

*The Life Cycles of Stars*

She was already standing outside the arrivals gate, cocooned in a large down jacket and scarf. Another city, another season, she could've been anyone else's mother, but here we were, at George Bush International. Heat shimmered off the asphalt. She was a lost Arctic explorer in the middle of a Houston summer. Even from a distance, I could see how fragile she was beneath all the layers, like a cornered animal, puffed up to conceal her true mass. As she approached, I felt myself swelling up too—old anxieties slipping their way back into my skin, reclaiming the empty cavities they'd left behind. My clothes tightened against me. The seatbelt bit deeper into my stomach. I took a deep breath, freed myself, and got out of the car.

Ma made no effort to embrace me. Instead, she repeated the ritual we'd performed ever since I was a child, back when she'd have to squat to be at eye level. She placed her hands on my shoulders, as if to say *look how big you've gotten*, squeezed once before letting go.

"How was your flight?" I asked.

"Couldn't sleep," she said, pushing her lone suitcase towards me.

The contents of the suitcase rattled as I lifted it into the trunk. I wondered what things she'd chosen to pack with her, how she had condensed her life.

"Tea? Are you hungry?" I offered her my thermos and some tangerines once we were both inside.

She nodded towards the tea, and I unscrewed the lid before handing it to her. She brought it close to her face, letting the steam envelop her. As she held it, I could see her hands trembling.

She was living on her own in L.A., still in the cramped apartment I'd grown up in. I made a show of sending her a few Zillow listings every now and then, but I thought both of us appreciated the distance. We'd see each other once a year, the specific holiday depending on Joseph's work schedule and mine.

She had called last Friday, asking for a favor.

"Can you ask Joseph something for me? For a friend."

"I keep telling you," I said, "they should speak to their own doctor. Joseph's busy enough with his own patients."

"Blood in stool. Fatigue. Loss of appetite."

She sounded as if she were reading items off a grocery list.

“Is it Auntie Zhao? Is she okay?”

“Fine, fine. Not serious. Text me what he says.”

This was one of the games we played, our love language, if you will. White lies and smokescreens, so that our respective bubbles could stay intact for as long as possible. Still. This one seemed a touch too far.

Whenever she fell ill, I knew her first stop would be a small acupuncture and herbal clinic, tucked away in one of the many strip malls off Valley Boulevard. My entire childhood had revolved around that street. Restaurants, boba shops, barbershops, dentists, one summer of taekwondo lessons, 99 Ranch Market. The last time I'd been there was in junior year of high school, when Ma brought me along to see if they had anything that could induce a growth spurt. *You'll look skinnier if you're taller*, she kept saying then. She'd read online that dried seahorses helped men grow, missing the euphemism. I could still smell the sharp, everchanging aroma of the shop. At once floral and earthy, pungent and bitter, its exact composition dependent on what jars were uncorked, what samples offered, what corner of the store you stood in, whether the door was open and the Sichuan restaurant across the parking lot was frying peppercorns.

Despite a life spent around doctors, working as a receptionist for a dentist, and then at a small medical clinic, she retired with her prejudices intact. Not exactly anti-science, but a firm believer in tradition, in *what worked for me will work for you*. When I broke my ankle falling off the monkey bars, she devised a boot made from a sandal fortified with PVC pipe, duct tape, and medical gauze. I shuffled around in it for a whole weekend before the school nurse rescued me. I had to barter for aspirin on the playground.

I shared the symptoms with Joseph late that night, broaching the topic as we microwaved leftover pad thai.

“Sorry, I know this is the last thing you want to think about right now.”

It had been a long day for both of us. For Joseph, what was supposed to be an hour-long surgery had turned quickly into two, and then three. He often stayed at the hospital longer on days like that, decompressing in the break room so that he could be more present at home with me. I'd been stuck at work too, fixing an intern's calculations.

"It's okay. Your mom?"

"She says it's a friend, but pretty sure it's her."

"Well, the bleeding could be any number of things. Angiodysplasia, colitis. We'll want to rule out a tumor, or polyps in the colon. She should get some tests done, as early as possible."

