

Esther Forever, A Eulogy for my Grandmother

Delivered 6/28/23

Anybody who knew my grandmother knows that, if asked what the most important thing in the entire world is, she would not hesitate.

“Family,” she would say.

And not just family, but The Family. This family.

None of you need me to explain this to you: our family’s different. The descendants of Jesus and Refugio...we just do family way more intensely than any other family I’ve ever encountered. We love harder, scream louder, party more and better. Anybody in this room who was not born into The Family had a second where they were like, “oh shit, that’s...a lot.” For some people, it’s too much, for other’s it’s the only way it can be.

It is family as a verb, as an intense practice and daily priority.

And it is the family that Esther, from long before I was born, sat atop, its unquestioned and all loving matriarch.

Her love took many forms: praise, worry, caretaking, forgiving, memento hoarding. And most importantly, unwavering support.

If I were to ask for a show of hands, how many people in this room felt that Esther—as a sibling, mother, aunt, Nina, grandmother—played an formative role in their lives and childhoods, hands will start flying, it would look like we were starting the wave in here.

Let’s think back to her 75th birthday party off Green River in Corona.

There’s a whole lot to remember from that wonderful evening, but what I remember most is the receiving line that spontaneously formed to greet her. As she entered that clubhouse and the mariachi started playing, all of you, already on your feet to shout surprise, instinctively queued up to wish her a happy birthday, waiting your turn to get your hug in. We suddenly looked like an entire familial brigade moving in lock step to salute its general. The line was as massive as the role she played in everybody’s lives in it, as big as the love she shared with all of us, and in my mind, there has never been anything bigger.

Well, not until today at least, as we again all gather, not in a line to receive her, but rather to send her off, as we huddle together around the massive hole her death has left in this family and in our hearts.

Sometimes that hole is the size of the house on Waikiki, where, without fail, she could be heard to shout, “Get out of my kitchen” as she rolled out masa with two *comals* going at once. I feel bad for anybody here who didn’t get to try her tortillas, and I still feel a little guilty that I used to horde dozens of them...or at least I acknowledge that I should feel guilty.

That house was the center of our family’s universe. It hosted wedding and baby showers, sister slumber parties, Jerry and Gloria’s anniversary party, graduation parties, and was the only place I could imagine being for Christmas. It was where Esther put family into practice, hosting long past when she should have bowed out, and when she finally sold the house, she made that practice a one woman road show, showing up for everybody everywhere. So, yes, we all know how important The Family was to my grandmother.

The only thing she loved more than family was peace, and she would say the two should be synonymous.

But, of course, family's also complicated.

My grandmother was given a heavy load as a child, assuming responsibilities beyond her years. And she carried that load admirably and beyond reproach, but the carrying reshaped her, building complicated resentments—she was frustrated that she never had time for herself, but also guilty that she harbored such resentment in the first place.

Before she ever got around to having a childhood, she began seeing others through theirs, making three-foot high stacks of tortillas on East O Street by age six. And just as her siblings moved into adulthood, she started having kids of her own. Children she loved every day of their lives with an infinite, unwavering ferocity. But, also, children for whom, I believe, she was not entirely emotionally prepared. Sure, she had thousands of hours' experience changing diapers and running a family household. But she'd never had the space to find herself, to be herself, to exhale and live in a world where nobody needed her.

This is something she came to understand and regret, especially the way these feelings shaped her throughout her early adulthood. I will quote from her journal, written in 1986: "I resented my time being taken away and it was followed then in my marriage. I went from the age of about 9 until my 55th year, when all of a sudden, for the first time in my life I began to see why I have been a wretch all my life."

I know some of you may object to me reading her interior thoughts that it may seem inappropriate to share these personal words and feelings, things we could have burned right along with her. But I profoundly disagree, and here's why: You cannot understand the triumph of her life without knowing its context.

This was an amazing woman who did not dare find space for herself within her crowded heart until she was in her mid fifties, but all the while managed to preside over an immediate and extended family that prioritized one another over all else. One that did family differently, harder.

And as she moved into the second half of her life, that resentment and coldness inside of her began to melt away as she embarked on her next chapter where she found space for herself by deliberately making it.

