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*Ex-Californica*

Brenda first meets her maternal grandparents when she is eleven. Later, she is surprised they were able to overcome the social taboo at all.

As a result of the strangeness of the visit, every detail, from the inoffensive maroon cap on her grandmother's head to the angle of the sunlight through the window, is carved into her mind. She even remembers the vase on the table. She remembers how the plant inside bore a striking resemblance to a set of lungs, collapsed and pressed together.

But Brenda doesn't remember her grandparent's faces. In her mind, they are a pair of flesh-colored canvases that lack a willing artist.

Her grandparents speak to her father in the Shanghai dialect, of which Brenda can only catch a few words. She used to be fluent when she was younger.

Then, her grandmother looks her straight in the eye, and Brenda automatically flinches away from the austerity of the woman. She cannot imagine that they are related.

Her grandmother says something while looking at her, and for once, Brenda's weak, narrow grasp of the language is enough to get her by. Her hands look like her mother's. Brenda buries them in her pockets and wishes that her pockets were earth.

Her hands are soft, unblemished. They are unscarred marble. They want for the fine map of bone and tendon that traces over the hands of her father and brother.

And apparently, they look like her mother's. She hates that even more. But Brenda knows that every year, her grandparents give her money, in great stacks, stuffed inside red envelopes not designed for such a guilty level of generosity. So she stifles whatever anger she feels and nods. Respects the strange couple, as she should.

Her father notices her discomfort, and to the annoyance of her grandparents, he tells Brenda that she can go play in the yard, that he'll come outside in a bit and they can go feed the fish in the lake. She takes her hands out of her pockets and smiles.

She figures out that there's a second, ulterior purpose to all the money when she's old enough to. This is new ground for all of them, and her grandparents navigate it with money.

Maia is Brenda's first girlfriend.

They meet in a political science class in the beginning of Brenda's senior year of college, and on their fifth date, Brenda drives her an hour away from the dorms to Christmas in the Park in downtown San Jose. They attempt, and fail, to ice skate with any kind of grace (and when Brenda checks her knees later that night she finds two open gashes), but at the end of their ridiculous fumbling is spiked cider.

As they leave the ice-skating plaza, Brenda pulls the candy cane out of her cup and sticks it in her mouth. The peppermint is so sharp that it might as well be branded as Listerine, and when she blinks, she feels a mint-cold mist evaporate from her eyes.

There is a dull ache building in her calves that will be worse tomorrow, but still she follows, faithfully, as Maia runs to the main park. They thread through families and couples, whose faces blur as Brenda is pulled along. It takes her a few more seconds to realize where Maia is headed: the series of train car exhibits that embrace the park in one great, gentle loop.

"I didn't think I'd have this much fun," Maia admits once they slow their pace, "given that neither of us can ice skate."

"Says a lot about the company then, huh?" Brenda comments, grinning. The cold has made her face less dynamic, but she manages to push the emotion through.

They stop in front of a comfortable scene: a family of brown bears inside a wooden cabin. The mother bear's chair rocks back and forth, and the father fishes through a hole in the floor. The two children play with alphabet blocks.

Maia lifts the edge of her scarf over her nose. It's getting a bit *too* cold, Brenda realizes.

"I can drop you back off at the dorms?" she offers.

"Okay. Or maybe we could hang out a little longer? I mean, as long as it's indoors."

So Brenda drives them to Ramen Osaka, a small restaurant in the suburbs. Its main clientele are high school students, but during the holidays and summer break, the establishment sees all kinds of customers.

Brenda and Maia seat themselves and strip down to their t-shirts, creating a huge bundle of jackets and sweaters on the seat next to them. As the waitress brings their drinks, Brenda does a cursory examination of the place, now simple, minimalistic, with soft white lights and Japanese woodblock prints.

“You know,” Brenda says, “when I was in sophomore year, this place had the *worst* lighting. The entire room was dark except for these awful neon lights. It was like a rave every night.”

“What made them change it?” Maia asks.

“I think they realized the style was hurting the employees too.”

“Well, there’s a much lower risk of eye damage now,” Maia says, tearing half of the paper wrapper off of the straw. She sticks the straw in her mouth and blows so that the other half hits Brenda squarely in the nose. Their first few dates were entirely unlike this one; as friendly as they were with each other, neither of them could be as comfortable as they are now.

“I think the risk of eye damage is still very high,” Brenda comments, as she picks the flimsy paper projectile off of her lap and flicks it onto the table.

“Sorry,” Maia says, although by her grin, she’s not sorry at all. “Okay. Let’s talk.”

“About?”

“Anything.”

Brenda leans back in her chair and thinks. “I’ve seen you tapping in class a few times. Like three times on your forehead or three times on your chin. What’s that?”

“EFT tapping. I used to get these awful bouts of anxiety, especially in school — well, I guess I still do — so my mother taught it to me. I don’t know that there’s any hardcore scientific evidence behind it, but it’s a good placebo. It helps me calm down.”

“Teach me?”

Maia smiles and reaches her hand across the table to demonstrate. “Just tap certain parts of your body. Forehead, bridge of your nose, chin, collarbone.”

Brenda can almost feel her bones relax. Placebo or not, her joints seem to creak with lovely satisfaction as Maia shows her the spots.

“What happened to your mom?” Maia asks, and it snaps Brenda out of her half-lidded, tropical calm.

“What?”

“You’ve mentioned her in passing before. Every time it’s like you want to say more but you always stop yourself before you do. You don’t have to talk about her, but if you want to, you can. Whatever it is won’t scare me off.”

Brenda clears her throat. “It’s okay. It’s nothing frightening. She just left,” Brenda says, “when I was...ten maybe?”

“Has she tried to keep in touch with you?”

“No. Clean break,” Brenda clarifies, and focuses on the deep color of her tea, as if the dark liquid will supply her with the right words.

“That’s—”

“Unusual?”

“I was going to say that’s terrible. I’m sorry. At least you have your dad, right?,” Maia says.

