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A Letter to Every Daughter

Dear *Nai Nai*,

Three generations of daughters, and what changed? In the time from Chiayi to the port of Los Angeles a whole lifetime was lived and then lost, you died and were reborn on a dingy ship with only a name that would have to change before you docked. How many McDonalds and how many churches were in America, you wondered, and the answer was something endless, so you went to McDonalds and then to church, and if you ever looked back, the only thing you would see was a foreign city, foreign sea. You married a man who was nothing but a reminder of your past, so the only thing you could do was look down on him.

"*Zuo hao le?*" he would ask in Mandarin.

"No," you would say, "English."

In the youth of this second life, you stood like a lighthouse does, a lone obelisk stuck in the flow of time. The man you married drifted across your waters without a sound and eventually banked himself on your shore, sudden and still.

The two of you could only do so much, and what else was there besides raking leaves in the heat of midday for a couple cents an hour, cleaning cafeteria tables and pocketing the coins carelessly left behind on trays and benches, hunched like someone who could not know better? You did many other things, but none of them were enough.

Your daughter was born silently, a little ghost. You and your husband ended up with three kids, two sons and one daughter, but there was always too much of something.

"One girl, one boy," you used to say, "that would be the perfect family."

In the earliest morning your daughter would make coffee with careful, timid hands, and then disappear. One day you left and none of them thought you would come back, but eventually you did, as they all always would, returning home with hastily packed luggage and a pair of dry eyes.

"Family only," said your sister-in-law, "neither of you can come."

On the eve of your brother-in-law's death, you didn't go to his last dinner. Instead, you closed a deal on a property and watched an old Taiwanese drama with the English captions turned on until you fell asleep late into the night.

"I remember you," said the waitress at Red Lobster, "you're the dragon lady's daughter," and your daughter had nothing to say to that. What was there to say? Dragon was a fine descriptor, but lady, not so much; all she could remember from her adolescence was you applying red lipstick like frosting, the sound of your dry, heaving sobs late at night, and your shaking hands as you cooked dinner, recipes copied from expensive restaurants visited during Christmas or Easter.

Each child wore a different life like an expensive coat; lawyer, engineer, artist. Inevitably, this was not enough: these coats were not designer, they were a couple thousand dollars too cheap, they were stolen from the lost-and-found.

"You used to be so smart," you said to nobody, late into your second life, "I used to be so proud."

What about the pain of a ruler across the knuckles of your daughter, of her late nights spent alone in the wreckage of her engagement, of an empty house? What about it, indeed? Like a fruit left behind in a school cafeteria, like the rotting and mold of an abandoned dinner for one, there was nowhere to go but forwards, even if forwards meant things were coming to an end.

"She gets like this when she's hungry," is what your husband said, "she doesn't mean it."

Hungry, always hungry, and when will it end? Every holiday, always at your daughter's house, always with a giant feast-- always not enough? These questions go unanswered because there is no answer to the infinite and infinitesimal hunger of a sink drain to water, or Tantalus to a ripe fruit. Some things last forever.

Then your granddaughter is born, chubby and small and loud, and you are reminded of the things you gave away, as well as the things taken from you. In the beginning, you couldn't help but dote like a mother bird, chewing almonds and feeding them to her when she was too young for sturdy teeth, combing her hair and cooking extravagant meals. Some things last forever, but most things do not, and as your granddaughter grew from a baby to a teenager, the only thing that you were left with was, as it always seemed to be, your memory.

"You're a bitch, just like your mother," you said to your granddaughter. Where did things go wrong, when did it become "your mother," and not "my daughter?"

"Don't say you want to sleep for so long," you used to say, "or God will take you seriously and you won't ever wake up."

You and your husband bought a beach house, and that was a light to your family of moths. You reeled in your sons, then your daughter and her family, and for the first time since the stilted and stress-ridden Thanksgivings, everyone was together. Your granddaughter hated it and your daughter needed it, but no matter how they felt, it always ended in the living room; your two sons would leave first, shuffling their kids in front of them like they were little ducks or small mice, and then you were alone, you, you and your daughter, you and your granddaughter.

A couple of years later your daughter adopted a dog for her family, chubby and small and loud like the baby born decades before, and that similarity did not go unnoticed by you, old now, and wanting.

"Zero IQ dog," you used to say, "low IQ dog."

"Dumbbell," your daughter had told her class when she was in first grade, "my nickname is dumbbell."

Years later, the three of them wanted to go to Taiwan. Your daughter didn't speak Chinese, didn't speak Taiwanese, never learned and never tried, but that was okay because your granddaughter did. You were proud of that, but being left with only regret for so long made revisiting the past an impossible task.

"We aren't going," you said, "maybe next year," and something like a second life dying off in a plane or on a ferry, something like the fear of a land you knew once, one without infinite McDonalds,

infinite churches, infinite Christmases and Thanksgivings and Easters, without Los Angeles prowling in the distance like a landmark that will never slink away, something like that caged you in, pressed you into the ostentation of your American home.

Your granddaughter is in high school now, just as sullen and sour as you are but maybe more hopeful, and she wants to go to Taiwan.

She goes to Chiayi and can see the skeleton of what you and your husband must have seen, covered in graffiti and telephone wires and flowers. She can also see you, still jaded, heartbroken, red-lipped and dry-eyed, but somewhere beautiful, somewhere where you don't have to buy fast food and believe in God, somewhere where you don't have to worry about your words or your accent or your clothes.

You will never know this, but when you die, lose your second life, there will be a third one. This late life but not the last, found in your granddaughter who hated you for too many years, in your daughter who never learned Taiwanese but wishes that she had, in your children who always will fly away like the baby birds that cry for their mothers in the spring, and maybe in Chiayi's telephone wires, in America, in the Red Lobster waitress who could only see the dragon, in that beautiful place where everything moves but nothing has to.

Three generations of daughters closed like a circle does, and you tell me what changed?

Your granddaughter,

Scarlet