This Girl
by
Serena W. Lin

A Dissertation submitted to the
Graduate School-Newark
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
Rutgers University – Newark MFA Program

Written under the direction of
John Keene
And approved by
Jayne Anne Phillips

[Director’s Signature]

[Advisor’s Signature]

Newark, New Jersey
May 2014
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My deepest gratitude to John Keene who has inspired me to write what I want to write. You are a true teacher, a light in the world, and a genius.

I’d like to thank my family. I am with you. Mom, Bernice, Justin, Booker, Phineas, James, Anna, and Michael — I love you.

Justin Lin created the cover art – Amazing, Brudda! Thanks!

Dear cream city review, thank you for publishing “This Girl.”

Thank you to my professors and fellow students at Rutgers-Newark:
   Jayne Anne Phillips, the line whisperer, who made it possible for me to study at Rutgers-Newark.
   Tayari Jones who baked me cookies after Hurricane Sandy, urges me to write with love, whose winning personality is legendary.
   Alice Elliott Dark whose stories consider the possibilities of communication, who lives what she writes.
   Many thanks to Brenda Shaughnessy, Jim Goodman, Rachel Hadas, Melissa Hartland, Fran Bartkowski, Akhil Sharma, Rigoberto González.

To the Voices of Our Nation (VONA) I write in solidarity with you. The first time I went to VONA, I wondered if I’d find poets grazing like sheep in the meadow. I returned believing that I deserve to write. Big Shout-Outs to the Lucky 13, NYC-VONA, all my lifelong VONA pals.
To the faculty and staff of VONA, especially David Mura, Diem Jones, Elmaz Abinader, Tananarive Due, Evelina Galang, Junot Díaz, and ZZ Packer—love.

So many friends edited, proofed, or otherwise improved, this manuscript. My thanks to:
   Sissy Trinh, Marie Avetria, Donna Maeda for improving my cultural competency.
   Dinah Finkelstein for astute line editing.
   Jennifer Derilo, RITA thanks you for her life.
   Cecilia Rendon and Melissa Rivero for editing my Spanglish.
   Viju Soma, Jimmy Lin, and Bernice Lin for technical support.

To my Friends – you are my chosen family.
Tonight I’m blessing a star, one for each of you, in your honor.
The blessing is also you.

To Courtni Burleson, you have poured so much love, work, and care into my characters that they are coming over for dinner. The conversation shall be merry. Thank you for reading and editing every story not once, but twice, plus. Thank you for keeping my head up.

For my father and for the years . . .
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Hero and The Dragonfly</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Girl</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sleepers</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Speed of Love</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I AM RITA</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Hero and The Dragonfly

My mother, Molly Le, passed away after a sudden heart attack in San Jose. Her sister, my Aunt May, asked me to fly back from New York City to California and deliver the eulogy. I received a bereavement leave from Rutgers-Newark, where I worked as a part-time librarian, and figured a few weeks would be time enough for me to fly back home, attend the funeral, and console Aunt May.

Nobody gave me any trouble at work about taking the leave because I was briefly a national hero. I’d rescued a teenager who’d fallen over, or some say he likely jumped, onto the PATH track at the World Trade Center stop. It was in all the newspapers, on t.v. The only person who didn’t congratulate me after I saved the kid’s life was my own mother.

“Nour, you just did what any decent human being would do,” my mom said when I called to tell her. I lifted that kid off the tracks the year before she died, but before that conversation we hadn’t even spoken in a couple years. I’d learned not to expect a lot from my mom, but I’d been excited to tell her the story. I didn’t have a chance to forgive her before she died.

*

I was in bed with my girlfriend Jean in her high-rise apartment in Hell’s Kitchen when I got the call from Aunt May, saying that my mom had passed. It was hard to make out what Aunt May was saying, but it seemed that my mom had passed from a heart attack at the fish market. It was sudden, and I needed to return to California right away.

Later, as I stood among the many rows of funeral mourners, I remembered that Aunt
May had said to please make the eulogy appropriate and serious. People, she’d told me, had been waiting for days for this funeral. I’d told Aunt May that the only thing funny about my mother’s death was that it was probably the only life event she hadn’t planned. Aunt May sighed and said. “You’re not funny, Nour.”

I asked Aunt May if she wanted to give the eulogy, and she told me she’d already given Uncle Harry’s eulogy when he’d died two years ago. Aunt May said it would be too hard for her to give my mom’s as well. We were having my mom’s service in the same church where we’d held services for Uncle Harry. I’d made the decision that it was okay to hold it in a church, even though my mother was a devout Buddhist. Not like my father, she used to say—she accused him of being a fake Christian who left her when she was pregnant with me. She would criticize him and his Mexican family. “He didn’t even have the decency,” she said, “to pay for your education. Maybe that’s his custom.” He passed away when I was only five in a restaurant fire, and I never met his family. He and my mom had eloped. As an adult, I realized that neither my mom’s nor my dad’s family approved of each other. And my mom disapproved of me, so everything was equal.

When I was in junior high, I dressed carefully every day, color-coordinating my outfits. One morning, my mom looked me up and down. I felt like a dowdy piece of furniture. She said, “Don’t wear that, Nour. It looks like a tent. Why couldn’t you take after my side of the family?” What she meant to say was that I wasn’t Vietnamese enough.

Maybe my mom’s hypocrisy was why I agreed so quickly when Aunt May asked if I would mind terribly if we just used Aunt May’s church. “But we could still have some Buddhist aspects to the funeral,” Aunt May said, trying to cover up how quickly I’d
agreed. She was always the peacemaker between me and my mother. It was in vogue for all the Vietnamese families to use the Western funeral parlors and burial grounds; many of them offered discounts for folks whose families were veterans. So my mom would get to be with her people.

Aunt May was herself a Christian, but not the annoying type. She maintained that God had saved my mom, her, and my grandmother, from the ocean when they were refugees fleeing Vietnam. She went to Bible study once a week and was active in the Church. That’s how she met her husband a few years before I was born—Harry Nasiri, who was a Palestinian Christian. He’d sought asylum in the United States. He practically had a stroke whenever he heard the word Israel. “It’s Palestine!” he’d hiss, his throat bulging with anger. Uncle Harry had passed away a couple years ago.

Uncle Harry was a charmer, a giant barrel-chested man with a warm laugh. He bought me history books and told me to study hard so I could be successful. One time, I heard him whisper behind my back to Aunt May, “Well, what else is she going to do? No husband is going to want a wife bigger than he is.” I didn’t hate him for thinking I wouldn’t be a bride. I did, however, wish he’d be a bit more like Aunt May, and get over the fact that I was fat.

My mom was very fond of Uncle Harry. At his funeral, she’d said, “Aunt May was lucky to find such a good man, so generous and so good-looking.” She’d even asked Uncle Harry to give me a Palestinian name when she found out Aunt May couldn’t have kids. Aunt May protested that she was too kind. My mom answered, “Uncle Harry’s the only man around. The only one who stayed, anyway.” It was such a weird name for a
Vietnamese kid that I’m accustomed to repeating my name over and over again to anybody who bothers to ask.

I really didn’t want to give my mom’s eulogy. I wasn’t sure what I could say about celebrating her life when I felt compelled to do the opposite. My mom spent most of her life denying my existence; not denying that she had a daughter exactly, but pretending that I wasn’t her daughter. I was her fat, lesbian daughter. I didn’t look like her, with my squishy face and too-thick lips. She was milky-white; I was sallow and kind of hairy. I was a giant next to her, nearly eight inches taller than her five feet.

My mom couldn’t control how I looked, but that didn’t keep her from trying. Once, she gave me a depilatory for a birthday gift. I’d come home from school and the refrigerator would be empty, and my mom would announce that there wouldn’t be dinner because I’d clearly eaten earlier. It didn’t matter to her when I told her I was a lesbian because she’d already given up on me, and I knew I didn’t want to be like her.

After I saved the guy on the PATH train and called my mom, maybe giving her one last chance to be proud, I didn’t bother to try again.

“What, was he holding a pizza?” she’d said at one point.

We were disappointments to each other. I called Aunt May after the PATH incident, and she’d listened to me as I sobbed. She told me I was a hero, to keep my head up high, and not to pay attention. She was always there for me.

*

There were purple crescent circles under Aunt May’s eyes at the funeral. She sat, anxious and closed-off, in old black canvas shoes and a faded black dress. The light coming in from the stained glass window, multi-colored and crystalline, revealed the
Virgin Mary and various saints. The filtered light muted and tinged the entire gathering
with a solemnity it didn’t deserve. I wished I were back in the meadow near the old creek
bed where I’d grown up; I’d spent a great deal of time alone. There were dragonflies and
living things everywhere, and I was happiest away from my mother’s eye and my Aunt’s
concern. To me, the meadow was a place much more holy than a musty room with old
wood benches.

Aunt May was tired from arranging all the funeral details, especially since I’d been so
far away on the East Coast. She made sure the notice was put in the newspapers, and that
she invited all my mother’s friends. Try as I might, I didn’t detect any blame from her.
My mom died of a broken heart, I knew, but I didn’t think that Aunt May needed to hear
it.

For Aunt May, I’d give the eulogy, but I’d keep it short. “The truth is,” I told the
audience, “my mother and I weren’t close. Maybe it’s because she was so petite, and it
was hard to throw her arms around me and hug me.” People laughed.

I knew that Aunt May was counting on me to make things right for her. Aunt May
remained cheerful and present, even after Uncle Harry’s death. I was certain she’d take
this same attitude about my mom’s death. It still surprised me when I heard a loud sob
and wailing at the funeral home, and it was coming from Aunt May.

* 

The open-air fish market at the corner of Broadway and First Avenue was one of my
frequent stomping grounds in San Jose. Aunt May was the one who insisted that we go
before the funeral. I didn’t really want to go out and run into my mom’s friends.
My eyes watered in the crisp autumn wind even as the fresh air alleviated the fishy smell. Blue and white tents formed a disorganized half-square in the empty parking lot. It was hours before noon, but dozens of people were shopping, most of them mothers with children pleading for strawberry milk candy and cheap plastic figures, using their baby-strollers as carts. The mothers walked about the market in purposeful strides, hunting for bargains.

The vendors were mostly middle-aged women with tied-back hair, t-shirts, and dirty aprons, hawking their special sales. They fluttered their hands aggressively over rows of fish that stared one-eyed from beds of ice. The women cried out: prime cuts of salmon, farm-fresh trout, oysters and mussels by the pound, lobster, scallops, and clams. Small green nets dangled loosely on hooks glued to the side of bubbling glass tanks. The catfish crowded in the corners. They glared at the ladies like reproachful schoolchildren at the end of a field trip.

Aunt May stopped at one of the stalls, in front of a barrel of dried shrimp. “Binh-ah,” she called out to one lady, “how much to buy one of your deep sea bass?”

Binh, who had cheeks like red apples, replied to Aunt May, “Not too much. I’ll give you $3.99 a pound.

Aunt May nodded and said it was a good price. Binh asked if she wanted the fish deboned and filleted. Aunt May shook her head and said just to chop off the head. “I’m making the soup that my sister made,” Aunt May said. Binh nodded approvingly and gestured toward a man whose heavily lined face shared her same rosy complexion. A fine weave of lines mapped his face as he smiled, an enormous gap between his two front teeth. He grinned at us, took a net, and caught a large, bulging-eyed bass with glittering
scales. He reached into the net, grasped the fish as it flipped about, and slammed it, hard, onto a metal countertop attached to the stand. It made a flat sound as it died. In a smooth motion, he brought his cleaver down and severed its head.

He gathered the head and the fish’s body and neatly wrapped up two parcels in butcher paper. He passed the bundles to Binh, who put them in a plastic bag that said *Have a Good Day*. She reached for some clams and wrapped them up too. “That’s for the broth,” Binh said.

Aunt May passed over the cash, but Binh shook her head and wrapped her thick fingers over Aunt May’s hand. “No charge. I insist,” Binh said. “Your sister always came to my stall. You should come back, too.”

Aunt May shook her head and tried to give Binh the money again. They went back and forth a few more times. Binh stared at Aunt May, but Aunt May didn’t look her back in the eye, just peered into her purse. Finally, Aunt May said, “Binh-ah, how about I pay for the fish, and we take the clams as a gift.”

Binh made a soft grunt, nodded, and took Aunt May’s money, grabbed some bills from her cash box and slid the change toward Aunt May. Her hands went under the counter, and she presented us with a glass bottle filled with dark mahogany liquid that she slid into a plastic bag. It was a bottle of Red Boat fish sauce.

“Ok, please take this?” Binh said. “This sauce was her favorite.” She winked at Aunt May. “Let me know how the soup is.”

Aunt May put her hand on my shoulder and said to Binh very seriously, “Yes, I’m going to make the soup the way she liked it. Thank you so much, Binh-ah, for thinking of my family.”
“You’re waiting two weeks for the funeral, right? Can’t do it during this week. It’s bad luck for us and bad for her spirit.”

My mouth dropped open. “Two weeks,” I said, “that’s too long. I can’t be here for two weeks.” I felt Aunt May’s hand against my back, steering me away.

Binh had put her hands on her hips, and she was scowling. “Who are you?” she asked me.

“Aour,” Aunt May said, “we should honor your mother’s traditions.” To Binh, she said, “Of course we’ll wait to bury her. She would’ve wanted us to wait, so we’ll wait.” My Aunt sounded firm, and her words formed a wall around me.

Binh’s mouth opened and closed. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know you were her daughter. You don’t look like her.”

Aunt May was already walking away, her hand gripping my elbow and squeezing tight. It reminded me of all the times my mother had bent over, elegant and manicured in her pea coat and precise bun, grabbing my arm the same way Aunt May was grabbing it now. Aunt May was whispering in my ear, “Don’t pay them any attention, Nour.” My mother would walk faster and faster, straight-legged, sharp-heeled. Sometimes she ended up in front of me, and her words floated away with her, part of the cloud of floral perfume that always accompanied my mother, adrift and out of my reach.

I could see strangers’ eyes filling with disgust as they took in my size. I’d hear them whisper, “Is that her daughter? She’s so fat.” They wanted me to feel embarrassment, but what I felt most was contempt, for their narrow minds.

By some stroke of fortune, I was born with the gene that lets me ignore what other people think about me. My mother was born with different genes. She ate up
compliments, fluttering her hand around her throat in fake modesty whenever someone mentioned how wonderful she looked.

Her heart attack meant she didn’t have one of those long and protracted battles with cancer. She was saved from having me come back home or stay by her bedside in the hospital, acting like the dutiful daughter, on view to the world and damning evidence that my beautiful mother had given birth to an ugly child.

