

Induce Me

by Ylan Ha

Since I was in elementary school, my mom taught me the importance of hard work, but because she worked hard to protect me, I hesitated to take risks and was afraid of failure. I think the only time I took a risk was when I asked her if I can go to a college that was a seven-hour drive away from home, away from her overprotective arms. She also took a risk and let me go. She was no longer there to watch over me, and I had to learn some things on my own. I fought against a sea of bright students who (mostly) knew where they were going. I suffered, but I graduated.

My aunt from South Carolina heard the good news from my mom, and she and her family flew down to celebrate. They took full advantage of the Californian weather; they visited a beach or went to a hotel pool at least once a day. Each time we went to a beach, I only let my feet touch the water and did not go further. My relatives crossed "visiting museums and beaches in LA" and "getting baked in Palm Springs" off their bucket list and left, satisfied with their adventures. They did not realize that they left me, alone and uncertain. It was a distraction, not a celebration.

"What are you going to do with your life now?" Mom glanced at me as she drove me and Dad back home from Palm Springs.

I don't know, I said with weary eyes.

She seemed to get the message and let her chest slowly expand and collapse. "My daughter doesn't know what to do with her life. I don't know what to do with my life. I'm tired," she muttered. I brought my knees up to my chin and pretended to sleep.

A couple days later, a former classmate sent me a text. He wanted to go to the beach.

"You're going to the beach *again*?" Mom eyed my teal sundress and towel tucked under my arm.

"An old classmate, he wanted to see me."

"He is a friend?"

I sensed the worried tone and reassured her: "He's just a friend."

She looked back down at her budget book and dismissed me with a wave of her hand.

I ran to the beach to find my friend sitting and staring at the girls sunbathing in front.

"Look at you! You look cute," my friend winked. I rolled my eyes, and he urged me to go in the water. I cautiously let my feet touch the foam and sink into the sand. I planted myself there.

"Come on, you chicken. Swim with me!"

I trudged farther away from the shore. The water around me suddenly turned a darker shade, and I looked up to see a wave towering over me. I heard some shouting, but I froze. I swore, and the tide crashed down on me. It pushed me off my feet. It slapped, seized, and shook me like I was a rag. It kept whipping me around until a pair of hands gripped under my armpits and pulled me up.

"Are you ok? Didn't you hear what I said?" Dizzy, I shook my head.

"First thing," he said, "never run away from a wave and never turn your back on it."

"Then what should I do?" I gritted my teeth.

"Two things. Jump over it if it's small enough. Or dive."

"Wouldn't I have to fight against the current if I dive?"

He sensed my sass and grinned, "You dive low, so low that you can feel the bottom scraping your knees. Oh, and dive before the wave crashes and turns into white foam. Let's try this again, shall we?"

He put his hands on my waist, and I grew tensed. Out of context, we look like the couples on those "hot summer romance" novels. I tried to shift my body away from his grip.

"I would focus on the water if I were you. This one's going to be a doozy."

I was about to protest and tell him that "doozy" is an exaggeration, but he motioned me to look.

Doozy was too vague. *Beautiful Mother Nature that would grab my feet and drag me down to the abyss? No, I am not a six-year old learning about the ocean for the first time. A towering monster that was going to slam me down and crush me like a flood of midterms and disappointing grades? Maybe. I hope not. No. It's more like those waves that come before bigger ones. Or Godzilla. A warning.*

The thoughts made me shiver and I closed my eyes. I felt my friend leaned forward and I mimicked his stance.

"Your turn to shine, little butterfly."

"Butterflies don't - "

"DIVE!"

He gave me a hard, encouraging shove. I put my hands together and pictured myself as an arrow.

Reach for the bottom. Aim low. I hope sand does not get into my mouth.

I heard it. Thundering, taunting, terrible. I tremble. Then I felt it. The wave rushed over my head like a machete that skimmed over tall blades of grass. My knees felt the prickle of sand, but I didn't want to come up. It might still be there, scanning the surface and waiting for my head to pop up so it can strangle me. I was running out of air.

"How was it?" my friend asked as I emerged. I took a deep breath and flipped my dripping hair over to get a better view.

"Not bad. I think I want to do that again."

His mouth fell open as I turned my head and saw another wave coming.

"I'm going to catch this one."

I heard him laugh behind me. He was probably shaking his head and trying to understand my newfound bravery. I wonder what came over me. I was running back, getting ready to face dark water again. Somewhere in my fear I found excitement. Somewhere in that high tide I found a surprising calmness at the bottom if I go low enough. I am still in one piece. I think I can endure hardships again. I am still uncertain about my future, but I'm willing to take a risk.

