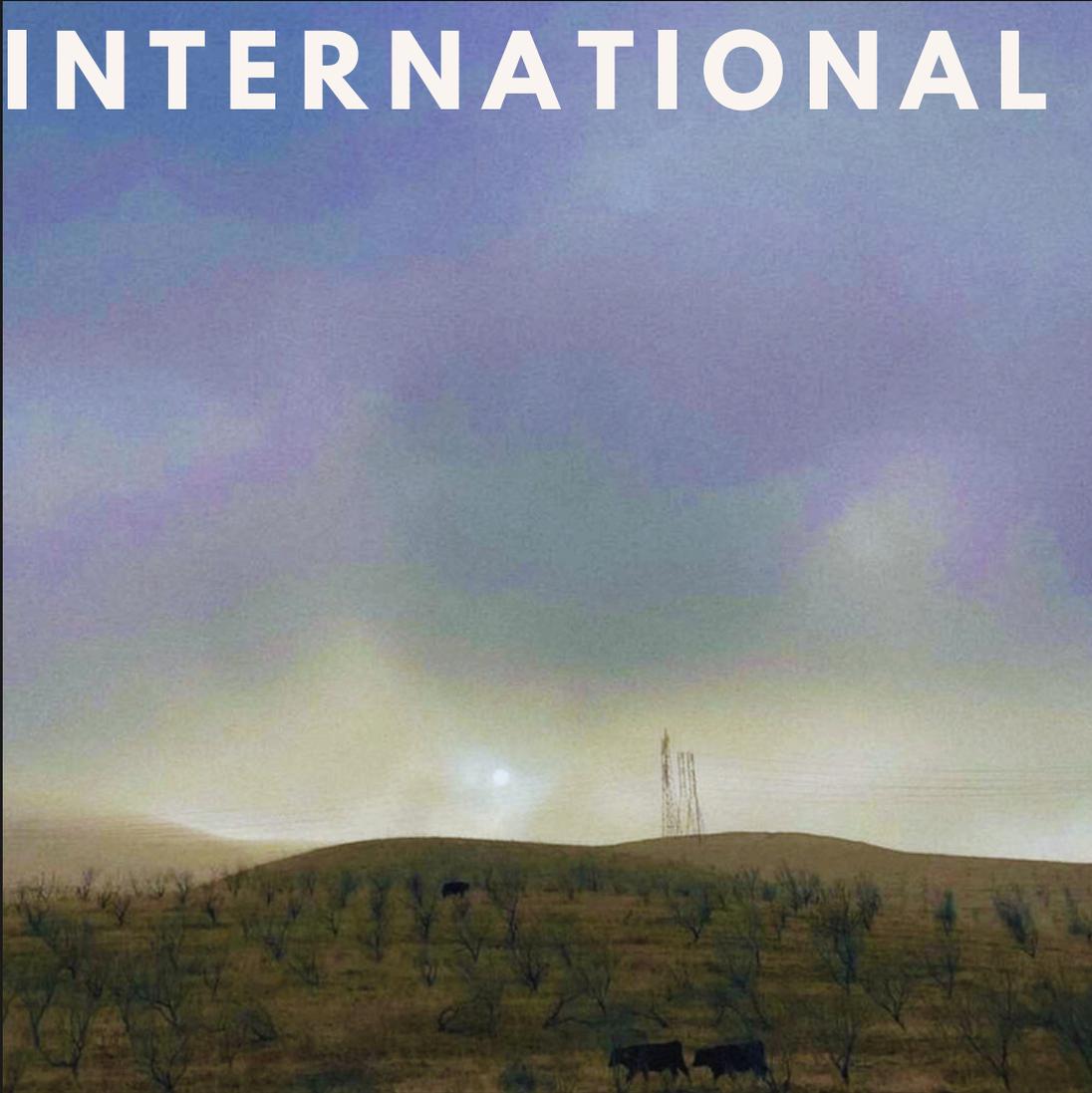


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FALL 2024

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Was I deceived, or did a sable cloud
Turn forth her silver lining on the night?
I did not err: there does a sable cloud
Turn forth her silver lining on the night,
And casts a gleam over this tufted grove.

—JOHN MILTON, “COMUS”



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WE AND ME AND HER

We loved the new library. It had slick tiles that looked cool to lay on with computer stations and paper cutouts bookmarks in colorful shapes and designs. The old one was kind of squat. We only had been to one part of it because we were babies and that's where the baby books were. Now though, there were oranges and greens and big kid books.

We gravitated to fantasy books. The Frog Princesses and dragons and schools for the magically gifted. Life was school and home and characters that planned grand schemes foiled dastardly plots.

Over the summer, we grew to encompass our brother and cousins into Us. We got packed up into a van, and spent hours entertaining ourselves on the ride up. Once in the mountains, we'd disembark at McDonalds as the weak sunlight began to show its face. Fresh from our nap-sleep-excitement fatigue, We scattered. He sometimes wanted pancakes instead of the sausage McMuffins everyone else had.

She was allergic to eggs and I don't remember when she grew out of it. He liked orange juice, like me, even if the orange juice didn't taste like it came from actual oranges. As a mass of ungainly limbs that had then been fed breakfast and was reminded that the road ahead wouldn't have bathrooms for a long while, we were summarily stuffed into backseats of cars. We spilled a cup of ice water. He did that sometimes. The car did not stop, because we were having a good time. If we were lucky we might make it by lunch time, and couldn't eat non-junk-food, to our disappointment. So we stopped up the spill the best we could with paper towels and had fun chucking the ice cubes out of the car into empty expanse of freeway.

We arrived at Grandpa's house, and got squished into hugs by people saying that we grew up too fast. We ducked out of the hugs to run inside. The smooth leather couch arm was a slide, the bed was clambered on, the light switches were switched on, and the closets were hidden in. We flopped on the floors and scoured the TV for cartoons as we weren't old enough to care about how sleeping on the floor would affect us the day after. We played video games to sprawl like cats, ate chocolate dipped ice cream, and thumped the backs of parents who had worried about the day after sleeping on the floor.

Going home meant shrinking back to normal. It was Me, Her, and Him, though he was young enough that he wasn't as close as we were. Here comes fall, although California had a fall season, we were one grade apart. We're practically the same person, as She was Me and I was Her. Our teachers that we had would call our names out like that, anyway. Also, we would get the same clothes and only need to be in slightly different sizes. Besides, wouldn't you think it would be cute if they matched? Grandma sometimes would split a banana and who got the butt.

