

To the man who did his best,

The last time I saw the world through these **goggles**, I was a pilot. A woman of the skies, flying around the expansive planet that was the playground on the oh, so reliable fighter jet that was my imagination. The **swingset** was my takeoff, and the slide, my runway. Whenever I looked through these lenses, I saw clouds below, and a sea of stars above. In school, my eyes were always glued to the clouds. You always screamed in my ear, but I think you were happy that I had my sights in your field. Vincent told me about how he wanted to be one when he grew up too. I know you were happy when that eight-year-old fool begged to see the skies with you.

The proverbial goggles flew with me all the way. I took them all the way to the air. Ever since you left the two of us, I found myself gravitating there. Maybe it was all the propaganda, or the allure of college being paid for you, but after all the grease-tweaking, pain and courses, I crawled my way to a pair of wings. I would have denied it to my last breath at the time, but I think it was really to find a way to see you again. I don't think a ten-year-old could fathom why her father suddenly had to go, especially when I already saw so much of your back.

Maybe mom broke away because you were always in the skies. Seeing you on weekends was never a guarantee, and maybe the distance was something that tore you away, too. Back then, I figured that I could have my cake and eat it, too. Where our seniors failed, I would prosper. Amanda did not see it that way. I didn't stay a pilot solely to pay bills or to chase your shadow - I liked it. I was good at it. I felt alive. But I ended up flying too close to the sun - I learnt this the hard way. Did you feel the same way? Did any sensible parent in my shoes ever dream of young Vincent breaking down in front of me when I had to move out? How would they have reacted to his sniveling appearance? Or when he struggled to word out, "**But what about the promises you made?**"

I spent countless sleepless, tearful nights getting pensive about what your expression was back then. Would you have fought tooth and nail to see the child? As I thought about it, I could imagine you laughing at my predicament, saying to my ear "**Trust me, I've had years of experience with this.**"

I could hear that, and the long, drawn-out lecture about how exactly I should have gone about it. More vivid to me is the wrathful outburst I would have given you in return. But that was if you could have been there to see it all.

At the time, I found myself saying it out loud, "**How did you end up over there?**"

When one of your friends reached out back then, it shocked me that you had left us. It gripped my heart when I found out. That time, I could not understand why it swelled for someone I fought to think of as a stranger. He gave me the details of your wake, but for the longest time, I did not have it in me to go. I didn't think it would do any good. But the years flew by, and against the waves, my sentiments weathered like the coastline.

That was what pushed me to make the trip all the way back here. It had been so long since I could appreciate our hometown again. Decades later, it amazed me to see the same Hamid I grew up with behind the gyro machine at the Greek joint. Watching him move his **spatula** to fill in the pitas re-winded the clock for me - I felt like I was watching his first day manning the counter solo again, and what might be his last. Behind the goggles, that wrap was as big and flavorful as it was all those years ago. He told me about all the different changes in spices and ingredients since our time together, but none of it mattered. None of it changed the memories I savored in every bite.

I listened to Hamid talk about his mom's passing, too. I could not tell why at the time, but there was envy welling inside when I heard him mourn his loss. He was there for her last moments, and that was when it dawned upon me. That was the closure I could only wish for. I also finally understood that even after divorce, your work was never truly done as a parent. Oftentimes, I think about if there was someone out there to change the flowers at your grave, or even leave some there.

I wonder if mom did her best to keep you away from me and her like Amanda did. Even if I could find her, it was always a dead end. Little Vince goes by a different name now, and so does his mom. I've always wondered if you simply chose to walk away from everything. As I write to you about this, I battle with the futility of it all. Fighting with the thought that in the days of my body failing, I won't ever reach him. If you're watching, you'll likely ask what I'm doing writing to a man six feet under. I think I just want something to pass on to Vincent. Something to tell him about Grandpa, and something to keep him from inheriting our goggles. And maybe, it's something that was just long overdue for us. I hold out hope that someday he will reach out, and that you were in the same boat.

So, to the man who tried his best,

I understand.

