



Grandma Cool

Inspired by a true story about living and leaving with dignity.

Life
Books





It's true what they say, grandchildren get 99% of their awesomeness from their grandmothers.

And my Ah Ma was pretty awesome. Her name was Sye Kee, quite appropriately named, as her psyche was the strongest of us all.

When the doctor broke the news about her colon cancer, the first thing my Ah Ma said was, "now I can eat whatever I want, whenever I want."

And that was that.





My grandmother raised me. She toughened me up when I was down. When I broke my mother's favourite flower pot, she would protect and conspire with me to tell Mom that my neighbour's cat did it. She was my best friend.

So, when she told me that she wanted to live her remaining days with dignity, I knew I had to help her live them to the fullest. But being the youngest and the most spoilt grandchild in the family, I had no idea what being a caregiver entailed. I had no idea where to begin, or who to ask for help.



Ah Ma's oncologist referred us to a home hospice care service and a few days later, the hospice care team visited us at our home.

That was the beginning of my friendship with Dr Dawn. She taught me everything I needed to know. She taught me how to dress Ah Ma's wound, properly transfer her out of bed, and keep her spirits high when things got tough. I am deeply grateful to her and the hospice care team for preparing us in every way possible to help Ah Ma live out the rest of her life with dignity.



When I got home after a caregiver training session, Ah Ma was curious to find out what I learnt. After I told her, she exclaimed, “that means you have to clean my poo-poo, Melisa!!” and broke into fits of laughter.

She was silly, but that was my Ah Ma.





The next few months weren't easy. The hospice care team came once a week to check up on Ah Ma and they grew very fond of her. I think the feeling was mutual because Ah Ma always looked forward to Dr Dawn's visits too.

Dr Dawn and the hospice care team helped me a lot, emotionally and physically, especially when things got hard. I don't know what I would have done without them.

I remember this one afternoon very vividly when Ah Ma was moaning in tremendous discomfort. It was heart-breaking to see a woman as strong as Ah Ma, defeated by her pain. I could tell it was unbearable because she never liked to show her vulnerable side.

I was desperate and frazzled. In that state of helplessness, I decided to call Dr Dawn for help. She calmed me down and guided me to the right dosage of medication to make the pain go away.

The next day, Dr Dawn and the hospice care team came by to update Ah Ma's medication and made sure that she was feeling better. They were so sincere.





I would drop Ah Ma at the hospice's day care centre on days when I had to go to work. She loved going there, because it was where she had an audience.

She was a star and the life of the day care centre. She would tell everyone stories, give the younger staff love advice, and create a buzz until it was time to go home. It was a place she could be herself, and the nurses and volunteers always went out of their way to make sure that she was comfortable and happy at all times.

She really didn't seem like a cancer patient, she was everybody's rockstar.

Even when times got tough, she never let her illness define her. Whenever I broke down, she would ask me to get it together and stop being such a downer.

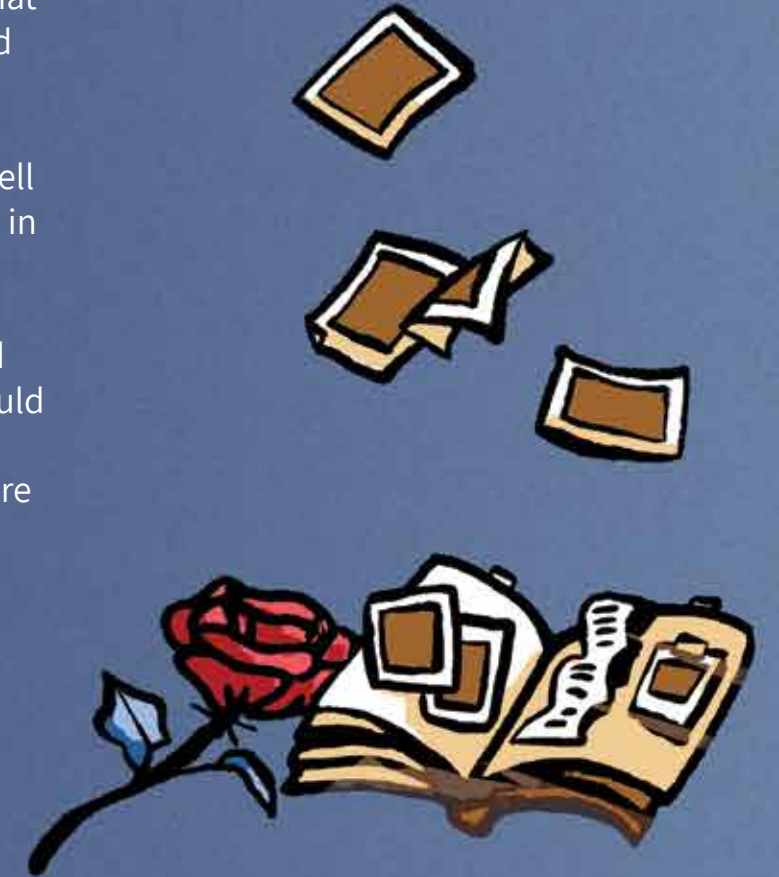
She would then tell Dr Dawn and the hospice care team about my breakdown while laughing about it. She was ruthless but I wouldn't have wanted her any other way.



Her memory started fading towards the end, she would forget the stories she'd told us a thousand times before. There was a song that she loved from her childhood, but she could only remember parts of it and not the title.

It would bug her for days. She would even tell Dr Dawn about it repeatedly and bring it up in every conversation.

She may have sounded like a broken record but Dr Dawn and the hospice care team would always humour her. They told me that they had a surprise for her the next time they were coming to visit.

