

## Quieter Around Me

*Lillian Huang Cummins*

I never really listened to my wife. Now I listen to her all day long. We used to get in fights—not real fights but arguments—Mona loved to argue. I used to think she argued with me just to irritate me, but now I know she was showing me she loved me. What a thing. “He will never change,” she said of my boss at work, a man who treated each of us differently, according to the color of our skin. “Just leave and go somewhere else.” When I was young, the anger burned inside of me. When I was young, such things seemed to matter so much.

These days she speaks to me on the wind or when I close my eyes for a short doze after a meal. I am putting the wet laundry in the dryer, and I hear her just behind my ear, telling me not to forget. *The mangoes are ripe; we should cut them tonight. Stop playing the stocks; you are giving money away to strangers. It is time to spray the plants and cut back the trees.* I hear her clearly—like nothing else I can hear these days. Her voice, when she speaks to me from that other place, is full of love and admonitions. It is the only melody I strain after, the only music I might try to chase down.

*Monday*

I am an old man now, and it is true, I am losing my hearing. My daughters reprimand me, “Why don’t you wear your hearing aids?” but these days I find less and less that I need to hear much at all. This is how it goes: every first Monday of the month is dinner at my house. The girls bring the food and clean up after. Tonight I sit with my family—I have a large family, four daughters, all married now, and all of their children too—and they are squawking and laughing at each other over the shiny, empty plates. The babies are wailing, and every now and then someone will shout something

right at me. I nod my head and smile, but mostly I am fine just sitting there, watching it all, a muffled din in my ears.

My wife would never have stood for it. She wanted to hear everything—she delighted in it. The grandchildren crawling and babbling at her feet, the birds screaming in the trees, the music from a passing car radio. “What are they singing? What are the words?” she would demand. She would drive fast, speeding to catch up. I, on the other hand, have long been a man who prefers solitude.

I watch the days pass, and each is the same with a different name; not much changes when you are old and alone. My wife, she died twelve years ago today. She died in her sleep, if you can believe that.

*Tuesday*

Last night my wife came to me in my dreams. “Luis,” she said. “Luis.” She kept saying my name. At first I thought maybe I had died, maybe she was coming to tell me it was my time. But no, that was all, and I woke up. It was dark in the room, the only light coming from the streetlight outside my window. I got up, turned the blinds, and looked out over the sidewalk. So still. It was 3 a.m., and there was no one, not like I expected it, but still no one except that big, tall lamp and its lazy circle of light down on the street.

I’ve been waking up to that streetlight for over thirty years, ever since we bought this house in this old neighborhood where it used to be that only the Swedes and Norwegians lived. Here all of the streets run straight like a grid down to Market where there are still the Swedish bakeries, the watch repair shops, a music store with instruments hanging on the walls. These have been there as long as I can remember. Now the old firehouse is a café, and a big bookstore took over the theater.

We thought this would be the place to raise our children. When we first moved here, we were the only Filipinos in the whole neighborhood, and it was too cold, too foggy all of the time. We bought this house, and we painted every room a different bright

color inside to remind us of home. The kitchen, pineapple yellow; the living room, bright ocean blue. We painted the family room the color of salmon because not far from here you can walk down and see them running in the locks.

Many years later, after we had raised our children and they had gone, my wife and I were taking a walk. Maybe we were going to the store. The sidewalk was blocked, someone was fixing something, and there were cars parked along the curb, so we had to walk around, almost in the middle of the street. I was holding Mona's hand. Just then, a pickup drove by, young teenage boys, revving their engine. One leaned out the window and yelled at us, "Get out of the road, fucking Japs!"

I remember that night, we stopped; we turned around and walked home, and I could not open my own front door, my hands were shaking so hard. Mona took the keys from me and opened it herself. Inside the house, I raged and I paced: *Is this really 1990 in the United States of America, and I am hearing this? After how I have served my country? If they are going to curse me in my own neighborhood, why couldn't they at least get it right?* At this Mona laughed, and then I saw, there were tears in her eyes—I saw that she had been scared too. She held my hand, and that night we sat together like that. We sat and held hands until it grew dark.