*

That night after the fish market, despite my protestations that the meal was too elaborate, I sat on a plastic stool at the kitchen counter, drinking a cup of chrysanthemum tea. Aunt May boiled the clams together with the fish head to make a clear, pungent broth. She took out a steamer and placed the fish body on a bed of green onion and lettuce. As she mixed the fish sauce with garlic, Aunt May said, “It would’ve meant a lot to her to have you give you the eulogy.” The kitchen was warm and cozy, but I shifted in my chair, knowing that she was telling a lie.

“We both know my mom would rather the world not know I exist,” I said. Aunt May kept stirring the sauce, so I kept talking. “She hated it that I was on television for saving that kid from the PATH train. She was ashamed of how I look, how fat I am. She didn’t care about what I did, that I risked my life for somebody else. I spent my whole life in the shadows. She never saw me.”

“Nour,” Aunt May said, “I’m glad that you came back. I know your mom and you didn’t get along. But she was planning to reach out to you before she died. It was so sudden. She was just standing there one second at the fish market, and then she fell over. I called 911, but it was too late. She was proud of you.”
“If she was so proud of me why is it that she never spoke to me after I left home? She never asked me to visit. You know she ordered me not to tell people I was her daughter.”

“I know,” Aunt May said.

“She told me to pretend that I was your daughter, Aunt May.”

“Your mom was also proud, too proud to admit that she made mistakes. Did she ever tell you what happened to us when we were little?” Aunt May said.

I didn’t know what she was talking about, and so I just slurped at my tea.

“We were so little, maybe your mom was thirteen, and I was twelve. We were close in age. We could’ve been twins. Back then, even before I got a little heavier and she got a little skinnier, we never looked alike. Your mother was so pretty. We used to joke that she’d be married before she was fifteen. Your grandmother, your mom, me—we survived the war and we survived the boat. Your grandfather didn’t. There really were sharks. We went via Florida to Texas, to a Christian family. They lived in this huge mansion with two floors, the biggest house I’d ever seen, and they even had a dog, and their lawn was the greenest in the neighborhood. The man and his wife were big and fat and white, and they said they couldn’t take two little girls and a grown woman. They said they didn’t have enough money. The house wasn’t big enough.”

I interrupted Aunt May. “I’ve heard this story before.”

“Wait,” Aunt May said. “That day we got there, the man’s wife said, ‘let’s keep this one, she’s so cute,’ and pointed at your mother. Your grandma was very upset. She started sobbing. She said she wasn’t going to leave her youngest daughter in an orphanage. Your mom looked at me, and then she said that she wouldn’t go anywhere without me. She turned around and marched back to the government car that had brought
us there and got in. The man’s wife saw this, and she said that it wasn’t right, that it wasn’t Christian. That’s how they ended up taking us all in.”

“They weren’t good Christians,” I said.

“They were, just needed a little push, that’s all. Your mom,” Aunt May said, “was always special because she was so pretty, but she never turned her back on her family. She didn’t hate you, Nour. She loved you. She was scared that the world wouldn’t treat you right because of ... because of you being heavier. She was scared that it was her fault.”

“It’s my mom who didn’t treat me right,” I said.

“I only wanted you to know that she wasn’t a bad person,” said Aunt May. The soup started boiling, and Aunt May set to retrieving the fish from the steamer.

Aunt May had a black and white photograph of my mother and herself as little girls on her refrigerator. A tall white man with a potbelly and a mustache knelt between them grinning from ear to ear, a gold cross glinting between the buttons of his shirt. He was a big fellow, almost as big as Uncle Harry. His arm was wrapped around my mother, who looked stiff and unhappy, while Aunt May was standing and waving. I walked over and put my finger over the white man and studied the picture more closely. I wondered why my mom wasn’t smiling at the camera, which she was doing in all the pictures she’d hung up in our home.

Aunt May served the steaming fish with a small dish of vinegar sauce on an elaborate plate that used to belong to my mother. Its one eye stared at me accusingly, as if it had something to say.

*
Jean and I fought a lot, and the night before the PATH rescue, we had one of our biggest fights. We lived in a swank 15th floor one-bedroom near Hell’s Kitchen. Jean and I were both standing there, hovering on either side of the dinner table, the lights dim the way Jean liked it. I imagined she could see a stretch of the city shining and alive, probably like the summer associates she would fuck every now and then. All I saw were our reflections against the window, me lumpy, Jean ramrod straight, leaning forward, waving her index finger back and forth like a flag.

Jean was a rainmaker at the corporate law firm of Tetley & Johnson. She’d even been written up in the Legal Times as one of the top attorneys under thirty. She was twenty-nine at the time and looked twenty-four. She was short and stocky and had a penchant for black pants and collared shirts. Maybe it was because she was butch, or because she was fearless, but her colleagues called her a bulldog behind her back.

I usually stayed at Jean’s place, especially since my studio in Brooklyn was shabby in comparison to hers. The commute was trying, but I’d come to look forward to it. I’d put on my headphones and listen to Jill Scott or Erykah Badu. I wished that I could be on a train instead of arguing inside the apartment, that I could put on some music and make the entire fight disappear.

“So what you’re saying is that you just can’t make the reception because you don’t feel like it?” Jean said. Jean liked to repeat things I’d said in previous fights even in a different argument.

“No,” I said, “It’s because I think I’m coming down with something, and I think it’d be better for me if I just stayed in, had a quiet night.”
“Seems like every night’s been a quiet night, lately. What’s wrong with you?” Jean started to run her hands repeatedly through her short, dark hair as she talked, and I worried that she’d tear out a patch or two because she was being so forceful. Unlike my mother, Jean never yelled. Instead, she’d pepper me with questions in her quiet but insistent manner until I got so tired of battling with her that I submitted to what she wanted.

“Why do you want me to go so much?” I asked. “It’s not like I’m going to do anything but stand around while you talk with your colleagues about the big case you’re working on.”

“Nour,” she said, her voice taking on a pleading tone, “please try to understand that it’s expected at these corporate functions that we bring our partners. You can stand by yourself if that’s what you want. People are going to think I’m lying about having a girlfriend. They ask why I never bring you around.”

“I have better things to do than be your decoration,” I said. I didn’t want to go with Jean because, while she loved me, Jean wasn’t immune to how I affected her image. I’d been to a firm reception when we started dating. Some stiff white men and women in suits and ties came up to talk to Jean, unconsciously separating the two of us. She could’ve opened up the informal circle they’d created; instead, she laughed and traded jokes with them without introducing me.

“What I’m trying to say,” she said, “is that I want your moral support, not that you’re a decoration.” Jean was using her most reasonable tone. That meant she was probably going to win the argument. She loved to win. I still didn’t want to go to her function, but there was no point in talking to her further. We had this argument often. While we both
had our victories, the battle was unceasing. We decided just to go to sleep. I’d figure out what I could handle in the morning.

* 

I first met Jean at a straight friend’s house party. Jean was still in law school; I was still figuring out whether being a librarian was enough for me. I dressed up in my favorite retro, dark red dress and comfortable indigo ballerinas, and applied a crimson lipstick with gloss.

I’d all but given up hope of meeting somebody, which cut out a lot of unnecessary worry in my life. I’d already sussed out that my twenty-something age group was shallow; people that age don’t deeply consider the value of potential mates. I was standing next to the snack table littered with a few plastic cups, a big bowl of chips, and a small bowl of peanuts. I was thinking about ducking out when Jean came up to me and said, “Hey, don’t we make a pair?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I said, instantly hostile, sizing her up like a trashed fraternity dude. I really hated it when people came up to me and tried to sympathize with my weight. I’d heard more sob stories about people’s disabilities, their sexual traumas, their coming-out experiences, their fat parents, their glandular conditions, and their past eating disorders than I cared to remember. What is it about being fat that always makes other people think something is wrong with you?

“We’re the only dykes here,” she’d grinned. Jean was both handsome and pretty, and I appreciated her directness. She looked like a teenager with her dimples, oversized soccer shirt, and backward baseball cap. Her breasts pushed against her shirt, straining
against the fabric, and opening a slight space near the button. Most times, people de-sexed me; they didn’t know, or care, if I was a lesbian.

I flirted with her. “What makes you think I’m a lesbian?” I asked her.

“Well, you’re undressing me mentally, and you’re looking at my chest. I checked, and I didn’t spill anything tonight, yet.” Jean was forward. She adjusted her shirt, suddenly self-conscious. Then, she asked me to go home with her that night. I said yes, because she was hot, and I was glad to meet a woman who didn’t want to play games.

She was an athletic lover. She fucked me with her black dildo, thrusting in and out with her hips and sucking my labia with the same surety and precision that I was certain made her a great lawyer. Before she came, she whispered that I should stay inside of her and not pull right out.

“Stay the night?” Jean asked. Her voice was heavy. She was falling asleep in the warm afterglow of her orgasm.

“Actually, I’m leaving,” I said, fastening my bra, “I’ve got some reading I need to do before the week starts. Thanks, I had fun, and I can show myself out.”

“I don’t think you should leave quite yet.” She surprised me—I thought she’d be too exhausted—by playfully jumping up and wrestling me back into bed. We kissed for so long I could barely feel my lips. After, I held her against me in the dark until we fell asleep, my arm snug in the curve of her waist, my wrist brushing her nipple.

I took the train home the next morning. A day later, I sent her an e-mail to let her know that I’d had a great time, and I hoped we could be good friends. I assumed that she wouldn’t want more than a one-night stand. I was wrong about Jean.
She confessed later that she felt really comfortable with me. In conversation after conversation, it became clear that I was good for her. Jean was a secretly anxious person. I’d developed a blasé attitude toward most of the things that seemed to stress out other people. She would tell me long, drawn-out stories of backbiting, political maneuvering, and plain harassment in law school. I was a good listener. I gave her stability. Jean was so competent and appeared to have everything, but she didn’t have high self-esteem. She’d had a rough childhood too, but she couldn’t get over it. She was always a little afraid that she would lose everybody in her life.

Partly, it’s because I understood her that I put up with her indiscretions. She’d give me some well-fashioned excuse about needing to prep a brief all night. They weren’t exactly affairs, more like one-nighters. The reason I understood her was what really disturbed me: Jean reminded me of my mom.

* 

When I was nine years old, I walked into my mom’s room at sunset one summery day to show her a dragonfly that I’d captured in the meadow with my bare hands, more by blind luck than any skill. They were sitting on the bed. Mom was kissing Uncle Harry on the lips. They got up and let go of each other so quickly that, out of sympathy, I released my hand, and the dragonfly’s iridescent wings—green on the tops, red on the bottoms—fluttered. It rose into the air and sailed out the open window. Distracted, I ran to the window to try to catch it.

It must’ve been the glint of light on its wings; in my rush to get the dragonfly back, I forgot my mother’s dilapidated bedroom, the wrong person on the bed with her. The
dragonfly’s a courageous creature, I thought, flying out into the world so beautiful and fearless, but it’s also delicate. I could hear its low hum, vibrating with joy.

It disappeared as if it’d never really existed. Who thought up dragonflies anyway? Their elongated bodies and transparent wings have a fantastical pattern that suggests they belong in another world. Their eyes are multiple mirrors, shiny and dark.

Earlier that day when I caught the dragonfly in the meadow, I was running and laughing. The sun was bright; the branches of the trees outside were flowing with pink buds; and the green blades of grass were more verdant than ever before. The sky was flushed with veins of blue and pink. I finally caught up to the dragonfly and cupped my palm; it just zipped in, and I saw that it had an extra set of wings.

Now it was gone. I turned from the window, and Uncle Harry was gone, too. My mom didn’t say anything, and she never did, not about that. Her lips were coral red. Her lipstick was like the underside of the dragonfly’s wings.

I didn’t trust my mother’s beauty. I was too young to acknowledge what a need it must have stirred in her, its ephemeral presence, its terrible presence, only confirmed by the eyes of men. I ran, sobbing, to find Aunt May, to tell her what I’d seen.

* 

Aunt May and I decided to go together to the Heavenly Sanctuary cemetery to pick out the design for my mom’s headstone. A gloomy woman greeted us in the foyer and said her name was Amy. She asked if we were the two o’clock appointment. We said yes. Amy looked like a ghost with a mop of long, straight blond hair.

“Are you sure she doesn’t want to be cremated?” Amy asked.
“Yes, absolutely sure,” I said. “We were hoping that we could get something simple. Maybe a picture of mountains or something.”

Amy selected several headstone photos showing engraved mountains. Aunt May picked one that looked generic, but with red lines. “Your mom liked colors,” Aunt May explained.

I let Amy know that I’d be paying for the headstone. After I saved the kid on the PATH train, Jean obtained a consolation settlement for me with the Port Authority for my back injury. I wasn’t rich, but it gave me some financial padding.

“Do you have a picture of your mom that you’d like placed in the stone?” Amy asked.

I’d brought with me a photograph of my mother, taken by my father, when they went on their honeymoon years ago in San Diego. My mother was smiling and beautiful. Amy looked at the photograph and then at me.

“Your mom,” Amy said, “sure was pretty.”

“She was,” Aunt May said. “Gorgeous.” She smiled warmly at Amy while I frowned.

“Can you let me know what you want to say on the stone?” Amy said.


“Usually, we list the children,” Amy said. “How about I put ‘in memory of’ next to her picture and then ‘her loving daughter, Nour.’”

“I was wondering,” Aunt May said, her voice going soft and shy, “my husband Harry is buried here too. Is it possible that we could have her plot next to his? We’re family, and it’d be nice to be together in death.”

It sounded like a horrible idea to me. I considered telling Aunt May about what I’d seen between her husband and my mom all those years ago, but when I looked at Aunt
May’s face, her kindness stopped me again, as it had all those years ago. I realized it was too cruel to talk about something that I didn’t fully understand.

“We have two plots open next to your husband’s,” Amy said.

“One other thing, Miss Amy,” Aunt May said, “I’d like it if we could purchase two plots then, one extra. Even though my sister’s husband is buried down in San Diego, I was thinking, that it’d be nice for my niece here to have the option to be buried next to me.”

My face was wet with tears. Embarrassed, I turned toward the cemetery that lay beyond the office. It really was a sanctuary, with a fountain and a lake, as well as rolling grass hills, dotted with stones that looked like little rabbits from a distance. For the first time, I thought about having to visit Aunt May here someday. I didn’t think I could ever let go of her.

*

It was five AM and still dark outside. I crept out of bed and dressed, careful not to wake Jean, slowly lifting my arm from her chest.

