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After living with Tita Pinky and Tito Arnel for several months, mom and I moved into a one-bedroom unit on the ground floor of an apartment complex not too far away. Instead of sharing a twin bed in a small second bedroom, cramped with mom's desk and a single bookshelf containing all my toys, mom and I would have our own kitchen, dining room, bathroom, living room and three windows – two looking out to a garden – all to ourselves.

I was five then, and mom was a year out of her divorce with dad. She was eager to begin her independent life, and having her own flat was just the place to start. Mom had a few things in storage to furnish the apartment – an old brown couch and four wicker chairs she bought with dad – but she also wanted to get a few new things, too.

One of those things was a matching set of Chinese-style vases, which she bought from a vendor on L.A. Street in downtown Los Angeles for what I thought was the extravagant price of \$25 each. The ceramic vases, printed with blue and white flowers in a pattern I couldn't follow, were about the size of a very large watermelon, topped with tiny lids. Mom seemed to be very excited about them, and when she came home, she placed them side by side on the glass bookshelf near the TV and warned me to be careful around the vases.

Decades later, in my late 30s, I would encounter a vessel that would remind me of mom's vases. It's about the size of an American football. It's white and blue and also looks to be Asian. It has a pattern of chrysanthemums, leaves and swirling vine tendrils, painted in dark cobalt with the thickness of a fine-tip marker. The surface is smooth and glossy, but if you look at it closely, you can see that the glaze has thousands of tiny cracks in it ...

At the time, I couldn't understand why mom wanted to buy them. To me, they had no function (I later learned from mom they were there *just for decoration*), and it made playing in the living room an anxiety-inducing affair. Even just walking (OK, stomping) to the kitchen would cause the lids to rattle in place and the bottoms of the vases to clatter against the glass. I was always terrified of breaking them.

... The mouth of the vessel is wide, the size of a dessert plate. It has a delicate, curved lip, in the same style of a ceramic mug with an exaggerated rim. The kind of mug that, when you take a sip of coffee from it, your bottom lip sits pleasingly on the edge. The pot is about as thick as if you pulled a piece of taffy slowly, about six inches apart, and has the shape of an inverted bell ...

And that is just what happened one day, when mom told me to stay in the apartment while she went to the next building in the complex to get our clothes from the coin-operated laundry room. It was the first time that mom had ever left me alone by myself. Usually I would come with her to load the laundry into the washer, then load it into the dryer, then bring the laundry home, but this time, for some reason, she was OK with leaving me behind. *If you feel scared, or if someone tries to talk to you, you just shout*, she said. To make it look like someone was home with me, she turned the TV on, a comfort against the silence without mom, and to make sure she could hear me yell, she cracked open the windows.

... There are two distinct patterns on the vase, separated by thin stripes between the neck and the shoulder then between the body and the foot. Painted on the front and the back of the lip, in a dark denim hue against creamy white, are alternating halves of chrysanthemum: two rows of petals with a criss-cross center. And on the body are random, whole chrysanthemums, about the size of a Famous Amos mini chocolate chip cookie, in clusters of two. Each flower, the color of light denim, is surrounded by a set of two veiny three-pointed leaves, painted dark denim. All the space in between is filled with dark cobalt swirls – the kind you might draw if you were bored at school and were doodling in the corners of your notebook.

I thought mom would be gone for 30 seconds, but she was gone for maybe 10 minutes. The dryer cycle probably wasn't done yet, so mom had to wait. During that time, I paced nervously around the living room. I stopped in front of the vases, which were illuminated by an unseen source of light affixed to the shelf above it. It had occurred to me that I had never *touched* the vases before, mostly because mom had forbidden it, and partly because they were on a shelf that was hard to reach. But since she was not here, I thought now was my chance. I stretched up to grab a hold of one of them. My hands grasped the body, but I forgot that the lids were unattached to the vase – just gently placed on the mouth – so one lid toppled over, hitting the other vase sitting beside it and causing that vase to sway in place for a moment, the ceramic making a terrible tinkling on the glass. I watched in horror, in the hopes that the vase would right itself in place, but instead it came toppling down, smashing against the bottom shelf and shattering in pieces before scattering on the carpet below.

In the world, you might encounter this kind of vessel at a Home Depot in the gardening section. You can imagine someone using it for a geranium, the bright red flowers contrasting nicely with the blue, to place on a side table on a veranda. But actually, this pot was used for tea. Not for drinking, but for storing loose leaf tea that you would perhaps dip into with a little spoon ...

MOOOOOMMMMM!!!!!! I yelled, starting to cry. I didn't dare move from my position, with the one vase still intact in the grip of my tiny hands. *MOOOOOMMMMM!!!!!!* I yelled and yelled until I could hear her footsteps, her calling my name and running to the door, no clothes in hand.

In the end, mom was not upset, just relieved that no real ill had befallen me during the one time she had left me alone in the apartment. The next week, we went back to L.A. Street to purchase a matching replacement, but we couldn't find one. So mom had to buy a vase that had a similar size, color and pattern, but with a square mouth instead of a circular one, and tiny handles that I could fit my thumb through. She took the lid of the vase that broke, miraculously unscathed, and put it in a drawer in the kitchen.

For many months after that, I couldn't bear to look at vases – they were just a reminder that I had broken the one thing that mom had bought for the new place, for no reason at all other than that to her, they were beautiful.

... and mercifully for this pot, it has no lid.