“Yeah. My dad’s great.”

They both stop talking. Then: “Have you ever wanted to find her?”

Brenda laughs and immediately regrets it for the way Maia winces.

“Sorry. No. Not really.” She’s lying, but either Maia doesn’t know her well enough to tell or decides not to chase that thread.

Even with the lies, Brenda hasn’t talked this openly about her mother in *years*, and she feels something like just-boiled tea pour down her spine. “It’s just so fucking stupid.”

Maia flinches when she curses.

“Have you ever heard about an *Asian* parent leaving? There’s...” Brenda struggles for the words, “centuries of Confucian sentiment written in. It’s literally *designed* so that no one leaves their kids.”

“I’ve heard of it before,” Maia says quietly.

Brenda blinks a few times as her seemingly momentous anger sputters into silence. “What happened?”

Maia closes her eyes briefly as she tries to remember. “He had three sons. They’d go fishing over the weekend. They also had a dog. My mother didn’t keep me updated, but I noticed that she was on the phone a lot more than usual. Then one day, as she’s driving me to school, she tells me what happened. He went to Shanghai to chase his dreams, start his business, whatever, and ended up getting a girlfriend in the first month.”

Brenda wrinkles her nose. “That guy’s a jerk.”

“I agree. My sister was just really mad that he left the dog,” Maia tacks on, trying to lighten the weight. Brenda does let out a puff of amusement.

“Was it one of those small, fluffy white ones?”

Maia laughs. “Yeah. How’d you know?”

“It’s an Asian dog.”

Maia smiles and fiddles with the wrapper she had blown into Brenda’s face. More solemnly, she continues. “I remember my mother saying that they still loved each other. And that they acknowledged that. They just couldn’t continue.”

Brenda gently takes the wrapper from Maia’s fingers, and folds it so that generous eyes might see a heart.

Maia reaches her hand out, and Brenda thinks she is going to take the heart from her. Instead, she threads their fingers together.

The night moves away from the painful light of anxiety and abandonment, and onto better things. Like the way Maia’s eyes are the darkest Brenda has ever seen. Like the way their fingers intertwine.

In moments of enamor like these, Brenda thinks she feels bad for her mother. She imagines being thousands of miles away from everyone she’s ever loved, and some kind of bitter pity rises in her throat.

That winter, Kai is applying to college, and every single school in New York sits, superior and smart, at the top of his list. Kai doesn’t seem to care about wind-like snow in March. The proximity of museums with Hopper plastered on every giftshop mug makes no never mind to him. He has not even considered the sweet, darling blue of Colombia’s graduation gowns. No. All Kai seems to care about is location.

Her brother’s inclination to attend school in New York makes Brenda feel oddly defensive of California.

Today she’s sitting with Kai in the parking lot of a plaza near their house. As he finishes his applications, Brenda stares out the window and looks for some spectacle to entertain her. There has to be *something*, between the bagel place with the tiling that looks like Venice and the tutoring center that swallowed a group of unlucky Asian kids that morning.

Her leg bounces up and down and she taps nervously on the wheel. She left her red Jetta in the driveway at home and took her father’s 2000 Yukon instead, hoping the childhood nostalgia of the car would provide Kai some comfort. It’s doing nothing to relax her, though. She has never

liked sitting still. She needs to be doing something, always, even if it's just driving in circles around the parking lot. But if she follows that inclination, Kai will complain about motion-sickness. So she continues tapping.

After a few clicks from the passenger seat, Kai sighs. "Okay. We can go now."

Brenda drives out of the parking lot and back home. Their dad greets them at the door.

"How was it?" he asks.

"Horrible," Kai drawls and throws his computer on the couch.

"Remember, you do things because they're right, not because they're easy," their father points out.

Brenda imagines Kai is deciding whether or not to argue about the "right-ness" of college. He seems to decide against it.

"Fine," Kai says.

"Are you ready to go?" her father asks. Brenda hooks her hand in the lid of her water bottle and gives him a thumbs-up.

Whenever Brenda is home from school, she and her father go hiking in the set of golden hills behind her neighborhood. Hidden in the hills is a trail that curves with random flair, as if a god had tossed a spool of yarn onto the land and razed the grass wherever the string fell. It's a pain to map, but a joy to explore.

Kai grabs an energy drink from the fridge. It would normally be just Brenda and her dad, but Kai has sunk so deep into the nihilism of college applications that he has agreed to come with them.

It's a quick walk to the beginning of the trail. Squirrels make waves through the grass as they run from them and into their holes.

Her friends who live right at the base have even reported coyotes wandering around the neighborhood at night, but Brenda has not been fortunate enough to see one. She's heard them, though, howling through the night. It's a lonely clanging.

"This was a mistake," Kai groans as they begin the incline. Even after years of doing this, Brenda drops her torso so that trudging up the hill becomes easier. Her father seems to feel none of the elevation. He walks ahead of them casually, without even the slightest unevenness of breath.

They reach a small plateau and Kai asks for them to stop.

"God, Dad. How do you do this?" he asks between gulps of water.

“I exercised a lot when I was young. I had to climb rope at middle school.”

“I suppose that that’s something else that’s right and not easy,” Kai breathes out. He signals that he’s okay to keep walking.

Whenever they hike, they talk about a variety of things. Her father’s childhood. Economic practices that Brenda lacks experience in -- they’ve had full-length discussions about Roth IRAs and call options. And sometimes, they talk about more trivial things like Ford Mercury Comets or the herd of wild elephants that has almost reached Kunming. It’s not the most emotional content, but Brenda feels as if she understands her father more for it.

They stop at the peak, and Brenda turns her attention on her neighborhood, miniaturized below her. In the horizon are the mountains, bleached purple and soft-edged. Brenda’s chest brims with emotion so large that only something equally colossal could understand it. The ocean maybe, the one that exists beyond the horizon.

She does not think she has loved anything as much as she loves her home.

A thought occurs to her.

