

*Losing a spouse is like losing a limb. How do you manage the grief without losing yourself altogether? The author's journey through grief and finding that light at the end of the tunnel.*

**The Absence Of Sifu G**  
By Cheryl Elferis

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# THE ABSENCE OF SIFU G

CHERYL ELFERIS

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# One

*“Death smiles at us all, all a man can do is smile back.” Marcus Aurelius*

How is it that the Angel of Death came into my house and I didn't hear him? Could he at least have had the decency to let me know exactly when he was coming?

Then again, would I have wanted to have been there for G's last breath? I think not. But it would have been nice to have had some warning.

And yet, I did tell G to let go and run towards the light, didn't I? So, I guess, in fact, I did give that Angel permission to enter our home.

I wonder what went through G's mind when he saw that Angel. Maybe I should have been in the room with him to hold his hand and let him know he wasn't alone. Although don't we all take that final journey alone?

I imagine myself confronting that Angel, demanding he loosen his grip on my beloved husband. Surely, I would have lost that battle, and to what end?

You have to realize that I never actually thought G would die. Despite the tumors, the weight loss, the incoherence, the inability to eat. What was I thinking? That he might somehow recover??? The mind is a wonderful protector, shielding us from harsh reality. But it's a high price to pay. Because when the illusion wears off and reality rears its ugly head, the truth is a fearful thing, indeed.

And so begins the telling of that awful, awful truth. But for that, we need to go back to early 2022.

Following are excerpts from G's Facebook posts and text messages to friends and family in the months preceding his death. He often linked favorite songs to his thoughts.

March 18: *Every day is a blessing some did not wake up to. Make sure you know and accept Jesus before you go to the Father. Pray and love each other.*

June 23: *Every day there are people who need your love and prayers. One day you may need them to pray for you as well. Sifu G.*

July 2: *For those who have experienced a loss of a family member. May this song remind us of that sweet day, one with no more separation, fear or sorrow. This song is a symbol of what we believe. He even waits for us, and in the end, everyone talks to God. (Mariah Carey and Boys II Men—"One Sweet Day")*

July 7: *Happy 24th Anniversary. Love you, Ting [G's nickname for me]. Greece next year. New beaches to explore. Thank you. Love, Sifu G*

July 14: *One day, Lord (Mercy Me—"I Can Only Imagine")*

August 19: *Make today a day where you can exercise your love and compassion in the middle of worldly nonsense. Test your faith. Every level of knowledge will be put to the test. Every martial arts student knows this. Being a master is not about telling others or flashing your belt or degrees—it's about displaying its character. Be humble and show honor.*

*Let your light shine in wisdom and understanding, let it be used to display mercy and forgiveness. In all things, be thankful for another day to train in God's Kingdom of Heaven.*

*Pray—we are all in this world together. For now, let's make the best of it.  
Love and peace  
Sifu G*

*The Absence of Sifu G*

*August 21: Enjoy the quiet. While you can. Making the most of my time. Praying for many. The days are going by faster and faster. The days have been shortened. The times ahead will be difficult for all of us. Use Godly wisdom. To learn spiritual truth, listen more, speak less. In all you do, enjoy your life in peace. Sifu G*

*August 31: Evening comfort. Another day has passed. Be thankful for what you have or time will only let you remember what you had. Peace. Sifu G*

*September 4: From the rising of the sun to the place where it goes down, I will always praise the Lord. He is worthy. Bless his Holy Name.*

*September 12: A rainbow over my home. So blessed is how I feel.*

*September 17: Evening prayers said for friends who are sick, worried or fearful. Also, we are reminded to pray for our enemies. Give them to God and be at rest. The blessing of being outside and the view only Costa Rica can offer. Peace and love. Sifu G*

*September 28: This is a drastic time for many. Keep those who you are made aware of, on your prayer list. One day it may be you in need. Keep watch and help. The days grow short for many. Make use of the time you have left. Peace and blessings. Sifu G*

## Two

*"When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight." Kahlil Gibran*

[The following are my journal entries picking up where G left off on the previous page and date.]

September 29: I'm keeping this journal—not so that I will remember anything at a later point in time. But as a means of self-preservation. And so I don't lose my mind in the process. Writing has always been my escape. I am hoping it will help me now.

Three weeks ago, we were playing volleyball in the pool, as usual. As G reached for the ball mid-air, he said he felt something "pop" in his back. He suspected a pulled muscle, so we agreed to let it rest for a few days. But it's not getting any better, and he continues to be in pain. This, in addition to his normal arthritis pain in his back, which always flares up during the current rainy season.

G is a Master in Martial Science and he's well versed with pressure points, meridians, etc. So, when he said, "This pain is different," I felt a bit of concern. He also kept saying, "I feel something there"—pointing to his lower back on the right-hand side. "Don't you feel it?" he asked frequently—but I never felt anything unusual—no swelling, no redness, nothing.

When G pees, we hear 'pings' of what looks like white stones hitting the side of the toilet. I suspect kidney stones. That would explain all the pain. I'm actually relieved, because I know once he passes those, he'll be fine.

He thought he had passed two "stones" last week, although he's just now telling me. Great—just great.

I have a flashback to two weeks ago—September 17, the day after my birthday. Still a bit miffed at G because, as usual, all I got was a “Happy Birthday” and a peck on the cheek—nothing more said or done. I shouldn’t have expected more; after all these years, I should have known better. G was never good at buying birthday presents. Every year, the same lame excuse: “I didn’t know what you would like.” Okay—maybe for the first two years of marriage, that might fly. But after twenty-plus years, there’s NO excuse for not knowing what your spouse might want or like. I would have been happy with a cheap piece of costume jewelry or a T-shirt. Whatever he would have picked out would have been fine with me.

Oh, one year, in Queens, we needed a new stove. While we were paying for it, G turned to me and said “Happy Birthday.” I lost my mind right there and then, in the middle of the store. I made it very clear that large household appliances do NOT count as birthday gifts, especially since they were going to be used primarily for his benefit, not mine.