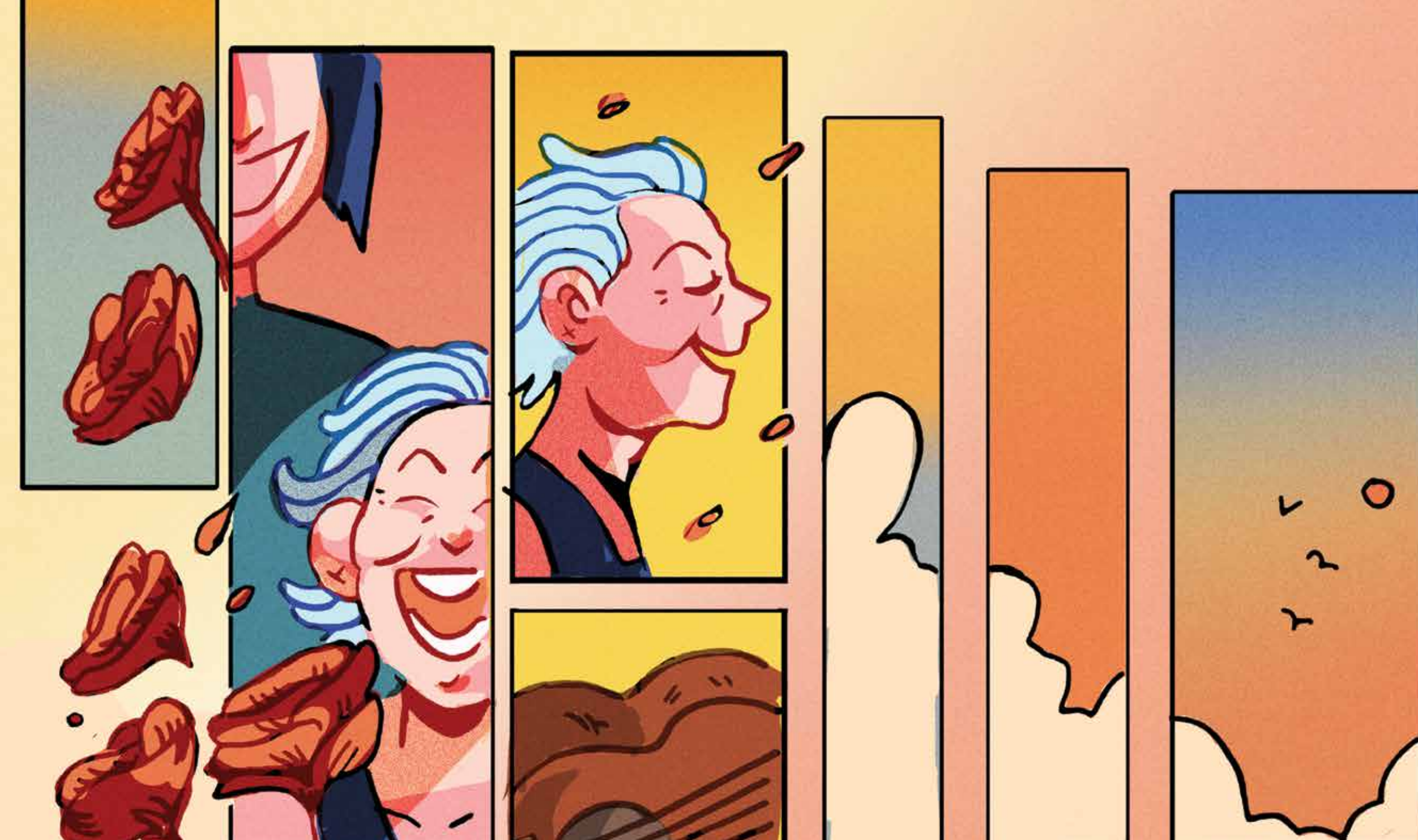


The next visit was their last visit. Dr Dawn and the hospice care team came to my home with a ukulele. I was so confused. They asked Ah Ma to close her eyes. She was very weak by then and couldn't sit up properly to enjoy their gig.

They set up their equipment close to Ah Ma and started playing a song. Her eyes opened and beamed with joy. She whispered, "that's the song, that's the song!" and started to sing along.

Dr Dawn and the hospice care team had searched high and low until they found the song from her childhood. They had made her last wish come true. I couldn't stop crying like a baby because I hadn't seen my Ah Ma so happy and oblivious of her pain in such a long time.





Ah Ma passed away a few days later with a big smile on her face. Though it was so hard to say goodbye, it felt bittersweet. Because I knew that she lived her final days full of life, happiness, and dignity.

Why palliative care?

Palliative care is provided by a multidisciplinary team consisting of doctors, nurses, social workers, counsellors, and trained volunteers. They bring comfort and support to patients and their family members by caring for them physically, emotionally, psychologically, socially and spiritually — just like what Dr Dawn and her team did for Melisa and her grandmother.

Patients choose palliative care to focus on their quality of life in the time that they still have. It is not to give up living. Palliative care services are available as home care, day care, inpatient care and consultative services.

If we want to spend our final days with dignity and the least possible pain, we must plan ahead and make our decisions known early, when we are able to with sound body and mind.

About Singapore Hospice Council

Established in 1995, Singapore Hospice Council (SHC) is a registered charity and an Institution of a Public Character (IPC). We are an umbrella body representing organisations that actively provide hospice and palliative care in Singapore.

SHC is committed to improving the lives of patients with serious life-limiting illnesses and to giving support to the loved ones of these patients.



The e-copy of the book can be downloaded at library.singaporehospice.org.sg

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