

“Can you tell me a story?”

Her eyes are dull and dark as her droopy eyelids cover the upper half of her pupils. Lying on her left side, she places both her hands—short and stunted fingers—under her sullen cheeks, yet her eyes remain half-open—a muddy pond of casted shadows and dark irises.

“Please,” her whiny voice is forced through her nose bridge, “We used to do—”

“That is a long time ago,” I cut her off, trying to smoothen the impatience in my voice, “Plus, you look tired. You need to be resting by now. Go to bed.”

“Just one story,” she insists as she removes one hand from under her cheek, scratching and poking the pillowcase with her index finger, “I just can't fall asleep. Maybe a story would help.”

The truth is, I do not know any story to tell. I have always been a lousy storyteller. My stories are always so plain and unflavored that they end up sounding like business reports. No one would enjoy that. Not even those kids who lack the basic taste.

“I don't tell stories,” I reply dryly, sticking out my index finger and thumb to pick her scratching hand off the pillow case and back underneath her face.

“I don't know, either,” she says, “Just say something.”

I draw back my fingers and look out the window. A foggy day.

“Fine,” I cross my arms across my chest, “Just promise me that you'd go to bed after the story. 'Cause I'll have to go anyway, even if you decide not to nap today.”

In my peripheral vision, she nods. I draw my gaze away from the window and realize that her eyes are now entirely closed. I know she is still listening and waiting for the story, but somehow, I feel more at ease without having to stare into those eyes. I clear my throat.

*I have superpowers. Nobody knows about it. I was not born with it. When I was about nine years old, I accidentally crossed a strange land, where I encountered an unusual person. An alien, maybe. I am not entirely sure. Ever since then, I have been bestowed this superpower of mind-reading. Mind-reading isn't quite the word to describe it. I can place myself in others' experiences and traverse through their memories.*

*I don't use this superpower very often. I don't always enjoy knowing what other people are thinking. Especially when they are thinking about me. That process is very stressful. So, most*

*of the time, I keep this superpower to myself. It is like a secret. And every piece of knowledge I gain from it also remains a secret.*

*Everything changed, however, on the day of the fourteenth birthday. It started quite ordinarily—I had all my friends at my place for a mini-birthday party. Not anything really fancy. Mom and I are just cooking some basic homemade food and taking out our pre-ordered birthday cake. Things went great. We talked, sang, danced, and ate. I blew the candles off with the simplest wish on Earth: to stay as happy as I was at that moment for the rest of my life.*

*When I waved goodbye to all of my friends, it was already pitch dark outside. I bore farewell to the last person who had just hopped into their parents' car and shut the heavy wooden door. The world quieted down. I just closed out the laughter and joys. My fingers lingered on the cold metal door knob. This year's mid-October was unusually cold—even standing outside for a few seconds would require a thin layer of winter jacket. I unzipped my puffy vest and hung it up the hook behind the door. I turned around.*

*I met the coldest eyes I had ever seen. My mother was standing on the staircases, looking down at me with a stone, cold expression. She crossed her arms. Her legs were slightly parted. Her frozen features paralyzed me. I swallowed my heartbeat and heard the sound of my body trying to nauseate it back out.*

*"What's wrong?" I asked with my voice sounding like a coughed-out whimper.*

*She said nothing. The yellow light hanging on the ceiling above the staircases cast its warmth against her, yet it did not melt her expression. The lighting highlighted the lines of her tensed facial muscles. I swallowed again.*

*"Have you ever even cared for your mother?"*

*"What?" I touched my left ear, questioning if I heard her right.*

*"Did you ever consider how tired I would be? I don't owe you anything just because I am your mother."*

*"What are you talking about?"*

*"Did you consider how much burden you placed on me when you invited your friends? I tried to make sure that everyone was happy and satisfied with everything. The food? How much time does it take me to prepare them? Do you know what a birthday means? It also meant a day of suffering for your mother! Did you ever consider that? Ever?"*

*I was struck. Dumbfounded. Unable to move. Of course I cared. But isn't it so awkward to just say that? Out of nowhere? No context?*

*"You know what? You really have changed since you've spent those two years with that host family. How can you not care for your parents? After all the time I've put into caring for you!"*

