

DEAR CHILD

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1. Popcorn

I want to have a baby.

I have several older female friends who have been in my shoes. In their early thirties, the longing to procreate drove them to tears at the sight of a babbling toddler on the MRT filling the car with the darling tinkle of their laughter. “But I was fine in the end, and you will be, too,” they reassure me. “It’s just your hormones playing tricks on you, telling you to have a child before it’s too late!” They pat me on the shoulder. “It’ll pass, just you wait and see. Then, back to business as usual: a smoke here, a glass of red wine there, a new boyfriend, traveling the world without a care.”

Yes, that’s it. It’s just my hormones sending out an alert. Picture the late-night shift at a restaurant, with your body playing the ever polite yet insistent waiter. “Last order, ma’am. Would you like anything else?” You shake your head, clinging onto your glass of red wine. No, thanks, you’re not hungry. But then your empty stomach growls. You beckon the waiter, but now he wears a bitter smile by way of apology. “Sorry, ma’am. Kitchen’s closed.” He’s certainly not lying; you glance at the service window and spot the chef’s assistant pouring a basin of soapy water onto the kitchen floor. All hope is gone. Perhaps there’ll be a handout of popcorn if the waiter or bartender takes pity on you. But you know it won’t be enough, not when the neighboring table is a cornucopia of delicious food: spicy grilled chicken wings, melty cheese fries, Mexican burritos that burst at the seams, a meat lover’s sausage pizza, and, of course, dessert – a chocolate volcano topped with shavings of macadamia nut atop spherical islands of vanilla ice cream. The luminous, magical joy of this banquet is too much to resist. With each cloud-like, insubstantial kernel that you pop into your mouth, you come closer to the tipping point of envy. Finally, you rush to their table, knife in hand, to issue a starved and desperate plea: “Can I have a bite?!”

I don’t want to become that kind of person.

I don’t want to go back to business as usual. Dangling like the cigarette in my mouth, drinking my red wine, bed-hopping, world-wandering. Drifting, for all intents and purposes, like a box of popcorn laden with sorrow and waiting to be knocked to the floor to make a sorry mess. I am not the kind of woman that wraps up her thirties single, childless, and beaming with confidence and beauty at the workplace. I’m way more likely to squat on the ground, hopelessly picking up spilt popcorn. Just you wait and see, my older girlfriends say. They may be fine, but I won’t be. I’ll be ruined.

2. My Sex Life

Wouldn't it be funny if someone who's never bought a lottery ticket openly dreamt of winning the big prize? Well, imagine me, a sexless woman, stating that I want to have a child.

But perhaps I should first say something about the scratch-and-win sex life I used to have. I bought a ticket and broke even, so naturally, I got a second one, and then a third. Same pattern every time: no loss, no win. At the time, it seemed that this could have gone on forever. I'll even have you know, dear child, that there was a moment in my life when I felt you were so very close.

We'll call him H. It was my thirtieth birthday, and I was going to board a flight to San Francisco in the evening. H, ever the busy senior executive, had extended an invitation for lunch during his brief break at noon. I took my luggage and boarded the high-speed rail, hopping off at the station where we'd agreed to meet. As I exited the station, I immediately saw H at his usual spot by the entrance gate. He stood by his car, wearing his faint smile and perfectly ironed suit pants, waving at me. After lunch at a high-end Italian restaurant, H would drive me back to the station. But when the time came, I had other ideas. "Oh, it'll be fine just as long as I am at the airport by five p.m." For good measure, I slipped my hand into the cuff of his fine jacket – a linen and cotton blend – gently rubbing his forearm back and forth.

He saw right through my coquetry, and was itching for some himself. It was time to drop the magic words. "It's my safe period of the month, you know?"

I knew that he wanted to pull the brakes and pin me right there, but lo and behold he steeled himself against his own desires. "I've only got half an hour left before my meeting at three p.m. You should have told me earlier, and we could have arranged something else for lunch." Well, I knew what the arrangements would have been. Surely takeaway from the MOS Burger just outside the station and a room in the nearby hotel. Now that was some perfect plan for my big 3-0!

Of course, I didn't say this. If you want to get laid, it's best not to be a drag. Puppy eyes: check. Whispering sweet nothings: check. Circling his inner forearm with my fingertips: check. Bingo! H gave up all resistance and drove around to the desolate redevelopment zone near the high-speed rail station. The road was brand new, almost empty of cars, with just a few equally new buildings on it. H parked in a vacant, weed-covered lot. "How about here?" I wasn't opposed to it, and seemingly out of nowhere he produced a bunch of window shades and curtains. He lost no time setting everything up, just like a seasoned mountaineer assembling his tent with a few swift moves. One had to wonder whether the last step would be pressing a button that would automatically cover the license plates.

