

Rhys Collins

Undaunted

*Hội An, Vietnam, 1977.*

A young woman is washing her clothes in the basin.

“Ma, you will take her to America,” she says in Vietnamese to the shadow behind her.

She is focused on squeezing the dirt from her pants and hasn’t looked up from the water, her bowed head her most distinct feature. Years of looking down has molded her spine so that bending in the fields is more natural than sleep— has forced her beautiful face into the soil.

“She is just born,” is all Ma replies. Ma is silently opening and closing her mouth, but the young woman is not looking. The words fade behind the tongue.

“So is this country.” The young woman is wringing her shirt. “Just born from fire, right back into flame... I will not make her survive another war.”

The young woman pauses and places her shirt on the edge of the basin. She leans on it, her hand pressing the wet cloth into the metal frame, her sweaty black hair hanging and damp. She has her back to the sky and, for a moment, looks as if she’s caving inwards on herself.

“She is just born,” is all Ma says.

The young woman sighs before looking up from the basin, gathering her hair in her hands, running her fingers through as she pushes it back behind her ears.

“Bring her to Linh, the boatman. He owes me.”

The young woman looks out across the fields, the pond. She watches a brown winged butterfly land onto a lotus. Its wings have white streaks and small black dots with even smaller white dots in them that remind her of the moon in the night sky— how it remains, how it stays.

She continues. “I just had her, she does not know this is home. Let her home be the boat, and then some nice place in America, near the sea. Let the tide carry you through. Every night, I will look at the water and search for her. I will search in the reflection of the moon. That is how I will remain a mother. That is how I will remain.”

The young woman turns to her mother.

“It has to be near the sea, Ma. So I can see her. Make it nice.”

Ma nods in understanding and walks towards their hut as the young woman goes back to squatting near the basin, talking to herself, the universe, to all willing to listen.

“She will know her mother as the woman who brought her to her home... Yes, she was just born. Her mother is the sea, and it is wet and beautiful and far from this place. Bring her to America, great old ocean. She will be safe. The war is over for them.”

As she squats, the woman looks like a tiger in the brush, undaunted, steadfast before the leap, her legs: bent tripwire, her bare feet: land mines.

She looks to the sky and sees blue and white. Her brain is napalm and mortar shells. Her heart is on fire.

From the doorway of their hut, Ma looks back to see her daughter’s arched back, traces her eyes along the spine, along the beautiful hair she would press to her lips and her mouth when helicopters passed overhead. She remembers the sound of the blades as they cut through the sky, like beats of dragon’s wings, like heartbeats within her chest. She listens.

Inside, she finds a small baby girl, resting in a bundle of cloth. She picks her granddaughter up, her arms heavy but strong, her fingers pressed tight to the warmth, as if to say that all will be well, that she will make sure of it.

Outside, the young woman squeezes the water out of her shirt one last time, humming an old lullaby she had heard in the village as a child. She speaks into the basin.

“I will be okay, Ma. I will.”

She presses her clothes to her face and sees her reflection in the water.

“I will.”

...

*And under the wings of a lost crane, there is wind. And it guides. Over jungle, over mountain, over fields of bright poppy. The wings soar just above the clouds, wisps of white and water. Below, a hazy country. And life and death. And change.*

*San Diego, 1978.*

Ma steps out of the tent that has been her and her granddaughter's home the past few months. Others begin to open the flaps of their tents as well. The contingent of people move along the tents in unison. They look haggard, men in old clothing, children in borrowed shoes. They look like hunger. They feel like hope. Ma shifts her arms as the baby starts to fuss, shushing and speaking softly.

“*Im lặng.* Shhh. Food. Soon.”

Ma enters the chow hall to get in line, one of the few landmarks in the repurposed military base, Camp Pendleton, that they were placed in after making shore in Guam, being processed and moving to California. The line shifts. She moves.

Ma tries to bounce and squeeze the crying baby in her arms, but can't stop the noise. The people in front and behind her cast small glances towards her. Frustration. Sympathy. Grief. Envy. The line shifts.

The food is a stew with some type of beef, carrot and celery. It burns her hand as she holds the bowl, but she doesn't flinch. She walks to a table to sit and begins blowing on the soup to cool it for the baby. She blows and blows, taking a small bite as she moves the baby to her lap. The line shifts as more people filter into the hall. Someone can be heard crying somewhere. Others arguing. Something resembling a laugh. And the line shifts.

