

Expecting Mothers

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There was a place on the ferry called the Coffee Shop. It was on the floor above the sleeping quarters, past the small convenience store, a turn to the right, then through the glass doors at the end of the hall. It was here that I saw the little girl.

Weirdly enough, there was no coffee in the coffee shop. Behind the disgruntled Kuya was a shelf with rows upon rows of cup noodles, junk food, a few canned beers, and nothing else. After choosing what was going to have to do for my lunch—a pack of Nova and a can of Coke—I settled on a seat at the back. That’s when I saw them, sitting in front of the glass windows overlooking the sea. I heard the girl call the old lady ‘Nay’ but she looked nothing like her mom. She had wild frizzy curls, a button nose, and wide-set eyes while her mom had sleek straight hair and a nose that looked too big for her face.

Like a nosey neighbor, I watched them for what seemed like hours. They were close. The girl was a chatterbox and the mom, although distracted and wincing occasionally with her hand clenched at her stomach, would nod and smile at every quick pause the girl took in between chatting and sipping at her drink. I watched the daughter more closely than I did the older woman. Her carefree youthfulness shone through the open smile she had for her mom as if being with her mother was easy. As if she had no qualms about her place in her mother’s life. Ridiculous as it was, for a second, I felt anger towards this girl, this stranger.

When I left her an hour ago back at the sleeping quarters, Ma still hadn’t touched the takeout lunch I got her from the cafeteria. The paper box sat inside the flimsy plastic bag beside her head in the top bunk, cold now and damp in places where the steam had condensed.

She hadn’t talked to me since we settled in on our beds. “My head hurts,” she said as soon as the attendant left after pointing us to the two available spots smack dab in the middle of the maze of bunk beds for Super Value passengers. The cheapest accommodations available consisted of only a bare bunk bed shared among eight passengers, four on top and four below,

separated by thin low boards in between. There were no bedsheets, no pillows, and no blankets. There was only a plasticky cover to a bed mattress that looked a bit old. Ma busily fluffed up her backpack as you would a pillow.

“Probably from the lack of sleep,” I said, not looking her in the eye.

“Probably,” she agreed. “I’m going to take a nap. Wake me up if you need anything.” She then turned her back to me, curled up on her side, and that was that. We didn’t talk about what happened that morning. We don’t talk about any of our fights at all.

The fight this morning was ridiculous. I had too little sleep. The night before, I had to travel from UP straight from my classes to Ma’s apartment. The ferry’s site said that we were expected to be at the port four hours before boarding. There was the hour of commute to take into account as well.

It still looked like the middle of the night when I woke up. I was in the middle of brushing my teeth when Ma turned from the stove and looked at me, brows furrowed. “That’s Patrick’s toothbrush.”

I looked at it. White handle with a purple stripe running at its side, white and blue bristles. “This is mine.”

“No, it’s not.” Ma’s nose wrinkled as it always does when she was disgusted, but for a second she looked as if she was unsure if she could laugh.

“This is mine,” I insisted, mortified. “I brought this here last month. I bought this in UP before I came over.”

“Yours had a blue stripe. That’s Patrick’s. He was here last week.”

“Where’s mine then?” I could hear my voice rising. “I know I put mine right here.”

“Well, I don’t know, you might have lost it somewhere,” Ma said, defensive.

“Why is this here anyway?” My voice was too loud. For a split second, Ma’s eyes shifted away, ashamed, but quickly right after, her gaze turned back at me hard with anger.

“Why wouldn’t he be here?”

Her voice didn't rise. I flinched. I looked away from her.

I rinsed the toothbrush and thrust it back into the glass with Ma's. I ignored the cracking sound and squeezed past Ma.

She was right, of course. Since stepping into college, my home has been the dormitory inside the campus. Ma moved into this studio apartment a few months after I enrolled. It was closer to her new job in BGC. She could invite her boyfriend, fiancé, whatever, over whenever she wanted. It was her place.

Ma was still quite young. I was two when my real mother left me in Ma and Lola's care. My father, her brother, died in an accident the year before. She was only nineteen when it happened. And when Lola passed away in my second grade, Ma became my only family, and me, hers. She was my aunt, my dad, sister, and mom, all at once.

A month ago, I spent the weekend at her place. She was taking a bath when I saw the ring wedged between two books on the bedside table. When she got out of the bath, I joked about how the ring looked too dainty and girly it didn't suit her at all. I wasn't sure whether she was smiling at the familiar banter, or if the sight of the ring was enough to make her smile as she did. She looked giddy. I couldn't remember if I congratulated her or not. I hoped I did.

On my next visit to Ma's place, I told her my mother found me online. I hadn't planned on telling her about it. The chat had been sitting unopened on my phone for weeks.

"She asked me where I was staying."

"What did you tell her?"

"I haven't replied."

"Do you want to meet with her?"

"I don't know." A pause. "Maybe?"

I knew I didn't want to meet her. Why would I want to meet someone I didn't know? But it always went like this, didn't it? An orphaned child would naturally want to be reunited back with her mother. That was where she belonged. I looked at the bedside table where I saw Ma's new ring. It wasn't there anymore but that didn't matter. It's funny how something so small could feel like it held more worth than me. I opened the chat on my phone. My mother

wanted to know where I was staying. She said she missed me. She asked me how I was. She said, “I love you, anak.”

