

Flood, Filtered: How My Mother's Clean Corners and Rag Box Made the Waters Clear

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Here in the Philippines, we learn to sense a storm before it arrives. The air thickens. The wind shifts tone. Even as children, we knew the signs. In elementary school, the announcement of Signal Number 3 from PAGASA meant no classes—storm conditions were serious. These days, we hear about "Orange Warnings" instead, often signalling intense rainfall rather than strong winds—a shift shaped by hard lessons from Typhoon Ondoy. No matter which island you come from in this archipelago, flooding is part of the national memory.

In our part of Batangas, floodwaters would come strolling down from Capitolio and P. Burgos, the main highway, collecting in Vergara Street, Barangay 13, like water in a basin.

Inside our two-story, 54-square-meter apartment, Inay, would begin to prepare—not with panic, but with practiced precision. As the weather turned, she moved into action: securing her army of rags, tying down the *masitera* with ropes so the pots wouldn't topple and scatter plants and sand, and unfolding a stack of cleaned, repurposed plastic—mostly old shower curtains and packaging sheets. She kept these specifically for the rainy season, ready with clips and cords to cover the open veranda. She had already planned where to tie, how to fold, and which way the wind would pull. When the first drops fell, she could shield the space in minutes.

She was a housekeeper of fierce logic. After I left full-time editing, I converted our bedroom upstairs into my home office—a compact world of organized chaos: my PC, server, paper files, a revolving chair, family photos glued to the wall, a rif-raff organizer on the closet door, and bursts of color to cheer me through deadlines. Often, as I worked at my narra desk—my back to a wall of filing cabinets and seven-tier bookshelves—Inay would roll across the linoleum floor, dusting, waxing, and rearranging rags. We fought over it more times than I can count. "I can't write with all this scrubbing and that strong wax smell," I'd protest. But she never stopped—not to annoy me, but because she knew something I didn't.

She could walk barefoot and feel the grit of dust with uncanny sensitivity. "*Marumi 'pag makati,*" she'd say. You know it's dirty when your feet itch. And she wouldn't allow that—not on her floors, not on her watch.

A Box of Rags and a House Without Scavengers

Inay had a strange obsession with rags. Not strange to me now, but back then, I rolled my eyes at the overflowing box she kept near the stairs. These weren't random pieces of cloth. They were cut from old *kamiseta*, squared pieces of used-garments categorized by purpose, folded perfectly, and stacked by size. She had rags for the floor, the shelves, the wooden stairs, the floor tiles, the jalousies, the ref, the stove, the sink – which to wet, which to use dry. A whole taxonomy of cloth. She even lined the rag box with plastic to protect them.

One day—when the rains fell hard and floodwaters rose from the street and entered our home—I woke up barefoot, stepping into water, and immediately froze. But instead of panic, I was struck by something odd: the water was crystal clear. There were no floating house debris, no dead insects, no slimy film of dirt. Even the box of rags had risen in the water like a little life raft, its contents untouched. The corners of the house—the same ones she waxed every morning while I groaned—were like calm shores. There were no cockroaches. No mice. Not a floating plastic anywhere.

Every Corner Had a System

Inay had a gift for homekeeping that went far beyond neatness. She understood how to create spaces where everything had a purpose—even the unpredictable. Her flood-preparedness didn't come from textbooks or emergency response guides. It came from watching weather, from touching the floor barefoot, from remembering how dirt hides in the corners and how corners, if left unguarded, invite chaos.

I remember looking at it—at my toes beneath the surface, still visible—and thinking: this doesn't feel like floodwater. This feels like a stream that somehow knew how to respect my mother's house. I wore slippers and began scooping water out with a pail, calm in a way I didn't expect. Psychologically, I felt safe.

Cleanliness as Strategy

In Filipino households, we often speak of mothers as self-sacrificing, but not enough is said about their operational brilliance. Inay wasn't just maintaining a home—she was managing risk. Her plastic-lined rag box, her rotation of cleaning zones, the exact placement of furniture in tight spaces—none of it was random. Every gesture was part of a framework. A flood-ready, insect-resistant, dust-monitored system.

My mother's routines weren't sentimental—they were calculated. Her insistence on wiping every surface, folding every rag, and organizing every tool wasn't just about tidiness. It was preparation. Folding rags wasn't symbolic—it was literal foresight. Cleanliness, for her, was a system for staying ahead of disruption.

What I Took With Me

Now, years later, I live in a condo above flood level. There's no one to argue with about floor wax, but I still sort my rags—toweling, cut t-shirts, recycled shorts—each one assigned to a specific task. I fold them tightly and stack them under the hanger basket, seams aligned. I can't stand seeing a rag tossed in the wrong corner. Even now, I test the tiles with my bare feet, checking for grit. I schedule my cleaning days by zone. It's all procedural now—habit turned into method.

I share this not to romanticize my mother's routines, but to note what they made possible. Clarity—of water, of space, of thought—often starts with the smallest, plainest things. Like a box of dry rags, floating through a flood so clear it made me stop and marvel.