V. Jo Hsu

Forest for the Trees

The car is from 2004. A Honda Element. Arizona plates. I repeat the details to the tow truck driver as he clamps a metal hook to the underside of my car. I don’t say that her name is Jordan, that I christened her when I was sixteen. For the past decade, she has been my escape, my partner-in-crime, and at times my bed and shelter. She has been freedom and safety. He flips a switch and Jordan is dragged by her rear bumper onto the back of the truck. I can still smell the smoke from the engine. Motor oil drains to the ground, leaving a thick trail from where it pooled on the side of the road. My shoes are slick with it.

I climb into the cab of the truck where Paul, the driver, gives me a clipboard to sign. He hands me a receipt and starts the truck, easing towards the freeway intersection. As we wait for passing cars, I watch Jess’s small, dark Scion creep beside us. It pauses, checks for oncoming cars, and accelerates onto the interstate. She goes west to Pittsburgh. I go east, back to State College, the city that has held me for the last five years. Longer than I lived in Houston or New York City, but less home than either.

“Don’t see many Elements in Pennsylvania,” Paul remarks.

“Nope.” The word stops my throat. It’s all I can say.

“Are there a lot in Arizona?” he asks.

“Nope.” I twist in the passenger seat and see the black sheen of Jordan’s rear window. Parking stickers from Rice University remain permanently stuck to the glass. Below them, the Human Rights Campaign logo has faded to a muted blue and yellow. The rear bumper was chewed apart in a parking lot mishap two years ago. The door to the fuel tank snapped off in a particularly harsh winter, and I haven’t found the money to replace it. It’s been getting 13 miles to the gallon for years, and no mechanic has been able to diagnose the problem. But I’ve kept it—the car that took me from Phoenix to Houston to State College, that wakes up groaning in the subzero temperatures before dawn, that skids clumsily through freshly powdered snow. The car that seems to miss the sun and southwest as much as I do.

When I moved to graduate school, my whole life fit neatly inside it—all the things I owned. It held my new winter clothes, my down coat, the insulated boots I stole from Elle, and my first set of cookware and dishes. It carried an Arizona license plate and tags – a chunk of the desert drifting eastward with me.

“It’s pretty unique,” I tell Paul. “I can spot it anywhere.”

I met Jess on OKCupid. In an effort to break my four-year pattern of emotional detachment, I found myself evaluating date options via online compatibility questions. Some items seemed entirely useless (“In a certain light, wouldn’t nuclear war be exciting?”). Many were frustratingly binaristic (“Do you put more weight in science or faith?”). Some were vaguely quirky (“Do you like to interpret your own dreams?”). But, I eliminated a depressing number of profiles based on two questions: “Would you strongly prefer to date someone of your own skin color/racial background?” and “Would you date someone who is bisexual?” Or rather, these people eliminated me.

I never thought or cared much about identity politics before graduate school. I’d scoffed when my parents instructed me to join Chinese student unions. I’d stood on the margins of gay-straight-alliance meetings, uncomfortable with the flagrance of their pride. I did not question then how much of my discomfort was rooted in my own shame. Nor did I realize that my apathy was a sign of privilege. There’s a line I love from Eric Liu’s *The Accidental Asian*: “That’s how it is with Asian American identity—nothing brings it out like other people’s expectations.”

In all honesty, that was probably what drew Jess and me to each other. Objectively, I could see all the things about her that I should find attractive. She was thoughtful, intelligent, ambitious. She was a med student, which meant that she was just as busy and stressed out as I was during the semester. But I think we connected because we recognized our loneliness in one another. For a rare moment in the middle of Pennsylvania, we saw bits of ourselves refracted by someone else.

On a quiet Saturday morning, I drove two and a half hours to Pittsburgh. We had lunch at Conflict Kitchen and hiked through Frick Park. It was nice. I hate that word—nice. Nice is a polite word. Four letters bolstered by distance. Jess and I tried to close that gap. We traded life histories and elaborated the stories we’d begun over email. We talked about first kisses and fumbled hearts. But facts make a poor approximation of intimacy, and despite the litany of truths I could recite about her life, she remained a stranger.

We kept trying. I returned to Pittsburgh a week later, and the second night I spent at her place, we laid awake in her bed. I studied the pattern of our fingers entwined as she asked.

