

Mango Rinds

Kaye Weatherly

The last time I saw you was in a dream. I dreamt it was your birthday and you wanted to celebrate at a Philippine beach. Mom brought her Filipino relatives to the party—aunts, uncles, cousins, and first cousins—many of whom I couldn't name, nor could you, to be honest. We all feasted under a shoddy, wooden gazebo, with a string of warm light bulbs hung up around its perimeter. The rest of our surroundings faded to black, besides the water crawling onto the sand and the docks jutting from the beach. I didn't know how I got there, nor what lay opposite to the sea, on the other side of the shelter. But did it really matter? This was what you would have wanted; in a way, it was more your dream than mine.

Mom asked for my pack of Uno cards. The sisters (you know, your other daughters, who were not present at the party) had taken to playing it at every family gathering, so Mom wanted to let the younger kids play it for the first time. I obliged and took the roughed-up pack out of my bag. She brought it to the table and they dealt out cards to one another. Comfortable sitting out of this game, I took in the warm night air. You never liked playing card games, at least not the competitive kind where people would yell at each other. You sat to my right in an orange button up patterned with white hibiscuses. Your usually gray hair had been dyed honey brown to conceal your age, but the squint of your eyes and loose cheeks under those glasses betrayed you. I thought about how, though I enjoyed these fast games, I envied your tendency to live vicariously. I tried to think of something, anything to ask about your life while you were still there. Maybe about your mother's old poetry, which I'd never read, or your time serving in Korea. You dangled a beer bottle between your knees, tapping against the neck of it in sporadic dings. You brought the mouth of the bottle to your lips, and though I wanted to say a lot to you, say everything, I cherished these moments of silence. To ask such personal questions would be best for another time, not on your big day.

Mom, having escaped the current round of Uno, which frustrated our young relatives with cries of laughter, called out to the group. From behind a wall she hefted a cardboard box filled with curvy, yellow knobs—carabao mangoes. Cutting them in half one by one, she sliced the gold insides of each into a square grid. Mom passed the slices to the children and then me, their brown arms contrasting my paleness as we all reached for a piece. We pushed the rinds inside out and the cubes of sticky flesh detached from one another, spouting beautifully. Everyone bit chunks off the rinds in delight, taking in the smoothness of its texture, the decadence of its taste. The fruit reminded me of childhood more than anything. One of my first cousins took an empty rind and carried it to the shore, where the only lights that touched the waves were white dashes along the endtips, painted by the moon above. She placed it gently on the rocking waves of moonlit water, her little fingers tapping its balance until it danced on the surface. We all followed along and crouched on the damp sand, setting the shells on the miniature waves. You murmured something to me about my old sailing lessons, the ones you signed me up for. You likened the mango rinds to little boats. It was so quiet I almost couldn't hear you.

Mom told me to walk along the docks with you—she said you'd want to look out at the water. I obliged and stood up from the cold, wet ground. The surroundings of our feet dissipated into shadow as the two of us strode down the wooden docks. Each step clunked with a hollowed note, rhythmic against the boards like the water crashing against the support beams. You trailed behind me, and although I could not see you, did not dare look back, I felt your presence at every moment. Your footsteps were greater and more constant than mine, a slow drum in my bones.

The wind blew in from the sea and caused me to shiver, but I remembered this was a dream, and I imagined I had on one of your old comfy sweaters. I wanted to take a photo of the moon as it hung above the horizon and dipped its light into the endless black pool. I wanted to ask you about my grandfather's love for photography, and then I wanted to ask about that same grandfather's old donut shop. I wanted to ask how young you were when he died. I wanted to ask about your first existential crisis as you stared into your reflection in the bathroom mirror, and whether that was before or after Korea, before or after your father's death. I wanted to ask if there was any timeline at all, any chronology to these events, and if any such order existed, how you remembered them, if you remembered them. I wanted to ask if there was another woman in Korea, one who might not have known your name, before you might've...

Mom called from the gazebo, beckoning me—Come back to shore, she cried, we're taking a group photo. I ran back down the empty docks and yelled I'm coming! as I neared the land, where my family waited to bask me in their light.