*I heard it. That was the moment when I heard it. Her inner voice. Her thoughts. The emotions and memories underneath. I threw out an invisible hand and grasped the fleeting thread passing before my eyes. It dragged me across space and time, thrusting me into a whole new perspective.*

*"Guess what? Fuck you! Even if you have to act that way, I can raise this kid alone!" She held the phone right in front of her lips, shouting those words into the speaker. The timer on the phone call page blinked to the twentieth minute.*

*"Listen," a dreadfully exhausted voice came from the speaker, "I've got to work. Of course, I would like to spend more time caring for you and stuff, but who's gonna sustain the family then?"*

*"Sure! Whatever! You are always right! I'm just making a fuss. Go do that fucking work!" She yelled into the speaker again and smashed the bright red "Hang-Up" button with all her might.*

*Then she twisted her heavy body in the small and constrained driver's seat. The seatbelt crossed her bulging belly, tightening against the heartbeat of her future offspring. It was all worth it. She affirmed to herself. The thought of having a baby within her warmed her up by a little bit during this extraordinarily chilly fall season. She stroked her own belly and held it from the bottom before unzipping the seatbelt.*

*She trudged toward the hospital. Another day of examinations.*

*"It's a girl!"*

*That was the first thing she heard once she became conscious. The blinding ceiling lights shook with the white, square tiles. Dizzy, she heard the voices of the rest of the family. A girl? She smiled, only that her lips were so dry that even the slightest twitch was now painful and impossible to endure.*

*Water. She wanted to tell all of them. But they all crowded around the bed, holding the baby girl. The excited voices muffled against one another. They held the baby in front of her. The bright lighting cast blinding spotlights within her dizzy vision.*

*“What’s that?”*

*“An airplane.”*

*“Why is it flying?”*

*“Because it goes very fast. People ride in airplanes to travel.”*

*“Why not cars?”*

*“Airplanes are faster.”*

*“I wanna ride in an airplane!”*

*“Oh my god! Are you okay? Should I ask them for help or something?” The seven-year-old girl gasped, trying to hold her voice low.*

*The cabin was nearly entirely dark. Her round, childish features were unfavored by the lighting, as the shadows barely made out the shapes of her nose and eye sockets. But she could tell that she was worried.*

*“I’m all right,” She swallowed, “I get just a bit of motion sickness when I travel on airplanes.”*

*“That’s not okay! I hate throwing up! Everyone does. What if you get sick? Then you won’t be able to play tomorrow. Then what’s the point of the trip?”*

*The child frowned and pouted her lips, and she knew that she was trying to look like an adult. To intimidate her into caring for herself.*

*“I’ll go ask the attendants if they could help,” she hopped off her seat.*

*She watched her small and slim body figure from the back as she moved toward the front of the cabin in the dark. Her pigtails swang with every step taken. The child was growing up.*

*“I hate it. When are you going to be able to come with me? I don’t want to live with a host family! I’m going to miss you!”*

*“As soon as I get all the visa problems settled. I promise.”*

*“That’s gonna be a long time, though.”*

*She sighed, "You are growing up, kid. Look at you. You are going to be a proud middle schooler now. You got this. We could stay in touch."*

*"But I'm so used to spending all of my time with you! We've never parted before."*

*"Maybe you'd like it?" She joked, "To not have someone supervise you 24/7?"*

*"Shut up!"*

*"Don't say that to your mother."*

*"Ugh," she rolled her eyes, "I hate long flights. They suck."*

*"Don't forget to call. Also, try not to go to bed too late. Like later than 11:00 pm? That's not good for your body! And make sure you do laundry regularly. Have your host parents help you to manage some of the cash you have—"*

*"I know. I know. We've gone through this many times before."*

*"Just do it as I've done it. Be strong."*

*"Hello?"*

*"Hey!" She held the phone close to her right ear and grasped her collar with the other hand, "How has school been?"*

*"Pretty well, I guess."*

*"Oh! I saw that you got a 92 on that math quiz. What happened? Were you just being careless?"*

*"I guess so? I haven't seen the actual graded quiz yet. I only know the grade."*