“What was the most memorable physical relationship that you’ve had?”

“Elle.” The name fell like a prayer. Jess was not the jealous type. She had an open approach to love and relationships that I knew I was too selfish and possessive to embrace. After she nodded, I asked, “You?”

I don’t remember his name now, but she dated a man – someone who meant something, someone whose gravity settled between us as she spoke.

“What was so great about it?” she asked.

“I think… the emotional connection. I think that has to be there.” I said. “You?”

“Yeah, I think that’s it too.”

We remained silent, her fingers still tracing my knuckles. I used to be a jealous lover. But lying beside Jess, thinking of her and Forgotten Name, I felt apathy. No, worse, I felt a distant longing for Elle, for the impossible, irretrievable past. I could feel Jess’s every breath but we might as well have been 200 miles apart again. When she fell asleep, I curled back around a pillow, shrinking beneath the familiar pall of my memories.

In college, Elle was the first roommate I ever had. We were both the only children of first-generation Asian immigrants. We spoke mangled Chinglish with our parents and with each other when we discussed things without translation. We grew up on the same paperback novels—heroes and heroines that kept us company while our parents were busy. But we connected well before knowing any of those things. We thought on the same wavelength, in the same language of hyperbole and sarcasm. Meeting her felt less like making a new friend and more like coming home. I learned to define home as the sound of her heels breaking the doorway. The rhythm of her breaths in sleep.

The towing costs $300. I called AAA, but my policy covers only five miles of towing. I am over 80 miles from State College. As Paul pulls the truck and my trailing Element onto the freeway, my mother calls.

“That’s too much money,” she tells me. She wants me to get my car back off the truck—to pull over and try the insurance company, which might send a cheaper tow whenever one becomes available.

I watch the empty freeway scroll past us, lit warm by the setting sun. I ask Paul if he would charge me to pull over, to unload my car, to abandon me on the edge of the freeway.

“It would be another hour until a truck could get here,” he tells me without slowing down. “You don’t want to be out here alone at night. This is the worst part of Pennsylvania for that.”

I can’t tell if he’s genuinely concerned or trying to scare me. My mom is still yelling into my other ear: “What were you doing going to Pittsburgh, anyway?” I haven’t told her. She doesn’t know about Jess. How do you tell your mother you got lonely enough to solicit strangers on the internet?

I imagine sitting on the side of the road as Jordan bleeds into the dirt, as Paul vanishes into the horizon and Jess returns to Pittsburgh. My parents know of my sexual orientation, but we don’t discuss it.

“I’ll pay it,” I tell my mom, speaking through her objections. “I don’t care. I’ll pay it.” She’s still yelling when I hang up.

“Well?” Paul asks me.

“Just take me home.”

Paul looks at me out of the corner of his eye.

“Seems like you’re having a rough day,” he observes.

“I’ve had that car a long time,” I say. At first, I think I’m making an excuse—that it’s really about the woman disappearing towards Pittsburgh. But the words keep coming as if my body knows something I don’t. “I’ve had it since high school. It’s been with me through a lot.” I laugh. “I ran away from home in that car. So many times.”

“Why did you run away from home?”

“I didn’t get along with my parents,” I say. “I mean, we get along much better now.” I always feel the need to qualify my descriptions of my family. “But then, not so much.”

“Why?” he asks.

I look at Paul—Paul with the Western Pennsylvanian accent that I can finally identify after four years. Paul, who’s accumulated empty canisters of chewing tobacco all over his truck, who fills out the driver’s side of the cabin, chest and belly stretching the buttons of his work shirt. Paul, who dwarfs me from six inches away.

“They’re traditional, and very conservative. I date women.” It’s the most reductive statement, but it has the punch I want. Paul’s mouth gapes for a few moments, a few hesitant queries edging at his throat in incoherent grumbles.

It feels good to say. I’ve known most of my life. Really, I’ve probably known all of my life, before my sexuality had a name. I heard the word “gay” for the first time on a TV sitcom. I don’t remember the line, but it was definitely used as a pejorative. My mother turned to me and asked, “Do you know what that means? When there is something wrong with a man’s brain…” It took me years to realize that term could apply to me too.

Paul still looks like a fish out of water, so I speak again. “They’re dealing with it better now. I mean, a lot of it was my fault. I tried to keep it from them, we fought a lot because I was being evasive, resentful.”

