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my brother & another body

When people ask me if I love my brother, the answer is “I love him so much.” When people ask me if we are close, I usually nod and say we’re close, but I don’t add “in comparison to the rest of my family.” Even with our scarce communication, my brother and I have always agreed that it is us against the world. Well, our parents.

I was the annoying, tagalong sister that my brother could only hope to get rid of. When I was four, I would knock incessantly on his door while he yelled back, “Read the sign!” which spelled out for me, very clearly: “no bab ys” in his childish, number-two pencil scrawl. I cried until I got my way. I cried to get him in trouble. I cried to damage him because I wasn’t allowed to cry about my mother. He wasn’t, either, but my brother never cried. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him in tears. I was a showy crier before I learned to hide, though, so I have images of my splotchy, red face in the first-floor bathroom of the house we used to live in, the syncopation of my hiccups mixed with the occasional whimper filling the cramped, white-tiled space. The same face appears outside, before ballet class, before math tutorials, before whatever else was planned for me that day. My brother was always just *there*, in a corner, his face emotionless. He flinched appropriately, but didn’t make a sound. It was like he was tearless. My mother found it satisfying because she hated it when we cried.

My brother and I used to sit in McDonald’s after piano lessons and gorge ourselves on cheeseburgers or a good chicken fillet. We spilled hot gravy over our fingers while our mother watched in silence. They sat warm and mushy in my stomach before ballet classes. At home my brother made chicken nuggets and burned himself. We kept it a secret. Years later I still pour gravy over my rice until it turns soupy. These days he no longer eats chicken nuggets from McDonald’s and claims he dislikes it. McDonald’s slogan is still “love ko ‘to!” In America, it’s “I’m lovin’ it!” I’m incapable of producing the confidence needed to execute saying it properly, with the flourish that I imagine someone on television would say it with. I remember growing up with “love ko ‘to” imprinted on all the McDonald’s takeout boxes. Even before my tongue learned Tagalog, I knew what it meant. I always wondered why it was so insistent on convincing me that I loved it. It was only ever a chance to feel greedy. I pumped out unlimited gravy until my food was drowning in it.

People always ask him why his name is just “Chris” and not “Christian” or “Christopher.” They tell him that there’s no way it’s just Chris. My mother calls him “Christopher.” My father calls him “Criss-Cross Applesauce” and we still laugh about it. We have a good time when we pretend like none of us know anything. The truth is that hardly any of us speak to each other anymore and it feels too early for our family to break apart this way. Sometimes I think it’s my fault for going so soon. Every time I come home, my brother repeats, over and over again, that he has it worse. I don’t disagree because he does. But he’s also said that he had it worse. And the more I think about it, the more I almost agree with him. But then again, the truth is that I hardly know him anymore either. Through the camera sitting on top of the piano, my dad can watch the house. It has motion sensors and he made me download the app because he gets excited about these things. I deleted it after I saw my brother come in at 2 a.m. after a night out. It felt incorrect to be able to see him grow up while he did not get to see me. My brother didn’t tell me when he got a girlfriend, and I found out from other people. My parents still don’t know, but they do know that they’re friends. My mom called her fat and my brother always tells me *that’s fucked up* and I agree. We agree on a lot of things, but we used to agree on more things.

Every day it feels like he’s becoming more and more like the man my father wants him to be. We walked to the mall together one day and he talked to me about money. He said, “Believe me, money can buy you everything. If you don’t have friends, you can buy them.” I looked at him and said, “You can’t buy authenticity.” He only shrugged. We

sat in his car late at night and he told me how badly he wants to be rich. He said he wants to make at least as much as our father. On road trips I always end up watching my father yell curses in Hokkien and Tagalog into the phone as if it makes his secretary work faster. My mother says he's hard of hearing now. My father told us about losing a million pesos at the lunch table as if it was nothing, but I knew that that was not the case because he's always worried, sweaty, slick in his pool of businessmen and bills. Stress lines started popping up and my mind involuntarily transfers them onto my brother's face. My brother inherited my father's forehead wrinkles and his penchant for running after money. It's as if nobody has noticed us drifting apart. My father always insists that we must all have dinner together because "a family that eats together, stays together" but it always ends up like this: my brother is at a friend's house working on a project and my father is on another business trip and it's just me and my grandfather who I don't talk to at the dinner table because my mother doesn't eat. Occasionally she peels my shrimp.