The soup cools. The baby quiets. Ma hopes for a sponsor from the Red Cross, so that she can leave this place. Her hand moves a spoon back and forth between the bowl and her granddaughter's mouth. The baby eats slowly, messily. Ma hopes her daughter is doing fine. The soup gets smaller and smaller. Her hand drops the spoon in an empty bowl. The baby starts fussing again. The line shifts. She moves.

Ma carries the baby back to the tent, laying her down before settling on her aching back. Ma hopes she can last longer than her bones are telling her. She kicks off her shoes and massages her blisters as she grabs her blanket to cover herself. The baby cries. Ma hopes for sleep.

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*San Francisco, 1988*

A young girl walks through a small street block called, "The Tenderloin," with her grandmother as they pass by little Vietnamese restaurants and run-down antique shops. Her grandmother holds her hand tight as the young girl tries to skip and jump around, unabashed by the world.

"Come on, Ma. We're almost home."

"*Im lằng*. I'm old. Tired. You. Break my arm."

"No, I'm not. You're super strong, always lifting baskets of people's laundry they leave too long. Anyways, let's go!"

She breaks free of Ma's grip and runs up the couple steps to the door of a dingy laundromat. Ma slowly follows, using the railing for support as she reaches into her pocket for the key. The young girl grabs it out of her hand and opens the door, swinging it wide before leading her grandmother inside. There are only 5 machines, but it's been enough for the past decade, and Ma never felt like she could add more in the already cramped space. Too much work anyways.

They move past the laundromat to open a door leading up to their small apartment upstairs. As Ma slowly makes her way up, the young girl is already inside, opening up the small fridge and grabbing a cake and candles, before rushing to set it on a coffee table with two paper plates and metal spoons. Ma enters the apartment and sits down at the table and leans back in her chair, wincing.

"Always so fast, just like your mother, Hai."

"I know. I know. You always tell me."

The young girl hastily opens a drawer, grabs a match box and places it in Ma's hand, smiling. Ma lights the candles one by one, placing them into the cake, as the girl closes her eyes.

"Chúc mừng sinh nhật. Happy 10th Birthday, Kendra."

"Thanks, Ma."

Kendra blows the candles out and digs into the cake with her spoon. Ma holds the spoon in her hand, a tired smile on her face as she watches Kendra eat. The spoon grows warm in her palm as she drifts off to sleep.

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*San Francisco, 2003.*

A young woman walks through the two blocks that have been her world for all her life: Larkin Street between Eddy and O'Farrell, "Little Saigon," the cultural hub for mostly Vietnamese refugees. Home to the survivors and the surviving.

She walks clumsily, in heels, through the small district. Along the alleys, there are murmurs that sound like war a block down at city hall: protests against the trouble brewing in Iraq. She looks down at her protruding belly and feels sick.

As she walks, the night sky opens for her, the way the mouth of a river might open into the body of the sea, the way her mouth opens for salt, for sugar, the way her lips open as if to say, "Please."

She stumbles up the stairs back to her apartment, just across the street from her childhood home, a small space above a laundromat, where her grandmother earned her first US dollar at the expense of her history and culture, where she counted coins and moved clothes over and over with her wrinkled hands. The laundromat, one of the cornerstones of Little Saigon, has stood for the better part of three decades.

As she nears the door to her apartment, the young woman looks over at the old building and catches a glimpse of movement, a shadow as it brushes past the bedroom light that she knows is her grandmother's. Her grandmother always paces when it gets late, the light at her window interrupted almost rhythmically by the shadow of an old woman who is scared of dreams and stagnation. Light, then shadow. Shadow, then light.

The young woman turns the key in the door and moves forward into the musty, yellow-brown hallway. She reaches her door and lets herself into her dark, sparsely furnished apartment. It reeks of vinegar and expired milk. She flips the light switch and a dim flicker

begins to hum and crackle on her ceiling. She collapses onto her bed, an old mattress marred by patches of dried vomit and old, crusty black drops. She grabs at something on the floor besides her and closes her hand around a metal spoon. She turns her body and grabs at her black dress, kicking off her heels, her fingers scratching at her arms and legs before resting on a small plastic bag she had stuffed away into her underwear.