I came out to my parents in college, but I suspect that they knew before then—probably when they grounded me on the night of my first date with my first girlfriend. Definitely when they prohibited me from my high school prom, which I attended anyway, with that same girl, in a tuxedo borrowed from the drama club. In those years before I told them, the strain of unspoken things drew us to the limits of our understanding.

One of the worst nights, my mom and I exhausted our voices until we retreated to different rooms, on opposite sides of the same wall. I could hear her crying through it, her ragged breaths matched with mine. When my father went to console her, I heard her scream: “If the daughter I raised wasn’t the daughter I thought I raised, I’d rather not have one at all.” I still remember the desperation of her voice, like woman drowning.

As I did often in those days, I fled the problems I couldn’t fix. In my car, I turned up the stereo until the bass filled my chest. Jordan carried me down empty freeways, pedal to the floor, splaying miles between my parents and me until I could breathe. That was the first of many nights I spent in that car—the seats laid flat, the windows cracked. Lying back on the driver’s seat, I liked to splay my palms across the ceiling and compress the fabric until I could feel her steel chassis cooling beneath the night sky. For as long as I was here, huddled in her protective frame, I was safe.

Paul’s head bobbed up and down. “So you’re… you’re a lesbian?” He draws out the word as if he’s never said it before. He probably hasn’t.

I shake my head. “I’ve dated men too.” The term I prefer is “queer,” though I feel like it has no meaning here. Really, I don’t know what the term is anyway. Romantic interest has been hard for me to sustain these past four years. Even now, drifting between Pittsburgh and State College, I think of Elle.

After college, Elle and I moved to New York. It was our city. We once spent a beautiful summer there—working internships, living off Chinatown dumplings, watching all the Broadway shows from the cheap seats reserved for students. Though we’d met and spent most of our time in Houston, I think of New York as the place that shaped us—as individuals and together. I’d walked all of Brooklyn to find her favorite cheeses, artisan sweets, fresh-ground coffee. She’d spent months perfecting an apartment for us both in the months before I graduated to join her in Bed-Stuy. Two kids from Southwestern suburbs, we took pride in memorizing the MTA subways, mapping the city’s veins as our own.

Before we moved, both our mothers warned us: we should never let the world see us as gay. It would never forgive us. But we were unapologetic about our affection. Elle and I were photographed by subway passengers often enough that it became almost routine. Once, on a train, a man narrated our every action over the phone as if we were his personal pornography. There were men that trailed our footsteps all through the East Village—ones whose aggression got louder and angrier the longer we ignored them. I don’t know what I felt then, but in my memories I have no fear or discomfort, just the sense of her hand in mine. The stupid, silly way she made me feel invincible.

Unfortunately, the feeling did not last. New York was different the second time around. It was winter. I was waiting to hear back from graduate schools. My health, which had been fickle my entire life, degraded from minor inconveniences to a genuine struggle. I maintained a low fever that defied the Tylenol I popped every morning. My stomach hurt constantly whether or not I ate, which became more and more infrequent. I never slept for more than an hour or two at time. Still, I rose every morning and rode the G train to Union Square where I read submissions for a literary agency. I subsisted off cappuccinos from the machine in the break room. In the afternoon, I reported for my server job at a ramen joint in Park Slope.

The owners were Australian, but our chef was Japanese-born and French-trained. Every night, he gave me a hefty serving of the family meal—kitchen surplus that he turned into rich curries or stews. His roasted chicken over rice reminded me of night markets in Taipei, eating from Styrofoam bowls on fold-out plastic tables. While the rest of the staff ate their dinner before we unlocked the doors, I portioned everything into plastic take-out containers and stored them in the fridge. I brought them home at the end of the night for Elle. When she asked if I had eaten, I said yes. When she told me how delicious it was, I agreed. When she finished and settled beside me in bed, I was too weak and tired to hold her.

I drifted in and out of consciousness and then always woke up coughing. I swallowed each hacking breath until I could slip out the room. When I breathed normally again, I laid down on the floor, accounting for the things in my life that made me inadequate: the jobs that hardly paid for the paper-thin roof over our heads, the bedbug-infested mattress that we had wrapped in plastic for six months because the damn things still hadn’t died. The fourteen graduate school applications I had out to MFA programs, from which I still hadn’t heard back though reports of acceptances and rejections proliferated the internet. The parents to whom I rarely spoke because I could no longer defend the career choice or the relationship I had defied them for. The beautiful woman sleeping on the other side of the door—my best friend, whom I was letting down with each passing day.