Another year, we went to St. Lucia for vacation. Happened to be my birthday week. We went shopping at a duty-free store and I said, “Today, you have to buy me something nice.” Unfortunately, I didn’t see anything at all that I even remotely liked. All day, I kept hinting that it was my birthday—repeating the date—but he never even picked up on it. Finally, I was madder than a wet hen and took a day tour by myself. Came back and sat in the restaurant by myself; when he came into the dining room, I got up and left the table, my dinner half-eaten. G never forgot the date again, but he still never went out of his way to do anything special.

The funny thing is—he was great at Christmas—always coming up with wonderful presents. But my birthday? A non-issue, which never failed to anger me, especially since I put so much thought and effort into his birthday gifts, events and trips.

Anyway, back to the 16th. Wanting to be alone, I went into the guest room, turned on my Kindle, and read for a while. At one point, I remembered feeling restless, and I got up and stood by the window, looking out at nothing in particular. G came in and asked me, “What’s the matter, Cheryl?”



Why is this worth mentioning? Because usually when my knickers are in a twist, G knows to leave me alone. Secondly, I can't EVER recall when he has asked me that question. I was caught so off guard that stupidly, I continued to look out the window and mumbled something about the new wasps' nest hanging from the shingles. G left the room, and *immediately*, I was left with a deep sense of dread. Something had just shifted in the universe that is directly affecting us. That feeling? It doesn't go away...but I soon put it out of my mind.

October 1: *G's Facebook post: I pray everyone is safe and doing well. Let's keep praying for others. Stay focused. God is with us.*

G wants to see Omar. We met Omar 6 years ago at the weekly open-air market in Tamarindo. He advertised acupressure, reflexology, adjustments, and acupuncture using beeswax instead of needles. Over a period of three weeks, he and G talked for hours. Later, G said to me, "That guy really knows his stuff—I asked him lots of questions about the body and pressure points."

So, I'm not surprised G wants to see Omar now. But G is in so much discomfort and Omar isn't able to do a full treatment. Afterwards, Omar says there is a problem with G's kidney and recommends Cat's Claw, *Chanca Piedra*, and Saw Palmetto. But I notice Omar isn't his usual chatty self, not smiling and not saying very much at all. I take note of his somber demeanor, but I brush it off quickly.

We immediately head to the organic store and purchase those supplements, along with some vitamins, nuts, and dried fruits. In the store, I am shocked to see G squatting down, looking at incense on one of the lower shelves. He hasn't been able to bend over for several weeks. I am thinking maybe just that little adjustment was all he needed. At home, his coloring looks better; he's eating normally and seems more comfortable.

October 3: *G's Facebook post: Two weeks now in such pain, from kidney stones. I believe I will be healed soon. Please pray for a quick return to peace. Thank you. Sifu G*

He's tossing and turning all night, and neither of us are getting much sleep. I move into the guest room with the dogs to give him some space and hopefully relief; I'm so afraid of bumping into him. Now we can see there is some swelling on his lower back, and that's the cause of most of his pain. It's so sensitive that just to touch it causes him agony. What is this???? Seems like more than just a strained muscle from playing volleyball, but I don't say anything, because G knows his body better than anyone else.

The days are spent alternating between ice packs and heat packs, helping him move from the bed to the sofa, trying to make him more comfortable. Trying to get him to eat something. Anything. Our evenings consist of us pacing the living room floor, holding hands, mostly to keep him steady, back and forth, back and forth. Barely speaking—what is there to say? Every time we reach the end of the kitchen counter, I make him take a sip of Ensure, the only thing he can keep down. We keep this up until he says "Enough" and we go to bed. Me, falling asleep within minutes from exhaustion. Him to toss and turn half the night.

Sometimes, I awaken in the middle of the night and hear him moaning, praying. It's too much for me to handle. I put the pillow over my head to drown out the noise. I have to get a good night's rest—I'm on constant alert during the day. No time to relax. The busier I am, the less I think. And right now, that's a good thing.

October 4: *G's Facebook post: We are born to be alive so we can enter eternal life. Live, dance and be full of joy knowing God loves you. Peace and blessings.*

G seems to be feeling a little better, so we decide to head into Tamarindo and have breakfast at our favorite café. I order my usual coffee and breakfast, but G just has a mango smoothie. He seems to be okay—not in

any pain—but he’s unusually quiet. The café is right across the street from the beach. I’m thinking a walk on the beach might do him good. We cross the street and take 5 steps towards the beach. G turns to me and says, “I can’t walk any further.” So I say, “Let’s just stand here and watch the waves for a while.” We hold hands and stand there in silence. Both of us are on the verge of tears—him from pain, me from heartbreak—but neither one of us wants to break down in front of each other. We go home, and I think to myself—that’s the last time he will see the ocean.

October 6: Texts to his buddy David in Tennessee:

*G: I feel like my time has come.*

*David: What do you mean? Don’t you go dyin’ on me.*

*G: Oh man, sorry. It feels that way.*

*David: I know. This too shall pass.*

*G: Yes.*

*David: In more ways than one.*

Now, the pain is unbearable. Barely able to get him into the car, I drive him to Beachside, the nearest clinic, less than a 15-minute ride. Although we pay into the national health system here in Costa Rica (the CAJA), those wheels move very slowly. So, we have always opted for private healthcare since it is quick and very affordable.

At the clinic, a young man introduces himself as Gustavo. He takes G’s vitals. Blood pressure is dangerously high, but I attribute that to the pain. What do I know? Nothing of medical importance, that’s for sure. They start G on an IV with vitamins and nutrients and pain medicine. The nurse takes blood and urine for labs.

After an hour and a half, G starts to feel a little better. But Gustavo, who turns out to be Dr. Gustavo, insists I drive Gary to the nearest hospital for a CT scan immediately! But it’s already 5:30 pm, and that’s a 90-minute drive through winding, unlit mountain roads. No way can I do that drive at night—it will be dark in half an hour—distracted as I am. I face the doctor, look him

straight in the eyes, and ask in a tone that implies he better not lie to me: “Is it going to make a difference if we go today or tomorrow morning?” He hesitates, stares back at me, and quietly says, “No.” And that’s when I know—we’re dealing with something worse than kidney stones. An appointment is made for 10:00 am tomorrow, we pay less than \$100 for the office visit, IVs, and meds and head home.