We both stripped from the waist down, and H said, "Push the seat all the way back, and recline the backrest all the way down." No sooner had I done so than he pressed his body onto mine. Geez, I thought to myself, some CEO of car sex you are. H's attitude was that of a lusty bigwig who'd hired an escort to shag in his car behind his industrial park complex up in the mountains, right before he headed home after a hard day at the office. It was a

hasty, perfunctory affair that I mostly wanted over as quickly as possible. For all his lack of ceremony, H was always gentle and tactful in his insistence that I come before him. On this occasion, this required a fake scream to speed things up. With a low and content grunt, H came inside of me.

That was that. Back at the station, I rolled my suitcase into the ladies' restroom and sat on the toilet for a good while, reminiscing about our previous two trysts. Damn, the first round had been in this lovely boutique hotel with a bathtub the size of a double bed. Our second encounter took place at my apartment, where we indulged in dessert on the candlelit balcony before venturing into foreplay. And for our third date, a vacant lot whose future I couldn't possibly guess – possibly a factory or luxury residential block?

I'd have loved to take a shower. However, upon close inspection, I found that this toilet was not equipped with the usual bidet hose you find in Southeast Asia. So, let's sum up the scenario: I was flying to San Francisco carrying H's semen as some precious cargo *du jour*, on my birthday. In fact, flying over the International Date Line meant that it would still be my birthday by the time I landed at my destination. Could it be, dear child, that this would be your date of conception?

If it had been, you truly would have seen so many neat places on your first trip with me: Fisherman's Wharf, the Golden Gate Bridge, The Castro, Napa wineries, City Lights Bookstore, even Francis Ford Coppola's very own Italian bar and restaurant, Café Zoetrope, not to mention Haight-Ashbury, home to San Francisco's 1960's countercultural movement. On that note, might you have grown into a hippie yourself?

Every morning during my trip I made use of the public computer downstairs in the hotel lobby, surfing the Internet and checking my email inbox, though H didn't ever write me. I didn't shoot him a single line, either. Seven days passed and I returned to Taipei, where the phone never rang. After a few days of torture, I finally attempted a call, but it was all in vain. His adieu arrived two days later via email. "You're a good girl. I think you should seek whatever happiness truly belongs to you."

What a heap of bullshit. Not that knowing this saved me from crying my eyes out in front of my computer all morning long. And needless to say, I was not pregnant.

Fare thee well, H. Time for my second scratch-and-win ticket – L, the Western backpacker.

L and I met in Taipei, at the self-help section of a local bookstore. He kept his English simple enough that I could follow his conversation on stuff like yoga, India, Osho, the New Age movement, and more. At the end, he said: "It's been nice talking to you. Have a lovely day." "You too," I said, and then we went our separate ways. After a short while – maybe thirty minutes, maybe an hour – I walked out of the bookstore and saw L a short distance away, facing the road and waiting for something. That something wasn't a cab, or a friend, or anything tangible. Rather, I felt he was waiting for something of an ambiguous nature, something unknown and fleeting. His silhouette conveyed, ever so slightly, a sense of trance and confusion, as well as the urge to search for something. And though others may not have understood, I did. After all, I was no stranger to any of those things, though it's worth mentioning that in the end, I found out I was waiting for nothing.

I walked up to where he stood and passed by with a polite greeting: “Bye-bye.” He smiled and nodded, and I turned around to head towards the nearest MRT station. Sure enough, L followed me. “Want to come over to my place?” I said yes.

Our cab took us to the sort of standard serviced apartment that laowai rent in Taipei for short stays that exceed the usual tourist trip. Once we were at his place, the next hour or so went like this: clothes off, sex, shower, clothes back on, back to the lobby downstairs and out into the streets, where we finally parted at the first intersection at an exact angle of ninety degrees, under the same shade of dusk that had seen us enter his block.

It really was too short. We did it from behind, then from the front, and then we came. Kind of like the standard, fast-paced course of events at a fast-food joint. No kissing, no hugging – only the one point of contact for our bodies. We showered separately, and separately we used a pair of washed, white towels. The one he handed me, he placed in the washing machine as soon as I got dressed, like they do at a spa (or, thinking back on it, more like one of those ten-minute express massage places with the blind masseurs). I’d come out of the shower and found him standing by the balcony, looking outside. When I went over to hug his naked body from behind, his hand reached out to pinch my buttocks through the towel.

