

**CLEO DANG  
WOULD  
RATHER  
BE DEAD**



**ALSO BY MAI NGUYEN**

*Sunshine Nails*



**CLEO DANG  
WOULD  
RATHER  
BE DEAD**

**A NOVEL**

**MAI NGUYEN**

**ATRIA BOOKS**

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*For Gemma and all the babies who didn't get to stay*



I don't believe in getting over it. I believe in  
weathering it badly, in nursing the grudge,  
and tending pathologically to  
the archive of people you have loved.  
RAVEN LEILANI, "Death of the Party"





I didn't expect the casket to be so small. It looked bigger in the catalog, but I suppose everything looks bigger in pictures. The sight of it rips into me like an arrow and I go back in time, wondering why I hadn't gone with something more bright and colorful to distract from how sadly small it is. There had been so many to choose from. Blue ones covered in clouds and angels. Pink ones with butterflies all over. Green ones with elephants painted on the side. But I didn't pick any of those, didn't want to pick any of them really, which is how I ended up with a twenty-eight-inch casket constructed out of solid Canadian oak in a semigloss finish. Simple, classic, not pretending to be something other than what it is.

Even if I wanted to change it now, I can't. It's too late. You're already inside. And people are entering the reception room. They're forming a line. A line for what I'm unsure. I don't know where Ethan has gone off to. He's been dealing with crippling diarrhea all morning, so he must be in the bathroom, probably cursing the anonymous individual who left that questionable stew on our porch last night with only a hastily scrawled note that read, *Please accept my condolences*.

Oh, he accepted your condolences all right!

I stand awkwardly beside the casket, unsure what to do with my arms, my face, my whole body for that matter, until one of the funeral staff comes up to me and asks if I would like to receive the line.

I freeze. This was not on the itinerary. I had not mentally prepared for activities that were not on the itinerary.

"W-what does that entail exactly?"

"Oftentimes guests want to express their sympathies and offer words of comfort directly to the parents. You don't have to do anything

you don't want to. Just tell me what you feel comfortable with and I can make this line go away if that's what you wish."

I feel hot. And irritated. And upset that an immediate decision is required of me. What do I do? Do I say yes, and run us behind schedule? Do I say no, and disappoint everyone I know? Suddenly I feel incredibly drained, like a phone at one percent. The doctor warned me this might happen. That my brain might not be up to snuff after such a seismic loss and that I should not be put in charge of making big decisions, which I thought was an odd thing to say because isn't that what we do when somebody we love dies—make big decisions one after the other, the biggest one of all being whether to keep on living?

"Grief brain" was what the doctor called it as he sent us home with some frightening pamphlets and a shoebox containing a lock of your hair, molds of your hands and feet, and a narrow strip of graph paper indicating your heartbeat. The nurses even gave us the tape that adhered the breathing tube to your face. I think they just wanted to give us as many things as they could in hopes it would distract us from our empty arms.

Ethan is back. His forehead is sweaty and his eyes are bloodshot. I tell him about the line, which looks to have grown to about fifty people, and ask if he's equipped to handle that kind of social pressure. He automatically nods, like a soldier obeying a command, then extends his arms to greet the first person in line. I guess we're doing this.

I've never been more grateful to be married to a textbook extrovert. It had seemed such a curse, having to remember so many friends' names and the stories of how they met and be in constant competition for his attention. It was something I always struggled with, having to accept I wasn't the only one who loved him.

Now I see it's proving quite useful. Ethan gets through the line with speed and proficiency. This comes natural to him. He's always on no matter where we are, no matter who has died, it seems. Ethan does most of the talking, leaving me with the easier task of accepting hugs and nodding my head at the *I'm sorrys* and *I'm here for yous*. I find myself doing a good job, keeping the line moving, not bursting into tears and disrupting the flow. I do my best to not visibly wince at the bright platitudes, all of which fail to downplay the horror of today.

*She's in a better place.  
You can always have another baby.  
At least you got a few days with her.  
At least you can get pregnant again.  
God needed another angel.  
Everything happens for a reason.  
I can't imagine.*

It's this last sentiment where I find myself gritting my teeth the most. I know that, for most of them, this tragedy defies their understanding of death—that people are supposed to die in the order of age. But surely it's possible to wonder what it might be like, to put yourself in my shoes and consider a world where sometimes, sadly, children die first.

