

“Tiger Lily Mom”

Senior Honors Thesis

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## Introduction

Made famous by Amy Chua's *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, the phrase "tiger mom" refers to a mother, typically of Asian descent, who practices intense and unyielding parenting methods. While my mother was strict, I don't believe the term "tiger mom" is entirely representative of her. After all, I got away with not playing the piano, violin, or any other musical instrument. My mother's complex and sometimes counterintuitive parenting style is hard to explain, but I definitely feel the need to qualify the label of "tiger mom." There's a delicate and understanding side of her that deserves recognition, especially in stark contrast to her aggressive side.

A tiger lily is said to be a symbol of female courage. Like other lilies, it also represents unconditional love, kindness, and mercy. My mother's unconventional mix of rigid and relaxed parenting is one I have never seen anyone else use. I also do not know a single person who is as close to their mother as I am.

When I began writing this memoir, I found myself taking mental notes whenever I interacted with my mother. It was difficult being with her as just a daughter and not a writer.

While I tried to appreciate our time together, I also worried about remembering our environment, her movements, exactly what she said, and the way she said it. One of the greatest challenges was maintaining her voice and authenticity when I translated her primarily Chinese speech into English (we speak "Chinglish," a mix of Chinese and English, with her relying on more Chinese and me relying on more English). I forgave myself for any poor translations because—despite my limited Chinese—I realized I was the only one who could tell this story, *my* story. And I will stick by that lame excuse until Google Translate learns to read minds.

I struggled a lot to make sense of our relationship—splicing together conversations that didn't follow a clear-cut narrative, representing contradictory interactions in a coherent way, and figuring out what made certain memories special. I couldn't quite figure out how to accurately represent my mother's fickle personality and eventually gave up on trying to pinpoint her defining characteristics. Everybody has good and bad days as well as good and bad qualities (often depending on those days). My mother is many people, and I hope that readers will understand that these stories represent only a few of those people.

Though she cannot read any of my stories so long as they are in English, my will continue to be a source of inspiration for me, both in my writing and in my life.

For Lily, my mother.

## Shirley Temples

In junior high, I had my first Shirley Temple at Boog's Bar and Grill, one of the few sit-down restaurants in my hometown of Marysville, Kansas that had a population of roughly 4,000. I was wary walking in because, at the time, I thought the phrase "bar and grill" had a dirty ring to it, like it was the destination of lewd men with cigarettes and women in too-tight clothing. But my friend Sara suggested we go because she had family there that could give us free cheeseburgers, so I was convinced.

It was Brea who had been raving about the Shirley Temples.

"They are so good!" she said, putting extra spice in the "so." Brea had dark brown hair and a snazzy way about her. She looked forward to mature things like sipping margaritas on a beach, which I thought was cool even though I didn't know what was in a margarita. Brea explained that Shirley Temples were just a mix of just cherry juice and ginger ale, so each of us ordered one.

The drink glowed bright red like a lava lamp. A soft cherry sat on a pile of ice, clear and glossy. The Shirley Temple had the sweet fizz of a classic punch—refreshing and addictive. I sipped the syrupy drink through a sleek black straw until there was just a pink ring of diluted soda at the bottom of my glass. We were chatty and giddy with sugary adolescence. I spun the heavy cubes in my glass with the straw, sad that my first Shirley Temple was over.

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"It was so good!" I told my mother.

"What's in it?" she asked, wiping countertops in the kitchen.

I explained the ingredients like a certified bartender—the same way Brea would, but with less of her saleswoman charisma. I told my mother about the ginger ale and the cherry juice and how you couldn't forget the maraschino cherry on top.

My mother said it sounded pretty basic and that she could make it at home for much cheaper. She resented the markup of restaurant pricing, having worked on the other side of one at the local Chinese American restaurant she and my father owned. It was a family business where my father's siblings also worked.

On the rare occasions I ate out with my parents, my mother always bombarded my father with questions about the ingredients in our entrées and how he would cook it differently. She then told me how easy it was to make—as if I didn't hear their entire conversation at the table—and guarantee that my father's improvised recipe would taste better.

"Why spend so much when we can make this at home?" she said. But I argued that if my father *did* add a few slices ginger here or a spoonful of vinegar there, then the dish would have a different ethnic flavor.

"It wouldn't even taste Italian anymore," I refuted.

"So? Chinese food is better anyway," she said, laughing at herself though she wasn't joking at all.

For the days following my experience at Boog's, I mixed Shirley Temples at home to unwind from long days at junior high. I imagined Shirley Temples were what coffee tasted like to working adults or what alcohol tasted like to kids who wanted to be adults—it was something I needed: the harsh bubbles in my throat, the sugar high, the dizziness from a gulp with a lot of carbonation. If I was religious, Shirley Temples would have been my saint.

We already had a jar of maraschino cherries in the fridge, so my parents only needed to bring home a Styrofoam cup of pop from the restaurant—Sprite was the closest thing we had but it was good enough for me, especially because we had an endless supply of it from the fountain machine.

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At my first home track meet that year, I waited at the second leg of the 4x1 relay, which was appropriately given to the slowest runner of the team. The sun had dropped to the side of the sky, indicating that it was afternoon, and more importantly between lunch and dinner hours when my mother could leave work. We lived only a block from the track, so she walked down the steep hill from our house to the high school.

The gun fired. The first runner took the curve with the power of a horse, galloping at me as the red baton glinted with each stride. I kept our lead down the straight and less than 30 seconds after my handoff, we won the race.

My mom watched from the stadium. I could always point her out of the home crowd of red, white, and black t-shirts even though she wore my school colors, too. She was the one who sat alone because both my parents couldn't leave the restaurant. The language barrier kept her comfortably isolated from the other parents, but she hated small talk anyway. She sat with her legs crossed like a lady regardless of what she wore: an grease-stained t-shirt from cutting and frying chicken or a sparkly black cardigan and wedge heels she was only willing to buy at 75% off. My mother loved fashion, but it was a wasted interest since she could not wear stylish clothes while she waitressed. Instead she usually wore a polo and black slacks, but she did take the liberty to wear high heel boots. She could walk around all day in heels, taking drink orders and clearing tables while customers remained unaware that she was actually three inches shorter.

I walked up the stadium steps toward my #1 fan.

“You run pretty fast,” she said with a congratulatory smile. “Look!” She held up a translucent blue water bottle that colored the liquid inside a light purple.

“It’s your favorite!” she said. “We didn’t have any Sprite at home though so I just used cherry juice and water. It should taste the same, shouldn’t it?” She shook the bottle of what was supposed to be a Shirley Temple. She said she tried some and it tasted good. One hand shielded her eyes from the sun and the other held out her surprise for me.

I took a drink and squinted my eyes, too, even though the sun was on my back. I tried to keep my lips from pulling up in disgust because the concoction tasted like watered down cough syrup. The bottle had been sitting outside long enough to reach an unpleasantly warm temperature—the kind you feel when you take the seat of someone who hasn’t moved in a while. Maybe she would think my face was contorted from heat exhaustion and not the drink—she didn’t have to know.

I nodded my head and shrugged like I couldn’t tell she improvised. It was the same face I probably made when my mother began experimenting with smoothies. She combined chocolate syrup and apples, which resulted in a grainy brown slush.

“Not bad,” she said of her bizarre flavor combination.

I thanked my mother for the Shirley Temple and handed back the bottle.

She took a drink herself and made a face that made me think we tasted very different things.

“See?” She held up the bottle to admire like a trophy. “I can make it right at home. You don’t need to go to a restaurant.” And she was right because I never purchased another Shirley Temple again.

## **This is College**

My mother, father, older sister and I walked down the cobbled red street to Spice Island Tea House, a Thai restaurant with a dingy storefront tucked into West Oakland. Despite its outer appearance, it's one of the best places restaurants near Carnegie Mellon campus and my favorite place to eat in all of Pittsburgh. It was the perfect place to take my family for homecoming weekend.

The atmosphere in Spice Island reminds me of an Egyptian tomb illuminated by lantern — mottled browns, tans, and dark reds absorbed the light and enclosed a collection of mismatched furniture. Earthy artifacts decorated the walls and a chalkboard listed the tea of the day.

We sat in a booth in the back corner of the dimly lit restaurant. I ordered for my family: Singaporean fried rice, pad kee mao, a spicy curry, and the house tea, which was a light mango flavored one.

We dug our forks into each dish and my parents followed every bite with commentary.

~~“What did they use?” My mother took another bite of pad kee mao and turned to my~~  
father. “Garlic? What else?” My sister and I exchanged a knowing glance.

My father chewed thoughtfully, as much as he could without any teeth. He was only 58 but had lost all his teeth years ago. But strangely, he did not have a single gray hair. He mulled over the food, moving his jaw softer than most people, but maybe he was just appreciating it more.

As we walked down Louise Street to my family's hotel, the sky exploded. Red, gold, white fireworks ignited the darkness above us and we lifted our chins to drink in the unknown

celebration. I wondered if it was for the University of Pittsburgh's homecoming since CMU would not have such grandiose display, or maybe it was to commemorate the giant rubber duck attraction floating in Allegheny River. We parked ourselves on the corner of the street to get a clear view of the fireworks. To the side of the main show, the Cathedral of Learning shot off a few measly fireworks every now and then, like stray notes within an orchestra. We laughed every time.

As the crackling and booming above continued, a flock of long-legged college girls galloped by in five-inch heels, shrieking like heifers. They leaned onto one another with heavy kneecaps and light states of mind. They all wore short, black dresses—the whiteness of their bare legs exaggerated by the headlights of passing cars with faceless drivers. I directed my sister's attention to our parents' facial expressions and their unfamiliarity with this distasteful and obnoxious group dynamic.

"Where are *they* going? What's the occasion?" My mother asked.

