

Umma

The plane was still boarding when her mother called. Hannah was squished in 28B, a middle seat. Normally Hannah would've paid extra for the window seat, but the flight was full, leaving her no way to upgrade. Next to her was an old man who was using both of the arm rests, his head lolled to the side as if already dozing. On her left was a woman who seemed generally uninterested in the rest of the plane, staring out of the window with her headphones in. The air in the plane was dry; Hannah could already feel the scratchiness in her throat, redness starting to bloom in her eyes.

Hannah was stuck thinking about her daughter, Avery. The look on her face as Hannah had carried her suitcase down the stairs. The twisted mixture of confusion and tears as Hannah explained that she would be back in a month. The way she clung to her husband's pants as Hannah got into the taxi; it was enough to break her. Avery barely reached Nathan's knee. Hannah wondered how tall her daughter would be when she returned.

Off to see Grandma, she had called out. I'll be back soon. Avery didn't look entirely convinced. As the taxi pulled away, Hannah waved to her family, who were quickly reduced to two huddled figures standing together on the pavement. They waved back at her, and didn't stop waving until the taxi had driven so far down their street that Hannah couldn't tell where Nathan's leg began and Avery's little body ended.

When her phone buzzed, Hannah grimaced.

The line came through crackly and loud. "Hello?"

"Hey, Umma," Hannah said.

"Hannah, is that you? I can't hear you." Hannah closed her eyes. It had been a while since she'd spoken Korean. It felt like her brain had a lag. She replied back in English:

"Yes. I'm on the plane."

"Hannah, please speak up. I can't hear you."

“I’m on the plane,” Hannah snapped, then quickly looked around. None of the passengers had noticed, but she sunk lower into her seat just the same. She could hear her mother breathing rhythmically on the line. “How are you feeling?”

“Oh, the same. The same.”

“Good. Have you been following the doctor’s advice?”

“Yes, yes. Ah, Hannah. The leaves are changing — have you noticed that the leaves are changing now? September. Early for fall.”

“Things look basically the same here all the time, but that’s nice to hear.”

“Ah. You live so far away now.”

Hannah squirmed. “California’s only a flight away.”

“But you’re on your way here now, right?”

“Yes. I’ll be there soon.”

“Did you bring enough warm clothes? It’s cold here.” By now, Hannah should’ve been used to her mother’s questions – she faced a barrage of them every time she came to visit.

She tried to swallow the irritation: “Yes, don’t worry.”

“And you have food for the trip?”

“They have food on the plane. Don’t worry about me.”

“Okay.” There was a slight pause. Perhaps her mother had run out of questions. “Get some sleep on the flight. When you wake up you’ll be surrounded by the most beautiful autumn leaves.”

Hannah took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Okay, Umma. I will.”

Hannah hung up. A moment later, the captain announced the flight was fully boarded. The plane shuddered into motion, jostling Hannah in her seat. The tremors ran through her whole body. She felt sick to her stomach. She closed her eyes and waited.

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The house was small and gray, with a flat roof and a tidy yard. Hannah took in the modest, cropped lawn that her mother had edged with a small array of yellow and purple flowers and stared ahead.

Her mother had been right; the house was framed with the beautiful red-gold of trees in transition, their leaves quaking in the breeze. On the drive over, Hannah had stared out of the window, a deep knot of nostalgia growing, gnarled, deep within her stomach, nausea coming in ebbing waves. Her mother had moved houses, but Poughkeepsie looked the same to her, and something about that sameness was unsettling. As soon as the plane had landed, she felt something wash over her, stripping her of her defenses, leaving her raw. It was a horrible feeling, being exposed.

After the taxi drove away, Hannah paused on the pavement for a moment. The air felt cold and refreshing on her bare hands and face. As she inhaled, she felt the fresh air rush into her lungs like she was taking a drag of a menthol cigarette.

I'm here, she texted Nathan.