I try really hard not to make a scene or say anything confrontational but when Claire, an underwriter from work, becomes the eleventh person to say the words *I can't imagine*, I explode.

“Well let me help you out with that, *Claaaire*. Just picture your son, Zach, dying right before your very eyes and the one thing you ever loved more than life itself was just suddenly gone and the only thing capable of bringing you a single ounce of joy was your doctor agreeing to prescribe you the strongest sedative in the world so you could sleep a sleep so deep it would feel like you were stone-cold dead.”

“Cleo!” Ethan snaps.

Claire looks appalled, as if I've just slapped her across the face. She blinks a couple times before pulling me in for a hug and saying, “There, there.”

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After we hug the last person in line, I spot Paloma. I haven't seen her since the hospital. She's wearing a black dress that hints at her postpartum pooch. Her hair is pulled into a tight, greasy bun. Her skin is dry and sallow as puffy lids cast shadows under her eyes. Sleepless nights are painted all over her face. The picture of new mom exhaustion.

What I wouldn't give to look like her—delirious and deathly tired—if it meant my baby were still alive.

Here's what you should know about me and Paloma: We are practically a mirror of each other. We live on the same street. We graduated with honors in business. We like our pizza thin-crust, well-done. We drink French 75s exclusively. We drive Kia Souls, surf blue, black roof. Our wedding dresses were signature Theia Couture and, you guessed it, we got married the same year, with the same officiant, at the same venue.

This is all to say that not a single person—not our husbands, friends, or parents—dropped their jaws or batted an eye when we fell pregnant at the same time. It was like a miracle or, at the very least, a message from the divine confirming what we had long suspected: that this inextricable bond between us would never, ever break, even long after we're dead.

Everything had lined up perfectly. Our bellies were growing, the babies were kicking, and our cravings frequently nudged us to Costco for hot dogs and Dairy Queen for Blizzards. And as if we needed more proof of how predestined this all was, we somehow surprised each other with the exact same gift: an orange spotted onesie that said, "YOU BET GIRAFFE I'M CUTE."

Nine months later, when our waters broke only minutes apart, we waddled into our respective Kias—Ethan and I leading, her and Freddie behind. At the hospital, the staff, perhaps seeing how tightly our hands were intertwined, automatically placed us in adjoining rooms. Just as we were meant to walk this earth together, so too would our babies.

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There was no cry when you came out. A gurgle maybe, but now I'm not sure. So much was happening. One minute I was pushing you out, the next you were connected to a confounding tangle of hospital wires. The doctor said it was hypoxic-ischemic encephalopathy, a type of birth asphyxia that occurs when the baby doesn't get enough oxygen during delivery. He said the damage to your brain was too severe. That you had to be on a ventilator. That I did nothing wrong. That this was just terrible luck. That he was very, very sorry. And in between all of these statements, he kept peppering in the word *Mum* to address *me*. It was so disorienting. I wanted to tell him to please stop calling me that

because out of everything that was coming out of his mouth, *Mum* was breaking my heart the most.

They gave us a private room, dimmed the lights, and let us be alone with you. We ignored the tubes and wires and beeping noises and played family. We gave you a bath. Combed your hair. Changed your diaper. Trimmed your nails. Opened up *Goodnight Moon* and said good night to the socks and clocks. Told you we loved you in Vietnamese and Japanese, our mother tongues. I don't know where we found the fortitude to take selfies, but we did—lots of them—and even laughed as we struggled to get the filter to add dog ears to all three of us. We got some good ones of you beside the wooden disc that we had custom carved with your name: Daisy Dang Hayashi.

Babies were crying all around us. I held you as tight as I could, squeezing you into my chest as if willing you to take shelter inside my heart where it was safest. I rocked you from side to side for hours. The only movement came from your little chest as it filled and unfilled with air from the mechanical ventilator. Your beauty was so startling I couldn't look away. The cloud-like arches of your eyebrows. The tiny curves of your nostrils, like doorways to heaven. I lifted an eyelid. Brown, just like mine. I asked your father to hold open the other eyelid so I could pretend, just for a moment, that you were looking at me with those deep pools of wonder, realizing I was the one whose belly you were inside. That I was your mother.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back. The silence was dense, the room cold. I didn't know how to pray, so I whispered something like *Please please please oh God please* in hopes the doctors had it all wrong and you'd miraculously belt out your first cry.