The 2 train was down the street from our apartment. It was a short ride to the World Trade Center stop where I could catch the PATH to Newark. This was my regular commute to work. The subway wasn’t really crowded, and the PATH station felt hollowed out and spooky because of its immensity and emptiness. I felt a sadness wedge itself inside me, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that maybe Jean and I weren’t going to make it.

After I’d tapped myself through with my card, I waited on the platform. There were only a few other people waiting, men wearing elegant suits and expensive wristwatches,
reading magazines and newspapers. It was one of those rare days I didn’t have my headphones on. I was in a bad mood, so I walked toward the last car, thinking it was best to avoid all human contact.

A boy was standing in the yellow caution area of the platform, weaving on his tippy toes and walking an imaginary straight line back and forth. He was rail thin. He couldn’t have been more than eighteen, wearing skinny jeans and a loose t-shirt, no shoes. I walked past him to the very end. Somebody should ask him if he’s okay, I thought to myself.

I turned around to do just that, but he wasn’t standing there anymore. He’d fallen onto the tracks, on his back, into the space between the rails. His eyes weren’t focused at first. He looked frantic. I saw the lights from the PATH train hit the curve, and I calculated that we had less than a minute. I squatted and leaned over, already breathing heavily, anticipating the exertion, and said, “Take my hand.”

He stared up at me, the look in his eyes familiar. I thought he wanted to die, but it was that same glinting fearlessness and even relief I’d seen in Aunt May’s eyes the night I ran over to her house, crying because I’d seen my mom kissing Uncle Harry. Instead of telling, I confessed to Aunt May that I loved her more than my mom, that I wished she were my mother instead.

“Nour,” she’d said, “you’re my daughter, as much as if I’d given birth to you myself.” She pressed me close to her, kissing the top of my head like a blessing.

*  

Despite the fact that I weighed so much that the newscasters referred to me as morbidly obese, and that the New York Post’s headline screamed “Big Save on PATH by
Big Lady,” I enjoyed watching the footage of me lifting the kid off of the tracks. I was proud of the ease with which I swung him up from the tracks with both hands.

Later, at my mother’s burial, I volunteered to be a pallbearer. It was usually something only the men were allowed to do. It was raining and so cold our hands were stiff and cracked. We lowered the casket slowly to the ground. I overheard my Aunt May say to the woman from the fish market standing next to her, “Binh-ah, she might look heavy, but it’s all muscle, all heart.”
**This Girl**

This is the girl. She has long, unwashed black hair. It thins along the crown. She bends her eyes downward. She wears her mouth like a line. She pauses at the airport turnstile. She does look back. She sees her boyfriend’s car.

He sees her squint in the lamplight. He drives a diesel, to save energy. Smoke pours from the tailpipe, ballooning in the cold. He has dropped her off at the curb. The snow covers the ground, making it dangerous. It is a low hour. It is 2AM. She is California-bound. In her right hand is a duffel bag. There is a name. It is an ink smear on an ID tag. The tag hangs from a thin string. It flaps against the bag.

She pushes at a glass sliding door. It does not give. She pushes at another door. Another. Another. She pries this door with her palm. It glides open on invisible tracks. Her palm leaves a smudge. It will be removed in the morning. The lobby emptied of sound. An escalator whirs to itself. The indentations on the leather couches are rising. Travelers made their conversations before midnight.

Her hands tremble. She lives in Wisconsin. Far away from home. There will not be another flight to San Jose until tomorrow. Her father is sick.

*

This is the bed. Joshua lives here too. The heater is broken. She’s wearing her bra. Black. Nothing else. She is cold. Her head is tilted. Her hair falls. To her shoulder. The pillow is soft. Her neck is stiff. His pelvis. Scratches against hers. She trembles. His skin glows white. His glasses are speckled. With dirt. She wants to polish them with a cloth. His eyes are lasers. She is underneath. His palms are planted. He thrusts. Again. Again. A
drop of sweat drips down. From his jaw. Sits on her clavicle. Another drop. Another. His velocity increases. He is a piston. His eyes pop open.

    His lips. Against her ear. He whispers.
    Was that okay?
    She nods.

    She gets up. She walks to the bathroom. Her knees. Sink to the tile. She leans over the tub. She gets out the vinegar. Gallon-sized jug. She rubs the sides of the tub. Hard. Like she did the day before. The day before that too. The sponge tears in half. She rips off the plastic wrap. A new sponge. She scrubs some more. Her fingers slip back. And forth. Her fingers scrape the ceramic. They bleed. She does not feel it. Her fingers are peeling. Skin cracked. She washes them twenty times a day.

    The phone rings. He answers.
    Yes, let me see if she is here.
    Do you want to come to the phone? he asks her.
    No, she says.
    It’s your Mom. It’s an emergency.
    He hands her the phone. She’s still wearing her bra.
    Mom? she says.
    He stands in the bathroom. He is still naked.
    I’ll drive you to the airport, he says.
    Thank you, she says. You’re a good boyfriend.
    He pulls her close. A hug. He strokes. Her hair. She turns her head. Away.
    Their bodies are cool. Tightening.
Her arms are crossed in resentment. This girl is not grateful. Her father sits with arms crossed to keep warm. He is cold. He is sick. The doctors have given him a year. There will be no surgery. He will have a hard time breathing. His stick legs curl behind him. The musty cloth of the easy chair. He is curled into himself like a cat. His pant legs lift. His sharp, bony ankles. She has pulled up a plastic folding chair that hurts her back. She is curled into herself. Head down. He sits in front of her. She cannot see him in spite of their proximity. She imagines a stack of books. They are big books, thick with vindications. Recommended by other people. They know. People who’ve had the talk. The big, gay talk. These queers think parents can change. These people think acceptance is a possibility. She knows they are wrong. She reads the books anyway.

Books can be used as weapons. Queer books are bullets for girls who are guns. She needs to select the right passages. Fire them. She needs to hurl the paragraphs out of her and into him. That is how she can defeat him. But she does not want to defeat her father. That would be a scorched earth victory. The damaged land not worth having. Not by a girl who is so young. She is twenty-five. He is fifty. She wants to win him. Over. Her life is at the start of the bright mile. His life is not. Over. She knows him very well. Better than most daughters know their fathers. As two adults. She knows his way of thinking. But they are alike. They have the same haircut. Short and buzzed in the back. They both wear Malcolm X glasses. They have the same temper. But they are unalike in some ways too. He yells when he is angry. He apologizes within the same day. She does not apologize. His English is not good. It sputters, does not make it over rocks. Broken. Her English is a fluent river. Product of the American school system. He is not. He belabors
his immigration to the US. Moaning as if it is a heaving thing. It interrupts conversation.

What do you want? he says.

Please will you accept me? Please don’t die without accepting me. Please don’t let me go without forgiving me. Born into a body I cannot change.

He turns his head. Faces the wall.

She cannot show him the books. He would not have time to read them. She thumbs through the chapters. She gets to her favorite one. Dog-eared. The one about falling in love. She wants to speak her girlfriend’s name. So her father can hear. But passages from books fail her. This is a conversation she can have. She opens her mouth. She is a fish in a filtered tank. Only air bubbles come out. She crosses her arms tighter. She flattens her breasts into pecs. She has more muscles than her father. Because he is sick. He is not the man he used to be.

He feels ashamed that he has this daughter. He is going to die without his baby girl. He did want a girl. This is not the girl he wanted. Girls are sweeter than boys. He was happy when his wife gave birth to a girl. A real girl. But that girl died in her mother’s arms. She contracted pneumonia. That girl’s lungs. Stopped. That girl was seven. This girl was not yet born. When her sister died.

That girl wore pink barrettes and played with a doll wearing a red paper dress. This girl ripped the head off Barbie, before her mother could serve her eggs and cereal in the morning. This girl built a house out of Legos and wore trousers and backward baseball caps in the afternoon. She was caught pretending to be a builder with Ken at night. She wanted a skateboard. He would not allow her to buy one. She made one by tacking together plywood with nails and taking wheels from an old office chair. She fell off of it
and gashed her knee and scarred her face. Her father broke her skateboard against his knee.

These are her memories. That night her father beat her with a clothes hanger. If she wanted to be his son then she could take it. Harder. His wrist hung limp. Tired. He smoked on the steps of his house. He inhaled with slow drags. He tried to let go of her. His baby girl. That girl.

This girl. At night. Her body. A bruise.

Her memories are in the room. She is done with books. They are not real. This is. His head is turned. He is facing the wall.

He is not the father she wanted.

* 

She lies on the bed. Prone. Her shirt hangs on a bedpost. The other girl stands against the wall. This is her mug shot. One of her long curls is pasted against the wall. A static cling. This girl doesn’t say the other girl looks silly. She does not think so. Other people may. But she does not. The other girl approaches her. Fast-forward. The other girl’s shirt is off. Her necklace. A naked cross between her breasts. Her panties are black lace. This girl longs to press pause. To study the image. To make an identification. The other girl chews her strawberry gum slowly. She is not worried about time. Not like this girl. A stick of incense burns down. Lavender and berry. This girl swears to remember the scent. The other girl’s lips press upon hers. A sponge. She screams when the other girl’s lips find her nipple. She is forgetting. Important things. The open window lets in the faint smell of skunk and trash. The wind wafts through the room. A cat meows in the distance. There is a honk. The bass of a Cadillac pounds in the night. Another cat shrieks. Then
quiets. The bed shakes. They grab each other’s wrists. Arms. Stomachs. Backs. Necks. They move on top of each other. Below they are wet. This girl closes her eyes like doors. She begins to think.

She is in a different room. In the new room is her mother. Who has poor eye-sight. Her glasses do not correct them. She may have cataracts. Her mother has to drive her father to the hospital tomorrow. Her mother will cut off the car behind her. An angry driver will honk. Long and angry honks. These honks will blast in her mother’s ear. She will be dizzy. Anxious. They will arrive at the hospital. They may or may not be safe. Is this all arrival? The needle will slide into him. He will feel all its inches. He will slumber in pain. He will be filled with chemicals. The pump that goes inside him. A bright green sludge. The doctors will murmur. The chemotherapy will help. This girl slides her fingers inside the other girl. The other girl yips. The other girl closes her eyes. She must imagine things too. It is probable that she does not see anything. The other girl drops her head. The other girl gnaws this girl’s collarbone. A silver cross flutters. This girl cannot breathe. This girl tries to go deeper with her hand. This girl finds a wall. She pushes against it. The other girl shouts. She repeats. The ceiling receives her cries. These are the holy words. These are the prayers for important things. She stops. She withdraws. Her fingers are covered in silk. This girl touches the other girl’s cheek. To even whisper a shame. But she cannot. Cannot. Cannot. There is one more kiss between these girls. It lasts for fifteen seconds. Their viewing is short. Long enough. To remember each other’s bodies. They pick up shirts. This girl leans back into the pillow. Into the pain. The other girl slams the door. She is out. She knows this girl’s father is dying. Even though she understands. It hurts. This understanding.
In the room with this girl are her parents. She wants to be alone. She tells the room, I love you.

*

This girl’s mother is a bank account specialist with a perm. Orange hair and brown hair. Unnatural. The back crooked. The mother’s mother straightened it. Her hands slipped off her daughter’s back. The mother wears a shiny nametag. She used to work twelve-hour days. Now she works part-time. Her husband is sick. In less than a year, he will be in a grave. In a Catholic cemetery. She has purchased the plot next to his. They will share the same gravestone. They left an empty space for her. After she dies they will carve the name and year. The weeds will pluck the moisture from both, alike.

The mother’s office is tidy. Three shelves stand against the walls. They contain volumes of data. The checks are in binders. The binders line the shelves. Things are labeled. She sits behind the desk. She faces the door. A paperweight of a bird sits on her desk facing outward too. Also on her desk is a picture of her husband. And her daughter. And her. The picture faces inward. In her drawer is a picture of the other daughter. The one who died. The mother forgets to look at her. She received a call from this girl yesterday. She is coming home for one month. She has heard the news. Her father is going to die. He has one year. Give or take.

The daughter calls the mother. Even at work, the mother picks up. She hears her daughter. She closes the door to the office. All the way.

Did you get my e-mail? the mother asks.

Yes, that’s why I’m calling.

The mother wants to know how her daughter is doing.
I’m hanging in there, the daughter says. I would like to come visit. If dad is sick, I should be there. I’m buying a plane ticket home. I will be there tomorrow. You don’t need to pick me up. I’ll rent a car. That way, I can drive him around. To appointments. I will stay for a month. I hope that’s okay.

I hope you didn’t cut your hair. The mother says this in Chinese. She wishes she had not said anything.

The daughter can pretend she doesn’t understand. But she does.

She hesitates.

I’m growing it out actually.

The mother feels relief. Her hand trembles. There is sweat on the receiver. We should pray, she says. Your father needs our prayers.

He doesn’t need that. He doesn’t believe in God. I’ll light a stick of incense instead.

The mother grows angry. She considers her next question carefully.

The daughter spares her. Mom, I am not bringing anyone with me. I am alone.

Good, the mother says. She is less afraid. I don’t want you to try to talk to him again. He does not want to hear about this. You will grow out of this. You’ve upset him before. It will be hard for him to heal.

He’s not going to heal, Mom.

The mother cannot agree. She says instead, Your hair. It is so beautiful. You should never have cut it.

The daughter says, Thank you.

She hangs up the phone. The silence is loud in the mother’s ear. This is not the time to speak about love. Taking care of him will be hard work. The mother knows she can
take care of him. She is alone.

She sits at her desk. She takes off her stockings. Unrolls them carefully from each leg. She makes a little ball. She puts it in her purse. She remembers what once was forgotten. In the drawer is the picture of the other daughter. She takes it out. She touches the gilded edge. She puts it back in the drawer. She squeezes her feet into her pumps. She rearranges the paperweight. She goes to the door. She opens it. Carefully. The teller working at his counter looks up. He smiles. He goes back to counting bills. He turns to the customer. He smiles.

*

This girl has heard the recent diagnosis. Her plane landed this afternoon. Already she is eager to return to Wisconsin. She must endure the family reunion that takes place every year. The reunion is tonight. She is tired. She has not adjusted to West Coast time. She has a year before her father will die, give or take.

The chicken is on the table. It is salted. It is seasoned. It is not tough. It must be tender. Roasted. Its deliciousness is the subject of conversation. The overhead lights are warm. They glow yellow. The kitchen is full of relatives. Her mother is responsible for the chicken. Her mother holds her head high. She meets all eyes.