*G’s Facebook post: Been up for 4 days—now they expect me to drive to Liberia. No food or water. Please pray for us.*

October 7:

*G’s Facebook post: Ending prayers. Feeling a little better. Thank you for all your love and prayers. You will never know how much God is all you need until God is all you have. Peace and blessings. Sifu G*

I can’t get G into our car—he’s just in too much pain to lower himself into the front seat. I call a friend who has a van; he’s at our house in 10 minutes. G can climb up into the van much easier.

Awful ride—I see G fidgeting and know he’s in pain, but trying to be stoic. Hospital even worse—waiting over an hour for the scan since the hospital didn’t have the results of the lab work. The woman in charge sends 3 text messages but no reply. Uh, hello—can’t we pick up the phone and call someone? That never occurs to her, so I call the clinic. They send the lab work over immediately. Now, how difficult was that?

CT scan procedure is horrible. G has a high tolerance for pain—so when I hear him crying out in agony, the hairs on my arm stand up and tears come to my eyes. Finally, the torture is over, I pay \$486 for the CT scan. The nurse takes my email address and says we will have the results by tomorrow. On the way home, our friend is in tears, Gary is moaning and I am in la-la land, desperately seeking something to distract me. Ah, look at the lovely cows and horses in the fields we pass.

October 8:

10:00 am: I receive the results from the lab and print the pages out. G is sleeping, thankfully, so I have time to figure out what's going on. The results are in Spanish, but I can read most of it and translate the rest. The words pop out at me. "Large mass on the bladder 3.4 x 2.5 inches." "Solid mass on the gluteus maximus 3.9 x 2.5 inches." "Blockage in the tube between the kidney and the bladder." "Multiple metastasized nodules in the lungs." "Lesions in the right seminal vesicle and at the base of the prostate." "Severe obstruction in the urethra." "Right kidney completely non-functional." "3 masses in the lymph glands." "Transitional cell carcinoma in the bladder."

I am nauseated and absolutely floored—how could so much be so wrong???

The second half of the report is the results of his labs, none of which makes a lick of sense to me. Dazed, I walk around the corner to Kathy's house; she's a retired nurse. We try to make heads or tails of the blood work, but I don't know why I even bothered—it still means nothing to me. I walk back home, one leaden footstep after another.

My first thought is, "How do I tell G?" I can't confront him with this yet. I can't even wrap my own head around it. I call my girlfriend, Christine, who has medical experience—she says I have to tell him.

An hour later, I'm still sitting at the kitchen counter—dazed—when G wakes up from his nap. He comes into the kitchen, takes one look at my face and says, "It's bad news, isn't it?" In an instant, I decide to not tell him everything—what good will that do? I only mention the two masses—one on his bladder wall, which explains why he's been having trouble peeing—and the one on his gluteus maximus, which explains the back pain. I don't mention the kidneys or the lungs or anything else. I do say, "But there is some good news: your heart, liver, stomach, gallbladder, adrenal glands—they're all good." And then I launch into full denial mode: "First thing we're going to do is get you pain-free, then work on your nutrition to get you stronger, and then we can take care of the rest." I can't even bring myself to mention any of the diseased organs by name or say the word "cancer." He looks at me with that same smirk, and we both realize the situation is much

worse than we thought, but neither of us will give voice to what we're really thinking—that the worst is yet to come.

Jesus, how did it come to this?

G texts his buddy David: *I woke up when you called me. My wife came to me with a look. My CT scan came back. It's not good...a mass on top of my internal organs. Sorry to tell you this. Please pray for my wife.*

He's suffering, and all he can think about is to ask prayers for me???? Nothing for himself??? What a wonderful man I have married. My heart is breaking. To think that this awesome relationship we shared might be coming to an end is more than I can bear to even think about. How on earth am I going to live without him???

2:36 pm: G texts messages with his sister, Barbara.

*G: Well, got my results back.*

*Barbara: Ok tell me.*

*G: Tell me, do you want to know? Don't cry. Have 3 masses on my pancreas and internal organs. Not recommended for surgery. And have come to accept it. I'm sorry for having to tell you this result. I love you. They are telling me just enjoy every day. I take with me the memories of a wild family I love dearly. God has told me already.*

*Barbara: Oh nooooo. Gary, can u come back and get a second opinion?*

*G: Well, the CT scan is a self-explanation.*

*Barbara: Gary I'm sitting here in tears and shock? Is it kidney stones too?*

*G: No, it was not. It is bladder calcium being passed. This is why I'm experiencing so much pain. Now I'm looking for remedy from holistic doctors. Just to keep it from getting worse. I woke up to see Cheryl's face with the paper from the doctor. I know but I believe in a God who is good. He has made himself known to me. It is an amazing experience.*

October 9: G sends me a text message at 1:52 am.

*Thank you, Cheryl, for all you have done for me. I knew the day we met, we would have a fun and adventurous life. To land in Costa Rica as the end blessing in life, only God could have orchestrated. My life was a mess until you came. When I fell, you gave me hope, a hope many will never have because you knew God. May God keep you protected.*

*I will miss your silly laugh. But most of all, your strength and beauty. I loved you from the first day we met, and it's the same even now. I have come to know God—what an amazing experience.*

*Keep smiling. Until we meet again.*

*I love you.*

*Gary*

My text response back when I read this text at 6:30 this morning: *I love you too but I don't know why you're saying good-bye. That's for God to decide, not you. You're the one who told me a true martial artist never gives up. Now is not the time to surrender. Now is the fight.*

His text response: *OK, fight I will.*

We never discuss these texts. Why bother?

I get a flashback to when my dad was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. My mother and I made the decision not to tell Dad the results of all the tests. We felt that if he knew, it would become like a self-fulfilling prophecy; it would only depress and frustrate him further. And so, we never actually uttered the words Alzheimer's or dementia in front of him. We told him the pills were vitamins and just acted like nothing was wrong. With Dad, that strategy worked—ignorance can be bliss. G is cut from the same cloth as my dad—very much alike in how they dealt with stressful situations—so I stick to my original plan of not telling G the depth of his illness. There's nothing to be done, one way or the other. What good is adding a death sentence to his already weakened mental and physical state???