"Friday night," I said. My sister nodded.

"This is just what college is like," my father said, despite never having attended himself.

He said it with conviction and nonchalance as if he was stating that the world was round. I like the think I inherited his witticism.

My mother asked us how the girls could walk in those heels and if their legs are cold.

"Where are their jackets?" she said. My parents watched the caravan of college girls stalk off into the night.

"It's so weird to think that neither of them have experienced college," my sister whispered to me. I thought about the four years of mistaken invincibility and mental maturing that are missing from their timelines.

Neither was the studious type though, so it wasn't as if college was an unattainable dream of theirs. My mother often cheated off friends in school and to this day has recurring dreams about sitting in a classroom, being completely stumped by an exam.

"I had a nightmare I got into MIT!" she once told me. She patted her chest, as if to calm her heart, and shook her head at the absurdity of it.

"Nightmare? Why would that be a nightmare? It's an name brand school," I teased. My mother, like most Asian parents, loved prestigious institutions—the ones that topped the annual college rankings lists, which she cut out of her Chinese newspapers and saved.

"I thought, 'this must be some kind of mistake,'" she said. "I can't even read English! How am I going to do the homework? But the admissions officer told me I would be fine and that everyone who was accepted into MIT was capable of graduating. But I thought, 'I'm doomed.'"

She knew college was no place for her, but she always wanted the best for me. She was the one who drove me to SAT testing centers, college information sessions, and college interviews. My father was equally as supportive of my education, though his support was not as visible as my mother's. He was a behind-the-scenes kind of parent, as necessary and hidden as the pilot of a plane, while my mother was the stewardess.

My parents returned to looking at the fireworks, starry-eyed and worshipping the sky like sunflowers. The show lit their faces like kids watching late night TV. After a few more minutes, we tired of its entertainment factor and continued down Louise Street.

But before we entered the hotel, the finale demanded our attention by shooting rapid fire. I kept hoping for the next one because I didn't want the night to end. I was cozy and satiated, surrounded by my family like old times when I had less to worry about. We paired off and held

each other—my mother hugged my sister's waist and my father draped his arm around my shoulder.

We clapped with the other people in the parking lot who also stopped to stare. The Cathedral of Learning shot off a pathetic good-bye firework. We laughed one last time before heading indoors.

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The hotel room smelled of cigarette smoke. We drank the free coffee from the lobby and doused it with French vanilla cream. There was only one bed because I booked my parents' room unaware of my sister's surprise visit. At dinner we decided she would stay with me at my dorm, but the two of us crashed at the hotel because it was "too dangerous" to walk to campus at 1 AM, according to my parents. I never told my parents about the time I hitchhiked alone to McDonald's at 4 AM or how the stranger who gave me a ride was actually a nice man.

My parents brought a mooncake to celebrate the Mid-Autumn Festival. We cut it into eight pieces with a plastic knife we took from the Panera Bread downstairs. We chewed on the dense mooncake, filled with lotus seed paste and fruit preserves, and talked until early morning. This late night conversing was called "kai hui," and whenever one of us said the word at home, each family member would turn off the TV, wake up from his or her nap, and crawl out from every corner of the house to gather around the dining table and enjoy each other's company. Even Dodo knew the routine, though she mainly came to paw at my father's arm for crumbs of whatever small snacks we ate.

In the cramped hotel room, the four of us slept horizontally on the queen bed. My father, the tallest, was only 5'6", but our feet hung off the bed and our Achilles heels curled over the edge of mattress. We slept two to a sheet, but were grateful for our own pillows.

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It reminded me of our first home in Marysville, Kansas: a brick house that was fire truck red, where I lived before the start of kindergarten. There were hooks on the porch ceiling, but my parents didn't have the money or desire to install a swing—they invested all they had into opening the restaurant, so the house was just a roof for the night and not quite a home. Mushrooms grew in the bathroom and bugs crawled on the kitchen walls. My sister, mother, and I all slept on one king sized bed in the living room. My father's bed was in the dining room. An aunt and uncle, who also worked at my parents' restaurant, lived upstairs and one of my parents' restaurant employees lived in the laundry room, which had no washer or dryer. It was typical in Asian culture for employers to provide their employees with housing. So the entire household travelled on the same schedule in a herd—to the restaurant in the morning and to the red brick house on Alston Street at night.

But even when my family of four moved to nicer houses with rooms to spare, away from our extended family and miscellaneous restaurant employees, I continued sleeping in the same bed with my mother. That lasted until at least fifth grade and I later wondered if it was one reason we were so close. People lay in bed at night to relax their bodies; but oftentimes, they also relax their minds and allow themselves to think thoughts too vulnerable for broad daylight. I imagine I did just that as a child, but it was different for me because I had someone beside me to confide in.

When I grew older and eventually retired to my own bed at night, I still felt an intimate bond with my mother that made me comfortable with telling her anything: the first time I drank, the first time I had sex, and even the first time I tried drugs. Though my mother never attended college herself, she was not naïve about what young people did.

In high school, I told her some parents wouldn't let their kids go on overnight trips with their boyfriends or girlfriends.

"Could they really be so stupid?" she said. "They think kids will only have sex at night in a bed? You can literally have sex anytime, anywhere. The more you tell kids no, the more they want to do it," she said. "So what's the point? Go do it! Go try everything."

When I asked why she was so trusting of me, she said that if you straightened out a tree early in life, you didn't have to worry about how it grew later. "It's the parents who are trying to straighten out a tree once it's crooked that have the problems."

My mother didn't buy it when parents loudly berated their children in public. "It's all for show," she said. "If they parented that way when no one was watching, then their child would not be doing this right now."

She didn't believe in parenting books or asking a rowdy child to "please" sit down.

"That's what they should be doing," she said. "Why should I have to beg?"

When other parents made a huge deal about good grades—or even Bs—my mother scoffed. She thought doing well in school was something to be expected of the child.

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"Everyone needs to do their job. Kid needs to be a good kid. Parent needs to be good parent." Unlike most tiger moms though, my mother set the bar for me only as high as she could jump herself. A tiger mom was a jockey who cracked the whip and demanded that her horse run faster. My mother was the jockey who ran beside me and finished the race as exhausted as I was. She didn't bait me with a carrot at the end of a stick because she didn't need to—she instilled in me a sense of pride that made me want to do well for myself, not for her or anyone else. But during times when I would come away with a win, I was happy I could make her proud, too.

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As I was dozing off in the hotel room, I heard my sister cough and my father snore—small human sounds to remind me I wasn't alone. The room was too warm and made my skin stick to the sheets. I kicked off my side of the covers. We cracked the balcony door earlier that evening but the room seemed to reheat the later we stayed up and the longer our voices stirred the air. There was no hope for the cigarette smell because it was already years into the walls. I waited for sleep to take me in the dark, listening to the body noises and letting dirty and warm air fill my lungs. Pittsburgh was hours from waking up and I knew I wouldn't get enough sleep to cheer at my football game the next day. But beside me, my mother breathed a lullaby in her slumber and it was the most comfortable I had been in a while.

## The Patio

In the outdoors section of the Super Wal\*Mart parking lot, my mother handed me another cement slab the size of a license plate to load onto our neighbor's pea green pick-up truck. He let us borrow it when he found out about my mother's newest home improvement project: converting our front yard into a patio space where my we could sit with our shih tzu, Dodo, and "sai tai yang," or bask in the sunlight. Our neighbor Peter called the truck "The Green Dragon" for its trusty engine that spit and sputtered but got the job done.

Instead of pouring a concrete foundation, my mother bought dozens of cement slabs to use as a platform for the patio. After paying for the tiles inside, we helped ourselves to the mountain of gray cement outside the building. She shuttled the blocks from Wal\*Mart's inventory to the edge of the truck bed and I stacked the blocks like a bricklayer, staggering the crevices so they wouldn't topple over and crack on the way home. She brought gardening gloves to protect our skin from abrasion.

It was the gritty, yet relaxing kind of manual work that cleared your mind of stress—the kind of work my mother excelled at. She was not the brightest intellectually, but she made up for it with her solid work ethic, quick hand-eye coordination, and impatient efficiency in anything she did. She criticized her in-laws who she worked with at the restaurant—lecturing them about faster and more efficient ways to refill drinks or prepare food. When my aunt wiped down a table, my mother would clean it again with her own towel because she didn't think it was clean enough. She even lectured the customers, to my embarrassment, about the right way to hold soup bowls. "Hey hey hey," she shouted at them. "Like this," she said, rearranging a child's hands around a bowl and plate to stabilize it. Some children were wide-eyed, either afraid of my

mother's tone or unfamiliar with her aggressive parenting methods. But the one thing these children had in common was that they never spilled their soup.

My mother and I took a break after moving every 20 cement tiles. 41, 42, 43....

We were both a little sweaty from the labor, our muscles stretched and sore from doing the same motions over and over.

"You're going to look back on this and miss it," she said. I was senior in high school, so my quality time with her was limited. She told me about similar memories of physical labor with her own father—she was an active child because him. He, being a physical education teacher, made her wake up early to exercise and swim in ice cold pools or do yard work with him. He was the hands-on parent for her, like my mother was to me. He passed away that year.

"You might not know it now, but you'll grow old and think about that time you built a patio with your mom," she said.

"I'm enjoying it now," I said. I watched her flip her short boyish bangs out of her face with her gloves. Her father never allowed her to have long hair as a child because it interfered with sports. After having shoulder length hair in her young adulthood, she returned to her cropped hair because it was easier to take care of. She cut it herself, taking a buzzer to the back with a hand mirror in the bathroom. On one night of incredible boldness, she buzzed her entire head—her hair was no longer than an inch. Upon seeing her, one customer at the restaurant asked if she was "sick."

