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Dear Penny,

It rained the day you were born. Outside the maternity ward, the sky was the color of liquid ash, and there was a sign that read: BIRTHDAYS ARE OUR SPECIALTY. I focused on it as I labored, as the nurses and doctor clamored around me. *You're nearly there*, a nurse exclaimed.

I trembled and bore down, wanting it to be over. A scream tore from my mouth. I pushed. The doctor pulled. And there you were. There. You. Were. Held aloft in a blistering cone of light.

Terrible silence ensued, one agonizing second stretching into eternity. As if you were deciding how your entrance into the world should be. Finally, you wailed, so high-pitched and piercing even the doctor commented on it. *This one has a lot to say already*, she said. Secretly, I was pleased by the fury in your voice. This boded well for you, I believed. You would not be easily silenced.

The doctor cut the cord, and I reached for you. For a moment, I forgot you were not mine to keep. She placed you in my arms. I marveled at your tiny hands, your sable hair, your bow-shaped mouth, your nose

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that resembled a bull's when your nostrils flared. My body had a purpose, and it was you. In the span of a single breath, I was unmade and made again.

What followed was a blur of stitches, fresh bed linens, and binge eating. Hana was there. Had been there since the beginning. A nurse had taken one look at Hana and me, at our nineteen-year-old faces, at how terrifyingly young we were, and clucked her tongue. *Babies having babies*, she'd said. It was easy to translate her meaning – dumb girls, irresponsible girls, *those girls*. She saw Hana treating the room service menu like her own personal vending machine, saw her pilfering kidney-shaped dishes, saw her lining her pockets with pads. But she didn't see Hana helping me shower after I'd grown dizzy trying to stand. Didn't see me weeping in the bathroom, mumbling *I'm sorry* over and over as Hana soaped circles on my body, cleaned under my arms, and gently between my legs. And she didn't see the way Hana smiled in response like it was no big deal.

Mrs Pearson, my adoption agent, came around the time when my hair was still drying. She produced some paperwork from her bag. It had been prefilled. All I had to do was sign. Bells chimed, echoing down the hospital corridor. A song called 'Breath of Life' that played every time a baby was born. Right as I reached for the pen, Hana squeezed my hand. *Are you sure?* she asked.

All I could do was nod. Breathe. Turning the pages, I scribbled my name. I ignored the tiny noises you

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made in your sleep. Ignored how the whole room smelled like antiseptic. Paid all my attention to the neon pink arrow marking where my final signature should go. Above it was a warning in bold letters. **'Upon surrender, the original birth certificate will be sealed, and a new birth certificate will be issued'** – one with your adoptive parents' names.

I signed, erasing myself from your life. It was done.

Then I held you one last time. Unwrapping your swaddle, I kissed each of your ten fingers, your two cheeks, your one little nose. Finally, I pressed my palm to your chest. You were warm, and I felt you brand me. *I'm sorry*, I whispered, apologizing for what I wanted but could not keep. I held you close a minute longer. Then I let you go. I let Mrs Pearson carry you away.

I couldn't watch. Instead, I bowed my head and clung to the memory of the first time I saw you on an ultrasound – potbellied, hand waving around, umbilical cord floating – a little diver. I saw myself then as one of those calves that circle in shallow water and keep beaching themselves, failing over and over again. I didn't want you to swim in vain. I wanted you to find open water, to dive deep – your life to be a single, straight, perfect line.

The door closed, and I remember the quiet snick, the sound of you slipping away from me. When you were gone, the hospital room felt so empty; I thought I might die from loneliness. Someone else would watch you sleep. Someone else would touch your

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chest and make sure you were breathing. I cried with such wild abandon Hana thought I'd torn my stitches.

That's it. That's all. All these moments live in me still. You live in me still. Half of my breaths, a quarter of each heartbeat, are yours. I guess that is what happens when you have children – they take a piece of you.

I didn't think about the future that day. I didn't think about the Calvins, your new mother and father, how white they were. Who would teach you to be a yellow body in America? I didn't think about what I might tell you if you came to me and asked 'Why, who are you, who am I?' Of course, I dreamed I might be a part of your life, but in the same way someone wishes upon a star or buys lottery tickets. I never believed it actually might happen. And I never believed we would be back in the same hospital – you sixteen years old, me thirty-five – or that *you'd* be in the bed this time, and I would be apologizing anew.

I'm sorry, Penny. I messed up. I hurt you.

I can't promise I will never hurt you again. The truth is, there isn't much I can promise you. *Still, still.* What little I have is yours. No matter what happens. If you forgive me or not. I want you to know I will always be around. Like any parent, I will be here, waiting for my child to come home.

Mika

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Seven months earlier . . .

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I

Fired.

