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“If you’re going to San Francisco”

by Olivia Sprinkel

People who travel are always fugitives.

I had my first passport when I was three months old. My parents were already on the run. I was just a new addition to the luggage. My father had been on the run since he was born in the Philippines to American expat parents, my mother from the age of eighteen when she left Finland for the first time.

At the age of eleven, a white expanse of ice spreads far and wide below me. I wonder at all this whiteness and emptiness. I wonder if we will be flying over the North Pole. Ice crystals pattern on the outer layer of the window. This is my first time on a plane on my own.

I’ve made this journey before. The first time was when I was six months old. There is a black-and-white picture of me propped up for the camera in the window seat, my chubby cheeks filling the frame. Then I was with my mother and father, and we were moving to San Francisco from London. Now I am an unaccompanied minor. My mother has handed me over to the TWA staff at Heathrow. I will get good at partings at airports over the years, mastering when to turn around and wave (when I was not so far that the tears had started to come), and when to march forward confidently and not look back (when the tears had started to gather).

“So you’re going to San Francisco?” says the lady sitting next to me. She had an American accent, was maybe in her twenties or thirties, younger than my parents.

“Yes,” I say, “to visit my father.”

She starts humming a tune softly, and then singing, quietly, slowly.

“If you’re going to San Francisco, be sure to wear some flowers in your hair.”

“Do you know this song?” she asks.

“No”, I say. “I like it.” I imagined myself with a crown of flowers, daisies maybe.

She started to sing again. “If you’re going to San Francisco, you’re going to meet some gentle people there.”

Twenty-five years later, I will be sitting in a window seat, thinking of this song, on the way to gather with my family. My father won’t be there. He has passed away in France.