At the end of the day, We still had half a banana each. Life went on. Homework needed to be done, games needed to be played, and books needed reading.

We thoroughly enjoyed taking a step up into the young adult section of the library. We still read each other's picks, delving into the bag that would strain under the maximum checkout limit and the inherent density of paper. We could stay up late to read and argue which of us would have to claw out our way out of the sleepy relaxation to turn off the light. Vampires, chosen ones, and coming of age stories abounded. She liked historical fiction and I liked the manga section.

At some point, She started getting into the Avengers while I started looking into Batman. She's played Stardew Valley and Valorant, while I've continued learning the names of the new Pokemon generation that was released. It was a far cry from crowding around the computer to play online flash games and demanding the next turn.

The fluctuations and splitting of Us and We becoming Me and Her happened organically, and it was a pleasure to have been there. It's still easy to fall into We when the other is all around. The other just isn't around as often. I don't like the texture of nuts in chocolate but She doesn't mind. We still eat chocolate dipped ice cream. Sometimes, She takes the chocolate shell, and I split the remaining ice cream with her.

WANNA PLAY POOL?

D A V I D A R T I G A

The rules of pool were explained to me by a now close friend. Sixteen balls, seven solid colors, seven with a stripe. One white cue ball to shoot, and one black 8-ball that determines the winner. Whoever sinks all their corresponding balls, either solids or stripes, gets the chance to sink the 8-ball. Sink it into a pocket you specifically choose to shoot for, and you win. If these rules are wrong, then Efren is to blame.

He was a classmate who asked me what I was doing after class. Clearly, he wanted to be friends, but I did not care. I knew his first name, that he was tall, and that he wears glasses. That's it, I didn't care to know anything else about him.

"What does he want?" I thought. "Why is he trying to be my friend?"

But, for some unknown reason, my response to his question was to acquiesce.

"Wanna play pool?"



The school's game room is scary. There is a carpet that I know hasn't been washed in far too long, lights that are both too blinding but also not illuminating anything, and people everywhere. Absolutely everywhere. We picked up the pool supplies from the front desk: the pool balls, pool cues, chalk, and the triangle rack used to set up the balls. We headed to an empty table. I watched as he set up the game, aligning the balls in the rack and then carefully lifting it.

He made the first shot and broke the neat formation. It was loud, like the crack of a whip. None of the pool balls sank into a pocket, so it was my turn. He showed me how to shoot. I laid the pool cue on the gap between my pointer finger and thumb, with my other fingers splayed on the table as support. I made my first shot... and I missed. Expected. All my first couple shots, suffice to say, were totally awful.

He pocketed the first ball. He was solids and I was stripes. As we kept taking turns, the feeling of the chalk became almost overwhelming. It has to be rubbed onto the end of the pool cue; it makes it not slip off the balls when you shoot. It left my fingers so dry. It left a fuzzy feeling on them, like the static of your arm falling asleep. Even the air smelled like old chalkboards. If I let myself think about that day, I can still feel that dusty film on my fingers. Since then, I've come to hate it less.

My complete lack of experience was evident, but his shots, man, his shots that game were amazing. It's the same feeling of seeing somebody crazy do something wildly dangerous and not get hurt, like sword swallows or motorcyclists who do parkour. But instead of a crazy person trying to meet their end early, it was just my classmate playing pool.

Perhaps it was not a remarkable thing, but I found it to be enthralling, beautiful even.

He leaned over and was extremely precise with each shot. It was easy to see that he had played many matches before. Little ol' novice me was very confused when he sat with his back to the table and turned slightly to the left. He held the pool cue behind him, and that was how he planned to shoot. His shoulders were still relaxed. He had the same deadpan expression he always had. And, with natural confidence, he took his shot. For all I remember, after that flashy move he could've fumbled and missed. But that wasn't important. My eyes were glued on him. He did something so simple, nothing more than a party trick, but it was still captivating to see. This moment wouldn't leave my head. It was poured into my mind like wet cement and solidified in the crevices of my brain. I could never forget it, even if for some reason I tried. In that moment, he replaced every expectation I had for him.

"He can play pool like this, like cool people in the movies", I thought to myself, "What else do I not know about him?"

I'd relegated my classmate to someone who couldn't hold my interest. But suddenly, he captured it in its entirety. How wrong I was to assume he would be boring or uninteresting. A tiny guilt hit me after finding out this surprising truth. Now, I wanted to know everything about Efren.

My turn. I snapped back to reality. My shoots were getting better, but nowhere near as flawless as him. Four of my stripes still remained on the table after my turn.

The game was nearing its end. He sunk all his solids and went

to pocket the 8-ball. He ducked down. His glasses obscured his face, especially with the glare from the lights. But then he dipped his head down to aim. The light moved away from the center of his lenses long enough for me to catch a glimpse. I saw his eyes, focused but relaxed. The darkest eyes I'd ever seen. Like black 8-balls.

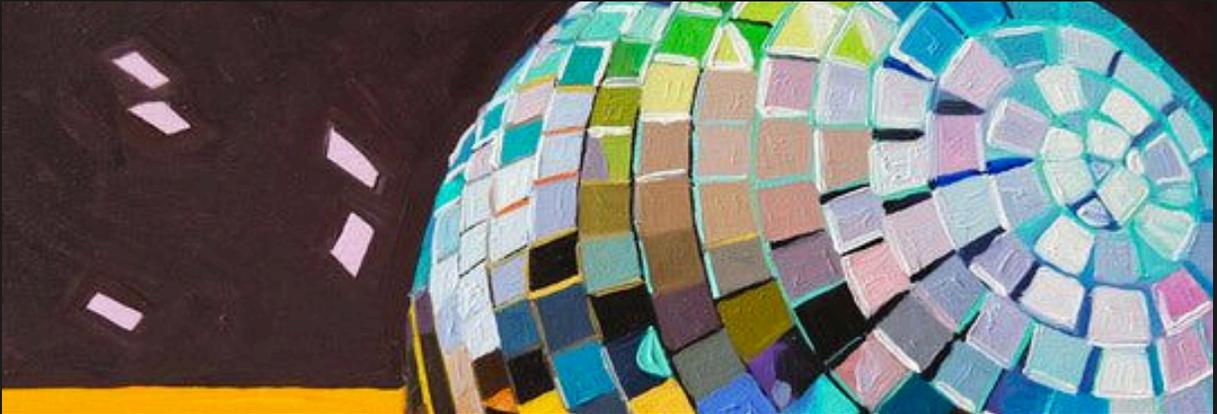
He shoots. He sinks.

