
CHASING SUBLIME

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Mom used to worry I would adopt my Dad's fashion sense. That I'd take after him in all ways—at best, spouting popular Lacanian psychoanalysis; at worst, dressing like (her words) “a sweaty proletarian.”

Her own father was a scholar of Maoism from Slovenia. That was largely the reason she even took an interest in Dad—some sort of (Dad's words) “Orientalist desire to possess the Other.” Dad would then accuse her of acting out an Oedipal impulse, as evidenced by her “attraction to unshowered intelligentsia of his sort.”

“Had I known there were *showered* intelligentsia of any sort,” she'd retort, “I never would have married you.”

I used to spend my idle days diving into my father's closet, pushing past the ill-fitting variations of black-faded-to-gray shirts. Slipping through cotton tees like the leafy curtains of a willow tree. I'd swim in a pile of his lumpy trousers, holey tweed jackets, and flimsy free socks from trans-Pacific airlines (he always preferred Asiana's). Dad never really noticed; he was usually too busy at the desk, pouring over some Mandarin translation of Derrida, muttering to himself while I dived into the hamper.

There is no autumn in Southern California. So I settled for the musty odor of cheap hotel aftershave and Irish Spring that lingered on the leaves of old laundry.

People would often ask me about Mom. It was really a way of asking me about Dad. They wrote about how Mom modeled for *Vogue*, how she was eighteen years my Dad's junior with a history of courting elite *philosophes*. That was more than I knew about her, since she had already moved

back to Ljubljana when I was ten. All I remember was she once took me there with Dad and I adored the dragons on the bridges and the multi-colored graffiti on narrow European streets. My mother didn't care about the particulars of continental philosophy or post-structuralism, didn't care if she was Slovenian or "Yugoslavian," didn't care about Tito or Balkanization or anything. The people who asked me about her—they rarely cared either.

Dad once nearly punched an administrative assistant in the department lounge when the man commented that I, his daughter, had inherited my mother's waifish build and "just enough" of her features—just enough of a curve in the lid of my eyes to apply a layer of black liner *and* shadow, just enough of a nose bridge to belie the profile of someone like Dad, just enough of Mom in me to be considered beautiful.

Sometimes, Dad would take me to the movies. We'd stop at whatever roadside outlet had the Regal or the Cinemax and spend the day watching matinees. He never seemed to like the ones I chose, or he wouldn't admit it.

"This film with toys coming to life," he said in his lingering Dongbei accent, scrunching up his nose as the credits rolled, "It is the direct materialization of Marx's commodity fetishism. What we have here is the 'secret life' of commodity." I nodded, digging out a fistful of greasy buttered popcorn from our shared plastic bucket. Dad chewed on the unpoppered kernels at the bottom. Even though he said he hated these films, he still watched them with me up to six times because I liked the songs.

Dad always complained about books and movies. I assumed it was part of his job, as we traveled across the country in his rusty Ford pickup and he gave lectures on topics like the implications of Judeo-Christianity and Afrofuturism in the Wachowski's *Matrix* trilogy. He never said no to a movie that I wanted to see, even if it had rainbow ponies ("the most rampant anti-empiricism of any equestrian-themed cinema"). He personally preferred the violent exploitation films or the pulpy Hong Kong action flicks that reminded him of what his country's cinematic culture could have been, maybe, had the nationalists not fled to the islands with their historical artifacts, their artistic licenses, and their supposed propensity for democracy. He always approved of my impassivity to R-rated violence, but was especially impressed when, at twelve years old, I told him I

especially liked the one where the drug addicts get their comeuppance at the end in the form of simultaneous psychotic delusions to an orchestral soundtrack.

“You understand then, my girl,” he said, a note of seriousness in his voice, “that this is as close as we come to representing the Real. Not the Imaginary real, but the Real real. The frightening, unsettling trace of sublime that permeates our existence and prods at the edge of our consciousness.”

Sure, Dad.

Mom called me about once a month, except when she would forget, to check up on me. She always took the time to complain about how Dad was raising me.

“Always on the road! This is not the fifties. And all this junk food you two are eating. The nice skin you got from me will be ruined.”