Dr. Gustavo wants G to come back to the clinic. No way! I'm lucky if I can get him dressed and upright for more than 5 minutes without pain. Fortunately, the doctor says no problem—he will come to the house. First things first—a shot for the pain. And then he mentions that taboo word—"cancer." I already knew it, but I had never said it to Gary. And when those letters leave the doctor's lips and rise into the stifling atmosphere in our bedroom, I hear a loud groan leave my lips, and I lose my balance, almost falling on Gary, who has to hold me up. It's as if, by saying the word out loud, he has breathed life into the monster.

Dr. Gustavo discusses our "options." First, he wants G to go to San José for a biopsy. I say he can't possibly be in a car for 5 hours. The doctor says we can take an ambulance, and they can sedate him. No way could we ever even consider that. With the awful roads here—this is the height of the rainy season and the roads are in disastrous shape—every bump will send shockwaves of pain through G, and I cannot even bear just the thought of that. He also mentions chemotherapy and something else; I see his lips moving, but I've tuned out everything he's saying. I turn to the strongest man I have ever known, standing quietly by my side, and I say, "It's your body. Whatever you decide, I will support you 1000%."

Gary refuses all of the doctor's suggestions. He does not want to be in a hospital and can't abide any more prodding and poking. All we want is for him to be comfortable and pain-free. All our lives together, we had discussed and agreed upon this course of action. Neither of us wanted to be hooked up to machines, chemotherapy, or any other aggressive treatment. Just drug us up so we're comfortable. And now look—all those times we talked about that, and here we are, facing that exact same situation. But we stand by our decision. He will stay at home, and we will do our best.

The doctor says that he cannot prescribe morphine without a biopsy, so we ask for the next best thing: oxycontin. G has taken that before for his back and can tolerate it. Later, one of my friends will mention that oxycontin is highly addictive. Are you kidding me???? Addiction is the least of our problems now!!



I walk the doctor outside and ask for a prognosis. The cancer is too far advanced to be treated, but he says he is obligated to offer those options. He adds that he is not an oncologist, and he is not sure, but he thinks not more than 6 months. I thank him, pay him \$100 for the home visit and meds—he left us enough pills to get us through a few days—and drag myself back inside. I actually count off 6 months on my fingers. Rats, that’s only April—G won’t make it to our 25th anniversary in July.

Back inside, I plant a smile back on my face and assure G that at least he won’t be in so much pain now.

October 10:

*Facebook post: To my friends. This is what I want you to remember me by. Put your trust in God.*

*G texts his buddy: I’m so weak, but strong in the Lord. I feel as if life is leaving my body.*

*David: Remain bold, my brother. Keep the faith.*

*G: Amen*

G wants to see Omar, but he’s not up to going out. I ask Omar to come to the house, but I don’t tell him the diagnosis. G lays on the massage table, but Omar can barely touch him. I can tell by the look on Omar’s face that whatever he is feeling through his hands isn’t good.

Outside, Omar just shakes his head at me. Words aren’t needed.

G feels like the treatment has helped. I just try to smile and agree and say we can have Omar come over anytime.

In my heart, I know I have to start preparing myself for the inevitable. But my brain won’t let me. There’s too much to do, too much to think about.

I sign G up for Medismart—not an insurance plan, but it provides discounts at health care providers. I’m thinking we may be in for a long haul, and any savings on medications will help.

*The Absence of Sifu G*

October 11: *G's Facebook post: This song speaks to my spirit. Please listen and enjoy every day. Sifu G. (Nickelback—If Today Was Your Last Day)*

*Text message to Barbara: Very strange. I feel this sickness come over me. Making me lose my focus.*

October 12: *G's Facebook post: It's okay to fall, but one must never give up. Sifu G.*

*Text message from Barbara: Are the dogs acting differently?*

*G: Oh boy. Kaia [our labrador] is sad. She knows the energy is different.*

October 13: *G's Facebook post: Get ready. The earth is getting ready to experience a strange energy. Turn your eyes to the King of Kings. The time is now. Pray for others. Peace and blessings. Sifu G.*

October 14: *G's Facebook post: All night in pain, no sleep. Lord, help me.*

October 15: *G's Facebook post: The teacher said 'Stand strong and remember the promises of God. Your problem is great but your God is even greater. Fear not, I am with you.*

Our neighbor, Kathy, has been wonderful—running to the pharmacy for pills (a controlled substance prescription in Gary's name, using a debit card in my name, never being asked for any ID!), anti-nausea medicine, enemas, you name it. I'm afraid to leave G alone for even a minute.

The pain is getting worse, and we are back to pacing the floor almost constantly. The mass on his backside is getting larger every day. It's as if, once we got the diagnosis, the tumor took on a life of its own and is just growing and growing. Good Lord, how did that happen?

The “stones” he was passing that we thought were kidney stones? Turns out it was pieces of calcification on top of the mass in the bladder. I just can’t comprehend this. I just can’t.

How did he not feel any of this? I think if there were not one, but two 3-inch aliens inside of me, I would know something was wrong. These masses must have been growing for a very long time. Part of me is so dumbfounded that I can’t even think logically. I’m so medically incompetent—the last person to be taking care of someone ill. I know I’m in over my head, but just trying to get us through hour by hour.

Three weeks ago, he was probably around 170 pounds. He’s not eating, so I manage to get him back to the clinic for another IV with vitamins, a shot of morphine, and a shot of something else. I don’t know, and I don’t care what they give him, as long as it works.

Back home, while he sleeps, I stand over him to see if his chest is still moving. Nothing is working. I realize I don’t know what to do if he dies. Call the doctor, I guess? Call 911? I don’t even know. Trying to prepare myself for the inevitable, but I don’t know how.