He paused to take my hand.

"It's early. She'll be all right."

I shook my head. She wouldn't have called me right away.

The possibility of cancer jolted her into admitting that the symptoms were hers, but she kept insisting that she'd be fine. That she'd stay where she was.

And I was tempted to let her deal with it on her own, to trust in her assurances. The small, bitter portion of my mind feared that under the same roof again, the kindnesses I had finally allowed myself would rewind, besieged by sharp looks and quiet comments. Living with her could feel like an inversion of acupuncture, each of her needles targeted to produce the smallest quantum of pain, each individual prick something you could handle. But instead of being healed, you noticed later, all at once, that your whole body had become paralyzed.

Once the shame set in, I knew I couldn't abandon her. I couldn't trust her to ask for help on her own, so I did my best to persuade her to move in with me. I messaged her the benefits of humidity on her joints. Told her about Joseph's friends and former colleagues still at the Texas Medical Center, internists and oncologists, with their shiny Ivy League pedigrees. *I miss you*, I texted her. *Family should stick together*.

What made the difference, in the end, was none of this, but news that a renowned traditional medicine specialist and former Tibetan monk, had set up shop in Houston.

Joseph and I lived near the end of our cul-de-sac, right before the road curved outwards into a potbelly. The avenue was lined with oak trees, their outstretched canopies casting mottled shadows that stretched from front lawn to asphalt. Out of the sun, the humidity was almost soothing. Joseph came out to greet us, helping Ma out of the car. He reached in for a hug, before Ma could protest or get out of the way.

"Welcome home," he said. "I have some soup ready."

He walked Ma up the steps to the front door, keeping an arm across her shoulders. I expected my mother to push away, and her body did tense and stiffen, but as they approached the door, she relaxed, easing into Joseph. I felt a pang of jealousy.

She had gotten along with him from the outset, before I had even come out to her, when we were still living under the pretext of roommates. And she had taken that news surprisingly well. I hadn't expected her, being non-religious, to try and pray the gay away, but I had expected *something*. Some attempt to create a homeopathic, homophobic concoction, some bullshit acupuncture appointment to "fix my energy," as she had done in the past. Instead, she had just smiled and asked me if it was Joseph.

Watching the pair of them move across the threshold, I felt the earth beneath me shifting, as if I had slipped out of orbit. Maybe I was the problem, all this time. My pride, and not hers. If I'd just lowered my own guards, physical and otherwise, would she lean into me that way? I couldn't remember the last time I'd held her that long. And yet. Gravity re-asserted itself, reining in these stray thoughts, anchoring myself back into my body and all its folds. Feeling my own weight again, I was reminded yet again of the times I had tried, all the times I was turned away. Memories of high school and college, of dim bathroom stalls and nausea, of her apathy.

Watching them, I pushed all this back, ignored the numbness spreading throughout my chest.

"How's my doctor?" my mother was saying.

"I got the day off, so doing well," Joseph said.

I forced myself to be happy instead. I put on a smile and followed them through the door. Days like this were rare. The smell of Joseph's homemade seolleongtang, started the night before. The summer evening gilding the kitchen in its warmth. The laugh of neighborhood children shooting hoops on driveways. It was dream-like, so far removed was it from our typical nights, from takeout boxes and microwaved meals, the two of us gathered around the dim kitchen light like June bugs, this current, outside world already lost, another day blurred into the next, leaving no sign of its passage.

In addition to the seolleongtang, we brought out ready-made H-Mart banchan. Kimchi and cucumbers and braised burdock root. Ma was unusually silent, talking only to praise how fragrant the broth was. For a while, the only sound was the crunch of fermented vegetable and the slurp of soup. As I tucked into some more rice

and japchae, my mother regained enough energy to return from the peaceful realm of exhaustion back into her own troubled body.

“Less rice at dinner,” she said, her eyes not leaving her own food, but her words piercing the soft skin of my stomach, vulnerable still, all these years later. “You’re heavier than I saw you last.”

