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The Original Daughter

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PROLOGUE: THE END

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Arin was somewhere in Germany when my mother got sick again. She'd been sick before, but never like this, and I knew it was only a matter of time before she would change her mind and start asking for Arin. The prospect filled me with dread. My sister and I hadn't spoken for years, not since she first got famous, not even when my mother was diagnosed with aggressive breast cancer a couple of years ago. Back then, too, I'd been afraid that if things got really bad, my mother would want Arin there. But we'd had her breasts lopped off, one after the other, and it appeared to have stopped the cancer's spread. The subject of Arin never came up.

Our relationship hadn't been good for a long time, and in recent years my mother's irreverence had dampened into a more respectable muteness. But after she recovered, my mother immediately became irritating again. She'd lost so much weight from the chemotherapy, it didn't seem to matter that she had no breasts. She sheared off her fluffy black hair, wore nothing but singlets and shorts, and gleefully told everyone passing by the photocopy shop that between this and menopause, she was finally relieved of the trappings of being a woman. The word she used, one I caught her selecting carefully from the Oxford English Dictionary by our sole electric night-light, was "liberation."

Liberation? When had she ever not acted exactly as she pleased? I felt that she was baiting me; I refused to respond. Then, a few days ago, I woke to find my mother still in bed beside me, one arm thrown over her face.

"Ma," I said. "It's eight."

She was usually out of the house by six, either at the wet market or doing exercises at Bedok Reservoir Park with her tai chi group before opening the photocopy shop. To her, sleeping in was something only rich people did, a sign of weak character.

My mother peeked at me from under her arm and didn't say a word. Rare for her to forgo a chance to tease. I put my face to her wrist, her neck, sniffing. When I clambered over her body and saw the milky splatter of vomit on the floor, beside the massive potted sansevieria my mother insisted on keeping by our bedside as an air filter, she hid her face again.

"Get dressed," I said after a long moment. "I'm calling Dana."

Dana was her oncologist, one my mother had scammed into friendship. When they first met, she told Dana she'd been involved with a church deacon years ago who abandoned her when she became pregnant with me, and sweet Dana, in spite of everything one might assume about doctors and intelligence, truly believed God had called her to be the attending physician the day I brought my mother in. All lies. My mother wasn't religious, and my father was a taxi driver. But when I confronted her, she waved me off with a laugh and stayed in touch with Dana, forwarding her prayers and Bible verses on WhatsApp.

It worked. Dana loved my mother. She dropped by the photocopy shop frequently to bring her food, or just to chat, and even ordered me to bypass the hospital's call center and ring her directly if we needed anything. When the neighborhood aunties found out, they teased us relentlessly—of course Su Yang would charm the famously stuffy hospital staff, of course she would be the person to pull the wool over their eyes. Whoever heard of a doctor giving out her personal number, it was absurd, it wasn't done. But in all their ribbing there was a sense of glee, as if we had won something. Not to me. I found my mother's relationship with Dana deceitful; I swore we would never call on this favor.

Yet here we were.

It turned out to be leptomenigeal disease. Neither my mother nor I had heard the term before, but Dana was crying as she delivered the news. She knew we couldn't afford surgery; we were still paying off debt from the first one. Because of her preexisting health conditions, we didn't qualify for the experimental drug trials. Because my mother belonged to the generation too poor, and therefore too proud, for insurance, there were no secret reserves

of cash that could be accessible to us via a sleight of hand in the medical paperwork. It was a terminal diagnosis. Terminal: that I understood. I wanted to know how long she had.

"Anywhere from three to six months with treatment."

"And without?"

"Four to six weeks."

I was stunned. Beside me, my mother let out a little sigh. "No treatment. I don't want to do that again."

The diagnosis invigorated her. She stood and stretched, then hopped around Dana's office, peering at confidential folders, fingering the stethoscope and green swimming goggles hanging by the door; making Dana laugh, teasing her for crying. But her voice was too bright, her eyes tired. As soon as we got home, she showered and changed into a fresh set of clothes. We stared each other down in our bedroom.

"Where are you going?"

"To work."

"They can manage without you, you should rest."

She didn't even stop. "Rest isn't going to cure me. You want me to lie at home like a useless person for the next six weeks?"

I could see her rib cage through the singlet arm holes. She'd gotten so skinny, I hadn't even realized. She watched my face twist and said quickly: "If you want to help, Genevieve, call your sister."

"She's not my sister."

"I want to see you and Arin together one last time." I kept quiet, and she pushed further. "I never ask you for anything." It was another one of her untruths; she was full of requests, both vocal and implied. "Promise me."