She brings the bag to her nose and smells it through the plastic, closing her eyes like she's smelling the most delicate flower. She opens the bag, and places a small amount of the black contents onto some aluminum foil she folds onto the spoon, mixing it with old water from a bottle she keeps beside the bed. She grabs a lighter and flicks a flame under the spoon, watching, rapt, as the black dissolves and melts. As the liquid settles, she places the spoon gingerly onto the floor so nothing spills, grabbing an old piece of a shirt and tying it tight around her bicep with her teeth. She frantically reaches around her for a syringe, sucks the black liquid into it, taps at her forearm, moving her arm over and over in the light, searching for a vein before injecting the syringe into herself and pushing the black liquid through.

As it enters her, she rolls her eyes back and curls her toes. She takes out the syringe, unties her arm, leans back on her mattress and moans. The world around her dims as her vision begins to fade. She sweats and sinks into the mattress, her body slowly releasing itself into pleasure and ecstasy. She opens her mouth and places the now warm spoon inside, running her tongue over and under it, tasting the metal and the heat.

And as the black liquid reaches her brain, as it makes love to her mind, she opens her heart in hopes that she will dream of a better life, of the sweet love of a flower on her ear, the sun and the meadow, a lover's lips and his mouth. A brown winged butterfly flaps its wings and

lands softly onto a dandelion. She dreams of before. She dreams of the heartbeat inside of her arm. She dreams of the liquid pounding inside her like blood. She dreams, and she opens.

*And in the meadow of a dream, she wakes to the face of a man, smiling as he escapes with a heart gifted to him in love and desperation. He leaps and bounds and skips across a field of bright poppies. He holds a hand that is attached to an arm that is attached to a woman who knows no better. And she loves him. And she looks up from his hand to see his smile. And she does not worry about anything.*

*Not the rumble in her stomach, nor the pain in her arms. Not her grandmother pacing back and forth. Not the fact that she met a beautiful man and brought him to her apartment across the street from her childhood home and has not stopped bringing him since. Not his hands under her dress and his heroin in her arm and how his body reminds her of nothing she's ever known.*

*This man loves her, she says. He excites her. He takes her away from everything. He gives her his heart and his love. He wants her to raise his child. He promised her his life, his devotion. He promised to be the best father and husband he could be. He loves her. He wants her. He promised her. He died.*

*Not the look on his face when he overdosed on heroin two weeks ago at his place four blocks away, how it seemed to want to smile forever. Not the look on the EMT's face when he saw her in the corner of the room and she told him she was seven months pregnant with his child, how it looked like pity, how it felt like karma. Not the look on her grandmother's face who, if she knew, would stop pacing for the time it takes to kill a granddaughter in her heart. Not how the young woman used to ask for a father her grandmother couldn't find the right words to talk*



*about. Not how, in the lone quiet hours of the night, she would call for a mother who left her in a boat and sent her far away. Not anything.*

*Because, in the meadow of a dream, she walks hand in hand with her lover, and he is breathing, and so she wants to breathe. Because, as she lays with him, there is a hand in her hands, a tongue in her tongue, a mouth in her mouth, legs in her legs, and she opens. She sees in his eyes something soft and warm and inviting. She sees the boundary between life and death. She wants to meet him there.*

The young woman wakes to vomit as it hurls from her throat out of her mouth onto the floor beside her as she lurches and turns over. Her stomach curls and twists. Her stomach calls to her and pleads for something. She thinks that this is living: pain, then vomit, vomit, then pain.

She is tired. She wants to sink. There is nothing else in her brain. There is nothing else in her heart. She wants to dream again. Her stomach kicks at her and she scratches at the sides of her head, tearing at her hair, at her dress, at her bed. Her stomach kicks and kicks.

She turns onto her side and cradles herself. The heartbeat in her arm is gone, and with her ear pressed to the mattress, she hears the muffled sound of her ragged breathing. She hears the voice of her lover again. She hears him tell her that she is worth more than the world. She does not believe him. She wants him to tell her again so that she can. She wants to join his lips to her mouth and his eyes with her own. She wants to join his breath with hers again and again. She wants to join him.

