

Anh Thu Dang
Family

I jumped in the car, beaming from ear to ear after the exciting weekend I had had. The car door slid to a close with a beep, and I started babbling.

"Sammy and Mikey and I had so much fun!" I said about hanging out with my favorite cousins. "We played Headbandz, and ugh, Sammy kept on winning. Mikey and I got mad, so we ganged up on her in Monopoly instead." I saw my dad chuckling in the rearview mirror as he turned on the air conditioner for us. It was a sweltering summer day, after all. I felt the cool breeze tickle my skin, giggled, and continued, "Sammy and I stayed up until one in the morning talking. When we were about to sleep, she asked me, 'What do you feel like ranting about today?' It's creepy how well she knows me. Oh, and I learned how to play poker! In the first game, I totally destroyed them. Hah, but after that, Mikey knew exactly what cards I had every round. He literally read my face and knew I had a pair of 8's!" I continued rambling on and on about what a wonderful time I had when my mother interjected.

"That's great! Hey, don't forget we're going to the family reunion for my family's side." My heart sank.

"Do I have to go?" I groaned. "Can't someone drive me home or something? Or maybe I can stay in the car?"

"No one can drive you home, and even if someone could, you have to go. You have to spend time with *family*," my mom's sister scoffed, shaking her head at me. I bit back a scathing remark about *family*. *Family is supposed to care about you*. I thought bitterly. I glared at the window, not daring to look at my family's faces. A lump started welling up in my throat as if it were a frog. I saw a spot of dried, sticky soda, the shape of a fluffy cloud on the window. I poured every ounce of resentment into scratching the soda off with my nails. Every word we exchanged felt like a nail screeching as it scraped against a car door.

"Plus, you already spent the weekend with your dad's family, so now you have to spend time with mine," my mom told me.

"But I never see Daddy's side of the family," I bitterly countered. *Your family sucks, and I prefer Daddy's family*.

"Well, that's because your cousins never bother to visit," my aunt said snidely, sneering at me. *As if her family is so much better. Screw her and her opinions on family. Screw all of them*. I gazed out the window at the cars zooming by and thought of the families inside them. Were they the perfect, happy families I always saw on TV? Would I be accepted in one of them? Or would I feel the same urge to escape as I did now? I closed my eyes and forced myself to think about *Keeper of the Lost Cities*, the book series I had recently become obsessed with. I drifted away to the elven world. Here, I could teleport away to the balcony of my sparkling, turquoise castle. I could stare down at the trees while devouring the most scrumptious foods, peacefully reading my books, and most of all, be-

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ing alone. Away from them all. After all, people always seemed to fail me. Sometimes I think I would be less lonely alone than in a room full of people.

We finally arrived at the front of the house. Even though the sun was shining, the skies were pastel blue, and the grass was a vibrant green, all I could picture was a battlefield. I was Mulan, running from the Huns in the snow. Except I wasn't fighting for my family. I walked into the house at the pace of a snail, trying to prolong the amount of time until I had to face them. Hiding behind my mom, I braced myself for the torturous five hours that were going to ensue. I found a chair in the corner, stole some food, and went on my phone. I had gotten an email that day telling me the latest *Keeper of the Lost Cities* book had just been loaned to me on the online library. I frantically pounded on the download button, desperate for some entertainment in this gloomy prison. Impatiently tapping the side of the chair, I stared at the slowly downloading e-book, desperately wishing I could speed up time. *Ugh, of course the wifi here is trash!* When the book finally finished downloading, my eyes were firmly glued to the screen, attempting in vain to finally get my escape path to another world. I was Mulan darting away from the men in the pond because she didn't belong. But Mushu was nowhere to be found. My second cousins began walking in, and as usual, they were complete jerks.

I forced a smile. "Hi!" I said, trying to be polite. . Each cousin would awkwardly nod at me, not even smiling, and leave to go hang out with the family they actually accepted. *Ugh, what phonies. In front of our classmates at school, Emily acts as if she's the best cousin in the universe. Here she can't even be bothered to smile. In front of our parents, they're actually nice.* I had a flashback to the time I showed up to a reunion when I was five with knitting needles because I knew they wouldn't include me. I sat in the corner knitting like a grandma while they played dodgeball without me. It's depressing that my first memory of this family had been them rejecting me, and it had only been the tip of the iceberg. I could smell the garlic and cheese from the Little Caesar's pizza my relatives ordered, and my mouth started watering. I remembered the eggrolls and the fact that I had had only one. *Ugh, I want seconds.* But then I saw my cousins, all gathered around the food like planets around the sun. If they were the eight planets, I was Pluto. I would need to be a thin piece of paper to slide between them. At this point, striving to get food would be equivalent to an ant tiptoeing into a room full of giants. Giants who wouldn't be able to decide between staring at the ant or stomping on it. As my stomach yearned for food, a few relatives started pressuring me to play the violin for them.

"Are you going to play violin for us today?" they interrogated, expectation written all over their faces.

"Umm, I actually didn't bring it today," I nervously replied, feeling like a mouse being backed into a corner by a team of felines. "And I don't have anything memorized anyway."

"Well, why not?" they prodded. "Why do you *never* play for us? We want to hear you play!" I pictured Mulan splashing tea all over the table, bringing "shame" upon her family.

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Of course, you don't understand my stage fright. Of course, you don't even understand me at all, yet expect me to have a song memorized just for you. Of course, you expect me to be just like you guys. I'm not, so you treat me like an outcast.

As I piled on my contempt towards my "family," I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around to see my dad grinning.