Glad you got there safe, he responded immediately. *Good luck in there. Love you.*

She propelled herself forward, dragging her suitcase behind her until she was on the porch. On the door a sign read, "All are welcome" with a small cross next to it. That was new.

The house sounded quiet inside, but Hannah knew her mother better than that. She rang the doorbell and waited. She could smell the faint scent of something sweet cooking. And then her mother opened the door.

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Poughkeepsie was the site of Hannah's first memory. She knew she'd been born in Korea, but remembered nothing of that — apparently they had lived near Jeju, a small, crater-like island said to have risen out of the sea. Periodically, she looked Jeju up to see if it sparked something inside of her, but all she felt scrolling through images on the internet was a sense of emptiness. Her life had started, really, when she was three, when they moved to Poughkeepsie.

There were unspoken rules back then. Shoes off in the house. Respect your elders. Help around the house. After school, it was time for homework until she had to help prepare dinner. The family ate mostly in silence, occasional spurts of conversation that was mostly in Korean, meaning Hannah could understand but not respond. Hannah had to learn an instrument; she chose piano over the violin, only

quitting when she went to college. She was shocked how easily affection came to her friends, running into their parents' arms after school, being scooped up and thrown into the air, coming down in fits of giggles. Affection in Hannah's house was limited to a wavering smile, a pat on the back. At friend's houses, on the rare occasion she was allowed, she ate sugary cereals for breakfast until she was vibrating with giddiness. At home, they ate boiled sweet potato, bean sprouts, rice, seaweed soup. Her friends were worried about things like clothes, boys, the English teacher who was cute and taught poetry in fifth period. Hannah was worried about those things, too, but felt as if she was watching everything through a thin sheet of glass.

She fit in better than her parents, though. There were no Korean markets around, so special ingredients for her mom were hard to come by. Her dad, a professor of physics, found his new department difficult. His colleagues were not entirely welcoming. It took them years to find a Korean church that they could easily get to — until then they commuted as far as an hour every Sunday to attend service. But for some reason, they stayed. Hannah never understood why. It was just another rule.

Hannah remembered Poughkeepsie as a town with bitter winters, followed by a brief and forgiving spring. It was the only place Hannah had ever called home, and for that she was grateful.

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They were sat side by side in Dr. Herman's office, both staring at him. Dr. Herman had been Hannah's childhood doctor. He had a kind, forgiving face, even under the sterile white of his doctor's coat. She remembered that he used to save her favorite stickers, the dinosaur ones, especially for her when she came to visit. If he gave her one now, she would save it for Avery. But examining him, the bags sunken under his eyes, gray streaks through his hair, faint purple veins running over his hands that flexed slightly as he typed on his computer, she didn't think he would offer anything to her. Beside her, her mother sat especially still, her hands clasped tightly together in her lap. Her mother had insisted on wearing a dress, a deep purple one with a white collar, and brought along her church handbag, the black clutch with the pearl in the middle. Her hair was done in tight curls that sat against flush against her head, and her lipstick, shakily applied, was a faint red. Hannah was dressed in a simple blue sweater and jeans.

“Okay,” Dr. Herman said. “I’ve found several clinics nearby that can provide more help than I can. There’s one about fifteen minutes from here. They’ve done a lot of great work for people with Parkinson’s — physical therapy, speech therapy, a lot of promising research into treatments to help relieve symptoms, too.”

Hannah cleared her throat. “But there’s no cure.”

“That’s true,” he said, “but that doesn’t mean that all is lost. There are a lot of promising treatments out there.” He gave Hannah a soft smile before turning back to his computer, printing out several sheets of paper and handing it to her. “It’s nice to see you’re back. Sorry I can’t do more for you.”

“It’s nice to be back. Thank you for your help.” With this, Hannah helped her mother get to her feet. Both Hannah and the doctor watched as she brushed the creases out of her dress with her hands, slowly. When she was finished, seemingly satisfied, she looked up at him.