I overlooked her from the truck bed. She walked in sturdy strides. "One more," she said, handing the last cement tile up to me.

My mother and I climbed into The Green Dragon. "You know, I could take an extra two or three pieces and they would never know," she said. "We already paid...."

She shrugged at the lost opportunity of taking \$6 worth of cement tiles. I shook my head at mother's stingy side, which always came out for the most insignificant costs. She took extra napkins at fast food restaurants and gas stations, but didn't hesitate to drop a grand on a designer purse. I thought it was a strange conflict between her humble upbringing and her current ability to buy the things she never had growing up. When she was a child, her family could only afford to give her candy and treats on major holidays. I couldn't fathom that she once lived a life so different that the one she led now: glass bowls of assorted candies and nuts sitting in the living room and dining room, our house a block away from a general store full of snacks, a bank account with enough padding to afford dessert at every meal. But her childhood experiences would explain why we packed an entire suitcase of candy when we visited her friends and family in China. That grocery trip was every child's dream—we checked out with an entire shopping cart of candy.

My mother drove The Green Dragon out of the parking lot and down the highway that ran east and west—one of only two highways that cut through Marysville. The truck roared along the sunset path until we reached the main part of town, marked by one of three stoplights the town had. My mother turned left onto a red brick road that led to our home. She parked outside the garage closest to the patio area, which was now a patch of dirt with the bushes cut down. Like ants, we carried our supplies piece by piece again and formed a pile near the front door. 41, 42, 43....

Across the street, we saw Peter, talkative and generously mustached, pulling a familiar passerby in to conversation. He is a good-natured and well-connected man in the community—everyone knew him by name before he lived a full year in Marysville. He came over to our lawn and suggested my mother and I pour a thin bed of sand on the ground before arranging the

cement tiles. He said it would keep them from cracking in the winter when moisture made the cement expand. I thought it was a good idea, but my mother said we didn't need to because the tiles would not crack. She declared many things she could not guarantee, but science has never intimidated my mother. Peter smiled at my mother's stubbornness, stroked his peppery facial hair, and left to be helpful elsewhere.

My mother and I switched jobs so she could arrange the tiles the way she wanted, directly onto the dirt with no sand in between. She left a few holes in the foundation to plant the flowers we bought from the farmers market. The gray blocks formed an even ground over the dirt and improved our house's curb appeal like a fresh coat of paint. I had doubts about my mother's vision of a patio, but the solid foundation before me showed it was really coming together.

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My mother and I walked down Broadway Street to a local gift shop that was as cloying and overpriced as Hallmark. A rich green canopy hung over the storefront and the word "Reflections" was printed in gold. My mother and I usually came exclusively for their post-holiday sales when items were 75% off, but this time she wanted to show me a patio bench that caught her eye.

A child-sized wooden bench sat along the entryway of the store. It had metal legs that curled under the seat like vines. On the backrest, metal was shaped into the word "WILDCATS" to pay tribute to the mascot of Kansas State University, or K-State, a popular college pick for Marysville High School graduates. K-State was located 45 minutes in the charming town of Manhattan, Kansas. Some time in elementary school, when I began recognizing locations beyond my home, school, and parents' restaurant, I learned that New York also had a town called Manhattan. I had a special attachment to the Kansas location though because my family and I

made regular trips to on Mondays—when the restaurant was closed—because it had one of the closest shopping malls.

Thought K-State has one of the best agriculture programs in the nation, to me it only represented the bubble that insulated my classmates and I from opportunities beyond our state borders. My mother shared my distaste for K-State for the same reason, or so I thought as I looked at the Wildcats bench she wanted to buy.

“What do you think?” my mother asked. “Doesn’t it match the big bench that we have? We can sit on the big one and Dodo can sit on this one.” She swung it around by the arm to examine its dimensions.

“It’s cute,” I said, which was true. While I disliked K-State, it seemed silly to hate a bench. Plus, as a senior in high school with no plans of staying close for college, I only had to look at it for another year. I found the only lady working in the store to tell her we are interested.

“Okay, great,” she said. Do you want this one or the Jayhawks one?” She motioned toward a disassembled bench in a cardboard box on the side. Jayhawks are the mascot of the University of Kansas, or KU, a huge sports rival of K-State and my sister’s alma mater before she transferred to Cornell. I disliked KU less than K-State, but only because it was more liberal and farther away from Marysville.

I translated to my mother that there was a KU option, but she pointed to the original bench and said she liked it better.

“We don’t want a college one, do we? And this one is already assembled. Let’s just take this one.”

I was confused why she would dismiss KU and not K-State if she didn't want a college bench, but she seemed set on her decision. So I paid the cashier and we took the assembled Wildcats bench to display in front of our anti-K-State household.

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One week later, my mother and I sat outside on the big bench and admire our handiwork of our finished patio. The holes in the cement were finally filled with the bright red flowers from the farmers market though they looked a little odd planted in the middle of the ground, sticking up awkwardly like the antlers of a buried deer. A black scalloped siding that my mother and I hammered into the dirt looked sharp on the outskirts of the patio, around the glittering white rocks that look like chunks of moon. Two large turtle sculptures guarded either side of the steps leading up to our front door.

To the right of us was the mini Wildcats bench.

"It's funny," I said, looking at it. "I thought you didn't like K-State either."

"Who said I liked K-State?"

"Well, you could've gotten the KU one, which made more sense...."

We both looked at the mini bench.

"But I didn't want a college one," she said. I looked at the bench again to check that I've read it correctly.

"But that one says, 'Wildcats,'" I said. I pointed at it like that somehow made my mother literate. "That's K-State's mascot."

"Wildcats?" My mother pulled her head back and frowned at the bench. "I thought it said, 'Welcome.'" She ran a finger across each syllable as she said it. "Wel-come. It doesn't say 'Welcome?'"

I buried my face in my hands and laughed as her shopping decision finally made sense to me.

"I saw the W and the C...how stupid!" She started laughing with me. "Why did I get this bench?" We both stared at the mini bench that managed to sneak its way onto our property. It sat there for only one more night before my mother and I returned it for the Jayhawks one.

My mother's inability to read English had caused other minor problems in the past, like the time she bought the large breed dog biscuits for Dodo. The milk bones were the size of Dodo's whole leg.

However, my mother didn't let her illiteracy inhibit her from living her life. There was a bold recklessness in the way she ignored English text, whether it was instruction manuals, signs, labels, or even warnings. She wasn't strung up on technicalities and procedures, which meant she wasn't shackled by the fear of a missed step. Whenever I cautioned her to wait for my translation, she went forward anyway, saying, "tsa bu dou," which meant "close enough."

She believed most things were intuitive and didn't see the point of following directions.

"If it's wrong, I'll just go back and try something different," she said. She didn't like to look before she leaped. Sometimes, I felt she leaped with her eyes closed, like the time she drove by herself from Pittsburgh to Marysville after dropping me off at college, a 17-hour drive. She didn't comprehend any location names.

"I passed I-oh-ha," she said. "Oh-hi-a. One of those O-I states." She could never differentiate between Iowa, Idaho, or Ohio. But she ended up in Kansas, which was all that really mattered.

My mother's haphazard way of ignoring the signs and getting the gist of an action taught me to look at the big picture. I found the mindset liberating the older I got, as structure mattered

more and more, restricting those who were raised to read all the signs. My mother's lifestyle may not have been the smartest way to go about things, but she never felt restrained, the way a bird flies right past a stop sign without a second thought—because sometimes words matter and other times, a bench is still a bench.

## I Feel Pretty

"I wish you wouldn't work out so vigorously," my mother said to me after my run. My forehead was covered in beads of sweat that dribbled from my hairline. My mother looked at me the way she looked at strangers who wore frumpy clothes.

"Well, if I you want me to lose weight..." I started my first set of squats.

I gained weight during my semester abroad in England the spring semester of my junior year. My mother was not pleased. She watched my every movement like a dance instructor, which she once was in her hometown in China. I imagined the young body my mother once had—lighter, leaner, but by no means ideal for a ballet dancer. Her limbs have since thickened, as they do with age, but she walks with the same technical strides that are engrained into the muscle memory of a dancer's body.

I was still an acceptable weight by American standards—125 lbs at 5'3". But "American average" and "Asian average" were two very different things. In fact, "American average" was probably closer to "Asian fat," which was anything higher than a size 6. As an Asian, I had the advantage of having a smaller frame, but it also meant it was more of an abomination to my heritage to be overweight.

While I did want to be a few pounds lighter, I didn't take my weight gain as hard as my mother did—or at least I didn't show it. I would run a bit more, I told myself. I would bounce back to "Asian average."

"Can't you just lightly stretch?" she said. "You're going to get bulky."

I dropped to another squat. It burned my thighs.

"It's not attractive, Connie. It's not what ladies look like. You're starting to look like a man. You see?" She cut an upside down triangle out of the air with the sides of her hands. "That's a man." Her hands then undulated in and out, forming an hourglass figure. "This is a lady."

She couldn't understand why I wanted to gain muscle, a quite American way of thinking for a girl, considering how healthy would never be the "new skinny" in Asia. Skinny was what was trendy in Asia and that's how it would always be.

She continued tracing shapes in front of me. "You see? Lady...man."

"Well, this is me," I said, and I sliced two parallel lines in the air. "Me."

"Your body is too hard." She cuffed my bicep and shook her head with disapproval. "Why do you want to train into this?" She examined the other parts of me with muscle mass too high for a lady.

"I like it." I kicked my foot out and flexed my quad. "Feel it. Isn't it nice?"

"It doesn't look good, Connie. Listen to me." She didn't even feel it.

"What do you know about fitness?" I said. My eyes didn't meet my own gaze into the mirror in our living room. "If I wanted to look like you, I'd ask you." Another squat.

