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## The Fourteen-Year Journey

Angelina Navarro  
*CSU-Monterey Bay*

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Figure 1: *Del Monte* by Megan Goodwin

# The Fourteen-Year Journey

Angelina Navarro

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I had heard my mother tell this story a million times. I had even lived through it with her as a child, yet I never heard it the way she told me it the chilly fall afternoon of November 12, 2020. I can't seem to get her to sit down for the interview; I think she knows what is coming. She finally joins me at our kitchen table with a warm cup of peppermint tea; this would be her sense of comfort throughout our interview. I commence by asking her what the day in her life

she remembered the most was. She pauses with a bit of hesitation, almost as if she doesn't know if she could tell this story, yet with a quick impulse she begins to tell me.

It all started with a gut feeling one morning. It was the morning of November 6, 2006. She woke up at 5:30 a.m. and looked in the mirror. At this point in the interview my mother has the grandest look of distraught almost as if the feelings from that morning suddenly and all at once rushed back to her. She explains how she looked down her stairway, still with this odd feeling. Something was wrong with her mother; she just knew it had to be so. My mother has always had this kind of scary sixth sense and premonitions about things. Her siblings thought she was crazy and over exaggerating when she contacted them about this feeling she had about their mother.

I cannot begin to imagine the frustration my mother felt with everyone who didn't believe her in the moment. Until this day her and her siblings still have quite the broken relationship. I begin to ponder if that is where the broken relationship amongst her and her siblings may have begun; if I were my mother, I feel I would carry that resentment with me for a lifetime. My father was the only one to believe her, he rushed home to care for their daughter while she rushed to the hospital without hesitation. My mother and father got divorced not long after this happened to my grandmother and I begin to wonder if my mother ever correlates the hospital time and her divorce. Did she ever feel that this may have also ruined her marriage? I hope my mother knows that being a good daughter didn't cost her these relationships. I wish she got the support she truly deserved throughout all the pain and hard days she had.

As my mother is explaining her arrival to the hospital worry spreads all throughout her as I can see this even just in her body language. She explains with a grave look on her face that there was nobody in the room. I begin to imagine what she was thinking. What was she feeling? At this point I begin to feel confused as I gather my thoughts. I choose to ask how she even knew she should go to the hospital out of all places and why she felt the way she did. She proceeds by saying that her mother had had a surgery just the night before due to excruciating stomach pain she had been having. My mother looks now as if she could use a hug to wipe away the sadness that is spreading slowly yet surely across her face.

She tells me of when my grandmother had such an intense stomach ache and she called her husband, my mother's father, while he was working. She never called him for anything let alone at work. She never had any pain, emphasizes my mother. My mother explains how my grandfather had to beg and plead for the doctors to do scans for my grandma, as originally, they refused. Just go home and take Tylenol, that's what the doctors told my grandmother rather than taking the time to give her the care she needed. My grandmother had a tear in her small intestine which was found after the scan was finally done at the hospital. I can't believe at this point what had happened; if the hospital had let my grandma go home, she could have died that very night of November 5, 2006. The tear would have never been found. I feel my mother and I are feeling the same emotions as we sit in this silence before she proceeds on with her story. I begin to see the pain my grandfather felt in my mother's eyes in this moment.

She uses body movements to explain her rush into the hospital room. She shoved the security guard out of the way. My mother can't stop the words from flowing out of her mouth as she explains the flow of blood that was being released from my grandmother's eyes and mouth the moment she walked into that hospital room. She burst into the room and saw that "they were trying to shove something down my mom's throat like a tube." My mother's face fills with rage and anger as she tells me about how the nurse told my mother to get out and the doctor was yelling at her. The doctor then said to "get the fuck out of the room." I begin to imagine how it felt for my mother and grandfather. They were so left in the dark about what was happening to my grandmother and for all they knew she could have been dying and they would have no idea.