Then I heard it. A cry. My heart raced as I looked down, awaiting my granted wish.

But it wasn't you. The cry was coming from the next room.

Paloma's baby was born.

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I take a seat as Paloma runs around like a veteran stage director on speed. I don't know how she found the time to plan a funeral with a

newborn stuck to her breasts all day. When I told her the horrible news, she insisted on taking care of everything. At the time I was so grateful. Now I find myself boiling with a totally irrational, but totally real, resentment towards her because while she may not have slept a wink or bathed in days, she at least had her baby.

“Can I help out with anything?” I ask her.

“Oh gosh, you do not need to do a single thing. The service will begin soon. You just sit tight, sweetie.”

I look around the room and am loath to admit how breathtaking it all looks. There are white daisies everywhere, their yellow disks like pops of hope and optimism. The most beautiful display is saved for the casket, where a combination of dainty daisies and wispy greenery delicately cascade across the top.

“Did you see the dumplings?” Paloma asks.

I didn’t even notice the plush white dumplings flanking each side of the casket. They were party favors from our baby shower. Because that’s what we called you, after all: our little dumpling. I thank Paloma for that poignant touch and tell her everything is perfect, even though everything is terrible.

My mother is sitting next to me. She is like a creature possessed, sobbing so uncontrollably that she somehow falls to the floor from a seated position. Multiple people rush to her aid. They check her pulse, offer her some water and a Werther’s Original to get her blood pressure back up, and lift her slowly back to her chair. I ask her if she’s okay and that’s when she gawks at me. “How are you not falling apart?”

I don’t know what to say. I can’t explain why I haven’t shed a single tear since arriving at the funeral home. At home I can soak pillows into oblivion but here, surrounded by all these people, I can’t even muster a drop. I envy my mother for that, the physical release of a good cry.

The service is going to start in five minutes. I go to the bathroom to change my pad, which is on the brink of leaking. Nobody prepares you for all the postpartum bleeding—the sheer volume, the volcanic gushing, the lime-size clots that slide out without warning. I wipe the jiggly mass of blood off the pad and flush it down the toilet.

I remove the cabbage leaves from my breasts. They are warm and

wilted, wet with milk from all the hugging. The lactation consultant at the hospital said the sulfur compounds would stop my supply but clearly it's not working because I'm as engorged as a horse in heat. I pop a Tylenol and check my reflection in the full-length mirror, my breasts practically up to my neck. Stupid, sad, pathetic excuse of a body. If it can create a little human from scratch, you'd think it could also detect that the little human has died and immediately signal to the breasts: *Halt! Halt the productions! There is no baby to feed!*

A tall, lanky woman washes her hands beside me. I don't recognize her, but she sees something in me that provokes her to start a conversation.

"It's just so tragic, isn't it? To lose a full-term baby like that? I feel terrible for that woman."

I stare at her, incredulous, wondering whose plus-one she even is. All I can muster is, "Yeah, I can't imagine."

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Everybody quiets down as the officiant enters the room and takes out his notebook.

"We open our hearts to you, O God. Let us give thanks to God, who welcomes the stranger . . ."

What the hell is this? I turn around and hiss at Paloma.

She leans in. "He was the only one I could find last minute!"

I grumble and sit there as the clergyman asks for Jesus Christ to welcome my baby into his arms and to bless her abundantly. As a non-Christian, this brings me no comfort whatsoever. For the rest of the service, I worry that my baby has been shepherded into the arms of a bearded, robed man whose credentials I know nothing of. Is he good with babies? Does he have any childcare experience? Does he know about the five S's for soothing a crying baby? It isn't until the clergyman announces that my baby will be in the company of the Virgin Mary and all the other angels and saints in heaven that I begin to feel a little bit better.

After the prayers are done, a handful of people take turns saying a few words. The order and identity of speakers is unbeknownst to me.

Paloma gave no hint as to who would be speaking and what they'd be saying. I wish I had pestered a bit more, because had I known Ethan's uncle was going to sing a "stirring" a capella rendition of *Hamilton's* "It's Quiet Uptown," the saddest song in musical theater history, I would have submerged that microphone in toilet water. And had I known that my cousin's daughter was going to do a reading of Robert Munsch's *Love You Forever*, the saddest memorial to stillborn babies ever written, I would have doused that book in kerosene and ignited it.