Just before we moved to New York, Elle’s mother confronted me in a parking lot on Rice’s campus. Elle stood thirty feet away, her back turned, her arms folded. The defensive bend of her shoulders made me want to reach for her, but I didn’t. Instead, I faced her mother. Even now, I admire this woman, despite her hatred of me. She raised Elle on her own, with their entire family back in Indonesia. She gave everything to her daughter. And when I looked her in the eye, I knew I had taken a part of that away.

After a small tirade about God and homosexuality, she asked me, “How are you going to support her? How will you take care of her?”

I resented the implication that my gender had any bearing on my competence and self-sufficiency. But I also knew she had a point about me, specifically—the same point my parents made when I decided against med school and law school. I believe in what I do. I hope to spend the rest of my life championing the written word—the importance of mindful communication. But I think of my parents and the checks they mail to Taiwan every year for their family’s care; I read the incessant articles about jobs in the humanities and how many English Ph.D.’s can’t find employment. I feel as if I have squandered their sacrifice—the opportunities they gave me with their practical, dependable jobs.

When we were alone, Elle kissed me and said, “I told my mom she’s not invited to my wedding anymore.”

She said “my,” but the implied “our” crushed me. Some part of me reveled in the unspoken promise—the fact that she could so casually assume a future with me. But I could not forget the accusation in her mother’s eyes. I don’t think it was about god, or really that much about sexuality. It was about me as a threat. And perhaps I was one.

Paul and I have nothing else to fill the ninety minute drive, so he continues asking me about Jess.

“So that woman that was with you. She’s… your girlfriend?”

Jess was very careful about never using that term. In her words, we were in “some sort of a relationship,” but not a *relationship*. We were “seeing” each other, but not “dating.” She dictated the terms of what we were to each other. I didn’t care much to begin with, but it has begun to feel like another way to keep me at bay.

“No,” I answer. “I mean, she didn’t want to use that word. It’s just that weird, in-between, not-quite-dating phase. You know how it is.”

Paul snorts and grins. Apparently, he does know.

“But you were going to Pittsburgh?”

“That’s where she lives. I’m in State College.”

“Long way for someone you’re not dating.”

I laugh. “I’m trying this thing where I’m bold and take risks, or… something. I’d normally never just up and leave and go to Pittsburgh. Obviously, it didn’t go that well.”

“Why are you doing that?” he asks.

The question surprises me. Or perhaps, my answer does.

“I think because I’m not happy. Because I’m trying to find a way to be happy.”

“How long have you been not happy?” Again, I am touched by Paul’s interest.

I look out the windshield where the sun’s final rays warm the horizon. The mountains are beautiful in Pennsylvania. I remember that every time I drive out of State College, when I realize that I am actually not bound to the city—that nothing keeps me there but me. I suppose nothing keeps me anywhere these days.

“Honestly? I think since I moved here.” It wasn’t Pennsylvania’s fault. It took me three years to regain my health after New York. Doctors found no cause for the severe inflammation of my stomach. They diagnosed me with IBS, which in my head stands for “Indeterminate Bullshit” Most instances of IBS are pretty livable – inconvenient, yes, but mild compared to other chronic conditions. By now, mine is too. I’ve never again experienced the misery that I did those first couple years. Part of it was certainly physical; I never had a meal that wasn’t followed by debilitating pain. Part of it was also self-induced. Keeled over behind the bathroom door, I felt pathetic. Not eating gave me the modicum of control I could claim. It let me feel stronger, capable. Until the deprivation became its own disease.

I moved to State College a few months after leaving Elle, preparing to start graduate school in the apartment I had chosen for both of us. That winter, I was literally so frail that the wind could (and did) knock me over. I blamed my illness for our separation. I searched obsessively for the root of my symptoms. I tried every kind of elimination diet and probiotic. My doctors rotated me through an array of prescription-strength drugs, many of which made me sicker. IBS is diagnosed by negation. It’s the condition you have when you don’t have anything else. It is treated by controlling the symptoms rather than removing the cause. These things I had to accept: that some things don’t make sense. Sometimes you never find the reason. Sometimes you can only deal with its effects.

