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Devoured by the Horizon

To this day I've still never heard the full story of why my parents decided to have a child, though I've determined that I was probably an accident. At the time, my mother was spending every moment traveling to remote areas of Bolivia and Vietnam, helping mend the mouths and lives of children with cleft palettes. My father was captaining a tall ship, probably the Spirit of Massachusetts or the Harvey Gammage, taking on groups of high school students and teaching them how to sail with the help of an overly-patient crew.

My parents met after my father blew out his knee by running into a tree while skiing. My mother was the nurse taking care of him in the recovery room after his surgery. And, even hopped up on drugs, he was charming enough to get her number. They went on a date a few days later and hit it off, and in a year and a bit, they were married.

My parents got together older than most people I know, most of my friends' parents are younger, most of them have more than one kid too, but we were built to be a small unit. I was supposed to be portable. My mother blames the lack of a sibling on a bout of colic that came after me with a vengeance for six out of the twelve months immediately after I was born. When I got older, she liked to complain about the breakdown of her eardrums during that period of time, tell me that I'd only understand after I had kids. That she'd be waiting for me to burst through the door, dripping tears and rain, and apologise profusely for being such a burden.

She would grab a bottle of wine, sit me down at our dining room table and we'd bond over the woes of motherhood together. Me, complaining and swirling a glass of whatever *cheap-ass shit* she had on hand. Both because I thought it looked fancy when I saw other people do it, but moreso because I liked the momentum, the sureness that it'd keep sloshing back and forth, coat the sides of the glass with violet petals. My mother, on the other hand, would down half the bottle in a matter of minutes, leaving me wondering if she could even taste the liquid before it crept carelessly into her mind. I still wouldn't have told her that I don't drink, that I won't ever drink, because she'd just say *Oh, so you think you're better than me now? Is that it?*

We'll go quiet, and she'll top off her glass with the rest of the bottle. I'll open my mouth and then close it again and she'll raise a carefully manicured eyebrow at me before telling me for the hundredth time about going running in the park near our house after I was born. All of the other mothers had slings across their chests with mostly-asleep babies bouncing along, lulled by the rhythm. My mother had me, a tumbleweed with sentience, determination and fists. None of the other mothers wanted to run with her because of me, not even the hated stroller-moms would take her in. So, she had to stop running. I wonder why she didn't just leave me at home with my father while she ran.

When I was younger, I loved to hear her tell one particular story over and over again. She'd always begin with: *Your Grandma is an incredible seamstress. The sewing machine in my room was hers, you know* My grandparents had decided to take my mother and her two-and-a-half brothers (my grandmother was heavily pregnant with brother #3 at the time) on a road trip from Washington to the Grand Canyon. My grandfather really wanted to get a good, fancy family photo so my grandmother decided to make my mother a new dress. I've never heard a clear description of it, but I like to imagine it as a billowing white sundress. The moment my mother put it on, she refused to take it off, and after fighting over whether or not it was worth it to wage a war against a stubborn six year-old, my grandmother decided to let her wear it, with careful instructions not to sit on the ground. Everything went smoothly until they hit Arizona:

It was mid-summer, heatwaves dancing across the cacti. My mother's small thighs were suction-cupped to the seat, anchoring her in place. My grandfather, of course, was refusing to turn the air conditioning on. My mother could feel every inch of her child-soft skin leaking sweat, and, as anyone would do in that situation, decided to take off her new dress completely, flinging it to the side. It caught a burst of wind from the rolled-down windows of the front seat as she did this, reminiscent of a dove glimpsing a chance towards freedom, before brutally smashing against a window and falling back to the floor. Intrigued, she rolled down her window and stuck her hand out, gripping the dress tightly, and watched it whip around in the air next to the car in wonder. One of her brothers, antsy and bored,

decided to pull on one of her pigtails, distracting her just long enough for the dress to slip out from between her fingers. Inside of the vehicle my mother began to scream and cry. Outside, the piece of fabric was quickly devoured by the horizon. She wore another dress in the picture, a pink and purple polka-dotted one.

