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FIRST STEPS

Jordynnn Paz

The baby pulled herself up on the TV stand, her big cheeks facing the bloated gray screen. Her grandmother was in the kitchen washing the lunch dishes. Every few minutes, her eyes flicked to the baby in the living room. Outside, the horses meandered lazily in the field. On an early Friday afternoon, they were the only company for the people inside. The usually busy house was quiet, save for the sink water and the cooing of an eleven-month-old.

The child belonged to the grandmother, the only evidence of her daughter's mistakes. Though she was a grandmother twice now, she wasn't old. In her late forties, but *not* "approaching fifty."

Her son had a child too, born just three weeks before the one now in her living room. But he was married and cared for his child himself, along with his wife. Unlike her daughter whose full-time job and college degree still didn't land her a husband that stuck around. The baby's father was nowhere to be seen, from another tribe that he returned to after "fixing" his mistake with a cheap ring.

She looked over to the child, who had since lowered herself back to the floor and was now darting on all fours between the furniture. The baby was chubby with cheeks that dragged her small lips down into a perpetual frown and rolls on her arms and legs that looked like stacks of plump bagels. She had dark hair that was still too short to tell she was a girl and almond eyes that barely opened enough for the child to see. They all but disappeared when she smiled.

"Auntie, where did you get that baby from? China?" one of the grandmother's nieces always asked her. She wasn't the only one. Oftentimes, the grandmother would get looks in the store and she could almost hear their questions. *What's that Indian woman doing with an Oriental child?*

An Indian woman with long braids, handmade dresses, and high-top moccasins carrying a chubby-faced Chinese baby was a sight, indeed. Especially in Montana. Never mind that the child wasn't Oriental at all. She was an Indian baby through and through, the product of traditional enemies no less.

The grandmother hummed an old round dance song as she wiped down her counters, her ears tuned into noise from the living room. She always cleaned the counters after washing the dishes. Your kitchen might as well have been a barn if you didn't. Her sons were always dragging dirt into the house after handling horses, saddles, and tack that hadn't been cleaned in years. Of course, when she told them to wash up before coming into her kitchen, they only half-listened. Young men always think they're done with their mothers, but they can't seem to stay away.

She wiped down the kitchen table, sweeping the crumbs into her hand. She'd sweep the floor after dinner. In her head, she made a list of things she needed to get when she went into town over the weekend. Thanksgiving was a week away and she'd been planning for days. All her boys would be home and she knew she'd need enough to feed all their appetites. She could count on the help of her second daughter, but she'd have to put up with the constant complaints and sharp comments as penance. She always paid it.

After laying the dishrag on the median of the sink, the grandmother walked into the living room. The baby looked up at her with glee, pushing her chubby fists into the air and opening them, a request. The grandmother smiled and bent down to pick up her grandchild. She hauled the doughy baby up and plopped her on her hip, chuckling at the effort. The grandmother reached up and pinched the baby's cheek lightly. The child gave her a slobbery grin.

She walked down the darkened hallway to the bedroom the two shared. Laying the child down gently, the grandmother grabbed a diaper and wipes, and changed the baby with a swiftness that came only from practice and lifelong repetition. After seven children of her own, her youngest not even a man yet, she could've done this blindfolded. No one would applaud her—this was her job. She was a mother. And a single one at that.

Her husband was buried up at the battlefield since he had fought in the War. He'd been gone for six years, fighting for a country that all but forgotten them. Their first child, Ella, was a toddler when he left and their first son, Richard, was still in her belly. When her husband returned, Richard didn't know who he was. He had looked up at his mother and asked, "Who is this man?" After the war ended, the couple had the rest of their children all within two years of each other. During this time of child-having, her husband busied himself with alcohol and other women, leaving his children to be cared for by his ever-responsible

wife. Her father had been right when he said she'd have a hard life if she married that man. She wished he hadn't said it.

The grandmother heaved the baby up from the bed and took her back to the living room. She gazed out the window, watching the quiet breeze sweep through the dusty fields. She'd lived here for the last twenty years. Though it was a simple two-bedroom, she had made it work. When all of her children were still under her roof, the boys had crammed into the living room and first bedroom. She and her daughters had shared the second. The great pastures that surrounded the house made up for the cramped living. It wasn't much, but it was a home for her children. A place for them to always come back to.