But I had no idea. So I sit through the service, gripping Ethan's hand while still producing zero tears. I look over at him. His face is wet, tears pooling at the edge of his jaw and soaking the collar that he carefully ironed that morning.

At most funerals, people share funny anecdotes or charming quirks or beloved memories of the deceased. But when someone dies before they've truly lived, it complicates the time-honored ritual. Yet, somehow, people still find a way to sum up your short little life. They talk sweetly about how loved and wanted you were, how beautiful you were, how wild and glorious and endless their dreams for you were. Hearing these speeches buoyed me even as they dragged me deeper into a dark abyss.

My mother is the last person to speak. By this point, everybody had more or less said variations of the same thing. That no parent should ever have to outlive their child. That it was fortunate she only ever knew love. That this was a tragic reminder of how we should all hold the ones we love close. What more could my mother say?

"There is so much I don't know about life and death," my mother starts in English before switching to Vietnamese for ease, "but one thing I know for sure is . . . is . . ."

Then, to my utter disbelief, she bursts into tears and collapses to the ground once again.

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After the service, people say their solemn farewells. A tall white man with a mustache and a protruding belly greets us. He looks to be in his sixties. His mustache is full and thick, shaped like a slug. He wears a

checkered waistcoat underneath a very loose-fitting jacket. If he had a British accent, he would be a good candidate for Batman's butler. He introduces himself as Kenneth Timmerman, the director of Monarch Funeral Homes, the person we spoke to on the phone to order the casket. His voice triggers memories of that thick catalog and the dissociative flipping of the pages. He tells us he will inform us when the ashes have been returned from the crematorium, which he estimates to be by the end of the week. We don't know what to say in return but *Thanks*.

"I'm very sorry for your loss," he says. "We hope this service has brought you some semblance of comfort. If there is anything you need at all, please don't hesitate to contact me. It would be a pleasure to hear from you again, whenever that may be."

I want to tell him, *With all due respect, sir, I hope I never have a reason to see you again*, but instead I nod and shake his big, calloused hand, noting the time on his watch and filling with dread that it is only noon, a whole day, a whole life, still ahead of me.

## 2



**T**he day after the funeral. Some might say it is the hardest day. Harder than the day of the funeral. Even harder than the day you find out your person is dead. Frankly, I don't even know which day is which. Time has collapsed. There are no today's and tomorrow's and yesterday's. There is just after.

The moment I wake up, I am greeted by an inescapable, unreachable loneliness. It sits on my chest, jagged edges and all, pressing so hard I don't emerge from the bedroom for days. It smells like death in here, bedsheets festering in a variety of comingling bodily fluids. Blood flowing out of my vagina. Urine leaking out of my bladder. Milk gushing from my nipples. Sweat seeping out of my pores. Tears streaming from my eyes. Snot dribbling out my nose. Bile projecting from my mouth. It won't be long before my anus betrays me, too.

I stare at the ceiling as question after question race through my head.

Did that really happen?

Are you really gone?

Where did you go?

Why are you not here?

Why am I still here?

Who keeps ringing the damn doorbell?

Flowers have been appearing at our doorstep all day. Carnations. Dahlias. Ranunculuses. And they just keep coming. There are already a dozen bouquets scattered around the house in various states of decay. The petals of the orchids have fallen off. Fuzzy mold climbs up the stems of the white roses. The leaves of the peace lily are drooping and

wilting to a yellow color, as if it, too, has been weeping for days. It's so hard to keep up. Which ones need water? Which need a trim? Which of them require sunlight? It feels futile keeping anything alive.

"Why are flowers sent to the bereaved?" Ethan asks because he's one of those people who throws random trivia questions at their spouse knowing full well they know nothing.

"I don't know. To terrorize them?"

"They were sent to mask the smell of a decaying body. Prior to the popularity of funeral homes and embalming, the body would simply rest in the house for days. People sent flowers to cover up the stench."

The doorbell rings again. Another flower delivery. Ethan sees my dread and gets the flowers out of my sight.

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I suppose I shouldn't be surprised by the warmth and generosity we're receiving, given the fact we live on Willow Avenue. Nestled in the Toronto neighborhood of the Beaches, the street is lined with detached houses that have well-maintained lawns, freshly painted doors, and a glowing neon heart pressed against the window. It's the kind of street where neighbors will put away your garbage bins for you once the trash has been picked up, where children walk over to each others' houses and ask to play with the dog, where misplaced Amazon packages get immediately returned to their rightful owner.