The girl is in the kitchen. She watches the soup. It bubbles. The daikons roil. The star anise rises. As do the tea eggs. Popping up from the depths.

Her uncle is in the living room. He shifts on a metal folding chair. His wool sweater has a stain. He is not like the father. He likes Westerns. Barely has an accent. His hair is moussed and flows. Her father is balding. Her uncle puts a hand on her shoulder. He is her favorite uncle. His teeth are grey. He drinks a lot of tea. He chews tobacco. This is
not a well-kept secret. Her mother and father act as if they do not know.

Her aunt knows. She knows all her husband’s habits. Her hair is loose. And grey. Her blouse spots. With soup. She dabs at her mouth. She crosses and uncrosses her legs. Her uncle touches her aunt’s elbow. A gentle poke. To make a point. She giggles. Hand over mouth.

This girl carries two glasses of champagne. Three cousins sit on the floor. Cross-legged in semi-circles. Giggling. She could join them. Her legs would go numb. She joins her uncle and her aunt instead. She hands a glass to her uncle. Her aunt shakes her head. This girl keeps a glass. For herself. She raises the glass. A toast. For all parents.

Her uncle asks after her. She tells him that she is here for the month. To help care for her father. He says, You’re a good kid. She says, If you knew me better, you wouldn’t say that. She laughs. He keeps his hand on her shoulder. He asks, How is he? Tell me how he’s really holding up. Your mother says to give him rest. Fewer visitors.

She answers. He’s strong. He’s eating well. You know my Mom. She’s researching Magic Recipes online. If anybody can find a cure, she will. What more can we do but have hope?

He shakes his head side to side.

He asks, Have you met anyone out there? In the middle of the country, they grow them tall, build them handsome.

She shakes her head from side to side. They are boring, she mutters.

Her uncle points in the direction of a tall man. See that guy over there? he says. He’s from Wisconsin too. He’s a physicist. Or was it a biologist? Anyway, he’s in the sciences. He’s very smart. You should go talk to him. I think his name is Jim. Or is it
Bob?

She pats her uncle on the back. She goes to the dining room. A tall man approaches her. His plate is heaped with chicken. He is Jim. Or Bob. He says, My name is Joshua. He is Jewish. He has only ever had one girlfriend. She was Asian too. He is here because his classmate, her cousin, invited him. His family is far away in Wisconsin. He has good skin and dimples. He talks to her about mitochondria. They are healing tools for the body. Microscopic things. He talks to her about books. Have you read Nietzsche? he asks her. She asks, Are all physicists fond of philosophy? All of us, he laughs. He asks her about her family. I was born and raised here in the Bay, she says. She erases her sister. He tells her about his family. I’m an only child too. My father died when I was young. My Mom raised me.

She is not listening. The simultaneous distance. Their present proximity. Her father would approve. She smiles at Joshua.

Her smile is a sweet curve. Two points on a parabola. Meet in the middle. He tells her that she is cute, especially her short hair. Glossy. Gleams. His glasses slide from his nose. She thinks that some girls would want to push them up.

She notices her mother in the kitchen. Her mother reaches for the jar of sugar. It is on top of the fridge. Her mother is short. She uses a step ladder. This girl thinks her mother might fall. Her father isn’t here. He could pull the jar from the top. Her mother smiles in her direction.

The relatives are in for a surprise. Her mother bakes. Unlike her husband, she has matriculated in this new world. An apple pie is her offering. Her aunt has brought blueberry pie from a grocery store. The apple pie is the favorite. Her mother gains
confidence as they lift their plastic spoons. They ran out of forks hours ago.

*

The curtains are blue paper sheets on two sides of the bed. On the other side is a picture window. It stretches across the wall. From the window, the mother has a view of the Bay. The view could belong to new lovers. The window does not open. It brings the room a certain light. But the curtains. They are netted on top. They hang from metal rings in a track. But the rectangular lights. They shudder and buzz. But the tiles on the floor. They are polished cold.

The curtains are parting. The doctor comes in. He looks at his clipboard. The wife looks up at him. She is an old woman. Married to an old man. There is a chair next to the bed. She does not sit. She hovers over her husband. He is in the bed. The metal railing is pushed down. He will not fall out. The husband’s head is tilted to the side. She puts a bended straw in his mouth. He sucks water from it. His eyes stay closed. The doctor observes. He says nothing. He opens and closes his mouth. The wife asks him if there is anything they can do. The doctor says, We can take good care of him. Make him comfortable. But you should prepare. I don’t think he has long. Maybe hours. Maybe a day. He’s contracted a cold. It’s spread to his lungs. His immune system. It was already compromised from the chemo. I’m sorry, so sorry.

The wife says, we thought he had a year. He can make it through this.

The doctor shakes his head from side to side. I’m sorry is all he has to say. Would you like us to give him some morphine?

The husband does not seem to hear the doctor. No, no, says the wife. No morphine. He wants to be awake when she comes.
Ah yes, the daughter, the doctor says. You should call her.

I already have, says the wife. She’s in Wisconsin.

Let me know if you change your mind. About the morphine. He leaves before she answers. He is on rounds. He has other patients.

The wife presses her lips against her husband’s bald head. Not everything can be translated, she realizes. She gets up and pulls a curtain closed. The doctor had left the one open, just a crack. She sits down in the chair and faces him. She begins to talk.

Don’t worry, my dear, my dear. She’s coming. Our daughter. Don’t leave before she comes. We did the best we could. She listened to us. She’s happy with Joshua. You should forgive her. What if she doesn’t want us at the wedding? She grew up here. It’s different. Don’t we want her to be happy? I hate it when you get so mad. It made you sick. Why don’t you calm down and get better?

He says nothing. This is what she thinks her husband would say if he could talk.

She grew up. At least she grew up. I miss her so much. Our other daughter. But this one can do whatever she wants. We can’t stop her. We can do what we want too. Do you remember what you promised me? We can go back. Buy a house together. Let’s go back. My sister is still there. Let’s leave this country when I retire next year. I want to travel together. I want you to see the castle in Canada. The one I went to without you. I want to take you on vacation. I want to go camping with you. I know you don’t hate it that much. I want to try all the new dishes you make. Have you found the right medicine yet? You’ve been sleeping so late. Researching. We can still try it. I can go home. I can drink soup with you. I can get well.

His breathing is filled with terrible things. The mucus is strangling him. His arms and
legs are twigs. The hospital band is twice as big as his wrist. His head is swollen. Water bag. It lolls upon his neck to the other side. He must have been trying to look at her. His eyelids flutter. He must be trying to say something. To her.

Look, she says. She takes his glasses and puts them over his closed eyes. Listen, she says. There are popping sounds in the distance. It is Labor Day. There are fireworks outside. She can see them through the window. Their bright rainbows arch across a dusky sky. She can see their tiny shapes dancing on his glasses. Just reflections. My dear, do you want to go?

He shakes his head up and down.

* 

This is the girl. She gets off the plane. There are only a handful of passengers. She bumps into another girl in the airport. That girl is carrying coffee. It spills. Down her sleeve. That girl gives her a nasty look. This girl does not notice. It is early in the morning. The airport is not crowded. Her knees feel stiff. She wobbles a little. She walks fast. She walks faster. She only has a duffel bag. She did not have time to pack. She exits through a sliding glass door.

She comes out. Her mother is there. Her mother has driven the Volvo. The engine is still running. Her mother gets out. The girl gets into the driver’s seat. She buckles her seatbelt. She is already crying. Her mother is in the passenger seat.

Have you had anything to eat, her mother asks. The girl says no. The girl says it doesn’t matter. She’s not hungry. Her mother’s eyes are swollen. They’ve turned a corner in the car. The girl hears planes that sound more and more distant. She imagines this will be the sound in the hospital. But it will be footsteps, more and more distant. She hears her
own thinking. She wishes her mother would talk. Her mother does not. The girl feels sick. She continues to drive.

They drive for twenty minutes in silence. They pass by a reservoir between two hills. The water in the gully is deep. The cranes standing still on the marsh make a thousand specks. The girl thinks they are sleeping. Her mother thinks they are getting ready to fly.

Her mother says, The sky is beautiful, don’t you think? I love how pink it is. Like the inside of a seashell. And the clouds are streaks. You can almost see the smoke from last night. From all the fireworks. They lit up the sky.

Her mother takes her hand. You know, you look just like her, she says. Both my girls. So beautiful. He spent more time with you than he ever did with her. I always thought to myself, she’s his favorite. It’s silly now.

The girl does not look at her mother. She wants to ask if she’s too late. Instead she says, I miss California.

They both look up. Toward the horizon.

The sky is beautiful.

***
In issue twenty-five of *Yume Force Chronicles*, Yukiko saves Hiraki from an airplane that flies of its own volition, on an indecipherable route, or track. Hiraki, our hero, is by himself on the plane. It travels a circuit between Tokyo and San Francisco, landing and then taking off again, endlessly. Eventually, the scenery distorts, and Hiraki recognizes it as the apartment he shares with Yukiko: living room, kitchen, and bathroom. In the bathroom, the plane loops by the sink, the toilet, and the medicine cabinet. Each time it passes the medicine cabinet, Hiraki can see his own reflection, fearful and anxious in the mirror.

All the other passengers are sleeping, and even when he shakes them, they don’t wake up. He becomes convinced that the plane’s trajectory is the same as his own future, seemingly eventful, but in reality, circular. He especially hates the medicine cabinet and whenever they fly near it, he squeezes his eyes shut and feels sick to his stomach. In his despair, he arrives at a plan to liberate himself. He’ll puncture the plane with his electric sword, releasing all the air pressure in the cabin, to end his own life and the misery of the flight pattern. He feels like a monster, killing all these innocent people, but they’re sleeping. They won’t feel anything or know any better, and he’s tried to wake them up. That’s how Hiraki justifies what he intends to do.

Right when Hiraki places the tip of his sword against the wall, Yukiko appears to him in a vision and sings him to sleep, a song so melancholy he swears he can feel his heart collapsing. “Somebody Already Broke My Heart,” by Sade. Yukiko’s voice is
mournful and ethereal. She misses him. He feels his consciousness floating beyond the plane.

When he wakes up, Hiraki is in his bed. He discovers Yukiko asleep, curled up next to him. The room is quiet, and she appears to be deeply dreaming. The kicker is that he can’t wake her up.

* 

I’m a late-November baby. My friends threw me a surprise birthday party that second to last semester, before I was to finish my Ph.D. in molecular biology at UC Berkeley. Jiang lured me to the party at Zachary’s Pizza, saying “just one drink.” She needed a break from hitting the books. This was also Jiang’s last year in law school, where she was on the public interest track. Though I’m usually a depressed loner on my birthday, I was susceptible to persuasion because I was on a juice diet. I’d read that the diet could improve my focus. Sipping down pureed celery stalks and lemon juice, my stomach was never entirely full. The hunger made me desperate. I was more aware of being single, of being lonely.

When my father called from Kaohsiung to wish me happy birthday, I kept the conversation short. I’d spoken to him only once every few months since he emigrated from San Jose back to Taiwan five years ago. “You can have a nice dinner with Jiang. I’ll treat,” he’d offered. Jiang was the only friend of mine whose name he knew. We’d been decent friends in high school, became better friends in college at UCLA, and when Jiang had her pick of law schools after a few gap years working for a public radio station, she decided on UC Berkeley so we could be in the same city again.
I thanked my dad for the new manga he’d mailed me as a present. I hadn’t opened it because he would pick whatever popular crap was on the shelves in Taiwan, like *Shitzimi Unmasked* and *Ronin Goddess Go*. We lapsed into an awkward silence. He didn’t like to discuss his personal life, or mine. Birthdays weren’t a big deal in his family, but my dad would slurp down the pig’s feet noodles my mom cooked for every birthday meal. Was he remembering her noodles too, their warm, fatty scent? Before he hung up, he said, “Be sure to wear a jacket. You don’t want to catch a cold.” Something my mom used to say at the end of every conversation, even during summer.

The surprise party really was a surprise. Jiang knows I don’t like surprises, and I don’t like pizza. That’s not the same as somebody saying they don’t like sex, despite what my friends say. To me, food is best served compartmentalized. Every part of a pizza is delicious: the sauce, the crust, the cheese, but it’s no good mixed together. A slice can overwhelm me. I can’t identify each taste.

Eight people, most of them from the molecular biology department, waited inside, wearing silly paper hats. They shouted “Congratulations!” when I came in. The other patrons twisted around in their chairs, curious about the commotion, and clapped. Jiang’s hat was crooked, pointing off at a festive angle, matching her lopsided smile. I blushed and ran my hands along my shaved head, the rough bristles.

“My goodness, you didn’t need to go to all this trouble,” I said, relieved the color in my cheeks was dissipating. “But thanks!”

Jiang threw her arms around me and squeezed my bicep. Her fingers felt warm through my shirt. “I know you’re juicing,” she whispered. “I figured that you’d be less tempted to eat if we had pizza.”
A pang shot through my stomach, and it let out a low grumble. I thanked her, considered a glass of water, and reached for a Coke instead. Jiang folded a mushroom slice into a roll and tore into it like a gyro. My friends and I chatted, trading stories about our professors. I heard a tinkle from the bell on the door and Ham, short for Hammond, his thick glasses fogged with steam, came in. He brushed the invisible damp off his pea coat, walked over, and wrapped Jiang and me in a bear hug. Jiang’s smile spread from ear to ear.

“Happy Birthday, Amel! Sorry I’m late, been studying all day,” Ham said. “You’re radiant tonight. Hope you’re not working too hard, enjoying the celebration.”

“Must be from coming off this juice diet,” I joked.

He beamed at me and gobbled half a pepperoni slice before peeking up from his glasses at Jiang. Jiang slowed her eating, nibbling at the edges, grinning. I slurped at my Coke.

“Oh crap!” Ham hit his forehead. “Are you both hanging out for a while? I left some books at the law library, got to go back and get them.”

“I’ll go with you,” Jiang said.

I’d mentioned to Jiang that I wanted to see the Star Wars prequel, Attack of the Clones, in the theater for my birthday. It started in half an hour. I glared at a shaker of Parmesan cheese, annoyed at Jiang’s forgetfulness. She patted my shoulder, sensing the direction of my thoughts. “Let’s make a dash for it, Ham,” Jiang said. “Amel and I are seeing Star Wars later. Want to come with us?”

“You two shouldn’t run.” I cut off Ham’s reply. I wished she hadn’t invited him.

