

## Chance

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The sound of the waves found its way into the house, and it felt like a big hug. It was the music that held her days together, one after the other, a compendium of moments of her life in that island. She would sometimes sleep outside without Mrs. Chen knowing about it. She would do it because she felt that the closer she was to the sea, the better she felt. Outside of the house, she always had the feeling that the sea was right there, under her toes.

Maia, Maria's friend, had told her to be careful; sleeping inside was perhaps a better choice since there were many little snakes outside at night. Maria didn't care. It was true, she knew it. She had often found the remains of snakeskin after molting, but she just didn't care about them. She closed her eyes, snuggled down into the armchair, and fell asleep with the rocking sound of the waves. She thought every time the sea *inhaled*, there was a profound silence that engulfed the whole Earth. And then it would *exhale* and something of this world would be restored; something would be given back.

That sea was all she had, to speak the truth. It was the only thing she could count on. Of course, there were her friends and family back home with whom she had video conferences every day, mostly at work, since she only had one day off per month, and sometimes her days off got canceled, and two or three months would pass without one day to herself. So she had no choice but to chat with everyone while taking care of Mrs. Chen. Of course, this was frowned upon by Mrs. Chen's family members, who were always suspicious of her and treated her with utter disdain. "You don't understand how things work," Mrs. Chen's daughter would say to her, "but here in Taiwan, when we take care of the elderly, we can't be talking on the phone all the time." That was on a good day. On a bad day, she would receive threats regarding the termination of her contract and even deportation! This last one sent shivers down her spine. She couldn't go back to the Philippines. Her and her family's lives depended on that job, so she would not talk with them while attending to Mrs. Chen. She would do it at night when the old woman was asleep (although Maria was technically still working). And as she talked to her family and friends, she would hear the waves in the background, telling her in that gentle whisper that she was not alone. That she mattered.

Mrs. Chen was, all in all, a nice lady, Maria reckoned. If she had to describe her, she found that the best word to do it would be "silent." She barely said anything, and whatever she wanted to express came out as small gestures and quick glances. When they first met, Maria thought her choice of not talking much revealed a sanctimonious disdain deliberately directed to her. Then she

realized it was Mrs. Chen's intimate way of dealing with old age: Her existential angst transformed into an atlas of silence, where the many circumstances of life bifurcated and converged into a landscape of hopelessness and regret. Still, there were times when Maria would say something nice to her, and Mrs. Chen would try a little smile or even say something nice back. But those were the vagaries of an odd day, nothing more. So their relationship was, thus, distant, almost non-existent. But, on some level, Maria thought there was a hidden conversation between them; a shared outcry that was only visible and invisible at the same time in that profound silence that enveloped them day after day. She couldn't think of Mrs. Chen as a friend, of course. But she sometimes wondered what a friend really was. She had once heard someone say, "Friendship is no less mysterious than love or any of the other faces of this confusion that is life." So would it have been wrong, for at least a moment of mild delusion, to regard Mrs. Chen as a friend? She did wonder.

One Wednesday morning, on her free day, Maria decided to go to Taipei and visit some friends from Indonesia who were having a party. Maia had invited her, and Maia's friends were all right, she thought, so she went. She made sure to carry her ARC (alien resident certificate) because she would be asked to show it every now and then. The police would do that. Men had it worse, she thought. But, still, she was usually asked to show it two or three times a day if she was out in the street.

She put on a black T-shirt, a skirt with a flower pattern (a gift from Maia), and some makeup she had bought herself. She didn't really like wearing makeup; it felt unnatural. But she had realized that some wrinkles in the corners of her eyes were starting to show; and, whenever she used makeup, poof! It was like magic—everything seemed smooth and young again. When she was wearing makeup and looked at herself in the mirror, she felt she could do anything; she could be anyone she chose to be.

She smiled. With that skirt and that makeup, she felt beautiful.

She took the 9:45 train to Shu Lin. It would arrive in Taipei at 11:30. Many of her friends hated the train ride because it took so long. They would look at their phones all the way to Taipei. She did that, too, but not after having passed the part with the sea. She would devote the first 30 minutes on the train to just looking out the window at that huge expanse of water. She liked to think of her friends and family somewhere on the other side. The horizon meant possibility. It meant millions of lives like hers, struggling, dreaming, and wanting to be something else.