“Thank you for your help, Dr. Herman,” her mother said.

They left the room quietly, Hannah’s mother standing behind her as Hannah spoke to the receptionist. The air in the car was stiff and cold. Hannah’s mother shivered and said nothing as Hannah started the car.

“You had no questions for Dr. Herman?” Hannah asked.

“No.” Her mother responded. “Let’s go home. It’s almost three and you haven’t eaten much today. My flowers need water.”

“I’ve been eating, *Umma*, and your flowers are fine. Don’t worry. I’m more concerned about other things.”

“Don’t be. Look, I will go home and make some soup. I picked up some canned pumpkin before you came.”

“I’m really okay, *Umma*.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m going to go home and make us soup. Now drive slowly, please.”

Hannah felt something boil up inside her. She snapped the car back into park, and whipped around to face her mother.

“How are you not more upset about this?” Her mother turned to look at Hannah, staring at her stonily, as if she had said nothing at all. “There is no cure for this, *Umma*. It’s Parkinson’s. Do you know what that means? It’s debilitating. It’s going to change your life forever. And you don’t even seem to care.”

“Hannah,” her mother said. Her lips were wavering as she spoke, her hands clenching and unclenching. Hannah stared at her mother, who looked so small tucked into the passenger seat. A lock of hair had come undone from her mother’s bun, trembling against her pale, wrinkled cheek. “What do you want me to say?”

Hannah couldn’t think of anything. Instead, they simply regarded one another.

“Let’s go home,” her mother said. “I will make pumpkin soup.”

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Their first dinner together was a feast, dozens of plates of banchan laid meticulously out across the table, a kimchi pancake in the middle, two steaming bowls of seaweed soup. The food was cold by the time they ate; Hannah’s mother refused to let her help, insisting on shuffling each plate over to the table herself. When it came time to eat, Hannah’s mother loaded food onto Hannah’s plate, far more than she would’ve taken for herself. Hannah knew better than to protest. She picked up her chopsticks, adjusting them in her hand. Her mother was watching her out of the corner of her eye.

“Don’t worry, *Umma*, I can still use chopsticks,” Hannah said. “You don’t have to watch me.”

Her mother tutted. “Hannah. I know.”

For a while, the two ate in silence. The food was delicious, familiar: steamed bean sprouts, japchae, rice, kimchi, sour pickled radish. She wondered what Nathan and Avery would think of it.

“How is your health?” her mother asked.

“It’s good.”

“And how is your family? Nathan and Avery?” her mother asked. Her accent made Avery’s name hard to pronounce, slurring it into almost oblivion.

“Avery,” Hannah corrected. “And they’re well.” Hannah’s mother made a face.

“So hard to pronounce,” she said.

“It’s a pretty common name.”

Her mother shook her head. “Not in Korea.”

“Yeah, in California.”

They were silent again. Hannah felt exhaustion pressing against her abdomen like a girdle.

“The food is good, Umma,” Hannah said. Hannah’s mother raised her head, staring at her with an intensity and seriousness Hannah didn’t quite understand.

“Thank you. Now, eat.”

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This is harder than I thought.

Nathan replied immediately: *What do you mean?*

She’s worse than I thought. And it’s hitting her faster.

Hannah. I’m so sorry. Have you two at least been getting along?

I’m not sure. It’s a little stunted. It’s not like we’re that close. Honestly, we never have been.

There was a break in the texting. Hannah checked her phone — 11:30 PM, 8:30 PM back in California. Avery was asleep by now; Nathan was probably putting her things away in the living room, preparing for work tomorrow.

She was lying in the guest bedroom, which was somehow always hot even in the chilly fall weather. When she’d first walked in, she half expected to see her old furniture rearranged in this new scape— her lavender bed sheets, the poster of Van Gogh’s “The Night Cafe” tacked to the wall, her bookshelf stacked with her Harry Potter collection. But none of it was hers -- the twin bed was remade with white linen sheets, a single blue rug stretched across the floor, the one window in the room fitted with new curtains. The only thing that was the same was the smell: the whole house always smelled like slightly burned rice.