I sense some relief as my mother begins to talk about her former boss. Her former boss was a chiropractor who practiced mostly homeopathic medicine. Tears begin to pour down her face as she explains the phone call that she had with him. These tears were not of sadness, they were tears of graciousness that she felt for him in the moment she describes. He was the one to explain what was happening with my grandmother just over what my mother told him she had witnessed. Her boss didn't hesitate and told her he would cancel all his patients for the day and head right over. That is exactly what defines reliability in my mother's eyes. Her boss at

the time was so selfless, so caring, and so loving. The memories of me going to the office everyday with my mother rush back to me and I remember how grateful my mother was for him. At this point, I can see she hasn't touched her cup of tea since we began so what she needed for comfort was not the tea but rather just to begin letting the words pour out of her mouth. "They had tried to jumpstart my mother like a car," weeps my mother, trying to catch her breath as if she can feel the pain my grandmother felt as they resuscitated her and injected her with \$45,000 worth of drugs. Again, my mother makes it a point to say that they were unaware of what was happening with my grandmother. I notice the amount of negligence my mother has brought up during our conversation and it begins to frustrate me as much as I am sure that it frustrated her. The doctor even personally apologized about what had happened and my mother responded by proclaiming how she should've been there to give her mother the care she deserved. I understand doctors are under a lot of stress but there is no reason a family should ever be left in the dark like my mother and grandfather were. How could so much neglect and so many mistakes be allowed?

My mother starts to talk about my Tia Carmen, my grandpa's sister who came up from Mexico as soon as she heard my grandmother was in the hospital. The smell of buttery pancakes and warm gorditas in the winter come back to me when she brings up my Tia. If there was anyone who was really there for my mother, it had to have been my Tia. I remember this just as my mother told it; my Tia was always one of the few who were constantly in the hospital day and night whenever it was necessary. This was yet another selfless and caring person who was with my mother along the journey with her mother. Just this one person was such a sense of comfort to my mother and I can see as she talks about my Tia, how much her being there was so appreciated. My mother lacked the amount of support that she needed but people like my Tia who were so genuine in her life are what kept her going each day.

My mother felt it was important for her at this point to contact her neurologist, who she later found out was out of town at the time. My mother explains to me the exhaustion she was feeling when she dozed off and suddenly, she heard someone say her name. She says she remembers looking up and seeing such a friendly face after days in the hospital. It was her neurologist's husband who was also a

neurologist and was offering his services in place of his wife's. She looks down and tells me that at this point her mother was on life support and because of this the neurologist asked for permission to do some assessments. It took hours of assessing from an outside neurologist in order for my mother and grandfather to finally find out what was really wrong with my grandma. My grandmother had gone into a coma due to lack of oxygen. I ask my mother what exactly a coma is and she responds with a rather direct answer which was that this is when your brain is deprived of oxygen because your lungs get so full of fluid. My mother gets quiet and then mentions how her mother wasn't acting like herself. Did my mom feel guilty? Did she think she could have done more? So many thoughts and questions are flowing through my head but I let her continue. The fluid made my grandmother's heart stop, leading to her intubation in order to revive her. This sentence pours out of my mother's mouth like she has had this memorized ever since the day this happened. It felt wrong to even think about interrupting her.

A course of five days, that's how long it took for all of this to happen. By the way my mother explains the details it all feels like a lifetime. I could not begin to imagine the emotional turmoil my mother went through. My mother has also seen mistakes as unacceptable for as long as I can remember and I could never see why she was so hot headed when it came to any mistake—this was of course until I heard this story during the interview. The mistakes made by the doctors and nurses led my mother to where she is today and the inner issues she faces with herself. In many ways everything that happened broke my mother but while it broke her it also made her into a strong person in a way no one will ever possibly be able to understand. Due to the number of mistakes made by the many nurses and doctors, this caused my mother and grandfather to get a second opinion from another neurologist. Another doctor that was on my grandmother's case was originally denied by the hospital. My mother has a look of anger on her face when she tells me how the hospital reacted which caused her to get the doctor escorted in with a sheriff in order to be able to do his job. The hospital backed down and allowed the doctor to assess my grandmother. My mother is such a strong woman and has been known to get her way and I think that this is where it stems from. I can see the strength she had to gain within the battles with the hospital and how it's helped her

flourish into who she is today—someone who will not back down.