### *Wednesday*

Let me tell you the story: I was young and poor when I first met my wife. I came from a long line of farmers, and from an early age I knew the hardships of a life dependent on crops, land, water, and weather. She was only sixteen years old, and it is no exaggeration to say that she was the most beautiful girl in our village. My wife, her beauty was not so much about her face or her figure—although these were perfect to me too—but more about the way her voice would ring like music when she was certain there was adventure before us. When I ran off to enlist in the Philippine Scouts, I half thought she might try to come with me. I told her then that I wasn't running away, that I was running toward our future—when I succeeded, I would come back and marry her. Even then as a

young girl, my wife had a strong mind, and she was smart: she refused my pleas that she promise to wait for me. I journeyed the 400 miles from our village in the south to Fort William McKinley. I trained for ten months, and then the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. We were at war.

At night when I sleep, I am on the march again. The march that would never end. We are walking along the road, so dusty and hot, even as I am just dreaming it, I can feel that dust in my nose, my mouth, my throat, my lungs. I cannot breathe. Those roads had been the roads of my home, the country that I loved and had fought for, but now they were only a place to put one swollen foot in front of another, to keep moving forward or face the consequences of beating and death. In my dream, there are no colors. The color of our skin, dusty from the dirt roads, burnt by the sun, is the color of the earth, the fields and rocks alongside, the same brown tan of what was left of our uniforms. It cannot be, and yet the color of the people, the civilians who watched as we marched past their villages and farms is all the same too. In my dream, I see a woman standing alongside the road. Her hair should be as black as the deepest part of the deepest pool of water, her eyes the color of coffee. But everything about her is the same color of dust: her dress, her lips, her hair. In real life, this woman, I saw her, and I saw what she did, at peril of death, to give us some hope, to help us survive: she ever so slightly lifted her hand, two fingers in a V for victory, kept close to her body, down near her waist, so the Japanese soldiers could not see. Tonight in my dream, this woman looks at me as I walk by, and I see her eyes, and I know that it is not the woman I saw many years ago. It is Mona, and she is looking at me, serious, not smiling, and letting me know that it is time to move on, time to keep marching.

I survived that march, and I survived much more. I survived the camps that followed, the ones that they were marching us to and that were even worse than the Death March, as they called it later. I survived the war, and I came back and found my wife, and she married me even though she could see that I was a young man who had already grown old. I survived moving to the United

States, and I survived staying in the Army, and I even survived it when they sent me to another war. I survived raising four children, I survived retiring from the military, and I survived working for the postal service for another twenty years. So this is the way a life goes. When I was young, after the war, I got fat; I filled my belly and could not stop eating after all of the disease and starvation. By the time we moved to Seattle, I was round and prosperous looking, and my wife, she was skinny, so small I could practically wrap my entire arm around her waist. As we got older, my wife got fatter, and I got skinnier, and neither of us cared. We loved one another, and we took care of each other. This is what happens to old people.

#### *Thursday*

Once a month my youngest daughter takes the day off and drives me to the vet hospital downtown for my appointments. I tell her I can take the bus, but she doesn't listen. Sometimes I see my doc—he adjusts my blood pressure medication, looks at my legs and feet, asks me about my arthritis. I get my hearing aids checked, and Laurie there changes the batteries for me and laughs at my jokes. Today I tell Laurie that maybe my hearing is fine, just the world is getting quieter around me. She smiles and says, “Things get quieter when you're alone.”

Mostly, though, I go for the guys, the ex-POW's group—we've been doing this for twenty years now. It used to be when Dr. Korman started with us, he made us talk about the war. Twenty years later, we're all talked out; we meet once a month just to check in. These days when you show up, you never know who will be there. We've learned to keep track of each other so someone usually knows why: Chuck's kids took him on that Alaska cruise with all the grandkids and everything; Stanley is in the hospital again and it's not looking so good this time. We sigh and shake our heads.