I call the doctor and demand he give us morphine. Prescription in hand, I head to the first clinic, then a second pharmacy. Neither carry morphine. I go to the nearest hospital. They only have 15 pills and won’t have any more for at least a week. I take the 15 pills, which cost \$15.76. Apparently, morphine is not covered by Medismart, but thank God, healthcare and prescriptions are very affordable here. I’m out of options and desperate. I would have paid any price for those pills.

October 16: Surprisingly, on the surface, we are both very peaceful throughout this whole ordeal, not daring to give voice to the disease. Never mentioning the ‘C’ word. I contact all our friends and ask them to pray. We are in desperate need of a miracle.

Seems like the morphine pills every 8 hours are helping somewhat. At least we are both getting a few hours of uninterrupted sleep. And G is eating—not quite back to his usual hearty appetite, but at least he’s not so weak that he can hardly stand up. I can barely eat. I have completely lost my appetite—seems like food is the last thing I can deal with now.

I try to bargain with God. Please let him live at least to the New Year. I still haven’t told G the full extent of the prognosis, and I likely never will. To help bolster his mood, I remind him that our 25th anniversary is coming up, and that we have the trip to Greece planned for September. Although I know that it’s likely I’ll be taking his ashes to Greece.

Friends are mostly encouraging. But the phone is constantly ringing, and the text messages are constantly beeping. I know people are concerned, but I’m tired of talking about this. I am careful not to say anything negative that G might overhear.

We don’t have good days and bad days. We only have good hours and bad hours. Right now, it’s a good hour because he ate a decent dinner—salad and chicken and now he’s sleeping.

But an hour ago was a bad hour. He’s taking OxaForte in between the morphine. Didn’t seem like the oxycontin was doing anything, and he was used to taking the OxaForte for his chronic back pain. One of my well-meaning friends mentions that morphine can cause “cessation of breath.” At times, he’s in such excruciating pain that “cessation of breath” would be a blessing.

Dr. Gustavo is suggesting we get a pain and palliative care doctor. But G is refusing to see another doctor. Honestly, I don’t care who he sees or what he decides, as long as he stays pain-free. That’s the primary goal. Then we can work on his nutrition and get his strength up. Everything else has to take a back seat to those two objectives.

It’s a daily struggle, but one that I am happy to do. Anything to help. To get G dressed—undressed—standing upright—laying down—alternating heat and ice packs—waking up at 5 am for the first pill of the day—trying to stay

awake until 11 pm for the last pill of the day—helping him to the bathroom—constant loads of laundry—and still working full time during the day on the computer. Friends mean well, but bring up inane points. A second opinion? I think the problem is obvious. Come to the States for treatment? We only have medical insurance here, and honestly, he's past the point of treatment. Do we have a will in order? Not in Costa Rica. Health proxy? Very different here. I'm lucky both of us are making it through the day in one piece—one exhausting hour at a time. We are both shell-shocked. Right now, it's triage. Time later to think about all those other things.

I'm getting 7 to 8 hours sleep at night, so why am I still so exhausted? I'm sleeping in the guest room on a futon, afraid to lay in the bed beside him and actually touch his hip or back.

We are both physically and emotionally worn out. I am trying to keep up a brave front—"when you get better." Both of us know there's no getting better from this, especially since the cancer is so advanced. But we have to be as positive as the situation will allow, even if it means deluding ourselves all day long.

I can't talk to anyone in case he overhears the conversation. And how can I complain? He's the one suffering. But I don't know if I can do this.

October 18: *G posts on Facebook: Love, what a gift. One of the many enjoyable experiences witnessed. Please find time to be thankful for the simple things. Peace and love, Sifu G*

This will be his last Facebook post.

October 19: In the midst of all this, we have clients coming down for 3 days next week. They had retained our services months ago to assist them with relocating to Costa Rica. We set up the whole Path to Pura Vida package for them—airport transfers, hotel stay, private driver, tours, meeting other expats, etc. We will be with the clients from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm every day.

I doubt G will be able to make it, though. He's so weak he can barely stand up. But I can't cancel the clients' plans. They've already bought their plane tickets, prepaid the entire package, and are expecting us to show them around. I guess I'll have to do it alone.

"Jesus, help me" becomes my mantra. But where is God in the midst of this?

October 20:

*4:06 am: Text messages*

*David: Good morning, how was your evening?*

*G: Was sick but feeling better. Slept most of the night. Have to eat but makes me sick.*

Woke up at 5:00 am to hear G violently throwing up everything he's eaten for the last 3 days. Seems like the food gets as far as his stomach and no further. I don't understand, since supposedly his stomach, intestines, pancreas, and liver are fine. And here he is, apologizing to me that I have to clean up the mess. What???!!! That's the least of it. I am committed to caring for him, no matter what. For better or worse, in sickness and in health, no???

Today, I can't get him to eat anything more than water and a few mouthfuls of yogurt. I'm even pureeing the yogurt in the blender to minimize the chunks of fruit.

Still giving him OxaForte in between the morphine. He sleeps almost all the time. But I suppose sleep is better than the pacing in constant pain. And for a few moments at least, I can sit down during the day. But he is wasting away while the mass on his backside gets bigger and bigger.

I've been trying to bargain with God to let G live to the New Year. But now that he's so frail, I think we will be lucky to make it to Thanksgiving.

Texting some of my friends, I mention that I'm just trying to keep G "comfortable and drugged up." And one of them replied, *"Just for the record,*

*I would like to adopt the ‘comfortable and drugged up’ scenario now! LOL!”*

I don’t respond to that insensitive comment; nothing about this is funny to me.

I spend my days alternating between wondering how I will manage alone and watching his chest to see if he is still breathing. What if the prognosis is wrong? All I know is that I’m not ready, but somehow, I feel that I will be ready to deal with his death in two months.

Yes, we are hopeful, and miracles do happen. But I am a pragmatist if nothing else. And I believe in being prepared. Who will I call first?

I make a note to email the U.S. Embassy in San José. Perhaps they can advise what to do when the time comes. We have permanent residency in Costa Rica, and I imagine the procedure is different here. One of our good friends helped when another U.S. citizen passed away here, so I know he has experience with this. I’ll be in touch with him when I get the strength to do so.