“Here’s a question, Dad. How do you say I love you in Chinese?”

Their dad pauses. “*Wo ai ni.*”

Brenda scrunches up her nose and sees Kai doing the same. The sound of the phrase is ugly and strange, and Brenda has never heard it before. But even in oblivion, it exists.

“Okay, okay, I have another one,” Kai says. “How do you say ‘I’m proud of you’?”

Their dad laughs slowly and says, “I don’t think there’s a phrase for that.”

Brenda looks at her brother and they both start laughing as well.

“Hey,” their dad says, “I am proud of you.”

In perfect sync, Brenda and Kai pretend to purge their guts, even doubling over as they continue along the trail. She’s never heard that before either, at least not from her father. Every time she has ever come to him with an A+ or a teacher’s praise, he has nodded solemnly as his only response. Because it’s expected. It’s not an achievement.

But there *is* a fourteen-year-old Post-it that Brenda keeps in her wallet from the first grade. Her school had had a back-to-school night for parents to tour the classroom and learn about the curriculum. The next day when Brenda pulled her composition notebook out of the desk, she had found the blue note on the front page. It read: “Great work, Brenda! Keep it up!”

She thinks it's her most prized possession. Before she was old enough for a wallet, she kept it safe in the corner of her bottom drawer, next to the picture of her and her mom in Italy.

Exactly six months after they start dating, Maia drives Brenda out to a park in her neighborhood. Maia was born and raised in northern California, near their university, where the oceans are cold and grey and beautiful. For her entire life, she has been 300 miles away from Brenda, who grew up under the soft, steady sun of the California south.

"A lot of the playground structures are broken, but some of them work. And it might smell like weed. Sometimes I can even smell it from my bedroom. Just a warning in advance. Sorry," Maia says. She makes countless more remarks like that. Preemptive apologies.

Brenda shakes her head and hooks her pinky finger in Maia's. "It's okay."

Maia holds Brenda's hand tightly after they step out of the car, pulling her away from the broken glass on the sidewalk.

Brenda pulls back. "There's a credit card over there."

"Ignore it."

"And poker chips," Brenda notices. She takes a second look and sees that they're just plastic arcade chips, with the name of the establishment in the center. Brenda's tempted to pick one up — it'd be a good memento for the night — but to do so, she'll either have to let go of Maia's hand or the 3-foot bag of kettle corn that she had brought along, and Brenda would rather not do either. So she lets herself be led away.

They walk up a paved slope that winds itself in a great spiral and reach the top as the sun is starting to set.

Maia grabs Brenda by her shoulders and drags her over to a small circle in the center of the pavilion. The bag of kettle corn makes a *thwacking* sound against her calf.

"Say something," Maia orders. When Maia grins, sharp and unfettered like she's doing now, her upper lip curls up like the curves of a heart. It makes Brenda feel half in love with her. Upon that realization, a lazy, smoking feeling emerges from the pit of her stomach.

"Hi," Brenda says. As it leaves her mouth, something in the air vibrates. Maia rolls her eyes. "Something longer."

"Econ is killing me."

All of her words race back to her in an echo, as if she is standing in a cylinder of glass.



Brenda laughs, and the sound repeats itself over and over. “That’s amazing.”

“It’s all physics. When you make a noise, the sound waves travel out to the ledge around the circle, and they travel back at the exact same time too! It’s really something. A bunch of wiggling air, matching you word for word.”

After Brenda plays with the echoes for a few more minutes, they go to sit on the ledge, letting their feet dangle into the red-green bushes below.

The sun looks red as it sets. There’s an explanation for that too, something about light particles and prisms, but Brenda never remembers. Her physics major girlfriend would, though. And yet, Brenda does not want to cheapen the heavy dusk with science.

In another hour, the sky has turned dark purple, but the air is still reassuringly warm as it embraces every part of their bodies. The low warbling of the meadowlarks around them drowns out the faint sounds of the city far away, and the deep orange streetlamps make Maia’s eyes look like multi-colored glass, reflecting anything that enters with even more brilliance. She’s so pretty that every few seconds, Brenda has to make sure she isn’t about to keel over the side of the ledge.

Maia hands her the bag of kettle corn. “Go. Something you’ve never told anyone.”

Brenda throws a kernel in the air, matches its arc, and angles her head so that it falls perfectly in her mouth.

“Do you know my favorite thing about California?”

“What?” Maia asks.

“You can *always* tell when there’s going to be thunder. Always. It feels exactly like the scientific definition of it. You can *literally* feel it, two fronts meeting, one of them warm, the other cold. So you know instinctively when there’s going to be thunder at night.”

Maia crosses her arms. “That might be a *you* thing, not a California thing.”

Brenda thinks. “Fine. If not that, the forests. You can see them in their entirety from my neighborhood. There’s something spectacular about the way they stretch themselves over the edge of the valley, like a tiny, green universe. And just imagine everything that goes on under that blanket of trees. Thousands of lives. Sunlight through the leaves. What I would give to melt into a redwood.”

“You love California so much, but you also travel so much,” Maia comments lightly.

Brenda smiles and shrugs. “We contain multitudes. Your turn.”

Maia hums and looks up into the sky; Brenda follows her line of sight to the moon.

“I loved Greek mythology when I was a kid. I’d spend all day reading this big book of myths my mother gave me. Then at night, I’d fling my curtains open so that the moonlight hit my bed, as if I could get Selene’s attention.”

Brenda scrunches up her nose and laughs. “You’ve never told anyone about that?”

“It’s *embarrassing!*”

“It’s adorable.”

Maia’s eyes became more expressive. “Did you know that people thought the moon induced insanity? So we have the word lunatic.”

“I did not know.”

“Strange, right?”

As Brenda looks from Maia to the moon, the etymology is clear. There is calm, yes, but if she searches deeply enough, also the faint glow of panic. Soft and diluted, but panic all the same, stemming from wherever Maia’s body touches her own.