My mother was not out of shape for her late 40s though, not even close. We had almost the same stats—she was 5'2" and in the 115-120 lbs range. The only difference was her body was loose from age, like a stretched sweater. Plenty of customers at my parent's restaurant could not believe that she had had two children already in their 20s. She prided herself on maintaining her weight and attributed it to walking the mile to work whenever possible and sometimes eating only one meal a day—that's as much food as people needed, she said.

However, my mother didn't know much about the particulars behind weight loss, like how cardio workouts were the most effective way to lose weight.

"I'm only saying it because I care about you. No one else will tell you this." She said the words like a last call to the survivors of the Titanic—a lifeline.

I started my second set of squats. I didn't need her help. I decided that if I couldn't be skinny, then I would be strong. And I convinced myself that our different standards of beauty were the reason I couldn't achieve her idea of perfect, when in reality, I was just struggling to lose that extra weight.

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My mother has blue eyebrows. They faded from black since she first had them tattooed, along with her eyeliner, which is less noticeably discolored. She plucked my eyebrows when I was in fifth grade. Pencil thin brows were in style at the time, so I blame that trend for why my eyebrows are now so sparse.

My mother has never read an English book to me because she is not literate enough. My mother has never read a Chinese book to me because she hates reading. Instead, she taught me life skills I couldn't learn in a classroom like how to walk in heels—I was a pro before I entered high school. She emphasized the importance of presenting one's best self.

"Chest out, head up, walk with one foot in front of the other in a line." It was like I was one of her dance students. She even preached the "penny between the cheeks" lesson from ballet. "Pretend a string is pulling you up from your head. It's lifting you up. Stand straight."

She made me walk back and forth across the living room, sometimes in the heels. On one side of the living room, she installed a mirror the size of the entire wall. I found myself staring at my own reflection more often than usual—it was hard not to with a mirror that big. It was right

by the front door, so every morning before I left the house, I caught a glimpse of what the rest of the world would see that day. I considered my mother to be superficial at the time, but the value of presentation is one of the most practical things my mother has taught me. I've never worried about how to dress properly for different occasions. No teacher in elementary school would have told me about how the world would give unfair advantages to attractive people or how appearance can be a deciding factor in otherwise equally qualified people. She presented me with an unfiltered reality. My mother knew that my formal education would teach the importance of personality and intellect, which she prioritized herself—she was merely teaching me a lesson I may not learn elsewhere. In stressing the power of appearances, she prepared me for the unique challenges and societal expectations I would face as a girl.

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“I liked how you were this past winter. You were perfect then,” she said, referring to the winter right before I studied abroad. Her glassy eyes floated upward, like she was reminiscing a sweet memory. We were at the dining table. I swung my feet over the rug under my seat. My socks, still damp from my run, felt cool between the toes.

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“I’ll get back to how I used to be,” I said, comforting her.

“Can you?” She met my eyes. I saw hope in them.

“I mean—I’ll try.” I was trying.

“I used to think you could get any guy you wanted. I’m just worried about you.” Her voice cracked.

The back of my body was warm and alert—the way I felt when I was being watched. I held the edge of my seat for more security. It felt like she was breaking up with me.

“I used to think you were so smart and beautiful and—” She started to cry.

"And now I'm just smart and that's not good enough?" A heat inside of me flared.

She choked out a nutty laugh I wish stayed in her throat.

"No," she agreed, wiping tears from her eyes. "It's not like that." She explained how it was natural to like someone "not as much" if they didn't meet your expectations, that you loved people more if they had qualities you liked, and that she would always love me and that it was just a matter of whether it was more or less. "That's all," she said, dismissing her explanation. She dabbed at her face with a napkin.

"Do you love me less?" she asked.

I didn't.

"I'd love you if you were 300 pounds because you're my mother." I started crying. "I love you because you're you, not because of how you look."

She asserted that she did love me.

"You just love me less," I restated for my own ears. The placemats on the dining table were unaligned. I didn't fix them.

She denied it again, padding it with some contradictory filler. She apologized for crying and being dramatic, realizing how silly it was to cry over a fat daughter now that she had some time to think about it. Her mood turned light when her eyes dried. She said she didn't mean what she said.

I used to feel guilty about being the "favorite child" between my sister and me because I assumed it was because I was younger—a typical Chinese favoritism. But as I sat at the dining table, feeling pitiful and embarrassed, I remembered a study from a psych class I took that proved cuter babies received more love and attention than their less attractive counterparts.

My mother waited with me for my tears to stop. She was patient, but she didn't take my pain seriously. It seemed entertaining to her, like watching a toddler throw a fit. She didn't know that no boy had ever made me feel worse about my looks than she did at that moment.

I pulled out a piece of paper and wrote three words in large print. I thickened the last word with the felt tip marker.

"What does that say?" she asked, unable to read it herself. She was amused by my melodramatic writing and stared blankly at the foreign words, bird-like. The paper read:

**PROVE HER WRONG**

"Connie, you aren't going to tell me what it says?" I continued to darken the letters. She thought it was funny, like I was playing keep-away. I didn't tell her what it meant because I barely knew what it meant.

After a while, she left the room to play with Dodo or watch dramas on one of three Chinese channels we received through satellite. When I was in high school, I read the error message on the TV screen after severe thunderstorms and made the channels come back. But since I left for college, my mother only tells me about how the TV isn't working over the phone—there is nothing I can do, but it usually fixes itself after a while. On those mornings, I imagine that she sits on our couch and as the words "No Signal" sit on the screen. She cannot read the words, but she will know that something is not right. She will then turn off the TV and have no choice but to play with Dodo.

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During my senior year, I began regularly weightlifting. I also opened up about another concern of mine, related to my weight.

"I think I have a problem with binge eating."

The counselor asked me to describe an episode of my binge eating and how I felt when it happened. I told her about the time I ate eight cupcakes in one sitting and how I wanted to stop after the third, but that my body just kept going. I told her about the immense guilt I felt with everything I ate—healthy or unhealthy—because all excess calories made people fat. Period.

“Do I have an eating disorder?” I asked.

Disordered eating was what she called it. Basically, I didn’t binge frequently enough to have a problem, but I didn’t binge infrequently enough to be normal.

While it was nice to talk confidentially about my eating issues, I didn’t like how the counselor sourced my disordered eating back to my mother. It didn’t believe it was her fault even though it may have appeared that way from the outside. She was not the reason I started bingeing—which was while I was abroad—or the reason I continued to binge, despite her hurtful comments. I still don’t know why I started bingeing, though it never felt like a voluntary decision. I just felt lost and stressed about my future, what I was doing for the summer, and what I was doing after graduation. My bingeing felt out of my control.

I read a book, *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom*, that spoke a truth I failed to recognize earlier: “But it is not what I am saying that is hurting you; it is that you have wounds that I touch by what I have said.”

My mother was wrong to react the way she did, but it only hurt worse because I was dissatisfied with my own body. She merely voiced what I didn’t want to acknowledge: I gained weight. She was right in that no other person would be honest as she was. Instead they would say that I didn’t need to lose weight and that anything I gained was “all muscle.” My mother’s words hurt a lot, but I have to give her credit for motivating me to exercise more, even if it was out of

anger and spite. She was never afraid to be the bad guy. I could always count on her to be honest, but whether it helped or hurt me was a different story.

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It was winter break, six months after I had returned from my semester abroad. I was back home in my living room, looking at my own reflection with my mother. I was exercising in a sports bra and shorts.

"I thought you were fatter, but you look really nice," she said.

"I want to get so fit that I can run without a shirt on."

"You look very good. I think you can run without a shirt on, and I have very high standards."

It was incredibly rewarding to hear those words come from her mouth, but I felt like I could do better.

"Not yet," I said and I continued with my exercises.

## Gua Sha

"See? It doesn't hurt her when I do it," my father said. He dragged a copper coin-like disk at an angle against my bare back. It was attached to a short wooden stick, roughly the size of a jump rope handle. I was resting on my stomach on my mother's bed. She sat on the left side of the queen-sized bed, which was normally left cold because my father slept in his own bed in the basement. He snored.

She was cross-legged under the covers and my father was perched at the foot of the bed. The bedspread was a metallic ruby with earthy chiffon roses. My mother switched between that and a light, gold bedspread in the warmer months.

"Not too hard. You're doing it too hard!" she said to my father, who continued to carve into my back. My mother had a habit of berating him lovingly, the way long-time spouses do. I closed my eyes to shut out the pain.

"Up," she said, and I lifted my cheek from the pillow. She passed her entire forearm under my head to lay out my hair.

"I'm going very light," my father said.

He traced a pattern like a fish skeleton straight down the middle of my spine, with alternating strokes to the left and then the right. The copper disc pressed hard enough into my skin to leave a trail of pink. My father, with skillful and deliberate strokes, did this until my entire back was covered with burning stripes.

My skin felt raw, like he had peeled back a dead layer, unearthing a fresh and vulnerable surface.

I had agreed to try a type of traditional Chinese medical practice called “gua sha” after coming down with an upset stomach. For dinner, I cooked pesto chicken with a friend, but I couldn’t find the appetite. My stomach was mostly empty, but it felt like a box instead of I asked my friend to leave so I could lie down.

I didn’t feel ill often. I had only experienced a handful of headaches in my life and my colds were usually just symptoms of the head like a runny nose or a barking cough. But that night, my stomach was torturing me.

I lay on my side on the couch. The living room was dark. My father walked in and interrupted my view of the back wall whose shelves were lined with candles, photo frames, and garage sale and antique shop trinkets my mother recently began collecting. Without light, the shelves looked like cityscapes—a taste of the urban contained in a small Midwestern home. My dad asked if I wanted to try gua sha, to which I said no the first time.