October 21: Worst possible timing. Clients will be arriving Monday for 3 days. G finally acknowledges he is too weak to go with us. 8 hours in a van is out of the question. I can handle the clients on my own, but no way can I leave him alone all day. I ask Brian, one of G’s buddies and martial arts student, if he can stay in the house during the day while I am out. Unfortunately, both of his vehicles are in repair shops. He’s been borrowing a neighbor’s car just to do errands. But our neighbor Kathy is away for three months, and I have the keys to her car, an automatic. So, Brian can take our Kia. If I need to go out, I can drive Kathy’s car. Problem solved—works out well for all of us. Brian and Christine will have a car they can use, and G won’t be alone. I don’t tell G about the arrangement I have made—he shouldn’t have to deal with these minor details. Plus, at this point, he is mostly bedridden and seems oblivious to what is going on. I doubt he will even notice if the car is missing from the front of the house.

I reach out to Dr. Melissa—I recall she has oncological experience and does palliative care. We set up an appointment for October 29th. She offers us the use of her pool afterward to relax. I guess she doesn't realize just how weak G is. I was trying to get him to the pool here in our development, and he can't even walk that short distance.

October 22: First, to the pharmacy at Metropolitano Hospital to see if the morphine I ordered came in. I realize it will only be 5 days' worth of pills, and I'll have to go back on Thursday. Then grocery shopping and picking up hip-and-joint supplements for Mister Chan, our pit bull with the bum back knee. Then I have to start cleaning. When G and I first met, I had a cleaning lady for my apartment. He said to me, "You don't need her—I'll do all the cleaning." I snickered, but I fired her and thought to myself, He's got to be kidding. But he kept his promise. One day, I came home from work, and he was washing the venetian blinds in the bathtub like my grandmother used to do. I was dumbfounded, but true to his word, G did all the cleaning, vacuuming, dusting, mopping, and even picking up my clothes from wherever I had flung them after work. 25 years later, he's still up at 5 am mopping and dusting every single morning.

Looks like I'm on cleaning duty now—ugh.

October 22: Text messages

*David: Hey, boss.*

*G: Wemmmmmmmmmnnbbj yj Wsmknnwakinu cv*

*Mmmmm5gmgmmm*

*Mmmmmmm km hokl*

*David: Is that tongues in text? (laughing emoji)*

*G: My dogd.everr know thec7 ow the then. The*

*Mmmmmmmmmmmuvmmnij uh*

*7watch it. Lt niw*

*Now*



October 23:

2:10 am: I'm awakened by moaning. I check on him—he seems to be in a lot of pain. I give him another OxaForte. I never do get back to sleep. At least every 20 minutes, I'm back in the bedroom, expecting every breath to be his last. I'm down to begging God for 3 more weeks.

3:46 am: Back in the bedroom watching him, I notice the dust on the headboard on the bed. G would be horrified if he would even notice it.

5:10 am: I refuse to get out of bed, despite his moaning. If I don't get any sleep at all, I'm going to be useless.

5:53 am: Text messages

*David: Hey man, you doing okay?*

*G: God glee*

*Doiinhk im doinj ok*

*David: Haven't talked to you much. Just wanted to check on you.*

*G: Yeah*

*All night*

*David: Love you brother! Hope you have a good day.*

That was G's last written text message.

6:56 am: G is hiccupping loudly, and that wakes me up. Wow—I got almost 2 hours sleep—a miracle. He greets me with a smile and a very loud, "Hi, are we going anywhere today?" Has he lost his mind?? No—we're not going anywhere. Where could we possibly go?

I had noticed that he seemed to pick up noticeably—more alert—distracted from the pain—when he was on the phone with his buddies. But now, G hardly has any voice left, and although he wants his phone nearby, he doesn't seem to have any interest in using it. I see there are several Facebook messages that he hasn't responded to.

I'm contacting the doctor again today to complain about the pain—did I already mention that? Lack of sleep is making me forgetful.

7:14 am: I make him a glass of Ensure. He doesn't want to drink it, so I resort to threatening him. "If you don't drink this, you're going back to the clinic for another IV." Down the hatch it goes.

At one point in the middle of the night, I got down on my hands and knees and cleaned and disinfected the whole bathroom. The whole house still smells. Of piss and sweat and wet dogs, and most of all, of despair. And I don't have the energy to do anything at all.

I resolve to nap when he does. But there's so much to do, even if it seems unimportant. Already on the second load of laundry—I want every sheet and towel clean and smelling fresh. I get G out of bed so I can strip it, move him to the living room, and put on Brooklyn Tabernacle gospel music. He's out in no time. I should lie down, too, but I can't stop the mindless chatter in my head. Have to leave a note for Brian who is coming to stay with him, text David who is wondering why his texts have gone unanswered, check work email, chat with the doctor, reconfirm the Expat Breakfast with the clients on Wednesday, who do I call first, thinking about taking Jerome and Anthony to Greece. [G and I didn't have any biological children, but Jerome and Anthony were like sons to us, although they had families of their own. Both of them trained in martial arts with G since they were teenagers. Everywhere we went, we introduced them as "our sons."]

3 loads of laundry—one more to go—and every linen in the house will be clean. David offers to fly down. Surprisingly, G says yes. I thought he would say no to guests. But David's passport is in the process of being renewed, and there is no telling when he will have it back in hand.

Today is the first time G says he is feeling "horrible." I think if I were in the same situation, I would feel like giving up. Last night, I told him I know this is hard, but he has to hang in there—for me. This has all happened so quickly, I haven't had time to process everything. It's only been a month since this nightmare started—3 weeks since the diagnosis—and the deterioration is unbelievable. He looks like a survivor from Auschwitz; except for this survivor, there's little hope.

During the day, he lays on the living room couch. I put tennis on the TV, which we both used to enjoy watching. But I can see—his eyes are on the screen, but nothing is registering. At one point, he gets up, sits in the chair at the desk, turns to me, and says, “I don’t even know where I am.” My heart is beating so fast I feel like it will burst out of my chest. But I calmly say, “You don’t need to know where you are. You’re home with me and Kaia and Mister Chan, and everything is okay.” I shock myself at the calmness of my words. I have shifted into fight-or-flight mode, and I’m not even aware of it. All I know is those are the saddest words I think I have ever heard in my life.