She lived alone on her schedule: Waking up when she wanted to wake up; cooking what she felt like eating, when she felt like eating it; going into work in the afternoons, getting home in time for Letterman. She gardened the days away, experimented with semi-occasional nocturnal nudity (ask me if you don't know), and let her hair go gray.

Compelled to seek out more, she traveled alone, half way across the world to Medjugorje, she traveled across the US Southwest and California coast with her dearest friend Harriet. She went to see movies alone.

She showed up for her people when they needed her—she never said no, to any of you, would be my guess—but more importantly she showed up for herself. She began to reevaluate her life up to that point, her choices, and her regrets.

Let me show you what I mean with one story about her mother and one story about me.

My grandmother had complicated feelings about her mother, a woman who put a lot of her parenting responsibilities onto her. But as Esther became a mother and a grandmother herself, as she came to understand herself better, she came to an understanding with her mother's ghost.

She dreamed of her often, dreams in which they silently gazed upon each other under an oak tree with love in their eyes but no words between them.

And then there was this, written into a 1945 edition of, *The Capitain from Castile*, a book she gave to me off her bookshelf over a decade ago:

“My mother and I had gone to San Pedro to renew her alien status. From San Pedro, we should take the Ferry to Terminal Island. It was a lot of fun cause there were some really cute prisoners of WW2. They were Italian. I was 14 or 15 and there was a lot of flirting to be done. Anyway, I went with my mother as an interpreter and wen went into a store and she bought me this book. I was looking through it and she said, “Do you want it?” I was surprised but very happy. It was brand new and the price of three dollars is still marked on the inside page. She knew what it meant to me because she also loved to read. This was one of the best days of my life. \$3.00 was a lot of money we didn't have. I love you, Cuca.”

People are born into circumstances, those circumstances shape them, and they become the person they are. My grandmother came to understand that just as her childhood had shaped her life, so to had her mothers shaped HER own. She learned more about responsibilities and regrets, and her resentment, however reasonable, receded.

On her deathbed, we showed my grandmother her mother's picture again and again, and it always brought her peace. It makes me smile to know they are together again, under that oak tree, this time with so much to share.

And now a story about us, taken from the *Chronicles of Nick and Esther*, aka *Sonny Boy and The Old Lady*.

She and I had flown to Texas, just the two of us to stay with the Lopez family—she desperately missed her son and I missed my cousins (and you, Jeanette, always you).

Now, I've always been a touchy person, my cousins and aunts and uncles all know this. I am clingy, touchy, leany, sometimes without even thinking about it. I am just a cuddler. And Esther, well, she was not. At all.

We were on our way home, at the most miserable place on earth, DFW, and both deep in our feelings. Neither of us wanted to say goodbye to our Texas family, neither of us wanted to spend hours on an airplane, slowly getting further and further away from them.

So I did what I always did, I clung.

Waiting in line, I pressed my side into her, not entirely knocking her off balance but enough that she had to correct her stance to avoid tipping over. She tried to take step away, but I wrapped her in a side embrace before she could escape.

Then, surrounded by Texas-Nice strangers, she let it all go in one exhausted, unholy exclamation: “GIVE ME MY SPACE!” she yelled loud enough for the entire economy checkin line to hear.

What had been an airport buzzing with chatter suddenly became a one woman shame spectacle.

“You can hug me, if you like,” offered a kindly woman in her mid-forties, in what seemed half genuine offer and half public rebuke.

Shamed, surrounded by strangers staring at her and the scene she just caused, and only roughly four minutes into a four hour journey, she did the only thing she could do: she clung to me. Half to show the crowd that she was not a wicked old grandmother, half because all eyes were on her, she was embarrassed, and didn’t want to be standing there alone.

We held hands the entire flight home.

Now, why would she always tell this story—to her friends, to her family members, to the boys I dated? Why would she lead with a story in which she is publicly shamed for her distance and coldness, other than the obvious fact that it is hilarious.

Because, I believe, it concisely captured a journey she had been on for some time. One in which she understood the roots of her distance and resentment, forgave herself for the ways it shaped her as a sibling, mother, and grandmother, and tried her hardest to love differently. Not more—she always loved all of us with all of her heart—but to love a bit differently. To meet people where they are with what they need.