And he wins.

I wondered how long he waited for that moment. Was it déjà vu the second he sunk the 8-ball? I hope it was. I hope that game went exactly how he envisioned it would happen.

Since then, we've had many rounds of pool, and I have loved every second of them, even if I am losing (which is most of the time). I may have lost that first game, but I didn't really lose. He now brings me more happiness than anyone else. There is no one I'd rather waste an evening with, no one who I anticipate seeing more.

Complete nerd. Talkative. Sarcastic, but still kind. The best humor and music taste of anyone I know. My best friend, Efren, who changed my life with just one question.



A 10-MINUTE LESSON ON LOVE AND LOSS

It was October 2021, I was a freshman at Cal Poly Pomona, living on campus, and I befriended this blonde chick named Bella. We despised everyone who lived on our floor, including our own roommates. But we found solace within each other. One day we went to Starbucks together to escape the boredom that lived in the four walls of our dorm rooms along with our annoying roommates. Bella drove, and as I sat in her compact black Mini Cooper, I heard the first line of what would be my favorite song for the next two years. The beginning verse starts out as, "I walked through the door with you." This is the beginning of Taylor Swift's "All Too Well" (10 minute version).

I had listened to a few Taylor Swift songs growing up that played on the radio while sitting in the back of my mom's SUV. I even downloaded a song onto my ipod from her Debut Album, but I was never a fan. I never considered myself to be one. As I grew up my music taste shifted from Pop to more RnB and Rap. Taylor Swift was too mainstream for me. I was

one of those Taylor Swift haters. I thought she and all her followers were annoying. They reminded me of the people on our dorm room floor. So when Bella, the coolest girl I knew, was playing Taylor Swift, I had to listen. And soon enough as I heard the strums of the guitar and Taylor Swift's voice filled the inside of Bella's Mini Cooper I was entranced. The song was so powerful it explored a world of love and heartbreak. The feeling of obtaining something so tangible and having it taken from you and reliving that cycle. This was not the same Taylor Swift that I heard playing from the back seat of my mom's car.

That night with our Starbucks drinks in hand we sipped and Bella explained to me the background behind this song. From that day on I was a Taylor Swift fan, or a "Swiftie" as one may call it. I went back to my dorm and listened to her albums. I entered a world of love and romance, as well as heartbreak and insecurities. All things that Taylor Swift herself has experienced. That winter I experienced what felt like a Taylor Swift heartbreak. I had an enormous crush on this guy that liked me, but couldn't date me because of my age. I felt like I was living inside the song "All Too Well." "You said if we had been closer in age maybe it would've been fine; and that made me want to die." This line in All Too Well explained how I had been feeling. Even when my friends were tired of hearing my pathetic sob story I knew that Taylor Swift understood what I felt.

I think partially the reason I admire her so much is because she is relatable. Even a broke college student like myself can relate to her, a billionaire. In her song "Mirrorball" she talks about having to put on a facade in order to try and please everyone while losing herself in the process. She ends

up becoming a reflection of everyone else. This is something I felt like I experienced throughout most of my college career. She speaks on topics in her songs that most people deem too personal or too "sappy" to speak on. She has taught me the importance of love and loss, friendship as well as the betrayals, and finally she taught me how to navigate my life as a young woman going into my twenties. I do not think that my college experience would have been the same if it hadn't been for that car ride with Bella.

SUPERHERO

K E V I N S A N T O S

Dedicated to all my people out there goin' through it
Take it day by day, find a way

Yo, everyday I'm wakin' up and wonder
What is it i'm doin' with my life, sacrifice?
Or am I stacking rice? It's a cold combination
I'm taking intimidation by the face, and drag it
On the floor, draw the line between;
A boundary, this the typa sh- i see
Different people; you and me
I've been askin' about dreams
Did you ever have a dream?
Did you ever wanna be a superhero and a heal people soul?
Hero to the people; be the hero for your home-?
Town, I get down and lay down foundation,
All these people really needin' super patience,
Doctor at the door; take time to find a cure
I've been hearin' memories,
Songs I always sang back in 2013
I was only like 12, now I'm like 23
And It's crazy how the time flies



You laugh, you cry, you live and then you- yea

Now take a moment and reflect

Is you doin' what you love or you livin' with regret?

Take time to make time and spend it with the people that you love

With the people who create, with the people who relate

There are people out there who mind your never mind's

And it only take a second to smile and show your kind

Ness, make sure you at your best,

We only got one love and it's livin' in your chest, yea

"Man love's underrated. I think people think it's like a cheesy, corny thing to always be like loving and... and like have a positive energy about you. I was one of those people, I was like, 'Man I'd be so much more interesting if I was like-self-destructing all the time and depressed and hated myself,' like, people would... I'm so much more interesting that way and more creative. It's not true. Fun fact."

—MAC MILLER

RADIO PLAYS

C H A R L I E B R O W N

Growing up I didn't care very much for the radio. Wait ... that might've been a bit of an understatement. I won't go as far as saying I "hated" it, but the feeling of hate wasn't too far off. The concept of it just hurts my brain. For hours on end, you'd have to sit and listen to the same 15 to 20 trashy songs that kids born in this decade wouldn't be able to name even if you offered them a million dollars. The only variations of these playlists across stations, obviously excluding a complete change in genre, are just the shitty little remixes and alterations to the songs made by the DJ's. Which felt like it was never done to elevate the music. They were done either to censor curse words or make the songs transition smoothly - even though they rarely do. It's the type of work that makes you think: "It can't be that hard to be a DJ" and "How much do DJ's get paid again?"

Long story short, radio is the worst. They play the same thing all day, always cut out that one good part of the song, and nowadays 50% of the broadcast are, what are probably fake, giveaways and commercials for liposuction. I think it goes without saying that, as a kid, I'd rather scratch up



my mom's Keyshia Cole CD or just listen to the sounds of my dad's engine overheating.

There are some times where this isn't the case though. Sometimes there exists a song that is such an absolute bop you can care less how many times it's played or the endless minutes of garbage you have to endure until you can listen to it again. It's simply that good. In the summer of 2013 THAT song was 3005 by Childish Gambino. This song made car rides with no AC in 100 degree heat a little more bearable. As a kid, I didn't know who Childish Gambino was, or the fact that he and Donald Glover were the same person. I just took the song and went about my days. It wasn't until later when Donald wrote, starred, and directed a television show called Atlanta which I gravitated towards in my early teens. It was my fascination with this show that led me to find the Gambino connection and really take a deep dive into the rest of Donald's career and art. I quickly came to find out he had fingerprints on almost every piece of growing media I liked; from music, film, animation, etc. Not only were most of these projects great in their own regard, but I loved how he used projects like Atlanta to push a cultural narrative that I hadn't seen before yet could closely relate to.