“It’s slippery outside. Don’t worry about the movie.” I knew I sounded petulant, but I
wanted to avoid a third-wheel situation. Lately, Jiang and Ham had been spending their study breaks together, a rare occurrence as third-years. Jiang would meet Ham at the law school courtyard. They’d stroll to Sproul Plaza, sit under a canopied table at the Golden Bear Cafe, and share peanut butter and banana sandwiches.

Every fifteen minutes they spent together led to an hour of recounting from Jiang. “We’re falling for each other,” she’d thrill. “Yesterday, he was sitting so close to me you couldn’t have put a ruler between us. I’m still waiting for the right moment for our first kiss.” She grew up in a conservative Christian family, though she didn’t buy wholesale into her family’s beliefs. Her dad was especially fearsome. Personally, I thought he was a nut job conservative, prone to fits of rage if he thought his kids weren’t doing right by God. So while she wouldn’t demand a promise ring, Jiang also wasn’t the type of girl who fooled around casually. She wanted Ham to be serious and committed before, as she used to say, they “took it to the next level.” What would become of our late night Netflix marathons if they hooked up?

After my last relationship, Jiang nursed me through a broken heart. Bisexual Jane, a grad student in the chemistry program, and I had broken up after a summer fling. She was new to grad school. Thankfully, the chem labs were in the center of campus, far away from my lab on the North side.

Bisexual Jane and I had ended things quite badly, over a salad from Intermezzo on Telegraph Avenue. “I met this guy, and don’t roll your eyes, but he’s a doctor,” she said. “If I can be with a guy, why disappoint my parents? I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want that whole white picket fence package, you know? I’m an only child.” When I didn’t
respond or point out that I, too, was an only child, she reasoned, “Amelia, I told you I was into boys too, from the start.”

I let her grasp my hand with her sweaty fingers as I ate my croutons on the side. I was afraid that I’d let go, and we’d be out of each other’s lives, as if nothing had ever happened. Neither Jane nor I spoke for a time. The garbanzo beans languished at the soggy bottom of the wood bowl. Jane blinked rapidly, and her next words bounced around in my head for years, even after she shuffled to the exit. “I’m sorry,” she said. “You’re amazing. Why couldn’t you have been a guy?”

I drove to Jiang’s cramped apartment on Shattuck and let myself cry most of the night. Jiang held me until I fell asleep. In the morning, she woke me up with pancakes and said that I should definitely shave my head. “It’s a sexy look on you,” Jiang said, “and Jane, that no-good bisexual vixen, will regret the break-up when she sees you.” We laughed. Jiang and I had a long-running argument about whether all people are bisexual. She was for the proposition. I was against.

Ham said he was concerned that we would miss the movie. “I’ll run and get the books myself.” The pizza parlor lamps, strung from the ceilings, swayed back and forth a little, their halogen bulbs warming the room. Ham picked a piece of pepperoni off of Jiang’s slice, popped it in his mouth. He draped his arm on the back of Jiang’s chair. She reclined, her body melting toward his. We needed to leave now if we were going to make the movie. I slurped even more loudly at my Coke.

A soft hand tapped my shoulder. I startled and turned to face a woman who was actually shorter than me. I was only a few inches above five feet and solid through the shoulders, so she seemed miniature, slight and delicate. Her neck curved like a swan’s.
Stiff, brassy ringlets of dark hair dropped from a purple bandana to her shoulders. I guessed she was Latina or Middle-Eastern. Her brown eyes, though, had that ancient luster I always associated with the grandmothers who sat in front of crates cutting fruit onto newspapers at the grocery in San Jose.

“Excuse me, are you Amel?” she asked. “May I sit here?”

“Sure,” I said.

She stuck out a doll’s hand. I loosened my grip, careful not to crush her fingers.

“No, I’m not Amel,” Jiang said as we shook, “have you met Lula before? We ran into each other on the College Avenue bus. Lula’s a 1-L over at Boalt, and the three of us had a great chat.”

_The three of us._

“I couldn’t help but overhear that people were getting together at Zachary’s in your honor.” Lula’s eyes honed in on mine as she spoke. “Hope you don’t mind that I invited myself along. Ham and Jiang said it would be cool.” Her voice was high with a childish, penetrating quality that I found unsettling. I found it unsettling.

“I wouldn’t say it’s in my honor,” I said. “Just a birthday party.”

“Right,” Lula said. “Well, the date of your birth was an honor to the universe.” She stepped forward and flicked her shoulders, pushing Jiang aside. She spoke with a strange formality. Jiang raised an eyebrow at Lula’s intense manner. “I’ve been hearing about you for a while, Amel. Jiang was kind to say I could stop by.”

Jiang shrugged, embarrassed. “I’ll just walk Ham out,” she said. “Be back in time for the movie.” She slung her coat over her shoulder. They seemed to float to the door before I could exhale, or protest.
Lula slipped into Jiang’s vacated chair. Thanks a bunch, Jiang, I thought, feeling alarmed. “Have a slice of pizza,” I said to Lula and swept my arm over the Chicago-style pepperoni sitting in the middle of the table. She opted for a tomato and basil pie instead.

“Thanks,” Lula said, sprawling out and chomping away. “You’re not having any?” she asked.

“Naw,” I said. “I’m juicing.” I pointed to the cup of water. “I’m not a huge pizza fan.”

“Nobody doesn’t like pizza,” she said. “That’s torturing yourself. That’s like saying you don’t like—”

“Sex.” I cut her off. I rolled my eyes, half-kidding.

With her mouth full, Lula said, “On the last-minute side, but would you like to come to this with me?” She reached into a woven bag, a red and yellow yarn affair, and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. “Like the bag? It’s from my mom’s mom, in Guatemala,” she said, handing me the flyer.

I smoothed out the paper. In plain lettering it said:


“I’ve been looking for all the good socialists on campus, and somebody said that you were the leader here. I thought your party was maybe a mini-meeting,” she said.

“I-I think somebody was playing a joke on you. I’m no socialist,” I said, flustered, then defensive. “Apparently, you can’t shave your head or be a dyke without folks assuming you’re an activist, or something. I’m really not that political. I’m a scientist.”
“I was born political. My father’s from El Salvador, my mom from Guatemala—she’s why I’m so short. Actually, most Guatemalans are short. Us outsider kids, we must be crusaders for the oppressed and honor our parents. Science isn’t mutually exclusive from activism, if you think about it.” Lula didn’t wait for an answer. “I prefer to be around a more rational faith. That’s why I divorced the Catholic Church when I was ten.”

“My parents,” I said, “came here when I was eight. My mom died when I was sixteen, a stroke.” I said it matter-of-factly, but it still hurt a little to admit it out loud. Usually, I don’t share this information with strangers. I knew even then that she was inviting me to confide in her.

“You don’t have an accent,” she commented.

“Neither do you,” I said.

“That’s because,” Lula said, “as soon as we came here I’d practice in my room whenever my sister left and I could be alone. I’d face the wall and listen to a cassette tape.”

“Brilliant!” I said. Lula was an easy conversationalist. We laughed about Americans, how obsessed they were with fast food, how there was a version of a burrito or a taco in every culture. She said she was a vegetarian, and it was the only ethical way to live. She said she proudly claimed the liberal trifecta: pro-choice, against the death penalty, and for gun control. I didn’t even notice that Jiang wasn’t back, and the movie had started without us.

“My father was in the army in Taiwan,” I explained. “I don’t like guns, but I’m glad he had one. He kept a gun in the house when I was growing up, in case there was a problem.”
Lula said she thought guns were emptying the country of brown kids, and that guns for the army or even to defend your home, weren’t the same thing. I liked that she was respectful of my views, even though we were arguing. The cheese on the pizza filled my nostrils, and to my surprise, I almost reached for a slice, but I didn’t want to break my fast.

“Hey, can I get your number?” I asked.

She said yes and asked me for my hand. She scribbled the number on my palm and extended her own. I wrote my number down, and when I was finished, I held onto her hand for a long beat. She didn’t lower her eyes, just met my gaze, steady, without blinking. I felt a frisson of excitement or tension. I couldn’t tell which one.

“I’m going to check out that socialist meeting. I’ll catch you soon, Amel.”

Abruptly, Lula scooped up her bag and left. I watched her butt stretch her jeans all the way out the door.

I finished my Coke and studied my palm. Her zeros were connected to each other through a line on the top. Jiang once gave me a handwriting analysis as a birthday present. The expert had said that my letters were broken up, as if I feared intimacy. I started to trace her writing with my finger and stopped when I saw a few of my friends exchanging sly whispers, giggling.

Lula’s flyer lay on the tabletop. I grabbed it. On the back, she’d written: If you’re interested, I read tarot. I’m a beginner. A free birthday reading for you. Mumbo-jumbo to me, but hey, it’d be a good excuse to call her. I went outside for a smoke.

It was drizzling lightly. I took a drag of my cigarette and leaned against the entryway. I watched Ham press Jiang against a lamppost. They were kissing. The light
cast a golden halo around them, silhouetting them into a perfect shape. The air smelled like damp gravel and pizza crust, and the car wheels traveling through the water sounded like hush, hush. Ham’s back was to me, his hands inside Jiang’s coat. Her eyes were closed. She was in a state of bliss, having waited months for Ham to make his move.

Why did it have to happen on my birthday? I wanted to be happier for her than I was. The rain smeared Lula’s number, the ink running into the rivulets of my hand.

The bell on the door emitted a tinkle as I pushed it open and went back inside. I left Jiang a voicemail on my way back, saying that the Coke had upset my stomach, a shock to my system after the juice diet—the movie wasn’t going to happen.

When I arrived at home, I was bone tired. I brushed my teeth, undressed, and tucked myself under the covers. I fell asleep and dreamt that I was the one kissing Jiang under the lamplight.

* 

It was a pleasant mid-January Wednesday, and I had time on my hands. Undergraduate classes would start again at the end of the month. My plan for the winter break had been to hibernate. I’d spent most of my time either running gels in the lab at Latimer Hall, or reading manga in my apartment—a cramped in-law unit attached to a coveted North Berkeley home. The main house belonged to a professor in the political science department, and its selling feature was an immense redwood deck that overlooked the Bay.

The professor welcomed me to use the deck. “Equal access is something I believe in,” he said when he gave me the keys. “You know, Foucault used to hang out on this very deck. I think he had a good time at a party or two.” He winked. When I told that
story to Jiang, she’d laughed and said, “That’s code for gay-friendly, or maybe friendly to parties and to gay people. You really need to get your head out of cell structures and into some queer lit.” I told her I was fine with my manga, plenty of girl-on-girl action and, well, girl-on-everything action.

I had yet to take advantage of the deck. I didn’t relish tripping over the professor’s spoiled kids, who chased each other across the wooden planks, screaming and crying. They left their tricycles, action figurines, oven sets, and plastic blocks wherever they dropped them. The professor, his wife, and their two kids were spending the recess with his family in Argentina. The day after they departed, the absence of activity was a dull roar in my ears. I couldn’t get used to the quiet, only the finches cheeping in the morning.

I ambled in my pj’s out to the deck with my laptop and watched a documentary about fast food. I tried to relax, but my jealousy kept pounding through my head and darkened the sky until it was no longer blue, but grey and misty. Maybe I could go back inside, go for a walk, or drive to the lab, wind my way down the familiar streets. I chided myself. I wouldn’t confess my feelings to Jiang when she returned from visiting her family in SoCal. She liked Ham, and she was straight. It would ruin the friendship. I knew better. But maybe she did like me a little bit. We’re all attracted to our friends in some way. Right? I definitely knew better, but even then, it was like somebody besides me was playing pinball, desperate to avoid full TILT. I was the ball. How could I prevent the ball from plummeting? I couldn’t help who I liked, right?

I thought about calling some of my program friends to unload my angst, but who wants to end up on the gossip rounds? I put on my Docs and decided to go down to the White Horse Inn. It was a bar on Telegraph Avenue. The bar occupies the bottom floor of
a nondescript, red brick apartment building. It has no windows. An imprint of a rearing white stallion on the awning is the White Horse’s sole identification.

Inside is a hallway with a bar and a few stools. Past the bar is a lounge area replete with a pool table, round tables dressed with unlit red candles in glass bowls, and a cavernous back room. On Saturday nights, strobe lights from the floor hit the disco ball that dangles from the ceiling in the back. The place transforms into a thumping dance hall, women gyrating and wiggling with abandon. But I was here on a Wednesday night. The lounge smelled stale and musky, like a leftover party, and the disco ball dangled unused, a forlorn rock.

A few customers, their ripped jeans and piercings shouting punk couture, were seated at the bar. They glanced up when I entered and then returned their attention to twisting their cocktail napkins and chatting with the bartender. One woman, whose back was to me, was seated in the roofless smoker’s courtyard that’s separated from the bar by a sliding glass door. In one hand, she held a wine glass, and in the other hand, a thick book that could’ve been a dictionary. She held it so close to her face that I guessed she’d forgotten her glasses. I couldn’t make out the title, but it must’ve been worth the effort.

I ordered a beer and sat down alone near the pool table. The table wobbled. “You Can’t Always Get What You Want,” streamed from the jukebox. Feeling self-conscious and as if the jukebox was somehow programmed to speak to me, I put my name on the board for a game. Two other names were on top of mine. A ponytailed brunette, statuesque, in tight jeans, thick boots, and a sleek black jacket, was knocking in the balls on the table, her hands on her hips. “Honey, you see anyone else here?” she said. “I already played everybody. They forgot to erase their names. You’re next. Grab a cue.”
I could make a decent bridge and hit a straight shot, but I had no other fancy skills. She wiped me off the table, twice. She was an expert, could even jump the ball, exerting little more effort to beat me than she would to peel lint off the table pockets.

“Name’s Chris,” she said. I let my fingers linger in hers. She labeled me the one decent player that night. Her hand was calloused and warm. She was at least a decade older than me, maybe mid- to late-thirties. She sized me up me as if I was a curio, reminding me of the ring holder in the shape of a cat my mom purchased before she died, not quite sure where to put it on her shelf. “Amel,” she’d said, “where do you think this belongs? It doesn’t fit in anywhere else.” I’d loved it so much that she’d put it with the fine china, where it stuck out and guests always asked if it was particularly expensive, or an antique. At least Chris was interesting, I thought, suggestively patting her forearm and asking if she wanted another drink for the game. I was tired of the university scene, of meeting only ambitious, wannabe professors. In the dim light, her crinkled smile was real and sexy.

She was about to answer me when a curly-haired woman with thick glasses sidled up to Chris and encircled her arm possessively. It was the woman with the book, and she was still holding it. “You’ve got some nerve hitting on my woman,” she said. Her words were slurred and her eyes were rimmed red and glassy. “I’ve got the next game, and the game after that, too.”