*"Make sure you check your answers next time after you finish."*

*"All right."*

*"Did you eat dinner?"*

*"Not yet."*

*"It's about to be 8:00 pm in Virginia. You should have eaten by now."*

*"I'm busy doing schoolwork. I'll eat in a minute."*

*"Okay, okay. Care to talk for just a bit more?"*

*"Nah, I'll finish this homework real quick. Bye."*

*The text message read: "I can't talk today. Need to finish up a project. Have been really busy studying for quizzes this week."*

*Her thumbs stretched across the screen, from the letters to the delete button, but never on the “enter” key.*

*“Make sure to take care of yourself. No, no, that’s too general. She needs a bit more guidance.”*

*“Remember to make a solid schedule so that you can fit everything into your routine. Don’t forget to do your laundry and wash your sheets. Keep yourself healthy. Exercise a bit, maybe? Oh god, what if she forgets to do any of these.”*

*Message sent: “All right. Don’t forget to let me know how you did once the grades come out.”*

*“Sure. You can see them on your account, too.”*

*“Okay. Be strong, though, even if things don’t turn out the way you’d like.”*

*She put down her phone. Emptiness filled her, squeezing the last bit of energy out of her body.*

*She remembered seeing her at the airport once she arrived in Richmond, Virginia, to finally reunite with her.*

*The grown-up figure walked toward the gate. Her round, chubby face was now squeezing at her eyes. The loose sweatshirt hid much of her upper body, but those jeans stretched on her thighs as if they could no longer withhold the weight. Excitement. Mixed with guilt. And anxiety. What happened? How could she have gained so much weight? Only if I could have been with her! Only if!*

*“Mom!” She cried out and charged toward her. She saw the weight rolling over before her eyes. She hugged her. Numbly.*

*“You’ve really put on some weight.” It was all she said.*

*They haven’t talked for a while. She knew it. She recognized it. But what else could she have done? Look at what living without her had done to this girl! How did she change so much? She had to do something now. To help her. To put her back on track. She’d make it work.*

*After all, that’s all she came here for. A foreign land with no friends or family. She only got her. She had one job: to take care of her. To start the day by sending her to school and cleaning the house until she came back. Everything was perfectly routine.*

*"I got a cut on my pinky finger," She raised her hand.*

*"Oh," The child was eating her vegetable soup, picking out sloppy, soft stems on her chopstick. She raised her eyes, "That's awful. Did you get it just now? From cooking?"*

*"Not sure," she shrugged.*

*"Get a bandage."*

*"Anything else?"*

*"What?"*

*"Nothing."*

*Why so indifferent? What have I done wrong? What wrong could I possibly have done in SERVING her? She's all I've got. She might have school and other stuff during the day, but all I've got is her and this house. When did things go wrong? What did the host family do to her? Why wouldn't she care for me as before?*

*"I'm stressed out," the child said, "About losing weight. I'm afraid that once I start eating normal food, my weight will go back up."*

*"Listen," she responded, "Everyone has to go through something. We all suffer. Just stay strong."*

*The thread thrust me out of those experiences. I was still terribly dizzy with everything I had just seen. The mere facets of what my mother had experienced throughout the years. The strong dependence she had placed on me. The paradoxical wish for me to both be independent and dependent on her. To supervise. To guide. To make me into the better version of myself according to her standards. A sign that I cared. For myself. For her. For the family.*

*"I think I understand," I sighed, "Let's leave each other some space and time. But I do care. Mom. I do care about you. We just need to work this out. Together"*

*"End of story."*

*"That's a bad ending," she says.*

*"What do you mean? That's the best ending I could think of."*

“It came out of nowhere. Little context. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Okay, sure. Now go to bed. You promised.”

“But that was a bad ending.”

“Don’t you wish that’s how things turned out?”

She falls into silence. Her fingers are still scratching the sheet next to her pillow. I trace my eyes from those yellowed nails to her wrinkled hand and thin arm—one covered in dark age marks—until I meet her eyes, a puddle on a rainy day. Chaotic. Silent. Reflective.

“No,” she says, “Because it pains me to think that you could tell a story like that, and meanwhile, here you are.”