Paul is now frowning at his steering wheel, so I amend my reply. “There are a lot of things I like about Pennsylvania. The forests are beautiful. I’ve never seen anything like them before. And the snow is really lovely when I don’t have to drive or walk through it. I’ve just had a hard time making it feel like home.”

He nods pensively.

“Are you from here?” I ask.

“Lived here my whole life,” he says. “My parents did too. And my sons.”

“You have kids? How old are they?”

“The older one’s 28. The younger, 23.” His voice dips in the last sentence; there’s a softness there, and I probe it.

“What do they do?”

“They work with me,” he nods. “Well, for now. Rob, my youngest, he wants to leave.”

“Yeah?”

“In January. He thinks he’s going to San Antonio.”

The thought of Texas sets me alight. I never expected to love that state, but I do. I miss its open space and the concrete sprawl of its cities. I miss the eighteen hours of flat desert I traversed with Jordan each semester. I miss tacos.

“It’s a good city,” I say. “Affordable living, good food, accessible. I’ve flown there several times from State College. It’s a pretty easy trip actually. What’s Rob going to do there?”

“He doesn’t know.” Paul shrugs and sneers at the road. “I don’t know what he thinks is out there for him. Here he has a job, his family.”

Growing up, I couldn’t wait to leave Arizona. It wasn’t until I left that I began to miss its particular charm. In verdant Pennsylvania, I long for red earth and painted sky. I miss a sun so forceful it burns. I wonder what compels anyone to leave “home,” but few people I know have done it more completely than my parents. They’re both the only members of their families living outside of Taiwan—except me. They did it for necessity, for the opportunities they would not have had at home. And to give me those same chances. In a few years, they will retire to Taipei. I doubt I will ever follow—the last Western outpost of our family name.

“Maybe the appeal is that he doesn’t know,” I say. “Maybe he needs it for perspective.”

Paul is unconvinced. He shrugs.

“It’s nice that he has this to come back to,” I say.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “He can always come back.”

I hadn’t planned to go to Pittsburgh. Jess had come to State College for two days and we accompanied a group of my friends to Hershey Park. The whole weekend, I tried to shake the suspicion that we were merely playing house—rehearsing the rhythms of couplehood. When it was time for her to return, she asked me to go with her. I didn’t want to, but it seemed like the nice thing to do.

Halfway to Pittsburgh, the emissions light popped up in my dash. I knew all of Jordan’s small quirks. I knew the exact dimensions of the car like an extension of my body. I had never seen this light before, but I suspected we weren’t getting to Pittsburgh. A minute later, she stopped responding to the gas pedal. We were going 80mph on the freeway and she began to decelerate. I lifted my foot, but she lurched forward, moving faster then slower, entirely unbidden, groaning with exertion.

Silently, I begged Jordan to bear with me. I had dragged her from the desert through the mountains, subjected her to four winters parked uncovered through sleet and snowstorms. I had pawed the snow off of her with my bare hands. Please, one more time, Jordan. Don’t leave me.

But I was asking too much, and I knew it. I watched as the speedometer dropped below 70, then 60. Jess’s car sped ahead and out of sight. I filled with dread as I reached for my phone.

“I need to pull over,” I told her.

Jordan barely made it to the next exit, accelerating and decelerating at random. We eased onto a road that seemed to lead nowhere—a narrow strip of blacktop flanked by barren land. Smoke unfurled from the hood of my car and the air reeked of singed metal.

Jess and I both parked and stepped outside. A trail of oil marked our path from the highway. I’d already decided to call AAA, to have the car towed back, to never get to Pittsburgh.

“What if the car just needs more oil?” Jess asked, squinting at the oil stick.

I bent to examine the puddle beneath my car.

“If it bled out that fast, I’m pretty sure it’ll just do it again.”

“Well what if we got in my car, got some oil, and just tried?”

I imagined filling the empty tank, forcing Jordan back onto the road for another hour. I pictured the engine bleeding dry, stranded in earnest in the middle of the freeway.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“What if we just tried?”

I didn’t want to try anymore. Our entire non-relationship had been a polite struggle for control. In the end, neither of us cared enough to yield.