“I don’t really do this kind of stuff often, even if I look the part,” he said in the elevator. He lent me two books, though I vaguely sensed that it didn’t matter whether I ever returned them, just like it wouldn’t matter if we ever met again. But we did meet again. In fact, he texted me every two or three weeks over the course of the next few months, each time leading to an exact reenactment of our first encounter.

It was a no-brainer to me that L must always wear a condom. Prior to landing here, he’d been to India, Indonesia and Thailand. No doubt he’d had his fun along the way, and I thought that a condom was the minimal modicum of courtesy, safety, and hygiene. This meant that he would never accidentally father a mixed Taiwanese-European child bearing his blond hair and blue eyes. However, L wasn’t all that thrilled about my precautions. He often lost his boner to the condom, which would inevitably fluster and frustrate him. This became a problem every time we had sex, and eventually I sought advice from Mori, my gay bestie and an expert at detecting nonsense. First things first, Mori wanted pictures – was L handsome enough to be worth the trouble? Problem was, I didn’t dare to take even a selfie with him. Pictures felt so damn awkward in the context of our situation. “Fair enough, then let’s talk physics.” The veracity of his claims aside, Mori was nothing if not a thorough teacher: “With laowai, what you gain in size you lose in endurance.” In other words, life’s imperfect and a girl couldn’t have it all.

Here’s an anecdote to show just how clumsy L was with condoms. He’d bought the usual box of three, wrapped in plastic film, except he couldn’t tear open the stubborn thing to save his life. Questions came to my mind as I watched him struggle. If every box came with three condoms, why the need for a brand new box every time I was there? Where had the other two gone? But I never asked; it felt moot. Condoms didn’t magically vanish into thin air, and what did I expect L to say? He’d play it smooth and naïve – he’d let the neighbor have a few. So, I stayed silent, even if I couldn’t say that I didn’t care about the truth. After

all, I was happy to stand there, stark naked, sulky and merciless. “Sweetheart, do you need a hand?” Fat chance I’d help. L fumbled in a desperate race against physics as his member slowly went soft. I just looked on, exacting a wretched vengeance that delivered no tangible benefit to me.

Eventually, L grabbed a fruit knife from his kitchen counter. His final attempt to pierce the plastic wrapping took a sharp turn when his hand slipped and the blade tip dug into his palm. Blood gushed out. I thought to myself, “Well, darn, now you’re *really* going to lose that boner,” as I went over to grab his hand and inspect the wound. The cut wasn’t excessively large, but it was deep. I passed him a clump of toilet paper. “Take this and press it against the wound.” We dressed in a hurry, and rushed into a cab bound for the hospital, where L got two stitches from the surgeon on duty.

The shock had passed somewhat once we were in the cab back to his place, and finally we burst into laughter like crazed children. L could hardly catch his breath as I retold the account of the facts I had given the surgeon: “Oysters. He was opening oysters, doctor.” And what did the surgeon say? “Oh, do be careful in the future. Oysters are hard to open like that.” The cab driver may well have thought we had lost our minds, but we didn’t care. “You’re a genius,” L proclaimed. He wrapped an arm around my shoulders and planted a kiss on my forehead.

Speaking of the cab driver, he probably also assumed that I was some flighty chick catering to *gweilo* in nightclubs. Nope, not me. I just hang around and fling myself at whatever comes my way.

Anyway, L and I still had it in us to finish what we’d started. In fact, this was also the only time he actually asked me to stay the night, which we spent with his uninjured hand resting on my head. However, there was no breakthrough in our relationship, and just two months later he returned to Europe. On the day he left, I sent him a two-word farewell text – *Bon voyage* – from the MRT. The subway car was packed. Standing by the glass door my reflection stared back at me sad and slightly pouty. After first hopping out at my station, I changed my mind and switched to the opposite platform, downtown-bound, on my way to Mori’s bar.

As it turned out, Mori had new staff. Ah-Ke, his former bartender, had been unrivaled at reading customers to craft personalized cocktails based on their state of mind. He could serve you your melancholic sigh at the memory of a past flame, or fill a highball glass with your fantasy of notorious South Korean entrepreneur, former actor, and hottie extraordinaire Bae Yong-joon showing up at your place at four a.m. to fix your AC unit. I didn’t ask where he’d gone, though. Mori had come over to greet me, singing the praises of the new bartender, the shy, introverted Ah-Yu.

“What are you having tonight?”

“Something sour.” Immediately, I added: “Mori, if I’ve got a bun in the oven, mix of local and European, I’m handing it off to you guys as soon as it pops out.”