She takes the rest of the bag and pours it all onto the discarded foil, mixes it with the last of her water. Her stomach kicks at her, and she groans in pain. She continues, desperately flicking at the lighter until it finally lights. She is shaking. Her stomach kicks. She cuts off the

circulation of blood to her arm again, hoping that it will stop the blood from flowing down so that the black liquid can flow up forever, so that her entire body could be filled with it, in every vein and vessel, her eyes, her ears, her heart. She is breathing heavily now, panting. Her stomach kicks. She finds a vein. She shoves the heroin into her and apologizes. She smiles and closes her eyes, pictures her hands in his in that beautiful meadow. And as the last of the black liquid pushes into her arm, she leaves behind the world between Eddy and O'Farrell, leaves the mattress and her dirty apartment, leaves her husband and her grandmother, leaves her past and her future, leaves time and space itself.

*And under the wings of a lost crane, there is, below, a hazy country. The water laps at the coast, and there is a young woman sitting with her feet in front of her, hugging her knees, her feet in the sand. The sea rushes up the beach and slows at her legs, uncovering her toes only to have her burrow them under again. She is wearing just washed clothes. Her skin is beautiful. Her hair flows in the breeze. She is looking out at the sea. She is undaunted.*

*She turns to her side to smile at a young woman who is stumbling towards her in a torn black dress. This young woman reaches her and asks if she has seen a meadow. The other responds with a laugh and pats at the spot next to her. For some reason, the young woman sits.*

*"Call me Hai," says the undaunted woman. She is still smiling.*

*"Kendra."*

*Kendra looks at Hai and, for a moment, is a child again, looking up at her grandmother who is crying because Kendra called her mom, because she asked why she looks older than other children's mothers, because her grandmother can't answer her when she is looking at her like that. Kendra looks at Hai, incredulous.*

*“Are you fucking kidding me?”*

*“Not the reaction I thought.”*

*“What the fuck did you think I would say? You were never in my life, anyways. Is this some sick joke? Some divine punishment? Look, I get it. I’m a terrible person. Now, just let me go.”*

*Hai sighs.*

*“You’ve had it rough, child. But, you have my blood in you. You are stronger than you know.”*

*“Fuck off. Don’t pretend to know who I am. I am not strong. I am weak. I have a six month old child in my stomach and I want to die. What mother does that? What mother leaves her child?”*

*“I did.”*

*“I don’t want to hear it. You had a reason. Ma said it was because of the war. You’re a fucking hero. I’m just a junkie.” Kendra marches into the sea. She is waist deep in the water.*

*“I’m going to where my lover is. You can’t stop me.”*

*Hai shakes her head.*

*“Kendra, you will understand soon enough. But, my time here is done. Your grandmother found you shot up with heroin and called an ambulance. You are at the hospital, and they’ve given you Naloxone. You’ll wake up any minute. Talk to your grandmother, she’ll explain.”*

*“Wait, no, what?!”*

*Kendra begins to splash forward into the ocean. She is chest deep. She is nearly fully submerged. She struggles against the tide. It keeps pulling her back towards the shore. She is*

*panting, clawing her way under. Her head is forced above the sea over and over again. Her mouth opens to swallow the water, to swallow the salt. Her lips open as if to say, "Please."*

*On the beach, Hai smiles and stands. She walks to the edge of the shore and motions at the sea. The tide pulls Kendra all the way back to her mother.*

*"It is not your time yet. You will understand if you listen."*

*Kendra coughs out the water despite herself.*

*"No, please."*

*Hai leans close, and Kendra sees the vast and unstoppable ocean in her eyes.*

*"Listen."*

Kendra wakes to a searing, aching pain in her stomach. She starts screaming. Her grandmother beside her jolts awake and begins calling for a nurse. The nurse calls the doctors. Kendra is sobbing, and her grandmother is trying to soothe her, but Kendra is not listening to any of it. All Kendra can hear is the heartbeat in her stomach clawing and kicking its way out. All she can hear is the child in her stomach doing everything in its power to live. All she can hear is it telling her to do the same.

The labor is the most pain she's ever felt. She doesn't want to push. The child pushes anyway. She wants it to be over. The child obliges. Silence.