This doesn’t mean that she suddenly flipped a switch and became a model of patience and grace, but it is to say that she gave it her best shot. She saw herself and did her absolute best to be better. And she then was ready to joke about it.

After that day in Dallas, our relationship got hot and heavy, so to speak. She never refused my touch, rub up against her instincts and boundaries tho it might. We comfortably shared a bed well into my twenties, held hands in the movie theater well into my thirties, and I had my head in her lap and her hands in my hair less than a month before she died.

The fact that, from time to time, you could still see the old grandma flash through—her face would change and she would get quiet and a bit angry (if you knew the face, you knew the face, not much else to say about that) but the fact that that grandma still showed up from time to time shouldn’t say to you that her journey was incomplete or that she fell short of patience and grace.

It should remind you how very tough that journey was for her, how tough it would be for any of us to try to change from the person our childhood made us. It should remind you how much she had to wrestle with the resentment and traumas of a life lived predominately for other people. She learned about herself and what she saw as her shortcomings, and she fought herself and her demons to be the best matriarch she could be.

And in my eyes, that makes her perfect.

She was my biggest champion, my partner in witty banter, my permanent movie date. She folded my clothes long after I told her I could take over, taught me most everything I know about cooking and the only correct way to fold a towel, told me stories about her life and listened attentively to mine.

Her final weeks were incredibly difficult.

I will be forever grateful to my mother and my Uncle Robert, who stayed with her twenty-four hours a day for the final agonizing weeks of her life. They honored the woman who brought them into the world by seeing her out of it as comfortably and peacefully as they could.

In those final weeks, she bounced from incoherence and restlessness to prolonged sleep and occasional bursts of lucidity. For those of us with her, those lucid moments gave us a beautiful way to remember her as she would have wanted us to.

Not as the woman who lost her way as she slowly lost her mind. The woman who repeatedly, meticulously wrote down her siblings, children, and grandchildren's' birthdays because she knew she could no longer trust her mind to remember them. The woman who no longer recognized or remembered the vast majority of the people she loved, who even if she knew you often forgot how. The woman who stopped caring about Christmas, who stopped wanting to go out just to be about, and who couldn't make it to family celebrations even if she wanted to. The woman who ultimately became the one thing she never wanted to be—dependent on others.

No, not that woman. Instead, those final lucid moments gave us A woman who again loved to lovingly tease, mocking my singing voice and even her own infirmity. A woman who again recognized and found comfort in the faces of her siblings—those standing at her bedside and those in photographs, already waiting for her on the other side. A woman who didn't want anybody to make a fuss or go to any trouble on her behalf, but who looked at us in her final days with true gratitude in her eyes.

The last thing she said to me was, “Well, I guess we made it!” My response, “Yeah, old lady, look how far we came...you got us here.”

At the time, I thought that was just for us. Because she and I did come a very long way together.

In 2018, although she had already began her descent, she was still enough of herself to truly be herself when Greg met her for the first time. “What was Nick like when he was a baby?” he asked her. “He was cute,” she replied, “but he was a little butthole.”

And she's right, I was a little butthole. But I was her little butthole. And she loved me entirely, even as she tried to gently help me become a better man. I went from the kid encroaching on her hard-earned independence and space with his constant clinging and babbling to...well... the adult who did the exact same thing, maybe with a bit more self awareness.

But she would have it no other way, she would have me no other way than me. That's who I was, and we couldn't be Old Lady and Sonny Boy without me being Sonny Boy.

I believe with all my heart that my grandmother was one of the great loves of my life, among the most complete and full relationships I will ever have. We had our own language, our own cultural history, our own shared grudge list (the entire state of FL, for example). Her home was my second home, she my second mother.

She was in my corner as I took my education for a decade long spin, at my engagement party with my future husband, and sitting at my birthday dinner a mere two and a half months before she died.

So yeah, when she said “I guess we made it,” I thought she was talking about the two of us.

But, the more that I’ve thought about it, I don’t think it was just for me.