The overwhelming success of Donald's endeavors and the fact that he was already rooted very closely to some core childhood memories made me feel extra invested in the trajectory of his career. Not just for his sake, but for the implications it had on my own dreams and aspirations. Here is someone that looks like me, comes from similar circumstances, doing all the things I want to do in life. I admire Donald Glover and many others like him because they prove to me that, despite the path to my dreams being long and difficult, they're proof that it is far from impossible.



A REACTION TO CELEBRITY CULTURE

"I don't believe in celebrity idolization."

"What?"

"I said, I don't buy that celebrity idolization bullshit." The man brought the glass to his lips and took a generous sip. "Like, look right there at that headline. Some video blogger's tweets needing a whole segment on the news? Compared to any actual issues? Nah, I don't buy it." The newscaster switched to a weather report. "Well, why not?"

"Why not? Why- I'll tell you why, Harv, and it's real simple. Even you can follow. You see, if I attach myself onto something, then it becomes a part of me, right? Materials, relationships, it makes me who I am. You following?"

"Sure."

"Good, you know I hate repeating myself. So anyways, these things, they all come together to make me...well, me. It takes a lot of effort as it is to maintain healthy relationships, ones that aren't one-sided and are real. Why do we give so much of ourselves to people who don't think twice about us?" He scoffs. Swigs. "Ridiculous."

"Okay, but surely there's a movie with an actor you like, whose new movie you'll always go to see? A band or artist you always listen to with each new release?"

"Well, sure, sure. It'd be pretty damn hard to be alive today without liking any movies or music. But there's a line between enjoying their work and enjoying the lives of people you'll never meet, or people that could turn out to be shitty, or people that can drop off the face of the earth at any time. At any time. Sure, I can be like a celebrity, admire their work. But to admire them? That's dedication. Like, let's say Jerry Lewis was alive and—"

"Jerry Lewis?"

"Yes, Jerry Fuckin' Lewis, now shut up! Anyways, let's say I was the dude's biggest fan. I watched every sketch, every movie, and listened to his godforsaken music. Now so far, this is okay. This is consuming the artist's work. But if I started looking closer at Jerry and everything he did outside of his work, memorized his favorite food, bought *King of Comedy* merch and shirts to wear daily, then that crosses a line. Jerry Lewis becomes a part of my day, a part of my life, and all that for someone who doesn't even know I exist. You see the problem?" Silence fell between us for a second. Enough to show my understanding.

"You see." He continued. "And that's how it is nowadays. You can't separate the consumer from the artist. So why indulge?"

The man took the final swig from his drink and departed from the bar.

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THE TREE

For I cannot see
My mind is paying a fee
I'm still as a tree
I need to move
Before I forever wonder
"What could be?"

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AN ECHO OF US

I replay our last few days together,
When everything seemed so much better.
Over and over, in my head,
I see you and relive the words you said.

Your laugh became my favorite melody,
But I wasn't ready for you to become a memory.
I need a remedy for this pain—
What can heal what still remains?

One thing I know is clear:
These memories hold no remedy.
Your absence is loud, it's deafening—
An echo left that keeps on settling.

"Move on," they say, "it's the only way."
But the pain won't go away.
It's worse than any wound I've known—
A hurt that stains my bones.

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"Hurry," my mother says,
"You won't be young forever."
But how am I to move on and be strong?
When you're the only one I want?

We were creating art so rare,
Our colors intertwined, so fair.
But not all art is preserved-
Now, all that is left is this hurt.

Perhaps I am going mad,
Stuck in a world we could have had.
I speak to you when I gaze at the moon,
Alone, inside my room.

My tears remain the only sign
That once, you were truly mine.
I'm haunted now by what once was
And what can never be again.

THE LONGAN FARM

C H E L S E A L I M

In an ideal world and an ideal timeline, every end date for every tragedy listed on Google would be the right one, the exact date when things would return to normal; however, this isn't true. The 70s were a time of disco and bell bottoms, but against this colorful backdrop, was a tragedy that would impact several generations. The Cambodian Genocide lasted from 1975 to 1979 with a death count in the millions. My mom's first memories occurred well after the end of the Genocide and were something she described incredibly casually to the point that an outsider might think that we were speaking about the weather. Crawling into an underground bomb shelter, she would recall looking back and seeing explosions, which she compared to the sounds of fireworks. The shelter, deep underground and large enough to fit an entire village, was humid and dark as the villagers waited for the explosions to stop. These people in the village managed to outlast a genocide that killed anywhere from 740,000 to 3 million people, yet they were still fearing for their lives. My mom was young and couldn't recall most details, but being the middle child of seven meant that she had many more stories to tell.



Truthfully most Asian immigrant moms have a treasure trove of stories to tell, whether traumatic or fun. My mom would recall so many stories from her childhood that it felt like I was there at some points. She would recall traveling through landmines with my grandfather to go to Angkor Wat. They would ride on a motorcycle to avoid running over a hidden landmine, which was a difficult task as 6,422 of the villages in Cambodia had been contaminated. While there, she would point out the Chinese characters carved onto the walls by travelers who feared that the temple would become their early graves. She would recall working in a clothing factory and faking sickness to avoid protests. This led to the workers being locked in the building for days without food or water, but because she befriended the right people, she managed to return home to her family. After a few years in the countryside, her family managed to move out to Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. The city sat on the edge of a riverbank which was filled with longan trees. She would recall my grandma renting out a floor to a Japanese embassy worker that she managed to befriend. The worker had come with the United Nations as a translator to help the people in the aftermath of the genocide. After my mom left for the States, that worker would return and ask for my mom to return to Japan with her. She would recall being in a crush at the King's palace, but she and other family members managed to survive. From that story, she would always tell me "If you're ever in a crowded room, find something strong to lean on. If there's a crush, that's going to be the only thing that saves you."

Some time in her late teens, she did the most selfless and brave thing a person could ever do: leave home and move to a different country. My mom rejected Denmark after my uncle told her that people there believed those with black hair

were witches and she chose to not go to Japan with the embassy worker because she didn't know anyone in that country. But, she chose America because a relative of my grandpa was willing to house her. However, after moving she hit a wall. She eventually managed to settle into the stereotypical lower-middle class life. With a schedule of moving between work and home, her life became one of repetition.