My father likes buying things he knows will make everyone happy. He installed a ridiculously expensive sound system in our house and over the summer and winter break I always played music on it. It pleases him to see me use the stuff he buys for me. I love music, but there's also the fact that there's no one to speak to in the house. Over winter break, father left for a business trip on the 20th of December— the night I got back home— and returned on the 24th. He left on the 26th, this time my brother in tow, and returned on the 30th. I flew out on New Years' Day at four in the morning and my parents started screaming at each other because my mother forgot to give me money and I forgot to ask her for money. Once I was in line at the check-in counters my brother and I had a final conversation. "Hahaha our parents are always stressful / Fuck this hellhole / Honestly I don't know whether I hate this country or just because of the stress that they give us" he typed. Of course, we agreed. Over the next two months I spent a few hundred dollars on my credit card and my father said nothing, as usual. He emailed me my bills, as usual. He complains to my mother but not to me because he thinks I'm lonely. He's not wrong, but it has nothing to do with being away from home. I keep thinking about my brother complaining about money. My brother wears a Rolex. My father built him a four-thousand dollar computer and regularly deposits money into his account. Maybe it's to make up for— for what? I can't even tell which fault my parents are trying to cover. The older I get, the more I uncover.

We used to play Monopoly a lot. I always wanted to be the shoe and I kept trying to fit my pinky into it. Over the next few hours the rest of my family would collect properties and there I'd be, trying to fit my pinky into a miniature shoe. I don't know what I got out of it, and my pinky never fit, no matter how tiny I was. Both my father and brother are competitive by nature. My mom is, too, but only for me. I used to be competitive but only with my brother: I joined my mother in humiliating him over spelling "jaguar" when he was around eleven and constantly emphasized that I was better than he was at the violin (although I was honestly only more advanced because I was the favorite and everyone thought that my brother was stupid). I acted like the perfect poster child when my mother wasn't beating me, and to this day my brother is bitter over how cruel I was. I don't have the heart to explain myself; I was my mother's puppet and I simply followed an example. It was fun to be cruel. I relished it. These days my family no longer plays board games together. We all eat dinner in fifteen minutes and leave to go to our separate rooms. We all play different music and sometimes when you walk into the hallway you can hear all the different songs blending with each other. It never sounds right.

McDonald's in America is disappointing because it tastes artificial and not in the right way, but it's also my go-to comment when asked about my experiences studying abroad. I don't like to go into detail and I like to shrug and say, "It's good. McDonald's sucks though" and people start laughing and drop their follow-up questions. What I don't say is that I've only really been to McDonald's once, and studying abroad is great except for the part when I realize that I call my parents twice a year, my main form of communication with my father is through my credit card bills, and I have no idea whether or not my brother and his girlfriend are dating. Sometimes I forget which year of college he's in. Sometimes I forget I have a brother. I love Asian McDonald's because the food is better but also because it reminds me of how happy we used to be able to act without being aware of the act. By this I mean, we were both being beaten by my mother for miniscule shortcomings, but at least we ate McDonald's. My mother eventually took this away from us as well, taught me to hate food and the way it filled my body. We stopped eating at McDonald's, stopped eating breakfast in the car on the way to school, and opted for apple juice and squeezed lemons. I still hate the taste of apples. My mother is always so angry because my brother has started refusing to drink the supplements she loves to shove down our throats. She calls him fat and I can't tell if he cares, because I no longer know him.

My brother's body is unfamiliar to me. Not because I don't know what he looks like, but because I can't bring myself to be comfortable around him or anyone else in my family. I can't hug him properly, much less my parents. We say I Love You but only through texts that I can't quote directly because I can't remember the last time that we said

that to each other. Sometimes my parents say it at the end of phone calls and I choke it out like I swallowed a bad lemon. I remind myself that I have known these people for my entire life. I tell myself that I owe something to them even though other people say that I don't.

