

Jamie Lin

Last Time I Saw Her

My mother disappeared and I don't have a boyfriend. My new guardians gave me a beta fish to cheer me up. They took me to this sketchy pet store next to an empty highway. I couldn't see past the blinding sunlight. The clouds were too close to ground for comfort that day.

He was a miserable creature barely moving within the plastic container approximately the size of two tennis balls. The metal shelf was full of them. There was a huge sign with a cartoon fish looking ridiculously happy above them. How insulting. I picked him because he was the closest to death. His eyes looked like shrunken raisins.

My aunt thinks he is a weird fish. He makes very loud splashes at night when he thinks I am not watching. I think he's just suicidal. Often, I wake up in the morning sweaty, imaging his bluish red body floating belly-up amongst his bubble nests.

We are both alone, the fish and I. My father had left right after I was conceived. I don't even know his name. My mom had considered abortion, but she saw a photo of a fetus sucking its thumb on the Internet and couldn't do it.

My favorite memory of her was watching her in front of the coffee table. I'd lie in my room with the door open, listening to her connect sparkly silver parts together. The repetitive jingling soothed me into sleep every time.

The rare times she'd embrace me, she never felt warm. I could only feel her bones. It felt different from when I was a child. I remember sitting between her legs while she combed my hair. It'd lean my cheek against her thigh and felt the heat radiating from her. Those were better times.

My friends thought she was gorgeous. I wanted her to eat more. Sometimes I would catch her staring out the kitchen window with that look in her eyes like she was haunted.

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The last time I saw her, it was August 6th, my best friend Sarah's 18th birthday. "It's a surprise," she said when I asked her where the five of us were going. The sky above her was a ripened blue. The streetlight tickled the space beneath her arrow-sharp chin and above her white throat. She had perfect moon-ringlets of hair protruding in thick layers down past her shoulders. I couldn't resist.

She drove about sixty miles to some orange-lit neighborhood with warehouses and low buildings with flat roofs. We stopped in front of one of the buildings. The strip club's neon sign flashed at me. A bouncer stood by the doorway shielded from the outside with flashing blue beads. "It'll be fun," she told me when I paused halfway inside the car, halfway out. She held my hand so I followed.

We showed him our IDs. It took him a long moment before he realized we weren't 21.

"But we're not going to drink!" Sara protested.

He didn't even blink, and refused to say anything more.

We returned back to the parking lot. I looked around us, remembering all those articles I read about people getting shot in places like this. Sara, all of the sudden, gasped, "Hey, isn't that your mom..."

I turned around and there she was, wearing a different outfit than she had left with earlier. She was just standing at the street corner smoking a cigarette and exposing her shoulders under the streetlight. Her skin looked green.

I didn't say anything, just ducked into Sara's car. Sara drove us all to her house without saying a word. She fed me cake after the others left. I stared into her eyes as I chewed and swallowed, wincing at how dry my throat felt. She pitied me like I used to pity her about her divorcing parents. I did not like it. Between us, I was always the lucky one.

When I got home, my mom wasn't on the couch. I waited and waited. I

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scrubbed the bathtub as I waited, peeled the mushrooms from the walls, crawled at the rust with my fingertips. She could have a nice bath when she got home, I thought. That'd be nice. I prepared it for her, sprinkled in some oatmeal. I heard it was good for the skin. I browsed the internet for a job so she could quit hers.

At six in the morning, I called the police. No one knew what happened to her. There was no body, no fingerprints, nothing.

It's been half a year. I know I should be grateful that I am not in some abusive foster care, but I miss Sara. She is half a country away and doing god knows what. I heard her father had a heart attack. I left her messages but she never called me back.

I should be doing better at school, but I am unable to concentrate. The only class I like is philosophy and only because there I can drift away with my thoughts. If atoms are indestructible and everything is composed of them, when a person dies, is that person really gone?

Being in their house too long makes me want to scream. My aunt is really annoying. She's always saying oh dear. Oh dear, I didn't do homework. Oh dear, I smell like cheap cigarettes. Oh dear, I wear so much black that she wouldn't be surprised if a car can't distinguish me from a shadow. Oh dear, my new friend is very promiscuous.

My new friend Emma told me that cum tastes like salt and comes out in spoonfuls. She told me that she screamed when she lost her virginity. She told me that energy drinks makes her painfully horny. She told me that Benjamin likes my face, especially my eyes. But whenever I talk to him, he finds an excuse to talk about my face and my figure, both cute. I never understood why people just don't say what they mean.

Benjamin took me to a café sponsoring a poetry reading. He said he was impressed by my interest in something not many people nowadays enjoyed. He told me he thought I was an interesting woman. We were congregated under a plastic tent outside with the fireplace burning nearby in soft colors.

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My favorite poet that evening was a tall man in his late twenties wearing oval glasses. He whispered about a Southern lady he never thought he'd fall in love with, a lady with cheeks as sharp as ice and lips as red as the center of cherries. He talked about how he liked to trail his hands over the dip of her back, along her calves, and kiss her in unexpected places. A little cliché but he expressed with longing and I felt for him. His glasses made his face intriguingly angular.

Afterwards, Benjamin and I sat in the back of his car and he turned on the radio, putting a hand on my leg. He kissed me so hard, my teeth hurt. While he was thrusting, I imagined my mom doing it for money with a stranger every night. He asked me if I was okay as he was zipping up and I told him sure, why not. He smiled and drove me home.

I didn't go inside the house. I walked back downtown and got on the train. I liked to sneak out some nights and head to Atlanta. Otherwise, I'd lose my mind. Every day, I felt it sliding away from me, as if it was something separate from my body.

There was an old man in my car. His face resembled a burnt gingerbread, angular-shaped beneath tufts of greasy hair. He stunk of old food and urine. He pointed at the tiny television with the news reporter and shaped his hand into a gun. He said, "Bang, bang," and then lay down on his seat, and didn't get up again.

Midtown, I sat down on a bench in the shadows outside of a closed restaurant and watched the prostitutes from across the street. I watched the streetlight illuminate on their faces and their bony shoulders.

I suppose it's a good thing Sara and I stopped talking. What can we talk about now? No one likes to trade sad stories. The only responses you get are loaded with sympathetic apologizes. We weren't friends like that. Maybe she still believes I am the lucky one. And whenever Sara believed, I always could talk myself into believing too.

Jamie Lin is currently in college studying creative writing, human rights, political science, and comparative literature.