

## Three Five Oh Six

Three five oh six, Graysby Avenue. Three five oh six.

“If you ever get lost, what do you tell the policeman?”

“Three five oh six Graysby Avenue.”

The house at 3506 Graysby Avenue sits atop a steep hill that rises from the road below, orange dirt hidden beneath succulents and ivy. The house isn't actually “Graysby”, but a sunny yellow. You can see the beautiful expanse of the ocean from the dining room window and I learned to measure a clear day by whether you could see Catalina on the horizon that morning. This house is where I lived with my grandparents when I was too young to exist beyond the present of my own mind. When I try to focus on what came before, all I can see are recurring nightmares and the little white flowers I loved to pick from the edge of a steep driveway. This house is where I lived when I couldn't remember what my mom looked like. I used to shut my eyes and try to imagine her, but she remained a blurred image - an overexposed memory with shifting edges. She had no smell, no sound, no color.

San Pedro is a suburb of Los Angeles and you could call it a port city. It used to be home to the US Navy Battle fleet back before the Forties, and decommissioned battleships now sit permanently docked for tourists. I would play a game at breakfast with my grandfather. Squinting into the bright blue distance from that dining room table, we took turns identifying what type of ship we could see and whether it was coming or going. Aircraft carriers were the most exciting of course. I used to beg Grandpapa to drive the long way around to go over the drawbridge, secretly hoping it would be raised and we would have to wait as one of the massive transport ships passed through below us.

When I think now about the family I knew then, I think about the natives who lived there before the Spanish settlers began to arrive in the sixteenth century. My absent father had some native blood, I was told. My last name, Blue, had been an Anglicised version of an older Anglicised version, Bluefeather. I was born in a hospital two miles from the water. My great grandfather whom I've never met had been the acting chief of a tribe in Arizona. The facts commingle and it all becomes a version of history I've pieced together over time. The Tongva natives were called “the lords of the ocean” for their mastery of ocean canoes. The hulking transport ships made their way slowly across the horizon as I watched over a bowl of cereal. Looking away from the ocean view and blinking the reddish blur from my eyes, the house always seemed too dark afterward.

There's a hedge separating the upward sloping front yard from the sidewalk that hides the house from the street and the street from the house. On the far left side of this hedge, a holly bush had grown, intermingling until it was impossible to separate the plants. The bright red berries are poisonous and we were not to touch the leaves. I privately cherished this plant, admiring its dark, glossy leaves and tempting berries. Feeling dangerous and defiant, I sometimes lingered out of sight and carefully ran my fingers between the thorny edges. It was as smooth as it looked, but not as soft as I had wanted it to be. All I really knew about my mother was that her name was Holly. I had the faint impression that she was beautiful and used to pretend that she was the queen of a far off land and I, her lost princess.

When Sammy died of leukemia in the first grade, my grandmother tied a yellow ribbon around the tree that sat next to the driveway. The tree is no longer there. After Sammy's death, her mother gave me the children's bible that had belonged to her and was filled with comic book-like illustrations. I didn't know anything about the bible, but the bright cartoons were too enticing for a five-and-a-half-year-old to refuse. The story of Esther was my favorite though I've since forgotten its details. She had been on the verge of tears, Sammy's mother, clutching the bible and her rosary beads when she arrived. When I peered from my room to spy on her conversation with my grandmother, I saw those tears fall carelessly, as if their presence had been long since accepted as a daily ritual. Even as she spoke, she never really stopped crying. I was reluctant to face the exchange and the looming acknowledgement that there was more to it than just a book. When her mother came to offer it to me, she thanked me for playing with Sammy, attempting a wavering smile as she held out the precious pages that had once belonged to her daughter.

At her memorial, all of Sammy's classmates dressed in their best clothes, adorned with homemade butterfly wings. She'd been obsessed with butterflies, surrounding herself with bright depictions everywhere she could: her clothes, folders, backpack, pencils, and erasers. I asked my grandmother what "in her honor" meant but she was too distracted to answer. Rows of adults in folding chairs watched in varying states of grief as we danced in unison to a song just loud enough to drown the scraping sounds of so many dress shoes on the stage. At the end of that school year, the same group of children would stand together on the warm concrete and watch quietly as the monarch butterflies we had cared for from egg to cocoon were set free in an uncertain cloud of delicate wings.

The air of San Pedro has a unique smell. But maybe that's what everyone says about where they're from. It's always windy there. Always. It pushes polluted air and smog inland and away. It carries with it the salty sting of the ocean and beneath it, the smells of civilization; gasoline fumes, oil leaking from cars onto the hot asphalt, and the greasy smell of the oil refineries near the port. Seaweed drying hard in the sun and corpses of smaller fish caught in the fatal mass as it drifted ashore are powerful enough up close, but from the stink of so much rot comes a strange sharp cleanliness from afar. There's the cracked smell of dust to remind you that this is still a desert, albeit near water. This complicated smell is where I find my home. As the wind whips violently along the beach, slowly carrying away the sheer cliffs in gusts of fine dust, clusters of unearthed quartz glint in the sun above the tidepools.