Whenever I saw her at home, she would always be cooking. Standing in all her 5 feet of glory, she would move around the kitchen, methodically and rhythmically. I would always work on homework at the kitchen table while she would make our dinner, the smells slowly filling our living room and kitchen. After homework help, we would eat dinner and settle down for the night. From there, after a night of sleep, she would wake up at three in the morning for work, get off at 1:30 to pick me up, and then repeat. The schedule never changed after my sister was born, and my mom's life of adventures in Cambodia seemed to slow.

During our pre-pandemic trip to Phnom Penh, I asked my mom why she couldn't act as our guide and she told me, "I don't recognize the city anymore. Everything looks different, everything has changed." I had felt nearly 20 years of life flow through me like water and looking at my mom, I saw those same 20 years. She never looked quite her age, holding herself as someone younger and often being mistaken as my sister, yet in that moment, being so far away from her family, you could feel her grief for what she missed. My mom would often recall stories about the different opportunities she had, but in every scenario, she would say she chose to move because of her belief that Cambodia no longer had any opportunities after the genocide. Every return though, she would always point out the

newly built skyscrapers and malls, and always compare it to America, noting how life did improve. Perhaps moving wasn't as vital as she thought.

Our trips became more frequent as my grandma developed Parkinson's and whenever we went to her childhood home, all of her pain seemed to vanish around my grandparents. Even though my grandpa's rules loosened with every grandchild born, my mom would still try to abide by them. "Leave the table when you're finished with lunch. Be back home before dark," unofficial rules that we followed for our entire stay. The days passed quickly and when we left, I saw my mom cry for the first time. My mom wasn't unemotional, but she was never willing to outwardly show any negative emotion other than anger. Leaving that airport left an air of uncertainty and my mom promised to return next summer, but whether she would is still a mystery.

Leaving that house felt different to my mom. We returned to our usual routine when we got back home, but there was an air of difference. My mom slowly stopped recalling old stories and began thinking about the present. She told me about wanting to purchase or build a vacation home and she already bought land on a Longan Farm a little ways out of the city, on the riverbanks she grew up near. Away from the tangled powerline and cracked sidewalks of Phnom Penh, my mom bought a little paradise. One whose future is so unsure, yet something she holds so dear: my mom's land, something she hopes to help with our tomorrow.



THE PURPOSE OF A PISTACHIO.

The vineyard is beautiful. I almost start to consider it worth the journey. The smell of grapes and bitter wine is pungent in the fresh air. It's carried through the wind like a melody-like it's trying to seduce me to stay. Everything is clean. My lungs don't ache.

The man who walks me down the aisles of grapevines is tall, with slick, jet black hair, and a sharp chin. His arms are folded gentlemanly behind his back. He hasn't stopped smiling, though we have not talked all this time.

At long last, after however long I have been there, I look up to meet him.

"Who are you supposed to be?"

He acknowledges the question, but not me. He seems satisfied, like he had just won a game of poker. "What would you like me to be?"

"Can you be kind?"

"Certainly."

I reconsider. Anybody can be kind.

"Be one thing, then. Be honest."

"Ah," and there comes that satisfied expression once more, "I think I have misspoke. That is a gift you won't have to ask for from me."

I can almost taste the merlot on my tongue; feel it in the back of my throat. It begins to sting my nose. The remnants of some distant memory dance through my thoughts.

"I've come a long way," I say, "and I think you're the one who can answer my questions."

The man nods - a dip of his chin. "Yes. I think you might be right about that."

I slow in my tracks. "Why did I come here?"

The man takes a step or two more, then stops. I shadow him. He takes out a pocket watch, listens to it tick, then tucks it back in his coat pocket.

"You are so human." The man muses. "Now, don't get me wrong -" he casts out a hand gloved in white, " - it's fascinating, really. Because you are all the *same*."

He continues briskly, like he can see the idea stringing

itself together out in the distance, fearing he might not catch it in time. I follow to hear him.

"Each one of you is searching the Earth far and wide for such a fickle thing. Reason. You're all desperate for it. Why this? Why that? What makes sky blue? What makes grass grow? What makes devil happy? Why, why, why?"

I'm on his heels, nearly stepping on them. "Tell me. You must know why. Tell me why it all brought me here."

The man stops again and cranes his neck over the rows of grapevines. He watches as though he is expecting something.

When nothing happens, the man looks back over his shoulder to me.

"I'll tell you why."

His eyes go narrow, and he grins. "Just because."

My mouth is partly agape, my lips are chapped, my nose is numb. Just because.

"Yes," the man says, "just because."

My dumb conscience makes me squeak, "Because why?"

"Because somewhere, in a forgotten library, an old woman settled in her rocker spins a globe and stops it wherever her painted nail may lie. She says to herself, 'There.' And so, this idea called reason that you and the rest of humanity seek tirelessly is nothing more than a lady's game of chance.

Oh, don't cry. You can't help it, you understand, for reason brings purpose. If you found the grounds on which you came here, you would have discovered your purpose, yes?"

Yes.

"So see, you're forgiven for your naivety."

How, I think, could I feel so heartbroken in heaven such as this? Such a funny place to cry. "What am I without reason and purpose, then?"

"What you are is alive," the man says matter of factly, like it was obvious all along, "Doesn't that mean something?"

I blink through my swollen eyes, my lashes sticky with tears, and catch the last few moments of dusk. "I need purpose. I'll die without purpose."

"I can assign you purpose, but that won't make it real. See here," the man begins to explain, "the purpose of a pistachio is to be cracked and eaten. Crack and eat, crack and eat. To be used and enjoyed. At least - that is what we get out of it. But, do we define purpose as what others enjoy from us?"

At the shake of my head, the man wags his finger affirmatively, "No. We do not. I have just assigned a pistachio purpose based on what I am given from it, but that will never define the universal purpose of a pistachio."

The man clicks his tongue and lifts his shoulders. "But, at the end of the day, it is just a pistachio. One that I have assigned meanings to, but a pistachio nonetheless."

"Is that what I'll be?" I ask like a wide eyed child. "If I ask you to assign me a purpose, will I exist as an empty shell to everyone but you?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Then, I think I'll stay here and be whole, instead."