“People began to flood in with books and binders full of my mother’s information,” states my mother as she describes the second neurologist’s assessment on my grandmother. She explains how she peeped into the room and saw how angry the doctor was and how he threw the binder on the floor so hard that it slid down the room. Yet another error on the transcription stated that my grandmother suffered hypoxia 2-7 minutes when in reality it was 27 minutes. I remember thinking “what even is hypoxia?” in my head but before I could ask my mother was explaining how my grandmother had suffered a traumatic brain injury due to the lack of oxygen, which is hypoxia. The doctor described this as drowning 27 times to my mother...not just once but 27 times. Drowning 27 times. This re-plays in my head as my mother continues speaking. I can only imagine what my grandmother suffered. My mother then continues the shock by telling me how it was so severe that the doctor said the damages could be permanent.

At this point my grandmother was 100 percent comatose, not responsive, and on life support. I can sense the confusion in my mother’s voice as she tells me about what happened after they found out my grandmother was in a coma. Eelco F.M. Wijdicks explains in his book, “The Comatose Patient,” that treatment for comatose patients is largely supportive. In the case of my grandmother’s, this wasn’t the case because my mother and grandfather had to go through external sources to get the support needed for my grandmother. The book also states that, “The vast majority of comatose patients die without awakening” (Wijdicks 328). Thankfully, my grandmother’s case contradicts this statement as later in the interview my mother joyously speaks on the day my grandmother opened her eyes.

I didn’t think this would be one of the hardest things to talk about for my mother in our interview. She seems fine at first as she talks about how she, my grandpa, and my aunt were there daily, day and night, whenever necessary. It is when she brings me up that she begins to burst out in tears so heavy that she could not catch her breath. She would take me with her and I would take my movies, color crayons, Play-Doh, and toys every day for months, says my mother as she takes a deep breath and pauses. I can see her emotions hit her all at once. I wish I could just hug her and tell

her that it was okay. I didn't resent her for the time we spent in the hospital. She was and is a great mother and I regret not telling her this as I see the tears flood down her face. I hate to cry in front of people or show any type of vulnerability so I hesitate to hug her at this moment. I think that the way I am stems from how my mother raised me, to be strong, even though I know she's okay with me crying if necessary. I just know I need to be strong for her in this moment just like she's been strong for me my whole life.

My mother regains her strength and dries her tears, although I know she would cry a river if she didn't have to continue this interview. She goes on and tells me about how she requested her mother's medical files for safekeeping and this led me to ask her if it was clear all of this had happened due to negligence at the hospital. My mother then responded that this was indeed true due to the fact that the hospital failed to check her vitals, x-rays, and overall, just made so many careless mistakes. It is at this moment that my mother's hot headedness comes to my mind again in this interview. She just will not accept mistakes, regardless of the consequence. I think this one experience alone changed my mother into someone who is more to the point and direct than she ever was before. This in many instances works in her favor, but I wonder how things would be different for her if she never had to go through what she went through those months in the hospital.

My mother begins to say how one day she was so exhausted about to leave the hospital when suddenly she was blocked in by a vehicle; the driver turned out to be chief of staff at the hospital my grandmother was at. The chief of staff told my mother honestly about all of the mistakes made and even admitted to my mother that he knew the hospital really messed up and he just is too honest to even lie and try to make them look any better than they were. My mother tells me that he isn't the only one in the hospital who brought the truth to the light; from nurses to radiologists, they all told my mother and grandfather how wrongfully my grandmother was cared for. Everyone was told to not speak on it but even at that point, my mother was still receiving the input of many of the healthcare workers there. My blood boils for my mother at this moment. I can't imagine how she felt hearing about all the mistakes that were made and how if the jobs of the healthcare workers at that hospital were done correctly, things would have gone so differently.