After her memorial, I thought about Sammy in abbreviated clips. Her sheepish smile is what I remember most. It seemed important then that I commit it to memory. I find the curling edges of her mouth and mischievous expression in one fading recollection: our teacher had decided to pause in our morning lesson after realizing our attention was elsewhere. It was Sammy's first day back in school after a long absence and we must have been staring at her change in appearance—the sequined hat atop her head. Sammy shyly nodded her permission for us to touch her fuzzy black hair which she had been hiding beneath it. We crowded eagerly around her, gently holding our

splayed fingers over her head as she giggled, and our movements sent dust swirling, suspended in the sunlight. She continued to wear her hats to school after that but her shame had faded, and that smile would appear when a kid would enthusiastically ask to feel her hair. Playing dress up in her bedroom had an air of authenticity as she showed me her luxurious black wig and birthday dresses. It was in her mother's kitchen, brightly painted with traditional flowers and vines around the archway, that I tasted blue tortilla chips for the first time. Their texture and rich, salty flavor would forever bring me back to standing in that spot as I stood wondering why they weren't really blue.

No one quite knows how the peacocks became so pervasive in the Palos Verdes Peninsula. There's some debate about whether it was one of the earliest business tycoons who purchased the birds from India in 1800, or a wealthy banker who claimed the birds were a gift from a famous lover. They also populate much of Catalina Island, where the Wrigley mansion is located. As plentiful as they were in our neighborhood, I imagined the island completely overrun by wildlife, peacock feathers strewn among the mansions, their car-alarm-like screeches reverberating from the hills right down to the docks. A peacock, I thought, was most beautiful with his long train of feathers rippling over the ground behind him like distinguished royalty. So often it's this potential on the cusp of beauty that is most coveted. With the bleak, brown hills framing our small piece of the city, I did not wonder why early residents might have desired the bright, glossy colors the peacock brings to the landscape.

Oddly enough, I don't remember ever seeing any peacocks in Point Fermin Park, just down the road from my house. The park was named for some town founder or another with a lighthouse erected after the city petitioned for one. Even after the petition was granted, it was another twenty years before the lighthouse appeared. Only now do I wonder about these events surrounding the lighthouse. It seems early San Pedro residents felt passionately both for and against the building. I never knew a lighthouse could be a controversy, both wanted and refused at the same time. By the time I would ride my bicycle around its base, training wheels rattling, the lighthouse was usually locked up except to allow tourists who felt that it was more significant than the locals did.

This park bleeds in my mind, reminding me in short crimson flashes to keep my balance, pay attention, and not to look down. At least twice I caught pooling blood in my cupped hands, one of those occasions prompting a visit to the emergency room for stitches in my split forehead. Unfazed, I begged to get back on my bike the following day. Maybe there is something to those exasperated mothers who call their children feral beasts. Animals possess a similar way of processing language. That is, lacking a way to communicate time or space, anything they could possibly have to communicate is immediate and local. If they are in trouble, the trouble is in the tangible present. For them, there is no reason to recall the past because all that matters is now. By my way of thinking, injury yesterday did not affect the things that I enjoyed any more than eating dinner the night before prevented my appetite from ever coming back.

Abandonment, my cousin said, is when someone leaves something behind that they don't want to take with them. She was already in college and caught somewhere between child and adult,

still conspiring with my sister and me, but able to participate in the grown up conversations. She paused in her explanation, the implication of the pity in her eyes was lost on me.

It wouldn't be for another few years that I would be reintroduced to my mother in the lobby of a novelty McDonald's, filled with bubbling fish tanks. She and my new stepdad shifted on their side of the plastic booth with as much uncertainty as I felt. In a way, it was reassuring to see that grownups didn't always know everything. She hadn't looked the way I'd imagined she would, though I refused to give up my thinking that she was the beautiful queen of my daydreams. They didn't order any food and we had already eaten our dinner. There were no rules, no social script to tell me what to do or say. I didn't know then about the lighthouse's complicated birth. She could have been anyone, but she wasn't. So I sat on my side of the booth, wishing the playplace was open and looking out the window at the shadows of palm trees dimly lit by the buzzing lights of the parking lot. To my young sensibilities, that the McDonald's was open at all was an unnatural suspension of time. Somehow, I knew that this meeting would change everything without really knowing what change would mean.

What I remember is overlapped by neatly packaged stories designed to create empathic connections. History is too slippery to rely on. What I know is that there's no such thing as a correct version. As an adult I wonder at how many other children never got the chance to remember what their mothers looked like. The opportunity I had to remember *my* mother feels like proof that we are inhabiting the "other" parallel universe. Somewhere in the knotted mess of time and space there's a version of this story wherein I never saw my mom again, and Sammy's mom never had to let go.

Soon after this meeting, custodial arrangements were made and I left three five oh six behind me. Like the eternal shifting of the sea, I wouldn't stop moving for another seventeen years or so. I would never regain my land legs.