I miss something?

Rosary Prayers

1. (Sign of the Cross) In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
2. (First Prayer) The Lord's Prayer
3. (Hail Mary, most frequent prayer in the Rosary) Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, Pray for us sinners, Now and at the hour of our death. Amen.
4. (Final Prayer in the Holy Rosary): Hail Holy Queen.

Nancy Glass has had a long and satisfying career taking care of children, practicing—at various times—pediatric critical care medicine, pediatric anesthesia and pain medicine, and palliative care. Currently she works as a pediatric hospice physician at Houston Hospice. In 2015, Dr. Glass began the Master's in Liberal Studies program at Rice University with the goal of becoming a better writer so she could tell her hospice stories. She is now working on a collection of these hospice stories. To deal with the emotional stresses and burdens of hospice care, Dr. Glass knits incessantly, enjoys bird photography and listens to classical music.

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