"No."

"Then you might as well kill me yourself."

She left.

Later that night, when she crawled into bed beside me, I didn't turn. I pretended I was asleep. But she pasted her skinny body to my back and began speaking. She repeated that she had never asked anything of me, not even when I left her back in 2010 and moved

to Christchurch, New Zealand, maintaining radio silence for six months, refusing to speak to her, refusing to explain how she had offended me to warrant that kind of severance, breaking her heart, shaving years off her life from worry, forcing her to communicate only through Arin, and then when I finally returned, how I exiled Arin, refusing to bend in the last four years, despite being brought up to understand that family was the key, the heart, the cornerstone of life; that, too, broke her heart, how could I be so callous, so cruel, perhaps these rash decisions could be made as a child, but wasn't I already twenty-seven, basically thirty, wasn't it time to grow up, yes, perhaps our childhood wasn't ideal, but whose is; anyway, wasn't it kind of silly to hold on to old grudges, and more importantly, she was dying, couldn't I put aside my own selfish desires for six short weeks, might not even be six, might be four, four weeks minus one day we had just wasted on yet another petty argument, come on, how hard could it be, didn't I love her, didn't I care?

By the end of that tirade, the sun was rising. I was crying too. Wasn't she the one who insisted we would only hold Arin back, wasn't she the one who said it was better to let her go? She was reverting to her old habits of lying in order to get what she wanted, increasingly convinced by the passionate tenor of her own voice till she truly believed the stories she'd constructed. And me—kidnapped by her emotions, unable to protest. A child again.

Even in the dark she could feel me nodding; her agitation subsided.

"You'll call her?"

"Yes."

But I wasn't a good daughter and no longer claimed to be one. There was considerable freedom to be had in knowing and accepting that I was a disappointment to my mother. The minute she let me go I put her plea out of my mind. I'd spent most of my adult life trying to divorce myself from Arin and wasn't about to stop now.

The next day, as if conjured by my mother's desires, Arin appeared on the cover of *Life*! I ignored the headlines and scrutinized the picture. Once upon a time we were so inseparable, people would often get us confused. If the neighborhood aunties had to

differentiate us, they'd say, Su's girls: the big one, the small one, even though I was only a year older than Arin. We looked so alike; people wouldn't believe Arin was adopted. Now, no. The picture showed Arin on a red carpet somewhere, looking straight into the camera. Her hair was coiled and resting at the top of her head like a snake, her eyebrows arched and sly, her gaze simultaneously placid and amused.

I recognized that expression, we'd practiced it together; I felt my own lips curling in response and made myself stop. I recognized, also, the dress she was wearing, a backless silvery contraption from a small Singaporean designer who had gone viral on Instagram after Arin was spotted using one of her pencil cases as a clutch. Everyone knew the story—Arin had reached out to the designer, postvirality, offering her talent a platform, connecting her to couture seamstresses in Jakarta, Indonesia. Like a modern fairy tale, the designer went from hand-sewing small leather goods to creating modern gowns, pantsuits, hairpieces; now, whenever she announced a new collection, women all over the country set alarms on their phones before bed despite their lives occasioning no gowns. But perhaps that was the true marker of her success: one doesn't buy an investment piece without also buying into a grander flight of fancy. *Dreams really do come true*, the designer had been profiled saying, *all you need is that one person who believes in you* . . .

Arin rarely gave interviews and didn't participate in the media circus around the designer, happy simply to remain the catalyst for her success, but I noticed that from then on she only wore pieces from independent Asian designers. When she turned down an offer to be dressed by Valentino, a small wave of think pieces sprouted online, opining how this signaled a turning of the tides, how these young, beautiful actresses from all corners of Southeast Asia no longer felt the need to follow the traditional Hollywood playbook—they had their own ways of doing things, how exciting, how new. The articles flooded the internet for a month before public interest moved on, but the glow of admiration endured.

The narrative was almost flawless. I was impressed. Arin had never been creative; someone in her team must have orchestrated

it. But in her cool, amused gaze, I could feel the undercurrent of delight, smirking at the layers of performance she'd successfully pulled off. I folded the newspapers away.

Another day passed, then another. My mother pressed me about Arin, and I told her I'd been trying, with no luck. Arin was too famous now, it was impossible to reach her; if she didn't believe me she was free to try contacting her herself. My mother got distracted, she returned to work, she asked about Arin again. Each time she asked it was easier to fob her off with an excuse. Because I'd already given my promise, she held on to the childlike trust that it would all work out, that I'd find a way to make it happen. I don't know where her faith in me came from. It made me sick with guilt.