I knew about the lawsuit. I was so young and oblivious to know at the time what it all meant. I remember driving up to San Jose a lot around the time everything happened to my grandmother but I always thought my father just enjoyed taking me to the museum there. All the negligence in the hospital urged my mother to contact an attorney and I later came to find that that was why we drove up to San Jose so often. I'm glad I was this young when all this was happening because I think me being older and aware of it all wouldn't have been great for my development. Though I'm glad I was young and oblivious, I am only left to think of the emotional impact this had on my mother. I wish she never had to go through any of this because she is deserving of so much more this life has had to offer her.

It is astonishing to hear this because I would think a hospital is somewhere mistakes like the ones that were made should never be allowed. Not only did the hospital make these mistakes, but they tried hiding them on altered medical files and by "hushing" their staff. One mistake they made sent chills down my spine as my mother told me. I felt like I was listening to the plot of a scary movie. My grandmother had a bowel movement and something was found in her feces. The nurses refused to give my mother what they had found which led my mother to sternly say that technically that was her mother's property so they were obligated to give it to her. I love to hear about how my mother got her backbone. My mother tells me about this event with her sturdy and affirmative tone of voice that she uses when she gets frustrated. Then again, another moment in which she had to stand up for herself and learn not to take anything from anyone. My mother mentions the word forensics and I am puzzled; it turns out what forensics found was that it was a tooth with a hardware like nail stuck to it in her feces. Cue the chills that ran down my spine at this moment. Until this day, we are still unclear as to how the object even got into my grandmother's body, but this is because the hospital never wanted to explain themselves. My mother tells me how the hospital thought it would be less expensive for her to die than to live about what was "accidentally" given to her mother to swallow. The tooth was not my grandmother's and my mother did everything in her power to prove it. The attorney made sure my mother kept what was found and my mother has it in her possession to this day.

The attorney only helped point out all of the errors that the hospital had made. Months went on meeting with the lawyers, gathering medical records, putting the case together, and going through court dates, my mother tells me. Not only did the hospital make so many mistakes found by the attorney but they also tried bribing my mother and grandfather with a \$20,000 check. My mother was so hurt by this as she described this as the hospital's way of seeing them as only 'poor Mexicans.' Hearing my mother say this hurt me because of how hard my grandparents worked for their kids and themselves when they immigrated to the U.S. and how they deserve to be seen as so much more than they were in the hospital. In an article by Adalberto Aguirre titled "Profiling Mexican American Identity: Issues and Concerns," he writes that "Racial profiling works because it targets racial and ethnic minorities in American society and because they are less likely to occupy positions of power and influence that shield them from aggressive and intrusive public scrutiny" (Aguirre 931). I feel that my grandfather was profiled because the hospital felt that belittling him would help them win the lawsuit; this would not be the outcome as my mother and grandfather are true fighters. The attorney then told her to take the check and cash it because it wasn't even one third of what the hospital would owe her once they were done with the lawsuit.

The lawsuit went on for months. My mother comments again on how race was an issue in the courtroom. My mother's eyes fill with rage as she begins to tell me how the lawyers for the opposing side degraded my grandfather. They would continuously say they couldn't understand my grandfather in such a sarcastic tone all because he didn't speak the most perfect English but my mother states that he spoke enough English to get the point across. My mother is so close to my grandfather that when he hurts, she hurts and this was proven to me in this moment. She felt the hospital thought my grandpa was money hungry when in reality before all of this he was very successful in life with my grandmother. It's sad that my grandfather was suffering through so much pain in this situation only to be profiled the way he was in a courtroom; it truly breaks my heart.

The hospital was so stubborn and originally just said they would dismiss what was owed for the stay and the "care." I couldn't believe my ears because what did the hospital mean by care? All they truly brought to my family was trauma and negligence in regard

to my grandmother's case; I would call this far from care. I feel at this point the hospital was just trying to get rid of my family and just do the bare minimum in order to get them to leave. I ask my mother if this was the final outcome in which she responds that in the end the hospital bill of \$4 million was dismissed and a settlement was given for the care that was going to be necessary for my grandmother. No amount of money could ever make up for the emotional trauma brought upon my family along with the condition that my grandmother came out in.