Seeing I was raving again, Mori walked out from behind the bar. “Aw, c’mere, open up your arms and gimme a hug.”

Damn this gay man for knowing my weak spot! His plump palm held my head gently, and my tears began to flow. Mori had an offer. "My new guy is a bit of a psychic. Want him to lend you a hand?" In other words, I was to wipe my tears and ask a question. Fair enough; when would I give birth to a child?

Quiet Ah-Yu looked into my eyes for a few seconds before lowering his head, as though he were intently listening to some private, silent broadcast. Finally, he looked up and said, "A little boy with big, round eyes is following you around. He's waiting for you to bring him into this world." I looked around the bar. "Huh? Where is he now?" "Well, everywhere." This was in line with what another stalwart friend, Big Bro, once told me. "Kids are mysterious creatures. When they want to come, they find a way. What's really crucial is the connection – that split second when mommy and daddy share a spark. There's love in that lightning flash that will persuade your child to come."

Oh, yes. Love. Is that so, dear child? Well then, you must have been disappointed with Mommy when she messed around with Daddy H in the vacant lot near to the high-speed rail station. And you sure weren't impressed with Mommy laughing her head off like a slutty hyena when Daddy L slashed his hand trying to open a condom box with a fruit knife, am I right?

3. I Only Need One Word

Love. What is love? Can you ever separate it from sex? Is it love or lust that your man feels for you? On any given appointment at the hair salon, you'll find me reading the likes of *Cosmopolitan*, and though these magazines' questionnaires and psychological advice may seem outdated, I dutifully consume their contents from cover to cover. A foolproof guide to the female orgasm. Eight tips to put your man on cloud nine. I read it all. No wonder then I routinely interrogated Mori in the same fashion about my private life. Listen, Mori, H drives with one hand, so that he can hold my hand with the other. Is that love? Hey, Mori, L always slips my bangs behind my ears for me when I'm reading a book. Is that love?

I wasn't the only customer at Mori's that night. At the other end of the bar sat a mature woman, beautifully stylish and confident, fitted with a long, lush set of fake eyelashes. With the kind of charming smile that is reserved for a naïve little sister, she said: "Baby girl, if you're willing to swallow – that's love right there."

Wow, chill there, big sis. If it really comes down to that, then I've never loved a man. I did give it a go once with L, which resulted in my rushing to the toilet to puke my guts out for a good while. So cringe.

In all honesty, though, I'm just feigning ignorance with Mori. The truth is I've always been clear on whether I loved a man. It all boils down to the farewell.

N and I never uttered the word "love" – not once during the two years that we spent entangled in our passionate, troubled affair. Then, a phone call: he was three days away from boarding a plane to Los Angeles where he would immigrate with his family, never to return. There were some books of mine left at his place; did I want to go fetch them, or

should he bring them over? (Oh, thank you for this polite and civilized break-up ritual. If only you had the guts to suggest simply shipping the books to me.)

I went over to his place anyway. I was still sharing an apartment at the time, and I used to visit his studio weekly. His place had always been to me the epitome of comfort, but now it was pared down to a virtually blank canvas. There was the bag with my books, and a long sofa for us to take awkward seats on at either end, seemingly unable to say a word.

Two years before, I'd been to this very same apartment with a group of friends for dinner and drinks. When the time came to leave, someone went to call the elevator while the rest of us stood by the entrance, putting our shoes back on. N issued a command as I bent down to lace up my flat, ankle-length sandals.

"You stay."

So that's what I did. I sat back on the sofa obediently, waiting for him to see his friends off. That's how our story started.

"I've got some leftover dishes in the kitchen, if you'd care for them," he said, as if this was the gentlest way to bid farewell. I shook my head. My gaze was fixated on the white-tiled floor as two big fat tears rolled down my cheeks. "I only need one word," I said. "Say it, and I'll give up everything, buy a plane ticket, and follow you to the United States."

When I looked up, I saw his face was glistening with tears. Our eyes locked. He took me in his arms before replying: "You're still young. You've still got a long road to travel." He walked me to the door, grazed my left cheek with a finger, and said his final words to me: "Now, go be happy." I insisted: "Just one word, and I'll be at your side." For a wimp like me, that was probably my bravest moment ever.

He was gone. I coped with N's departure from my life with yoga – I signed up for every class I could find, and lost a ton of weight over the course of the following month. When I finally figured out there was no point in staying willingly blind, I turned to N's friends for the truth. He'd been cheating on me all along. In fact, he'd taken the other woman to the United States to start a new life together.