Hannah had tried, at first, to use the leftover furniture to make the room her own somehow. She spread her various belongings out the desk: her contacts, her makeup, a couple books she brought with

her. She unpacked her clothing into the single dresser in the corner. She picked a single blue tulip from her mother's garden and put it in a vase on the corner of the dresser. She tucked away her suitcase into the hallway closet so she wouldn't be tempted to pack it up again. But the room still looked skeletal. Eventually, Hannah had stopped trying to make herself at home, and just started living in it.

Her phone chimed: *Aren't things different now?*

Why would they be?

Your mother needs you, Hannah. She's lonely. She needs you even if she can't express it. And she loves you.

Hannah sighed and rolled over. Nathan was optimistic. Sometimes she appreciated his unflinching positivity, but now she wanted to shake him. *It's not that simple. There's a reason I went to college on the other side of the country. I feel so... foreign here.*

Believe me, Hannah. She needs you there and appreciates you so much. I know it's hard.

I just miss you guys.

We miss you too. Avery can't stop asking about when you'll be home.

Hannah closed her eyes, imagined Avery's warm, tiny body curled up next to hers. Her soft, rhythmic breathing. Her eyelids fluttering as she dreamt.

Tell her I'll be there soon.

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Hannah's last clear memory in Poughkeepsie took place on a Friday night, sometime in May in her senior year of high school. Hannah's friends were going out to dinner. It was a last minute plan, which Hannah knew her parents wouldn't like, but she was eighteen and about to graduate. Her homework was done, dinner was prepared and warming on the stove, her father was dozing in the armchair, a news channel playing lazily in the background. Hannah knew that now was the best time.

She asked her mother quietly, barely getting the words out.

"Umma, dinner is ready. Some of my friends want to go out to eat. Is it okay if I join them?"

Her mother was bent over a newspaper and mumbling the Korean translation softly under her breath. When Hannah had finished her question, her mother had paused, flipped the page, then said no.

“Please, Umma, it’s just dinner.”

“You said you would help us with dinner here.”

“But I made dinner. All you have to do is serve it.”

Her mother said nothing. She still hadn’t looked up from her paper.

“God, Umma. Why won’t you ever let me do anything?” It was the first time Hannah had snapped at her mother, but she didn’t care to filter herself. “Do you even care if I have friends?”

Her mother finally looked up, stood. “Everything we have ever done, we do for you,” her mother said, stepping toward her. “Your father works so hard so he can send you to college. We moved here for you. And you are so ungrateful.” She practically spat the last word at her. Hannah was unphased.

“All you want to do is make me miserable. And you don’t own me.”

Her mother put down her newspaper, then, staring at Hannah with her mouth slightly agape said “You do not talk to me this way.” But Hannah had stopped listening — she was already tugging on her shoes, grabbing her purse. She left the house and slammed the door behind her. It felt like the whole house shook on its foundation in her wake.

When she got back from dinner, she was expecting a storm, a slap, a reckoning. She walked in strong, planting one foot firmly in front of another, head held high. To her surprise, her mother, waiting in a chair in the living room with the newspaper on her lap, said nothing — she simply raised her head when Hannah walked in, watching her intently. That night Hannah went to bed guilty, shaken, and free.

They never spoke of the incident again.

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They started the treatment in October, at one of the clinics Dr. Herman recommended at Vassar’s Medical Center. Hannah knew not to get her hopes up, but every time she watched her mother’s hands tremble as she poured herself tea, the stiffness that weighed down her body as shuffled around the house,

the slight slur to her words, she felt her stomach sink. It was strange to watch her mother like this — weak, incapable. Hannah was the caregiver now. She felt an uneasiness she wouldn't ever wish on Avery.