After finally being done with the lawsuit my grandmother had to go into a nursing home but my family felt this wasn't right; my grandmother needed to be home. My grandfather did everything in his power to move my grandma into their home and get all the supplies that were necessary. My mother tells me about the process of having her at home and how my grandpa, my aunt, my cousin, and herself became my grandmother's primary caregivers. I remember how exhausted my mother would constantly be day after day but she never gave up and did her best to care for her mother. I was so young but I remember spending more time at my grandparents' house than anywhere else. I don't have any negative feelings towards this; if anything, I am grateful for the time I got to spend with my grandparents regardless of the conditions.

My mother did her best to care for everyone including myself but I wish there was someone there to care for her as hard as she did. Days and nights passed in the hospital. Months flew by. Some days were harder than usual for her. In this moment of our interview so many things click for me all at once. In an article titled "Family Members' Lived Experiences of Everyday Life After Intensive Care Treatment of a Loved One a Phenomenological Hermeneutical Study," it is stated that "The unpredictability and fear arising from having a relative in the ICU can induce intense psychological stress. Furthermore, after returning home, relatives might experience various changes due to their personal adaptation to the situation or patient-related conditions" (McAdam et al. qtd. in Frivold et al. 393). My mother tried to conceal all of the stress she had at the time but I can see it now in the way our home life changed and just our household overall. These weren't necessarily negative changes; things were just so different suddenly.

Post hospital, lawsuit, and nursing home, and adjustment to the

move home, my grandmother was finally settled. My mother is talking about how recovery was for my grandma and she emphasizes her former boss once again. I remember him mostly as part of our family more than anything. My mother genuinely tells me how day after day he would come visit my grandmother and do everything in his power to help her improve in her condition. He was seen as a miracle worker in our eyes as he had a solution to nearly all of our health problems. I can see how much her mood shifts when she talks about him moving. She not only learned so much from him that I know she carries with her daily but she made a lifelong friend who would support her when she needed it most.

I then come up to the current date to ask my mother what my grandmothers' current condition she is in and how long it has been since what happened in the hospital. She pauses for a second before saying, "It's been fourteen years. She's still alive, she blinks for yes and no, she smiles when it's appropriate, laughs when it's appropriate, she didn't lose the memory of our family, she knows all of us." Fourteen years my mother has been there to care for my grandmother day in and day out. She doesn't mention it but along with caring for my grandmother, she also cares for my grandfather who just beat cancer. My mother has given up so much just to be there for the people who raised her. She explains how my grandmother is not considered comatose anymore, even though she is not yet able to walk or talk, and she is still comfortable, happy, and not in pain.

I know it was difficult for my mother to open up about this in general but hearing the passion in her voice and seeing how much she opens up during our interview was something I had never seen from her. When we're done with our interview it feels like it had just been 10 minutes. I thank my mother for telling me this story because even if we lived through it together, I never knew things like she did. She takes a deep breath and just gives a simple "of course" even though I know there is so much more she can talk about. I don't think she even realizes how much she has opened up until this moment in which our interview was done.

My grandmother may not be able to use her voice due to what the hospital did but through the interview my mother acted as the voice for her. I was able to learn the full truth behind the hospital, the lawsuit, and the overall experience that my family had gone through. Little does my mother know that not only did she become

an advocate for my grandmother but all that she experienced helped shape her into the resilient and bold person that she is. I am a firm believer that everything happens for a reason; even though the experience was difficult each person who was involved learned something and developed into the person they are because of what happened.

### Author Bio

Angelina Navarro is a student at CSUMB. This essay was written as part of a first-year composition course.

### Artist's Statement

#### *Del Monte* by Megan Goodwin

*Del Monte* is painted from a fond memory with old friends at Del Monte Beach. This piece also takes inspiration from impressionism, and is meant to depict how memories tend to become more beautiful than reality. Through nostalgia's lens, a normal day turns into a moment of transcendental beauty.

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