With her free hand, she grabbed at Chris’s pool stick, but she was hammered. She slapped it instead. The stick knocked into the green lamp hanging over the pool table. She dropped the book. The light spilled back and forth, splashing over the book on the floor and Chris’s face and body, carving hollows into her cheekbones, a patchwork of shadow,
elongating her chin into a vertex. She was gaunt, more so than I’d realized. Dark circles ringed her eyes. I caught the multiple mirrors of the disco ball behind her, an unflattering, oversize t-shirt and peach fuzz for hair winking in and out of existence. Averting my eyes toward my feet, I read the book title, *Tarot for Your Self*—it set my brain to connections.

“Hey, do you know Lula?” The words fell out of my mouth, and my blurring, even back then, always made trouble. The effect, however, of my random question was to instantly lighten the woman’s mood. The woman looked at Chris, and then they both laughed, or, cawing sounds more like it. “Who doesn’t know Lula?” the woman said; her vowels ran into her consonants. She pretended to toast the air.

“How do you know Lula?” I asked.

“Girrrl, Lula comes in here every Sunday, looking for somebody, anybody to—” the woman drawled, unable or unwilling to finish her sentence. I couldn’t tell which. “You’re not a regular,” she said, “You’re probably one of those students. What’re you? A dyke, a queer. One of those college types, too good for us regular lesbians.” She mistook my age; something people still do. She drew out the word lesbians. Her lips twitched. “This one’s taken,” she said and chuckled, “an’ when you find Lula, ask her if she wants to sleep with you.”

“Maybe she’s a sleeper. Maybe she’ll let you sleep with her,” she added, smooth, as if she was giving me friendly advice, but I didn’t like the way she laughed at her own words, as if she was pulling a fast one on me.

Making it clear she was done with me, Chris bent her head and lip-locked the other woman. I could see their tongues wrapping around each other. I felt frozen and transfixed, as I did when I saw Ham and Jiang kissing on my birthday. The lamp was still
swinging, but in long yawns. The other woman rolled her neck around as they groped each other. The shadows behind them stretched, their dark shapes disappearing and reappearing again. The music wasn’t playing anymore.

When I arrived home, I stumbled through the door, feeling light-headed. I was starving. I opened my fridge and found some bread, half a tomato, and some cheese slices. I set about making a grilled cheese sandwich. I burned one side a bit, the way I like it.

I ate the sandwich in front of my computer, randomly toggling through the women-meet-women ads. After reading through several ads, I was disgusted and definitely not turned on. “Wet tongue seeks your pussy.” “HOT TUB fun.” “Stud on the prowl for Queen.” On a whim, I searched for “sleepers.” The query pulled up baby jammies and diaper bags. I switched off my computer. It was almost two in the morning, and nothing more could be done with the day. Time to get to bed. I usually fall asleep riffling through my back issues of *Yume Force Chronicles*.

Yukiko is still asleep in Issue 29. That disappoints me. I like the story best when she’s interacting with Hiraki. Also, disloyal Hiraki, waiting for Yukiko to awaken, stumbles into a dalliance with Kokoro, a demon mermaid, in the underwater country of Yonaguni. The mermaid and Hiraki were lovers in a past life—both as young men. Kokoro recognized him, but he failed to recognize her, in her current form. She is angry so she seduces Hiraki and then imprisons him. Diligently and tediously, she performs a torture routine on him. Gruesome. I know he’ll escape, eventually, but how will Yukiko feel when she wakes up to find Hiraki in the arms of a demon mermaid?

*
“They’ve re-opened the lake at Strawberry Canyon,” Jiang said. “We should go for a swim.” Jiang stretched her arms out on the law school’s remodeled courtyard, a cafe built on a second floor extension of the building and filled with patio furniture. We were both sipping cups of iced coffee. When the weather was warm enough, they opened the Canyon’s lake to swimmers. With its shaded trees and artificial beach front, the place was our special getaway, and when we closed our eyes, we could feel as if we were lying out on the beach.

As Jiang talked, students scurried around beyond the glass railing wearing backpacks and carrying books in their arms. It was the day before spring recess, with midterms soon to follow. We were the only two sitting on the wood octagonal tables. Most of the students had cleared out; only the few unlucky ones who had Friday classes were still around. The canvas umbrellas usually accompanying each table had been removed—no shade against the sun. Jiang’s shirt rose a little off her stomach as she shielded her eyes. I could see flat lines and the barest trace of black hair. Jiang ran marathons for fun. I thought about how warm her taut stomach would feel, and I shivered, pushing the thought away. I was earnest and naive, hoping it wouldn’t come back.

“Yea,” I said, extending my legs toward her, sinking into the chair.

“C’mon Amel,” Jiang needled, “Ham and I are packing some potato salad and cucumber sandwiches so we can all have a picnic. You love those sandwiches.”

“I have to check on my gel. It’s been running all night,” I said.

Jiang frowned. “Well, why don’t we go together at the end of the semester? The water’s a bit cold anyway.”
“I’m not much of a swimmer.”

“Should we talk?” Jiang asked.

“About what?” I said. A seagull flew overhead. We both flinched instinctively, as if it was going to poop.

“Did you ever see that Far Side cartoon about how seagulls see the world?” I asked.

“It’s awesome, a bunch of people walking on the sidewalk. Instead of heads, everybody’s wearing a bulls-eye.”

“Target practice, ha! But don’t change the subject, Amel.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say. I haven’t heard from you much lately, Jiang. You text instead of calling.” I was angry. I wished I had hair so I could hide my face. I didn’t want Jiang to see me mad, but being taken for granted didn’t sit right with me.

“Amel,” she said, “I’m thinking about moving to Texas after we graduate. Ham’s family is in Houston. He’s got a great job lined up. The firm is willing to pay for moving costs. He can work at legal aid for the first six months and still earn an associate’s salary. It’d be great, it would mean I could do public interest work too. That hardly pays anything, but I wouldn’t want to rely on my dad. What do you think?”

I squinted at the sky. All I could manage was, “That’s great, Jiang.”

She chewed on her straw and ran her hand up and down the table. “You don’t like Ham, do you?” she asked. She studied me, gauging my reaction to her question. I composed my face into non-expression, the way I used to with my dad before I came out, when he would ask if I was dating anyone.

“He’s fine.” I didn’t know what to say, and Jiang narrowed her eyes.
“Fine?”

“He’s great,” I blurted. “I’m distracted. That’s all.” I offered this statement up like a magic trick, aiming to misdirect. Jiang’s eyes flashed in disbelief. I looked down before she could drag the truth out of me.

“Are you crushing on someone?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“Not really.” I hesitated. “Well, I lost her number, but I was maybe going to get in touch with Lula.”

Jiang pursed her mouth. “Are you actually thinking of going on a date with Lula? She’s cute and all, but well—”

“She’s not crazy. Just eccentric.”

“I was going to say she doesn’t seem like she’s gay.”

I felt edgy and sharp. “I didn’t think your gaydar substituted for really getting to know somebody.”

“I didn’t mean to assume.” Jiang hesitated. “I thought you were mad at me.”

I grabbed my bag and stood up, startling Jiang. “I have to go. Why would I be mad at you? Ham’s a really decent guy.”

Jiang grasped my forearm, a little tight. She must’ve thought she could bring me to my senses. “I’m sorry if what I said was insensitive. I’ll get Lula’s number from Ham. Maybe we can all have dinner?”

“Sure,” I said, already walking away. “We can handle that.”

I stole a backward glance at Jiang. She hadn’t moved. Her head rested on her hand, her eyebrows were knitted and she was still looking in my direction, as if she was weighing my words. She caught my eye and smiled. I’d bitten the inside of my mouth,
and it was tender. I worried the spot with my tongue. I smiled back at her. I’m letting her go, I thought.

* 

I called Lula when Jiang gave me her number, a week later, right after spring break. We agreed to meet at The Graduate on Claremont, a known law school watering hole. She’d explained that she had an evidence midterm coming up, so she didn’t have much time to hang out. She suggested a late afternoon drink so she could walk to the law library afterward. “Got to save money, so no dinner if that’s okay with you,” she’d said.

I let her know it wouldn’t be a problem for me. I worried for a minute that Jiang and Ham might be there. However, they were probably squirreled up together at her apartment. I hadn’t specified it was a date. Better to ask her out after the first meeting.

I arrived early and sat at the bar while Eminem whined on the radio about authenticity. A pack of eight students, hyper and vibrant, likely from the law school, filled up the small triangle-shaped space. They joked and danced, eyeing each other hungrily. The sexual tension in the room was dialed up. I could hear a jumble of their words: *Torts!* *Heather did what? Intestate, my ass. Ms. Picket’s property exam is so b.s., couldn’t figure out that dead hand control q! Remainders! I’ll show her my separate property. The Dean’s resignation, more bull! You think our rankings will go down? Were you at the auction? I overheard him hitting on her.* I didn’t understand half of what they were saying, but found them amusing.

Lula breezed in, and I ordered a Corona for each of us. We squeezed into a corner table, as far away as we could get from the law students.

“You know them?” I asked Lula.
“Nope, I dropped out my first year.” As she spoke, Lula took out a box of cards, and I could see that it was a Tarot deck. “I had a hard time adjusting, and I couldn’t finish the spring semester. This is my second semester back since I left. The year’s gone better.” I wanted to ask her what had happened, but her lips quivered a little as she spoke. I didn’t want to be too nosy.

“So, want to get started?” she asked. “A good reading can take an hour, and we only have about half that. Plus, I wanted to ask for an exchange, if you enjoy the reading. It’s stupid, really.”

“I thought, well, I thought that we were just hanging out.” Oh crap, Jiang’s right, I thought. Lula had completely misunderstood my reasons for asking her out.

“I promised you a tarot reading, for your birthday,” she said. “So that’s what you’re going to get.” She had a mischievous expression on her face, and I hoped she was flirting.

“Well, it’d be nice to get to know you a little better before we jump into tarot.”

What an idiotic thing to say. Hope she doesn’t think it’s an innuendo, I thought.

Lula blinked and chuckled. A cute, comma-shaped dimple puckered her left cheek.

“Amel, that’s actually a good idea. Tarot can be incredibly personal, so yeah, let’s even things up. You get one question: I’ll answer it, and then I’ll read your cards.”

“Any question?”

“Of course!”

“Well, how come you dropped out?”

Lula shook her head at me. “I think that’s too intimate a story for today.”

I knew the polite thing to do was to leave her be, but I was intrigued. My eyes fell on her small hands. Her nails were neat and clipped. Dyke hands, I thought. I shifted,
leaning toward her. I was disappointed that she didn’t notice. She wasn’t looking at me, but at the ceiling, as if her thoughts had flown upward.

Before I could pry further, Lula said, “I dropped out because I had a breakdown.” She put her hand on her chin. “But, it wasn’t because I was crazy. I was away from my mother who’s in L.A., and I didn’t feel okay about leaving her alone. I tried to study, but all I could see was her, folding blankets for the old people in the nursing home she works at. She was the strongest mother you can imagine. She did everything for me and my sister.” Her voice quaked at the last sentence. Despair spread in her eyes, her long lashes a fence for her tears. I wanted to hug her.

“We came here without papers. My dad, he was here already, but we came all that way because he sent for us, and when we got here, he had some puta mistress. It broke my mom’s heart. She wouldn’t stand for it. My sister...well something bad happened, and my mom sent her away, so it was just us two. Can you imagine, you come to a country for your family, and then everybody leaves you. That’s what kids do here. America, right? Try to make our mark, be independent, an individual, get rich. We leave home and separate ourselves from the people that raise us. Just like our parents, it’s in our blood, inmigrantes para siempre.” Her last words drifted off, as if she’d reeled in the heavy anchor, and her ship had picked up the wind. She was sailing into the distance.

She’d pulled something up in me too. Guilt. This whole time I’d been so angry at my dad for leaving me, for moving back to Taiwan, for starting a new life. Maybe it was just that he’d moved first, before I could leave him, all by himself in the empty house we shared in San Jose. Maybe he didn’t want to be alone either. I felt ashamed to be sitting there.
“Did your sister ever come back?” I asked. “Do you or your mom still talk to her?”

Lula’s face went blank. “No, my mom—I don’t know. She sent us a letter my first year of law school, said she was a lesbian now. Maybe our uncle did some stuff—I-I think—” Lula was fidgeting and had torn her napkin to shreds, and her face was hard, as if she were reinforcing it, trying to keep some terrible animal from coming out.

“Lula, you did the right thing, going home. I wish I’d been there for my dad the same way.” I just wanted her to feel better.

Lula and I sat there without needing to talk further, taking long pulls from our Coronas. I didn’t pretend that I understood exactly what she was going through, which was the best I could offer. I remembered what hurt felt like. Best to share it in silence.

She put away the tarot deck and said, “Amel, thank you for understanding, for not judging me, or assuming I was a freak.” When she left, I engulfed her in a hug, the way I needed to be hugged too.

* *

Around the last corner, the month before graduation, the days stretched forward, extended their limbs to cross the finish line. Everybody had somewhere to be. They didn’t hesitate or shuffle. The scent of importance rose up around us, a perfume. The more I smelled, the sicker I got. I succumbed to the mystery flu that was making the rounds. Was graduation a three-day cold, or more like an incurable illness?

Jiang came over one night, dropping off a paper bag. Inside, she’d placed the ingredients of her miracle cure: lemons, maple syrup, and a plastic baggie of cayenne pepper. She also included some cold medication. “In case the miracle cure doesn’t work,” the note read.
At the doorway, exaggerating her hand over her mouth, Jiang said, “Sickie, I’ve got to graduate too, so I’m not coming in. You stressed yourself out. Take it easy and relax.”

My throat was sore so I mumbled my thank you and clutched my tissues.

Before she walked away, Jiang said, “By the way, when’re you planning to read issue one of YFC? You must be excited that your dad didn’t give you a stinker for your birthday. Maybe you can cheer yourself up by reading it.” Issue one of Yume Force Chronicles is a limited edition and hard to find in paper copy. I opted out of reading it online, much as it killed me. I wanted the sensation of turning the pages from left to right, the way manga is meant to be read.

“Let’s read it together when I feel better,” I said.

Even though her hand still covered her face, I could see Jiang smile and think of Lula. I wondered what Lula was up to and whether I’d see her anytime soon. I’d called her and left a couple messages after we met at The Graduate, but we ended up playing phone tag. She’d left a message explaining that the semester was really tough in terms of school, and she would get back to me as soon as she could take a break. “I prefer quality time to quantity time. Let’s see each other when we can have a whole night together.” she’d said before signing off. That night, I decided to read the latest YFC before I fell asleep.

