

High School Essay Winner

Hed: Fluid Dynamics

By Emily Tian

My mom and I used to shower together. My-first-grade-self fashioned a thrifty plan: One of us would lather up for a 10-count while the other washed off, pivoting back-to-back on the small acrylic floor. When I stood beneath the showerhead, she caught all the diffuse spray with her extra height. Our clumsy dance: in the water, then out. And again, like a revolving door.

The two of us are like that: no degree of separation. I grew up without any real expectation of privacy. Our townhouse was a kind of diaphanous space: One moment she's inspecting my legs unceremoniously for ticks after a Girl Scouts camping trip, the next I'm rustling through her closet to pick a dress for a college interview.

Last Memorial Day, Mom crumpled suddenly onto the kitchen floor. I had to step over her to call the ambulance. The dispatcher told me to wait; I repeated my address; I felt my contacts strain against tears when the line slowed. I waited and looked at her, and looked at her some more, and swung the front door wide open for the paramedics.

She didn't look like my two-step dance partner. We had bought extra-large men's cotton T-shirts from Costco to schlep around the house; I saw her chest sway like a white tent. When they lifted up her T-shirt to check her vitals, it seemed to me like we were both being violently uncocooned.

Up until that point I had seen Mom as my go-to confidante. We've made a game out of every time we're able to guess what the other is thinking. She's honed a sixth sense for what I might be craving for dinner, and I spin verisimilar office dramas while watching her refresh her phone inbox with creased brows.

Sitting in the front seat of the ambulance, the black purse she bought at Loehmann's wedged between my ankles, I stared straight at the dizzy road. The asphalt thick with stitches.

Then, just as unexpectedly, it was a false alarm. The doctors couldn't trace anything wrong, besides fatigue and dehydration. Dad drove me home and I studied for my last exams in the car.

I try to be a good daughter. I try to be a good daughter, which means back-to-back showers and tacit guessing games, and yet I am always hurtling farther distances away.

"Why don't you apply to colleges close to home?" she suggested, expectantly, a few weeks later.

Her reasons:

"I'll take your roommates to dinner on the weekends."

"We need to know that you're safe."

"I'll miss you."

She and I both know that it's a futile effort. I can promise to FaceTime her nightly, get us tiny matching tattoos, let her teach my daughters Chinese. But as I'm standing at the cusp of

adulthood, a list of dreams folded in my back pocket, we're learning that love is liquid. It fills shower stalls and hospital beds, splashes the archives of memory, exits without friction. Floods us again.