My mother's headaches returned, worse than before. She became even more unmoored, missing days at the photocopy shop and weeping when she realized. At her behest, I went down over the weekend and spoke to the lady boss.

It was located in a string of shops crammed in the void deck under a block of HDB flats five minutes from home, sandwiched between a value dollar store perpetually advertising a closing sale, and a barber offering ten-dollar haircuts. The void deck aunties all recognized me. As I approached, the photocopy auntie nodded and called out in Mandarin: "Su's girl. So big now."

I grimaced. "Ma asked me to apologize in person. She's not well—"

"Yes, that's obvious." The photocopy shop was full of the baby sansevieria plants my mother propagated and dispensed throughout the neighborhood, and the photocopy auntie touched a stubby, swordlike leaf as she spoke. "Tell her to take as much time as she needs."

"Ah—Auntie, can I ask for a favor? Can you let my mother come in as and when she's able? I'll return you the money, you wouldn't have to pay her."

I'd been working up to that offer all week. I wasn't sure how much exactly my mother was paid at the shop or whether I could actually afford to give the money back. I'd only just started a job marking compositions for a private tuition center, it was the kind

of job that paid by the hour, a student job. The photocopy auntie waved me off. "It's been going on for a while, don't worry about it."

"A while?"

She looked surprised that I didn't know. "She misses days here and there, it's fine."

We weren't speaking loudly, but the entire cluster of void deck aunties were listening in. The value dollar auntie rang up a customer, who lingered until it became apparent the conversation wouldn't continue while she was there, then said: "Your sister hasn't been in touch?"

"No, she's on tour."

Disapproval rippled across their faces. None of the void deck aunties had seen her movies, which were too Western and modern, not their kind of thing. As a result, they were caught in between the glamour of stardom, which they did not understand and therefore were in reluctant awe of, and tradition, which they did.

In the end, tradition won out. "You should tell her to come home," the photocopy auntie said. "It's not good for Arin to forget her family when she gets a bit of success. She'll regret it later."

The rest of the aunties began murmuring in agreement. I left.

2

My mother was gone when I let myself back into the apartment, without even leaving a note. I wasn't worried. The parameters of her life only stretched an hour's walk either way. The older she got, the more resistant to public transportation or cars. I sat at the dining table and tried to catch up on correcting compositions.

But evening came and went with no sign of her. I started to worry. I sent her a WhatsApp, I tried to call her—nothing. When she finally walked in, it was close to 10:00 p.m. I was slumped in a corner on the floor, surrounded by unmarked papers, trying to figure out how to file a missing person's report on my phone. She looked surprised. Her phone had run out of battery, she hadn't thought to charge it. I lost my temper; how could she be so irresponsible, so unaccountable, but she found it funny.

"Life can't be lived on a leash, Gen," she said mildly. It was something I'd said to her, when I first left home at twenty-three. I ignored this, I wanted to know where she'd been.

"I went for dinner with your father." She looked at me. "You didn't tell him I was sick?"

"You two don't even talk."

"Yes, dying changes things."

She went into the kitchen, pulling her singlet off as she went, shedding her shorts, too, until she was standing only in her boxers, getting herself a glass of water. "Ma," I said, glancing at the shirtless uncle smoking out of the apartment window across from us, "the window."

She turned to face me, her chest ribbed and bare. When I averted my gaze, she laughed loudly. "Did you reach your sister?"

"Stop asking, I already told you I've tried. Anyway, she's not here, I am."

"Call her again."

"If you want to see her so badly, call her yourself."

She just smiled. "Of course I could."

Was this a game to her? Irritation surged, and I returned to my papers, ignoring her. One of her remaining six weeks had passed, but I could not imagine how my mother might go from the skinny, sarcastic person before me, still present enough to tease and make demands, to a woman on her deathbed. I had begun to doubt the doctor's diagnosis. People made mistakes; in fact, if anyone was to twist out from the grip of certain death, it would be my mother. She had no respect for rules. The thought that a medical diagnosis might be the thing to finally pin her down suddenly seemed laughable.

Dana agreed to meet me privately during her lunch break, but the warmth she exuded in my mother's presence dissipated as I explained my theory.