“Your son is perfect as he is,” Joseph said, giving me a worried look.

“Very handsome, yes,” Ma said. “But handsomer, ten pounds less. You always love food too much.”

“Have you heard the story?” she continued, laughing now. “Maybe another time,” Joseph said.

“It’s fine, tell it again,” I said. “I’m going to do dishes.”

Ma loved to tell this story at every dinner party.

This was the version she told me:

*Once upon a time, we found you washed up on the beach. Seeing that you came from the ocean, we took you to the only place we could afford to purchase seafood, the cheap buffet across the street from the grocery store, where children under five could eat for free. We went there every weekend and raised you on mountains of shrimp. We couldn’t peel the shells fast enough. You’d shove handfuls of flesh into your mouth, the juices dribbling down your chin. You couldn’t speak yet, could only mimic the sounds of your birthplace. When you were hungry, you’d cry like the gulls, throw tantrums like the waves. The first words you learned were off the menu. Crab. Shrimp. We went there every weekend until you ate them out of business!*

She would laugh, doubling over, but I was always terrified of this story, of how all that emptiness and desire was born within me. I’d walk home from school, tennis practice, wherever, and she was always in the kitchen, mid-motion, dicing green onions, smashing cucumbers with the flat of her blade, mincing pork tenderloins by cleaver. I began to imagine that whenever I ate, I was taking away a part of her. Her cheeks hollowing as mine filled in, her stomach flattening as mine expanded, a law of physics, an equal and opposite reaction.

I realized the pain wasn’t just this memory returning, but the water running too hot. I dropped the bowl into the sink, and turned the tap off, watching the remnants of food and water swirl down the drain.

Selected contents of my mother's suitcase:

*Kirkland Daily Multi Vitamins & Mineral Tablets. Kirkland Signature Natural Fish Oil Concentrate. Ziplock baggies of ground herbs and roots and fungi, labeled in triplicate, with their Chinese, English, and Latin names, including 黄芩, skullcap, scutellaria baicalensis, 牡丹根, peony root, paeonia lactiflora. A packet of dried jujube dates. A small bottle of concentrated licorice root extract. Three pairs of sweatpants. My high school tennis hoodie.*

Penglai Health Center was booked out for the next month, as news of the shop and its venerable practitioner, Dr. Lobsang, spread throughout the Houston suburbs, making its way from gossiping retirees strolling around Sugar Land Town Square to the international students posing next to its selfie statue, from Bellaire to Montrose to Clear Lake, to the targeted ads that began popping up in my phone. We got the earliest appointment available, the first Thursday of August, but Ma still refused to see anyone else before that consultation.

We began to settle into a rhythm. My mother woke every morning before dawn and went out into the yard to practice qigong. She brought a speaker outside the first time, oblivious to the world around her. I got some frustrated texts from our neighbors, whom I had to apologize to profusely. She began setting up in the living room, playing the music softer, although both Joseph and I were often up around that time ourselves. Instead of breakfast, she measured out spoonfuls of the various herbal powders she'd brought along, mixing them with hot water until the house was filled with a bitter sting.

I left for work early so that I could come back in time to cook dinner. Joseph's schedule was out of his control, so I did what I could, saving less urgent but time-consuming work—anything that didn't require equipment, writing up reports—to bring home with me at the end of the day. My supervisor, Tomoko, was sympathetic, and she helped me set up my laptop so that I could login remotely. But it helped to have something else demand my attention for most of the day. There was something left that I could control—the quality of parts being fabricated, testing the latest jet engine sent in from R&D.

I often arrived home to see my mother occupying herself with odd chores. I'd open the front door and she'd be vacuuming a section

of the living room or dusting windows. When I got out of the car, she might be outside pruning the bushes that lined the perimeter of the house. Joseph and I tried dissuading her at first, but we saw that it improved her spirits, and gave her other topics to talk about at dinner—what areas of the house needed fixing up, what furniture we were missing, what plants to grow in the yard.