The weekend before Brenda graduates, she goes to London alone. All of her friends and Maia had begged her for weeks to go somewhere more fitting for a soon to be ex-student who felt like irresponsible. Brenda had dodged all of the pleas until the small fleet attacking her gave up.

She tells both her father and Maia that she’s going for a job interview at a small consulting firm, but she doesn’t lie to Kai. According to him, she’s incapable of lying. Apparently, her face freezes up like a statue and she looks like one of those puffed-up orange fish in the aquariums at Chinese restaurants. Eyes bulging with dumbness.

Brenda feels horrible about the lies, but she doesn’t want her father to know that she’s hoping to see the woman that flipped his life upside down. She also doesn’t want Maia to know, because she’ll try to talk to her, and the last thing Brenda needs is to vocalize anything. If she says it out loud, she makes it real. It becomes uncontrollable and unmanageable. So, she lies. It breaks her heart two ways, to realize that Maia knows something is wrong and to witness her father’s enthusiasm about a fake first job.

Kai calls her every night she’s there. The first night ends with a screaming match in which he calls her a coward and she calls him pathetic. The next few are better.

“Dad wouldn’t care, you know? He didn’t care when you went to Florence. He didn’t care when you went to Barcelona,” Kai tells her.

Brenda scoffs. “No. He’d pretend not to care. I can’t tell her if he hates her or if he’s just sad about it, but either way, I’m not about to fuck up and tell him!”

Kai changes course. “Why are you in London? You have nothing to go on.”

Brenda stares out her hotel window at the city lights. “I have a few things. Mom was *always* talking about Europe with me, about France, about Germany, about all the castles and the libraries and the gardens.”

“Okay, but what made you choose London?”

“She told me that my first trip alone should be to London. That I should go after I graduate. Because they speak English. Because I wouldn’t have to flounder around and resort to stopping random strangers on the street,” Brenda explains.

“Whatever,” Kai says. “I think it’s stupid.”

“What else is new?”

She hangs up then, grabs her jacket, and leaves the hotel. It’s dark outside, but tourists still swarm the street in masses, so Brenda doesn’t feel concerned.

She heads over to the London Bridge and maneuvers a way to the water’s edge. Brenda squints down at her barely visible reflection; tonight, there is no moonlight that makes it through the clouds. “If I was ever going to get an epiphany, it’d be now,” she thinks, although when it comes down to it, Brenda’s not sure what kind of realization she’d even want.

Before she forgets, she texts her dad that she’s okay. Otherwise, he’ll worry.

As soon as she puts her phone away, it starts to ring. When she sees that it’s Maia and not Kai, she picks up.

“Hey!” Brenda answers, and jostles back through the crowd to a quieter area.

“Hey,” Maia says. “How’s London?”

Her voice is gloomier than usual, and Brenda swears internally at that observation. There’s something in her chest nagging her about grand gestures and necessary concessions to make up for the lies and the shutting out.

“It’s good,” she says, and there’s silence. Brenda lets the thing in her chest push her to speak. “When I get back, do you want to have that dinner with your parents?”

“Really?” Maia asks. “I thought you didn’t want to.”

“I want to now,” Brenda affirms and she can imagine Maia on the other end, smiling and bouncing slightly on the balls of her feet.

“Okay. I’ll schedule it then.”

The conversation between them gets easier after that, as if Brenda’s offer dislodged a huge boulder blocking a river mouth.

Maia is there at the airport to pick her up. Brenda had been in a bad mood from the plane trip — a mother-daughter pair had asked her if she would please switch seats so they could remain together, effectively booting Brenda out of her aisle seat and into a space between two men — but seeing Maia waiting outside with her car washes the experience away.

After Brenda loads her suitcase in the trunk and takes the keys from Maia, they slide into the car. Away from the brash headlights of the vehicles behind them, Brenda kisses Maia as best as she can over the center console.

Then when the cars behind start honking, Brenda puts the car into drive.

“I’m glad to report that your plants are still alive,” Maia says. “I mean, it was only a few days, but I think we should consider this a huge success.”

Brenda laughs. She had given Maia the keys to her university apartment with only a reasonable amount of concern for her new daylilies.

“Do you want to stay over tonight?” Brenda asks.

“I’d like to, but my aunts and uncles are coming to campus tomorrow morning and I don’t think I’m capable of waking up at seven and running back to my dorm.”

Brenda laughs and recalls the numerous occasions where they’ve slept through their morning classes.

“Then my mom will drive over this weekend,” Maia explains. “She’s very excited to meet you.”

“I’m looking forward to it too.”

“Any place you’d care about going to?”

Brenda shrugs. “Not particularly. Maybe somewhere downtown.”

“I’ll ask my mom if she has any ideas,” Maia says. “But thanks for going along with this. My mom’s been talking all week about how she can’t wait to meet you.”

She doesn’t know where the thought comes from, but Brenda imagines that she’ll be a disappointment. That notion bullies her into silence.

A few beats of silence pass. Maia tries, “Do you miss yours?”

Brenda wonders how long Maia has wanted to ask that. She turns the radio down. “You can miss someone and be angry at them at the same time,” she says, her voice rising in pitch near the end. It’s a question.

“You can.”

Brenda nods. “Okay. Yeah. I miss her. You know, when I was nine, she took me to Venice? Kai had a special summer trip in D.C., so my dad flew there with him, and my mother decided she’d take me somewhere too. Long way for a kid, but I guess it’s good she took me when I was young because damn, I just slept through the entire flight. It’s like, thirteen hours long. I’d be awake the entire time, just suffering, if I had to go now.”

“What was it like?”

“*Awesome*,” Brenda breathes out. She’s never told anyone about it, much less admitted how fun it was. “We took a ferry to the hotel...Saturn something. I don’t remember, but shit, the whole thing was something else. We went to this restaurant with pizzas for each star sign of the zodiac.”

She can hear Maia smile.

“I almost fell into a canal on the first night,” Brenda laughs. “I didn’t realize the steps would be that slippery until I was already falling. She caught me before I completely slid in.”