THE GHOST OF YOU

I wish I could say that the day you left was pleasant. I tried to paint over the memory of that horrible day by remembering the days we would spend together with Pooh riding all over Monrovia. The sun shining down on us, warm air blowing through our hair as we rode with the top down in the convertible. I wish I could always remember you that way. I feel as though you sometimes feel like a recurring dream that I suddenly stopped slipping away to in my slumber, but sadly you weren't a dream. If you were a dream, then I would not harbor the same resentment I do for you today and I would not spend my empty moments wondering about your life.

Having an older sister like you felt like a dream to me, even though we weren't blood. You were this force to be reckoned with and carried yourself like sunshine where all I wanted was to bask in the light of being known as your little sister. Sadly, this isn't one of those happy Bildungsroman tales; rather, the tragic unfolding of the day my sister left our family for good. You packed your bags with a mix of emotions

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that I'll never quite understand with a look on your face- like a mask of determination was bolted to your face with years of angst and resentment as their glue. I watched as you folded your clothes with precision, each item a carefully chosen relic of your possession, but to me it felt like you took your favorite mementos of our shared past.

The sky filled with clouds of grey as if the Earth knew it should be saddened by your departure from our home. You rusted around the house with hostility like a quiet storm brewing as you collected your final items and the air felt thick with so many unspoken words because I could not get past the lump in my throat to utter anything to persuade you to stay.

I stood in the doorway, clutching the frame as if it could hold me in place. You looked back one last time, your expression was a mixture of relief and bittersweet sadness. Your steps got further and further until suddenly you were gone. The silence that followed was suffocating and engulfed me with grief as if you had died- but no. You were in the flesh, heart beating, pulse racing, and yet I felt as if I needed to hold a memorial for what once was.

I remember the rest of the day feeling like every other day. No one stopped to truly process, rather just moved on in order to stop from feeling all together. Looking at Pooh's face throughout the day hurt me the most. I don't truly think you understood what you were doing or how many lives you were affecting other than your own.

You were a teenager doing dumb teenage things that led you to the path of leaving us, but just because you were making a grown choice does not mean that he does not remember the little girl who used to have her dad show up to every gymnastics practice, how you stepped on his feet as he walked you around the house, and what it felt like to watch his baby walk out of his life for good.

In case you feel like we have forgotten about you, just know not a single stone has gone unturned with me trying to find you and hopefully persuade you to have a relationship with your younger sisters. Every time I look at Charlie's face, it makes me feel as if the universe needed to leave me with the lingering memory of you in some fashion so I could never truly forget you. It saddens me to feel as if you've become a phantom spirit, lingering just beyond the edges of my memory.

I often find myself imagining you walking through the door once more, your laughter spilling like sunlight into the dim corners of our home. Sadly, each time, the door remains closed, and I am left with only echoes of what once was. The house has grown quiet without you. Mom and Pooh will never be able to fill the void without you here. I see the way they both glance at your empty room, its door forever ajar as if waiting for you to return. It's a painful reminder that you are out there, somewhere, living a life that no longer includes us.

I often wonder what you are doing. Do you remember the

way I used to make you play hide and seek around the house? What about the times I used to come in and annoy you when you were with your friends, yet you still let me proceed with the same routine? I come in, try to maneuver my way into your group, and you let me stay for a little to make me feel like a big girl.

You were my compass, guiding me through the trials and tribulations that I faced at eight years old, but now as a twenty-two-year-old girl, I am lost in a world without you wishing she had her big sister to help her once more. The only regret I have is not telling you how much you meant to me on the day you left. I would tell you all the things I love about you and how your absence would leave a void in my heart that will never be able to be fulfilled completely. I would let all my feelings pour out like word vomit if it meant there was a chance to keep you around even a little bit longer.

Maybe if we filled our days with all the last things we could do together before you left, then you would have never been able to vanish in front of my eyes into thin air. I want to believe that you are out there, still a part of my life in some omnipresent kind of way. You are the ghost that lingers in my heart, a spirit woven into the fabric that clothes my soul. Maybe, just maybe, one day you will return, and I will finally be able to tell you everything I've been holding inside. Until then, I will keep writing, keeping your memory alive in the pages of my stories, where you will forever remain a phantom spirit of my childhood.



ON BEING A PALM: RETHINKING THE IMPORTANCE OF POLITENESS

There is a rare palm tree, a true behemoth in size, that resides in Madagascar. Known to reach 60 feet in height and adorned with massive fan-leaves, it prematurely sprouts hundreds of little flowers, thereby attracting various pollinators. Consequently, the palm is quickly depleted of all nutrients. It seems as if the palm were in a consistent marathon of producing an abundance of sustenance. For what exact purpose? No one really knows. Already at the last stage of life, the palm will quickly degrade, crumble or topple, (whichever it so chooses) and then it will die. Their timeline is rushed and obscure - it does not follow or mimic any other palm in this aspect. A tree that gives so much of itself, so openly and willingly, only to self-immolate. A tree so full of life and potential - snuffed out. Had the palm tree not been so eager to produce its nourishing flowers and had taken more personal time to recuperate, there may have been a better outcome for the palm. Someone should have taught

this breed of palm some restraint - the need to put itself first. This is the issue with being the palm. Remember this. Remember this especially when you feel worn out and are tired of saying yes, but you feel the need to remain polite. The next time you forget to put yourself first, ask yourself "why?" Ladies and gentlemen, I used to be this palm. But in recent years, I have deliberately chosen not to be.

For years I always believed that being polite, the idea of being nice, was a necessity and something that I needed to consistently work hard to embody. There was a fear of being reprimanded or being seen and regarded as someone who was impertinent or disagreeable. There was a stigma that impoliteness equated to being ill-mannered. Especially as a young female, it appeared to me that this was one characteristic that was essential. Let me pick your brain. Have you ever heard the expression, "boys will be boys"? A popular idiom, known to excuse any bad behaviors. Now, can the same be said for girls? Is there any such expression even slightly close? I can't think of many right off the bat. However, one does come to mind. "What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice and everything nice." Ahh, there goes that notion again. Girls need to be "nice." This leads me to go a bit further and ask - Why is this behavior stressed more for females but males are not held to the same standard? Interesting - definitely reeks of hints of misogyny.