Mika blinked. ‘I’m sorry, what?’ she asked Greg, in his shoebox of an office. In fact, it wasn’t really an office. It was a cubicle carved out of the large copy room at Kennedy, Smith & McDougal Law. But Greg wielded the tiny space like a corner office on the thirtieth floor. He’d even decorated it – a bonsai tree in the corner of his desk, a cheap samurai sword tacked crookedly to the wall. Greg was white and a self-described Japanophile. On more than one occasion, he’d tried to converse with Mika in Japanese, and she’d demurred – she was fluent, she just wasn’t fluent for him. So yeah, that guy.

Greg leaned back in his chair. ‘This shouldn’t come as a surprise,’ he said, steepling his fingers together and placing them under his hairless chin. ‘I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors.’

Mika nodded vacantly. A senior partner, a rainmaker, had recently departed for another firm. Profit shares were down. She opened her hands. ‘But I make twenty dollars an hour.’ A pittance compared to the other salaried employees. Did the powers that be think laying off a copy assistant would make a dent in their financial woes?

Greg waved a hand. ‘I get it,’ he said. ‘But you know

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how these things go, last in the pecking order . . . ? He trailed off.

‘Please.’ She hated begging, especially to Greg. ‘I need this job.’ She liked it at Kennedy, Smith & McDougal. The work was easy. The pay was good. Enough for her to make rent and utilities every month with a little left over to buy groceries, mostly of the soft cheese variety. Plus, the building was located near the museum. She went there on her lunch break, letting her food digest while gazing at Monets and strolling through the antiquities section, her soul at rest. ‘What about Stephanie?’ She’d been hired after Mika.

‘Stephanie has more paralegal experience than you. The decision came down to who was a better asset for the company. Look, I’m sure you’ll find something else. Unfortunately, you won’t qualify for severance since you’ve been here for less than a year, but I’ll give you a great recommendation.’ Greg started to stand. End of discussion.

‘I’ll take a pay cut,’ Mika blurted. Her gaze landed on the floor, near where her pride was. She couldn’t handle it. Tears threatened to spill. Thirty-five and fired from another job. Again.

Greg shook his head. ‘I’m sorry, Mika. It’s no use. Today is your last day.’

The faint scent of stale popcorn. The emotionally healing candles on clearance. What was it about this particular store that sucked Mika in? She stood in the home section, examining a pillow embroidered with the saying

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MONEY CAN BUY A HOUSE, BUT NOT A HOME. On the phone, Hana laughed. ‘So, let me get this straight. He asked you out at the same time he was firing you?’

‘Directly after,’ Mika corrected. Greg had escorted her to her desk, watched while she packed up her stuff, and *then* asked if she’d like to see a movie later or maybe attend the Cherry Blossom Festival at the university next weekend. The angry humiliation ran deep.

Hana snorted another laugh.

Mika’s mouth quirked into a smile. ‘Please don’t. I’m in a very vulnerable place right now.’

‘You’re in a Target,’ Hana pointed out.

Mika tilted her head, contemplating the pillow. It was designed by a couple who had become filthy rich making new houses look old. It was all about the shiplap. The pillow could be hers for \$29.99. ‘I never thought I’d be laid off *and* sexually harassed all in the same day. It’s a new first.’ Mika bypassed the pillow and went on to the wine section. Her pocketbook was lighter, but a five-dollar bottle of wine was a necessity.

Hana made a sympathetic noise. ‘It could be worse. Remember the time you were fired from that donut shop for keeping a box of maple bars in the freezer and eating them between filling orders?’

‘That was in college.’ Mika tucked the phone between her ear and shoulder. Finished choosing wine, she was in the food aisle now, filling her basket with Cheez-Its. Class all the way.

‘Or that nanny job for showing the kids *The Shining*?’

‘They said they wanted a ghost story,’ she defended.

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‘How about when you wrote X-rated *Predator* fan fiction, then left it open on your work computer?’

Confusion rippled across her face. ‘That never happened.’ Hana laughed again. Mika rubbed her forehead, feeling as if she’d fallen from an unlucky tree, hitting every branch on the way down, then landing in a pit of snakes and bears. ‘What am I going to do?’

‘I don’t know. But you’re in good company. I found out this morning Pearl Jam chose Garrett for their summer tour.’ Hana was an ASL interpreter for bands, and Garrett, having recently crossed over from the Christian alt-rock circuit, had edged into Hana’s territory. ‘I’m probably going to have to do a bunch of Earth, Wind & Fire gigs now. Fucking Garrett. Come home. We’ll eat and drink our feelings together.’

