

A Pilgrimage for My Mom (Excerpted)

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My mom's room is a history exhibit, but instead of a preservation of the past, it's a petrification of the present. Stapled to her wall are my art pieces from elementary school and a Harry Potter-themed service poster from my sister's high school organization. On the floor, there are empty cereal boxes and candy wrappers. There isn't much space in the room, the back corner taken up by a bunk bed covered with trash bags of old blankets and beside it, my sister's old bookcase. In the middle of the room is Mom's bed: a green hammock with a comforter folded underneath. The hammock hangs low, and each time my mom gets out of it, she has to grip the metal stand.

My mom claims that the hammock is better for her back, but I think the room is her way of reclaiming space from my dad. When he isn't working offshore to fish for tuna, the house is his. Somehow, every part of him spreads throughout the house—even his smell, a combination of hairspray and dental powder. Late at night, he'll watch TV in the living room with the volume at thirty, until the noise seeps into every crack in the walls and echoes. On those nights, my mom closes the door to her room. She hasn't slept in the same room as him in over ten years, alternating between the couch and her hammock, unless he is working. Then, when he's gone, she'll take the undented side of his queen bed, laying her thin green blanket over his covers.

Her room is the one place my dad doesn't touch, a place that's just for her. To me, the room is stuffy, and I can't help but get nervous when I look at all the mess. It wouldn't bother me so much if my mom let me clean the room, but the second I try to throw away a stretched out scrunchie or a rusted hair clip, my

mom snatches it back from me, slipping it into one of the boxes by her hammock.



When I walk into her room, I only hear the hum of the computer modem. In the dark, I can barely make out my mom's body in the hammock. Her breathing is quiet, with just an occasional deep breath. Sniffing, I push half-filled water bottles out of the way and sit crisscross on the floor next to her. I place my hand on her arm. It's smooth and cold to the touch.

"Má," I call out, my voice just a whisper. Part of me is embarrassed about coming to her, puffy-eyed and crying. By the end of graduation, I was ready to leave New Orleans and my family, to get the space I wanted away from my mom. With no response from her, I decide that if she doesn't wake up in the next couple of minutes, I'll try and go back to sleep.

"Má?" Her body twitches, and I see her eyes open. She moves her mouth, like she is trying to warm up before talking. As she shifts in the hammock, the metal chain hits against the metal stand, a clear chime ringing out. I sit there, still, too scared to say anything.

"Why are you up so early?" she asks, scratching her scalp. I don't answer her question, the sound of her voice making me start to cry again.

"Má, I'm leaving you," I cry out, choking on the last word. Her eyes close again, and she turns her face towards the ceiling.

"You're going to have a great time in college, though," she says, "you'll meet new people, make new friends. You won't even think of home."

"But what about you," I whisper. I lean my head on her stomach, feel it rise and fall. My tears soak into her floral shirt, and I like to believe that she ran her hand through my hair, but I know that isn't the way she knows how to love. Instead, she answers my question with another question.

"But Emmy, weren't you the one who wanted to go in the

first place?” The question is only meant to hurt a little, just like everything she says, and it nestles itself into my skin. This is the way we comfort each other, and I feel at home with our bodies beside each other in a dark, crowded room, the humid New Orleans air like a blanket over us.

I don't remember the rest of the conversation, just that my mom's voice sounded like the lullabies she sang to me as a kid.

At some point, she gets up to turn on the light and checks her phone.

“It's only 2 AM?” She asks, confused.

“That's why I was scared to wake you up. I thought you had only just fallen asleep,” I say, stretching my legs out.

“I thought it was 5 or 6 in the morning,” she says, her mouth in a small frown, “well, I'm going to make some coffee.” As she leaves, she turns on her TV, putting on a Vietnamese love show for us to watch.

This is her way of saying, “sit with me, spend some time with me,” and I oblige.