During the week, Hannah watched her mother stretch outside with the help of one of the nurses, tucked away on the bleachers of the small field behind the center where the patients worked with occupational therapists. Watching her mother's face and body contort, slowly easing into simple positions, Hannah sometimes felt her own joints hurt, some sort of phantom reflection. Sometimes she was joined by others — spouses, daughters, sons, grandchildren — but often she was alone, watching the crows circle, brushing wrinkles out of her clothes, counting the days as the leaves turned from orange to red and then finally fell to the ground.

Her thoughts most often fell to Avery. What she was doing, how she was feeling. What milestones Hannah was missing. Nathan had been updating her often, pictures and texts and video chats that always seemed too short, but every morning Hannah felt that tug in her heart as she awoke to a room that was only just becoming familiar. Nathan had proposed that they fly out to New York for a weekend, but Hannah had rejected the idea; she didn't want to have Avery remember her grandmother like this. She wasn't sure if she was going to remember her at all.

She measured out her mother's medication each morning and evening, putting the pills out in a neat pile beside a cup of barley tea. Most evenings, regardless of pain, Hannah's mother would insist on cooking for them; Hannah would often awake to faint clicking sounds downstairs and the smell of cooking garlic in preparation for the night's dinner. At first Hannah would come down scolding her mother, worried about her fingers, the knives, the hot stove. Soon, though, the smell became a familiar one. There was always space next to Hannah's mother on the counter, and she started to occupy it, dicing the pepper, mincing the meat, washing the scallions and spinach and cabbage when her mother was too stiff and tired. Together they made stews, jigae, bibimbap, soups, sweet treats they brought to church. The mornings were quiet, wrapped in a soft blanket.

Her mother didn't say much, but Hannah could tell. Fewer comments about Hannah's eating. Less insistence that things be done precisely her way. Less energy for walks, for trips to the supermarket,

for English language classes in the library. One weekend in October, she showed up for church in a loose red sweater and pants — no pearls, no handbag. No curls in her hair. The only thing she did consistently was the cooking. Hannah held onto this semblance of normalcy, and held onto it tight.

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Hannah was upstairs, looking for some ibuprofen. Her mother was resting in her armchair in the living room, the TV playing in the background. Her joints had been bothering her, she had said. Hannah offered to get some medicine, and her mother didn't protest, didn't insist she could get it herself. That was how Hannah knew she was in pain.

Her mother's instructions were vague — she didn't know where the medicine was, except that it was in a drawer somewhere in her mother's room. She made her way through her desk drawers, sorting through the various stacks of papers, books, sleeping masks and lotions that had accumulated. She had almost cleared out the whole desk when she found the box. It was marked, 'Avery.' Hannah lifted the wooden box out of the drawer, feeling its weight in her hands. It looked like an old chess set, worn at the edges, a checkerboard pattern etched into its wooden frame. Hannah opened the box gently, her fingers working to peel the latch apart.

It was filled of mementos. Photos of Avery as a newborn, wearing a red dress and matching headband. Avery on top of Nathan's shoulders, beaming. An art piece Avery had made, the outline of her tiny hand dipped in yellow paint and stamped onto the page. Avery and Hannah in front of their house, Hannah holding Avery at her hip, smiling. The invitation to Avery's christening her mother and father hadn't been able to make. Hannah's hands trembled as she passed from photo to photo. Avery with Hannah on a carousel. A copy of Avery's birth certificate Hannah had sent her mother just in case. Avery wearing denim overalls and beaming at the camera. Avery sitting on a swing, Hannah behind her, ready to push.

Hannah put the box down on the bed next to her, rested her trembling hands on her lap. The air was suddenly electrified. Avery's grandfather had died before she was born. Avery and Umma had only met once, when Avery was an infant. Avery looked especially small and lovely tucked into the folds of

Umma's sweater. Hannah knew Avery wouldn't remember that. But Hannah knew now that even if Umma wasn't on Avery's mind, Avery was on Umma's.