The train advanced fast. But the sea was imperturbable. It was out there, in all its magnificence, like a rock, deceptively unaltered, as if watching over the land. She thought the sea

was wise. It had all the answers and all the questions. This idea made her feel protected. She had a very private dialogue with that sea she knew so well; and, in that special relationship they had, in that silent exchange of breathing in and out together, the world made more sense. Maria loved looking at it from the train because she was certain the sea was looking back, only focused on her. Nobody else understood that secret logic they shared, the internal abyss of their minds, their ways of saying so much by not saying anything at all. And in those ways, the sea made her remember things. One memory, in particular, came up often on the train.

She must have been around ten years old. It was the most beautiful Saturday morning, and her grandmother had just come to Manila from the little town where she lived to spend a few days with them. Maria and her five sisters adored the old woman and saw her as a definite source of wisdom. Her name was Esther, and she was stern and decisive. She had raised Maria's father and his brother under the belief that one should only cry as a last resort and, even then, to try anything in their power to avoid it. That mandate had been passed on to Maria and her sisters through her dad in what she considered ruthless parental choices.

That Saturday morning, her grandma brought an imported chocolate that one of her neighbors had given her and put it in the fridge. Maria's mother said they would all share it the next day. It was a real treasure to have something imported, and Maria and the girls were all crazy about it. They would open the door of the fridge just to look at it. On Sunday, when the time to share it finally came, the chocolate was gone. Somebody had eaten it the night before and had artfully left the paper sleeve, with the aluminum foil in it, in the fridge, almost untouched, giving the impression the chocolate was still there. Since nobody confessed, and the chances of finding the thief were slim, all the girls were grounded, locked in the bedroom they shared, amidst an uproar of much yelling and confusion.

Two weeks passed, and grandma was long gone, back in her town. To everybody's surprise, another chocolate of the same brand as the one that had caused so much turmoil appeared in the fridge. It was a surprising event, indeed, since they didn't have the money to afford such a luxury. The girls, a little troubled, didn't say anything to their parents. They didn't even discuss its sudden appearance with one another. It was as if the new chocolate didn't exist.

That night, the whole house was suddenly disturbed by a wailing sound and a flurry of activity in the kitchen. Everyone quickly gathered there to see what was going on, but the lights were off so they could barely see each other. When their mother turned the lights on, they found Maria's youngest sister, Christina, shouting, crying in pain as she touched her left cheek, trying to explain how much her tooth hurt. Their father was right next to her, looking a little amused and

holding the paper sleeve of the famous chocolate, with its gold aluminum foil and a piece of rectangular wood that fit perfectly in it. The hoax, the guilty, and the tears were all out in the open. It was peculiar, Maria thought, that their father seemed to be vectoring towards this strange moment of weakness, giving ground to the crying. But then it hit her. That night, he had established something in their household that was completely his own, something to pass on to generations to come: tactical shrewdness as a newly founded mandate.

He died a year later, accidentally being shot by the police. But Maria had always kept that teaching fresh in her mind, and she gave way to that memory every time the sea spoke to her in their own secret dialogue.

She was feeling drowsy; and, when the train stopped at Gui Shan, she realized she had fallen asleep. She had missed a good 15 minutes of the first part of the journey (her favorite part!), and this was very frustrating. They stayed in that station for 10 minutes. It was a shabby station. The walls were all cement gray, with big patches of mold everywhere. Some men who spoke in Malaysian got on the train. She didn't know how to speak Malaysian, but was used to hearing it in the streets and could rapidly recognize it. Right when the train was about to leave the station, a woman with a three-year-old boy hopped on. She was Taiwanese. She looked at her and smiled, and this disconcerted her deeply. Nobody ever smiled at her like that for free, least of all a Taiwanese woman. She would sometimes get pity smiles from white folks, the so-called "expats." Of course she was an "immigrant," not an "expat," although she didn't understand the difference since she and the expats were all working there and had adopted the country as their own.