I called AAA. I called my parents. Through the phone, my mother told me the tow truck was too expensive. In my other ear, Jess insisted we should try just adding oil to the tank as if that would fix whatever underlying problem had crippled my car in the middle of the freeway. I decided, against everyone’s advice, to have Jordan towed back to State College.

By the time I settled things on the phone, Jess had retreated to her own car. She was seated in the driver’s seat, arms folded. I opened the door and slid quietly into the passenger’s side.

“I love my car, but she’s always had the worst luck on long drives,” I said.

Jess nodded. She was already gone and I had lost the will to chase after her. But it would be another half hour before the tow truck arrived.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Can we talk about it?”

She sighed and spoke to her window. I stared at the back of her head.

“I feel disrespected,” she told me. “I feel like you immediately excluded me from your decision.”

We had been “dating” for a couple months and she was not even prepared to call it that. We’d been “getting to know each other”—a stage that is fun and manageable for hiking adventures and day trips to theme parks. A stage that does nothing for crises, for watching the one constant in your life bleed out on the side of the road.

Funnily enough, Jordan was my longest relationship. I have kept that car after leaving my parents’ house, after leaving Elle, through all the shitty, emotionless flings in which I tried to forget her and myself. No, I didn’t trust Jess to help me decide the fate of my car. I didn’t trust that she would be there if Jordan’s smoking engine completely gave out another twenty miles down the road. I didn’t trust her.

“I didn’t mean to disrespect you,” I said carefully. Nice. “I handled that poorly, I’m sorry. I should have consulted you.” I paused. “I also don’t think it’s fair for you to expect to be included in major decisions about my life and my car when we aren’t even sure… what we are.”

The back of her head remained impassive.

“You know what’s stupid?” I kept talking. “If this hadn’t happened… we’d just be on our way to Pittsburgh. Everything would be great.”

But it had happened. We knew what we were now—and it was something that enjoyed casual dates and superficial conversations. It was not a thing that understood misfortune. Or sacrifice.

When at last I saw the tow truck turn the corner, I looked again at the back of Jess’s head. She had not looked at me once in the last twenty minutes.

“So what now?” I asked. “Are we still doing this thing?” Whatever it is.

She lifted her shoulders. I thought of the roller coasters we’d spent the weekend riding in Hershey Park—the cranking of steel gears as the cars crept towards the final peak. I anticipated the plummet. Except, like the ride, my feelings were constructed. I’d been hoping that if I attached myself to someone else after Elle, the feelings would eventually follow. If we pretended romance long enough, it would become real. But no one would help me move on. No one would take care of me before I made peace with my aloneness. These things I would have to fix myself.

I have rewritten the story of how Elle and I fell apart over and over, trying to make sense of it—reason with it, accept it. When I explain it now, neither of us declared it over. It just was. We had reached a point where we couldn’t continue as one.

In our apartment, Elle tried to confront me in her own blunt way.

“You’re not okay. Do you see yourself? I feel like I’m dating a cancer patient.” Her reflection frowned at me in the mirror. My reflection stared back, halfway out of my street clothes, looking for my pajamas. The waist of my jeans crumpled at my hips where I had to bundle the fabric beneath a leather belt—the belt in which Elle had punched a new hole for me since we couldn’t find one that fit. My skin sank between my ribs, enough that I could count them by sight. My arms had diminished so that my elbows and shoulders protruded as if swollen. I realized then how long it had been since she’d touched me—how she always watched me from afar, as if afraid I might break.

When Elle and I finally ended, it was ugly. Because we both knew that our life was killing me. Because I was too stubborn and scared to admit I was weak and seriously ill. I had a sickness with no name and no cause—part physical malaise, part depression. I was paralyzed by fear—that any step would be the wrong move. I was floundering in New York, in the city that had forged my fantasy of who I’d be as an adult. My best friend and lover had become a stranger inured by our relentless frustration. We were tethered to each other by the people we used to be, by fear of abandoning what we had already lost. My health insurance couldn’t cover treatment in the city, where she was bound by her job. I knew that if I left her, it would be for the last time.

My final tactic was cowardice. I feigned apathy. I picked fights over nothing. I needed her to force me out because I hadn’t the strength to walk out on our life on my own. I wanted her to hate me, and finally, she did.

“I haven’t enjoyed being around you in almost a year,” she told me. “You’ve just drizzled away. You are empty.” She told me to leave. To fix myself. To find the things I had lost. She told me, “I’d want you to be whole rather than in love with me.”

