

A Moment in Time

My mother had never stayed in a place for more than six months. We hopped from city to city, state to state in our beat-up Honda hatchback with my faded stickers plastered to the inside back window. She picked up menial jobs like bussing tables or being a movie ticket collector to pay for our month to month rent. Sometimes, she worked late into the nights and I would heat up spaghetti leftovers in the microwave and wait for her next to the window.

My backpack held all my belongings: cheap postcards from gas stations, chips of paint from crappy apartment walls, butterfly wings and crinkly, dry exoskeletons of dragonflies found roadside when the car engine had overheated. I rarely unpacked those mementos because I knew I would come home one day and find all our belongings in boxes and trash bags. She'd be standing there, in the kitchen, in the bathroom tub with yellow rubber gloves on, in the apartment foyer collecting weeks' worth of mail. She'd have this wild look in her eyes and she'd just say: "It's time for a change." And back into our car we and our entire lives went. Down the long stretch of road that lead us to wherever she thought suited us best.

Once, we were parked in a CVS parking lot and the rain was sliding down the windows in clear film sheets and I asked her why we moved so often. She was eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and she looked over at me and slowed her chewing. My mother had these dark eyes, beautiful like when you look into the depths of a still lake. And just like looking into the depths of a lake, you could see so much flickering and moving life within them.

She had jelly on her thumb and she raised it to her mouth to suck it off while she thought. "I'm searching," she simply said.

“For what?”

“A moment in time.” Then she finished the last bites of her sandwich, started her car, and we drove in silence for the rest of the evening.

At first, it was difficult for me as a child who wanted to keep the friends she had made, but over time I learned to not get so attached. I started to sense when we were about to pack up and leave. An emptiness in my bones, perhaps a lightness? It was a feeling that made me wear heavier clothes like wool sweaters and scuffed up boots, even during summer time. The closer it got to moving time, the more I doubled up on beanies and turtlenecks and knee-high striped socks. I waddled to school wearing snow pants on top of jeans over tights, my backpack full of whole book series I was not interested in reading. My pockets bulged with rocks. Friends asked with concern if I was cold and maybe they should ask the teacher to turn off the A/C, even though we all saw the heat slithering up from the pavement. I told them I wasn't cold.

My mother laughed at me and said I was acting weird, but sure enough, a week later, she was there in the middle of all our half-packed belongings. A bright sun in the middle of a possession planetary system. In the car, I peeled back each layer as quickly as I could, threw my backpack off my now aching shoulders, and tossed all the rocks from my pockets into the street with a satisfying clatter. I was so heavy I thought that I would sink through the seat, through the car floor, the ground, and straight to the center of the earth.

My mother's most prized possession, besides myself, was a Winnie the Pooh shaped cookie jar that her mother had given her. My grandparents had passed before I could sustain memories of them, but my mother said my grandmother loved themed cookie jars. “Checkered, cheetah print, teal, polka dots. You name it, your grandmother had it. You know, when we lived

with them, she threw you a birthday party once with all her cookie jars.” It was early one morning, and the light was gray and filtered through the curtained window. We were lying face to face in her bed, a double mattress placed on the floor. She reached over with curled fingers to brush back tangled hair from my face. “You loved it so much. She hid cookies and prizes in each of the jars for you, then hid the jars in the back garden of our house.”

“What was their house like?”

“It was a small house with a small garden. It overflowed with plants. There was a cherry tree with lights twined around its limbs, two plum trees, a fig tree, and a mulberry tree that their dog enjoyed eating under for hours. He’d snuffle around in the grass for the dropped fruit like a truffle pig. Oh *mija*, and the flowers. The garden was surrounded by a wire fence, but you could never tell because it looked like a wall of morning glories. They had taken over the fence and were starting to strangle the mulberry tree.

“When you were small, I would lay down a blanket on beautiful days and place you on it. All the flowers attracted these fat bumble bees and they would bop through the air the way merry go horses move. The grass was always kept, and it stained our feet; the air on hot days smelled like the lemon grass they grew around the perimeter of the garden.”

She never really got to finish her memory; the alarm would chirp, and she’d roll out of bed to get dressed for work or she would interrupt herself for a bowl of cereal. I’d lay in bed for a few moments afterwards and think about that memory, how I had been there within it, but now could not be a part of it.

My mother had never really stayed in a place for longer than six months, before she got sick. By the time I had grown old enough, I moved away from her and gone to a community college with a two-year program. She had wanted to stick around and see me graduate but when the 5th month rolled around, her studio flat was empty except for a yellow sticky note left on the fridge: *It was time for a change. I'll give you a call when I arrive.* I wasn't hurt much by it, I knew it was going to happen. It almost upset me more to think that she might have stayed for me.

We spoke often on the phone and she'd tell me about all the places she was staying: the arid hotness of Arizona, the passive politeness of Midwesterners, the French-Canadian people she met in Maine. I'd tell her about the courses I was taking and the friends I had made; I chose to leave out that since she had left, I had worn heavy clothing each day. Layers and layers of clothing I didn't bother taking off when I went to bed or shower. My classmates stared; they asked in mild concern if I was alright as the sweat slipped over my cheeks and dripped onto my paperwork. In the mornings, I found my bedsheets stained with muddy foot prints and my boots on, unlaced. The mud was fresh and wet; the night before was absent from my memory except for the darkness of dreamless sleep.