"For the patient to engage in magical thinking is one thing, but family members need to be realistic." We were sitting in the hospital's kopitiam. I'd offered to buy her a coffee, but she'd waved it off and paid for us both with her staff pass. She'd barely touched hers, and was speaking slowly, looking at me as if I were a child. "You need to be realistic, Genevieve," she repeated. "To be otherwise is dangerous, even detrimental." At this stage, the patient's quality of life was the priority, it did no one any good to pretend otherwise. My mother had already refused medication and surgery. Even though she seemed fine, if a little frail, we would soon reach the edge of a cliff, and the semblance of normalcy would fall off rapidly. Did I understand? It was coming, we were already approaching that point.

She downed her coffee, glanced at the wall clock, and started talking about preparations for the next stage. I nodded but couldn't bring myself to focus on her words. Dana broke off, leaving us to sit in silence as people—other medical staff, patients, families—ate, drank, fretted around us. A couple of doctors called out greetings to Dana as they returned their lunch trays; she acknowledged them with a slight nod. I braced myself for her inevitable reprimand. But when she spoke, her tone had changed. It was low, worried. Unprofessional. Just like that, my mother was with us again.

"You should probably know that a columnist from *The New Paper* has been asking around. She wants to know what kind of care Auntie Su is receiving, and if your sister has been involved at all. Obviously, hospital records are confidential, but if your mother is with a public hospital, it's not hard to put two and two together." Dana frowned. "She's persistent. She's already written to the head of radiology, and a mutual friend reached out to ask if he could connect us."

I didn't know what to say. Dana had thus far been too courteous to articulate her opinions on Arin's absence, but they hovered at the periphery of our every conversation. I was quite literally useless, but Arin? To be so successful, yet absent in person and deed, was unforgivable. "If hospital records are confidential," I said finally, "it should be fine. The reporter won't get anywhere."

Dana's lunch hour was over, she stood up. She looked at me and I felt ashamed. "Auntie Su doesn't need any additional stress now. Call your sister."

A bus arrived with Arin's blown-up portrait plastered on its side. In a fit of childish irritation I let it go by, only to be squished up against a sweaty boy in school uniform on the next one. He had his phone held horizontally and was playing an obnoxiously loud game, each electronic bleep drawing the ire of exhausted housewives and overworked students trying to take naps against the oil-stained bus window.

Then his game was interrupted by an ad. I glanced down: a trailer for Arin's new movie. It was a cheesy superhero flick, a stand-alone, Arin's character a clear Lois Lane rip-off—though no one but me seemed to have noticed. The trailer showed a transformation sequence, the protagonist leaping out of his office window in a running jump. Arin's anxious face filled the screen, her hair teased into fat waves, nose scrunching in an adorable gasp as her apparently suicidal coworker shot upward into the sky, newly wrapped in dark red spandex. The worry melted away, her eyes sparkled with admiration and mischief. A tiny X appeared in the corner of the screen, but the boy didn't notice, he was enamored. It wasn't even one of Arin's good angles, but it was easy to conflate fame

with beauty. The trailer continued playing: he took a screenshot. I flinched at the sharp snap of the mechanical shutter, and the boy became aware of my presence for the first time. His body stiffened slightly; then, without ever looking at me, he relaxed into a defiant, embarrassed pride.

I got off the bus.

Dana was wrong. The tabloid writer could dig all she wanted, but Arin was unimpeachable. She was the only Singaporean in recent years to breach mainstream Hollywood, making her a national treasure—any attempt to defame her would immediately be buried by the newspaper editors, only bubbling up in gossip forums or a pathetic LiveJournal blog, if at all. But more than that: even if the writer found us, interrogated us, we wouldn't have sold Arin out for a story, no. Nor would I ever allow Arin to pay our way out of this situation, even if my mother's disease weren't terminal. Not with the success she earned by plagiarizing my life. To win by accepting her help would be no triumph at all.

But I couldn't stop thinking about Dana's expression, the way her voice had dropped as she tried to draw me into a conversation about Arin, the frustration that had flashed across her face at my dull response. In that twist of her mouth I could see what was so plainly written on the faces of everyone who interacted with me—that they had gotten the short end of the stick, that they had gotten hold of the wrong sister. I was usually able to take comfort in this; it was better they had no expectations of me. Still, on occasion, my old sense of injustice bubbled up. Like now. I went home, ignored my mother's questioning face, and thought to myself, if only people knew. The story wasn't that Arin was unfilial, abandoning the family that had taken her in all those years ago. It wasn't that she wouldn't drop everything and reappear, the shining, generous daughter, by my mother's side again.

It was that she was an impostor, a usurper. Our violent amputation took eleven years. My independence from her was hard-won, it was the most precious thing I owned. But if she came home, I wasn't certain I could leave her again.