“It’ll make you feel better. Really,” he said. His voice was not pleading, as if the miracle of gua sha was persuasive enough on its own.

It was only after I emptied everything from my system and still felt terrible that I agreed to try gua sha. We relocated to my mother’s bedroom to begin the procedure.

My parents used gua sha all the time to relieve upset stomachs, fevers, nausea, and basically any kind of general discomfort. It was the aspirin of our household since our medicine cabinet never had any. The practice of casually popping a Tylenol for a headache disturbed my mother, who believed that Americans ate pills like candy.

“The human body doesn’t need pills,” she would say. “You just need to tough it out for a little while, but people cry and moan over every little pain. They will eat vitamins but they won’t eat their fruits and vegetables. It’s not the same. I don’t trust it.”

My mother's stance only using medicine in extreme cases affected my own perceptions of its use. A friend once asked if I had any Ibuprofen in my purse and I was surprised because the possibility of it seemed as likely as casually carrying around a stethoscope.

My mother peeled back the sheets of her bed and tucked me in from my waist down. I lied on my stomach and she pushed my shirt to the top of my back. My father went to retrieve the necessary items from our medicine cabinet.

During gua sha, skin is prepped with body oil and then scraped with a hard metal disk to create bruises. The words "gua sha" literally translate to "scraping bruises." The practice is said to stimulate blood flow and promote "healing"—that's the word my mother used. I found it too generic of an explanation and wrote off gua sha as folk medicine. Through later research, I discovered there was scientific backing, but that the practice was still largely regarded as an Eastern practice.

When my older sister was a baby, my family used gua sha on her to relieve discomfort. But when it came time for a check-up, my parents feared the doctor would mistake the markings of gua sha for physical abuse.

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Despite gua sha's mysterious method of healing, I gave it a shot. I probably would've tried anything with the way I was feeling. When I pressed for more scientific reasoning, my mother said gua sha brought all the bad things in your system to the surface so your body could expel it. I was unconvinced, but desperate. My father returned with his tools.

He used body oil with hints of lavender, though the other mysterious ingredients overpowered any pleasant scent it may have had. It came in a clear, octagonal vile with a yellow cap and had a pungent medicinal smell that I came to associate with both sickness and recuperation from how often my parents used it. The scent was like menthol to the nose and

aloe vera to the skin but more menacing. The oil's smell would cling to clothes and bed sheets, so it was always a laundry day after any gua sha session. But I was used to it because many effective Asian medicines were pungent, such as Tiger Balm, a pain relieving ointment that could calm my mosquito bites that would otherwise swell to the size of a baseball.

When I pressed my father for a particular symptom that gua sha was meant to alleviate, he said everything:

"Trust me, you'll feel much better in the morning," he said. While my mother couldn't explain it either, she said that ancient Chinese remedies were kept around for a reason.

My father carved more stripes into my back and my mom told me about another common Chinese practice.

"Bundle a sick person in as many blankets as you can so they sweat out the bad things. You have to cover them completely, head and everything, so they are very hot." She grabbed at the air, collecting invisible blankets.

She then told me about a friend's grandma who used this remedy and ended up suffocating inside a mountain of linens.

"I guess they just wrapped too tightly," she said. She shrugged, like death by blankets was as unavoidable as a natural disaster. "Should we use more oil?"

The friction of the copper on my skin had dried out the first application. My father applied another coat, working it into my back with calloused hands. Despite being stronger than my mother, his backrubs were always softer. My parents worked on my body like mechanics, passing tools to each other and moving me around. My mother brushed the hair out of my face and my father reapplied oil on the dry patches of my skin. The process of scraping was painful, but I felt very safe. Maybe this is how one could personify tough love.

Gua sha was initially satisfying like itching a bug bite, but the satisfaction went away when I no longer had an itch and the scratching went on and on. It was like a thick fingernail clawing at my back, which number as I became conditioned to the burn. My mother looked at my twisted face as I tried to stay silent. I smiled through the tingling pain.

"You're doing it too hard!" My mother playfully slapped my father's hand.

"The harder you scrape, the more effective it is," he said as I yelped.

"It hurts! I'm uncomfortable," I laughed through the misery.

"No, it feels good!" my mother said.

I tried to relax my face and my shoulders and embrace the pained hilarity of it all. I had to think of it as a rough massage—one I both needed and did not want. The copper coin dug into another layer of dead skin cells and I thought about how my mother said people needed to muster through the pain. This was only for now, I thought. The burning would stop and my stomachache would go away somehow.

"You start to like it more when you get older," my mother said, like it was a vegetable. "I hated gua sha as a kid, too."

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Did she still think I was a kid? While I thought it was unlikely, I did come around to liking certain Asian foods I hated when I was younger, such as kim chi and taro? I realized in college that there seemed to be a part of adults that sought and even needed pain and discomfort. It was like a rite of passage that came with age—to drink a glass of whiskey, hate every moment of it, and order another.

I imagined that one day I would be able to tolerate gua sha the way my father did. He had the thickest skin of us all. He would urge my mom to scrape harder even when his skin turned

purple. Despite the unsightly aftermath of gua sha, my father said he always felt peachy and energized the next day.

Maybe I would learn to like gua sha and the pungent smell of the body oil the way I liked cigarette smoke. It was inherently unpleasant, but I associated it with my father, so it was familiar and comforting. Gua sha oil would be an intimate smell though, unlike cigarette smoke, because my father didn't let me stand close to him when he smoked. He would take a drag and shoo me away with the back of his hand, walking away when I walked closer.

After my gua sha session was over, I thanked both my parents.

"We put you through this much pain and you thank us?" my mother said. To be displeased with them seemed ungrateful and unfair like hating a dentist. I was also just glad for it to be over.

"I promise, you'll feel much better tomorrow now that we have used gua sha." My father spoke with the utmost conviction and empty promise of a psychic.

"How would she know the difference now that we've done it?" my mother said. She frowned at my father and looked for my approval.

The next day, I woke up feeling fine. And though I could not verify the cause of my improved health, I asked my parents where I could buy a gua sha stick.

## The Golden Boy

"I have bad news." I pushed my phone against with my shoulder and paced the room. Though I broke up with my boyfriend of a year and a half a week ago, I felt like the worst was yet to come when I broke the news to my mother.

"What is it?" She didn't have a clue.

"Dan and I broke up." I smiled because I was okay and it felt weird to say aloud. Dan and I still talked so it didn't seem much different from being single. Plus, we were interning in different states, just like last summer when we were long distance. The only difference this summer was that it turned into a long distance friendship.

My mother let out a genuine howl and I could only make out, "Connie...why."

"I'm sorry, Mommy." She sobbed as I tried to rationalize the situation and explain how things were going downhill for a while and that it was more or less a mutual breakup. I heard her talk to my father who had entered the room after hearing her cries. Her voice was distant when she told him. I heard murmuring on the other end, unsure of what to do.

"Connie?" It was my father.

"Hi Daddy. Is she going to be okay?"

"Mama will be fine, she's acting crazy. Are you okay?"

"Yea, I'm fine."

"We'll call you back later. Don't worry, ha?" My father told me everything would be okay, like he always did. My mother was still crying in the background.

Dan met my parents for the first time after we had been dating for a little over a year, but my mother told me she felt like she already knew him from the pictures I showed her. Dan was always in the periphery of pictures, never the attention-seeker or goofball. He had a modest and closed-lip smile that curved just enough to satisfy the photographer. She could tell he was a “guai hai zi,” a well-behaved and obedient kid. He dressed the way my mother would want her son to dress if she had one: clean and simple. His entire wardrobe was grey, white, and navy.

My mother gave him the endearing nickname of “man tou nose,” a man tou being a steamed bun in Chinese cuisine that was often eaten at breakfast. My mother dipped hers in sugar. My mother knew his personality through the way he presented himself in pictures and through the stories I told, like the time he found me crying in a computer cluster over my homework and figured out my problem within half an hour, despite having no experience with the class. He skimmed my textbook and created the correct formula from resourcefulness, not genius. He studied intently for job interviews, researching common questions and rehearsing his answers. It was hard to think of someone catching him off guard—he was always so practically prepared.

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Dan came home with me to Kansas for a week over the winter break of my sophomore year—a jarring change of pace from his usual breaks in New York, never more than an hour away from the most interesting city in America. An hour away from my hometown was the closest shopping mall, but only half an hour away way was our closest McDonald’s. I always loved when my parents went out of town because I knew I’d find a bag of fish filet sandwiches waiting for me on the kitchen counter when I returned home from school.

Dan often blamed my small town upbringing for my real world naïveté. He once let me locate the closest shipping center from Carnegie Mellon because he needed to deliver an urgent package. I led us onto a bus and took us half an hour in the wrong direction before crying the half-hour back. Dan told me it was okay, but he never let me navigate again.

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Two hours away from my hometown, my mother and I picked Dan up at the Kansas City airport. We had been dating for a little over a year at that time and it was his first time meeting my parents. Dan stepped out of the gate with a black backpack, black duffle bag, and his square glasses that—for the same reason—I hated and my mother loved: they made him look studious. It looked homely and nerdy to me, who preferred when he wore contacts because it made him look athletic.

I hugged him and introduced him to my mother, who he called, “ah yi,” a respectful title one uses for an older woman or aunt-like figure. My mother and Dan continued to speak in Chinese. I realized it was the first time in my life that I brought someone home—a friend or more—that could communicate with my mother without my translation. It was relieving, but I felt useless and vulnerable because I couldn’t filter what either of them said. My sister and I grew up as one of two Chinese families in our town, but the other family’s children were much younger than me, so I never had any friends who could communicate with my mother.

The three of us went to Ruby Tuesday for an early dinner. My mother told Dan that Kansas City was famous for its steaks, so Dan and I each ordered one, medium-rare. When the steaks were served, I cut into the middle of mine to check the redness.

