

My Stranger

by Jessica Lee

Again, I feel a tightening in my chest, like a sharp dagger digging and digging and digging in. I try to resist by shutting my eyes, but the aching only increases - my nose starts tingling, my eyes blur with defying tears - and the next thing I know, I am burying my wet face in the sofa cushion, fighting to muffle my uncontrollable sobs. *I will never watch "Mrs. Doubtfire" again*, I tell myself for the hundredth time, *this stupid movie gets to me way too much!* A minute or two passes by and I detach myself from the now dampened pillow. I sit back up, all cried out, and with my legs tucked in and my ponytail tangled up, I reposition myself on the familiar couch. My perverse eyes revert to the television screen, where for the next hour I continue sniffing over a father, who out of desperate love, goes beyond law, sanity, and pride, and disguises himself as a housemaid just to be with his three children.

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I never quite understood the relationship between a father and his child ever since I entered school. I found it unexplainable when my friends' dads would come to watch their daughters during our *Nutcracker* ballet recital where I played the China Doll or during orchestra concerts where I sat in the first cellist chair all the way up to middle school. For as long as I could remember, my father never attended any of my important childhood events. Like the typical Taiwanese businessman he was, work came before everything else. This meant traveling every other week, missing dinners, coming home late, making big money, and sacrificing his family. However, his absence didn't matter to me then, partly because I never quite understood his fatherly role and partly because it made no difference to me whether he was or wasn't there. On the days he was home, he was practically not there. Even if my younger brother, Derek, excitedly put out the extra table settings while my mom cooked up his favorite dishes like Kung Pao Chicken, my father would flip open the daily newspaper and barricade himself within the pages of words. When we talked to him, he answered with thoughtless responses, absolutely unaware of our eagerness to impress him. Perhaps, he was so swamped with work that when he came home, he just wanted to escape from anything and anyone. Perhaps, he just wasn't ready to have a family. Perhaps, he just didn't care. In my world, my family consisted of my mother, Derek, my black cocker spaniel, Pluto, and me. I considered my father a stranger.

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"For show and tell, please bring one or both of your parents to class to share your life story," instructed my fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Larson. "Remember to bring photos!"

It was just my luck. On my presentation day, my mother was called into a meeting. The only other parent left? My stranger.

I remember feeling uncomfortably awkward when my father showed up outside my classroom door. It was the first time I've ever seen him inside my school campus at Taipei American School. With his hair nicely trimmed, slickly groomed in a black suit with a light-colored dress shirt, and wearing his usual purple-framed glasses for "looks," he stood there in the doorway looking like a salesman, clearly out of place. I wanted him to go back to where he belonged. He clutched in his arms a photo album, the one my mom and I had put together over the years.

I pulled two small chairs away from the desks and placed them in front of the classroom chalkboard, while my classmates sat cross-legged in a half-circle around us. My father then started flipping through the pages of the photo album, while I watched him devise fanciful stories to fool the kids and himself. At age ten, I knew it must have been very different from his normal presentations at work, for improvisation would only get so far. This type of fifth-grade presentation on his daughter needed life-long research, thorough observation and personal experience, all of which he lacked. As he flipped through the photos from my first birthday to my ballet practices to my swimming lessons and my solo cello recitals, I watched as he had less to say and skipped more quickly from one photo to five. As the album pages lessened, so did his presence in the photos.

When we finally arrived at the last page, there, tucked with a few other loose pictures, was a black-and-white picture dangling almost out of the album: a colorless picture of my young father standing next to a window, smiling wholeheartedly at his once blanket-wrapped baby that he thought he would know everything about.

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By the time I reached high school, my father decided to move my family out of our home in Taiwan and into a quiet small town in Central California, twenty minutes away from Pismo Beach. My world of tall buildings, restless taxis, and insomniac city-life was replaced by cows, perfectly mown backyards and church bells. He promised us that it would be a good change. But, I knew better; I knew that things would never be the same again.

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On the morning of my sixteenth birthday, mother and Derek were both catering to my every need. My usually, defiant little brother brought me water with ice at my every sisterly command while my mother brought me snacks and drinks every couple of hours. My brother was even letting me keep the three dogs -- Pluto, Buddy, and Lily -- in my room without trying to heave them out into his room. But, I remember being especially excited because after a month-long trip away from home, my father was finally coming back to celebrate my birthday with me; I welcomed any familiar faces during those culture-shocked, lonely days. He promised that I would be very delighted with his perfectly chosen gift. I didn't even know what I wanted. So I had no idea how he could possibly know.

