

It is a nondescript summer day. Hot, but in the way all summer days are, entirely unremarkable on its own. My mother, ever the artist, takes one look at the sprawling canvas of blues and grays and browns before her, so at odds with the outside world, and decides it needs remedying.

She asks me, Ni xiang chi mang guo ma? *Do you want to eat mango?*

I consider a million things to tell her. It is too hot outside to be eating sticky fruit. Upon peeling and serving the fruit, I would politely ask her if she wanted some as well, to which she would say no, and a meaningless back-and-forth would ensue until one of us would inevitably leave the kitchen in a fit of rage. *This time*, I think, gathering my courage and thoughts and buried feelings, *I'll tell her. I'll tell her what I really think.*

When I meet her eyes, however, I see her golden vision reflected in them. I see her bearing the heat of the golden sun and serving it to me, her muse, in the form of warm golden fruit. My mother is too good at making the outside world palatable; she softens its edges with her artist's brush and beats the harder parts into submission with a gentle lift of the finger. It is why I yield to her demands, I think, because I want a slice of the world she has envisioned for us: vibrant, utopian, colorful. It is this vision that has brought our family here to *měi guó*, America, the land of beauty; to this suburb, where each house is a perfect mirror image of the next; to this home, with its semi-transparent, semi-colorful inhabitants. My mother will not settle for less.

She takes my lack of response for a yes, a product of the malaise in the summer air she's taken upon herself to cure, and takes a kitchen knife out of her artist's toolbox. While she's peeling the mango and stripping it to its pulpy essence she stops and swears, loudly, and I realize she has cut her finger against the knife's edge. The gush of red reminds me too much of her love and so I look away. But I do not forget. It is my mother's gift and curse to effortlessly transform the mundane into something out of the ordinary.

We are walking on the streets of Lisbon and waiting at a traffic light when my mother turns to my father and asks him to take a picture of me. I stand, awkward, with all the awareness of a muse who knows she's being watched. *Quickly, now!* She urges.

The light turns green. I make no effort to move as my father fumbles in his bag for his phone and passersby cross in the space between us, unaware that the middle-aged Asian couple gesturing wildly at each other are arguing about me, their daughter, standing still as a statue. Or, more accurately, they're arguing over the treatment of their muse — which angle to take the picture from, whether I should smile, and whose camera quality is better.

Finally, my mother throws her phone on the ground in exasperation. People stare.

She's crying. *How hard is it, she weeps, how hard is it to take a picture?*

I want so badly to tell her, *You are making a scene. We are in a foreign country and these people are looking at us funny and my eyes are prickling under the weight of their scrutiny. We can always take another picture later—*

—But I know that it is not true, that once my mother has a vision, it is impossible to replicate it under any circumstance except the one in which it was born. I also know that it is not my place to tell her that taking a picture is like writing a story, that there is an inherent impossibility to creating art that she knows better than anyone else. Instead I watch, silently, as my father picks up the phone and searches for directions to the Thai restaurant that sells mango fried rice as though nothing has happened.

I am not the dynamic tornado that is my mother nor the cool apathy that makes up my father. When they get entangled in a messy blur, colors swirling to produce a cloudy nebula that threatens to consume the universe, it's all I can do to stay out of it.

When I was a child, I committed the worst crime an artist could possibly think of — tampering with another's work. Colored pencils in hand, I assaulted my mother's black-and-white painting with color: green for the lotuses, blue for the water, and droplets of pink everywhere.

Upon seeing my kaleidoscopic vision, my mother promptly fainted. Then, after recovering from her initial shock, gave me the scolding of a lifetime. *Never, ever touch what isn't yours.*

But that is the only piece of art I can say for certain we have ever created *together*. To this day it hangs in our living room as proof of *us*, our shared handiwork: the color extending beyond my mother's smooth lines, the oblong shapes peering curiously above the sea of blue, and its unfinished quality all an amalgamation of who we are. Some parts of the painting are so blurred you can't tell where my mother ends and I begin. It may not have been a collaboration in earnest, but neither is the relationship between predecessor and successor, between mother and daughter. The former always lays the groundwork for the latter.

Mother and daughter. Artist and muse. Doesn't it all get a bit tiring? We must have lived a million lifetimes like this stubbornly confined to our own roles, the visionary and the realist. All the while, my mother has been dimming herself for the sake of other's frail visions, and soon there will be nothing left for her to give.

For her forty-second birthday, I decide against getting my mom a camera. I buy one anyway.

What a cosmic joke! It is a worthwhile endeavor, I think: to make my mother my muse.