“Oh Connie, yours looks a little overdone,” my mother said. “This isn’t as good as last time we were here.”

I started eating anyway.

"Dan, how is yours?" She asked. He sliced his steak and revealed a perfectly pink inside.

"That one looks better. That's how they should've cooked yours, Connie."

Dan turned to me. "Do you want to trade?"

"It's okay, mine tastes fine."

He insisted I take his, but I declined again. So instead, he cut off a strip of his perfectly cooked steak and placed on my plate. "Have some," he said. He continued slicing his steak, piling more pieces on to my plate before turning to my mother and asking, "ah yi, would you like some?"

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"How's Dan?" She asked, months after our breakup.

"I don't know, he's not my boyfriend anymore," I said again.

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It was Monday night, my least favorite night of the week because the problem sets of my least favorite class were due the next day.

"Did you do the reading?" he asked.

"No." I squirmed on his dark bed sheets that were decorated with small schools of fish.

"How can you expect to understand if you don't read the book?" Dan grabbed my logic textbook whose spine was still stiff.

He flipped through the pages. "Did you read any of it?" I lowered my eyes like a dog.

"I'm just not good at it, I don't get it."

"No one is naturally good at it. Everyone has to learn from somewhere. People aren't born smart."

"But I know I'm not going to do well in that class, maybe a C."

"You shouldn't think that way. Work for an A, and that way if you don't quite get there, you still have a B and that's good. Just start doing the reading for next week and I promise it will start making sense."

"Okay."

"You'll do the reading?" It sounded more like a command.

"I'll read."

"Good."

In the spring of my freshman year, after I had been dating Dan for two months, I started caring more about school. I wanted to get back on track after a demoralizing fall semester and Dan was the driving force that made me a better student and what I believed to be a better person overall. He regularly went to the gym and stuck to a healthy diet with the utmost commitment, as he did with anything in his life. While his intelligence appealed to every Asian parent's expectations, his athleticism was an idiosyncratic cherry on top for my mother, whose father was a physical education teacher at her elementary school. She was raised on exercise, so a glance at Dan's fitness regime showed that he cared as much about fitness as she did.

Like with my study habits, I mimicked Dan's healthy lifestyle. I started working out. I ate less junk food. Each snack and meal became a consumption of caloric numbers and I ended freshman year the exact same weight as I started. I was a female copy of Dan, and since I thought he was perfect at the time, maybe it meant I was perfect too.

"Baby, can I have a kiss?" he asked from his desk chair.

I flipped a page in my book and continued reading on his bed, despite my usual, incessant need for his affection and attention.

"Wow, so studious," he said. "Good. That was a test. You passed."

I reached a stopping point and look up at him. "Kiss?" I perked up.

"After you finish the chapter."

My mother relished in the fact that Dan was an engineer—and at Carnegie Mellon nonetheless, or as my mother pronounced it: "Con-a-gee Meh-win." I graduated at the top of my class in high school but it was not an academically rigorous environment—my school didn't even offer AP courses, which most of my classmates had never heard of anyway. Dan graduated from Stuyvesant, one of the nation's best high schools, so you could say I "leveled up" when we became a couple. He was the cream of the crop at a prestigious engineering school, so it was like striking gold, both figuratively and literally. According to Forbes in 2013, Carnegie Mellon's College of Engineering had the 7th highest paid graduates in the nation. Big names and numbers easily won my mother over—and Dan nailed it with his internships at JP Morgan and Microsoft. My first real internship paid a stipend that averaged out to less than minimum wage.

"It's okay," my mother joked when I told her about my offer. "Dan can support you."

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"Such a shame, Connie. You two were so perfect. I don't understand," she said over Skype.

"You don't know how it was. All you saw was the outside. I wasn't happy," I said.

My father chimed in with how my happiness was most important and that I could do what I wanted.

"Will you find someone better?" My mother looked at me with pleading eyes.

"You think Dan's the best I can do?" I wasn't sure if I was more offended or angry.

"I don't know. How do you think?" I saw her thinking about everything he was, everything he did for me, and all the things I lacked now that I was single.

"You always make it sound like I'm the one that missed out. *I'm* good, too. People are lucky to have me, too." It came out cockier than I expected, but I had to defend myself.

"Aw, you *are* right, huh?" I heard pity in her voice. I could tell she was not entirely reassured, but she was trying and it would do until the next time she asked about Dan. "'You're *Connie Chan*,'" she quoted, but the motto didn't sound as confident coming out of her mouth.

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Dan and I remained close the summer after our breakup, but drifted apart when the school year rolled around. We grabbed dinner twice—at the beginning and end of the semester, a hello dinner and a good-bye dinner before I studied abroad in the spring. By the second dinner, Dan was dating someone else. We ate at my favorite restaurant, but I can't remember if it was by chance. He urged me to take some of the food from his plate. It felt just like when we were dating, which is how I knew we were over before the relationship officially ended.

Dan and I didn't make eye contact the following school year when I came back from Europe. I found myself looking at him, but the gaze was not returned. Part of me was glad because I don't know what I would have seen. A lost opportunity? Someone I once strived to be? Or be better than? Sometimes, when I run on the treadmill, I watch the calorie count tick on and think, "Dan could never run this much." I could beat him at cardio, I knew that. When we crossed paths on campus, we acknowledged the other in a bashful and polite way, but not really seeing each other. But, I am still drawn to him because even if my own romantic feelings have dissipated, there's a special attachment I have for any person who once held so much of my mother's hope.

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A year and a half after the breakup, my mother finally stopped bringing up Dan in our Skype conversations. Instead, I would tell her about the boys I was currently into, and because my mother had a hard time remembering American names, we used nicknames: the lawyer (even though he was still in law school), the Vietnamese guy, the basketball player, the roommate (who I only lived with for two weeks before my internship ended), the really funny guy, the 28-year-old. She lost track sometimes. When she had a hard time recalling one of the boys, she would ask if he was important, meaning if he would be a frequently recurring name in our conversations or if I could see myself settling down with him. I always said no.

People often go to Europe to find themselves, but during my semester abroad I only discovered that I would be fine with dying alone. It sounds morbid, but I was so content being on my own that I didn't believe a significant other was an integral part of my future. I would certainly be happy if I had someone, but I would be no less happy without.

"So you're just going to live by yourself your whole life?" My new outlook disgusted my mother, especially after I said no marriage, which meant no grandchildren. But at least she could still count on my sister who was living with her boyfriend of two years. They spoke extensively about their future, so their engagement was imminent.

"Not everybody has to get married and have kids. I don't like either, so why should I do it?"

"Connie, normal people do that."

"Let her," my father said to my mother, trying to ease the tension.

I said I needed to go to bed and we ended the Skype conversation on a bitter note, neither side relenting on our ideals of my future. But later that night, my mother sent me five separate texts (she was just learning how):

**I am so sorry**

**I talk too much to you.**

**Keep happy you can go**

**Your way**

The last text contained two emoticons: one wearing sunglasses and the other sticking its tongue out.

My annoyance with her settled as soon as I read the messages, but I wanted to take advantage of her playful mood. I wasn't sure my mother was advanced enough to detect snideness in text messaging, but I replied:

**I'm sorry I have no job and no boyfriend. I love you and Daddy! <3**

She texted back:

**You no sleep yet**

I said:

**You no sleep too!**

Her last texts of the night were:

**i fill bad \*crying emoticon\***

**i kwak sa (gua sha)**

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During the winter break of my senior year, I started crying in my mother's bed. It was dark, so she only knew from my sounds. We were talking about something unrelated to love.

"Connie? What's the matter?"

"I'm not going to find anyone."

"Aww, Connie." She chuckled softly and wiped the tears from my eyes.

"Don't let tears fall for this." She pulled me into her arms and held me the way only a mother could. "This is not something deserving of tears."

It was usually easy to be single. But I had my moments, the ones that plagued those both in and out of relationships, when I felt hopelessly alone. I let myself feel it all at once: the insecurity of having no rock, the emptiness of a purely physical relationship, the bitterness of seeing both happy couples and cheating couples, the hurt of caring more than you are cared about, the loneliness at the end of a night when the music stops and passion wanes.

"You'll find someone," she said, right next to my head. I could feel the vibration of her vocal chords as she talked. "You think you've seen all there is to see? You're only at college. There are so many good people out there. How could someone like you not find somebody? We will go to the bars. I will go to the bars with you. We will find the boys."

She soothed my breathing and reassured me of a happy fate she could not guarantee. I could very well live the rest of my life single. I could very well die alone. My mother knew of my fleeting romances: the ones that bored me, the ones I couldn't make last, the ones that left me wronged. But she believed things would work out for me one day and that was enough for me to fall asleep that night.

## Life After Love

My father grew up in a wealthy home in Cambodia because his family owned a bakery and a flour shop. His parents had six mouths to feed, but enough money to hire cooks and servants. My mother, on the other hand, grew up on a farm in a poorer area of Sichuan. Despite only having two siblings, her family struggled to put enough food on the table. “We ate noodles and rice. Meat was scarce, so we only had vegetables. We almost never had candy or treats.”

But my father’s luxurious lifestyle was cut short when the Vietnam War took away everything he had. His family was separated and sent away—to Hong Kong, Macau, Lau, and even France—where they did not see each other for years until they were reunited at a refugee camp in Thailand. In an alternate reality, if the Vietnam War did not happen, then my father would have been a very eligible bachelor for my mother because of his wealth. But, my father became desirable in another way. A Lutheran church agreed to sponsor his entire family’s immigration to America, which was the cornerstone of my parents’ relationship. My mother was desperate for a way out of China and my father happened to be her ticket.