She turned from the window and set the child down.

"Should we walk?" she asked. The baby gave her grandmother a gooey smile, her eyes disappearing above her cheeks.

The grandmother slid her index fingers into the baby's closed fists and lifted the child to her feet by her dimpled hands. The child giggled. In her onesie-covered feet, she took a shaky step, her balance failing, but Grandma steadied her from high above. The baby's poked knuckles went white with the effort to hold her own weight. She took another step, finding her balance at last, and toddled across the living room and into the kitchen. The grandmother laughed, still crouched over the child. The little one led with her hands, taking small steps in her beaded moccasins.

"*Itchik! Itchik!*" Good! Good!

She followed the child's feet and her own hands around the kitchen table, laughing and giggling together. Suddenly, the door swung open, hitting the window behind it. The grandmother's smile faded as she pulled her fingers out of the child's grip, grabbing her underarms and lifting the chunkster to her hip.

"What are you doing?" her son asked from the doorway.

"She's almost ready to walk," the grandmother replied plainly.

He looked at the baby quickly, then back at his mother. "Well, I came by to pick up that extra saddle for Richard."

"Oh," she said.

"You have anything to eat?"

"Mmm, *awaachia*." Sit down.

He took a seat at the table, removing his straw cowboy hat and setting it on the chair seat next to him, brim up. His mother set the child in her highchair and moved to pull a plate from the cupboard.

"Coffee?" she offered.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said quickly, nodding his head.

There was still some in the pot from that morning. She turned on the stove to heat it up.

“So, you’re gonna start getting into everything, huh?” her son said to the baby, his thick calloused fingers reaching over to tap her cheeks. They jiggled like Jell-O. The baby let out a scream of delight, bouncing herself in the highchair. “See, Mom? You better keep an eye on her,” he said to his mother. She didn’t turn around but smiled to herself.

After fishing in the fridge, the grandmother began making a bologna sandwich. She buttered the bread and pulled the lunch meat out of the wrappings. It was the last slice. She made a note in her head to grab lunch meat when she went to town.

“What time are you cooking next week?” he asked her. He had gotten up from his seat and was now wandering around her kitchen for a reason all his own. He was her third son, fifth child, and he never sat still. Since his first steps, he was all over everything all the time. Chasing him everywhere when he was a toddler was the fittest she had ever been—she had to take in her belt. Thankfully, she didn’t have to chase him now. Unlike his brothers, he didn’t take to drinking so she didn’t have to go looking for him when he didn’t come home.

“Get here around three,” she said. “Don’t forget to tell your brothers, don’t let them be late.”

“Mhm,” he mumbled back. He had started looking out the window that faced the river. She knew he was no longer listening, so she quieted. He was a poet, his mind always running, thinking things the rest of them never bothered with. Sometimes he wrote it down. He’d written about the mountains once. After one of his rides, he wrote about the ups and downs of the coulees in the foothills of the Big Horn Mountains, on his grandfather’s land. His mother didn’t understand it, but she was proud, nonetheless.

She finished his sandwich and grabbed some potato chips from the pantry. After dumping a small pile onto the plate, she set it on the table. “*Dia.*” And he took his seat again. He started into his sandwich, the way men do, like they’re mad at the food on their plate.

While he tore into his lunch, his mother put a couple chips on the table in front of the highchair. She stepped back to the sink and turned on the faucet, her index finger lingering under the stream. She added dish soap before turning to face her son.

“You heard from Ella?” she asked.

He snorted through his meal, "No, she don't like me, remember?"
"*Bitediasah*," she scolded him. "She's your sister."

"Whatever, Mom, she don't even talk to us," he said, finishing his bite of sandwich. "The only one she'll talk to is Richard, ever since you had to fight her."

"I didn't fight her," his mother spat back. "All I asked for was some money to help with her." She gestured to the child now banging her hands on the table, making the potato chips jump.