‘Will do.’ Mika hung up and dropped her phone in her purse. A minute passed. Mika wandered. Her phone rang. Might be Hana again. Or her mother – Hiromi had already left a message that morning. *I just stopped by the church and met the new congregant. His name is Hayato, and he works for Nike. I gave him your number.*

Her phone rang again. Sometimes Hiromi called two, three times in a row, inducing panic. Last time Mika answered breathless, reaching for her keys, ready to head to the hospital. *What’s the matter?*

Hiromi replied, *Nothing. Why do you sound so winded? I wanted to tell you Fred Meyer is having a sale on chicken . . .*

Mika listened, temper rising. *You can’t call so many times. I thought something was wrong,* she said.

To which Hiromi scoffed, *I’m sorry I’m not more dead for*

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you. The ringing continued. Mika fished the phone from her purse and peered at the screen. A blocked number.

Curious, she swiped to answer. ‘Hello?’ she said, brows knitting together. *Shit*, she thought too late. It could be the new congregant, Hayato. Quickly, she cycled through possible excuses. *My phone is dying*. I’m *dying*.

‘Oh, wow! You picked up! I wasn’t sure if you would!’ a hyper-positive young voice said. The connection became muffled, as though a hand had been placed over the phone’s speaker. ‘She picked up. What do I do?’ the voice said to someone in the background.

‘Hello?’ Mika spoke louder.

‘Sorry, my friend Sophie is here. You know, for moral support? Is this Mika Suzuki?’

‘It is.’ Mika set the basket down at her feet. ‘Who is this?’

‘This is Penny. Penelope Calvin. I think I’m your daughter.’

Mika managed to keep a hold on the phone even as her limbs went completely slack. Even as the blood raced in her veins and her vision blurred, then tunneled. Even as she hurtled back in time, back to the hospital, to Penny as a newborn. The day returned in heart-stopping flashes. Holding Penny in the crook of her arm. Kissing her brow. Slicking her hair away to place a thin blue-and-pink-striped cap on her head. All so unbearable and beautiful.

‘Are you still there?’ Penny asked. ‘Is this the right Mika Suzuki? I paid for one of those online search finder

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thingies. I used my dad's credit card for a free trial. He'll kill me if he finds out! But no worries, I'll cancel before they charge.'

Silence then. Penny was waiting for Mika to say something. She closed her eyes, opened them. 'That's very clever,' she murmured, trembling. Sit. She needed to sit down. She stumbled back into a plastic outdoor chair, gripping the armrest to regain her balance, her knuckles turning white. How had she wound up in the garden section?

'I know, right? My dad always says: "If only you'd use your powers for good!"' Penny lowered her voice an octave, impersonating her father. Mika almost smiled. *Almost.* 'So, is this the right Mika Suzuki? There aren't very many in Oregon. The only other two candidates were older. I mean, I guess they could be my bio mom. There was, like, that lady who gave birth to twins at the age of fifty? But I was pretty sure it was you . . . Are you there?'

Mika was sweating, the phone slippery against her ear. She breathed in and out. In and out. 'I'm here.'

'And are you Mika Suzuki? Did you give a baby up for adoption sixteen years ago?'

A throb settled in her temples. 'I am. I did,' Mika said, her throat dry. Secretly, she'd dreamed of this moment. The day she might hear her daughter's voice. *Talk to her.* Sometimes the fantasy bordered on delusional. Over the years, she thought she'd seen Penny a couple of times. Which was ridiculous. She knew Penny lived in the Midwest. But then she'd spot a dark-headed little girl with

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blunt bangs, and Mika's body would swell with certainty. She'd feel an invisible tug. *That's my daughter*, she'd think, only to deflate when the girl turned around, and the nose was wrong, or the eyes were green, not a deep brown. Not Penny. *An imposter*.

Mika released the lawn chair from her death grip, her legs wobbly as she stood. She began to wander the aisles. She needed to move. It helped to ground her, to keep her in the present. Helped to exorcise the storm of emotions brewing.

'This is awesome!' Penny squealed.

'I can't believe you found me,' Mika said, still just so stunned. She passed a display of purple-bottled magnesium tablets.

'It wasn't hard. Your name is super unique and cool. I wish I had a Japanese name,' sighed Penny wistfully.

'Oh.' Mika frowned, not knowing what to say. She'd chosen Penny's name. Had made a big deal about it, insisted it be part of the legal agreement. *You can have my daughter, but you cannot have her name*. While Mrs Pearson had tried hard to make the adoption feel less transactional, certain parts couldn't be helped. There were lawyers. Negotiations. Ironclad paperwork that leaned slightly in the adoptive family's favor. But the name . . . the name was Mika's. At first, she'd considered Holly – a plant that blooms in winter. It was traditional in Japan to select a moniker based on your hopes for the child. Mika's name in kanji translated to 'beautiful fragrance.' It told Mika much about her value to her mother. As an accessory. As something meant to attract. She didn't

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want that for her child. So ultimately, Mika settled on Penelope, meaning ‘weaver,’ from Homer’s *Odyssey*. It was a strong, resilient, and aspirational name; it fit the life Mika wanted for her daughter. The person she thought she might be. The family she might belong to.