“That’s a nice memory to have.”

“It is,” Brenda says. She presses down on the gas. “There were lights everywhere, hanging on lines between buildings, from the vaults next to Saint Mark’s Square. It’s not dark, not ever, not even in the middle of the night. You look around, and all you can see are waterfalls. White and gold waterfalls.”

Maia puts her hand on Brenda’s arm and she feels something like guilt stem from the warmth of her fingers.

Brenda inhales. “Do you remember when I told you that I wasn’t looking for my mother? Like, way back when?”

“Yeah.”

“That wasn’t entirely true,” Brenda says, and some of the shame dissipates. “Sometimes I think, or I hope, that I’ll find her abroad. Maybe I’ll be in Italy again. Rome, or something. Maybe I’ll go down to the Pantheon so early in the morning that when I breathe, it looks like smoke. And maybe I’ll see her inside.”

“And?”

Brenda shakes her head. “And *nothing*. I have nothing. I’ve imagined everything leading up to that moment, even the peddler by one of the columns, with those same gimmicky souvenirs you’ll find everywhere throughout the city. But I’ve got nothing past that.”

“So that’s why you travel so much. It’s to find her.”

Brenda struggles with Maia’s new understanding of her, and leaps to debase it. “Well, I travel because...it’s travel. I don’t *actively* look,” Brenda explains. It’s not entirely a lie, but it’s not a truth either. Maia must know her well enough to tell by now, but once again, she doesn’t chase that particular rabbit.

“That leaves you constantly suspended in limbo,” Maia says. At least in her voice, pity is not the condescending thing with horns that Brenda has learned to expect.

“Can we talk about something else?” Brenda asks. Maia makes a noncommittal hum and looks out the window.

“Okay,” she says, “We should go to Reno.”

“I graduate on Wednesday. Your internship starts next week,” Brenda comments evenly, even as the guilt starts to swarm in her chest. She knows where this is going.

Maia shakes her head. “For Christmas. Or maybe early January, if you’re planning on spending the holidays with your family.”

“Christmas is six months away,” Brenda says, and she sees the space between them widen like a gaping jaw.

“But come on, you like to travel right?” Maia says. It’s an appeal, not a challenge, but still, Brenda starts to feel the space in the car get inexplicably tighter.

“Yeah. But...I don’t think I can go to Venice again. So, if we went to Reno together, and if we...”. Her voice fades out at the exact moment she thinks about them breaking up. She flexes her fingers on the wheel.

“So what,” Maia laughs awkwardly, “are we never going to go anywhere?”

This feels like the beginning of a bad conversation, for which Brenda is wholly unprepared for.

“No. Can we just take it slow?”

“Okay,” Maia says. Her hand leaves Brenda’s shoulder and moves to turn up the radio again. It’s playing some nonsensical EDM, which both Brenda and Maia hate as a rule, but neither of them moves to change the station.

Brenda clears her throat as the guilt unfurls its wings and presses into the front of her chest, burning a hole through her collarbone.

Brenda remembers the moment she felt the most in love with Maia.

They had been in Maia’s dorm room, just lying on the bed. What few sounds entered the space between them were muted: the *shuffle-clack* of the printer across the hall, the softened discussions occurring in neighboring rooms, the invented rhythm of nature, produced by the understanding that there were birds outside.

Louder was the sound of their breathing. Deep, and calm, and gentle.

Spring midterms were over, and for the first time, Brenda had begun to consider what would happen to the two of them. She’d have graduate school to attend in Massachusetts come August. Maia would stay in California for her senior year.

They had meant to do something that afternoon. Maia had come up with some vague plan to go to the music store in town and see if they were giving out free vinyl records. But instead, they had stayed in Maia’s bed past the setting of the sun, half-asleep, drowsy.

Brenda remembers studying Maia’s face. She remembers dissociating Maia’s features from her person, and she remembers the swell of emotion in her chest upon connecting them once again. She remembers realizing the gross enormity of her love.

And Brenda remembers the panic that rushed in afterwards. It was everywhere. Underneath her fingernails, behind her eyes, everywhere, threading between the finely woven capillaries of her blood.

On their one-year anniversary, Maia breaks up with Brenda.

She had come to Brenda’s apartment in Boston with two plane tickets hidden behind her back, and Brenda had reacted as expected.

The guilt pushes into Brenda’s ears and makes everything that Maia says louder and sharper and clearer.

“Brenda, we’re not going *anywhere*. I can’t do this anymore. I can’t just be in the moment with you all the time, I want to plan with you, I want to work out a *future* with you.”

“Okay, maybe, we can just take it slow —” Brenda tries. She hates the way the words leave her tongue, bruised and deformed, like a thick stew of rotten orange.

“Brenda, that’s what we always agree to do. *Always*. Anytime we have this conversation, we always stop short of any resolution. ‘We’re going to take it slow’. Even if you’re going slow, you’re going somewhere! We’re not going anywhere! We’ve been together a *year* and we’re not going anywhere! *Shit*, Brenda!”

Maia is shouting now and Brenda can hardly blame her for it.

“So what now?” Brenda asks, barely unsticking her throat enough to get the words out. She doesn’t expect an answer; in truth, she doesn’t think that there is a way for them at all. And it’d be entirely her fault. But even at the end of their relationship, Maia stretches out a hand to help her up.

“I can’t do this anymore, not without you committing to something. To *anything*.”

And even at the end of their relationship, Brenda can’t respond in any way that matters.

Maia nods as if she expected this failing, and the only word Brenda can describe the action as is quiet. It’s the quietest thing she’s ever seen.

When Brenda comes home from graduate school during winter, she spends every afternoon and evening sitting on the back porch and staring at the lake. Her dad comes out at night to make sure she’s okay, but the rest of the time, she’s alone.