Though in the US, N still wrote to me sometimes. It was always careless texting: funny clips, reels featuring cute puppies and kittens, shocking fast-food chain conspiracy theories. And I replied in much the same fashion – I never asked, for instance, "Why did you cry that night?" It was as though we were carrying out routine checks on each other's existence. Two years passed in a flash; I'd met H and L one after another, and one after another they disappeared from my life.

You might be wondering whether I always seem to place myself out of love's reach due to some weighty emotional trauma. No, no, it really isn't the case. When it comes to love, there are no causal laws that perfectly explain everything. Every time a man shows up in my life, I fervently hope he will be the one to stay – please, oh please, let me have a stable, committed relationship with him; please may he father my child and be my happily ever after. But I can't keep any of these men by my side. They percolate through what seems to be a large hole carved in my body.

No cause and effect, but something is at work, filling in the blanks as soon as they appear. Just two days after L's departure, I received an unexpected invitation via text from N. *Will you come to the United States for New Year's Eve?*

I told myself it was just another scratch-and-win ticket, that I no longer hoped to hear that one word I'd been longing to hear. Even so, I didn't hesitate to spend a fortune on a plane ticket, and went to meet N at a homestay he booked for me in LA's Chinatown. He kept me company for the few days I was in LA, never returning home even once. Then we set out on a journey that had us crossing the US-Mexico border to Tijuana on New Year's Eve before heading to Las Vegas for a week of feasting and fun. Finally, we disappeared into the desert, where we stayed in a cabin deep in a national park camping area prior to our return to LA. Obviously, we slept in the same bed at night, but otherwise we behaved like friends. In fact, we made a point of saying as much. We were met with that quintessential American attentiveness, somewhat cloying and excessive, at every supermarket, brand-name outlet, restaurant, bar and gambling table: "Oh, Mom and Dad out having fun without the kids, huh?" And every time we gave the same tacit reply: "No, we're actually just friends."

I don't quite remember how far into the journey this happened, but one night after sex, I began to cry in his arms, pleading with him to let me bear his child. No, it wouldn't be his child; I'd raise the kid on my own; he wouldn't ever hear from me; we could even sign a waiver. N refused. He argued that he'd never be able to shake off the immense burden of knowing that he'd brought a new life into the world. He also pointed out that I was much too naïve and reckless for my own good.

"But I will love this child dearly!" I protested, crying. "I really will love them so." I cried as though the whole world had let me down; I wailed myself into self-loathing, and then into sleep.

N actually went on to initiate a second round of dazed, drowsy sex that night; for us, just the presence of the other was a kind of seduction. Again, he pulled out at the last moment and came on my belly. I wanted to rush to the restroom, eager to dip a finger or a tissue in his seed to try and force a miracle – something like one of those sensationalist health articles: "Woman gets pregnant swimming at the pool!"

But I couldn't move. I couldn't even open my eyes. The tears and semen on my body pinned me to our bed, like invisible ropes. I could only let the dense fatigue wash over me, pushing me into a deep, restorative slumber. When I woke up, it was already dawn. There was no telling how long N had been awake, but he sat neatly dressed in front of the window, while I still lay naked in bed. In that soft, white nest I quietly took in his softly backlit silhouette before he turned and, with a tender look, asked: "Shall I go downstairs and buy you a coffee?"

On the last day, N drove me to the airport, where he parked the car in the temporary unloading zone before getting out to help with my luggage. I knew he was not good at parting. Even hugs and kisses felt too heavy. So, I just gave him a toothy smile and said: "Bye-bye." I turned and began walking, dragging my suitcase behind me, when suddenly I felt N's hands on my shoulders. Leaning close to me, he spoke his familiar command: "Go be happy."

I didn't look back. I entered the departure hall, passed through the annoying security checks, and boarded my plane. Flight attendants came over thrice during the fourteen-hour flight, offering meals that I did not touch. Neither did I read a book nor watch a movie. I just cradled myself, sleeping intermittently. When the plane was about to land, my neighbor, a handsome Southeast Asian guy, kindly offered me a piece of chewing gum, but again I shook my head. I knew that the main significance of my scratch-and-win ticket to the United States was that I'd won nothing. No exchanges allowed. Okay, I find metaphors so annoying. Long story short, I realized that I could no longer play the cute, whiny airhead when I vented to my girlfriends about these relationships that fizzled out. I could no longer say – ah, they were silly flings, things I did for fun. No, I had to face the truth. And the truth was that I was a wreck of a whore, uncherished and crushed by rejection.

