**A Song of Home**

Autumn, at dusk, just after the sun had sunk below the horizon, we'd sit on the sofa in the living room, in front of the turned-off television, cradling cups of tea in our hands. It was the three of us— grandmother, mother, daughter, knit together like the threads on the blanket, not knowing where one ended and the others began.

We asked each other about our days. We talked over one another. We cut each other off at odd places, said, "No, you go," so many times that we ended up speaking at the same time regardless. Then, we adjusted, verbally and bodily, to fit into together, puzzle that we were, and adapted when it wasn't working.

As we spoke, we ignored the men in the house: my dad getting water in the kitchen, my brother searching for a game chip that fell beneath the couch. They faded into the background of our tradition, when it was still too warm to turn on the heaters but too cold from the persistent storms to go without a blanket over your shoulders and tea in your hands.

Eventually, naturally, we'd quiet, my mother and I, and we'd sit on the edge of the sofa, still entangled. Lola sat a bit further, away from us, in a sweater two sizes too big. My left leg tucked under my right, I leaned against my mother's chest, listening to her heartbeat.

Most nights, Lola would just sit there, close to us and not close at all. As she held red rosary beads in her hands, her lips moved to the holy prayers her mother taught her, *O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary*. And my mother and I would sit in silence, that being our solemn prayer.

But some nights, like tonight, she'd tell stories. When she did, she sat closer, both legs on the sofa, her legs resting against my mother's, her hands clutching mine. But even when she'd be

touching us both, she felt far away. As if I couldn't really reach her where she was, in a world I never knew or could come to know.

When my grandmother would tell stories, she didn't gesture with her hands the way my mother and I did, wild and free. Instead, I listened to her voice crescendo and decrescendo, like a symphonic solo, allowing her volume to drown herself, the words flowing from her mouth to my ears.

"When I was a girl, I had a hole in the middle of my head."

I felt my chest rise and fall, sharply. This story was different. This was about her.

Her eyes met mine. "And when my mother found this hole, she told me what I will you now. Mahal, *you* are a descendant of people who believed that water is life and death, simultaneously. Capable of giving life, as well as destroying it. The Ilocanos, our people, understood this, and likened water to power—something they held in their hands but could never keep still.

"When my mother found the hole in my head, she told me that the ancestors did not believe in vengeance, nor did they believe in curses. They believed that, like water, life flowed and ebbed. That our lives would consist of the rising and falling of each wave. And this was part of the fall."

Lola paused for a moment, her eyes no longer looking into mine but somewhere else, as if she hoped to grasp something far, something unknown.

I looked at my mother. Her brow was creased, even though she said it caused wrinkles. "A hole?" she asked.

My grandmother turned to her, eyes glazed then nodded. "It was small, the size of a quarter. At the end of my part, a straight line through the center of my scalp. No one knew how it

got there or what happened. It just showed up one day, a dead spot." She smiled. "Mama found it while she was braiding my hair. I remember she touched it with her finger. I can still feel it now. Her finger was cold. I remember my head was warm."

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On another night, years after *that* night, my grandmother gathered us together. We were older, the threads of our blanket fraying and separating. Unraveling. But when my grandmother called, we answered.

"Our people lived along the water," Lola told us, "in Santa Catalina," the *a*s a dance on her tongue.

"In the North?" I asked. My mother sighed, and it sounded like disappointment. These days, I was often disappointing her.

She nodded but not as an answer. More like breathing; it was a part of the story. "It was another story Mama used to tell me, long forgotten by the people of Ilocos Sur. But after she found the spot, she said, *Marisol, it came back.* Like fate.

"She told me there was a man, a water spirit, called litao. And a woman, a mortal, Serena. Every day, Serena combed her hair, singing on the sand, by the water. Entranced by her song beneath the surface, the litao fell in love, leaving her flowers and gifts of his admiration along the shore. Once, Serena saw a diamond the size of a coconut, dancing on the waves. As she reached out to touch the stone, a bubble took her to the litao's underwater palace.

"They spent the day together, falling for each other. At the end of the day, the litao gave her an offer: to live forever in this palace underneath the sea. She agreed, but for her to live under the sea, he had to create an elixir, one that unbeknownst to her, came at the price of his immortality."

I gasped. “What happened?”

“Shh,” my mother said, putting her hand on my shoulder. “She’ll tell you.”

My grandmother looked at my mother, gaze sharp, before she continued. “With a silver knife to his skin, he drew his blood, creating the elixir for Serena’s transformation. It was effortless. In bliss, they visited Serena’s mother, who, at first, forbade Serena from seeing the water deity. Only after their return, in witnessing their joy, did she bless their union.

“For a century, they lived in joy and love. Then, the litao told his wife, ‘A hundred years with you is greater than an eternity without you.’ After consoling his wife for only a night, he swam to where the bubble took her that first day and became a rock.

“Distraught at the secret of his mortality, Serena returned to the shore and sorrowfully followed the village’s procession of Virgin Mary, where the townsfolk wondered who this woman was who smelled like fish. They watched as she passed through their streets and their city, ghostlike and anguished, until she reached the edge of the shore. They watched as she submerged herself in the water. As they murmured a prayer for the drowned woman, they saw her at the gates of the litao’s underwater palace, where she lived for eternity, never forgetting him and his love.

“After telling this story, Mama asked my sister to take a silver knife to my hair and cut it short. My hair, once long and beautiful, was jagged like the water’s edge, and my mother said it was because once every century, there is one daughter, from the Ilocano people, with a hole on her head, found when she is thirteen. The hole will only be covered if her hair is cut the way the litao cut skin for his Serena, an eternal reminder of their love cut short. This is the story that my mother told me, and her mother told her, and on and on. So, I tell you this now. For your daughters and theirs and theirs. Until the next Serena is born.”

It was finally quiet, the only thing we heard was air: the wind in our backyard and our breath, rising and falling in symphony.

In the silence, I looked at my grandmother. I looked at her hair, endless sheaths of black, twining and twisting with strands of silver, the cool metal I imagined the knife of her sister and the knife of the litao. I looked at the line of scalp that separated the right from the left of her hair.

Maybe I tricked myself into being able to see her spot because I saw *it*, like a silver halo, scintillating and bright, hovering above her head as she stood to leave my mother and me, still on the couch.

As she left, I turned my gaze to the sky.

Somehow, in the background of Lola's story, it became dark; the stars glittered and shone silver and gold, while we sat there, breathing in the words of my grandmother, swimming through my mind, like sands in an hourglass turned over, time continuing onward.