This is from a 2012 journal entry: “I was just thinking about how far the second generation of our family has come. My parents were from Zamorra, Mexico. My father, grandfather, and uncle had been working in the US for several years. My grandmother, mother, and Hope came to stay in the US in 1925. The next generation, that includes me, was the first generation of US citizens. We started school not speaking a word of English. But for me starting in Kindergarten, I picked it up quickly, and by the end of the school year I spoke English and could understand pretty well.”

She and her siblings, the daughters and sons of laborers who migrated to the United States in the mid 1920s—not friendly times to be Mexican in Los Angeles, by the way—went into school and learned English on the fly. In her typically modest way, she doesn’t say much more than “I picked it up quickly” but we all know how very smart and quick she was.

She didn’t just pick it up quickly, she excelled in school and ultimately became a licensed vocational nurse, a career she kept through retirement. She owned her own home and spent her free time watching PBS costume dramas and salacious reality television, reading with an unquenchable thirst, and gardening every single day. Her final healthy days were comfortable, proud, and fulfilled in Yorba Linda with my mother, presiding over yet another thriving garden and a family that always filled her with love and pride.

So, look how far SHE made it.

Her journal went on to include this simple sentence: “By the time the second generation in the US came along, they were Americans and on an even field.”

This generation includes her children, of course, children who have gone on to maximize this even field with successful careers and families that exemplify everything America promised to her parents as they came from Mexico.

- Raquel, a celebrated registered nurse who took her mother’s career one step further.
- Ramona, a masters’ degree-holding researcher for the county’s social services and probation departments.
- And Robert, a professional who worked himself up from pole-climber to corporate badass through his long GTE/Verizon career.

They climbed to new heights with the home on Waikiki serving as basecamp. Look how far THEY made it.

And then there is the third generation, one she doesn’t mention in her journal but that was constantly on her mind: her grandchildren—me and my cousins Matthew, Jordan, Korey, Alex, and Phillip.

Going through her things after she passed, I found near obsessive levels of memorabilia and ephemera from our graduations, marriages, children, and every other milestone. She was proud and protective of us as far as long as her mind allowed it, and even as dementia overtook her, she always loved when I told her stories about how great we were all doing. “Oh, good!” she’d always say.

So, yeah, look how far WE made it.

And you helped get us here, Grandma Esther.

And now look at her great grandchildren, already all so uniquely perfect—Hazel, Penelope, Clark, Jacob and Lucia— who only briefly, if at all, got to encounter the woman all of us knew, who never got to taste her tortillas, but in whom Esther already lives on in their curiosity, laughter, and love of their family.

They made it.

We all made it

All of us.

For anybody here Who traces their blood through Jesus and Refugio, whose roots go all the way back to East O Street, who came up in the family Esther presided over for well over eighty years—think about how far we’ve all come, how far she got us.

From that small house in Wilmington next to a place called the hole, our family has climbed to places her parents could never have imagined. She cleared the way out for us, and she’s been behind us ever since, pushing us forward.

No matter the amount of time you shared with Esther, her place in your life was massive, just like the line to receive her on her 75th birthday party. Because she only knew how to love her family one way: all the way.

She loved all of you all the way, seeing those she cared for as children go on to have their own children and grandchildren, and she saved every single photo that each and every one of you ever sent her (seriously, I had to sort through them). She saved your graduation announcements, your Christmas cards, your children’s t-ball photos. Every gift ever made for her in a crafts class, every drawing dedicated to Aunt Esther, every token of your affection and achievement. She saved all of it.

Because, as the first woman in and last woman out for this family, as its unquestioned supreme, we were, all of us together, her life’s work and its greatest accomplishment—at least according to her.

Family is the most important thing, and not just family, but The Family. And celebrating you is the single best way I can think of to celebrate my grandmother. Across distance and time and change, we stay connected to each other, we come together in ghastly tragedy and in glorious celebration.

It’s not just what we achieved with her at our backs, it’s the mere fact of us being together that is a credit to her memory. No matter what happens, I am bound in my heart and soul to so all of you, and you to me, and to each other—that is her legacy, and the most important thing in the world to her.

So, if you want to know how to honor her, it's pretty simple: Love your family, hard. Keep these bonds that she worked so hard to build and maintain, move towards forgiveness, for yourself and others...but never for anybody who fucks with The Family.

Thanks for getting us this far, old lady. We've got it from here.