The guys in my group, they are the only ones who don't ask me the question: why didn't you run when you had the chance? There were 55,000 of us still fighting when General King surrendered,

and only 15,000 were Americans. The American soldiers, they had no choice, as dirty and starved as they were, the Japs knew them on sight. But us Philippine Scouts, we could have walked away, turned our backs and disappeared into the villages and pretended to be any other civilian. Some did, and there were so many of us, the Japs didn't know; who would miss another skinny, sick Filipino?

My children have asked me this question, my grandchildren have asked too: *Lolo, why didn't you run away?* They are young, they have not seen war, and they don't understand. *You could have avoided the prison camps and kept fighting in the underground resistance,* they say. I try my best, but there is no way to make them understand. The guys in my group know, and Mona knew too: I had a choice, and yet I had none.

The things I have seen, they were too much of a nightmare for me to say again or speak to another human being, even my wife. She married me even though she knew I was a shell of a man, and feelings were hard to come by. When we were young, I never cried because maybe it felt like all bad things had happened already. The joy was there—like when our children were born—but even then I felt like I was watching the movie of someone else's life. My wife was the one who embraced everything. She embraced life, and I watched her, and it was just fine for me that way.

#### *Friday*

Tonight when my wife comes to me in my dreams, it is like a scene in a movie, the dancing scene, the one where the dashing gentleman convinces the beautiful girl to be his. I am Fred Astaire in my black tuxedo tails, and she is Ginger Rogers in her long, flowing dress. I have never been a good dancer. At each of my daughters' weddings, I tried—I walked around the dance floor and held the bride with my arms stiff and high. Mona laughed outright. “Shuffling,” she called it. She looked so beautiful when she laughed that way—I would grumble but couldn't truly be mad.

In this dream, there is no shuffling, only gliding across the dance floor, my wife in my arms. We swirl and twirl, and it is like

our feet aren't even touching the ground, just floating on clouds of grace. I think, this is the way it should be, and for a moment I wish that I had learned to dance in real life, that I had taken my wife in my arms and swept her away like this, like they do in the movies. She deserved that kind of life. But then I remember her laugh at my shuffling—I can hear that beautiful sound, and I think, would I have given that up too? And then I remember that in my dream, my wife is still alive, and I can just keep dancing. I don't have to have my regrets. For a moment, the quiet recedes.

I wake up humming a tune.

### *Saturday*

Ahmed owns the vacuum shop down on Market Street now. Old Mr. Olander taught him everything he knew, and Ahmed bought the place from the younger Mr. Olander after the older Mr. Olander died. This vacuum shop, I've been going there thirty years. This is something I always liked to do. My wife kept a good, clean house, but I did the vacuuming. Vacuuming makes a room feel new, leaves you with that smell of hot, pressed air in your nose. So this became my job: I kept the vacuum clean, took it to Mr. Olander when it needed to be fixed, and every few months, I walked down to the shop and bought my vacuum bags.

Ahmed is not very tall, hardly taller than me. His head is round and bald, and today even before I walk through the glass door, I can see the shininess of his scalp as he leans over a vacuum on the floor. He is emptying out its contents, showing this lady standing next to him how it has sucked up all of the muck. He is trying to sell this lady a fancy new vacuum cleaner, and I can see that she doesn't want it.

The string of bells that Mr. Olander tied to the door decades ago ring when I walk in, and Ahmed and the lady look up. He smiles and lifts a hand in greeting, and I do the same. I head to the wall lined with grey hoses, attachment pieces, brushes, and, of course, vacuum bags. She is young, maybe even younger than my youngest daughter, but her face is lined and tired. Her brown hair

is pulled back into a limp ponytail, and there are dark circles under her eyes. She leans on a low-end Hoover that is standing upright next to her. It looks as if she is using it to hold herself up. You can tell she does not know how to respond to Ahmed's smiling victory over the dirt and dust. She is trying to be kind.