Hannah found the ibuprofen in the bathroom cabinet. She made her way down the stairs slowly, clutching the bottle in her hand. Her mother was still in the armchair, but her eyes were closed. The tea that Hannah had brought to her was now cool. Hannah made her way over to her mother, put the bottle down on the table. She felt compelled to do something to show her that she understood now. But, looking down at her sleeping mother, the only thing Hannah could think to do was turn off the television, then take the blanket that was bundled around her mother's feet and spread it gently over her lap.

Her earliest memory in Poughkeepsie, she remembered now, was swinging on a swing set, her mother behind her, pushing. At first she recalled being afraid of the way the swing shook with each push, her little legs dangling precariously, her hands clutching at the ropes. But Umma had been there to reassure her, to push her higher. Soon she forgot about the trembling at all.

*

On the first Tuesday of November, Hannah awoke to silence and still air: there was no cooking smell in the house, no clinking or sizzling to be heard. Hannah jumped out of bed, shoving her feet into her slippers and hurrying downstairs.

"Umma?" she called out. There was no response. Hannah's heart sank into her stomach. She wasn't in the kitchen. She wasn't in the living room. She ran upstairs to check her mother's room. She wasn't there. A wave of panic overtook her. "Umma!" she called out again. Her own echo threw her words back at her. She rushed down the stairs again, throwing open the front door and stumbling outside. The rush of cold air knocked the wind out of her — for a moment she couldn't breathe. Overnight the temperature had plummeted, the air icy and nipping relentlessly at her bare arms and face. And then she saw her mother standing on the edge of the lawn, staring down at her flower patch.

"Umma," Hannah called from the porch. Her mother turned around, a bewildered expression on her face.

"Hannah," she said. "My flowers are still alive."

“God. I was so scared. You weren’t downstairs, and—” Hannah took a deep breath. “What are you doing out here? It’s freezing.”

Hannah’s mother smiled. “I’m sorry. I was checking on my flowers. I want to go for a walk today. Can you get my wheelchair?”

They set off together, Hannah pushing the chair down the sidewalk, her mother sitting stiffly in it, gazing around. Hannah didn’t have a particular course in mind, so they ended up at the park, almost empty on the cold November morning except a father and his son bent over by a pond, feeding some ducks. Here they paused at her mother’s request, right at the edge between the pond and the forest.

“Hannah. When do you go back home?” Umma asked, her voice quiet.

Hannah paused. She had told Nathan she would try to leave by December, but hadn’t said anything to her mother, who hadn’t asked. “I can stay as long as you want.”

“You must miss Avery,” her mother said. “She’s getting big, isn’t she?”

“Almost two.”

“Hm. She is so beautiful. Looks nothing like me,” her mother said.

Hannah shook her head. “Don’t say that. She has our eyes.”

“Have you taught her any Korean?”

“A little.”

Hannah’s mother nodded. “Your father would have liked to meet her.”

They fell silent. Hannah watched the father and son rip apart their bread and throw it at the ducks, smiling softly as the little boy collapsed into giggles on his father’s shoulder. A bird above them crowed and flew off across the pond. Her mother was still, gazing across the landscape. Hannah was taken aback when her mother reached for her hand. It felt small and fragile and trembled in her own, like she was holding a small bird.

“Hannah,” Umma said. “I want you to take care of yourself. Okay? Take care of Avery and Nathan, too. So many people rely on you. But you need to take care of yourself.”

“I will. I am. Don’t worry about me, please.” At this Hannah’s mother met her gaze and smiled, a small, wavering thing.

“I will always worry about you.”

Hannah couldn’t remember the last time they had stood like this together, holding hands, speaking softly to one another, mother and daughter.

“It will be winter soon,” Hannah’s mother said. “My flowers will die.”

“It’s okay, Umma,” Hannah replied. “They’ll grow back in the spring. They always do.”

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