One evening I came home to her seated on the floor, crying. A mop lay discarded to one side, along with a broken pot. The orchid it had held was mostly intact, although a few petals and flower bulbs were scattered here and there. I stood there in shock for a moment.

“Hey, it’s okay,” I said. “We can replant the orchid. The vase was like ten bucks at IKEA.”

She said nothing, although she wiped her tears away once she saw me and was now just sniffing slightly. I let her gather herself, and setting aside the flowers to replant, went to grab a dustpan and brush.

“Are you okay?”

“I was sweeping the floor,” she said. “Then I started feeling faint, so I reached out to steady myself. Knocked over the flower. Sorry.”

“If you’re feeling worse, we should go see the doctors.”

She shook her head.

“You know you can talk to me, right?”

I took a break to look at her, so that she could see the openness in my face. But she was turned away from me. When she opened her mouth to speak, I felt my hope faltering.

“I came here so that you’d feel better,” Ma said at last.

“You’re sick. I’m supposed to be taking care of you.”

“I’m fine,” she said. “I don’t need you.”

She said it gently, but the words still caught me off balance.

“It’s okay if you do,” I said. By the time I’d recovered, she was already gone. I heard her footsteps retreating to her room, the door slamming shut. I tried to halt my own tears, but they continued to fall, mixing with the dirt, leaving dark streaks against the floorboards as I kept on sweeping.

The next morning, it was unusually quiet. I peeked through her bedroom door before I left and saw that she was still asleep. Sunlight had started filtering in through the curtains, giving the room a sense of weightlessness, but perhaps it was my own vertigo.

I had never seen her so small.

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The day of her appointment, I took the afternoon off to drive her. For a moment, turning onto Bellaire, I forgot where we were. Passing by Chinese storefronts and strip malls, my mother sitting quietly beside me, the intervening years and miles collapsed. I was sixteen again, learning to drive in the suburbs of San Gabriel Valley.

One of our early dates, when Joseph was still in residency and I was in the first year of grad school, he had taken me to a shaved-ice shop tucked in the center of a two-story shopping plaza. It was my first summer in Houston, and I found myself crying as we passed by palatial dim sum halls and supermarkets, tiny hot pot restaurants and dance academies. This nostalgia was also painful, so I seldom went on my own. I settled for Kroger's or HEB, which were closer anyway. Even when I was craving hongshaorou or lotus root, youcai or gailan, I'd stay away, buying yams and bok choy and trimmed, inoffensive American cuts of meat instead of skin-on pork belly, bristles and all.

The center happened to be in the same plaza as that distant date, on the second floor across the parking lot from Star Snow Ice, above a Feng Cha and ramen noodle bar. Ma let me take her arm as we walked up the stairs. The waiting room was unadorned, except for a poster with an anatomical figure, acupuncture qi points labeled on the body. A small Buddha figurine sat on the reception desk, and there was a small waterfall feature that trickled in one corner.

The receptionist brought out two iPads.

"Oh, I'm just accompanying my mom," I said. "The appointment's just for her."

"Fill it out, no exceptions."

He stared me down until I took the tablet from him. It had an online survey already loaded. It started off typical—asking some questions about prior medical history, known allergies, before transforming into a long questionnaire, asking about everything from *cravings for cool drinks* to *sexually excitable but difficulty sustaining arousal or achieving release*. It took Ma almost a half hour to fill out completely, as she fully deliberated each symptom.

After we finished, the receptionist took the tablets and disappeared into a back room. When he returned, he pointed at me.

"You, first."



As I stood up from the couch, I felt a sudden urge to squeeze my mother's hand, and she was as surprised as I was by the gesture.

"It'll be okay," she said, looking up at me. I couldn't tell if she was more excited or nervous now that she was finally here. Her feet tapped a frenetic Morse code into the tile.

I followed the receptionist down the hall and into a large exam room. A massage table occupied most of the space, along with a small desk and computer in one corner, and a row of apothecary cabinets against the opposite wall. I sat down on one of the stools by the back wall so the doctor wouldn't get any ideas about why I was there.