"Don't even know why you asked in the first place, what'd you expect?" he replied, disdain swelling his words. "You know she don't want to be bothered."

"Well, it's her responsibility—"

"Then give her back."

The statement filled the kitchen, silencing everything with its sharpness. Even the baby stopped banging, her eyes fixed on her uncle like she understood what he said.

Steam rose from the coffee pot on the stove. The grandmother, turning away from her son and grandchild, grabbed a mug from the cupboard and filled it with darkness. She carried it to her son and dropped it loudly on the table in front of him. He looked up at his mother, but she snapped her eyes away quickly. He let out a sigh and shook his head, picking up the coffee and taking a sip. They continued in tense silence, the son finishing up his lunch as his mother busied herself with her kitchen. The baby between them chewed on her chip-covered fingers.

His plate emptied, he grabbed his hat, stood, and left without a "thank you." His mother picked up the cleared plate and mug and put them into fresh dishwater.

He had always been arrogant, she thought. Always thought he knew better than everyone, like his sisters. She washed his lunch plates while the baby, still in her highchair, started whining.

"You can't be hungry already, I just fed you," the grandmother said without turning around. If she fed her any more, she'd never be able to pick her up again. The child continued her whimpering until it turned into all-out screaming.

"*Aagawah!*" My gosh! the grandmother gasped. "Wait." She finished up her son's dishes and placed them next to the other clean plates on the rack. Stepping away from the sink, she leaned down to pull the child from her highchair. The screaming baby's face turned redder than a rare steak while her eyes opened no wider than a paper cut.

“Shh, shhh.” The grandmother softly held the child’s head against her chest and bounced her as she walked around the kitchen. She bent her knees as she walked like she was dancing, old-style. She began humming her father’s medicine song. The song about the foal singing on the ridge of her childhood home in Soap Creek. As she sang and danced lightly around her kitchen, the child’s screams turned to cries and then to whimpers and finally to soft snuffles. With the baby’s tear-stained cheeks and red eyes, they sat down in the wooden rocking chair with the quilted cushion on the seat and the grandmother placed the baby on her lap, facing each other.

The grandmother looked at the child and pulled up the edge of her dress to wipe the wetness from her fat cheeks. The cheeks were a legacy of her Medicine Tail family. Though the grandmother’s family had large features as well, no one’s matched the large surface area of her husband’s face. Had he been alive to meet this baby, he would’ve tossed her high to the sky just to watch her cheeks lift in the air before she fell back into his arms.

She lifted and turned the baby around to face the window.

“*Ihgyah.*” Look, the grandmother said, pointing out the window toward the horses now clustered around some hay. The boys must’ve fed them without her noticing. The baby caught sight of the animals and let out a squeal of excitement. She started kicking her legs and waving her arms, rocking the two of them with her own force.

Though the grandmother would never admit it to her children, she was glad the child was here to keep her busy. The baby was a small handful compared to her own kids when they had been infants. They had cried and cried, and her husband would get upset, thinking her inept to care for her own children. But not this baby. This baby was calm and she was happy. No matter what way she came into this world and no matter what the child’s mother did or didn’t do for her, she was a happy baby and her grandmother couldn’t be more grateful. She had spent her life caring for unhappy children who later became even more miserable adults. She loved her children very much, but she could never figure out what had happened to them. Probably something inherited from their father.

Looking around the living room, the grandmother surveyed for anything that needed tidying up. She had finished cleaning the kitchen twice now since their lunch, so there was no need to fuss around unnecessarily. She could start prepping things for dinner, but it was still too early for that. She considered calling her sister to visit for a bit but then her sister

would want to talk for hours and the grandmother couldn't bring herself to commit that much time to gossip.

"Should we watch some television?" she asked, leaning forward to look at the baby's face. "Yeah? Yeah?" the grandmother nodded her head and smiled at the child, after a moment the baby grinned back and began bouncing again.