I left New York a shattered thing, all my fractured pieces still desperately in love with her. I stood in our apartment with all my belongings folded into a duffle bag: the clothes that no longer fit me, my half of the towels and the kitchenware. We said nothing as we embraced, her eyes pressed to my shoulder, my shirt sodden with tears.

For their part, my parents welcomed me back. I told them less about Elle and more that I was sick. I told them, finally, that I had not slept in earnest for months. That my temperature was constantly in the triple digits, that I’d all but stopped eating. I was 5’2” and 88lbs, so thin that it hurt to sit or stand. I have never seen my mother so afraid as when I walked through the airport gate. Her daughter had returned as a ghost—an angry, bitter, skeletal echo of the person she once was. I could not meet her eyes as I stumbled beneath the bag on my shoulder. I knew I had broken her heart.

In Arizona, I saw more doctors. I was probed and scoped and put on a number of drugs, some of which helped. I remember waking from my stomach biopsy, the anesthesia ebbing from my veins. My father stood over me, his face etched with a tenderness I had never seen before. His concern was so complete I could not stand to look at him. I stirred and his expression wiped clean.

When I finally told my mother that Elle and I had broken up, she said it was for the better. She has never told me that being gay is immoral. She has told me that it is too hard. I think my parents are both uncomfortable with it from an abstractly ethical standpoint. But more, I think they’re genuinely concerned that the world would treat me cruelly for it. The thing is, I was never bothered by the ignorance of strangers. What I couldn’t bear was the weight of their concern.

My first girlfriend and I celebrated Thanksgiving on the tailgate of that car. A winter break when I was home from college, neither of our families welcomed us home. It was just her and me and Jordan, coasting past driveways lined with out-of-state cars—past windows framing postcard-perfect turkey dinners, past children playing on lawns, and houses that smelled of hearth and affection. We bought a slice of pie from a Denny’s and split it on the tailgate of my car. We spoke of the day we could celebrate holidays in earnest—when we could gather loved ones around us, who embraced us as we were. But we broke up before the next Thanksgiving, with all the fireworks and exaggeration of teenaged love. Several years later, Elle made Thanksgiving dinner in our Brooklyn apartment, which we ate on furniture scavenged from Craiglist and curbs. That, too, I thought would last.

Last year, my parents met me in Philadelphia for Thanksgiving. Eschewing the city’s offerings of five course dinners and fancy hotel buffets, we elected a family-owned Turkish restaurant. We walked forty minutes in silence, my parents shivering and unaccustomed to the cold. I could sense my father’s anxiety as we turned through alleyways, our footsteps the only sound in a sleeping city. He grumbled about the lack of street lights and the crime rates in urban areas. I thought of mine and Elle’s apartment in Bed-Stuy, in a neighborhood with the second-highest crime rate in Brooklyn. I remembered learning the sound of sirens as a lullaby. But, of course, I had never told my parents about that.

My mom turned to me and asked, “What about that friend you lived with in New York? What is she doing now? I don’t remember her name.”

For a moment, I had no idea what she was talking about—and then I realized: Elle. How could she forget, the first thing on my mind for four years? How could she reduce what we were to a pair of roommates in New York? Yet, I realized I couldn’t know how much my parents knew of our relationship—how much it had meant to me, all the things I had lost. There was so much I hadn’t shared with them. The fact that my mom was asking about Elle at all—that was an acknowledgement of her significance.

“She’s in Rwanda,” I explained. “In the Peace Corps.” We had finally begun speaking again. It surprises me still, how much some things have changed and others not at all. With an entire world between us, talking to her still makes me feel grounded. She sees me—all the parts of me I can’t make visible to the world. More incredibly, we are learning to care for one another without owning each other in the way that we once did. What lies between us no longer feels like a severed limb; we are bound by scarred flesh.

“Is she happy?” my mom asked.

I smiled at my mother across an intersection in Philadelphia. “I think so,” I said. “Thanks for asking.”

Just before Christmas this year, four years after our breakup, Elle and I met in Houston during her annual leave from Rwanda. We spent a few days revisiting the places we had once shared, and discovering new pockets of our old city. I picked her up every day in a rented car; neither of us had vehicles in Texas anymore. When I rang the doorbell, her mother never came to the door. On our way back on the last day, Elle mused aloud to me, “I think, chances are, I wouldn’t end up with a woman. It’s just harder that way with my mom.”