Then, crying. Her baby, first. Then, her grandmother. Then, her.

The doctor cuts the umbilical cord and hands the baby to the nurse to wash and wrap in a bundle. They move to give it to her, but she isn't listening. Her grandmother takes it instead.

Ma looks at the baby and smiles. He looks small enough to fit in one hand. She rocks the child back and forth in her arms, her fingers tight against the cloth. She hums a lullaby Hai used to love.

Kendra is exhausted, and the world around her is closing. She hopes to dream of something better, something simpler. As she falls asleep, she hears the sound of a lullaby that for some reason, reminds her of life.

*And under the wings of a lost crane, lies a cold, windy coast in Pescadero, California, where a young man is striding slowly into the sea. For some reason, Kendra calls out to him.*

*He turns and she sees this young man, his face, his shoulders, the way he is forcing himself to stay standing and knows he is her son. He is hers. He turns and smiles in a way that makes her want to hold him closer, but he keeps moving further and further away. She calls out to him, but her cries are silent. He turns back to the sea.*

*Kendra runs towards him, fighting against the tide. She pushes and pushes until he is just within arm's reach. She tries to reach out and grab him, and all of a sudden, the ocean opens up, swallows him whole. She sees the light of his smile fade into the water.*

Kendra jerks awake hours later in a bed at the postnatal ward, clutching her hands to her chest as if trying to hold something close to her. A nurse walks in, and smiles at her.

“Where— Is my grandma here?”

“We contacted her, but she hasn’t come yet, no. I’m sorry.”

Kendra closes her panting mouth silently, calming her lungs and her chest. Her whole body is exhausted and numb. She tries to ask another question, but can't fight the overwhelming rush of sleep.

...

"Kendra."

Kendra opens her eyes to see Ma standing over her. She feels like a child again. She stares at her grandmother, waiting.

"Good. You are alive."

"I guess."

Ma flicks her on the head, before chastising in Vietnamese.

"What were you thinking? You have a child. The boy was taken to NICU, and they are dealing with the drug issue. CPS was called."

Kendra shakes her head, crying, her hands covering her face.

"I know it's terrible. I know. I just— I couldn't do it anymore. Don't you understand? I can't be like you or mom. I'm not some strong immigrant hero. I'm just... me. And I'm hurting. I don't want to hurt anymore."

Ma is staring intently at her granddaughter. Her eyes soften, but they remain focused. They are focused in a way Kendra has never seen before.

"You know I do not sleep. Everything that happens outside my window, I see. Habit from the war, I guess. I saw him come once, and then twice. I saw him many times."

Ma pauses for a moment, and looks upwards as if she were asking for guidance. She closes her eyes, looks back at Kendra and continues.

“I understand. You did not want to stay forever working in the laundromat. I shouldn’t have expected you to, but I wanted a normal life for you. Then, you stopped talking to me. Stopped visiting. Left to that apartment.”

Kendra begins to speak, but Ma stops her.

“Perhaps, that was part of the reason why when I saw you with that man, I was glad that you had found someone, anyone. I pretended not to see the signs, your scratching, your stumbling, all the time you spent away. You looked terrible, but I thought that maybe you were happy. I did not know he died, until I heard from the police when they found you two weeks ago. I did not go to you. Your mother was younger than you were when I left. I did not know what to say.”

Ma pauses to make sure Kendra was still listening. Kendra’s nose is dry, her head aches and all she wants to do is get out of the bed, the hospital, and her sweat matted clothes.

“Hey, stop fussing with your clothes. Listen to me.”

Kendra begrudgingly nods, but her head is swimming.

“I saw you come back. I was by the window, and I could see the signs past the curtain. I thought I would sleep, and tried to. But, I had a terrible feeling, so I came up and went through the door to your building. Your door was unlocked.”

Kendra feels like vomiting.

“I’m sorry, Ma.”

“*Im lặng*. Quiet. First, I must tell you about what really happened to your father and your mother and where you come from. I didn’t tell you, no matter how much you asked, saying it was because you were too young, but really it was because I did not know how. Now, I must.”

“What does it matter?”

“Listen.”

Ma leans forward in her seat.

“Your father killed himself while you were still in your mother’s stomach. He found out that his mother and brother who were estranged years before because of some terrible, unimportant fight had been flattened and smeared by a bomb this country dropped onto ours. He walked into the sea without saying a word and your mother and I understood.”