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“I was against it,” my mother said. “But my sister said my parents could not support me. And I couldn’t get into college to find a good job. She said I needed to do it to survive.”

My parents were introduced through mutual friends, though neither was searching for true love, or love at all. My mother took out a loan to pay for a train ticket to meet my father. The trip from Sichuan to Guangzhou—where they agreed to meet—took two days. My father was guilted into the setup after the mutual friend said my mother was already at Guangzhou, waiting. My father relented and made the five-hour trip from Hong Kong.

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Her first impression of him was sour: "He was all skin and bones except for a huge beer belly. If you can imagine: it was me, 18-years-old, when people look their best, and him, already 30. He didn't even dress up or cut his hair! I was all done up. I went home and told my sister, 'I don't like him, I don't like him.' But, I knew if I didn't marry him, then I couldn't go to America."

But before my parents even met, my father knew of my mother's situation and ulterior motives. Nonetheless, he told her that the decision was hers and that he was willing to take her to America. My father understood that she was not attracted to him, but he said he would still pay for her train ticket home if she chose not to be with him.

"I didn't like him, but I could tell he was a good person. What kind of guy would still pay for your ticket if he knew you wouldn't be with him?"

My father was silent while my mother praised him during our Skype conversation.

"Daddy, why did you want to be with her if you knew she didn't like you?"

"I had to rescue her. She would've had a very bad life."

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Despite the disinterest from my mother's end, my parents spent the following week together in Guangzhou, where it was her first experience with a big city. She said my father treated her to the nicest places she couldn't even dream of when she was in Sichuan.

"Your father took me to a fancy restaurant on the top floor of a building, it must have been over ten stories. The highest I'd ever been was only five. This is also where I saw carpet for the first time. I thought, 'this floor has such a beautiful fabric covering.' Back home, it was all hard floors." Even when I visited China when I was a child, my mother's friend had cement

floors. I recalled which of her friends was the wealthiest one because he had a regular toilet you could sit on like in America. Her other friends had toilets that were an oval hole in the ground.

One of my mother's greatest indulgences in Guangzhou was the fruit. "I loved bananas, but didn't eat them often. They were the cheapest fruit, but even then they were not affordable. When I arrived in Guangzhou, they had so many types of fruit, ones I'd never even seen. Back home, the bananas I ate were very small." She pointed out her two index fingers a short distance apart. "But the bananas in Guangzhou were huge!" She stretched her hands apart, reaching her shoulder width.

"I ate them all day, I didn't eat rice. I had to get my fill and make up for the times I didn't get to eat bananas before."

Even though my mother was not attracted to my father, it was almost impossible for an impressionable teenager not to be swayed by the grandiose treatment. "He took me to a temple and on a boat ride. He bought me clothes imported from America and Hong Kong. Only rich people could wear denim and I had all jeans. We went sightseeing. I had never been on a vacation before and I thought, 'if it is this great here, America must be even better.'"

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The summer I visited Dan at his hometown was my first time in New York City. I never had a soft spot for "The City" and my impression only went downhill from the visit. Although Dan treated me to *The Lion King* on Broadway and an expensive dinner at Buddakan, a trendy and new Asian fusion restaurant in Chelsea, I disliked the materialistic quality of it all. Everyone's night could be bought—through a ticket fee, a cover charge, or a generous tip. Nothing was priceless, like the warmth of a smoky bonfire or the clear view of the stars in Kansas. The city with "always something to do" was really the city with "always something to

buy.” Dan was nothing short of a gentleman and did what any New York native would do for a girlfriend from the middle of nowhere—I just didn’t like bustling cities.

The difference between my mother and me was that I still had a privileged life without Dan. During my time in NYC, Dan showed me a good time. During my mother’s time in Guangzhou, my father showed her opportunity. I could walk away from Dan because New York City would still be there if I was single. I could visit on my own in the future. But my mother had a taste of a life that was only possible through my father. She didn’t have a comfortable Kansan home waiting for her, or parents who could support her financially. It was all or nothing—and I don’t think choosing “all” made her a bad person.

I used to think mail-order brides or similar arrangements were “wrong” because it felt like the man was buying a woman’s love, and the woman was choosing wealth over an emotional connection. But now I find that view to be naïve because in circumstance’s like my mother’s, the woman can be guided by something more basic than an emotional connection: the need to survive.

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“Marriage is very different in China and America,” my mother said. She was raised believing marriage was for survival, not love. She told me, in China, the first priority was to eat, so a good spouse was someone who could provide support. *Did they come from a wealthy family? What do their parents do? Did they do well in school? Have they secured a high-paying job?* Chinese couples looked first at financial status and if that looked promising, then they would see if there was any chemistry between the individuals. But marriage was a possibility if and only if the other person met the financial prerequisites for love.

"In America," she said, "a couple could be starving, but as long as they love each other, that is reason enough to marry." She spoke as if she was talking about cliff jumpers, though even they probably seemed less reckless to her. "And American marriages are just between the two people. Chinese marriages are between two whole families."

I can recall a situation with one of my married cousins where the two families were encouraging the couple to split because the families didn't like one another, despite a harmonious relationship between the couple.

"In China, marriage not about love. That's the last thing to look at," my mother said.

"Is marriage still that way in China?" I asked.

"It's probably better now, but I will always regard it in the same way."

"Do you believe in love?" I had asked her this before, but purposefully asked again because her answers often changed drastically depending on her mood. However, she had been a consistent non-believer when it came to love.

"I think it exists, but not for me. I wouldn't choose it first," she said nonchalantly, as if dismissing a dinner option. "Your father believes in love, though." She turned to her side, where my father sat, on the right of my Skype screen.

"Daddy, do you believe in love?"

"Mmm, I do." Yet his voice was not optimistic or even hopeful. Instead, he spoke with conviction like it had to be true.

"You're like your father," my mom said. I looked at my father and thought true love had to exist—he was sitting right next to his and they were approaching their 28<sup>th</sup> anniversary. But then I looked to my mother, a woman who never found true love, but had developed a familial love for my father.

I agree that love is not a reason to get married. I think it's possible to love anyone if you spend enough quality time and that love is too delusional of a feeling to warrant something as important and permanent as marriage. I think people should get married to people who are good for them—I suppose I take after my mother in that way.

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A week or so after my parents first met, one of my father's friends wanted to set him up again—the second setup offer in his entire life. However, my parents had kept in touch through letters, and my father declined meeting the new woman.

He told his friend that he already had a girlfriend, though my parents never really confirmed they were dating.

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“Almost 95% of marriages like ours end with the woman leaving the man when she gets to America,” my mother said. “Sometimes, the man will leave for work in the morning and she'll be gone by the time he goes home.”

“So if you didn't love him, what made you stay?”

“I didn't love him, but he treated me so well. I thought it wouldn't be right for something like that to happen to a person so good. So I stayed.” I remembered watching my father give my mother a massage every night before they went to bed. How kind, I thought, and sadly one-sided, but it wasn't until later that I found out he received his massages in the morning.

Though my parents have spent roughly the same amount of time in America, my father's English is far better than my mother's. Even after 30 years in the US, my mother is limited to conversational English and cannot read or write without referencing other text. I attributed this learning curve to her being a bad student, but my mother is a fast learner and highly functional

outside of the classroom. When I asked why she didn't try harder to learn English, she said she deliberately put it off so she would remain dependent on my father.

"If I was fluent in English while living in America, that would give me wings," she said. "And if I had wings, I could fly away."

My mother had finally made it to America, but who could have guessed she would face self-imposed limits?

"I also had you two [my sister and me] to make myself stay. I wouldn't let my children grow up without a father. I wanted to repay your father by raising two wonderful children for him. I just had to find many ways to force myself to stay because I didn't trust myself."

In many ways, my mother had cut herself off from choice, which aligned perfectly for someone who hated change. If she could, she would eat the same meal everyday. After the lunch hour rush at the restaurant, she usually ate a bowl of white rice, a few florets of steamed broccoli, and sautéed beef. My mother finds comfort in ritual and familiarity. It's a quality that has blessed her relationship with my father, though I am unsure whether she has always been that way.

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My mother couldn't understand why I would throw away a seemingly perfect relationship. She told me it was so hard to find two people who really loved each other, so if Dan and I had that, then we should be able to work through anything. She said if she and my father were able to make a relationship work with one-sided love, then Dan and I had no reason to fail.

She believed we weren't one-sided. But unlike my father, I couldn't handle unrequited love. I was selfish and wanted to receive the same love I dealt, but I didn't feel it. Dan still took care of me in all the concrete and responsible ways—he helped me move boxes, thought of me during mealtimes, and was physically present as my date in all the appropriate places. He loved

me in the practical “Chinese” way. But it was when we were alone together that I realized he stopped loving me in an American way—the privileged, “let’s kiss instead of eat” way. Though he never confessed to it and I can’t speak for him, I knew it to be true.

You can’t make someone love you; it’s as simple as that. I initiated the breakup, saying something was off in our relationship. He agreed, saying he didn’t know what it was. I lied and said I didn’t know either.

## Alcohol

"Connie, why do people think drinking is fun when it makes your head hurt?" My mother crinkled her face. At dinner, my mom had a few sips of wine, but stopped when she felt dizzy. My mom knew I drank in college and that I was more experienced than her when it came to alcohol. Having never gone to college, she missed out on the binge drinking culture and the social pressure to drink in order to have fun.

Her inexperience is almost adorable. She once had one sip of my sister's drink at a restaurant, then handed over the car keys because she wasn't sure if she was okay to drive.

"She's a lightweight!" my sister laughed as she climbed into the driver's seat.

My mom was sitting upright in her bed, frowning and rubbing her temples.

"For most people, it doesn't make your head hurt," I said. Unless she meant hangovers.

"Your head doesn't hurt when you drink?"

