

Dear Mother [R]

For a long time, you were a spy---and an excellent one, at that. During the days, when I was a kid, my mind would drift to thoughts of the other side of the world, where I knew you were fighting off a gang of evil henchmen or meeting a stranger for some sensitive, clandestine meeting. With crimson hair and a fearsome roundhouse kick, I recognize that this image I formed of you was just the product of my overactive childhood imagination (and probably the many hours I spent watching Kim Possible after school). Nevertheless, until I stumbled upon reality's tedious rules, which taught me that it would be unlikely for a rural Chinese woman to possess natural red hair or work as a high-profile secret agent, I had found a relationship with you, my birth mother, in these fantastical stories that I would tell myself about your life.

It was never a secret to me that I had been adopted. These people here raised me with the knowledge that at approximately three days old, I was left at the gates of an orphanage, fated to find the arms of their happy American family almost exactly one year later. Blessed with such transparency around the subject, my adoption has never been internalized by as something negative; I've always tended to view it through a lens of objectivity. Just as the sky is blue and it is air we breathe, I am the non-biological addition to the Tobin household. However, while I am more than grateful for my situation and have managed to find a working comfort with this part of my history, I think it would be a lie to say that you are not always somewhere being longed after in the corners of my brain.

I remember how when I still adhered to my crazy ideas about you and your line of work, it was a routine to pray beside my bedside every evening and ask God to ensure your safety. A fraction of me had always hoped that you were out there doing the same. After all, I never treated my anecdotes about you as fantasies. To my six, seven, maybe eight-year old self, these stories functioned not as stories, but as an explanation. It was my solace that because you were a devoted spy of such prestigious ranking and with such dangerous assignments that you had no choice: you were forced to put me up for adoption.

And therein lies my guess as to why I had clung onto, unarguably, such an outrageous notion so tight and for so long. Because what's the alternative? If you weren't a spy, then what other reason did you have to let me go? You couldn't have loved me if this was the case, because how does one give up their own daughter if they do, leaving her to the will of chance outside of an orphanage and with no way for her to ever find them again? People don't fall into delusions because they're rational. They buy into them because they're easy. It's easier on a child to believe that their mom had noble grounds to leave them. That the reason she never gave them a way to contact her or tried to contact them herself was because it would jeopardize their safety or national security. Not because she merely couldn't bother.

Eventually, though, I grew out of this spy fantasy, and my narrative of you began to evolve into something more grounded. When I consider the sea of information that my family had imparted to me about my adoption, there was only ever one statement that pertained to you, and that was that you loved me. For a while, my parents could never offer anything more than that, and it was from this knowledge that my brain had seemed to extrapolate your entire history as a secret agent. But, inevitably, as I grew older, my parents' and I's conversations were able to broach more sensitive issues and enter the thicket that was the reality behind my situation--or rather, yours.

From the stern one-child policy to the severe wrath of the government that would be unleashed if one was caught violating it, it appears that your hands really were tied when it came to the decision to give me up. Upon hearing about these circumstances, your identity suddenly became the mother of two children, one boy and now one girl. Whenever I pictured you, I always pictured you in your bed. Having just given birth to the daughter three days ago, your son was outside tending to the chores, while you sat cradling your baby girl in your arms for the last time. She was swaddled in worn, stained cloth, and it was one of the rare occasions in which she was not flailing about with the violence of a loose bullet. Undeniably, something about it all seemed aligned with everything right in the universe. But then, the moment dissolved, and your husband emerged from the corner to nod. It was time. Accompanied with no

possessions or keepsakes, I was the only luggage en route for delivery to the gates of the Yangjiang Social Welfare Institute, where you knew someone would be sure to find me. The husband grabbed his shoes and his travel supplies, and with as much swiftness as I had stayed, the door collapsed back on its hinges, closing its window before I, the daughter, could ever hear you cry.

This account of events is certainly more realistic than my prior fabrications, and it is one whose general idea is echoed by my parents and adoption agencies, alike. Yet, at the end of the day, I still can't shake the fact that everything about this story is still just that: a story--no less true or false than my ridiculous tales of you as a spy. Sure, we may have the context information to guide our speculations and the examples of other birth mother's stories' to support our claims, but when it comes to you and what we can say for sure about who you were or are, we have nothing. You've given us nothing. Hell, I don't even know what tense I'm able to refer to you in. To this day, I dream of notes and tokens that you could have left me to remember you by. Of a nameless woman arriving at my orphanage to inquire about her daughter that she sent there eighteen years ago. But I revisited my orphanage this summer, and on no day in over the past decade has there been a visit from a family member recorded under my name. Likewise, I've never had a divulgent letter arrive for me in the mail or a stranger stop me on the street to reveal themselves as you. There's no evidence of you. You're just gone. And while the better parts of me appreciate that your actions had likely been made with the best in mind, I admit that my selfish pieces regard your decision as giving up and resent you for having forsaken our family and leaving me in the dark.

That being said, beyond these surface-level instincts, there is really nothing even more about you available for me to judge. Love you or hate you, I don't think it's in me to be able to do either. You are not a secret agent or the woman who cried when I when I left her arms. And for better or for worse, you are not any of the other billion possible identities out there, either. But, while you may not have had the chance to let me down and prove that you are actually, perhaps, neglectful or mean, you haven't given me

the chance to confirm otherwise. Don't you see? You are not hug nor a face nor even a name that I can hold in my heart.

So, maybe I'm mad. Maybe I'm angry that you've forced me to write fairy tales in order to meet you; that without my stories, I'm without a mother. A birth mother, that is. After all, you, Mother, are not my mom. My mom is the one who has went through the headache of raising me and loving me for all these years. She is the one who has invested countless hours into my upbringing and has sacrificed so much in order for me to live so proudly as I do today, and for that I am forever thankful. But there is a connection that they worship in novels and in nature that exists only in blood between two souls--the maternal bond--and you've rid me of it completely and forever. Indeed, maturing has meant learning to accept that I might persist my whole life in want of this fundamental relationship, and I believe that peace will only come when I can truly learn to forgive you for that. However, I'm not there yet.

That's why I'm writing this letter today, pretending that your spirit is still alive out there and that my words will somehow find a way to reach you. I need you to know how I feel so that, one day, I can move on from this resentment towards you and solely embrace compassion.

I confess that while I may not believe in fairytales anymore or expect you to appear out of nowhere with a grappling hook and a sleek belt of spy accessories, there are days when I still scan large crowds with a little extra effort, wondering to myself if you're out there among them in disguise, secretly watching over me. After all, my stories are what give you life and allow me to care about you. Placing all else aside, you're the one who got me into the world, and I owe it you to keep your memory alive, even if it is only within the intangible realm of fiction.