I have often thought how a simple one-syllable word so rarely left my lips. "No" - it felt so unnatural to say. It may seem like common sense, or appear like any other ordinary task, but revelations have long been made on my end and I have shed and I have gut-instinct reactions but often times my vocal and

outward actions do not align. Now, a little bit more sage, I see this pitfall in so many of the women elders in my family. I hear reminiscences and stories filled with regrets. A frustrated, "I wish I didn't have to be nice about it." When responding with a, "Okay, then don't be. Do what you want, who cares?", a stern look and disapproving shake of the head always lets me know that this is still not an option. This propensity to perpetuate the belief that one needs to be nice can be hard to break, I suppose. My personal opinion? If you bend over backwards with a loud willingness to put yourself on the line for the benefit of others, people will have you bend until your back is brittle and broken. I understand there is most likely an air of contempt or perhaps even resentment, but I speak strictly from personal inner truths. This is not to say that I am a permanent bitter bitch - not at all. I can be pleasant and "nice" given the situation, but I no longer jump at every chance to put myself on the line. To be everyone's last saving grace. I am no longer the palm. Fuck that.

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THE 2 A.M. WHISPER FIGHT

"You're lying!" My best friend cried out as we exited the plane.

"Why is it so hot?" I followed directly behind her with a carry-on backpack bigger than me.

Although the layover in Honolulu made the plane ticket cheaper, our layers upon layers of clothing, heavy luggage, and upcoming 11-hour flight made it feel as if those six-hundred dollars saved were not worth it.

A nine hundred and eighty-nine-dollar ticket to South Korea from Los Angeles is cheap in comparison to other flights to Asian countries. That is exactly why, the night my best friend opened Google and noticed that the ticket prices had drastically dropped, she spontaneously, two melatonin in, booked the two plane tickets at 1a.m. Eastern Standard Time.

My best friend lives in Pennsylvania, but she immediately

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sent me the screenshot of the ticket purchase, and we yelled together, over text, as this trip was something that we had both been eager about for a while.

After our celebratory back-and-forth messages, I immediately sent the screenshot of the tickets to my older sister, hoping she was awake. I got an immediate Facetime call and see her on the other side of the screen sobbing. I burst out in laughter at the sight. My sister was outside with my brother-in-law. I asked her how the weather in South Korea is in January. She dismissed almost every question I asked her that night, and all I can recall from the video call is her crying, repeatedly telling me that she can't believe she's going to see me again, and mocking her husband because I was going to visit her, and his family was not.

Landing in South Korea felt surreal. While going through immigration and waiting for our luggage, my thoughts consisted of hoping my luggage wasn't lost and anticipating seeing my older sister again. As soon as I walk out into the gates, I saw my older sister and she immediately began to cry again. We hugged as if it has been a decade since we had last seen each other. I felt comfortable around her immediately, and we conversed on the train to our Airbnb as if no time had passed since we were last in each other's company.

While in a different country, my best friend, sister, and I did the typical tourist tasks necessary for a successful trip. The sights in Korea were like those of bigger cities in the United States, such as New York and Los Angeles. But in the smaller cities, it was interesting to see the differences between those and the ones at home. We visited many different cities, such as Gangnam, Hongdae, Myeongdong, and Itaewon.

Itaewon was the most interesting city I visited while in Korea-not because of the city itself, but because of my experiences with my older sister there.

Being foreigners on an international street in Itaewon played to our advantage. Natives in Korea were interested in getting to know us, started conversations, bought us drinks, and chatted with us despite our language barriers.

After a while, my older sister headed back to the Airbnb with her husband and left my best friend and me with her and her husband's best friends.

At the time, I was a twenty-one-year-old with newfound freedom in a different country, living life to the fullest, and was having fun meeting new people- exactly why, when my older sister went to pick me up from a bar, telling me that it's time to go back to the Airbnb, I was angry and upset.

My older sister and I whisper-fought in the Airbnb at 2a.m. It was a constant back-and-forth of me telling her that I'm grown, and her repeatedly telling me that she doesn't care.

Honestly, she made very valid points. She argued that I was in a different country, it was 2 a.m., I didn't know the language, and said that our parents would never forgive her if anything happened to me.

Despite that, I kept talking back to my sister, angrily making points about how I am grown, want to have fun, and telling her that she can't control what I can and can't do. Although I was happy to be with her again, I said some pretty hurtful things that I clearly did not mean.

My sister kept telling me that she did not care.

After a long, dragged-out argument, I fell asleep that night crying out of anger. I woke up that morning crying out of guilt.

A sober me in the morning was filled with regret, knowing that my older sister was simply looking out for me and caring for me, not trying to ruin my night and maliciously upset me.

I must admit, I thought she was being dramatic, but she reacted the exact same way I would have if I was in a different country with my younger siblings.

I went to her door, crying for the first time in front of her, as she had been the one crying in front of me up until now, and immediately apologized.

She did the most older-sister-thing that she could do. She told me to stop crying and that she was okay. She provided explanations for everything she did and reassured me that she just wanted me to be safe.

I know that my older sister is the most loving and caring person in the world, but her quick forgiveness despite my behavior the previous night reassured me of that. She was aware of my state the previous night and did not hold it against me.

My older sister's ability to be so forgiving -immediately-also provided me with more insight on life and what is and isn't worth stressing. Although it was a small and insignificant incident for her, it was a major argument to me that helped me redevelop and reshape my core values. A grudge against loved

ones isn't worth lost time with them. I don't think my older sister knows how much she's positively affected me in life. The care she has for me has been a driving factor in my life, and it is as mutual as it could be.

When I left her in South Korea, she cried in front of me again. I admire her vulnerability, which I find so difficult to display. Although this trip was life-altering because of new experiences and culture exposure, it reiterated to me that I will always aspire to be like my older sister.

As a kid, I would write about her as my hero.

As a teenager, I would write about her as my role model.

And as an adult, I write about her as a vulnerable, strong-loving, and morally conscious role model.

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AN ODE TO SUMMER

i am craving summer
when the smell of suburban air was crisp
and full of wonder
and belonging.

i am craving the asphalt
that ate through the soles
of my black chuck taylors
and spit them back out, hot and tired.

i am craving red solo cups
filled with ice water from the hose
forgotten on the curb
as i raced the sun up the cul-de-sac.

i am craving barefooted cartwheels
and grass-stained knees
hanging over the tailgate
of my dad's stick-shift tan truck.

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i am craving pink jolly rancher lollipops,
the kind you can only get from last year's halloween,
the kind you can only eat alone
while watching your friends return home as the street
lights flicker on.

there will forever be a piece of me
longing for strawberry lemonade
and scooter-bruised ankles.

there will forever be a piece of me
begging for my father's laughter
and my mother's peace.

there will forever be a piece of me
craving summer
not this summer
five years ago summer.

a.e.

