The Nests That Don't Empty

"I hate America."

Many in my generation hate America too, considering its system of injustice and disregard that we are trapped in. My mother resents the quiet ways it pulls us from our origins. I am Iraqi-American. I grew up wishing I had lasagna for lunch instead of *dolma*. I wanted Santa Claus to visit my home, I wished my hair was golden and delicate and tame. And like many of my ancestors, I hated my nose. The luxury of my culture was overlooked.

But right now I don't hear a voice that actually hates America. I hear the heart of a mother yearning for the years to return. If there was a way to reverse time and experience the joys of raising children once again, she would not hesitate. She scowls at the mango juice in the drink aisle, a new enemy. A teardrop flashes in her eye, even within Costco's dim lighting. The cartons mock her frustration. Who will drink them now? How dare she not have a reason to add them to her receipt? We fully desert the frozen food aisle.

Jammed in their confined space, two young children giggle in a shopping cart, side by side, kicking their feet as their mother pushes them through the grocery store. A baby carrier sits in the cart, demonstrating the presence of a third child.

"We shouldn't have kids so close in age. They leave you all at once," my mother says.

I am soon off to college. I know what you are thinking. This transition is natural: it enforces independence, reinforces identity. But tell that to a grown woman, accustomed to her Middle-Eastern upbringing, and she will shake her head. In Iraq, nests never empty. She didn't raise her children for them to suddenly vanish. Suddenly, all the times I felt obliged to reassure her that she will NOT end up in a nursing home made sense. We, as children, try to push ourselves as far away as possible while our mothers thrive in our presence. They adore the acts of surprising us with fruit assortments while we study. Ironically, these represent the same acts we ridicule online: Arab Parents During the Pandemic (cue the mother's grinning face, a round white plate, finely chopped apples, peeled bananas, stem-less strawberries). They find joy in poking their heads through the door. "Get out, Mom! I'm busy!" is music to their ears when faced with the imminent threat of our absence. No amount of mango juice and frozen chicken tenders can alter our mentality.

They don't use my mother's saffron on the rice in the dining hall. I can't find her versions of *shawarma* or her freshly squeezed orange juice or her tangy *fattoush* salads. She hears about each of my minor inconveniences. I explain that some of my classmates have never met an Arab before. She says they should try some *kibbeh*, or maybe she'll make them her sweet *kleicha* cookies. The longer I am apart from her solace, the more I appreciate my upbringing. Every weekend, she convinces me to come home. And I do.