I finished my program with a nursing degree around the time she started to get sick. She was in Hillsborough, North Carolina at the time and I flew out to her side when she confessed to me over the phone she was having issues breathing. She'd been in the town for about 4 months and when I arrived I could see that sharp glimmer in her eyes. However, my mother had lost a lot of weight and her hands shook as she tried to shove her belongings back into boxes. I steered her towards the bedroom and forced her to lay down as I packed her things, knowing full and well neither of us were going to leave any time soon.

She was irritable that we couldn't leave because of her illness so I put her in the car and we drove around Hillsborough. It was a small town and the humid air filled my lungs so much like packed wet sand I didn't need to wear my layers of flannel and coats and wool socks. We were driving one evening around the town when my mother pointed out the thick gray clouds moving in our direction. "Looks like it's going to be a magnificent summer storm," she said. "Pull over. You must see this." I obliged and parked the car in the lot facing a red bricked dentist office.

We sat in silence and the clouds rolled in, grumbling. The air was still, pregnant with anticipation, before a sharp crack split the thickness and rain poured down onto our car. It wasn't graceful, the way it pummeled the ceiling and slapped against the window. It doused the world around us, dramatic and full force, and my mother laughed and pressed herself against the door.

"Isn't it incredible, *mija*? Isn't it just beautiful?"

I couldn't look away from her as she continued to laugh in awe at the storm. Her eyes mirrored the sky.

My mother had stayed in North Carolina for eleven months before she passed. It was snowing outside when she called me into her room one morning, a week or so before she died. She was lying on her bed, curled up in the comforter, and patted the empty space beside herself.

"Come here. I want to talk to you." I lifted the blanket and curled under to be closer to her. Beneath the comforter, our bodies radiated heat, soft like the warmth of dying coals. She brushed the strands of my hair away from my face, like she used to do when I was a child.

“When I die, I want to be cremated. Put me in your grandmother’s cookie jar, ok? I don’t want to be stuck in the ground.”

Tears burned my throat. As a nurse, I could see her health deteriorating but to discuss her mortality so brazenly... Her words hung in the air between us, delicate as soap bubbles.

“Ok,” I said.

“Bueno.” Her face was soft and wrinkled like weathered maps you pull from car compartments.

I wanted to trace those lines with my fingers. Instead, I cleared my throat and wiped the underside of my eyes with my fingertips. “Would you like to go on a drive? Maybe get out of the house?”

My mother did not respond immediately. Instead, she shifted her body away from me and stared out the window. The snow fell in meandering patterns, twirling down in soft, silent flakes that clung to the window before melting away.

“You know, I think I’d like to stay in actually.”

I shuffled closer to her and lay my cheek on top of hers. Together, we watched the snow in silence.

I honored her request by cremating her and putting her ashes in the cookie jar. I gave all her other possessions away to a Goodwill shop a few blocks away from her apartment. None of her belongings seemed to stand out to me. To others-- who asked why I kept the jar with me while I went into bars, placed her on bookshelves, on desktops while I read in libraries--it

seemed macabre to keep her around like that. Almost down right disrespectful, the way they crinkled their noses in response. In truth, I had wanted to keep the cookie jar long before my mother inhabited it. It seemed to shine of her, even when I was a little girl; even with its faded yellow and dull red, the scratched-up black nose.

I considered living in her apartment-- if only for a moment--but the place felt empty without her hectic energy, empty like my bones, even with all the boxes full of her things. The hollowness that had never left since I had arrived in North Caroline intensified. I sat by the window at night, bundled in layers of clothes and comforters and throws. I balanced fat dictionaries on my head and gripped chair arms with white knuckles, horrified that I would float to the ceiling like a lost balloon if I let go. I could only find comfort sleeping beneath the mattress and pressed against the bottom of the tub, expelling bubbles into the water that pushed down on me. My floorboards were covered in fresh and dry boot prints I never bothered cleaning; some early mornings, I found myself sleeping on the outskirts of town.

The Honda hatchback engine stalled a few times before squealing to life on a dark winter morning. It was miraculous that it had made it this far, over so many miles and through so many towns. My stickers were still in the back window, the edges fuzzy and peeling. I had thrown all my belongings into my backpack and my mother in the Pooh Bear cookie jar was strapped into the passenger seat next to me.

We drove for days out of North Carolina, headed west. Every mile made the marrow of my bones solidify. I drove fast, reaching over to grab the jar and steer the car with my knees to manually open the window. I didn't stop as I threw her ashes out the window in Louisiana,

beside all the Spanish moss trees; as she twirled in the dry desert air of New Mexico, the clear turquoise sky bearing down on us; next to the Martian red rocks of Utah.

I didn't stop until I got the Oregon coast. The dark waters crashed against the sand, frothing as it crept up the black shore. It was beautiful the way the rock formations jutted out of the water and the trees clung to the edges of the cliffs. They loomed over the jade waters, accented with delicate fog that entwined itself within the forest like loose stuffing.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, letting the salty air fill my lungs.

"Isn't it just beautiful, Ma?" I said. The ocean sighed in response.

I poured what was left of my mother into the freezing water, curling my toes as it splashed up my shins, and watched the wave pull back with the ashes. My toes felt numb, the pebbly sand prickling the souls of my feet. I cradled the now empty jar in my arms and gave the beach one last look before turning and climbing back into my car. The car trembled, almost as if it were anxious to get started, and I turned the steering wheel. Down the road I went, down the long stretch that would lead me to wherever I thought suited me best.