BOLIDE/“OH YOU MAC MILLER” B E A S L E Y N G A N G

The admiration for another person, usually someone we would see as bigger than ourselves, can come in varying forms. Whether that be identifying with the emotions of a shooting star or finding a fondness in a persona, the performance. For most, including myself, it is a mixture of the former as well as the latter. Many celebrities can be exemplified under these conditions, but for the sake of selfish favoritism, my admiration will land on the late Mac Miller, a musical talent of the late 2010s. As we traverse my reasoning, we will attempt to understand Mac Miller as an idol through the eyes of the idolizer.

Mac Miller was an artist that could be categorized under the Hip Hop genre, and though my appreciation of his contribution to the culture of Hip Hop is great, our focus will be on his character. Miller was a man with many complications beyond the public's unremittingly darting eyes. He was a drug addict, battled with depression, and conveyed a certain sense of hopelessness openly. The laxity in his rhyme scheme joined by his lyrical romanticization of his damaging lifestyle spat back



out a personality far removed from the bright-eyed talent that produced the hit song "Donald Trump". He changed, and that change was marked by drug experimentation and intensive self-evaluation. What Miller conveyed as his true feelings and experiences the public took as a costume worn for their entertainment as it drew them in. The allure for me is less in the individual and more in the commonality of their story. I find it helps to ground a person in the eyes of another when they can find relatedness in that person's story.

Miller often wore his heart on exposed sleeves, discussing his battles openly through his music. There was no need to look closely, he was more than willing to show his imperfections in his persona. In this way, the public may not completely be at fault for their dismissiveness of his struggles. As he wore his flaws in such a way that made them easy to confuse with a nonchalant swagger and charisma. He had a persona that could breeze around a wake and leave the room with two missed presences. Miller leaves his idolizers at a crossroads, where they can choose to stay enamored by the wavy ways of Mac Miller, or tune in to the melancholic message of Malcolm McCormick. For Mac, either choice leads back to the same man. One more concerned with his delivery than the reception.

Perfection is repugnant. Its form can only be appreciated softly, from a distance. Imperfection, in contrast, is beautiful. It stares back at us evenly, reminding us that it is not big, and we are not small. Thank you for the sentiments, Mac Miller, your ugliness was beautiful.



BIRD'S-EYE VIEW

A near perfect day. A near perfect warmth accompanied by a near perfect breeze. Not quite enough wind to push a glass off a table, but maybe just enough to steal a few napkins from the top of a neatly folded stack. Near perfect days like this ought to be spent outdoors where you could genuinely appreciate it. Admire the yellow of the sky and the greens and browns that fill the outdoors. Smell the nascent life in the recently changed season. And of course, feel that gentle breeze nudge you in whichever direction it chooses. To a child, it's the perfect recipe for curiosity.

For my mother, it was the perfect day to call a handyman and ask him to repair the shingles on our roof. It had been raining for the past week and my mom noticed a leak between the walls. Once the rain stopped, she seized the opportunity to hire someone for the job. And so, soon after, he arrived and got straight to work. I would've liked to watch him work, but I wasn't allowed outside because my mom said it was dangerous. I was only two and a half at the time so I can

understand now why she worried.

I sat inside, quietly, and curiously listening to him work above. Eventually, the man came inside and told my mom the good news: the leak would not bother her anymore. He packed up his tools and went home still too early to call it evening. This is when I saw my opportunity to seize this near perfect day. I packed up some toys and hurried outside to play. It did not take long before stumbling upon a realization. An incredible stroke of good fortune, shown to me by the breeze on this near perfect day. Leaning against the house and leading to the roof stood a ladder.

To this day, I have no recollection of getting up that ladder. It's hard to remember a lot about that day without being reminded of it by my family. What I will never forget, however, is what I found up there. I could see and admire more of the day than I ever could from the ground. Everything looked completely different. So much smaller. I had only gone up about 15 feet, but that was more than enough to completely change my perspective. Everything that was familiar became unfamiliar. It was beautiful.

I feel we often get caught up in our own lives and daily routine that we forget this truth. How the slightest adjustments in our reality can dramatically change our perspective. Two people standing across from each other can see someone running. One will say he went right. Both have different tellings of the story, but both are telling the truth. The same way something as ordinary and routine as a roof repair could be exceptional to a child. I like to sometimes close my eyes and put myself back on that roof and watch myself. I'd see more objectively from above and

reevaluate my actions, my purpose. Most importantly, what kind of person I am. How I treat others.

I stayed up there for about forty minutes before anyone found me. As I sat at the edge of the roof with my feet dangling, I saw my mom come outside and do a lap around the house with this pale blank expression on her face. She was likely so blinded by worry that she didn't even notice the ladder. Eventually, though, my older brother came out, and once he did, I said hi. He looked up at me and said hi right back. *What are you doing up there? Ok well you stay right there, okay?* He then went to fetch our mom. They both came back out while whispering to each other, a secret conversation that made me worry. My brother didn't even look at me, he just wandered away without another word. I figured he must've been angry with me for coming up here.

Now I started to worry about getting in trouble once I came down. I then became very aware of the wind. It wasn't so gentle as it was on the ground, I could feel it pushing on my back. Looking down made me feel dizzy, it looked like the ground itself was falling from under the house. I didn't realize it before climbing up the ladder, but I didn't really know how to get down. It was funny really, how I signed myself up for this without realizing it, but now I was stuck. Even funnier now realizing that I never stopped. I am often reminded of this story, and I remember parts of it so vividly, but I never learned from my mistake. Like the time I made my dad buy me a guitar without knowing how hard it would be to learn. Or how I agreed to go on a nine-mile hike with no prior experience. I never stopped climbing up ladders.

My mom began to talk to me. *My baby, look where you are.*

Como estás hermoso mi niño. Do you know how I love you? Te amo tanto miijo, no puedes imaginar cuanto. Such a relief that she wasn't angry with me. I thought I would for sure be in trouble, but instead she showered me with affection in baby-talk. The very next moment, I was snatched from my seat on the edge of the roof, but into familiar arms. It was my brother's arms. He somehow got onto the roof without the ladder and snuck up behind me. He climbed down the ladder with one arm while the other held me. At the bottom, I was embraced by my mother's waiting arms. This is my very first memory. It's one that I remember, despite being so young, because it reminds me that I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for my family's safety net. No matter what trouble I get myself into, their arms are always there to catch me.

HARVEST INTERNATIONAL

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