Ma pauses to gauge Kendra’s reaction, but Kendra does not know how to process what she’s just been told.

Ma continues. “And your grandfather, the love of my life, the kind fisherman who I knew since birth, was killed during the war. He was dead and the only way I knew was because I could feel it. And because he never came home. I never heard how he died. My imagination is worse than any truth. He had to fight for us, and I understood.”

“I don’t want to hear this.”

Ma gets up from the chair and sits on the side of Kendra’s bed. She places her hands gently on Kendra’s arm and squeezes.

“Listen.”

Kendra winces, but resigns.

“Your mother left you with me to go all the way here. She was alone in that country. I can only imagine how scared she was. She loved you more than anything. She wrote to me before she passed wishing that you live knowing little of her. She thought it would be better. She died of a disease. When she had me take you, I understood.”



Ma cannot keep eye contact with Kendra as she speaks. She turns and Kendra can feel her grandmother shudder through her arm. Ma takes one hand and wipes away her tears. When she looks back at Kendra, her eyes are unfaltering.

“I tell you this because I need you to understand where you come from. You do not come from people who do things because they are weak. You come from people who do things because they are strong. Because they love. Your mother wanted to see you again. She sent a letter saying so. But, she also said that as she was, she would never be able to be the mother she wanted to be, that she would be helping you by moving on. So, she joined your father. She died knowing that you would be strong enough to live a better life. But in case you didn’t, she told me to give you this.”

She opens a folder that Kendra hadn’t taken notice of before, and unfolds an aged letter before giving it to Kendra. It is written in Vietnamese.

It says:

*My child, you are stronger than you think. You come from an ancestry of strength and love. Your grandmother was always an example of that to me, and I know she will be an example of that to you, even as I won’t be. When things go wrong, listen. Eat well, be respectful and find somebody to love. Have a child and be good to them as Ma has done to me, as I would to you. Be well. Be undaunted.*

“I should have been more there for you, but I am now.”

Ma’s hands are shaking, but her eyes are fiery. She is determined, steadfast, undaunted.

“Your mother left this world knowing that you have all the strength you need. It comes from your blood. It comes from your country. We come from people who have been attacked and

oppressed for millennia. China, France, Japan, America. Not once did we give up, and not once will you.”

Kendra is shaking under her grandmother’s stare. She starts to sob and heave, folding into herself. “But I did, Ma. I did. I gave up and I’m sorry. I couldn’t do it anymore.”

Ma holds Kendra as she breaks down.

“Your mind gave up, but your blood did not. Did you not listen? Your son was calling for you the whole time. He came out two months early. Did you see him? He was tiny, less than three pounds. It is a miracle he came out okay, and he will need us to continue.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“I know, but we don’t have time to decide. Child Protective Services are waiting outside of the room, because of the heroin. I told them that I would take him, because they will not release the child to you. He needs time here in the hospital, because he came out so early, but once he is out, I will take care of him, and help you get better. You will go on a recovery program, and will be clear of this drug. That is what I promised. That is what will happen.”

Kendra pushes Ma away gently, shaking her head.

“No, I can’t. I don’t know how to be a parent. I don’t want to be a parent. I just— Even now, I want to go back to that apartment. I’m itching to do it again and again. This is all too much. I want to go back. I miss him. I’m so tired. And it’s so hard. You tell me everyone in our family was strong, but why do I have to be?”

“Because, you love him. Because when you love, you are strong. Because no matter how many times you fall, you will always get back up. Because that is the type of people we are.”

“I can’t just accept that. Look, Ma, it sounds amazing. I wish that I could be like that. I wish I could be as strong as you or father or grandfather or mother, but I just can’t. I can’t.”

Ma rests her hand on Kendra's leg. "You already have. You lived."

"I can't be who he needs me to be right now. I don't know if I ever will be. Maybe, I want to be, but that will take time and I will need more help than you can give if you're taking care of him too. It's impossible. Have CPS put him in foster care, or something. He deserves to be with people who can take care of him, who can be there for him, who are more than just... this."

