**We Were Wildlife**

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“Tell me something useless,” you say.

I begin. I flip between screens on my iPhone. I look up odd animal facts. It’s how we always pass the time on these car rides. As teenagers during sleepovers, it was how-to articles in *Vogue* or *Cosmo*. When your dad came to check on us, we hid the magazines under your sheets. We’d try the words out on our tongues: *blowjob*, *sixty-nine.* We’d wonder when we’d get our chance. Now, I’m telling you about koalas that feed their joeys feces and the polar bears that must gain 400 pounds or reabsorb their fetus. Sloths that eat their young because they are too sick to survive. My fingers scroll over the paragraphs about Mei Xiang, that panda at the National Zoo.

These are not the right kind of facts, I think, so I turn my attention to our playlist.

You open the car windows. It’s hot and the Santa Ana winds are in full swing; warm air rushes in. This dry heat makes my skin crack. This, too, is why your son has cracked. The constant weather fluctuations from sun to clouds to dust and drought with no rain has played a part in his mania and suicidal ideations.

You started out with more luck, you, with your long skinny frame and vibrantly curly hair. Boys adored you; they always wanted more. And you always reported back.

“Remember that time my mom caught us looking at porn?” I ask.

You perk up and pat my arm. You mimic my mother’s high-pitched scolding. “Now girls, you know, no man looks like that. No man is that big.”

“Was it true?” I ask.

“Wasn’t true,” you reply.

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We arrive at the Children’s Hospital after traveling north on the 5 forever. You switched lanes, weaving back and forth in a meditative stupor. I switched songs, reading your facial expressions for what was appropriate. We go through an entire decade: the ‘90s. Those years when your son was little and there was so much promise, and still so many problems. The years when life set in.

You’ll listen to anything from that Ready to Die album or Tupac’s Me Against the World. You wanted your son to feel comfortable in his own skin. He liked ballet, but your husband didn’t want a Baryshnikov in the family. You didn’t care if he wore tutus. Your husband fought back—buying him a football uniform and claiming that those were the only tights he’d ever wear.

The divorce was inevitable: a happy ending for you both.

And soon enough, your son stopped wearing those tights.

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Failure to thrive? Mood disorder? Anxiety? Depression? ADHD? Bipolar? Schizophrenia?

Still, you’ve tried it all for your son, hoping to make the real world more bearable through Ritalin, stimulants, non-stimulants, meditation, breathwork, in-patient, and outpatient treatments.

“Why?” he’d ask.

“Because,” you’d say, as you drug him to his never-ending list of therapists and psychiatrists, “we have to live through it till the end.”

Later, you realize you forgot to mention joy, or sunsets, or friendships, and that intense satisfaction that comes with creating something beautiful, like him.

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It’s a secret knock, a gentle rap on the door. A quick ID check at the nurse’s station.

He’s dressed in his hospital-best: a blue gown with white trim showing his rear end. He’s not wearing any underwear. You point this out gleefully.

We laugh. There’s a sparkle in his eyes behind the medication. Your son curtsies.

You kiss him. You take in his whole body.

We sit in the living room. I move into the corner of the couch and grab a magazine; I don’t want to stare. I want to give you some time with your son on your own. But I know it won’t last. There’s a reason we are behind a locked door.

A few others around us are playing board games or watching TV. It’s quiet, but not silent. A rustle from an orderly pushing a blood pressure monitor from one patient to the next checking their vitals. A low guttural howl comes from a room down the hall.

When it happens, I don’t see it. I hear the table topple over and break under the weight of your son. Before I get up, two nurses are on top of him. It takes a third and a shot of sedative for him to calm down. He screams and kicks for a long time, but they let you stay with him.

Specks of his blood stain your shirt. I know you’ll stay to caress his hair. You’ll stay till he’s calm.

I don’t have to stay. I hit the hallway and run, not waiting for the elevator, and shuffling down the stairs — two at a time.

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Here’s that fact about Mei, that giant panda, that’s been bugging me. She stopped caring for one of her cubs; she wouldn’t even hold it. Seems she made a choice.

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A few years back, you sent me a video labeled *then*.

We’re in my dad’s old sports car, with the desert on both sides of us. There’s that hot breeze pushing through the windows and moving through your hair.

You squeeze through the sunroof and shimmy, shimmy, shake.

Wild, carefree.