Later, I found out my mother lives in Palawan. I told Ma it could be an excuse to travel. We’ve never gone anywhere before. She could take a few days off from work. Take a vacation leave. She pursed her lips, the corners peeling back to what could barely be called a smile. “Why?” The traffic outside her window suddenly seemed too loud. The fan facing the bed blew out hot air as if it was punishing me. But Ma didn’t wait for a reply. Suddenly, as if she didn’t want to hear my answer, she grabbed her phone and scrolled. “We could go by ferry. It’s a bit cheaper than going by plane, I think.”

I went back to exploring the ship while Ma napped. Or pretended to. Over the years, we have mastered the art of silent treatment. We’ve never really apologized to each other when we get into fights. Sure, we say sorry for small things because for some reason we can only apologize light-heartedly, but when it comes to actual arguments, apologizing seems to go out of the window. Instead, we let it cool off for a few hours, or a day until one of us forgets, or until one offers the other food, then it’ll be as if we never fought at all. And so that was what I did. I left Ma alone in that sardine can of crowded bunk beds and wandered around.

There weren’t a lot of places to go to on the ship. The cheapest accommodations—ours—were on the first floor along with the lobby, the cafeteria, and the cargo. The smaller, more expensive cabins and the private suites occupy the floors above, closer to the deck and less crowded. I spent most of the afternoon lounging at the deck. The waves weren’t strong but sea spray sometimes reached up despite the height of the ship, making some daring passengers who approached the gunwales yelp as they were thrown off balance from the rocking, their shoes wet.

Aside from the occasional chattering from stray passengers, the deck was peaceful. The sounds of the sea and the ship drowned out almost everything else. I sat back and closed my eyes. I could almost imagine I was alone. Occasionally, the ship would make this low moaning sound that seemed to come from everywhere. The sound roused an old memory. The story of the loneliest whale. What if the ship was calling out like that whale, but nobody could hear? It was ridiculous, but it made me think of where we were going. For the first time since Ma and I talked about going on this trip, I thought about what would happen when we hit land. Would my mother recognize me? Would she want me to stay with her? What of Ma? Would she leave me with my mother? I didn’t know what exactly I was afraid of anymore.

Ma was up when I got back. The lunch I bought for her was still where I left it. Untouched. “How’s the headache?” I asked.

“Fine,” came a mutter I barely heard over the noises the other passengers made around us. She still wouldn’t look at me. I couldn’t remember any of our fights leaving me feeling this heavy before.

The overhead speakers suddenly boomed with the captain’s voice, announcing again that our expected time of arrival to Puerto Princesa was at 10 o’clock the next morning.

At around 8 in the evening, passengers started streaming into the lobby from their suites and cabins looking for recreation. But a quick sweep of the room would reveal that the lobby was bare except for seats scattered in front of the receptionist’s counter and a couple of TVs attached to the walls. There weren’t enough chairs to accommodate the number of idle passengers forced to stand awkwardly by the walls.

At the back end of the room I caught sight of the daughter I saw at lunch. She was alone, making her way out of the lobby. Thoughtlessly, my body moved on its own to follow. The girl slithered in between bodies that blocked her way. A graceful fish swimming away from her predator.

I stayed a few feet back, far from her enough that she wouldn’t notice me but close enough to not lose sight of her. I told myself that this wasn’t stalking. So what if she happened to be where I was going? I wasn’t even sure why I followed her but her mother wasn’t with her. She might have been lost. Was she looking for her mother? Where was her mother? Did I want to make friends? Ask if they were related? Does it matter?

She took a left at a hallway that I recognized as the turn towards the cafeteria. I thought her mother would be there. Perhaps they were having dinner together. But she went straight past it and went through another hall, towards the stern of the ship. Before I could decide whether to continue following or not, a group of the ferry’s staff emerged from an intersection and I lost her.

I went back from where I came, towards the cafeteria, and had dinner alone that night.

The following morning, a rumor started going around that someone had a miscarriage on board. Nobody knew who it was. But a loud Manang claimed she saw the mess of blood in one of the restrooms.

Ma and I packed our bags. The speaker overhead announced that we were making land in an hour. “Will your mother be waiting for us at the port?” It took me a second to realize that the question was addressed to me and that it was Ma who asked.

“You told her we were arriving this morning, right?” She asked again as she zipped her bag up.

I didn’t. I asked Ma if she had eaten at all. In a rush, I told her I was hungry, and that we should grab something for take-out before we leave.

“You can eat after we meet up with your mother.”

As we made our way towards the exit, I thought about the miscarried baby. I wondered if it was an abortion, if the mother didn’t want the baby, or perhaps it was the baby who rejected the mother, leaving the uterus willingly, thinking the mother better off without it.

I looked at Ma who was walking in front of me. In this sea of passengers slowly making their way out of the ship, she looked small, like if I looked away from her she would drown and get lost among the bodies pressed all around us.

“Ma,” I called out to her. She looked back and she might have seen something in my face because her brows furrowed in concern. She stopped walking, letting the passenger in front of me pass her as she reached her hand back and pulled me closer to her.

When we reached the end of the stairs, at the platform, I told Ma, “She’s not here.” Ma stared at me, not understanding.

“I’ll tell her she doesn’t need to come.” I played with the straps of my bag. I did not look at her, afraid she would get mad again. “I’m sorry, Ma.”

Silence.

Then, “Where do you want to eat?”

