

Pounds / Kimmy Chang

I was 135. Then 125. Then 99. My big sister graduated and left for college. Ma said it from the sink—hands wet, eyes down: You'll join her in two years.

Ma dressed me in my sister's old clothes. Sleeves that swallowed my wrists. Cuffs worn soft where her fingers had worried them. I made Ma pack my sister's usual lunch for me. At school, I dismantled it. Bread, cheese, ham, bread. The ham came off in a damp sheet. The cheese left a pale sweat on my fingertips. Her homemade cupcake—whipped peaks, chocolate curls—something I couldn't separate without ruining.

A thick binder waited on my desk, rings yawning. The papers inside had my sister's cursive in the margins. I pressed my pencil until the lead snapped. I reached for the eraser again.

At dinner, I practiced with my fork. Peas to one side. Potatoes to the other. Dill pinched between my nails. The clean space shone back at me.

Inside the binder, a museum postcard of a painting—glossy, thin border, neat corners. A yellow seam that might be sunset. Curved water. A sky scraped raw. Below it, hands—only hands—thrown up by the waves. No faces. No bodies. I stared until the red fell from the sky. I rubbed my palms together, but they stayed cold.

Ma said she loved her daughters equally, eyes fixed on the drain. Then she ladled my sister's go-to soup into my bowl—the same orange smell that clung to the house. She set it down and said, You love this. Then went back to the sink. Drying her hands, before wetting them again.

I visited my big sister's college. I sat in the empty lecture halls. The campus looked scrubbed clean: brick, clipped grass, a bell tower keeping time.

In the dining hall, a girl from her dorm sat across from me. She held her plastic knife like a pencil and sawed at dry chicken until it frayed.

She smiled. You're so small. So cute.

Then, as if it belonged with the compliment: What's your last name again?

When I told her, her eyebrows rose. Oh. Like—are you her sister?
My hands lay on the table; I tugged my sleeves down. I shrugged and poked at the applesauce.

Back home, my head filled with counts: the next meal, the ounce, the tipping point, the imagined hand on my shoulder. I stepped on the scale at exactly seven, naked. Between seven and the next seven, the numbers kept tallying themselves.

SAT prep. Soft paper, solid weight. The faucet dripped, steady as a metronome. I could hear Ma laughing on the phone with my big sister. I gripped the pencil tighter, squeezed the eraser hard.

Week of application deadlines. Classmates clustered outside the college counselor's office with coffee, token chocolates, and stacks of paper.

Across town, in an exam room, a nurse slid a compartmentalized tray toward me. Snack time again. The heart-rate monitor chattered, thin and robotic. A milk carton sweated; a bead ran down and pooled in the crease.

My hands hovered, tendons up, then pulled back.

The door clicked shut—the same hard snap as binder rings.
A week of being watched. Edit. Eat. Submit. Gain.

My sister came back for the holidays. Hands in her pockets. Brow knotted over her laptop. Ma's voice threaded through her keys. My sister pulled up the course catalog with me: first-year requirements, gen-eds, the classes everyone takes. I hated how her sweater kept brushing up against me.

The acceptance came on Ma's birthday.
Relief, at first. A mala hotpot celebration. A call from my big sister saying she knew I'd get in. Staring at my bowl, I thought of the postcard painting again: hands. The yellow seam. The red smear where sky becomes ocean. Birds cutting circles above the water.

I'd slipped the postcard into a cheap frame—thin wood, corners holding.

I trace the rim of my bowl. My hand rises in the refrigerator steel, lifting a taro chunk gone limp from being overboiled, and for a moment I think I might be able to enjoy it. No thought to its numbers.

Then everything went black—my right cheek finding the table.

"You want the worst part?" Ma said to my big sister. "I didn't even feel like celebrating. It was nothing new."

I kept my eyes closed. The light above me smeared the room.
"She can't do anything the normal way," Ma said, and I heard the faint drag of her rings against the bedrail. Metal on metal, like binder teeth finding their holes.

Beep, beep, beep. Somewhere nearby, a timer went off for the next snack.

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