When Ethan and I decided to have children, we knew we only wanted to do it if we could live on Willow Avenue. The daycares and schools all had stellar reviews. The crime rate was nonexistent. The nearby boardwalk was stroller-friendly. But if I were being honest, the real reason I wanted to live on that street was because Paloma and Freddie lived there.

When the house across from them miraculously came up on the market, we put in an offer. We were so desperate we sent the owner a basket of our favorite artisanal jams and scones and included a letter that explained who we were (a married couple in their midthirties), what we did for a living (Ethan an anesthesiologist, I an actuary). We detailed all the hopes and dreams we had of raising our yet-to-exist

children in this house. Ethan was going to camp with the kids in the backyard and teach them the difference between Ursa Major and Ursa Minor. I was going to show them how to grow heirloom tomatoes and purple carrots and white bell peppers while blowing their minds with fun facts like how cucumbers are actually fruit. At the bottom of the letter, we attached a silly photo of us eating peanut butter corn dogs at the Ex, in case there was any concern that our very serious jobs connoted a lack of ability to let loose and have fun.

Out of nine offers, the sellers picked us. I like to believe it was because of the wholesome picture we painted in our letter, but given the state of the real estate market, it was most likely due to our high-income jobs and contingent-free, much-over-asking offer.

The day we got the keys, we celebrated with Paloma and Freddie in our new home. All our furniture was still at the old place, so we sat on camping chairs around the fireplace. We ordered pizza that we ate off the floor. We drank champagne, then tequila, then capped off the night with an Amaro apiece.

After they left, I puked everything up and flushed down my esophagus with another Amaro. Ethan and I spread our musty sleeping bags on the living room floor, holding each other tight to generate warmth. That night, after many months of trying, on the century-old, hickory hardwood floors we paid way too much for, you were conceived.

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There is not much to do after a death takes place. No need to cook as the fridge is stocked with more food than we could ever eat. No need to rake the leaves or mow the lawn as neighbors kindly take it upon themselves. No need to clean as the in-laws generously gift us with a housekeeper for the month. Ethan's mother hands me a Jizo statue, a tiny bald figurine that the Japanese use to honor lost babies, and tells me she hopes it will speed my healing.

I thank everyone for their generosity. I don't burst their bubble by telling them these gestures keep me bedridden. Because without any clothes to launder, weeds to pull, or eggs to scramble, I have no reason to get up ever again.

My parents are deeply upset by this. They see my bed rotting as a failure of constitution. An indication I'm not trying hard enough to work through the grief in a quick and nondisruptive manner. Proof I'm letting the darkness win.

Ethan is on their side, I know it. He's already gone back to work after exhausting all five of his unpaid bereavement days. Said he preferred to work than sit around at home all day. "But you don't even sit around!" I pointed out, which was true. He had suddenly taken to running at the crack of dawn and close of day and, bewilderingly, in the middle of the night. All this running should be setting off alarm bells, but it's only garnered him praise. Good for him! That's the spirit! If you ask me, running from the sadness seems to be a curse much worse than laying it all bare.

Still, nobody worries about Ethan the way they worry about me. I imagine they all secretly meet behind my back to discuss my despondence and agree upon a plan of action. That can be the only explanation for why, one by one, my parents and friends and awkwardly the housekeeper all desperately try to coax me out of bed.

"C'mon, you have to eat something."

"Seriously, you need to shower."

"Let's go for a little walk around the block, shall we?"

My response is always the same: "I would rather be dead."

Do you know what my mother said? The woman who fell to her knees twice at the funeral?

"Oh, don't be so dramatic!"

---

Paloma is the first person I see when I wake up. I don't know how long I've been asleep. It could be hours. It could be days. She's picking up clothes and crumpled tissues off the floor. She's giving the nightstands a wipe. She's peeling back the curtains to let in the burning sunlight. She's opening the windows to let out the pungency. And, absurdly, she's removing the bedsheets while I'm still encased in them.

"What the hell are you doing?" I cry.

"You need to get up."

With one mighty yank, she pulls the duvet off me, exposing my pathetic, pantless state, thighs crusty from blood and urine.

