



Miss You

Anonymous

“We should all take a family trip to Hawaii,” my brother said. “You know, while Dad’s health is still okay.” My oldest brother would take care of the cost for my parents. It was a sign of our traditional family values that the oldest child took care of my parents’ finances now that they were in their old age. A conventional patriarchy states that everyone silently falls in line. We were a line of six. We were immigrants, and managed to flee our country’s war with each other and our family values. We were all full grown adults now, married with children, except for the oldest brother who tried to get married in his fifties and quickly got divorced. We had survived upheaval, prejudice, and the 1980’s in America. Surely we were all in a position now to afford a family trip. It turns out, we were all able to go, except for one of us.

My husband and two children couldn’t afford to go to Hawaii, and everyone knew it. We were living on one income and had been for the last seven years. Before that were a few years of a beginning savings since we both had jobs. But that money quickly dissolved when I didn’t return to work after my first child and when my husband lost his job and the wages he had been promised for the last six months, which he had kept a secret until the business finally went bankrupt and the spell was broken. We sold our house to pay off the debt we had acquired and rented houses from year to year. Desperately, we even lived with one of my sisters for a year because we didn’t have enough in savings for the down payment of another rental.

When my brother proposed the idea of Hawaii, it wouldn’t happen for a year. That would give everyone time to plan and save money. Secretly, I hoped. Six months went by and the emails started. Three more months went by and my brother needed a head count. It looked like we needed to rent two large houses to accommodate everyone. Everyone’s share of the deposit money was due. I asked my husband, how did it look? Were we going to be able to go? He looked at me and said, “I don’t think we can afford it.” I cried and didn’t talk to him for weeks. I didn’t ask further about it, and I didn’t respond to my brother’s emails, except in silence. Nine years later I would ask my husband again about this trip to Hawaii that we never took, as our divorce was now clearly in sight. He admitted that he never made any attempt to save money for the year before the trip. He just didn’t think we could afford it, so he never even tried.

The plane tickets were bought by my siblings, spouses, and children, and one cousin from Pennsylvania who was conveniently told and invited. Now the trip was nearly a few days away, and slowly, one, two, and then three of my family members

called me and asked me if I could do them a favor. Could I pick up their newspapers from their driveway while they were gone? You see, they were going to be gone for over two weeks, and if two weeks of newspapers were piled up in the driveway, well then it would invite robbers. Could I do this for them?

And I did. For two weeks, I drove around town to each of their houses to clean the newspapers out of their driveway. Every day for two weeks, I wondered what they were doing today. When they returned I would see the photos, even the special ones. My family had hired a professional photographer to take a family portrait, on the cliffs overlooking the ocean. Everyone wore white with a flower lei. The white, the blue, their faces, made for a beautiful photo. One sister had one of them blown up on a canvas to hang in her living room.

I thought about how they had all left me. Every single one of them, including my mother and father. In the nine years since, not one of them has ever spoken to me about it. I wonder why I did it, why I said yes to picking up their newspapers. I remember I didn't want to seem difficult.

When they returned, I had missed them. I wanted to be seen again. I went to family dinners again. When they passed around photo books, I looked at them, and kept from crying. I felt so ashamed of myself as I sat there looking at their faces. But it was all I could do. And all I've ever done since. Until now when the weight of this memory heaves one too many weights upon me as life's tallest buildings of control and meaning crumble all around me.

When the pandemic hit, I was terrified of getting sick. Three months, four months, it's been seven. I have seen my mother on the computer screen, and while I have heard that some of my siblings have taken the risk to go over for dinner, I don't. Sometimes I'll get a typed message. "Miss you," my mother sends. I've been missing you for nine years, Mom, most likely more. But I don't reply with that. I don't reply at all. Now as the months wear on, I am no longer afraid of getting sick, I am afraid that I have already died. I am afraid I've made myself sick with the poison that shame makes me swallow. Until I can separate it out of me, like oil and water. A natural rejection based on what things are made of. I think to myself, estrangement comes in many forms. Pandemic or otherwise.