Brenda knows she needs to stop. If not for some shred of self-respect and discipline, then for the fact that her dad will stop letting her lies about how great she’s doing slip by. He knows something is wrong. Whenever he brings her a bowl of sliced fruit, he seems to hover slightly. As if she’ll unload her burden.

But today’s not the day for that.

Brenda hears the glass door slide open and she whips around, nearly falling down the short flight of stairs to the grass. As she turns to see who it is, disappointment catches in her throat. Hostility is a close second.

“Who the hell are you?”



The girl in front of her has a cigarette between her fingers — already a bad sign, Brenda thinks — and is wearing an oversized sweater. Brenda stares at the finely woven cashmere and remembers when her brother bought it in an ill-advised midnight splurge.

“I’m Kai’s girlfriend. Who are you?”

Brenda feels her interest droop considerably as she answers. “His sister.”

The girl presses the end of her cigarette down on the wooden railing, and smoke escapes in little wisps. Brenda winces. How Kai is going to tell their father that he’s started dating a smoker is beyond her.

The lake shimmers in her peripherals.

“He’s told me a lot about you,” the girl says.

“Good things I hope.”

The girl laughs. “Only that you’ve been *everywhere*.”

“Oh,” Brenda says, and wraps the blanket even tighter around her shoulders. “That’s an exaggeration.”

“It’s just funny that you like to travel. Kai said you hated everywhere except California.”

Brenda doesn’t realize that her silence sounds like irritation until the girl fills the space with an apology.

“I didn’t mean that in a bad way, it’s just kind of ironic, you know?”

Brenda nods, and without another point of conversation, the girl looks out at the lake. Brenda can see it in her eyes, the shift to wonder, the slow, almost sleepy gaze of admiration. The sight of the water makes people vulnerable.

“Why do you smoke?” Brenda asks.

The girl remains in her trance as she shrugs. “My mother used to.”

“That’s not really an answer,” Brenda says. The girl raises her shoulders and drops them again.

It’s bad reasoning, Brenda thinks, to do something just because one’s mother did.

She can see her brother and her father by the lake now, gesturing radically.

“So, when are you leaving on your next trip?” the girl asks.

Brenda closes her eyes and tilts her head back.

“I don’t know.”

Both Brenda and Kai are home for the holidays as part of an unspoken obligation. Not that they don't want to be, but there's some kind of software built into both of them to come for Thanksgiving, New Year's, their birthdays.

Brenda is not sure what possesses her to attend the alumni event at her old university, but she drives the six hours north anyways, and after she endures the admittedly stale event, she heads down to the sprawling plaza in red brick that the university built for their undergraduate students. The Rez, it's called. Brenda buys a chaga chai latte from the coffee shop and sits by the two-dimensional fountain in the center.

Ten minutes later, and a small group of people exit Honeybird, the small, gold-washed restaurant across from the fountain.

Six months ago, when she was graduating, Brenda had searched diligently for Maia in the auditorium, eyes scanning the hundreds of faces so far away they were feature-less. In the end, it wasn't Maia's features that tipped her off. No, it was a movement. It was the way that the person in the upper left row had raised her elbow to brush back her hair. It was the detail of the motion, the angle of the arm, the arrangement of the fingers, that had made Brenda recognize Maia.

It's the same now. Her hair is shorter, her smile is sharper, but every line, every breath, every blink, is still burnt into Brenda's mind.

Before Maia can turn around and see her, Brenda leaves her seat and runs.

On Christmas morning, Brenda and Kai find a wealth of presents under the tree, all of them stacked in the most pleasing manner, like a little pagoda. Because of their father's painstaking efforts, the two of them become children again, if only for a morning.

There's a small box that stands out in the front, wrapped in red and green stripes with little reindeers scattered across. It's the last one Brenda opens. There is no letter, no well-wishes. Just a card with Maia's name.

She has sent Brenda one of those expensive, do-it-yourself, spit-in-a-tube DNA tests.

Brenda suspects that Maia bought it when they were still seeing each other and only drummed up the courage to send it to her now. She imagines Maia writing her name on the card. She imagines the twist in her mouth.

"The government is going to get your information," her father warns.

Kai leans over to look at the box. His girlfriend had decided to spend the day with her own family, which came as a great relief to Brenda (and her father).

“Not like they don’t have it already,” Kai reasons. “Are you going to do it?”

Brenda shrugs. “Not sure.”

“Why not?”

“It’s useless. And I doubt I’ll learn anything new. I’m pretty sure we’re 100% Chinese.”

“Maybe not! I knew a guy who thought he was all Chinese too, and he ended up having a great-grandparent from Korea. Plus, it can tell you what kind of earwax you have.”

Their dad starts picking up the shreds of wrapping paper and heads to the garage to throw them away. When she’s sure he’s out of earshot, Brenda comments, “Your girlfriend smokes.”

“I know.”

“Okay,” Brenda says. She knows better than to pick on it further; if she does, Kai will start arguing and weave some kind convoluted, vitriolic argument that will inevitably come to rest on her own girlfriend. Ex-girlfriend, Brenda thinks, but she’s not ready to come out with that yet.

“Are you really not going to do the test?” Kai asks.

“Nope,” she says.

Kai sticks out his hand. “Give it then.”

She hands it over and Kai stares at the back of the box. “Oh,” he realizes, “It tells you about the people you share DNA with.”

Brenda leans back against the foot of the couch and closes her eyes. “Haven’t you heard the stories? People finding out that they’re adopted, that their parents cheated, etc.”

“You think our mother’s the type of person to do the test?” Kai asks. Brenda opens her eyes as calmly as she can to stare at him.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“I think she is. From what you’ve told me,” Kai declares, and it irritates Brenda that he feels comfortable making that definitive of a statement.

“You’re still going to do the test?”

“I want to know. She’s my mother too.”

Brenda sits up then. The words had come across not as a taunt. His voice had been uncharacteristically subdued, almost as if he was looking for compassion.

“I know,” Brenda says.

“Okay. Okay. I’m going to do it. I’ll tell you when I get the results.”

Brenda nods.