“Oh dear god!” Paloma plugs her nose, wafting the air in front of her. “I’m drawing you a bath.”

I catch myself in a mirror and see a sad, frizzy, pinched gremlin. Paloma, of course, looks absolutely stunning. Her hair is shiny and voluminous. There’s color in her cheeks and a sheen to her skin, as if she’s just come from a hot yoga class. She’s stylish, too, accessorized in gold jewelry and nary a drawstring or milk stain in sight.

“When did you last eat?” she asks.

I shrug. All the medications I’d been taking—a cocktail of Benadryls, NyQuils, Tylenols, and melatonin—had made it difficult to go to the bathroom. My stomach is hard to the touch. My flatulence is unremitting.

Paloma exhales. I can tell she’s frustrated at my lack of desire to improve my state of being. She goes inside the bathroom and a scream erupts from her.

“Good god, Cleo! There’s blood everywhere!” Paloma shouts.

I go in to check. There’s blood in the toilet, blood dotted all over the white tile, blood dripping down the sides of the cabinet. The garbage is overflowing with soaked pads. The towels are all stained. A brown film coats the porcelain white sink. Toothpaste is splattered all over the mirror and faucet. I really did try to keep it clean, but basic tasks have become Sisyphean.

“Didn’t they get you a housekeeper?” Paloma asks.

“I told her to stay out.”

The expression on Paloma’s face goes from pure disgust to sheer determination. She rolls up her sleeves and says, “Where’s the Clorox?”

After the bathroom has been cleaned and the tub has been filled, she strips me of my clothing, assists me in, and—can you believe it?—she just sits there on the toilet staring at me like I’m a fly in her tea. I’m not accustomed to leering eyes while I bathe, but I sense from her furrowed brows that she wants me to take the bar of soap that’s on the shelf and rub it all over my body. And so I do, despite my extreme discomfort at being gawked at.

“It’s okay to cry, you know? What you’re going through . . . it’s a lot.”

I nod, suddenly feeling pressure to cry on the spot, to show Paloma how bad I’m hurting, but I can’t do it. I can’t unleash the cries that keep me awake at night, cries so manic with misery and yearning they sound like the howls of an animal struck by a bullet, so instead I offer her a little frown.

Paloma, to my complete horror, gets on her knees and scrubs my back with a loofah. She starts bawling. “I—I just can’t believe it,” she says. “How did this happen?”

I freeze, unsure if she meant the question to be rhetorical. I hope so because I don’t know how to put words to something so inconceivable, something so horrific it escapes narrativization. I know when people ask this question they do it out of curiosity, maybe to put order back into the world. *Surely there is a simple explanation. Surely this could have been prevented. Surely bad things don’t just happen.* I think a better question to ask might be, *Why does anything shitty happen ever?*

I change the subject and announce that our mortgage will soon be up for renewal and all the emotion in Paloma’s face disappears.

“You can’t keep pretending like nothing’s happened,” she snaps.

I blink and resume what I was saying. “Ethan says we don’t have to wait until the maturity date. We can lock in a lower rate at least six months in advance without any penalty. Isn’t that such a relief?”

Paloma starts ugly crying again. She yanks some toilet paper off the handle and gives me a few squares, but I don’t need them, so she uses it to blow her nose. “I wish . . . I wish things were different,” she wails. “Your baby . . . our babies . . . they were supposed to grow up together. Do you know you’re the reason I wanted to be a mom? If it weren’t for you, I would never have even signed up for this.”

I pray she will stop talking, *please*. A sudden urge to drown myself envelops me. I hold my head underwater until my lungs feel like fire and then quickly pop back up. I place my hands over the loose fat on my belly and glide my finger along my linea nigra. Not long ago, I was lush with twice the life. Now I’m carved out, hollow. What is a mother without her child? What is the sun without the moon, the sky without stars, the ocean without water?

I met Paloma on the first day of grade six. The teacher sat us next to each other, presumably because we were both Asian and would naturally get along. We hated that assumption, but the teacher was right. We did get along. We recognized ourselves in each other and formed an unbreakable bond. We shared our school supplies and helped each other with homework and stood up to bullies who said we looked alike when we really did not at all—she was Filipino, I was Vietnamese. It was tough being a preteen, what with all the pimples and racism. So we came up with a secret code to get us through the school year. We had these mini flashlights on our key chains that we'd flick three times in quick succession to let the other know *I love you*. Just that tiny act alone was enough to keep us going. Without Paloma, I don't think I would've made it out of high school alive.