"I don't know," she says. "That one is pretty great, but maybe see if you can fix mine first?"

Ahmed's smile falters but only a little. He is disappointed but still up for the job. He rolls the gleaming vacuum back to its place on the display. He returns and kneels in front of the aging Hoover at her side, inspecting the metal underbelly. "I can look at for you," he says, speaking each word slowly to make sure she understands. "But I cannot...uh...guarantee," he pauses, looking serious as he stands up and edges away from her, "it worth your repair."

"I know, I understand," she says. Each word is a slow sigh coming out of her mouth, like she has been holding this breath for a long time. She scratches the back of her neck with one hand and looks down at her vacuum cleaner with such sadness. I think, what is it about a vacuum that could make a person so sad? I have my bags, and I am now standing at the counter, waiting for Ahmed to finish. Suddenly the woman's face wrinkles all along both sides, and tears start slipping fast down her face. Ahmed looks at me, then her. He holds up his hands low in front of him, as if he is backing away from a bad problem. "Miss," he says. "Please, miss, is okay. Don't cry. Please."

She shields her face with her free hand, as if she is trying to press the tears away with her palm. "No, no," she says and takes a shuddering breath. Her other hand grips the old Hoover. "No," she says again. She breathes and presses, and I can see what she is doing, she is trying to stop. "No, it's not your fault. Please. I'm sorry."

Ahmed stands a few feet from her, looking back and forth from her to me and back again. His face is silently beseeching: *Help me*. It is clear that it is not every day a lady comes into his vacuum shop and bursts into tears. I stand there for a moment thinking,

what can I do? I'm just an old man here to buy his vacuum bags—don't get involved. Her hand is still pressed to her face, and her shoulders are heaving up and down, with each deep breath she takes, then expels with a shudder.

After one of these gasps, she stops. "I'm sorry," she says. "I've had a bad time. I mean, this thing happened, and then today my vacuum broke. I thought I was better, the kids were out with friends today, but then the damn thing broke." She tightens her grip on the vacuum, as if she might collapse if she lets it go. She looks around the shop, her eyes red but her cheek pale and still wet from where she was pressing it. She sees me standing there and shrugs like you might do when you are apologizing to a room full of strangers. But there is just me. "I'm sorry," she says again.

"Is okay. Is okay," says Ahmed as he steps forward and gently peels the vacuum from under her fingers. He sees his opening here, and he is not going to miss it. He rolls the Hoover past me, behind the counter, and gets out a pad and starts filling out the form on top. I look at the girl standing precariously balanced, her vacuum now rolled out from under her. She seems lost, uncertain what to do next.

I am standing there, thinking how I should not get involved, when the girl, she looks right at me and says, "My husband died." She says it like she knows it is true but also with a pause at the end, like it is a question at the same time that it is a statement. Like she is asking me, I know it is true but could it be true? I know this feeling. I have seen many die. I have lost my own Mona twelve years now, but still I know that you wonder, even after so many years. How can it be that at once someone is there, and then they are not? This woman is standing there, asking me this question, and I want to tell her something that will make it better—I know this is what Mona would do. She would take this girl, a stranger in a vacuum shop, and she would put her arm around her shoulder. She would find a chair, sit her down, pat her on the arm, and tell her that in time, it would not hurt so much. I know. I know this is true. But somehow I cannot say these words to this girl. I don't know how to explain

the truth: that it will hurt every single day, but different, and better, and worse, and then, it will hurt all over again.

I leave my vacuum bags on the counter and cross the distance to the middle of the vacuum shop to where she is standing, moving across the newly vacuumed carpet, so clean and warm. I take her hand. I imagine she must be thinking, what is this old Filipino man doing, holding my hand in the middle of the vacuum repair shop? But all she says to me is the same thing again, "My husband died." She says it without the question this time, looking me straight in the eyes. I nod.