Yes, it's cruel to never know love. But you wouldn't rage at a slot machine after feeding it all your money. You wouldn't shake its head from its hypothetical shoulders, and kneel at its feet, wailing: "I was lucky yesterday, so why are you doing this to me today?" Of course, you would do no such thing. In the end, you gave it away voluntarily.

You shouldn't assume you've been wronged because someone didn't give you an equal return on your investment, let alone double it. You're the one who decided to take the risk, and now, all you can say is, "Oh wow, I guess I was unlucky. What a shame."

And from that moment, poor, hapless me no longer had a sex life.

4. Bonding with the BUMP

The friends I did keep around in my life, I grouped under a most humorous banner – the BUMP, aka Bureau of Unrelenting Motherhood Persuasion. At the core of this supportive squad of college buddies turned lifelong pals is a veritable power couple that has been immersed in a love marathon spanning fifteen years and counting. They're parents to a child named Che – more on that later – so let's call them Mama Che and Papa Che. Together, they've conquered every mountain in Taiwan, trekking countless alpine streams. Freshly graduated from university, they moved onto ice climbing in Colorado and rock climbing in Argentina, where they summited Aconcagua, the highest peak in South America, standing at a staggering 7,000 meters.

To top it all off, Papa Che went and completed the Seven Summits. Upon his triumphant return from Everest, on arrival at the airport with his team, he proposed to Mama Che, much to the delight of the gathered reporters. Crazy lovebirds that they are, they couldn't wait to be married before heading off on their honeymoon, and they were with child by the time they returned to Taiwan. Their eldest's affectionate nickname is an homage to Ernesto "Che" Guevara.

Speaking of the honeymoon, Mama and Papa Che's itinerary featured two cities – Paris and Barcelona. It was clear that Baby Che was the couple's happy souvenir, however the question stood as to where he'd been conceived.

I often visited the happy little family at their home in southern Taiwan. On one of these occasions, when Baby Che was about ten months old, I joked with his adoring mother.

“So, you guys never checked for a label.”

“Huh? A label?”

“Yeah, the label. Made in Paris? Made in Barcelona? Inquiring minds want to know.”

Mama Che cracked up at my corny joke, and soon enough we all burst into laughter, Che included. Papa Che, who had been loosely following the scene from his office next door, feigned anger: “Hey, my child is 100% Taiwanese, alright?”

Baby Che was blissfully oblivious to our tomfoolery, but he seemed thrilled to be there. He grabbed at his baby bottle and rolled around between his mother and me, giggling away in his delightfully high-pitched voice.

Mama and Papa Che had been my favorite pair of seniors in college. Their traveling and climbing exploits, however awe-inspiring, were just a part-time gig. More impressive was the fact that both had received scholarships to pursue their PhDs abroad (though Papa Che would beg to differ: “Playing around is our main job. Academia is the side hustle.”) In this next season of life in sunny, southern Taiwan, they were still thriving, having recently bought a house and a car. In this idyllic space, they’d readied themselves to spend the rest of their enviable lives teaching and raising a family. What a stark contrast to my own prospects: a piecemeal degree and a messy private life. If pressed to say where I might have come out ahead, I would probably have to say “freedom”.

Freedom, oh, freedom. During those years, my friends would never miss out on the chance to gather us all in the south after one of their mountain trips. We often went to Sizihwan beach in Kaohsiung, where we’d partake of cold beers and fresh seafood, watch the sunset, and lie in a row on the jetty by Sun Yat-sen University. Someone would inevitably bring out their guitar, and we’d belt Bobby Chen’s songs one after another into the sea breeze. I myself was partial to “Crowded Paradise”:

Say good-bye to the crowded paradise.

I want you freedom, like a bird.

By the time Mama and Papa Che finally settled down, I had matured somewhat myself, no longer deserting my friends at the slightest hint of romance. They would often invite me down south, and I’d buy a high-speed rail ticket for what we called a “family day”. I was present for many of Baby Che’s early milestones: six months, ten months, then his first birthday, followed by twenty-four-months and his subsequent entrance into toddlerhood. He went from crawling to stumbling and eventually running. He was also learning to talk up a storm: Auntie! Daddy! Mommy! Thank you! Bye-bye. Mama Che was undergoing her own transformation during her second pregnancy, which I equally bore witness to: twenty weeks, twenty-four weeks, thirty weeks. Our guitar days, caressed by the sea breeze, were now behind us. Instead, we went to the supermarket as a family. It didn’t take long until the parents noticed that I was a good nanny and entrusted me with their eldest and the shopping cart. Thus, toddler Che and I began our supermarket adventures, exploring

