

Moment of Truth

by Deborah Jiang-Stein

When the woman asks, she means well.

Say it's the second Sunday in May, Mother's Day, and say you're in Chicago visiting your aunt again this year to stay with her most of the spring. You do it every year, ever since she moved here to live with a man, and to get away from Seattle. You visit to get away, too.

But the woman across the hall, who's lived there for years, intercepts you when you walk out of your aunt's apartment. Her timing is uncanny. She catches up to your stride as you march out the front door, down the building steps, on the way to the train.

"Where you headed?" she asks, and you can't avoid the truth because you know she knows you do this when you visit, spend every Sunday afternoon at the Belmont Flower Market. You love flowers like you were a master gardener in another life.

Aunt Fran says your mama loves flowers, too, but you got nothing to prove it except that one photo, the only one you have of the woman other people call your mother. You don't know her enough to call her that. In truth, you don't know her at all.

You always want to be with flowers, their beauty, the frail, and the quiet. But this woman, this neighbor, wants more from you.

Every Sunday, the same question. "Where you headed?"

Why ask? you wonder. You know she does it to make small talk but still, every Sunday? The same question?

You draw in a deep slow breath. "Nowhere," you say, "just out." Then you smile your please-can-you-back-off grin at her.

But she goes on. "Me too," she says, "out."

You tumble into the tunnel together and wait for the 2 o'clock train.

Say you're not one to be rude, so you let her walk next to you.

Don't ask, you think. Can we just stay away from the niceties for a change?

"Need help?" the woman asks. Her eyes dart down at your foot in a cast. "What happened?"

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No, niceties are not nice. Not for you. What happened was you broke your foot when you kicked the baseboard out of fury, the rage you can't help when it rises unannounced this time of year, Mother's Day when little girls doodle on napkins and cards and give them to their mothers in exchange for kisses followed by long hugs. As if that were something you would have wanted to do anyway.

"I got in a fight with a wall," you say, "and the wall won."

"Oh," the woman says. Then with no pause, "How's it going otherwise?"

How's what going? you think, Life, you mean? Or my foot? Or do you just mean how's it going on this street right here, now, walking with you?

Going great, you say to yourself, until you got here, lady, and started to talk to me.

"How's your aunt?" she asks.

Here it comes, you think, and you know it's in the next question or two. Odds are, you can calculate the exact moment, maybe even count the words between How's your aunt? and the question she really wants to ask. She's always curious. About your aunt, your mother, about you.

Does she know? you wonder, know how your aunt loves sex with women. Did she overhear the way you did? You wish you never knew this about your aunt, never heard her with those women when you were little, never saw her long body covered by some woman's arched back.

She loves sex with men more. You know because you overheard her once when you were a teen. She shouldn't have left the door cracked, let you hear, see her legs hiked up on some guy's hips. You wish you hadn't heard, hadn't seen.

"How is she?" the woman asks again.

"Fran's fine," you say.

"She's like a mother to you, huh," the woman says.

Then she slams you with it. Here goes, you know it's next.

"Speaking of your mother, how is she?" the woman asks. She leans in, almost in a whisper, "Fran said she wasn't well."

“Oh, nothing much to worry about,” you answer and smile to reassure her. It's not as if she really cares. She asks because you know she heard the medics haul your mother away in an ambulance that one time she stayed with Fran. You lived in Thailand then, as far away as you could get.

Still, you pretend, and force the corners of your mouth up. “She's fine, nothing much. Nothing at all.”

But then there's the moment of truth, the answer you want to give, the story you need to tell but can't.

You started out in the nut house with your mother, popped out behind a locked steel door in the isolation unit, your mother in shackles and handcuffs because her meds weren't working, guards along with the doctor and nurses at her side. You wonder if your baby soft brown hair got caught in her handcuffs when she held you for the first time.

When she held you for the first time was also the last. Or did she hold you at all?

Your aunt held you more, held you since your mother couldn't. Not when she was in the nuthouse.

You love your aunt. She hugs you to bits. She taught you how to sew, how women tend to their own. Yes, she's kind of like your mother. But she's not.

Your mother draws. She sketches with crayons and colored pencil on cafeteria napkins. Your mother gets the napkins from the mental ward in the hospital where she's spent most of her life. A gallery showed her work once, but you were out of town that time too. Fran didn't know where to find you.

You can't draw but you like to line things up. Pennies, forks, books on the shelf, your shoes. For the symmetry. It makes life safe, like in the nuthouse, you imagine, everything constant, safe if you're alone there, if the guards leave you be.

You wish you could start over. Stay in the mental ward with your mama.

But your mother's not in the mental wing anymore. She's on death row. It never was a hospital the way your aunt told you when you were little.

You wish they'd let babies grow up with their mamas no matter what. Maybe then yours wouldn't be on death row now. Maybe if she'd been able to keep you, she wouldn't have gone so wacko and sliced up that guard to pieces.

Maybe then you'd find it easier to settle down, have your own family, kids and everything, a home. Not so edgy.

But then again, maybe it's not such a good idea if you grow up inside the nut house all your little girl days.

You wish the two of you could start over. On a beach somewhere. High tide out, where coconuts float along the shore. A place where nothing but sand can come between you and your mother.

This moment of truth, this story you need to tell, isn't quite the answer you give to, *How's your mother?*

The woman next to you jingles her keys in her jacket pocket and the metal sound jolts you back into the world. Metal on metal, it's familiar, a cozy sound, like when keys bang metal bars. It's soothes you.

The story you want to tell slaps you in the face. You step back, your gasp drowned by the click-click of the train's steel wheels on the track.

"Well, wish your mama Happy Mother's Day for me," the woman says.

People mean well but you can't wait to reach your flowers at the market, to stand still in the midst of those bouquets and pretend you too are tender, and imagine yourself a flower.

Light shines from the darkness as the train comes closer. You can't wait to reach your flowers, to pet their colors. Even if like everything else they wither, innocent petals cast to the ground.