The DNA results come back on the last day of Kai's winter break. To his disappointment, he is entirely Chinese. The results also tell them that his earwax is light-colored, that he's biologically disposed to wake up at 9 in the morning (unlikely, Brenda thinks), and that their mother is in Shanghai.

Kai tells their dad that last piece of information the same evening he gets the results and Brenda has half a mind to slap him for that. She ends up going into his room after dinner and throws his pillow at his face.

"Hey, what the fuck?"

"Why the hell would you tell Dad?" she hisses. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Kai throws the pillow back and it catches her in the mouth. "You don't get some kind of monopoly over Mom, Brenda!"

She frowns.

"I told Dad because that's the kind of person he is! He needs closure! Maybe you're fine hovering in uncertainty, going around to any city that you heard Mom mention ten years ago, but Dad isn't! Now he knows. Now he can let it go! Maybe if you were normal, you'd be able to let it go too and you'd stop stressing Dad out every time you feel like traveling!"

"What?"

"You don't think he knows why you travel? You don't think he's worried you'll end up exactly like our mother? Abandoning us?"

Brenda does not expect that.

Kai continues, "You're like a fucking wild animal. He can't even *try* to help you because who knows when you'll spook? Who knows when you'll run away from us? I know you've got these great aspirations about becoming an asshole on Wall Street and buying Dad everything he's ever wanted, but have you considered that that's not how it works? Maybe that's not what he wants!"

"How would you know what he wants?" Brenda questions in a normal voice. If their dad hears them arguing he might send them to different corners of the house again.

"How could you not! Read between the *fucking* lines, Brenda! Look at his face once and a while!"

"Are you kidding me?" she whisper-screams. "His face never shows anything!"

“What are you talking about!” Kai snaps. “You can tell! Look again!”

“No! You can’t! Do you remember when the car got rear-ended?”

Kai’s eyes widen. He’s always had an affinity for the Yukon because it was manufactured the same year as he was born.

“It was *rear-ended*?”

“Exactly! And dad didn’t tell me for weeks!” Brenda explains. Kai flops onto his bed, and Brenda realizes that this is probably the very first argument where Kai is the first to be speechless. But there’s no satisfaction. There’s no winning.

Brenda leaves Kai alone and goes downstairs. Her father is sitting at his desk, working. He is disciplined. Mature, responsible. Brenda wonders if he has always been like that or if he had to rise to it. Kai is right, she realizes; she has been a horrible daughter.

Her point about the Yukon only hammers it home. Her father has never told her about his worries. He has never told her about his unease. The only reason he mentioned the Yukon was probably because he knew she’d see the dent eventually.

Brenda realizes that her father doesn’t ever expect her to see his fear. Without Kai, she probably wouldn’t have known it even existed.

“Just getting some fresh air,” Brenda says, and he gives her a thumbs-up. As she opens the front door, she expects the safety of the evening. In the dark, nothing needs to be true.

Instead, she’s met with a set of blinding lights. They dim, and Kai’s girlfriend steps out of the green Jeep she drives.

Brenda gives her a cursory wave as she sits down on the porch, and Reagan waves back. In lieu of going inside, Reagan sits down next to her and a slight aversion builds in Brenda’s legs. She smells too strongly of raw honey.

“What are you doing?” Brenda asks.

“Nothing,” Reagan says. “Talking to you. Trying to.”

Brenda doesn’t respond.

“What happened to your girlfriend?” Reagan asks. Brenda’s recent listlessness combined with Reagan’s staccato, interrogative tone makes the answers flow out of her mouth like a stream flopping with fish.

“Broke up.”

“Why?”

“Couldn’t commit.”

“You or her?”

“Me.”

“Damn. Isn’t that the way?”

Brenda squints at her. “Does Kai know you’re here?”

Reagan laughs and leans back. “Yeah. We’re watching *Gremlins*.”

After that, Brenda decides that she doesn’t necessarily dislike this girl.

“Good movie,” Brenda says, “even though the microwave scene terrified me as a child. But as an adult, it’s like, good for the mom.”

Reagan stares at her and Brenda tries to avoid the sharpness of her attention. “Kai told me that he found your mother,” Reagan says. “Are you going to go after her?”

Brenda is too tired to react to this girl’s lack of boundaries, and she is too tired to come up with an escape. Maybe if she had been like this with Maia it’d be the two of them on the porch right now. But god, they’d be so unhappy.

For want of a binary response, Brenda lands on a complete dismissal of Reagan’s question. “Kai’s probably waiting for you,” she says. Reagan swings her head up and down.

“If you want to watch with us, you’re welcome to.”

Brenda doesn’t make any sort of response and only relaxes when she hears Reagan open the door and greet her father. The door swings close, and she’s alone again.

Brenda loops around her house, and walks to the lake, sidestepping the weeds that sound like barbed wire when snapped in half. She stops at the bank and looks in the water. She searches for absolution. There needs to be a way to cleanse her chest of the disgust she feels for herself.

Brenda remembers a story she read in high school, about a girl who would sneak down to a lake at night and push a concrete tub into the water. Then she’d sit in there for hours at a time, just bobbing up and down.

Brenda imagines what that would be like. To be timeless. To be spaceless.

But there is no concrete tub for her. No. For her, there is only a web of crisscrossing threads in her mind.

She doesn’t know whether she wants to go to Shanghai, or stay. She’s not even sure if it matters anymore.

Brenda kicks the edge of the water. She is so tired of this struggle she feels like she could cry. If she stays, what is she supposed to do? Wait to be attacked by that black thing perched in the golden doorframe of California? All it does is crow about the shit she put Maia through, and after Kai's rightful accusations, about the shit she put her father through. Maybe if she goes, she can put an end to it.

But if she stays, that thing will come for her. And it will tell her that all the suffering, the suffering she created and the suffering she endured, has been without meaning.

And she will not listen to that.