delicacies from imported Australian short ribs and Italian cheese, to a bottle of Chateau Mont Perat 2001 Bordeaux, a highly coveted wine featured early on in Agi Tadashi's and Okimoto Shu's manga *The Drops of God*. Mama and Papa Che were getting their me time, and I, on the other hand, enjoyed my stint as nanny. I sang nursery rhymes with little Che, learned to speak his own secret language of nonsense syllables, and lifted him to shelves or the edge of freezers, so that he could see everything. Look, Baby Che, fish. Do you want to eat fish? Look, Baby Che, milk. Did you drink your milkies today? At the end, we'd meet back up with his parents, and Papa Che would inquire about my "single motherhood internship". "Ding, ding, ding!" I replied. "Challenge passed." Baby Che echoed me: "Ding, ding, ding!"

Together, we made our way back to Mama and Papa Che's family home, the epitome of domestic prosperity with a robot vacuum cleaner, a dishwasher, and a lovely table set for our dinner guests: Mama and Papa Jiang and Baby Jiang, two-and-a-half at the time. Mama and Papa Jiang were also important members of the BUMP Squad. Upon arrival, their kid immediately partnered up with Baby Che to topple the toy storage box. Laughing and mimicking small animals, they chased each other, jumping and generally treating the house as their jungle. In my role as honorary aunt, I got to sit with my adult peers, all of us holding our own toys, otherwise known as wine glasses. It was time for Papa Che, in his capacity as presiding member of the BUMP, to persevere at their core mission: convincing me to reproduce.

"You really must have a child, even if it means being a single mother."

"Meh. I'd rather wait a couple of years until I'm more financially settled."

"Having a baby isn't like planting flowers, you know. You don't just say you want a kid and voilà, you're cradling a baby. It's like your scriptwriting, you don't sell one on the first go. You've got to put the time in. Write a few that just sit on the shelf for a while."

"I'll have you know scriptwriting isn't like a fast-food breakfast sandwich, you don't fry them up and set them aside for later."

"All I am saying is, someday you'll turn forty and you'll realize that you've done everything you wanted to do. And then what? If you haven't had kids by then, what are you going to do? Go to outer space?"

"Well yeah, maybe I'll find an astronaut to father my child."

Our nonsense was impressive, but nothing compared to Mama Jiang's drunken declaration, which just about made her husband drop his wine glass. "Even if our marriage tanks, I will never regret having a child!"

I can believe that she has no regrets. After all, I have plenty of friends who were determined to remain DINKs for life until an unplanned pregnancy came along. One after the next, they welcomed new life into this world and poured themselves into daily routines defined by feedings, diaper changing, sleep deprivation, and the purchasing of all sorts of baby stuff at the expense of their disposable income. They no longer indulge in fancy wines, but they all agree on one thing: no regrets.

Every time I took the high-speed train back north after a meeting with the BUMP squad, I found that my tolerance for crying babies and rowdy toddlers in the train car had increased. I no longer was a sour-faced auntie; my internship with Baby Che was obviously

bearing fruit and my jagged edges were being smoothed over. And that's a good thing, my child, because if you don't come, who knows how long my sharp corners will go on hurting myself and others.

Big Bro advised me to secure a loving partner before I went for kids. We were both born in the year of the monkey, separated by two cycles, so he was twenty-four years my senior, the same age as my mother. He had a son, another monkey – but two cycles my junior – a very much wanted child that came into Big Bro's life at the ripe age of forty-eight. His advice made me pout as though I were his long lost eldest daughter: I was planning to go to Bali and sleep with every man I could find. The baby could come out black, white, or yellow, for all I cared. Big Bro urged me not to be reckless, but there's no stopping me once I've set my mind on something.

And I really did go, but my performance fell utterly short of my goals. Each day, my walks around Ubud, a mountain town in Bali, earned me catcalls from the burly Indonesian men that sat outside the most popular cafés. "Hey, baby! Are you looking for a boyfriend?" But I always quickened my pace, like a complete wimp. Meanwhile, many of my fellow female solo travelers, whether Western or Asian, seemed to have no trouble finding themselves companions, though I can't say that they didn't have to pay for them. One day I saw a local boy escort a plump, fair-skinned Korean girl to the bus stop before her departure. He grabbed her hand and said: "Email me, okay?" The girl touched his face lightly. For all I knew she already had a mixed Indonesian-Korean baby growing in her belly. Why couldn't I bring myself to do this thing other women seemed to have no trouble with? Was I too proud? Or, simply too choosy?