When I was six, the same age as my mother in that story, I began collecting snow globes. My aunt prompted my obsession by giving me one when I went with my father to stay with her in New York. I loved shaking it and watching the small flecks swirl, settling over New York's skyline, completely covering the tiny figures going about their day. *Warning: Blizzard approaching, run away, get out!* I'd say now, screaming at the small people until they listened, forcing them to shatter their mini-utopia of New York winter. By the end of that year, I'd amassed seven more. They rested on top of one of the shelves in my room. One night my mother was yelling at me, I don't remember why.

(Later, I'd notice the correlation between the number of empty bottles in the recycling bin and how vocal she'd get, how deeply she'd dig in her heels and stand her ground, pounding on my door.)

But, then, I was seven and scared. I snuggled deep into the pile of blankets sitting on my bed, grabbing my battered copy of *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* I read a chapter, then two, and then I hit the back cover and my mother had receded back to her domain. I felt a surge of anger at her for trapping me inside my room, heightened by fear of the possibility of her coming back.

I was a very physical child, both in affection and emotion, known to hug everyone as well as flip boards of monopoly when I was losing. I tried throwing a tissue box onto the floor, but was unsatisfied at the lack of noise. I slammed my door, earning me a string of curses from my mother down the hall. My blood pumped harder and I decided to grab my New York snowglobe. That'd be messy and loud. I raised it above my head, tensing my arm to hurl it to the ground. But, instead, I drew my arm down, shoving the globe into my stomach and clutching it tightly. Destroying it wouldn't hurt anyone but me.

As I hit my tweens, my mother started going to therapy. When she was around, she spent a lot of time apologising to me profusely for being a terrible mother. Often while crying. We started watching Masterchef together, then the Great British Bake Off, then excessive amounts of HGTV. We got pedicures. She taught me how to bake her legendary banana bread (pro tip: always add extra walnuts). I was supposed to forgive her, and I did. But I couldn't bring myself to care about her again, still thought of her as the monster beneath my bed.

My mother would never eat anything that we baked. It'd been going on all of my life, her baking trays upon trays of cookies or making dinner for my father and I and a bowl of salad for herself. I never really learned what 'normal' was with food, cowering beneath her judgemental gaze as I quickly shoved a bowl of soup or chili or pasta down my throat, trying to speed up the process of going back to my room. Eventually, I just stopped going to dinner, then eating at all because if my mother didn't have to, why should I? And hadn't she said that I could stand to lose a few pounds?

She loved showing me pictures of her in highschool versus college, telling me over and over about how she grew three inches and lost weight, and learned how to use makeup. The two girls in the pictures staring at me, one smiling, head cocked slightly to the side, hair tucked behind her ears. The other, a skeleton. In having me, she'd returned to somewhere in-between those pictures, and blamed me for the extra inch of flesh added to her waist, her slightly less-hollowed cheeks. Later, when my friend's mother told her that her daughter had come to her concerned because no one had seen me eat in weeks, my mother would sit me down and tell me that she'd developed bulimia in college. That she'd decided not to eat, or eat very little, finally looking for help when her hair started to fall out and she couldn't stop shivering. *You don't want to go down that path,* she said, looking me dead in the eyes. She still skipped dinner the next day, wrapped her fleece jacket tighter around her shoulders, went out on our porch for a smoke.

I wasn't ever supposed to find out that she smoked. I only did by accident, walked out on her and one of her friends smoking on our back porch one night. She tried to play it off as a one-time thing, hazel eyes frantically darting from her friend to me. Bending the arm holding the cigarette behind her back. But, the smoke still curled up, intermingling with the maple leaves fanned out above us.

One of our cats likes to find small places to curl up and sleep in where she's hidden from anyone that might bother her. She reuses the same spot until she's sure that someone has figured it out. This has prompted my father and I to develop a game of sorts. Every time either of us finds her, we'll wait until the other gets home, and both sneak just into eyeshot of the cat, memorizing the spot, trying to pretend that we're just there to rearrange blankets, or grab a can of beans. No, we don't see you.

My mother changes spots a lot too, I've noticed her sitting in her car a lot, parked, head dangling out the window. Can't make the car smell like smoke, don't want to buy one of those shitty tree-shaped pine air fresheners. Sometimes she'll just go to our neighbor's house, but her favorite spot is still our back porch. Her father passed away three years ago from an illness that would've probably gotten better if his lungs hadn't been charred and she doesn't want me following in his footsteps, her footsteps.