Her mother had left on the second Sunday in January, when Brenda was ten years old. Two days before, her mother had pulled her out of class and took her to the zoo. It was to be their secret, her mother had said on the car ride there. They had looked at the meerkats.

A month later, Brenda's teacher informed her that her mother had signed up to do a reading for the class. Brenda couldn't understand why her mother wasn't there. Every shadow that flitted through the window blinds ripped her attention from whatever worksheet was on her desk.

Brenda begged the teacher to keep waiting. She offered to read the book herself. In the end, her father had come. He had driven the hour from his company to read a thin little book about a family of bears. Hearing the laminated cover crinkle in his hands had nearly pushed Brenda to tears again, but of a different sort.

Until that day, she must not have grasped the idea that her mother was gone for good.

Her dad drives her to the airport a week later. It's as if she's going to college for the first time or flying out to the East for an internship.

Before Brenda goes through the security checkpoint, her dad hugs her and tells her to text him when she's boarding. He's probably hugged her less than twenty times her entire life, but it doesn't matter to her. He cuts her mangoes and sits with her on the porch. That's more than enough.

"Be safe," her dad says.

"Will do," Brenda promises. Then she says goodbye and goes to stand in line for security.

Brenda goes through the same process she's done dozens of times by now: she lifts her suitcase and backpack onto the belt, she takes her shoes off, she slips her watch off of her wrist

and puts it in the plastic tray with her phone. Brenda watches her bags go through the X-ray machine, and the TSA agents wave her through.

When Brenda finally puts her shoes back on, she turns around to see if her dad is still there. He is.

She waves before heading to the gates.

In the well-lit terminal, Brenda almost feels re-made. She's shed the weariness from last week. This is the part where she's figured things out. No longer groping around in the dark, lunging for anything, fleeing from anything. It's a new beginning.

She'll find her mother, and finish whatever she's been hung up on for all 23 wretched years of her life. It'll be done. It'll be over. If Brenda feels remade now, she can hardly imagine how good, and clean, and *fixed* she'll feel when this is done.

Then, as Brenda passes by the food court, she sees a woman come out of the bathroom less than 50 feet in front of her. Brenda recognizes all the features, their composition. It's the face of the woman from the picture in her drawer, the one she hasn't looked at for years but has memorized like her own name. The woman who took her to Venice when she was a kid and left her family less than a year later.

And before Brenda can pick a wiser course of action, she swerves and nearly trips over her own feet in an effort to get away. She finds that her suitcase slows her down; she leaves it standing, hears it fall over from the momentum, but keeps *running*.

She pounds her feet into the floor. The fear reflects off the linoleum and back into her body.

Brenda finally stops behind a juice bar and hides. This is fear, she thinks. As irrational as it is, this is what fear is.

Brenda starts tapping, three times on her forehead, three times on her chin, three times on her collarbone. Three times on her forehead. Three times on her chin. Three times on her collarbone. She taps until she can breathe normally again.

Brenda sees her suitcase still on the floor, and the woman hovering next to it. She must have seen her drop it and run. Brenda swears. She starts to count her breaths.

She watches the woman check her phone. Brenda realizes that the woman must have a flight that's leaving soon, that she'll walk away from the suitcase and give Brenda an opening to get it back.



Before the woman leaves, she turns in a full circle one more time, and when her face comes to Brenda's line of sight, she feels her chest give way.

It's not a release like a jump scare, but softer, like steam rising from the rice cooker at home when Brenda removes the lid, like Kai giving up on an argument before he starts to shout, like Maia getting angry but accepting her excuses over and over.

It's not her mother. After a second look, everything comes out all wrong, the nose smaller, the eyes wider apart, the lips thinner. A shudder passes through her.

Brenda breathes easier and watches the woman leave.

Then, she starts to cry.

Thirty minutes later, Brenda's sitting in a red plastic seat and staring at a deflated chicken sandwich that she hasn't touched. She's saved her suitcase, now standing under the table.

Brenda checks her watch. She's missed her flight, but she keeps staring at the ticking hands as if she can turn them back.

The face of the watch is the face Brenda used during the SAT; its band is the band of the first watch her dad bought in America. Upon her request, he had stitched the two together when she was in high school.

Brenda stares at her diluted reflection in the watch face. More than anyone, it is she that bears the greatest resemblance to her mother.

If Brenda closes her eyes, she can feel the winged thing again, staring at her. Waiting for her. She was wrong, she realizes. Its roosts on her shoulder, not her home.

Before Brenda can think twice about it, she pulls her phone out of her pocket and finds the number she must have stared at for weeks on end. She's met with a voicemail message, but Maia's bright, gentle lilt still makes her want to cry.

"Hi, this is Maia. Sorry I can't come to the phone right now, please leave a message!"

The beep sounds and Brenda snaps herself to action.

"Hey. It's Brenda. I mean, you know that. Saved contact. Yeah. So, anyways, thanks for the DNA test. Sorry I didn't say anything earlier. Kai ended up taking it. Turns out we're like 100% Chinese. So that's cool."

Brenda pinches her nose and inhales before continuing.

“I remembered something else about Venice. As fun as it was, all I could think about on the flight back was how much I wanted to see Kai and my dad again. So, I guess what I’m trying to say is that I miss you. And I’m sorry. I’m so sorry about everything. Okay, that’s it. Yeah. Call me back. I mean, that is, you don’t have to, and I’d understand if you don’t ever want me in your life again. But I hope you’re doing alright. I hope you’re doing good. More than anything.”

Brenda clicks off her phone then and turns it face down, shoving down the slight repulsion she feels at letting the screen touch the surface. Then she folds her arm and slouches in her seat. Her dad would be telling her to sit up straight if he could see her now.

Brenda stares at the grainy surface of the table and crumples the paper straw wrapped in her hand. She’ll have to get another ticket if she still wants to go to Shanghai.

Or she can go back.

Brenda picks up her phone again. This time, she dials the number she knows by heart, the poem of digits she learned when she was eight and never forgot.

“Hey, Dad. I’m coming home.”