Issue 50, and Yukiko’s still not awake. How frustrating! Hiraki has moved on, escaped Kokoro the demon mermaid, even without Yukiko by his side. Manga characters don’t age; they just endure episode after episode. There’s always somebody else for Hiraki to save.
The Queen of the Yonaguni, an underwater species that anatomically resembles humans (only with fins and gills), summons Hiraki who, by now, is essentially a hero-for-beckoning. Many of the Yonaguni have mysteriously disappeared, and the Queen doesn’t know where they are.

After some snazzy detective work, all the clues point Hiraki to an evil fox spirit, grieving its child who fell into a river current and was carried out to sea. The fox spirit has spelled any Yonaguni who came too close to the surface, turning them into human beings. These humans are villainous. They live in a state of confusion, constantly searching for their identity, often committing violent and destructive acts. Despite his reluctance to work with her, the Queen insists that he obtain Kokoro’s help. Kokoro has the unusual gift of comprehension; she can recognize someone of Yonaguni origins in any form. Kokoro quickly agrees to assist Hiraki.

Hiraki captures the evil fox spirit and brings it in front of the Queen who forces the spirit to mourn her child by writing down her memories of it. The fox spirit’s love for her child creates a magical death scroll. A person who hears their name read from the scroll will know their true self.

Together, Hiraki and the demon mermaid are able to save the transformed Yonaguni. Kokoro would identify the former Yonaguni to Hiraki. One by one, Hiraki drags the humans into the sea and drowns them, while Kokoro reads their Yonaguni name out loud. They can never return to their underwater forms, but at least they know who they once were and won’t be causing any more mayhem in the world.

Not wanting the souls to journey alone to the next life, Hiraki and the demon mermaid join hands in the ocean and weep as each spirit of a lost Yonaguni flies from the
water’s edge, into the clouds, and out of sight. When the ritual is over, the demon mermaid reads her own name from the scroll and collapses.

“Please,” she says, “kill me for the wrongs I’ve done. I was vengeful and misdirected.”

Hiraki refuses to do so and embraces her instead. “How can I not forgive you?” he says, “When everything you’ve done is for the sake of love.”

In the other room, Yukiko wakes up.

*

The next morning I bounced up, feeling brand new, and made my way to the lab. I’d started my last PCR sample a couple days before, prepping the mixture and programming the thermal cycler. My lab mate was supposed to check on it while I was sick, observing the reaction to make sure it heated properly while she was autoclaving a microbial sample. I checked in the machine window. Sample looked good, and I needed to start packing things up. The lab bench was too much to tackle. I emptied a metal shelf into a cardboard box, stripped down my Marie Curie poster. I left the diagram of a signaling pathway up on the wall—too clinical to be a memento. I hefted the full box and made my way back to my car.

The marble halls of the building echoed with each footstep. I took the back stairwell—I knew it would be empty. It was also a pain since it spiraled down in a seashell pattern. On the final step, I was tired, and set down the box. The back wall of the stairwell was stained glass, and the light filtered in bright green circles through the sad eyes of a swan. I felt nostalgic, even though we were still weeks away from graduation. I
pulled my phone from my coat pocket to call Jiang, thinking I’d been rude the previous night.

“Amel?” a voice said.

Startled, I looked up from the phone. Lula was standing right in front of me. She wore the same purple bandana.

“Lula! Sorry, you surprised me. It’s good to see you.”

“When you came down the stairs right now,” Lula said, ”well, I shouldn’t say this, but your aura was so clear. Unbelievable. Your light is radiant. I’ve been down lately, and the auras at the law school are all grey and muddy. But, when I see you, I can’t help but think you’re shining. It’s like you just reach into the world and call people to you. Beautiful, and I hope you know it.”

I was very suspicious of her bizarre, alternative babble. “Hey,” I said, “I don’t believe in crystals, new age woo-woo, whatever it is. I’m sure you think you saw something, but I can assure you it wasn’t coming from me.” It seemed harsh, but I meant it. I was a little hurt, too, that I hadn’t heard from her.

Lula’s enthusiasm wasn’t dampened. “It’s hard to see your own self clearly. I know what I saw, and some day you will believe it too.”

Speechless that Lula was as weird as she was, I reached for the box. She bent down and lifted it. “Let me help you, Amel,” she said.

“No, really, it’s okay. I got it.”

“You seem tired,” she said, giving me a lovely grin. “I’m pretty strong. I can carry it.”
I was relieved. The box was heavy, and I was still feeling weak. We made our way into the oily, cool garage.

“Thanks Lula, but how did you know I was here?” I asked when we got to my car and she’d helped me stack the box in my trunk, alongside a case of Gatorade and an old fishing pole covered by blankets.

She seemed taken aback. “I thought you’d want us to see each other again. I left you a message saying that I was going to take a walk, maybe cross campus and see if I could find the labs?” She paused and started again. “Amel, I meant to call you earlier, but I was busy. Plus, I figured you were pretty busy too, last semester and all. Do you know what you’re doing for your post-doctorate?”

I shrugged, not wanting her to notice that I’d been hurt. “I was in lab so I didn’t hear you call. I’ve had a few offers, still waiting for one more. Why don’t we save that whole ‘where do you see yourself’ conversation for when I know all my options?” I said.

I was waiting to hear back from two more postdocs, one in Houston, the other in Taiwan. I’d applied to them on a whim. They weren’t particularly prestigious, or highly paid. The one in Houston wasn’t directly in my area of specialty, stem cell research and AHR receptors, but the lead professor there was a rock star and known to be a great mentor.

“Are you angry at me?” Lula asked.

I was frustrated about not knowing my future, and it upset me more to think it was showing. First to Jiang, now to Lula. I hated this feeling; I was giving off signals I didn’t intend. “I’m not angry at you,” I said. “I’m really glad you came by. I hadn’t heard from you in a while, so I didn’t know what to think.”
“Well,” Lula’s voice was sweet, “I’d love to hang out again if you’re okay. I just wasn’t sure that you wanted to because last time was so heavy. There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you.”

I was surprised, but glad she’d explained. “No, it felt like an important conversation. I’d love to see you again.”

She flashed a smile and asked me to call her. I got in the car and turned on the engine, but I didn’t drive forward. I sat in my parked car for an extra minute, the engine humming. I watched her walk away, floating on her toes. I felt a little light-headed, but I wasn’t sure if it was happiness that I’d seen Lula again, if it was how awkward I sometimes felt around her, or if it was my flu, rebounding.

My phone rang, and when I picked it up, hearing Jiang’s voice made me feel better immediately. I apologized for being short with her the other night. I mentioned Lula’s visit. Jiang invited me to dinner with Ham and her. “Bring Lula,” she said. I drove the rest of the way, chatting with her, telling her about how one of the idiots on my lab team botched up the simple task of plugging in the autoclave. That same teammate had actually made an Agarose gel with water instead of TAE—weeks of our work, wasted.

Jiang and I were back to normal. I didn’t hang up, even though I knew I should be paying attention to the road. I drove right by Bisexual Jane, who was walking with a nondescript, nerdy-looking guy in a baseball cap. She turned her face toward the road after giving him a playful punch on the arm, and I thought she saw me. I kept driving without even waving or slowing, all the while laughing with Jiang. In the rearview mirror, Jane’s eyebrows shot up in recognition, her eyes dohey and dumb.

*
“I’m so glad you both could make it,” Jiang said, taking my jacket as I reached clumsily behind me for Lula’s and thrust the bundle over to Jiang. It was an overcast Friday evening, but Jiang’s Oakland one-bedroom was warm and cozy and smelled like burnt toast and roasted vegetables. The walls were lined with photographs of her family in various poses: her family at the park, feeding pigeons. Jiang as a little girl with her cheeks puffed out, trying to blow out too many candles on a chocolate cake, heaped with frosting. Jiang with her mom posed in a glamour shot. Their faces were powdered white. Her mother’s arms were wrapped around Jiang, forming a heart-shape around the front. Both their lips were pulled together and curved, looking coy. Next to that picture was one of Ham and Jiang at Strawberry Canyon, with Jiang looking sexy and fit in a bikini.

Weren’t we supposed to go together?

We shucked our shoes off in the square of linoleum that served as an entry. Ham reclined on the sofa, next to the sliding glass doors that led to a balcony. He flipped through a magazine. Emblazoned on the front were the words: Is Gay the New Black: Civil Rights For a New Era. He shouted hello from the other room. I was peeved that he didn’t get up to greet us.

“You two been hanging out a lot?” Jiang asked, pointing us to two chairs at the table facing the kitchen.

“Oh,” Lula said, cheerfully, “we haven’t been hanging out that much. We ran into each other a few days ago. Amel called the other night to invite me to your dinner party.”

I frowned, as did Jiang, but she covered it up smoothly.

“I’ve made more than enough eggplant to go around,” Jiang said.
Lula thanked Jiang for being so considerate of vegetarians, asked for the bathroom, and Jiang pointed to one of two plain doors. As soon as Lula went inside, Jiang nudged me. “I thought she’d be your girlfriend by now.”

I held up my hand to Jiang in a stop gesture and crossed my arms. “Hey, you wanted a double-date, so I invited Lula.”

Jiang didn’t react, sensing my irritation, and said, “Spend a little time with Ham, ok? For me, to get to know him better.”

I sat down next to Ham, determined to be a good best friend, or at least a harmless doppelganger. “What’s the article about?” I asked. “We’re done with Dr. King’s first dream and onto his second?”

Ham rumbled in a monotone from his chest, “You know, I agree with you. This article’s written by a professor of mine who’s pointing out the same thing; that we haven’t done enough for racial justice, so it’s not right that we’re calling rights for gay people the new civil rights struggle.”

My resolve to be friendly failing, I scrutinized his words for some potential conflict. I wanted a fight. Now, Ham was going to corner the market on gays too? He already had everything I didn’t have. “I didn’t know you cared about gay rights.” I laughed, a forced laugh, and said, “I thought you were a big firm attorney.”

“Amel!” Jiang said from the kitchen where she was taking out a large baking pan. “Stop giving Ham a hard time.” I could tell that Jiang was only mock-angry. “Don’t worry,” she joked, “we’re going to start a foundation for ‘the gays,’ as my mom would say, with all the money that Ham makes when we move to Texas.”
Lula laughed as she walked across the room, went to the table, and sat down.

“Every cause needs its funders,” she said, dissolving the frown on Ham’s face. Why did he care what I thought of him? He should know by now that Jiang was in love with him. And what had Jiang just said? That they were moving to Texas? She’d mentioned it before, but she hadn’t said anything on the phone when I left lab. I thought she’d at least have a private conversation with me instead of just announcing it. I felt I deserved more.

All of us sat down at the table and dug into the eggplant parmigiana, Ham and Lula complimenting Jiang on how juicy and spicy it was. They chatted about law school, which students were moving where. I was quiet, the words passing over me like clouds, but inside I was fuming, an acid punching holes in my stomach as if I’d forgotten to take the sticker off my gel strip and ruined the experiment. What good would it do to try and save a bad situation? I needed to start over. But how could she? Why’d she tell me in front of Ham? Ham had replaced me as Jiang’s best friend.

“So, Amel, where are you going after you graduate?” Ham asked me when their gossip had lulled.

“Not to Houston,” I said, unable to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

“I-I- thought that you applied there,” Jiang said.

“I did, but there are better programs elsewhere. I’ve decided to go to one of them.”

“Well,” Ham said, “that makes sense. You should go to the best program. Jiang says you’re an amazing scientist.” Jiang didn’t say anything. Her face was beet red. She had a temper too. “I hope you acknowledge us after you win the Nobel,” Ham added.
“Why would I acknowledge you? We barely know each other. All I know is you’re the kind of guy she can bring home to dad.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I knew I had made a terrible mistake.

Jiang was crying. She stood up and walked to her bedroom, slamming the door.

Ham was crestfallen. “Amel, whatever I did to offend you, I wish you wouldn’t take it out on Jiang. You’re her closest friend. She told me you took care of her ever since you were both young. Now you’re acting like an ass. She deserves better from you.”

I felt dizzy. Ham was scolding me. Even then, some small part of my brain knew that I should be a bigger person. I knew I was focusing on the wrong things. What Ham was saying wasn’t an insult. I should apologize and explain, but I was shrinking inside, disappearing into the person I’d been after my mom passed, useless, unable to help anybody. I’d done nothing but lie around, reading comic books and manga, sleeping for hours during the day. My dad cried once and then went back to work after a week.

One day, Jiang showed up at my house in her dad’s car with a frisbee and a blanket. She’d driven me, protesting, all the way to Half Moon Bay. It was freezing, but we tried to toss the frisbee around anyway. The wind blew it into the water. Jiang said to wait, that she could get it back, and ran to the car. When she returned, she had her dad’s old fishing pole with her. She explained how he kept it in the trunk for good luck, just in case he happened to have free time. We spent hours casting in the water, dragging up seaweed. It’s like we couldn’t stop. We were having so much fun. “That frisbee,” Jiang intoned solemnly, “I’ve prayed for its soul. It’s in a better place now.” I started sobbing and cried for hours, and the next day, even though I knew Jiang was going to get belted for it if her dad ever found out, I found the fishing pole on our doorstep with a note reading: just in
case. I thought about returning it, but I wanted to keep it. Jiang wore a sweatshirt for the next week, even though it was almost summer, warm and muggy outside.

Jiang had been the one to take care of me, not the other way around. I could hear her sobbing in the next room. None of us spoke, the eggplant sinking into the pan.

Lula’s voice came as if from underwater. “Amel, you owe Jiang an apology. But you should talk to her later. Thank Jiang for making the meal,” she said, “from both of us.” Her eyes were on Ham, but she was speaking to me, unyielding. They were full of sorrow, as if she was giving an apology on my behalf.

“Let’s go, Amel.” Her hand was insistent at my back, steering me to the door, where we grabbed our jackets and put our shoes on. My fingers stumbled over the laces.

*I*

I was surprised to read that Hiraki already knows Yukiko in issue one of *Yume Force Chronicles*. I mean, issues two through ten, are truly boring. They detail Hiraki’s dream life, and things don’t get exciting until Hiraki meets Yukiko, when he turns sixteen. What was he doing for all that time? Also, I can’t believe the creator wrote a retrospective beginning. Who wants to know the end when they start reading a story? I’m going to write a letter to Mr. H. Sawa, the series creator, to complain about his failure of imagination.