It wasn't long before the doctor strode in. He was clean-shaven, his graying hair combed back neatly.

He shook my hand.

"Dr. Lobsang," he said. "Great to meet you."

"I think there's been a mistake," I said. "I'm just here for my mother. She's the sick one."

He smiled, as if I were a kid asking how airplanes worked.

"I like to understand my patients holistically. I find that we're affected not just mentally and spiritually, but physically, by our relationships. Especially family relationships. Even if your mother had come in alone, I'd want to sit down with you. I'm grateful that you're here today."

I nodded, not sure how else to respond.

"Now, if you'll lie on the table for me. Don't worry, we won't be doing acupuncture. I just want to examine the flow of energy in your body."

I did as he said, lying face down at first. He took out a stethoscope and asked me to inhale deeply as he pressed the cold metal to various points along my back. I flipped over, and he held his hand against my stomach. Finally, he took the temperature of my hands and feet.

"You both have issues concerning the meridian at your large intestine," he said, once I was seated again. He had taken some notes on the iPad but was looking directly at me now.

"Me too?"

"The large intestine does more than just eliminate the body's waste," he said, ignoring my question. "It also has a role in clearing out the mind. Imagine the mind as a river, running down from mountain into valley, feeding smaller streams as it goes. If we don't

take care of it properly, if we allow things to block off the valley, the flow of water becomes interrupted. Even though the water at higher elevations seems clear, the pathway—” he pulled up a diagram of the body on the tablet, drawing a line from the brain to the lungs to the intestines “—is blocked.”

He looked at me, and I nodded again, hoping to get this over with.

“When we are strongly connected with other people, sometimes our pathologies are connected as well. Your mother is sick, yes. But you are sick too.”

“I feel fine, thanks.”

“The energy doesn’t lie, my son. There is something in your past, in your relationship with your mother, that weighs heavily on the two of you. Guilt. Grief. That is the debris that blocks the valley, that stops the energy from making its way to the other meridians. Only when you can forgive her, forgive yourself, will the path be cleared.”

“You don’t know anything about us.”

He tapped the iPad, and I had to resist the urge to slap him.

“It’s all connected,” he said sadly. “Have you heard of phantom limb syndrome?”

“No.”

“Sometimes, when a limb needs to be severed from the body, the amputee will feel pain in their missing arm, missing leg, years after the amputation. It’s all connected, you see. Father to daughter. Mother to son. We are a part of our parents. We share their pain, and they share ours. To heal, we need mind and body. You and her.”

He pulled out another paper, began making notes.

“Here is a prescription, based on your survey, to help balance your energy. You can give it to the receptionist for the right blend. Think about what I’ve said, though. It is more important than the herbs,” he said, shaking my hand again, this time holding mine in both of his.

“Please send your mother in.”

Later, in the car, I asked her what she thought.

“Waste of time,” she said. “He just told me to go to the hospital.”

“That’s all?”

“Yes,” she said, but she wouldn’t turn to meet my eyes. She stared straight ahead, past the cars, stuck somewhere I couldn’t

reach her.

Through Joseph's connections, we were able to get Ma an appointment at MD Anderson that weekend. The oncologist, Dr. Martinez, was an old classmate of his.

The three of us, Ma sandwiched between Joseph and me, faced across from her as she looked through the test results.

"You should've come to me sooner," she said. "But all things considered, the prognosis is good, and we anticipate being able to take it all out in one operation."

She let the words colon cancer sink in with us before continuing. While it had advanced beyond the stage where it could be treated during a colonoscopy, it was still operable. The cancerous cells hadn't spread too far.

With Joseph here, I let myself relax a little as Dr. Martinez talked. I'd been fearing the worst, as Ma had seemed especially deflated after the visit to Penglai. Most of the words held no meaning to me anyway—polyps and colectomies, the minutiae of different surgical approaches.