"No. Not even the next morning." I guess I struck the genetic lottery because I've only ever had one hangover, despite the many occasions I deserved one. "I don't know that I would drink as much if I had to deal with hangovers. I drink to have fun, so if it's making your head hurt and you're not having fun, then don't drink." It seemed like an obvious solution to me.

"But drinking a glass of red wine a day is good for you," she said, parroting advice from her Chinese TV shows. She obediently tried anything she heard from those talk shows. When they suggested grapefruits as a good breakfast option to promote weight loss, she started eating them all the time, believing that the more she ate the more weight she would lose. I had to explain that they were simply low-calorie, not negative-calorie.

It was interesting to think about downing alcohol in a healthy sense. College life had conditioned me to muster through shots of tequila and whiskey for the sake of intoxication *despite* the negative physical consequences. I was reminded that alcohol was not the enemy and that people did not only drink to get drunk.

"You shouldn't drink it if it makes you so uncomfortable though," I said. "You know some people are allergic to alcohol?"

I told her how it was more common for Asians to be allergic, citing stories from college about friends like her who skipped their "happy place" and went straight to migraines and regret. They turned red in the face after one drink, marking themselves with the tell-tale "Asian glow." I rarely glowed—another blessing.

I climbed into the king-sized bed I shared with my mom when I came home from college. It was like old times.

"Have you ever been drunk?" I said.

"Drunk? I've never even been tipsy! My head hurts every time."

I reminisced on the alcohol-induced fun I've had in my three and a half years of college. While it was not the only way to loosen up, it certainly set up situations for escalated familiarity and boosted confidence. A stranger could turn into my best friend in a matter of hours and relocating a road barricade to a fraternity house entrance could seem like the greatest idea in the world. I felt sorry that my mother had never experienced this temporary and carefree escape. She was always thinking and worrying—if she was travelling anywhere, she wouldn't be able to sleep the entire week before the trip. Overly critical and inherently pessimistic, my mom was trapped in a reality where even alcohol could not relax her.

"That sucks," I said.

"You must be like your dad," she said. "He can drink."

My mom turned off the ceiling light and I turned on the bedside lamp, which indicated that we were getting sleepy. If I didn't fall asleep first, I'd turn off the lamp since it was closer to me. But usually, it was whoever was left talking while the other fell asleep.

We still had my old twin bed from high school, but my mom told me the sheets on her bed were of a better quality and that her room was warmer. Secretly, I think she just wanted to talk with me like old times before we fell asleep, so I didn't call her out on it. I enjoyed talking with her, too.

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"Good thing you are not planning on having kids," my mom said, walking into the living room to pick up a strand of hair from the floor. "Your lifestyle habits...."

I woke up on the couch from a night of drinking with friends. I assumed she was mad at me for staying out late. I was always uneasy about being home for an extended period of time during winter break. I stayed up late at college and used the floor as a second closet. My warped sleep schedule and standard of cleanliness at college was the exact opposite of my mother's. I remembered these differences and her nagging during times she felt especially empty nested and suggested we live together again after I graduated.

"Please? I'll pay you \$1000 to live with you," she had said, half joking while petting my hair.

"I'll pay you \$1000 to *not* live with me," I negotiated.

"You wicked thing," she laughed.

When I did visit home, she disliked when I hung out with my high school friends because it took time away from her. "I'm selfish," she confessed. "I want you to myself."

But those were times I didn't annoy her with my filthiness and general disregard for responsible behavior, such as showering and sleeping in a bed instead of passing out on the couch.

I heard the wooden floors creak as she made rounds around the house, emptying the trash and picking up strands of hair only she could see. She came back into the living room.

"I heard you come home," she said. "Your feet were soaking wet and cold. Why didn't you at least take your socks off?"

I drank more than I planned to the night before and honestly couldn't even remember walking in my front door, but I did know why my feet were wet—I made snow angels in a pasture.

"If I hadn't warmed your feet up, you wouldn't have fallen asleep all night," she said. "I put dry socks on you and wetted a towel with hot water to wipe your feet, but they wouldn't warm up. I was really worried, so I held your feet to my bare belly and used my body heat."

"Aww, Mommy, you didn't have to do that." I felt a pang of guilt—the type of emotional hangover you experience when you regret how you've treated someone.

"It was so cold," she said, but it sounded more like a recap than a complaint. "And then they warmed up." I hated that I couldn't remember any of this and that her body warmth was wasted.

"Did you even know I did that?" She blinked at me. "You didn't."

"I was really tired," I said, being the terrible person I was. The snow angel wasn't even good from what my friend later told me and it certainly wasn't worth interrupting my mom's sleep so she could use her stomach as a hot blanket.

"You would've been awake all night if I hadn't. They were freezing."

"I can sleep through anything — you know that," I said, trying to dismiss her hospitality as unnecessary. I thought about my mom seeing me passed out on the couch, tending to my shivering body, ignorant of my drunken slumber, and still believing her little girl was just a deep sleeper.

"You talked in your sleep," she said.

"Really? What did I say?"

"You just kept saying, 'Oh my God,' like you were annoyed. I thought, 'Oh no, she must have had a bad time with her friends.' I knew you were looking forward to hanging out with them for a long time."

I hated that she could still only think of my wellbeing—that something as privileged as enjoying myself came before her own basic needs of being comfortable and warm. It was so typical for my mom to be robbed of the relaxing side of alcohol, and instead have to deal with the negative consequences of someone else's good time. She must have slept poorly after warming my feet, thinking about whether the blankets on the couch were thick enough or if my feet had turned cold again.

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"No, it was a good time," I told her. "Really fun."

"That's good," she said, genuinely relieved.

The worst part was that she didn't see her actions as an extreme sacrifice. It was what any parent should have done, she thought. While alcohol distorted my perception of what was a good idea on a slushy winter night, my mother didn't need a drink to distort her ideas of the obligations of a parent. She was forever on sober patrol, providing others first with a place to sleep or a cup of water, even if she was thirsty herself.

## Encore

"I'm almost done writing my senior project. Is there anything you want to say?" I call it my senior project because my mother has a hard time saying and remembering the word "thesis."

My mother considers for a moment, leaning back on her desk chair. It is our last Skype call before I turn in my thesis the next day. "No, I'm just a hick. I don't have anything to say." She thinks I'm looking for academic commentary. "I don't know this stuff."

I try to explain how she can say anything she wants, but give up when I see she is not interested.

"Does it make you nervous that I can write anything about you and you'll never know?" It's a joke, but I feel empowered, or as empowered as a writing major can be at a school famous for engineering and computer science.

"No, there's nothing you'd write that you wouldn't tell me anyway, right?"

She's right.

"What if I make you look like a bad person?" I ask.

She shrugs. "I don't care. It doesn't affect me. You create what you need to create. The writing comes first."

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Two hours later, I receive a video call from her on Skype.

"Connie, I tried going to bed, but I couldn't sleep." She is as hyper as a child. "I thought of some things to say. Do you have time?" I'm very behind on revising my final draft, but figure it's only fair to hear her out considering the topic of my thesis.

"I always have time."

Her closing remarks turn out to a hypothesis on the three different ways people earn money. The first way is by using money itself.

“There are rich families that start off well, so they just use this money to make more money.”

The second way is through time.

“I would say 80% of people make a living this way.” She likes to use arbitrary percentages to drive her points home. “This is the best way to make money.” She’s referring to white-collar jobs where people are paid as long as they put forth the mental effort.

The third way is through “ming,” a Chinese word that means something more profound than spirit or existence. It is the core of someone’s being—like a soul, but I tend to think of it as a more tangible entity. I have never been able to articulate it well in English, which is bizarre because I think and dream in English. It is uncomfortable to feel and know the word in Chinese and be at a loss for a satisfying translation in what I consider to be my native tongue.

My mother says joining the army is a using someone’s ming because it is dangerous and the person can die. This category of earning money also includes very physically taxing, blue-collar jobs.

“Your dad and I are using our ming to make money.” They work 11 hours a day, six days a week. I feel terrible about having a fantastic time at CMU’s 100<sup>th</sup> Carnival this past weekend.

“I just want you to go to school so you don’t have to use your ming,” she says. She smiles, ashamed. “You must forgive me for talking about money all the time. It’s all I know. When I had the chance to come to America, I thought, ‘I can finally make money and give some to my parents.’ Other than money, nothing else in life can help me.”

I don't blame my mother for the value she places on wealth because it stems not from greed, but from residual fear of the way she grew up. It's not the relevant closing remark I was hoping for, but I shouldn't have expected less quirky from her.

"I thought of this hypothesis myself, Connie. I think it has merit." She laughs like she always does when she praises herself. It's jolly and oddly self-deprecating.

She continues to tell me about how everyone has to work and that life is 70-80% pain and 20-30% happiness. She uses a Chinese word I don't understand. We sit there, unable to communicate and help the other person out. We forget about the word and I never find out what it means.

"You know I speak poorly of things, Connie. You know the kind of person I am. You have to remember to not take what I say too seriously. Take whatever I say and think of it as a little better. Take whatever your father says and think of it as a little worse. We balance each other." She holds her hands out like a lever, my father in her right and herself in her left.

"Do I talk too much, Connie? I don't want to make you sad but I feel like you need to know these things. I feel bad not saying it and saying it, so I don't know what to do."

"Just say it. Always say it," I tell her.

At the end of our Skype conversation, she tells me a Chinese tale about a son who can no longer support his mother, so he rids himself of the burden by taking her far away into the mountains to abandon her. As they travel the long distance, the mother drops beans along their path every so often. It isn't until they reach their destination that the son asks why the mother left behind a trail of beans. The mother replies: "We have travelled quite far to abandon me. I didn't want you to get lost on your way home."

She says it's the ultimate tale of maternal love.