She had also hoped a more American-sounding name would ease Penny’s way in life. Mika had years of mispronunciations and misspellings under her belt. She’d been called Mickey more times than she could count. She’d wanted Penny to blend in. But it didn’t seem the right time to say all this. Instead, she said, ‘I was sorry to hear about your mom.’ When Mrs Pearson had informed Mika five years ago that Caroline Calvin had cancer and was dying, she’d begged to be put in touch with Penny, swore she could feel her daughter’s grief pressing against her skin like a hot iron.

She needs me, Mika had said.

I’ll try, Mrs Pearson had replied. Then Thomas Calvin denied the request. *I’m sorry, Mika*, Mrs Pearson said, *Caroline doesn’t have much time. Cancer. Stage four. Very sudden. He wants it to be the three of them these last few days.*

‘Yeah.’ Penny’s voice dimmed. ‘That was a bad time. We just came up on the fifth anniversary. I kind of can’t believe it’s been so long.’

Quiet fell on the line again. Mika kept walking. Destination unknown. Her entire body was in an uproar. She passed the aisle of pregnancy tests. Nearly seventeen years ago, she’d picked through Hana’s car to find enough money to buy a test at the dollar store, then peed on the stick in the bathroom of a grocery store nearby.

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She'd barely wiped when the two pink lines appeared, when her world fell apart.

Mika realized she'd gone silent for too long. 'She wrote me letters, your mom, and sent me packages with pictures of you, drawings you made. She had nice handwriting,' she blurted. Mika didn't know much about the couple who adopted Penny. She'd chosen them from dozens of scrapbook family profiles. She used to stare at the photographs of Penny's future parents. At Thomas, a copyright attorney, pictured in college on his rowing team. She would focus on his hands wrapped around the oars, at the scowly dent between his green eyes. *He is strong*, Mika remembered thinking. He'd stand up for Penny. Then she'd peer at Caroline, also in college wearing a sweatshirt with Greek letters, her smile wide. It was easy to imagine her smiling the same way at Penny, saying wonderful things like *I'm proud of you. I'm so happy you're mine. I'd run blind through the dark for you.*

'She did have nice handwriting. It was perfect,' Penny said warmly. It didn't surprise Mika. Caroline seemed perfect in all aspects of her life. 'Mine is so sloppy. I always wondered if that was something genetic?'

Mika didn't think it was. But she longed for a connection to Penny, any way to bind them together. 'My handwriting is terrible too.'

'It is?' A note of hope in Penny's voice.

Mika slowed. Calmed a little. 'I like to think of it as my own font. It'd be called "too much coffee and donuts."''

Penny laughed. It was a pleasant sound, full-bodied and earnest. *Her daughter*. 'Or "clean up your mess."''

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Finally, Mika paused in the detergent aisle. No one was in it. She leaned back, inhaled the scent of clean laundry. She'd thought in time the memory of Penny, what happened before, might fade, but it only grew sharper against the blurred, less important memories of her recent past. Graduating college, her first paying job, even some of the pregnancy – the ever-ticking clock had worn smooth all those rough edges. But Penny, the baby, *Mika's baby*, had stayed, a hand cast in concrete. She wished she knew then what she knew now. That every day she would wake and think of Penny. Of how old she was. What she might be wearing. Whom she might be smiling at. That her love would be teeth and nails, unwilling to let go.

'Are you okay?' A mother with two kids rounded the corner.

Mika jolted upright. 'Fine. I'm fine.' One of the children had chocolate all over his face. He licked a slow circle around his lips. The mom waited until Mika got moving before moving on herself.

'Is someone else with you?' Penny asked.

'No. I'm shopping. I'm in a Target,' Mika said before she could think better of it. She wanted to punch herself in the face. *Hard*. What would Penny think? A grown woman in a Target on a Wednesday afternoon. Would she wonder why Mika wasn't at work?

Penny swore. 'I'm sorry. I should've asked if now was a good time to talk. I should let you go.'

Mika didn't like the sound of that. The threat of this tiny tenuous string being cut again. Could Penny feel it

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too? This flow of bliss-like energy between them. ‘No. It’s okay.’

‘I should go anyway. My dad will be home soon.’

No. Keep talking. I’d listen to you read War and Peace. She stifled the sudden urge to cry. ‘Of course. It was nice speaking with you.’ Mika stepped out of the store. The sky was gray – end of winter in Portland. A couple of crows picked at trash in the parking lot. She blinked and, on the inside of her eyelids, saw another set of crows. From a long time ago, fighting over a discarded watermelon container. She pushed the memory away. ‘If you ever need anything. If I can ever do anything . . .’