I confessed to her, then: the last thought I had as I left our apartment. A thought so shameful that it didn’t have words, just a feeling: Hope. Hope that I could forge life that would not further the divide between me and my parents. Hope that I could whittle myself into a shape they would recognize. It took me years to acknowledge that sentiment, and I don’t know how to forgive myself for it.

I expected Elle to be incensed, to tell me how stupid I was. Instead she considered me sadly from the passenger seat. “I never knew you felt that way,” she said.

“Yeah, I didn’t either.” I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter… Turns out, I don’t think I can actually become that person.” My parents and I will have to find acceptance another way. I think we will, someday.

As Paul’s truck nears State College, I begin to recognize the exit signs. My little mountain town pulls into view and I am surprised by my own relief. We’ve grown silent and Paul’s cell phone pierces the quiet.

He glances at the screen and rolls his eyes to me. “My son.”

“Rob?” I remember. He nods.

Paul doesn’t say much when he answers—mostly one word replies that are meaningless out of context. At the end, he says, “I’ll be back in an hour. I’m bringing burgers. Yeah, what do you want?”

In my head, Paul’s sons are waiting for him when he gets home. They clear a table as he unloads paper bags and plastic wrappers. They sit. They talk.

Two days later, when the auto shop opens, my car is diagnosed: the oil plug had dropped out. The engine drained and seized up. This was especially mysterious because the engine had not been touched or tinkered with for months. I’d driven Jordan to and from Pittsburgh several times without incident and all over the hills of State College. There was no sign of damage or foul play; the cap somehow came unscrewed while the car sped down a flat stretch of freeway.

I consider Jordan in the parking lot of the dealership. In the past five years, I’d taken her to every mechanic in town. I’d replaced all the tires, fixed the air conditioning three times and it still didn’t work. I’d known that she was on her last legs for years, but I’d been reluctant to do anything about it. Finally, she’d made the decision for me.

I call my mother to tell her that I’m selling Jordan and buying something suited for the snowy landscape—something that will start in the winter, with all-wheel-drive. She likes this idea.

“What were you doing in Pittsburgh anyway?” she asks again.

I sigh. “I was dating someone who lived there. I’m pretty sure it’s over now, though.” I don’t use pronouns. I don’t need to.

My mother is quiet for a long time. “It’s hard,” she says.

“Yeah. I’m okay though.”

“Good,” my mom says.

Someday, this conversation will be longer. Someday, I will ask my parents to embrace the daughter they did not hope for but the one they got anyway. A daughter not exactly molded in their image but nonetheless shaped by their brand of stoic yet devastating care.

Before I left for graduate school, my mother told me that they’d never meant to have children. The health problems that run in my blood read like a medical textbook. They didn’t want to put a child through that. Ironically, I’d always resented them for not having more children—for making me the only member of our family raised on American soil. I’d often wondered if we’d have been warmer, closer, more expressive if I had grown up Taiwanese. But this is another thing I can’t change.

My medical file still reads “IBS,” but my life has returned to a semblance of normal. I have my symptoms under control and appropriate medications that help when I need it. I hear from Elle every week in Rwanda, and we trade strategies for teaching English, laughing at the commonalities between American college students and African high schoolers. I call my mother every week. We speak in our hybridized Chinglish—about her work and my studies, translating what we can.

I named the new car Sadie after the Beatles song, which Elle introduced me to. It’s a little too small to sleep in, but I’m hoping that won’t be necessary—even after I graduate and venture into the scant marketplace of humanities employment. The evening that I buy the car, I take her out in search of an empty lot. I feed an old CD into the stereo. I have a soft spot for country music; it is, inexplicably, the only American music that my parents listened to when I was a child. My mother took me to karate practice and piano lessons with George Strait filling the car.

Out in a nameless patch of Pennsylvania, I pull to the side of a dirt road and park. I crank the windows down and the volume up. As the opening notes to “The Thunder Rolls” carries through the trees, I hop onto the rear bumper. We are on the brink of autumn and the leaves are tinged with yellow. When the breeze sweeps through the branches, the foliage flickers like a nascent fire. The forests really are beautiful here.