She once mailed me a Gucci denim miniskirt, which Dad shoved in the trash bin, deaf to my pleas, because (his words) “I will not let my daughter turn into a bobby-soxer *biao nu!*”

Mom never said that she could have done any better. She probably would have left me to some migrant *a yi* while she flew to Paris, Munich, or Tokyo. I think the fact that she let Dad take custody was her way of tacitly acknowledging that for all my father’s foibles, he was still the best shot I had.

But I know wasn’t easy for him to raise a girl who preferred *Cosmopolitan* to Kant.

It wasn’t easy for him, fighting with pencil and paper out of the icy northern mountains of the Heilongjiang to attend Beijing University after Mao’s death heralded the return of the *gao kao* tests—empty stadiums turned execution chambers turned overflowing exam halls. It wasn’t easy to study Western religion and medieval philosophy, but he did it because (his words) he was secretly looking for an institution more powerful, more compelling, more pervasive than even the Party that had imprisoned his parents for ten years.

He found the Church.

And Aquinas and Anselm led to Foucault and Lacan, and his Dongbei accent, which usually only reappeared around me, gave way to a professional but unplaceable European pronunciation, which eventually got him

in trouble with the CCP—but granted him asylum into the comfortable world of the American liberal arts academic circuit.

It still wasn't easy for him, when I was thirteen and got my first period on the road to Claremont McKenna.

I was kicking my feet up on the dashboard of his rattled blue Ford pickup as we passed Bakersfield when I noticed the burgundy patch between my legs. Dad spent four miles trying to decide what to do, before skidding through an exit to the nearest Walmart.

I'm gonna bleed to death, I whispered in mock panic.

"Stop that," he muttered, dragging me through the store past a blue-vested greeter to the women's hygiene aisle. We stood, flummoxed, in front of a wall of multicolored boxes. Names like Kotex, Stayfree, and Essence—in various morphologies and iterations—left us both dumbfounded.

"Hrm," Dad said, putting his forefinger and thumb to his sparsely bearded chin. "Let's see—you, excuse me, miss, you work here. My daughter, she needs ..." He gestured to the wall of sanitary napkins. "Which do you recommend?"

A woman in a bright blue vest turned, eyeing my father's perspiring armpits and straggly facial hair before resting her gaze on me.

"What she need?"

"She has her ..." he struggled to find his preferred English word, "*menses*."

"Most of the girls say these are the comfortablest," the woman said, pointing to some pads on the top shelf.

"They are also the expensive-ist," he retorted.

The woman shrugged. "You get what you pay for." Her lips smacked of chewing gum. "I'd recommend the tampons though. Much easier for a girl to wear."

Dad stared at the packages as though he had never really seen them before. In hindsight, maybe he never had. I could sense him swelling with fury.

Daaaad. I groaned from the corner of my mouth.

"These phallic cotton vestiges?" he shook a box violently up and down, his full arsenal of language returning. "What ridiculous, cruel commerce are you promoting—"

Daaaad ...

"—a brutal exploitation of the feminine body—"

I tugged at his shirt as passing shoppers paused to peer down our aisle. I had learned to look him in the eye and hold his hand—to convince bystanders my father wasn't a stranger, a kidnapper, an ill-hired caretaker of a child who inherited just enough of her mother's shade of light brown hair and pale skin to alienate her from the pock-marked snow-sun scorched face of her Harbin father.

“—I'd like to see what Irigaray would have to say about all of this!” he huffed, shoving the box back onto the shelf. The woman opened and closed her mouth again. I tried to bury my head into a row of panty liners.

He eventually chose a pack of mid-ranged maxipads instead. They had “wings.”

It felt like I was wearing a diaper, waddling out of the gas station rest stop.

“Would you rather have those cotton phalluses?” he grumbled, filling up the gas tank.

I heard tampons weren't bad. All the older girls in dance class wore them. It was the only thing they could wear under their leotards.

Dad sighed.

He was always disappointed that I had chosen to live what he called a “life of the body” over a career in scholarship and intellectual development. When he and Mom were still together, they came to my first recital. It was “The Nutcracker: Remixed,” Tchaikovsky mashed up with pop songs and Top 40 radio hits. Dad grumbled words like “dissimulation” and “performativity,” but he clapped for my piece and said that being a dancing Russian candy cane was far less problematic than the insipid Orientalism of portraying an Arabian dancer or Chinese doll.