Maybe when I got older, she would've taken me out on the porch and leaned against the sturdy wooden railing, eyed the forty foot drop to the ground below. She'd pull a pack out of her right pocket, offer me a cigarette that I'd decline, and shrug, *Suit yourself*. She'd spend a minute struggling to coax a flame out of her stubborn portable lighter before succeeding and inhaling for a few seconds. My eyes would probably start watering. She'd grumble about my father, how he refused to slow down and take a break from all of his home and garden related projects. *It's 'patch the roof' this and 'I'm going to pick up some free lumber I saw on the side of the road' that. I still don't know why I agreed to marry that man.* I'd point out that it just meant that he cared, and she'd smile and shake her head. I'd ask her how they met, again, wondering if I'd gotten old enough to unlock a new section of the story that'd been deemed too inappropriate to know (usually one of the three Ds: drinking, drugs, dillegal things) the last time I'd asked.

My parents have never made a lot of sense to me as a pairing. My mother is loud, aggressive, impatient, a fireball constantly on the verge of exploding. She's the kind of person that you can't have a neutral opinion on. My father was both a tuba player and popular in high school, which I think encapsulates him as a person, walking the line between obscure and known. Opposites attract though, I suppose. While my mother raged, my father would do his best to calm her, to remove anything that could set her off again. When my father went for weeks without seeing his friends, my mother would drag him out to a social event.

My family may not have been entirely cohesive, what with my mother and I ignoring one another most days by the time I reached sixteen and my parents fighting more often than not, tension draping itself across every piece of furniture like a coat of dust that refused to leave. I'd seen plenty of my friends' families collapse on themselves: parents that wouldn't stop fighting but refused to get divorced until their children went to college, parents that refused to acknowledge that anything was wrong, parents that flat-out didn't speak to one another. My family was rainbows and butterflies compared to so many. So, although it shouldn't have, it came as a complete surprise to me when my father told me that he and my mother were getting a divorce.

I was struggling to get my father's truck going. It was a stick shift, and I'd only just learned how to drive it. He wanted to run some errands, and I was taking every opportunity I could to spend more time behind the wheel with someone else in the car who knew how to drive stick (someone to look to for guidance when I stalled, though moreso just someone to stop me from freaking out if I stalled at a light and felt the honking, cursing wrath of the cars behind me). We'd just been to Costco to pick up groceries, and were headed to Papa Murphy's to get pizza. My father leaned forwards and turned down the radio a little bit. He said that he had something to tell me, and proceeded to explain that, although he and my mother loved each other very much, they needed to go their separate ways.

Suddenly, copies upon copies of my mother were spinning around in my head, xeroxes of what-could-be-but-wasn't. Sloshing from one memory to the next at random momentums, was this always where we were meant to end up?

Everyone I knew would apologize to me when I told them. Their parents would always tell me that they were only a call away if I ever needed anywhere to stay. I shrugged them off because, honestly, deep down I'd known this was coming. I'd found Tinder on my mother's phone a few months prior and never mentioned it, told myself that I'd imagined it. She stopped coming by the house as often, always out late with 'friends.'

When I told my father that I wanted him to have full custody of me, he looked at me with surprise, we'd never been the closest and I think he assumed I'd want to stay with my mother. But, he didn't ask any questions, and I haven't been forced to see my mother yet, so I'm assuming that I'm solely his now. We had a conversation about her a few weeks ago and he told me that if he'd known how terrible things were for me that he would've broken it off sooner. He told me that if he could go back in time and change things then he would, with no hesitation. I buried my head into the soft fabric of his cotton t-shirt and hugged him because that's what the heroes do when the villain is vanquished.

Except she wasn't really a villain, I have to remind myself of that each time that she sends me a letter, each time that I have to hear from her again. It would be so much simpler to just hate her, if I could pretend that my father was my only parent. But she's my mother. She was in a bad situation, struggling with depression and alcohol addiction. She probably jumped into a marriage with my father too soon. She was hurting, and she let that hurt pour out and hurt other people. But she cared, too. She scared me, but she was also so kind, so understanding. She's reckless, but she's helped millions of people through nursing, and done incredible things with her life. I've spent my entire life running from my mother, but it hasn't worked. It's never going to work because I'm always going to feel her inside of me, the good and the bad, and I think that has to be ok.