‘Actually.’ Penny exhaled audibly. ‘I’d like to keep talking. I’d like to call you again. Maybe even Skype? It would be nice to see each other face-to-face.’

‘Oh,’ Mika said, too stunned to breathe, too flustered with disbelief. Penny wanted her. Penny wanted *her*. And Mika was pierced with such an acute longing she feared she might crumble. So she spoke on impulse, on raging desire, and answered, ‘Yes, of course. I’d like that.’

Mika drove home in a fugue state. She didn't remember placing her key in the ignition, starting the car, leaving the lot, the streetlights, blinkers, turns, or parking along the curb. Once there, she sat in the driver's seat, engine off. Rain spattered the windshield. 'Penny,' she whispered into the quiet. Saying her daughter's name felt like a prayer, like a secret, like a bell ringing, calling her home to dinner. 'Penny, Penny, Penny,' she said over and over again. Her mouth lifted at the corners into a full smile as she stepped from her car.

Weeds and various thorny plants peeked through a chipped and peeling white fence. The walkway was narrowly visible. The house was a cottage. One of its shutters hung on its side, a single nail holding it in place. *Eyesore* was a generous term. Mika unlocked the door and pushed . . . only . . . something blocked it. After much grunting, she tumbled through, shoving boxes out of the way.

Irritation chipped away at joy. 'Wow. Did you wake up this morning and say: "Today's the day I'm going to take this hoarding shit to the next level and barricade myself until they find my skeleton twenty years from now"?' Mika huffed out to Hana.

Hana kept her eyes trained on the television, a half-eaten cake in her lap. 'So weird. That's exactly what I said

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to myself. You're late.' Hana shoveled a bite of cake into her mouth. 'I started without you. Also, I've been brainstorming. I think we should get a dog and teach it that "shit" means "Garrett." Like, instead of saying "take a shit," we say "take a Garrett." Then I'll film it and send it to him.' She glanced up. 'Where's the wine?'

'No dog. No film. No sending to Garrett. And I forgot the wine.' Mika skirted around unopened boxes and dead plants, then pushed a stack of magazines off a chair to sit in it. For a while, Hana had kept her compulsive collecting habits under control. She'd bought the house with her girlfriend, Nicole. They'd been happy, filling it with garage sale and flea market finds. They'd even adopted a puppy. Then Nicole cheated. Hana got the house. Nicole got their golden retriever. Mika, fresh off a breakup from Leif and short on cash, had offered to move in with Hana. Together, they'd drowned their broken hearts in wine and expensive takeout and agreed their friendship was much better than that with either of their previous lovers. They understood each other more. Mika didn't mind that Hana treated online shopping like her patriotic duty. Hana didn't mind Mika's lousy track record of employment. Nobody was perfect. Embracing each other's faults was the bedrock upon which their friendship was built.

So, it didn't faze Mika seeing Hana on the couch, bitching about a coworker and watching . . . '*Monster?* Are you seriously watching *Monster?* A movie about serial-killing lesbians?' Mika found the remote between cans of Red Bull and Mountain Dew. She clicked off the television.

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‘Hey,’ Hana said.

‘There’s a lot to unpack here.’ Mika used her hand to circle the room, encompassing the whole hoarding, cake-eating, *Monster*-watching situation in general. ‘And I don’t have the time. I need to tell you something.’

Hana sat up and put the cake down. ‘I’m intrigued.’ There was a tiny bit of frosting on her cropped roller derby T-shirt.

‘Penny called.’

‘Ha!’ Hana barked out a laugh. Then at Mika’s face, she said, ‘Holy shit. You’re serious.’

Mika could only nod. Her stomach flipped, thinking about it. *She has new-baby smell*, Hana had purred in the hospital as she held newborn Penny, rubbing her cheek against hers.

Hana sat back. ‘Whoa. Heavy.’

‘You’re telling me.’ Mika opened her mouth, but her phone beeped – an incoming text. *Penny again?*

‘Is it her?’ Hana leaned forward, reading Mika’s mind.

Mika glanced down. ‘No, it’s Charlie.’ She checked the message. ‘She’s thinking of buying Tuan’ – Charlie’s husband – ‘a life-size Lego portrait.’

Hana rolled her eyes. ‘Ignore her. How’d Penny find you?’ Hana reached for a wooden box on the coffee table and flipped it open. Inside was a tiny plastic baggie full of weed and some papers. She set to rolling a joint between her long fingers.