As my mom placed the last Italian dish she learned from the Food Channel down onto our party table, the one we used for special occasions, I heard the muffled rumble of the garage door. Within seconds, my father, in his long urban over-coat walked in

suavely with a couple of large suitcases, dragging one in each hand. During my two years living in small-town Arroyo Grande, the many times he walked in our house after weeks of business trips always seemed somewhat bizarre to me. His metropolitan wardrobe against the country-styled, wooden interior of the ranch we lived in seemed to clash, as if he belonged somewhere else. And we always knew that buried inside that luggage were gifts he bought to make us happy, but mostly, we knew it was his way to forgive himself for being absent.

Without taking his coat off, he laid down his giant luggage, unzipped one of the bags, and withdrew a transparent, white bag. From where I was sitting, a red object was visible through the bag's lucidity, something seemingly durable and with thick layers. Slightly nervous, I ran over to politely receive the mysterious, unwrapped gift -- a heart-shaped jewelry box that opened sideways, straight down the middle. Up-close, however, the heart strangely resembled a broken heart, its exterior fragile with only one layer of shelf space, enough to hold maybe two or three necklaces. At first, it seemed big enough to fit all my necklaces, rings, and earrings, but I later realized the compartments were merely for looks. Yes, the gift was perfectly picked out from a father to a daughter, except not from my father to me.

My father left the following morning as he left in the weeks after that.

And in the following summer of 1999, my parents officially divorced.

He left America and has lived in China ever since.

I never used that jewelry box. It sat there, closed, looking like a complete, unbroken heart.

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The last time I saw my father was four months ago, at my cousin Kenneth's wedding in Pismo Beach. After six years away from America, it was the first time he hopped on the plane from Shanghai to attend his nephew's wedding, conduct what-else-but usual business meetings, and if his time allowed, visit his two children. But, of course, we had to drive 236 miles north on Highways I-405 and US-101 after dinner, through Friday night traffic, to meet him at the Shell Beach Inn at one in the morning.

With all the bitterness from four hours of driving there and thinking about the other four hours driving back, I was feeling a little queasy when I exited at our pitch-dark destination, Spyglass Drive. It had been a year since I last saw him, our usual contact through awkwardly formal e-mails -- "Sincerely, Dad" -- or uncomfortable telephone calls about the latest news event. How was I supposed to react when I saw him? Hugs? *No, we don't do that.* Shake his hand? *No, that's too weird.* What am I supposed to say? *How've you been for the past year?* Oh what the hell, I'll make Derek do the work.

I unskillfully parked the blue Honda Civic in the outdoor parking lot and stepped out of the car into the night that was piercingly chilled by the ocean water. 1:00 A.M. I dialed my father's temporary cell phone number. No one picked up. I dialed again. Same dial tone. I waited another five minutes, and dialed one last time. It transferred to voicemail. I suddenly felt a pang of familiar anger -- an anger that had developed ever since I could comprehend my father's irresponsible nature -- which I had tried so hard to hide away for that trip. So, I dragged my brother out of the car, stormed into the inn, checked out a room with two twin beds, and called it a night. The next day, as soon as

the family wedding was over, I packed up my things and drove the 236 miles back to where I started.

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“In regards to my behavior, I can only plead insanity,” declares Daniel Hilliard (played by Robin Williams) to the judge. “Because, ever since my children were born, the moment I looked at them, I was crazy about them. Once I held them, I was hooked. I’m addicted to m children, sir. I love them with all my heart. And the idea of someone telling me I can’t be with them, I can’t see them every day... It’s like someone saying I can’t have air. I can’t live without air, and I can’t live without them...So, please. Don’t take my kids away from me.”

The father’s relentless love can be seen through every twitch of his hand, every sparkle in his aging eyes, every ridiculous mistake he had ever committed, just to be with his children. Even if this is acting, this is some damn good acting. My eyes have now cried out every possible tear, the tissue box is stuffed back with used, torn-up toilet paper and even paper towels. I release an odd chuckle, imagining how foolish I must look sitting there crying over what is supposed to be a light-hearted comedy.

What a strange, unfamiliar love.

I turn off the television. I already know the ending.