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At the two-hour mark of Paloma's impromptu visit, I begin to drop hints for her to leave.

"It's getting pretty late," I start.

"It's eleven in the morning."

"Oh, looks pretty dark out."

"There's not a single cloud in the sky."

I can't tell if she's being obtuse on purpose. She has always tested the boundaries of our friendship. Today, I fear she's willing to stretch it to the point of rupture.

She insists I eat something. A cube of cheese. A slice of apple. A partially melted lozenge uncovered from her pocket. Anything. "Please, for me," she begs. "What if I make you a sandwich?"

As she spreads a layer of fermented chili mayo on the bread—all the way to the crust because she knows that's how I like it—I can't help but feel a hot rage burn inside me. Why is she being so perfectly lovely when it's clear how ungrateful I am? Would it kill her to be a little bit terrible, just to assuage my guilt? I desperately want her to bring up her newborn so that I can lambaste her for rubbing her good fortune in my

face. But she doesn't say a single word about her baby. She's too kind and pure to do that. She knows it would be like dangling a garden hose in front of a burning person.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little bit curious. What does her baby look like? What did she name it? Did the baby inherit her cute Filipino nose? And what about the birth? How long was the labor? Did she get the epidural? And oh god please tell me she didn't tear her perineum like she feared?

But I can't ask her any of it. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

"You know I love you, right?" she says. "I hate seeing you like this. I wish I could take away some of the pain you're feeling. You're my best friend. I want you to be happy. I—" She pauses to tend to the tears streaming down her cheeks.

Suddenly there's a drop in my chest, a tightness in my throat. My nostrils flare, and pressure builds behind my eyes. I beg her to please stop crying, to stop saying such nice things, because if I cry now I fear I'll never be able to stop. I know she's only trying to repair the gulf between us, but can't she see the gulf is now oceanic?

"Go ahead and cry," Paloma says. "It's not a sign of weakness, it's the mightiest display of courage there is."

This is perhaps one of the few areas in which Paloma and I differ. For as long as I've known her, she has always been someone oriented towards positivity, someone whose ambitions revolved around some form of self-optimization. She's always talking about the powers of meditation, the buoyancy you feel after a good therapy session, the life-changing magic of journaling. She believes there's a non-pharmaceutical fix for all of life's maladies. I bet she's dying to shake me and scream in my face:

*Look on the bright side!*

*At least you're alive!*

*Sorrow is a choice!*

"You know," she starts, "I'm worried you're letting the sadness take over. I know it's tempting, but you can't let it win. Don't throw away your life because of this. There are so many reasons to live. Daisy wouldn't want you to be sad."

I look up, stabbing her with my stare. “She wouldn’t want to be dead, either.”

Paloma sighs and drops her head. I bet she’s calculating the perfect thing to say next because she believes the only thing standing in the way of my healing is a good old-fashioned aphorism. Instead, she pulls out a business card belonging to somebody named Bonnie Spoon and tells me I should give her a call.

“She runs a grief support group for people experiencing out-of-order deaths. I think it will be good for you to attend, even if it’s just one session.”

I analyze the card. Bonnie Spoon’s official title is Grief Counselor Since 2005 and she has a trademarked slogan: “Become a mourning person.”™

Paloma’s phone rings. It’s Freddie. He doesn’t know what to do. The baby is crying nonstop. He has tried everything. Feeding, burping, diaper, five different pacifiers, peekaboo, swaddle after swaddle, bouncy bouncy bouncy, but nothing is working so can she please come home right now? I hear her baby screeching through the phone. Unbeknownst to Paloma, her breasts begin to leak through her shirt. I watch the two wet dots grow larger and larger.

Paloma turns to me, unaware of the state of her chest. “I’m so sorry, sweetie. I have to go.”

I hide my smile.

“Please, *please*, eat that sandwich. I’m going to call Ethan later and if he tells me the sandwich is still there, I will rush back here and kill you.”

“Whoa whoa, don’t tempt me with a good time,” I say, raising both palms in the air and chuckling. Paloma doesn’t laugh back.

I walk her to the door and wave goodbye. It isn’t until I turn the lock that I realize I, too, am leaking.