Mika shrugged. ‘It’s the internet, Penny explained, you can find anyone these days.’ But then again . . . how had Penny found her? Mika had chosen a closed adoption: her

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identity was kept private, and she received annual updates in exchange. Any more would have been too painful. She'd opted for scraps knowing she'd gorge herself otherwise. She guessed it didn't matter whether Thomas Calvin told Penny Mika's name or if Penny had stumbled upon the information snooping through her parents' things. What mattered was the here and now. That Penny had called Mika. That Penny wanted to know Mika.

'True.' Hana licked the paper and sealed the joint. Out of anyone, Mika's best friend would know how easy it was to find people online. A few years ago, she had tracked down her former elementary school teacher – the one who had called the color of her skin 'half-and-half,' like coffee creamer. Hana was part Black, a quarter Vietnamese, and a quarter white – Hungarian and Irish. She trolled the woman into quitting social media.

Hana lit the joint, took a drag, and offered it to Mika. 'What's she like?'

Mika pinched the joint between her fingers and eyed the ceiling. There was a crack running through it that trailed down, splitting the wall. She was pretty sure they had foundation troubles. 'I don't know. The conversation was short. She's young, hopeful, positive.' *A force of nature*. 'She used her dad's credit card to sign up for a free trial to find people.' Mika aimed a lopsided smile at Hana and put the joint to her lips. 'She was going to cancel it before he found out.' Mika passed the joint back to Hana.

'Reminds me of us.' Hana smiled and took a drag. 'So,' she said, exhaling, 'what did she want?'

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Mika chewed her bottom lip. Her bedroom door was open. The bed was a rumpled mess, the comforter pushed down to the end. No point in making it if she was going to slip back between the sheets a few hours later. On the floor was her favorite T-shirt featuring a Gudetama – a cartoon by the makers of Hello Kitty. What looked like a yellow blob was a lazy egg. ‘She wants to get to know me.’ Her wheels started to turn. She took greater stock of her surroundings, her life, herself, and instantly regretted it.

What could she offer Penny? What had she accomplished? Her love life was anemic. A handful of boyfriends, one serious relationship with Leif that ended in a garbage fire. And her work life just as thin. A series of unfulfilling jobs. All of them placeholders. She had thought of herself as a stone skipping over murky water. Time passing without consequence, without thinking, staying the same, getting farther and farther from the shore. But a pebble never reaches the other side. Eventually, it sinks. *When did I sink?* Mika’s stomach bottomed out. ‘I said we could talk again, but now . . . I don’t know.’ She felt as inadequate as that day in the hospital.

‘Elaborate.’ Hana stamped out the joint.

Mika tore her gaze from the house and focused on her lap. What were the stakes of connecting with Penny? ‘She might hate me. I might hate her,’ Mika thought out loud. Although Mika couldn’t see herself ever hating Penny. Penny could murder someone, and Mika would bring her a shovel to bury the body. She’d always give Penny the benefit of the doubt. *Believe her.* ‘I’m sure she

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has questions. Lots of questions. She seems . . . persistent. She might want to know about her biological father. She wishes she had a Japanese name.’

Hana inhaled. She scooted down the couch, closer to Mika. ‘No doubt she’s curious. We all want to know where we come from. But she’s not entitled to that information until you’re ready.’

Under penalty of law, Mika had signed a form attesting she did not know anything about her baby’s biological father, such as his age or location, or that he had a birthmark shaped like the state of Maine on his chest. ‘What if she’s angry with me?’ she asked in a slight voice.

Hana inhaled. ‘Can I give you some unsolicited advice?’
‘Never stopped you before.’

‘When Nicole cheated, Charlie sat me down and said: “There is strength in leaving and strength in staying.”’ Hana flicked some ash from her knee. ‘I’m pretty sure she got it from one of those self-help gurus.’

Mika frowned. ‘I’m not following.’

‘What I mean is there would have been strength in you keeping Penny, but there was also strength in relinquishing her. And if Penny is as smart as she seems to be, she won’t care what you’ve done; she’ll care about who you are.’

‘And who am I?’ Mika asked it like a dare. She thought about her unimpressive life résumé. Unemployment enthusiast. Weed smoker. Biological mom.

Hana ticked off a list on her fingers. ‘First thing, you’re loyal. Second thing, you’re compassionate. Third thing, you have a beautiful heart. Fourth thing, you are an

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amazing artist who knows all sorts of things about art, especially really uninteresting things like which caves have paintings of cavemen donges. Fifth thing –’

‘That’s good.’ Mika held up her hands, cutting Hana off. ‘I’m not exactly emotionally prepared for this.’ Hana knew how messy this could get. Each year around Penny’s birthday, a package arrived. Mika would read the letter from Caroline or Thomas, stare at the photographs of Penny with her happy family, rub her thumbs over Penny’s crayon drawings, then spread it all around her in a suffocating hug. Mika would stay in bed all day. Hana would stay too. She would crawl in behind Mika, wordlessly wrap her arms around her in a mourning cocoon. Together they cried. Mika for Penny. And Hana for Mika.