After Mom and Dad split, we never stayed in one place long enough for me to actually dance another recital, but Dad always arranged for me to audit a few movement classes at the nearest conservatory or college he was teaching at that semester.

I think it was his way of saying sorry. Sorry about the constant upheaval. Sorry about the drunker nights. Sorry about the sublime. Sorry about that.

He bought me a soft pair of pink dance slippers for my thirteenth birthday.

I would eventually insist on wearing tampons, as would I insist on bras with underwire, three-blade razors (we compromised on gender-neutral

shaving equipment to save money), and mascara. Dad would assent to all these things, although he'd still refer to tampons as "vampire teabags." He kept a stash of them in their pearly white floral wrappers in the glove compartment of his truck. His truck would forever be littered with my things—a plastic folding hairbrush, gum wrappers, bobby pins, and elastic hair bands in the backseat.

Dad, for all his Dongbei sentiments, shared with me a bit of a guilty obsession with kitschy Americana. We loved diners with malted milkshakes, broken jukeboxes, and neon signposts. He'd pause with me to wander through old Indian curio shops on the interstate and pick out dream weavers, handfuls of smooth quartz stones sold like candy, and jewelry boxes that smelled of redwood. On our long trips across flat plains and hilly Western landscapes, he would often reference Nabokov. He said I would understand when I was older.

When we weren't on the road, he and I would always unpack the waffle iron first. Moving in was simple: we didn't own anything that didn't fit in the back of the truck, but no matter what, waffles were the top priority. I loved watching golden batter ooze into the crevices and dents of the black iron, coming out fluffy and light brown within minutes. Mom never appreciated how good Dad's waffles were—it was the only foodstuff he could make with any consistency, Occidental or otherwise.

"This is the only way to make a waffle," he said.

The Platonic ideal of the Waffle, I called it. He smirked. And there we sat on the sunny stretch of carpet under the window, in the empty one-bedroom apartment that still smelled of cleaning products. We ate the waffles with honeyed syrup or cubes of butter, the afternoon sunbeams warming our backs, surrounded by cardboard boxes and dust bunnies. One winter he even bought a string of cheap fairy lights to drape across the futon while we made our Christmas feast.

I think Mom worried that I'd make the same mistake that she did. That I would fall in love with a guy who loved dead white men more than any woman. Luckily, boys never really wanted to approach me, with my kitchen-scissor haircuts and scabbed knees, and I never stayed in one school long enough to miss them. I imagine if some Camus-reading prep school boy had ever tried to court me, Dad would have laid an existential smack down on him over dinner.

“Sometimes I wonder if your father even is interested in women,” my mother sighed, her disembodied drawl on the phone. “He seems to care about nothing else but his work.”

He cares about me, I told her.

She remained silent.

The lecture halls in which my father spoke would be packed, a smattering of old leftists with berets and long hair, mostly drowned in a sea of plaid and horned-rim glasses. Some East Asian studies major would inevitably stand up and ask a question about his “background,” or quote some classical Chinese philosopher they assumed he’d know—at which point I, usually reclining in the balcony seats or texting in the back corner, would excuse myself to go find the dance studio.

College campuses were always fun to explore. I liked the ones with green grass quads where I could lounge, large libraries with hundreds of shallow steps, or gothic dorms built to look old but in actuality come complete with elevators and air-conditioning. Sometimes I would try to listen to my father, focusing in as he perspired under the podium lights, gesticulating, pontificating, his lilt getting stronger as he got more passionate—the long “ehn” slipping into a northern, curling “err.” Many of his students idolized him. Many thought he was insane.

“Schizophrenics don’t have associations this loose,” said one, shaking his head after class.

“He has to be on something,” said another in half-awe.

I chose to keep quiet in these moments, but sometimes after one of his big lectures, maybe at Stanford or UDub, a school reporter would interlope. They were always profiling Dad’s crazy exploits, calling him (their words) “The Next Up-and-Coming Celebrity Philosopher.” “The Scholar from Dongbei.” “The Manchurian Tenure-track Candidate.” At some point, I grew old enough to stop having Dad shoo them away. I could answer for myself.