Laughing, the grandmother set the child on the ground and stepped over her to the television in the corner of the room. She wheeled the stand forward to see better from her chair. She turned the dial, and a high-pitched ringing filled the room as the screen glowed to artificial life. At first, she made to sit back down in her chair, but she wandered into the kitchen for a glass of water and an orange instead. Might as well have a light snack with the afternoon's story. While she filled her glass, she heard the rambling characters of *As the World Turns*. The soap had already started. She liked these kinds of stories. They always broadcast in the lull of her afternoons, so she could settle in for a watch. Of course, she'd never actually finished an episode since she didn't like sitting still for very long, but they were good distractions for the meantime.

She turned off the faucet once her glass had filled and grabbed the last orange in the bowl on her counter. She made another note to her mind's growing grocery list. Walking back to the living room, she saw the child had pulled herself up on the couch across from the rocking chair with her back to the talking faces of the television.

The grandmother sat down in her chair and slowly began rocking herself on the balls of her feet. Setting her water down on the end table next to her, she peeled her orange. While the people in the story continued talking, she made a neat pile of stringy peels on her lap. She pulled a slice out of the bundled orange and held it out to the child. Without warning, the soap disappeared and the television screen turned to black with white grainy letters that read: *CBS NEWS BULLETIN*.

A voice came over the screen: "Here is a bulletin from CBS News..."

The baby caught sight of the orange in her grandmother's outstretched hand and reached her chubby fingers for it. Her other hand held her steady against the couch.

"...In Dallas, Texas, three shots were fired at President Kennedy's motorcade in downtown Dallas. The first reports say that President Kennedy has been seriously wounded by this shooting."

The orange slice dropped from the grandmother's hand as her head snapped to look at the television. The news bulletin remained for a mo-

ment before returning to the soap opera. Confusion spread across her face as she leaned back in her chair, wondering what had just happened. The baby's eyes had followed the orange to the floor and her covered toes moved forward slightly in pursuit of the fallen fruit. Her grandmother didn't notice, nor did she reach down to pick up the orange.

Instead, the grandmother got up from her seat and went to the phone on the wall in the kitchen. She dialed her son, Richard's number. The line rang and rang. Impatient, the grandmother mumbled about his unnecessary outings before hanging up. On her way back to the living room she heard a news anchor speaking and she took the last few steps a little quicker. Her moccasins slid easily on the tiles. In front of the television, she didn't sit down, instead focusing on the white-haired man with black frames on the screen.

He talked more about the shooting, and that the president was at a hospital somewhere in Dallas. The grandmother stared at the television with her hand under her chin and her other arm wrapped around herself. She said a prayer in Crow. The phone shrieked loudly from the kitchen, making her jump. She pulled herself away from the screen and hurried to the phone, lifting it off its mount.

"Huloh?" she asked, quickly.

"Hey," her son answered brusquely on the other line. "Annie said the phone just rang and I figured it was you."

"Did you hear?" she asked him.

"Hear what?"

"There was a shooting," she replied.

He huffed on the other line but said nothing, waiting for her to continue.

"In Texas," she said finally.

"Texas?" he repeated, confused.

"*Aah*, it was the president," she told him.

"Oh, well, is he all right?"

"*Bahluxduck*," she said. I don't know.

He asked a few more questions and the grandmother replied with fewer answers. After a minute or two, he asked her if there was anything else. He had the horses loaded up and needed to get them to Lodge Grass. She told him no, that was all, and he hung up.

Her ears listened for the baby. She heard the familiar wet smacking and knew instantly that the child was chewing on the orange she'd left on the floor. The grandmother heard the news anchor's voice return to the

television and scuttled into the living room quickly.

The anchor had taken his black glasses off and set them on the desk in front of him. In the background, people moved among desks while he continued speaking. The grandmother's eyes were frozen to the man, waiting.

Behind her, the child stood up in front of the rocking chair facing the television and news anchor. Her chubby hands opened for her grandmother. The back of her grandmother's long skirts was just out of reach. The child's foot lifted, and she took a small, uneven step. Finding her balance in the new position, she lifted her other foot and it landed again, keeping her upright. She took another step and another until her open hands found the back of her grandmother's dress and she gripped them tightly in her thick fists.

"From Dallas, Texas, the flash, apparently official, President Kennedy died at 1:00 p.m. Central Standard Time, some thirty-eight minutes ago."