G is so thin, I think I weigh more than him, and he looks like a 90-year-old man.

Some evenings, G’s sleeping so soundly on the sofa that I don’t have the heart to wake him and move him to the bedroom. So, I drag the futon out to the living room and sleep there. At least I’ll be close enough to hear him if he needs anything.

Still, we cling to our faith. Neither of us are afraid of dying. But oh—the plans we were making: renovations in the house, traveling, celebrating our 25th anniversary. At this point, he’s not going to live that long, although there’s always hope. Or so I keep telling myself. Telling—deluding—hoping—praying: what’s the difference? None. Absolutely none at all.

October 24: One of our drivers picks me up at 9:30 am for the airport run to meet the clients. Brian will be here soon to stay with G. I’ve left him notes with the schedules of medications, wi-fi password, how to work the TV, etc. After morning routine taking care of G, I barely have time to gulp down half a cup of coffee and some burnt toast, which I end up giving to the dogs.

Our driver is devastated when I tell him why it’s just me in the van. Like everyone else, he offers to help in any way he can. He makes a phone call to a friend who is a pharmacist, has plenty of morphine pills and will give me a good price. I pick up 30 pills for \$73.43 without a prescription. The

pharmacist says anytime I need more, just come to him. Thank you, Jesus—one less thing I will have to think about.

Good day with the clients, but when I get home at 4:30 pm, the house is eerily quiet. No one in the living room, backyard, or bedrooms. Then I hear Brian's voice from the master bathroom. It seems G got to the bathroom on his own, but when he tried to leave, he must have gotten dizzy or weak. I squeeze in, and Brian is holding G up, who has an iron grip on the bathroom sink and counter. We finally get him to let go of everything. I pick up his legs, and we carry him back to bed. Thankfully, he doesn't seem to be in any pain.

I give Brian the keys to our Kia—but it won't start—the battery is dead. Good thing I have my neighbor's car, and with a jump, the Kia is good to go. Can anything else go wrong?

Around 9:00 pm, I wake him to give him another pain pill. I ask G if he wants anything else. Feebly, he shakes his head no. It's difficult to get him to even look at me. He's frequently so disoriented—I'm not sure if that's a result of the disease or the meds. I make a mental note to ask the doc about that. Then I ask G if he would like me to stay with him, and he nods his head yes.

I turn on YouTube on the TV—Hillsongs videos with praise and worship music, get my Kindle, and make myself comfortable in the recliner. He falls asleep, but I can't slow my mind down, and I'm struggling to relax.

Every time I hear a thump, I jump up to check if his chest is still moving. Finally, I realize the futility of this. I pray and I fall asleep.

October 26: I'm at a hotel on the beach with the clients and other expats who share their experiences of moving to and living in Costa Rica. Dr. Melissa and her husband are two of the expats there. After they all leave to walk to the beach, Dr. Melissa wants to talk with me—and she doesn't have good news. She's reviewed G's labs and scans in consultation with an oncologist in the States. The mass on his gluteus maximus has eroded the bone in his hip—that explains the excruciating pain and the new limp. The

prognosis: he'll likely not survive THIS WEEK-END. I let out a load groan and yell "I'm not ready" as it feels like someone has stabbed me—just stuck a knife in my belly. I don't hear anything she says after that, and when I get back in the van with the clients, it's like my brain has left my body. I don't even think I say anything on the ride back to the hotel to drop the clients off. When we get to the house, the driver wants to come inside to say hi to Gary. I try to prepare him, but the shock on his face when he saw G lying in the bed—that was scary. He couldn't even bring himself to speak, and neither could I. What is there to say???

Jesus, help us.

G's lips are constantly moving, but his voice is so weak that I have to put my ears right to his lips to hear what he is whispering. Even so, I can't make anything coherent out. "Gary, I don't understand." And then he yells loudly and forcefully, "I'M PRAYING!" Oh, okay—so not talking to me. Well, you lie there and talk to God. Since I can't help you, maybe He can.

I post on Facebook: *Praying for a Thanksgiving miracle* along with the link to the song "I Need a Miracle" by Third Day.

October 27: My girlfriend was right; going out with the clients was a welcome distraction. I'm on the verge of tears several times each day, but I try to maintain a professional air of self-control. The clients now know why Gary wasn't with us every day, and they have been very understanding. But they still need to get the full benefit of the Path to Pura Vida program. I have a job to do, and I do it as well as I can, going through the motions and rehearsed speeches like a robot.

Our driver is on the verge of a breakdown himself; he said he went home and cried all evening last night. I don't have the luxury of doing that. G and I are a team. Only one of us is allowed to be broken at any given time.

The difficult part is responding to all the text messages and emails. All day long, both phones are dingling and ringing. I still refuse to speak to anyone

on the phone about the disease. I can't take the chance that G might overhear anything.

I Skype my boss and ask for another week off.

I rearrange the furniture in the bedroom. The large speaker is moved from under the TV to a corner, so no chance of him knocking it over on his way to the bathroom. The recliner is moved from the window to the other side of the bed. I'm going to sleep in it. This way, I'll wake up as soon as he tries to get out of bed.

I don't have to wait long. 10:35 pm—he's wet the bed (which I don't notice right away) and says he has to go to the bathroom. But he stops at the bathroom counter, leans against it, and spends the next 15 minutes rearranging every item. Moving things back and forth, mumbling incoherently. Oh, great—this is something new—and very weird. I get my phone and videotape this to show the doctor.

Eventually, he stops and leaves the bathroom, but I can't get G back into bed. He insists on "practicing." When I ask him what he is practicing, he yells, "GETTING UP!" Oh, great. Just great.

He insists on standing, holding the door to the bathroom. He's so unsteady, the door is swinging back and forth wildly. Please, dear God, don't let him fall again. He pees again, and I grab another towel. It's going to be another 2-loads-of-laundry day tomorrow. I take advantage of him being upright and change the bed linens.

