Keeper of the clouds

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Mom and I sat in my dad's car on a hot summer afternoon. I was stressed because there were doctors to see and forms to fill out. Mom was carefree. She sat quietly in the passenger's seat and observed, taking everything in. We stopped at the lights at a major intersection.

My mind was racing to the next doctor's waiting room, doctor's office, home, then insurance agent, then the ministry of internal affairs to validate the foreign workers' permits, then phone calls to the neurologist, the memory clinic, the social worker to set further appointments.

Mom's mind, unlike mine, was present. In the moment.

We were still waiting for the lights to turn green — that is, I was waiting. Mom wasn't. The concept of waiting became foreign to her long before the official diagnosis. Time, for her, stands still or rushes backward or forward with no particular order. She was never great at being on time for anything (except concerts and doctors' appointments). A few months before our visit to the memory clinic where she took her second minimal mental exam, she started having trouble deciphering the time on her wristwatch. When I noticed that she couldn't read the time on her analog watch, I bought her a turquoise digital wristwatch with a large screen, thinking that it was her eyesight that prevented her from seeing the time.

It was not about her vision.

It was about time.

Only when Mom makes a sound that signals contentedness do I notice her wonder-filled gaze. Her eyes are wide open, engaged, fixed on the electric power lines above the major intersection, where I'm still waiting for the lights to change. No, not really on the lines, but on the solitary pigeon perched on one of them. She smiles and observes, "A bird." I find myself at a loss for words. *How do I respond to that? I have*

so much on my plate right now, I can't possibly rejoice about seeing a stupid bloody pigeon. I nod and smile and produce a sound that signals my acknowledgement of Mom and the bird, and of Mom's acknowledgment of the bird. "Hmm mmh." Mom continues, "He's the keeper!" Hearing this intrigues me. I'm all ears, she's got my attention now. "Keeper of what?" I ask with curiosity mixed with skepticism. She pauses for a moment. "Hmmmmm," and responds with conviction: "Of the clouds of course!"

And then, "It's green," she says automatically, as if her poetic interlude was as casual as the changing light at a major intersection. I put my foot on the gas pedal, and we drive to the next doctor's waiting room.

My mind is no longer racing; it stands still, just like the solitary keeper of the clouds. I think some pieces of me stayed at that crossroads forever.

Later that evening, at the kitchen table in my parents' home, I tell Mom and Dad

about Mom's poetic interjection on the way to the doctor's office. Dad is sitting. He's chewing and smiling. Mom is standing near the table. She does not remember, but when she hears me utter her words, she seems happy, more than adult-happy. Having abandoned the inhibitions that bind many of us, she spins on one foot and claps her hands with excitement. Continuing her celebration, Mom lands on the other foot, and claps once again. She's laughing with delight at the sound of her poetry recited by her daughter — and her joy tempts me to recite it again.

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This article has been peer reviewed.

This is a true story. The author has received consent for this story to be told.