I found myself thinking instead of what Dr. Lobsang had said, about the guilt and grief that I still held. The memories I thought I'd let go of. During the month that Ma had been here, it was hard not to see my past self in her. Watching her body wasting away reminded me again of the last time we'd lived under the same roof. When I was still in high school. In the hospital now, I was brought fully back to the summer before sophomore year, the summer I stopped eating.

Those days, while my mother worked, I trained myself to ignore the ache. The hunger that I feared more than anything. I would lie in bed all morning, flipping through magazines, imagining what it would be like to have someone else's body. I played tennis obsessively with friends in the afternoon, my eyes lingering on flashes of skin revealed in our frantic movements. An extended leg, an exposed stomach.

One night, I tried excusing myself from dinner, claiming lack of appetite.

"You're not well?"

"I'm fine, just not hungry."

"You must be sick."

She checked my temperature, pressing her forehead to mine. I writhed under the intense gaze of her eyes, the heat of her breath. Satisfied I was not feverish, she made me down two pills made of rhubarb and licorice, to improve my appetite. She steered me back to my seat.

“Don’t be ungrateful,” she said. “When I was young, all we had were mantou and paocai.”

“Eat,” she said.

And I ate, each bite a brief bliss. Later, after she had gone to bed, I betrayed her in the bathroom. I watched the contents of my stomach swirl downwards, vomit mixing with the dual shame of unresisted hunger and regurgitated love.

I’ve heard people say that food is love, especially from immigrant parents, who are too emotionally traumatized to offer it in any other way. But no emotion is pure, unentangled; it felt especially cruel that she transformed what should be a source of love into a source of fear. It was a delicate series of transactions, her body as labor, labor for money, money for food, food as love, love as something you could grow fat on if given too much, love as something to be controlled and consumed carefully. Her body for mine. My body, undeserving.

I ended up in the hospital only once, after one of my fainting spells happened during a tennis match. When my mother came in, worried out of her mind, I lied and told her it was a concussion. I’d hit my head diving for a ball that had turned out to be out-of-bounds anyway, I laughed. I couldn’t bring myself to tell her the truth, ashamed that after all of it, I still looked unchanged on the surface.

Watching her shrink over the past month, I felt as if I were looking into a funhouse mirror. The reflections of mother and son fusing until they became all but indistinguishable. We were trapped in both the present and the past, not knowing how to help each other, trying to reach through, but hitting glass. I was back in those long high school years, when it was me that was dying, and I couldn’t help but imagine, as Dr. Lobsang had implied, that these events were connected, that I was somehow to blame.

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She was still dozing when I came in after the surgery, so I sat down and watched her sleep. Lying on her side, she all but disappeared, becoming visible only in her movements, in the steady rise-fall, rise-fall of her breathing. I focused on those breaths. Looking around the room was overwhelming. The sheets, the metal bedframe, the medical devices, the walls, the floor tiles, all in dizzying, sterile shades of white. I couldn't decide whether I thought she was now saved, her hospital gown becoming holy vestment, or if she was still prey, snared in spider silk, awaiting a delayed dinner date.

It was the last image that stuck, and I checked under the bed, in case there was some creature hiding in its shadow. I sat back down for another few minutes, but I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. I took a hospital lobby trifold—*Cancer and You*—from my purse and scooted the chair into each corner of the room, dusting for imaginary cobwebs.

It was then, of course, that she woke.

"Son? What are you doing?"

"There was a spider," I explained, flushing. I stepped down, moved the chair back beside the bed. "How are you feeling?"

"I've never seen a dolphin."

"What?"

"I had a dream just now about dolphins. They're so beautiful. Graceful. But I've never seen one in real life."

"What are you talking about? We've been to SeaWorld, remember?"

She shook her head.

"That doesn't count. Will you take me?"

"To SeaWorld?"

"No. To see dolphins. Promise me."

"Okay, Ma. I promise. Get some rest now."

"Don't forget."

I almost did. She hadn't brought it up again afterwards, and I figured it was the pain medication talking. But, after one of her follow-up visits to the doctor, I remembered her wish, how earnest and childlike she'd seemed when confessing it. Taken by a rare flash of spontaneity, I skipped our normal exit and kept driving down I-45, past our house in Clear Lake, past the Space Center.

