

Seeking the Comfort of an Old Flame: Solitude

By Lisa Ko

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At the San Francisco Office of Vital Records, I paid \$10 for a copy of the death certificate of a woman I had never met.

It was September 2005. A few weeks before, I had broken up with my boyfriend of more than a year. My roommates and I had been hosting a party; we were moving out of our house the next day. My boyfriend had given me the silent treatment again because he saw me talking to a male friend. Exhausted, I had told him it was over.

The following week he emailed me a rant, ending with a line that made me gasp: “I hope you get raped to death.”

We had been planning to move in together in the fall. Although I had known for months that it was the wrong decision, I had been afraid of breaking up with him.

I was afraid of him. He had never physically harmed me, but he was quick to rage in a way that frightened me.

So I shipped my belongings to my parents’ house in New Jersey, gave notice at my job at a film-production company, made arrangements for work in New York City and bought a cross-country train ticket. After five years in San Francisco, I was ready to return to New York, where I hoped he would never find me.

The morning after the party, my roommate drove me to a studio apartment on a hilly side street that I was subletting for the next month. It was the first time I had lived alone in San Francisco, and I stayed up late watching movies and dreamily looking out a little window, the downtown lights just visible behind thick swirls of fog. I read books at breakfast, bought flowers for the kitchen table.

All my life I have loved being alone. An only child, I grew up reading and writing stories while my parents worked. As an adult, some of my happiest times have been days by myself in new cities, as I wandered the streets of Tokyo and Bangkok and Paris, deciding what to do on a whim.

When I had first moved to San Francisco and hadn’t yet made many friends, I spent hours riding the bus from one end of the city to another, gazing out the window with my headphones on, studying neighborhoods. One day, I thought, the map of this city will mean more than just lines on a page. But five years later, when so many lines represented memories and it seemed impossible to go out without running into someone I knew, I fantasized about anonymity again.

I called my mother and told her I had broken up with my boyfriend and was moving back to New York.

She said I must have done something to anger him; maybe I should apologize. “He’ll marry someone else and you’ll be alone,” she said. “You’re going to be 30 in two months.”

Her anxiety irritated me, but I worried, too. My roommates and friends were moving in with their boyfriends and girlfriends. Some were getting engaged.

I didn’t want that, yet I feared something was wrong with me for not wanting what everyone else did. It made me uncomfortable, like I became when people expressed concern that I was traveling alone.

“Won’t you be lonely?” they asked.

“No,” I said, but I wondered if I was lying to myself.

It was a craving for anonymity that had brought me from New York to California in the first place. I had barely spent any time in San Francisco before I moved there. I first knew of it through my childhood pen pal, Marie Sasselli, a woman more than 70 years my senior.

My father had met Marie when he was a college student from the Philippines, waiting tables in a San Francisco cafeteria on his summer break. Marie accidentally left a \$20 bill on the table, far too large to be a tip back then. When she returned a few hours later, my father gave the money back to her. They became friends.

She was in her late 50s at the time, and had never been married or had children. She and her “gentleman friend” took my father to Ocean Beach and Berkeley on his days off. After he returned to Utah State University, and later, when he moved to Queens and then to New Jersey, he and Marie exchanged Christmas cards.

I was 8, obsessed with the mail and looking for any excuse to send a letter, when my mother said, “Why don’t you write to Marie? She’s alone.”

For years Marie was my most loyal pen pal, sending typewritten letters on thick pastel stationery. She sent me postcards of the Golden Gate Bridge, detailing the weather and her room in a residency hotel.

As I got older I took longer to respond, preferring pen pals my own age. When I came home hoping to find the latest issue of Spin and saw one of Marie’s pink envelopes instead, I would feel disappointed.

We called her once at Christmastime. She was in her room, surprised to hear from us. “Have a wonderful holiday with your family,” she told me, and I thought it was strange that she didn’t have a family of her own.

In 1988, when I was 12 and Marie was 84, a letter I sent to her came back, marked “Attempted: Not Known.” My father called but there was no answer. My parents said she might have died. I hadn’t even considered that she could. I wondered who had cleaned out her room and if they had found my letters.

Now, living in my sublet, I remembered where Marie had lived: on Post Street, not far from where I was. Could she still be alive? It was unlikely; she would be 101.

I went out and walked around the street but couldn’t remember her address.

Which led me to the Office of Vital Records. I paid a fee; an hour later, a clerk slid me a white envelope that contained Marie’s death certificate. Born Jan. 22, 1904, died June 20, 1988. (That same summer, I had been smearing neon zinc on my nose at the town pool.) Marital status: Single. Occupation: Secretary. Marie had died in the hospital, of a heart attack. Her address had been 628 Post Street.

The death certificate offered a finality I hadn’t expected. After work, I went to Post Street but couldn’t find 628. I went into a restaurant and asked if there had ever been a residential hotel at 628. Nobody knew.

Three nights later, I returned to my sublet after my goodbye party. In the morning I would board the train to New York; my bags were already packed and in the hallway.

I sat at the kitchen table, watching my reflection in the window. I loved to be alone, but what if I liked it too much? What if I ended up like Marie? I studied the paintings on the walls, the flowers in their glass vase.

I had hugged my friends goodbye and cried. I would miss them, but I was also excited. Since I had broken up with my ex, I no longer worried about him lashing out at me or storming from the house at some perceived slight. To have those hours of fighting and screaming replaced by a precarious quiet felt like a gift. To have my days returned to me, to be by myself again. I was sleeping well for the first time in years.

Maybe Marie would have liked that I came looking for her, that she was still remembered. My mother had thought Marie’s life was lonely and sad. But living in a hotel in downtown San Francisco didn’t sound bad to me. Staying in an unhappy relationship because you were afraid you weren’t strong enough to be on your own — that was lonely and sad.

I thought about the decisions Marie had made. I would never know what she had settled for, what she had insisted upon, but I knew what I would refuse to compromise.

In the morning a friend dropped me off at the Amtrak station, and as the train pulled away I felt a giddy joy. We rolled through the Sierras, then the Rockies, and I felt my old life receding, something new unspooling.

Days passed. I transferred in Chicago. When I heard New York accents again, I knew I was home.

I moved into an apartment near the Brooklyn waterfront, painted the rooms yellow, blue and pink. By then it was winter and so cold, with the wind howling on the streets outside, but inside my home I was warm. I was alone, so alone, and I had never been happier.

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