‘Are we ever prepared? That’s the whole point of emotions. The least you expect them, the more intense they are. That’s the beauty of feeling.’

‘That’s dumb.’ Mika lay her head back against the chair. The whole situation was overwhelming in every way. But Hana was there. Had always been there. ‘Love your face,’ she said to her best friend. The three words had been their mantra since meeting as freshmen at the same alternative high school, the kind of place where students are put when folks don’t expect too much of them. Mika had taken one look at Hana and sensed a kindred spirit. Both of them, wayward branches growing from their family trees.

‘Love your face too.’

Mika felt around the cushion for her phone. Right before hanging up, Penny had given Mika her number.

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Now, she messaged her. Excited to video chat. What time works for you?

There, done. She placed her phone away from herself. Drummed her fingers against her thighs. *It will be okay.* She flashed again to the hospital. To seeing Penny for the first time cradled in the doctor's hands. Yes, it would be okay. How could it not? Penny and Mika had been a love story from the beginning.

A week later, Mika attended church. With her parents. Squished into the corner of the pew, Mika snuck a glance at her mother. Hiromi Suzuki stared straight ahead. Her black button eyes focused on the pulpit. Her face was small with delicate features and a mouth that frowned more than it smiled. At home, she had a closet full of velour tracksuits. Today, she wore eggplant. It complemented her short dark hair permed into half-domes to curl away from her head, like the queen of England's. Next to Hiromi, Mika's father, Shige, snoozed.

The sermon continued, something about friendship, and Mika reached for her phone, popping open her Instagram profile. It featured exactly five photos. Her toes in the sand from a trip she took to Puerto Rico with Leif, right before they broke up. Another of her and Leif on the same trip dressed up for the evening. Hana's backyard after she'd first moved in – they'd strung fairy lights all around and drunk margaritas with top-shelf tequila. A bridesmaid photo from Charlie's wedding. And a photograph of a beet and goat cheese salad. That was all. Penny had liked all of them. They'd scheduled a call for tomorrow, their first Skype meeting. She clicked out of her profile and onto the magnifying glass – the explore tab.

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Her screen populated with posts, the algorithm producing content for her based on previous clicks and searches. There were a lot of women with symmetrical faces who matched the perfect beige houses they lived in. An ad to celebrate a new federal holiday by purchasing commemorative toilet paper. A celebrity whom Hiromi loved because she didn't have a nanny. How impressive.

In the search line, she entered the word *adoption*. The screen repopulated. Mostly with adoptive moms describing their journey. *He's finally home. Mateo (we've been calling him Matty!) is six weeks old and has never been held. To reacclimate him, I've been wearing him in the Ring Sling (not a paid sponsorship) as much as possible. My back is tired, and I'm tired in general – Mateo has been waking up every two hours. Any other mamas out there feeling a little overwhelmed today?* People had commented with: *You can do this! You got it! Try this smoothie recipe for an extra energy boost.* Mika frowned at the twist in her gut. Nobody said *It's okay to stop. It's okay to admit you can't. This is beyond you.* There was so much emphasis placed on women doing everything on their own. To keep going even if they were tired, poor, hanging on by a thread. She peered at the picture again of the woman holding her newly adopted son. Smiling like a hero. Is this what Thomas and Caroline thought, that they'd rescued Penny?

A hand snaked behind Mika's arm and pinched the thin-skinned underside. 'Pay attention,' said her mother in the same tone she used when sending Mika to her room in elementary school.

'Ow,' Mika hissed, rubbing her arm and glaring at her mother. *And this was better here than visiting them at home.*

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At the thought of her childhood house, Mika's anxiety stretched and prepared for a sprint. The house itself wasn't particularly intimidating. A 1970s bungalow with all its original charm – puke green shag carpet, yellow globe lights, and paneled den. On the outside, it was similar to all the other homes on the block, the architecture unremarkable – definitely not worthy of any art history textbook. But on the inside, there were all the classical Japanese touches: soy sauce packets and plastic silverware shoved into drawers, slippers neatly aligned by the front door, a drying line in the backyard, a sprinkle of pistachio shells her dad liked to eat while watching NHK or Japanese baseball, the Hanshin Tigers, his favorite team.

Despite the clutter, the incense smell, and the dated décor, the drive for perfection persisted within its walls. It was in the dusty kimono Mika refused to wear after she quit odori. In the empty frames where Mika's Ivy League degree and wedding photos should have gone. In the pots and pans Mika had never learned to cook with.