"We aren't going home?" she asked, noticing a few minutes

late that she was now on an unfamiliar stretch of highway.

“I have a surprise for you.”

“Where are we going?”

“It wouldn’t be a surprise if I told you.”

Land soon fell away as the highway stretched out over the ocean to Galveston. Looking out through the windshield, I could almost convince myself that there was nothing separating me from the wide expanse of sky. It was a cloudless day, bright and hopeful. If I just kept going, I could expand out across the horizon, slip through the pull of gravity.

We parked by the wharf. There were some families and tourists, but it wasn’t too crowded on the north side of the island. Most visitors would be down by the Pleasure Pier, riding on rollercoasters, eating funnel cake, whatever else happy families did.

“We’re going dolphin-watching,” I told her, as we went inside the Seaport Museum to purchase tickets.

“Why?”

“Don’t you remember? You wanted to see dolphins.”

“I said no such thing.”

I could tell she was excited, though. She kept looking out towards the ocean in anticipation and didn’t complain about the strong musk of seaweed and petroleum.

The harbor was filled with shrimping boats and offshore oil-rigs, but evidently, the dolphins had adjusted to the intrusion of human activity. We were out on the water for only a few minutes before we had our first sighting—a lone dolphin off to the starboard side flashed its tail before diving out of view.

“Ah!” my mother yelled, as if in pain.

“Are you okay?” My heart skipped a beat. Maybe I had taken her out too soon.

“No, I’m not,” she said. “I pressed the wrong button! How will I show my friends?” We saw three more dolphins that morning, and I helped her take a video she could share on WeChat later. She made us pose for a picture too, her face barely visible beneath a baseball cap and sunglasses, a peace sign peeking out from the blanket draped around her shoulders, me hunched beside her to get into view.

“Thank you,” she said, as we pulled back into the dock.

“Of course, this was fun.”

“Not just today.”

She paused as the boat lurched forward, caught on a cresting wave.

“I didn’t think I deserved your help,” she continued, still looking out for signs of more dolphins. “But thank you. For helping me anyways.”

“That’s not something you have to thank me for.”

We picked up pho on the way back. Joseph was still working, so we had a quiet dinner, just the two of us. When she left to go to her room, I thought she’d gone to sleep early. Instead, she returned to the living room, holding a small photo album.

“I found this when cleaning the apartment a few months ago,” she said.

I sat on the couch beside her, as she flipped through the pages.

Here, we were at Disneyland, one of the murky years before my parents’ divorce, posing in front of Splash Mountain.

Here, I was at the top of a playground slide, grinning ear to ear, in a striped sweater.

Here, I was celebrating after a seventh-place finish, out of eight, at an elementary school track meet.

Here, the two of us before a middle school homecoming dance, the first time I’d worn a suit.

It had been a long time since I’d seen pictures of my childhood. I realized that even now, the image I had of myself in those early years was skewed. There was baby fat, yes, but I looked healthy. A normal kid.

Here, a cutout from the city newspaper, me in mid-serve, my doubles partner in the foreground.

I wondered what I’d say to a younger self. Knowing, even after the fainting spells and the hospital trip, that things wouldn’t change right away. I remembered senior year. My physics teacher heard me in the bathroom stall. He started looking out for me then, made me attend the physics club meeting in his classroom every lunch. It was in those meetings that I found a new thing to obsess over. One day, when reading about the life cycles of stars, I imagined a bulimic black hole, spewing out half-chewed comets and stardust back into the void. I remembered laughing at this absurdity, almost falling off my rickety desk, the confused looks of my classmates.

Through the photos, I felt a sudden rush of empathy, for the face looking back out at me from the glossy pages, for my mother, for my current self as well. What else could I not see, what else would be revealed to me in time?

I felt my heart uncurl enough to escape as voice.

“Can I tell you something?” I said.

But when I turned to her, she had already fallen asleep against my shoulder.