

An Abbreviated Life: A Memoir

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I am on the other side of the planet from New York, twenty-five meters beneath sea level. The fish are phosphorescent. There is coral shaped like a brain. Other coral reminds me of mushrooms. I am silently passing over the swaying tubes, the pointy structures, my head tilted down so that I can see through my mask as I take in the scene and glide over the surface of the moon, sand dunes and mazes, rigid stony corals and silky ones that look like teardrops. The only sound is of bubbles. I watch as they float up toward the surface, a place I have no desire to return to.

Here, underwater, I am free. Unleashed from history. My mother will never find me. I am untraceable. I equalize the pressure and descend even deeper.

MY MOTHER SAYS, "When I'm dead, you will be all alone because your father doesn't want you. You know that, right?"

I am six years old, an only child.

She is naked in front of the white porcelain sink putting on eye shadow, and I am seated on top of the toilet seat, perched on the lid, watching as she gets ready to go out for the evening.

She says, "Just remember that and treat me nicely."

That same year, I stopped speaking for six months. My mother sent me to a psychiatrist. He put me on Valium and we played checkers. I stopped speaking because Kiki, the woman who had looked after me since I was born, who had endured my mother's behavior, my father's departure, who'd seen to it that I was clothed and fed and attended school, the woman I was attached to the way a child should be to her mother, died on a plane while sitting next to me. It was 1974 and we were returning to New York after a visit with my father, who lived in Bangkok.

I remember we were seated in the middle of the plane, in the middle of a row. The neon-yellow oxygen mask fell from the ceiling. It looked like a Dixie cup dangling from a string. There was an announcement the pilot made asking if there was a doctor on the flight. I was moved to a different part of the plane and seated next to a stranger. There was an awareness that something alarming was going on. The plane made an emergency landing in Greenland so they could remove Kiki's body from the aircraft, and an airline representative from Lufthansa escorted me the rest of the way.

Kiki had suffered a stroke.

Later, when I started speaking again, I began to ask everyone for their phone number. I made people promise, if they were leaving, to tell me when we would see

each other again. My mother decided I shouldn't go back to Thailand. She said if my father loved me, he wouldn't have moved so far away. But then she also said that he loved me more than anyone. I started to stutter. It disappeared when I was seven years old, and from then on, she let me return to see him once a year.

KIKI'S DEATH BECAME a mythological incident. I had little memory of the experience other than before and after. Order, then disorder. I was told about it as though I hadn't been there. An unfortunate occurrence. The time when Kiki died. The time when I stopped speaking. Plot points in the story that amounted to *one more thing*.

THE GRAVITRON is a ride at amusement parks and carnivals. It is an enclosed circular machine with padded panels on the walls. When you step on this ride, you lean back against the panels. The ride begins to rotate and the centrifugal force removes the machine from the ground on a slant, so that you are experiencing the force three times the speed of gravity. The world spins around. You are tilted and you spin and you spin. And when you are through, you step off the ride, but even with your feet on the ground, the world is still spinning. Up is down. You can't find your balance.

I hate you. I love you. You're a moron. I never said that. You're the most important person in the world to me. I wish you were never born. Your father left you because he's a selfish man who doesn't care about you. He's a wonderful father and you're lucky to have him. You should be grateful. You should be happy. You're a liar—I never did that. You're jealous of me. You should be thanking your lucky stars to have me as your mother. What are you talking about—why are you making up these spiteful lies about me—I never did that. I never said that. What's wrong with you? You hate me. You always have and I feel very sorry for you.

I AM IN HIDING. An emotional fugitive. I am trying to write a letter to my mother from here in Bali. A disconnection notice. A termination of service. I have revised this letter a dozen times. Staying one step ahead is essential. I am careful of the words. Frightened of the consequence. I am launching the separation grenade from ten thousand miles away so that when it detonates, I will be at a distance.

Can I write this letter? Can I send it?

IMAGINE SOMEONE LIES to you and about you. Imagine this person is your mother, whose job it is to provide safety, security, consistency, and love. "You're my sunshine," she says. "The love of my life."

But her love comes with conditions. You need to be able to give her what she needs first. You have to meet her demands. For attention, appreciation, company, and admiration. Anything else is unacceptable. But no matter how much you give, there will be a need for more. These are the terms. You were five. You were ten. You were twenty. You were forty. And at forty-five, something changed.