By the fifth month of Mika's pregnancy, she had started to show. She couldn't hide it any longer, didn't want to. She and Hiromi were cleaning the lime-green-tiled kitchen when Mika blurted out the truth. *I'm pregnant*. Mika's father was watching television in the next room. All the doors in the hallway were neatly closed – you only saw what Hiromi wanted you to see. Hiromi stopped wiping down the counters. For one single moment, she stayed still. Unable to comprehend this new reality. *Did you hear me? I said I'm pregnant*. Against the inside of Mika's belly, Penny moved – a gentle flutter

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like wings. The quickening, the ob-gyn at the free health clinic on campus had told her.

Hiromi blinked once. Straightened. *Who's the father?* she asked coolly.

The house smelled of sukiyaki – boiled beef and vegetable in mirin, soy sauce, and sugar. They always ate the traditional hotpot meal when the weather turned cold. That night, snow was forecast. *It's a girl*, Mika said.

Hiromi wrung out the sponge in the sink. *Girls are difficult*. 'You are difficult,' Hiromi meant. Someone laughed on the television.

I'm giving her up for adoption. The statement was spontaneous. Mika hadn't decided anything. She was still processing the pregnancy, a pendulum swinging between disbelief and stark fear. What had she been expecting her mother to say? Too late, Mika realized she wanted Hiromi to tell her to keep the baby. To promise to help raise the bundle of cells. But Mika should have known. Hiromi's support always came at a high price, and Mika had never quite figured out how to afford it. Still, Mika couldn't help coming to her mother, offering her broken need on a platter, hoping for more, for better, for her mother to change – to heal Mika. The word *adoption* was mentioned as a kind of dare.

Hiromi turned on the faucet to flush food scraps down the drain. Hot water scalded her hands red, and steam dampened the hollow of her throat. *That's probably best. What do you know about raising a baby?* Another way in which she'd failed her mother. Hiromi had tried to teach Mika how to be a good housewife, how to cook, how to

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host and be a housekeeper. All in preparation for the day she'd have her own partner and child. But Hiromi had never taught Mika about birth control or sex or love or what to do if you found yourself suddenly pregnant. Because that was an undesirable outcome. And you did not talk of that which you did not want to happen.

In the kitchen, Mika was stunned for a moment. Disappointment suffocated her like a clot of overcooked rice in her throat. *That's it? That's all you want to say to me?*

Hiromi's eyes snapped to Mika's, then roved over Mika's stomach. Her expression the same as when Mika came home with secondhand clothing from a thrift store in high school. That had been the style then – ripped jeans, flannels, crop tees. *What will the ladies at church think?* Hiromi had said, focusing on Mika's bare midriff.

What else do you want me to say? I'll tell your father about it. 'It.' That's how Hiromi referred to Penny. She turned away from Mika, her fingers curled in. *Do you want leftovers to take back to the dorm?*

Mika cupped her belly. *No. No, thanks.*

She didn't see her parents until after Penny was born, after she'd flunked part of her freshman and sophomore years. *It* became an unspeakable thing, contained behind one of the closed doors in Hiromi's home.

Now, Mika settled back in the pew. Outside the stained-glass windows, a rainbow and BLM flag flapped in the wind – Hiromi and Shige tolerated the church's progressive views and attended services every Sunday. Mika wasn't even sure they believed in a Christian God. Statues of the Buddha and little altars, butsudan, covered

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their home. They came to drink ocha, to mingle with the ninety-nine percent Japanese congregation, and to find Mika dates.

‘We’re looking for someone to maintain our social media accounts,’ Pastor Barbara announced from the pulpit. ‘Keep them updated with all the goings-on.’ White but fluent in Japanese, Pastor Barbara was a stout woman with a gentle voice. She liked to hold both your hands while she spoke to you. Behind her was a specially commissioned Asian Jesus – the woodworker used only fallen logs found on non-tribal land and plastic pieces harvested from the floating garbage patch in the Pacific Ocean.

Really Mika’s mother should be the one applauded for sustainable living. The woman had been using the same sour cream container as Tupperware for the last twenty years. She also reused wrapping paper like it was her job. Five birthdays in a row, Mika’s present was wrapped in the same My Little Pony paper. Hiromi’s parents had been World War II survivors in Japan, had grown up in a time when fruit was a memory, their lives shaped by war and famine. They’d taught Hiromi to save every scrap of paper, to stir-fry field grasses, to take soil blackened from bombs and make it rich again.

‘We’re also looking for volunteers for the annual bazaar for food prep,’ Pastor Barbara went on. ‘But what we really need are taiko players or dancers for the exhibit portion. If you’ve got a special talent, now is the time to let it shine!’ Once a year, in the spring, the church held a fundraiser. Tents went up in the parking lot. Chicken was marinated in tubs of teriyaki sauce. Soba noodles

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