Finally, he tires, and I get him back to bed. How can he have lost so much weight and still be so heavy and difficult to move?

I can see his mind is gone now. The doctor had mentioned there was a possibility the cancer had reached his brain. I repeatedly ask G, "Tomorrow is October 28—do you know what that is?" He just shakes his head. He doesn't even recognize his own birth date. It's like living with my dad's Alzheimer's all over again. This is unreal.

Three weeks ago, he was upright, strong, verbal, and coherent. What happened to the Gary I know? This shell of a man in front of me is completely unrecognizable. Where did my Gary go??

Maybe it's a blessing the deterioration is so fast. And maybe it's also a blessing that his mind is gone. He's not in any pain from what I can tell—that's what we wanted—for him to be pain-free and comfortable. But what a terrible cost.

I'm missing my old therapist in New York. During the 3 years when G took care of my dad, I found a wonderful psychologist who was my lifeline, helping me to deal with the whole dementia issue.

I realize I'm angry at G. Very unfair of him to be this sick now. Messing up all the plans we had for the future. We live in one of the Blue Zones of the world. All that healthier lifestyle—no one ate more salad or drank more water, or exercised more, or meditated more than Gary—and all for what? Look at what happened.

But I shouldn't be angry. I know it's not his fault. But some part of me is very annoyed at having been put in this position. That's why I am writing. My old therapist is not here so this expression will have to be my therapy.

Well, now he's back asleep. Gave him another morphine pill. With any luck, that will knock him out for the rest of the night. At least the recliner trick is working. Somehow, it's not as comfortable as I thought it would be, and now I have a backache. And it took forever to fall asleep with his loud snoring. Now, of course, I'm wide awake.

Everyone thinks I'm handling this so well. I am constantly quoting the Bible verse Matthew 5.45: *"...sun rises on the evil and the good, and it rains on the just and the unjust."* These things just happen. There are no guarantees, no exemptions, no free passes in life. We may not like the cards we have been dealt, but there is nothing to be done but "pull up your big girl panties and deal with it." Well, I've got my big girl panties on, but not sure how well I'm dealing. I can answer family and friends' text messages and emails—no problem. But verbalizing the situation makes it too real.

Dr. Melissa is providing palliative care, but honestly, it's mostly support for me since nothing more can be done for G. She's coming by again on Saturday. Another lie to G—she's not coming to examine him—I tell him since he's doing so well with the Ensure, he doesn't need any more medical care—she's just coming by to say hello.

2:41 am: Well, G's up again. I took my eyes off him for a split second, and he's sliding on the bathroom floor. "WEREN'T YOU WATCHING ME?" he yells. I'm too stunned to respond. While he's wobbling over the toilet seat, I notice he's already wet the bed. I strip the bed and start a load of laundry.

I get the bright idea to put some yoga mats on top of the mattress pad and then some plastic garbage bags on top of that. Why didn't I think of this sooner?

Finally realizing the trick to getting him to respond is to make sure he is looking straight at me when I'm talking. Otherwise, he's just mumbling incoherently and repeating useless hand movements.

I saw some nice cabinet handles at the Bohemia Store. Think I'll replace the ones on the kitchen cabinets. This is what I'm thinking while getting a clean pair of underwear on him, which takes forever. Halfway back to the bed, he plops down in the recliner and pees there. Unrepeatable words from me. Back into the bathroom.

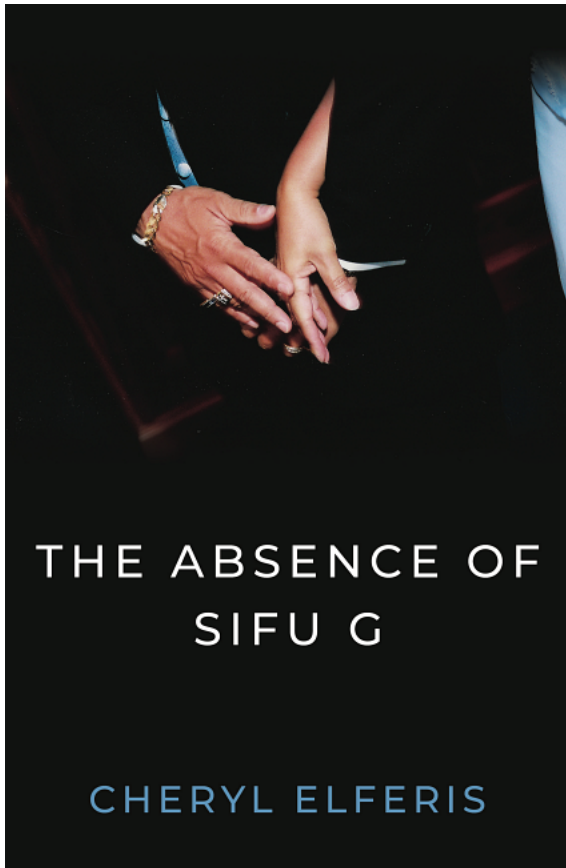
Fresh linens on the bed while I pick up the rest of the towels that I used to clean the bathroom floor. The next load of laundry will include the new cover on the recliner. No more sleep tonight for me, I can see.

Two other friends are coming by tomorrow—well, today at this point. I'll nap while they are here.

What do I miss? Listening to my Spanish music. I've got a great YouTube playlist including Ricardo Arjona—my favorite artist—Ricky Martin, Enrique Iglesias, Gente de Zona, and Maná, with a few Italian songs by Eros Ramazzotti, Micheal Castaldo, and Zucchero thrown in. But I can't put the headphones on because I'm afraid I won't hear G move.



3:32 am: Might as well have a cup of tea. I feel like the whole house smells of piss. The knots in my neck and shoulders are unbelievable. I mop the hallway, bedroom, and bathroom floors with Pine Sol. He's fast asleep while I sip my tea and contemplate murder.



*Losing a spouse is like losing a limb. How do you manage the grief without losing yourself altogether? The author's journey through grief and finding that light at the end of the tunnel.*

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