Ma gets up from Kendra's bed and starts slowly pacing back and forth. She pauses and looks at the door. "When I saw him, I saw your grandfather. I couldn't stop myself from loving him. He's my great grandson. How could I let him be without his family?"

Kendra sighs, and musters up every ounce of her fading strength. "Ma, look at me, please."

Ma turns.

"I don't know why, but I love him too. I love him, as much as I have loved anything. He is his. He is mine. There is nothing that will take that away from him. He will always be a part of this family, no matter where he goes. Just like with Hai, I have to give him away."

Ma grumbles, but does not say anything.

"Our blood is strong, just like you said, right? He will come back to us. He will be okay. And you are too old, Ma. Of course, I am thankful to you for bringing me all the way here, but you were only barely able to keep us afloat. He deserves better."

"Foster care is not guaranteed. He could be hurt. He is just a small boy."

"He is strong."

Ma is silent for a long time. The bones in her body creak and ache, forcing her to sit down and gather herself. Now that the rush of adrenaline is gone, she can feel it, her old body

betraying her, weighing her down. It feels like all the water of the ocean is pressing upon her shoulders.

“Okay. But you will get better. Beat this drug. We will put him in foster care, and he will go to someone who will love him and support him for now. And if he does not get that support and that love, he will be strong enough to wait until you or someone in his life will give it to him. Because that is who he is. He will be someone that loves and will be someone that will be loved. We must believe in that.”

“I do. I don’t know why, but I do.”

“Good. Rest. I will tell them. Do you want to see him before he goes?”

“No, I don’t want him to see me like this.”

Ma scoffs. “Like mother, like daughter.”

Kendra smiles weakly.

“Fine. Rest. You will write a letter later, and I will send it through. You are still going to recover, you will be there for him if he searches for you. That is non-negotiable.”

“Okay.”

Ma nods resolutely, and leaves through the door. Kendra closes her eyes, wishing for sleep and only sleep.

. . .

At the edge between the ocean and the shore, a young woman sits holding a bundle of fabric. She remarks upon how small it is, how she could probably hold it all with one hand. Despite herself, she smiles.

“The foster care parents let us have the hospital blanket to hold onto. It was nice of them. They were American, too. Father, a businessman, mother, a teacher. They seemed nice.”

“Good. It has to be nice.”

“Have you thought about what you will write to him?”

“Somewhat. You brought the paper and pen?”

“Yes, though I do not know why you wanted to write it here.”

“So that my mother can bear witness. So that my son will know the ocean is his home.”

Ma doesn’t know what to say. She hands her the paper and pen.

Kendra writes:

“You will be stronger than you know. You are loved, even if I’m letting you go, I’m your mother, and I won’t forget your little toes and hands and head. I have so much to say, but no way to say it. I will be better, and you will be able to find me again. I have a feeling you will need to. If things go south, do what my mother, your grandmother, says and listen. It’s hard to believe all of that. I know. Trust me, I’m dealing with it myself, but there’s something in your blood, like in mine, that’ll let you know it’s true. Even though I’m probably fumbling up all that I’m saying, there’s a part deep inside of me that knows what I’m telling you is right, so trust your mother’s intuition and trust your own. Be strong, even in the face of hell and grief. And don’t be a junkie like me. And love people a lot, even if it hurts. And be nice and trust people, but not too much. And if you find someone who loves you, hold them tight. And...

She pauses and squeezes the blanket to her chest.

“You’ll be okay, child. You’ll be okay.”

The young woman is shaking as she hands over the letter and blanket over to her grandmother.

The young woman sits at the edge of the shore and sticks her feet in the sand. She looks calm and composed for the first time in years, even as the effects of the Naloxone fade and her body begs for the black liquid.

Ma stands off to the side behind her. She folds the letter into her coat. “Have you given thought to what his name would be, if you were to name him?”

“A name that represents his passion for life, how he fought to be here, how he fought for all of us, how he will continue to fight for himself. Let it be like ardor, like fire, like flame, a light enveloped in the middle of the ocean, burning no matter what, forever.”

She looks out at the sea and sees the reflection of the moon as it ripples and waves. She looks poised and certain, even as her mind tries to give in to fear. She looks beautiful as her long black hair flows in the breeze. She looks out and imagines an uncertain future, for herself and her son. She smiles.

She looks undaunted.