I turn her hand in mine and shuffle around to face her, taking her other hand and pulling it up to my shoulder. I leave it resting there. She is just a bit taller than me. I put my other hand on her hip, and she flinches, her wet eyes wrinkling in curiosity. Her top teeth start to bite her bottom lip, but she does not move. She is waiting, and I am waiting too. She knows we are going to dance. I close my eyes, and I hear the music in my head. I begin to whisper, my voice croaking:

"There is a flower within my heart... Daisy, Daisy... Planted one day by a glancing dart... planted by Daisy Bell..."

I open my eyes, and I can see that she is standing there, staring at me, uncertain. I can hear the music in my head much better than I can hear my own voice so I clear my throat and try a little louder.

"Whether she loves me or not... Sometimes it's hard to tell... Still I am longing to share the lot... Of beautiful Daisy Bell..."

Here I pause and take a breath. I close my eyes again, and I think about my wife. This time I will try my best. *One*, two, three; *one*, two, three. My feet begin to move. First a square, best I can do.

"Daisy, Daisy... give me your answer, do..."

I open my eyes, and the look on her face is still uncertain, but surprising to both of us now is that she is moving with me. One square done, so I try another, and something like a smile starts at the corners of her mouth as we trace the next square together. My voice picks up a notch.

"...I'm half crazy, all for the love of you..."

Now we are moving around the store, and I look down and see the sun shining on the carpet through the words painted on the windows: brand names of vacuum cleaners and “We Repair on Site.” I look down at my thick, black shoes with the tie up laces and her sad, tired tennis shoes following along, and I see that we are moving through the circles of sunlight and the shadows of the words. I know I am not supposed to look at our feet, so I straighten up and keep going.

“... it won’t be a stylish marriage. I can’t afford a carriage...”

I look over and see Ahmed standing behind the counter. His head is cocked to one side, and now he is smiling too. I see that he is a boy who has grown into a man, before my eyes, a transformation I did not even recognize, coming into this store every few months over the course of many years. Things change, even as you are not seeing them. I take courage from his smile.

“... But you’d look sweet. Upon the seat. Of a bicycle built for two.”

I stop and let go, and her hands rest there in the air for just a moment before she drops them. I bow slightly, and I see her cheeks are still wet, glistening, but just a bit pink. She is blushing. I feel my cheeks warm too, and I shuffle backwards as I say, “Excuse me.” That is all, and I go to the counter and buy my bags.

### *Sunday*

Most weeks I still walk to mass. Sometimes my daughter drives over from Renton to go with me—this she does maybe once or twice a month. It is less than a mile from my front door, and yet she insists on picking me up and driving me there. I think she doesn’t like that I walk, but really what could happen to an old man like me, walking to church? Today I am halfway there, I am enjoying how quiet and comely the streets of my old neighborhood are at 7:30 on a Sunday morning, when I realize that I have forgotten my hearing aids. I stop, and a car passes, drifting by me like a ghost without the rumbling of its engine. I see robins pulling worms out of the wet grass, but when they open their sharp beaks to call, their song is

silent. What the hell, I think, the homily will be just about as good. I am halfway there so I keep walking.

Without my hearing aids, I cannot hear the mass reverberate through the tall eaves of the church, but the familiar sounds echo through my mind. I have been doing this for eighty years; I know when to sit and stand. I can feel the congregation as they break into the first hymn, the pulsing of the organ from the front of the church, sounds that I have loved my whole life and that have emerged from my memory to sustain me through the greatest hells that any man can know. But all of these sounds are hushed and muted today, as if they are coming from a far off place, the people around me singing emphatically into a 100-mile tunnel, and me standing at the end. The words of the priest echo the same way, like sentiments from a distant place even though I know the liturgy by heart. I suppose this is what it is to grow old: even the things closest to you begin to sound far away.

Tonight when I sleep, I will call her name. Mona. “Mona, my love. My sweet, my heart.” Things I never called her when she was alive. I will close my eyes and think of my wife, hoping she will come to me once more in my dreams. I will say it over and over again. I will call her name until I can’t anymore, until all I can hear is the whisper of my voice. ☪