Mori had offered to help set me up with one of the anarchist rock musicians that performed at his bar in exchange for free drinks and a roof over their heads for the night. God knew they were willing to sleep with anyone, Mori said, so what objections could they have to helping an older gal like myself achieve her dreams? At the time I joked that I'd be willing to give them some loose change for milk money. A perfect deal! I said, laughing it off.

Occasionally, I'd spot some tall and handsome guy on the street looking like a Korean model and text Papa Che excitedly: "Alert, alert! Target sighted, what next?" He would invariably reply with crystal clear instructions: "Mate on the spot! What else?" But the truth was, I couldn't be bothered to even strike up a conversation with these men. They just weren't my type. I'm all words, no action. As Big Bro once told me, it's all about love. That love in the moment when the sparks fly, he said. Otherwise, who'd bother to bring a child into this world? Are you just going to close your eyes, spread your legs, grit your teeth, and clutch the bedsheets? What was the point if there was no love?

In the end, I spent most of my time in Bali at a yoga center surrounded by rice paddies, working on my breathing, meditation, and chanting. Mori made a really cruel remark about this. "Careful with getting hooked to those spiritual retreats. You only ever find three kinds of chicks there: divorcées, widows, and leftover, unloved women. You don't want to end up like that." I know I fall squarely into the third category, but I'm at peace with it. One day I bawled my eyes out during the chanting session as the instructor led us in my favorite prayer: *Lokah Samastah Sukhino Bhavantu*. "May everyone in the whole world be

happy." I sang it over and over, forgiving each of the men who'd passed through my life, and then extending that same forgiveness to myself, again and again.

5. Little Boy

My Bali trip came to an end, and I took an early morning flight back to Taiwan. No sooner had I turned on my phone upon landing than I received a WhatsApp message in the BUMP group chat: "Hell, yeah, guys! 2-0!"

Ah, Mama Che had given birth three days ago. Over the course of the next few days, we were flooded by a never-ending carousel of adorable videos that I never skipped, not even once. Three-day-old Baby Sister Che was a miniature of her older brother – tiny button nose and puckered mouth, lively eyes that wandered around leisurely, eager to look at the world, and little yawns that could melt multitudes. "Aww, she's so beautiful! I'd better hurry up and have a baby boy to be her little boyfriend!" For good measure, I added a plethora of kiss emojis.

Perhaps I'd absorbed too much positive energy in Bali, or maybe it was the light and warmth radiating from the BUMP chat group, but I didn't go straight home to sleep, like I'd typically do after a trip. Instead, I took the airport bus directly to a still sparsely populated downtown department store, where I made the most of the early morning to shop for baby gifts. Before heading to the children's clothing department, I browsed the stalls on the first floor for essential oils and fragrances, visiting several to compare quality and price before finally returning to the first. The clerk came over to greet me with feigned familiarity and asked: "Would you like to try our eucalyptus essential oil? It's wonderful to clear up your child's stuffy nose!" "Uh, I don't have a child just yet." I pulled at the loose Balinese cotton and linen dress I was wearing and tilted my head in a show of cuteness: "And I'm not pregnant either. It's just a baby doll dress." The clerk apologized hurriedly. "Oh, goodness, I am sorry. I just saw you walk by with a little boy, so I thought he was your child... so strange!"

On hearing these words, I abruptly put down the essential oil cap in my hand. "What did he look like?" I demanded, in full interrogation mode. Now I'd obviously frightened the clerk, a thin, sheepish man. "Well, he had round, big eyes," he replied timidly. "He was such a cutie." I took a deep breath. *Oh my God.*

"Where is he now?" I asked, taking a deep breath.

"Ma'am, I didn't see him again after you passed by the first time."

"So, where do you think he went?"

"Oh, I thought you might have handed him over to your Filipino maid." He stuck out his tongue after he finished speaking. Why, thank you for mistaking me for a wealthy housewife.

"Are you some sort of medium?"

The clerk looked at me surprised, and I lowered my voice. "What I mean is, can you see things that other people can't see?"

He looked at me hesitantly, and then nodded.

Long story short, I bought a ton of essential oils to make up for the awkwardness of this exchange. After paying the bill, the fatigue and exhaustion of the flight suddenly came over me. I dragged my suitcase and shopping bag into the nearest restroom to wash my face. Looking in the mirror, I slowly wiped the water droplets from my face with a tissue, pressing down on the dark circles under my eyes with a forced smile. As I peered into this unknown existence, I thought to myself, as if sharing a secret nobody else knew: "Dear child, Mommy may have just come back from far away, but I know that you are very close."

(The End)