“What’s it like, as his daughter?” they’d ask. They loved how I cared very little for philosophy, how I wore flip-flops and dance capris. “What’s home life like?”

I’d pause.

I never told my mother about this. Dad was always fine if we were on

the road, in the blue pickup that took us across twenty states and back. During those eight years, with two hundred thousand miles on the meter, he never once did anything that scared me on the road. People wondered why he never sought tenure in academia. Why he settled for the adjunct pay or the guest lecturer honorarium. But I knew it was because the road was where he found home. Home in the moments where the horizon curved and the hills looked like (Hemingway's words) white elephants. Home in those days where the rising air flattened the bottoms of clouds and we pointed out which formations look like bearded economists. Home in the crunch of gravel under tires and the ever-retreating roadside signs as you chased the Next Great American Destination.

It was only when we were settled, once we unpacked half of the cardboard boxes, mostly books, into the one bedroom apartment, once I unfolded my futon in the living room and unrolled his mattress to the floor that the malaise began. Brown ale bottles like breadcrumbs to the bathroom. Burnt out cigarette butts on the windowsill ashtray. The greenish-yellow stains on the rim of the toilet bowl or chunks of half-digested cheese—Dad still struggled with dairy—in the bathroom sink. My father's lectures were born from this madness, madness that meant he never felt right in one place. Looking back, I realize his students were right. He was *on* something, or *onto* something.

The creeping memories of the camps where his parents had birthed him, where he had spent his first years nibbling on white rice plucked grain by grain from the dirt floor. The vague recollection of the cold winters near the Songhua Jiang, where he worked in his youth to cut turquoise ice blocks from the river for local sculptors. The longing for my mother, the girl who had courted him in the front row of a conference in *Univerza v Ljubljani*, whose white skin he refused to admit allured him too—pale like those Russian girls he had seen in the scattered churches around Harbin, soft and thin and so sensitive that it scrubbed pink at the graze of his whiskey black chin in that Slovenian hotel bedroom.

I came home after dance class to find him splayed out, face down on the kitchen floor. I thought he had passed out while reading Sartre and hadn't bothered to crawl into bed.

Dad, we're all out of waffle mix.

But then I noticed the bottles. Stout orange tubes and white safety caps I had never seen before among his sparse possessions. I looked at the bottles, then at him.

Are you okay?

I knelt beside him, my hand resting on his sweaty back. In the movies, they check the pulse or perform resuscitation. But I realized I knew nothing of real-world medical protocol as I fumbled with his wrist searching for a beat, only to feel my own hands going numb and my vision narrowing to pinpricks. I tried to turn him over, but his bearlike body would not budge as my hands squeezed his sweat-drenched gray shirt. He grunted a few times.

Dad, can you hear me?

“Not now,” he groaned. “Not now I’m almost there ...” His glassy eyes stared up at me as I parted his gray hairs, my hand against his clammy forehead. He started whispering in the old dialect of his youth, “*I’m coming home.*”

Please, please, Dad, don’t do this.

“*Home ...*”

I’m calling the ambulance.

The doctors pumped his stomach. I remember sitting in the white, sterile hospital waiting room, feeling nothing but the empty ache in my abdomen. Dad came out after a few hours, looking deflated in his blue hospital gown. He later said to me that he had wanted, as those kids in that movie with the drugs and the psychosis had wanted—to have a Real experience. To have the physical world fall away at your fingertips and bend the senses and find the edge of the sublime as Lacan would have dreamed it. To live forever between the breasts of a woman whose pale features, in the soft focus of uppers and downers, blended with his own in the face of the young girl standing over him, shaking his fading corporeal body.

“But at some point,” he said softly, looking away from me. “I heard you say. I needed to buy waffle mix.”

We would pack up and head out and never speak of it, just as we had packed and transferred from school to school every other semester for eight years. And Dad would buy me dance shoes and I’d go on to study

contemporary movement at college and I would stop chasing boys, men, and the metaphysical world altogether.

Years and years later, we stopped living on the road. I moved to New York to join a company. He sold off the pickup truck for a more respectable Honda Civic. He would still struggle to park it in Forest Hills. And I would still find tampons in the glove compartment.