There are facts about my life, however spotty my memory is, that I know to be true. One: my name is Bianca and I have an older brother. Two: His name is Chris. Three: We were born to our parents, Jasmin and Edwin. Four: We grew up in the Philippines. Five: We are both Chinese. My brother used to tell me that his skin was dark like my father's sister's skin when she was younger, who eventually became pale. I don't know how this happened, but I accepted it as fact. I tried to imagine my brother as pale and what came to mind instead was an image of bleached Michael Jackson. Still, I waited for him to stop being brown, not because I hated it but because this was what I thought would happen. People asked questions and I fed them answers. I said that I looked like my father but my brother looked like my mother. I said that my brother inherited my mother's tall genes and my father's long legs. I said that we didn't look alike because genetics are strange.

My brother's body is brown, unlike mine, and Fact #3 is incorrect. I printed out my birth certificate to apply for a visa and noticed what was printed on it for the first time. These were the sections that stood out to me:

5c. Birth Order: First

9a. Total number of children born alive: 1

9b. No. of children still living including this birth: 1

I suddenly felt dizzy, and spun around in my brother's desk chair. He had the printer and coincidentally, he was in his room as well. "Why does it say I'm the first-born child?" I don't hear a response. I glance towards him and see how engrossed he is in the film he's watching. I feel my chest tighten, and I choose to walk out of the room instead. I still don't know if he heard me. I walk into my own room, where two of my cousins who are visiting from California are sitting. "Why does it say that my brother and I have different moms?" I wonder, aloud. My cousin Nina, who is 22 years old and therefore much older than me, gasps. She says, "Wait, you don't know?" and I don't know how to respond. No, I don't know. I don't know why I didn't guess. Neither one of my parents were brown skinned. Had I just chalked it down to being some sort of recessive gene? My brother was born on March 7th, 1999. My parents married in February of 2003, and I was born seven months later. I felt stupid, standing there under the blinding light of the chandelier that I didn't want that was bought for me anyway, toes digging into the expensive rug that I also didn't want.

My parents don't know that I know. I don't know if my brother does because I don't know if he heard me, and I don't think I ever want to know. I suppose that my brother must know that my mother is not my mother because he always told me stories about being left at my grandfather's house while my parents went on their honeymoon. I don't know why I didn't notice. I don't know why they didn't tell me. My family is the type to sweep things under the rug, but a part of me still finds it hard to believe that absolutely no one in my family corrected me when I said that my brother and I had the same parents.

These days I don't know my brother's life, and he doesn't know mine. I think about her sometimes. Who was she? Who did my father love before my mother, and what happened? Was it because she wasn't Chinese? I think about where she is now. I think about how my brother must have felt every single time I swept him under the bus and through my tears watched my mother hit him. I wonder if he's ever felt like he's lost ownership of his body. I wonder what she is doing right now, if her body ever birthed another child. I wonder if she thinks about him. She isn't my mother but I wonder what it would've been like if things had been different. These days I don't know my brother's life but I don't think I ever did. I am still told stories about who raised him before my mother— my aunt Lingap, the maids— and I ask myself, again and again, why I didn't notice anything. Then I remember how good my family is at this act we all uphold. I don't think I know my life and I don't know if I ever have.

At the back of my mind, did I always know? When I tell people they reason with me and say that "Well, your brother is still your brother. Nothing changes that." I never said he wasn't my brother. I just mean that my family lies, is always lying. We're so good at lying we convince ourselves. Occasionally I glance at a McDonald's sign and I'm transported back home. I think about who had it worse. I discover that I don't know who anyone is in this story and that you can recall a memory, but it's much more difficult to recover a state of mind. My parents always taught me to be honest, but my brother and I always lied anyway out of pure fear. I suppose one thing we've inherited from our parents is our skill for lying to people. Sometimes I wish I could go back, even with the bruises. Maybe I was so good at pretending that I didn't know what I did.