"Come on, let's go visit your grandma," he said to me. Of course, my dad understood that I needed to be rescued. It took us about twenty minutes to walk out of the house. Each of my nosy relatives' questions jabbed at us and delayed us

"Why are you leaving? Where are you going?" they shot, barricading us before we could escape.

"Umm, we're going to visit my mom at the hospital," my dad told them, plastering a smile on his face. "She has Dementia and had a heart attack last week."

"Oh, no!" they exclaimed, feigning looks of concern. "Poor woman! Oh my gosh, I know this doctor you should totally go to! He's literally the best cardiologist. Oh, and you have to bring this fruit to her. You have to make sure you take care of her!"

They chattered on and on, listing everything we *had* to do. I visualized the Huns shooting arrows, us dodging them all expertly. *Of course, they can't mind their own business. The family gossip grapevine is legendary, after all. Of course they think they're always right, and we need to live life their way.* One aunt patted my shoulder as we left. I resisted the temptation to shove off the bitter cold, ghost-like hand that had touched me. *Like she cares.* At last, we escaped from the house, and I saw my cousins laughing, having a blast. I didn't belong.

My dad started the car, saying, "Your cousin Emily's fake eyelashes looked so ridiculous on her!" I started laughing, thrilled my dad wouldn't lecture me about "loving" this venomous "family" of mine.

"I know, right?" I said. "And can you believe it took us twenty minutes to get out of the house? Of course, they can't mind their own business and just let us go."

"They mean well," my dad sighed. "But it's annoying. Oh, and do you know Uncle Benjamin kept on pestering me to make you play violin for him?" He rolled his eyes, half amused, half annoyed.

"Ugh, I know. Of course they'd do that. They kept bothering me too!" I replied, shaking my head.

"They shouldn't push you if you don't want to do it," my dad told me.

"Why don't I get along with them, Daddy?" I asked wistfully.

He sighed. "My family and your mom's family are very different. My family is shy and reserved, and we stay out of each other's business. Your mom's family is closer and doesn't know the concept of privacy. They annoy me too, but I've learned to get used to it. It is what it is. As long as your mom is happy, you know?" He shrugged. I thought of Mulan sitting with her father in the garden, him telling her about a flower that had not

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bloomed with the rest. But when it did, it would be the most magnificent of them all. A million words unspoken. He embraced her differences when others renounced them.

"Thanks for saving me, Daddy," I told him. "I hate being there."

"So do I," my dad replied. We sat in the car and drove, listening to music in silence. Even with the quiet, I felt like I was in a room full of joyous people. My dad and I didn't need to talk to feel close. We got to the hospital, where my grandma was staying after her heart attack. The floors were slippery and filthy, the air frigid. Yet it still felt warmer than the house. I watched my dad take care of my grandma and fill out her paperwork. We probably sat in the uncomfortable leather chairs as the paperwork was being filled for a half hour. But my dad didn't blink an eye. My dad, of course, had to meticulously ensure my grandma was taken care of in every way imaginable. He had always done this, even driving an hour to visit her every week to sort out her medication.

"Why do you take such good care of Grandma?" I asked my dad.

"She took such good care of me growing up," he told me. "I want to do the same for her. It's what you do for family and people you love." It was so odd to me, this feeling of loving someone for what they did, rather than because they were related to you. All my memories of being told to love family were of loving my mom's family. Specifically, caring about people who were blood-related to you. *Auntie was wrong. I was right, and Daddy agrees with me.* I belong here.

On the ride back to the reunion, my dad and I discussed random topics.

"Ugh, Taylor Swift again," my dad groaned. "Why does she always blame the other guy for the relationship ending? They share the responsibility!"

"I don't know man. But ugh, 'Can't Stop the Feeling' is playing. This song has no dynamics! It's just the same thing over and over," I complained.

"Hey Daddy, do you have any regrets in life?" I asked curiously. I always asked him out-of-the-blue questions like this.

"No," he shook his head. "I have you, your mom, and your sister. I think I have a pretty good life. Ooh, Starbucks! Want to get something? We can share a green tea frappuccino!"

"Daddy, you always say we're going to share, and then you get a large size. And then you tell me I can have it all, and I'm stuck drinking all of it myself! I'm trying to be healthy these days."

My dad chuckled. "I guess you're doing me a favor by drinking it for me then."

The car pulled up in front of the house, and I wondered how time could possibly speed that quickly. If only time could stop at this moment. Reluctant to leave my safety bubble for the flytrap, I told my dad, "Ugh, I don't want to go back. I always feel so left out. Can't we leave sooner?"

"If I had it my way, we would," my dad replied. "But we have to stay

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for your mom. Try to behave for me, will you?" I thought of how my dad always put everyone else first: my grandma, my mom, me. He was an old man hobbling into war to "bring honor to us all." I remembered how he visited his mom every week, sorted out her medication, made her she was taken care of, all because he was grateful for her. He stayed at this reunion, even if it made him feel trapped, for my mom to cheerfully spend time with her family. After all, he found joy in making her happy. I remembered back then to when I was three, at my aunt's wedding, and hid from the camera because I was scared. He shielded me from the people who were pushing me for a picture. Even today, he rescued me when he could tell how miserable I was. Family isn't the people who are blood-related to you. Your family is the people who love you for who you are, and you have a duty to love them back. Maybe I despised my mom's family and always felt like an outsider, but I didn't have to feel this way about all family. I could love only the family who made me feel like I belonged. Maybe this was the battlefield, but I had just made an ally. If my dad could put everyone else first his entire life, so could I. This time, I was Mulan racing into war for my father.

"I'll behave, Daddy."