The woman and the little boy started playing hide-and-seek. He would put both hands on his face, and he was thus automatically hidden; sometimes he would just close his eyes, which meant, for all purposes, that he was gone, that nothing existed but himself in the dark. His mother would do the same, and she would kiss him almost non-stop. He would kiss her, too, with the same fruition. They would hug and kiss as if there was no tomorrow. The mother would also whisper things in his ear, and he would laugh with a loud and hearty laugh that she would then have to suppress. But she did it with no real commitment, laughing with him as she tried to make him stop. This whole scene was so confusing to Maria, who was sitting some inches away from them. She had never seen a Taiwanese mother so devoted to her child in public. The constant show of affection was certainly mystifying, unexpected. She thought about this for a moment and looked at them and felt happy. She didn't really know why she felt happy; she reckoned it had to do with the profound beauty in that outburst of emotion she was witnessing. She smiled at them, and they smiled back. The little

boy said 你好!<sup>1</sup> and waved his hand. She did the same, and the mother was amused by him. But the sun was now reaching Maria's head, and she started to doze off. She tried making herself comfortable, but the gap between the window and the seat was too big. After a little bit of twisting and turning, she suddenly felt something soft being placed on the gap. It was a beautiful flowery little coat. But, with closer inspection, what she thought were flowers revealed themselves as tiny little dinosaurs of different colors. She looked at the woman with the boy and told her it was not necessary. She had this terrible habit of drooling when sleeping. The woman said, "Take it, really, no problem at all." The boy, trying to solemnly reinforce his mother's statement, said, "My dinosaurs help me sleep. They are not scary; they want to play. I dream of them. You dream of them now." Maria and the woman laughed, and the only option was to accept such a beautiful gesture, so she did.

It was a pity that she felt so tired in the first 30 minutes of her journey. She never missed that part, but she couldn't manage to stay with her eyes open this time. The funny thing was she *did* dream of dinosaurs. Two big dinosaurs who roamed a desert island and loved eating coconuts until they turned on each other and one of them killed the other. That's when Maria suddenly woke up and found out the train was already in Xi Zhi. She looked at where the woman and the boy had been sitting and saw that the spot was empty. They had already gotten off the train.

As Maria held the little coat with the dinosaurs and looked outside the window to the buildings that now populated the view, she started crying. She cried as demurely as she could because she didn't want to attract attention to herself, and also because every time she cried, she remembered her father and her grandmother, and their ways of dealing with grief. She covered her face with the coat until she realized her makeup was all smudged, running down her face now and leaving big stains on the little piece of cloth. She thought she must have looked hideous—like a monster—and felt bad about ruining the coat, although she knew how to clean it.

She couldn't stop crying. She had slept so well with that coat as her pillow that she felt guilty. Not only hadn't she been able to give it back, but she had also missed the chance to say thank you one more time. She now felt she hadn't thanked them enough. She had been so shocked since that very first moment the woman had smiled at her that it had all happened too quickly, without giving her time to process the profundity of the interaction—ambushed in that strange configuration of a reality that had never been *her* reality—and the only way she could now cope with it was by crying, by letting out all that melancholy that was unrelentingly welling up in her mind.

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<sup>1</sup> Hello!

For some reason, she kept hearing the sound of the waves, as vivid as if she was at the beach, and this made her cry even more. The train was already nearing Taipei, and Maria thought she now had to step into another world. She had to go to this party and smile and try not to be herself too much. Even in those little reunions, she had to change her skin, like a snake would, like those snakes that probably slept near her at night when she decided to sleep outside in the armchair and be lulled by the rhythm of the waves.

She put the coat with the dinosaurs in her little purse, got off the train, and slowly stepped on the platform. The day was just beginning, but Maria felt so tired already. Of course, she was tired because of her work, but now she felt her energy was drained by what had happened in the train. That small, tiny gesture of human solidarity had not only helped her sleep and made her feel grateful, even hopeful about the future, but it had also done something else for her. The woman and the child, for those few minutes in which they had been part of her life, had given her something as abstract and concrete as what the waves had always offered her: the certainty of a hug. And she felt good. She felt precious.