In the first scene, Yukiko is in a sassy string bikini, lying face down next to Hiraki on the same towel. I think they’re relaxing at a beach together, except it looks more like a lake (probably because the artist wasn’t very skilled yet). They’re close enough that he can see the faint smile lines on the side of her mouth. They appear to have aged, that
unvarying no-no in manga land. The clouds are drifting lazily. The air feels buoyant and fresh. Hiraki can see people swimming and splashing in the water.

They’re discussing a big fight they had years before, and Yukiko says, “I know you waited all those years for me to wake up, Hiraki, but the hard part came after I woke up. When you reconnected with Kokoro, you didn’t give me a chance to even say goodbye. You were the only one I had, for so long. You were the first person I ever really loved. I won’t lose you. I can move away, but I love you. I need you.”

“I need you too, Yukiko, but I need more than you can give me.”

“You do, and that’s why I should have said this before.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m sorry, and this.” She kissed Hiraki.

I closed the manga. The first person I thought of was Jiang. I couldn’t wait to tell her the ending.

*

“The lyrics of the song are kind of a miracle,” Lula said. We were in her apartment. “They’re very sad, but she says it like it is. All the songs sound different, but they say the same thing.” We were listening to Sade, the Lover’s Rock album. To this day, I can’t remember which song, even when I squeeze my eyes shut and try to visualize all the details.

I’d driven to Lula’s, sloppy, trying to see the road through my tears. She’d asked me up for tea. I didn’t want to be alone, so I followed her up. “I live with a bunch of capitalists,” she confided, trying to get a laugh out of me, “You’ll like them.” I was too numb to react. Outside, the place was dingy, but inside it was brightly painted, lime
green, bright orange. Lula explained she’d painted the rooms herself to resemble her old
home in Guatemala.

We went into her room, the floor squeaked under me, despite my efforts not to
wake Lula’s roommates. I lay down on top of her bed and curled into a fetal position,
clutching my stomach. I splotched her pillow with my tears. She had no box spring, just a
mattress raised off the ground by a rickety wooden frame. The bed creaked like an old
woman.

“You’ll be okay, you know. She loves you. She’ll get over it,” Lula said. Then,
“Excuse me, I have to get something.” I noticed that she was wearing tight jeans as she
walked out, shutting the door behind her, and chastised myself. Wouldn’t it be ironic, I
thought, if I got laid, tonight of all nights.

A bare light bulb hung from the ceiling. She had tied to it a long piece of red string
that swung idly back and forth. Her window was open, letting in a faint breeze and the
sweet smell of jasmine. Even though the light was on, Lula had lit a few thick candles, all
of them melted down close to the base. I was on a quilt woven with a pattern of rich
yellow and red squares. I ran my hand on the squares of the quilt, comforted by its
creases and bumps. Lula had pinned up a drawing on the wall of a naked woman,
strategically covered by thick, thorny vines. The woman stared forward, determined,
haunted, the way I imagined Yukiko would look when she woke up and found her whole
world knocked upside down. The portrait, however, didn’t give clues as to what it was
she was planning to do.

Jiang won’t forgive me, I thought to myself, believing that it didn’t matter if I
apologized. I’d messed everything up. I’d lost it in front of Ham, who definitely hated me
now, and was probably saying terrible things about me to Jiang. She was leaving for
Texas, and there wouldn’t be enough time for us to talk it all out, for me to make it up to
her. Everything was shifting too fast.

“I made you peppermint tea,” Lula said, returning with two steaming mugs.

I said thanks and set my tea on the bed stand, next to a framed photo of Lula with a
chubby, blushing woman who had soul in her coconut brown eyes. That must be her
mom, I thought.

“Don’t you have a sister?” I asked Lula.

“Yeah, that’s my mom and me,” Lula said, not giving further explanation.

“Did she make this blanket?” I asked to avoid a long silence.

Lula wore a wistful expression. “Yeah. Beautiful, right?”

“Your mom sounds like she’s amazing. Anybody who’s a hospice nurse must be
really patient and kind.”

Lula beamed at my compliment. “She’s sweet to everybody. All the patients love
her. I worry about her, though. My mom doesn’t really stand up for herself. She’s a
pushover.” She paused, walked over to her dresser and rifled through the drawers. She
pulled out a cut-up Doors tee that was now a tank and some mismatched pink plaid
pajama pants, laying them on the bed. “Amel, would you mind if I change?”

I put my hands over my eyes. I could hear clothes brushing against each other and
her belt buckle hitting the floor. When I opened my eyes, Lula had the deck of Tarot
cards in her hand. I could see that she’d taken off her bra, and her breasts were larger than
I’d thought, pressing against her top. The skin on her bare arms was a rich, flawless
maple. Her bandana was gone, and her curls were frizzy and wild. “I never gave you a reading,” she explained.

“That’s okay,” I said. I wanted to run my hands through her hair, but she’d sat down on the floor next to me. “Do we have to do that right now?”

She hesitated, disappointed.

“Could we do an abbreviated reading?” I asked, wanting her to come sit on the bed.

“I’d like to do the full reading since there’s no one else around to interfere with your energy.”

I told her to go ahead, not wanting to hurt her feelings. As she shuffled, she rambled a little more about her family. “Remember how I told you we came over when I was young. The three of us, my mom, sister, and me. It was with a coyote. He left us after we went through Mexico and crossed the river. I was so scared. The brush out there is thin, and it doesn’t grow high, so we crawled on our bellies through the dirt. He kept asking us for more money, and after we gave him all we had, he wanted to leave us there, in the middle of the desert.”

I was entranced by the story. I’d never gone through anything so difficult, and I felt special that she was telling me about it. Lula laid the tarot cards out mechanically as she spoke. Her eyes drifted away to the long ago memories.

“My mom is a fast talker, and she convinced the coyote that my dad would pay double the fee if he got us over. There was a truck run by one of the coyote’s partners waiting for us with a group of families. The coyote let us come with them, a really greedy bastard. When we went through border patrol, we were in Arizona. I never could fall asleep, even back then, and I shook my mom awake when the coyote slowed down his
truck. One of the little boys had thrown up over everyone, and the coyote couldn’t stand the smell. It was so strong it went even to the front. My mom grabbed my sister and me, and we jumped and picked ourselves back up and ran. The coyote couldn’t risk going back because there were other cars around, and the other families might do the same. A month later, we were in Los Angeles, and my dad wasn’t even at the address he’d given us.”

Lula’s eyes were glazed, and she passed her hand over a candle flame again and again, not yet close enough to burn herself. I was both excited and disturbed to see her doing this. “I don’t remember all of it. I was too little,” she said. “But Amel, look at your cards!”

All I saw was a bunch of pictures on the floor I didn’t understand. Lula was explaining them, but I wasn’t paying attention. Her words were a blur: *Ten of Feathers. Seeker of Feathers. Four of Feathers. There’s a dyad here, two people fixated on each other, missing the outside world. The Empress. Means you need to be receptive to your dreams. The Star. Oh my, Amel, that’s your major arcana. It’s the highest state of consciousness, of hope, of dreaming.*

What was I doing here? I didn’t believe in this stuff. I didn’t know Lula. I was mixed up. I wanted Jiang with me. I wanted to make love to Jiang, and I wanted to come clean about it to Lula. The candles were eating the air out of the room.

“Lula, I’m sorry. I think I have to leave.”

“Wait, Amel.” Lula sat next to me. She was even tinier when we were sitting side-by-side. “I don’t want you to leave. I-I’ve been trying to ask you. Will you spend the night with me?”
I leaned toward her and kissed her on the lips. They felt right and gentle. She pulled away. I was frustrated.

“Lula, maybe there’s been a misunderstanding.”

“No, I-I. Please let me explain. Will you sleep with me?”

“I just tried to kiss you.” I said, indignant.

“It’s for me, to heal me. I don’t want to be sick anymore. I want to graduate. My mom used to find it hard to go to work. She gets down, you know, if I don’t tell her enough that I’m okay. I can’t go home again. I, we, had a hard time when I was little. My sister is only a few years older than me. We all shared a bed, and at night, when my mom was asleep, my sister touched me. On my chest. Inside me. I saw auras back then, even when I was nine, and I saw hers, confused, not clear like yours. I never told my mom. She’s really not a bad person. She still calls, but I can’t speak to her. She says she’s sorry. She’s a lesbian too. I need to, to be able to fall asleep.” Lula was crying so hard I could barely make out her words through her sobs. “Please understand.”

“That woman at the bar, she had a tarot book, her girlfriend. They knew you. They called you something.”

“I asked her, Amel. I thought we connected. We talked about tarot, and she said yes. Then she changed her mind. She called me a tease.”

The moon rose between clouds, wispy and smoky, hanging against the velvety, still-blue sky, it seemed to me that there was no true day, or true night. I wasn’t the first person she’d asked, but I was the person who cared about her.

“I never told my mom. I didn’t want to get my sister in trouble. I couldn’t take anybody else away from her, but I think she knew when she sent my sister away.”
My eyes fell on the picture of Lula and her mother, the empty space between them.

“Please, just fall asleep with me, Amel? I want to wake up and not be afraid.”

Maybe it was somebody other than me on the bed with Lula, somebody who didn’t, or couldn’t, feel any of the things I was scared I would feel. But when I think of that night, I realize that nothing I felt was wrong. That only what I did mattered.

I knew to move slowly, not to break eye contact until we were both on the bed, my knees tucked into the crook of her knees. I rested my chin on the top of her head, the curls tickling me. I wrapped both my arms around her, cradling the length of her with my own body, as if she was a small child again, following her into sleep. Rocking, back and forth. Her tears washed us. Through the window, I smelled freshly cut grass. There were no curtains, and I was with the stars, and we were in her room, clear and bright, lit for the inky night.

“Shhh,” I said. “Shhh.”
The Speed of Love

My boyfriend Gael's arm encircles mine as we walk up and down the long, cool hallways of the fifth floor oncology ward at Cedars-Sinai. This is the East Wing; it’s for patients who won't overstay our welcome. I don't lean against him for support. I keep my hands on my walker. I’m a man, after all.

Gael is wearing a foam green Ralph Lauren vest, 100% silk. It cost at least five hundred dollars. I know because I bought it years ago and never wore it. Gael begged me for it, but I wouldn't give it to him until he unzipped me right there in my walk-in closet and sucked me off. I stroked his face the whole time and stared at his full lips that pout and curve downward, even when all of me is in his mouth.

While we walk, I can see semi-circles of armpit sweat on the plaid shirt he's wearing underneath the vest. It’s hot outside, here on the West Side of LA. The air conditioner is on full blast. When he turns his head to smile at me with perfect straight teeth, he flicks his thick chestnut curls off the collar just so.

This place is so sterile with its white, white walls. Prints of Impressionist paintings, the only selection the hospital seems to allow, hang in neat duck rows. Could the yellowing print of Van Gogh's Sunflowers be more generic? I pay a lot to have a private suite, and not be separated by a flimsy curtain from some sad, screaming old man with Medicare doctors and night terrors. You'd think they could at least ink off some cheap prints from the LACMA collection with what they make off patrons like me. I’m a diamond-level donor at LACMA too.

---

1 “The Speed of Love” is in conversation with a Tracy K. Smith poem, “The Speed of Belief.”
Today, I don't mind the paintings as much. I'm glad Gael is finally visiting. As we near my room, Gael lets go of my arm and walks a step in front of me with his butt clenched up – it bobs up and down in his jeans like a ripe apple. I can see the nurses watching his behind too, though not my nurse. She's got her head buried in paperwork, too much of a workaholic to even notice a sweet piece of ass. I grimace at the peeping nurses. They dress like pink undertakers. Gael is mine alone.

We get back into my room after about a half hour walk. I look at Gael's pecs stretching against the vest. He's got some real guns too. I can see the outline of his biceps against his shirt. I have to get on the bed, but I don't want his help. So I don't say anything. I struggle and breathe like a fucking trout. I'm disgusting. Parts of me jiggle and flop until I'm on the bed. Gael just stands there, his eyes cool, crossing and uncrossing his arms. He doesn’t give away his nervousness. Neither do I.

I've got a really crappy type of cancer, the painful kind, not the kind where you pass away in your sleep one night and all your relatives talk about how it's like some sort of miracle that you died peacefully. Mine's a giant sucking beast, a tumor affixed to my liver. I might lose motor function before I die. I might become confused and disoriented and lose my mind. I know it will be pathetic and horrible and sometimes I wonder if I will be able to stand the pain. Will I remember any jokes? I love jokes.

Doctor Shan walks in. Fucking foreigners like us make the best doctors. He's carrying a bunch of CAT scan images that he waves in front of my face. His sorry mustache droops on both sides of his broad, flat nose. "Mr. Lee," he says.

"Call me Irving, Doc."
"Irving, sure, Irving. I'm sorry to tell you this, but the tumor's progressed. We thought the radiation and chemotherapy would slow it down, but it's metastasized.” He holds up one of the CAT scans. “If you see here, along your chest, the cancer is slowly spreading through your lymphatic system, and unfortunately, I see metastases involving your brain as well."

"Doc, what the fuck are you telling me?"

"I'm trying to say that we are unable to resect the cancer, that we can't remove it."

He looks at his prissy brown loafers.

"What about surgery? Get me a doctor who actually knows how to perform a goddamned surgery."

"Mr. Lee, I'm sorry, but even if we could resect the liver tumor, there would be no way to remove all of the affected lymph nodes or the lesions in your brain. And you've consulted with three surgeons who have all said the same thing. The radiation treatment last month was our final alternative. Not the anticipated results."

Gael stretches toward me. The drizzling of hair on his fingers ripples gently when he moves his hand to my leg. "How long does he have, Doctor?"

"A month, give or take. Toward the end, we expect some new symptoms, including headaches and maybe even seizures. He could also develop dementia." Doctor Shan is still not looking at me. He takes out a pen and starts to write on a clipboard near my desk.

"Listen, you moron," I say. “Why don't you try a little harder and give me some of those fancy pills or something. Modern miracle. What the hell is this, some sort of set-up?"
"Please don't be agitated, Mr. Lee. Now, I think you need some time to absorb this information with your loved ones. Is there anybody else that you'd like me to call?" He looks at Gael sideways, like he doesn't quite know what to do with a twenty-year old stud hanging out with a bag of bones three times his age. Gael is too well dressed to be some urchin that I brought off the street, though I could spend my final month on quickies. I don't need anybody else, but does Gael really want to be here? I need to know.

"Get out!" I yell at Dr. Shan. I grope around frantically, looking for something to throw at Shan's pin-sized head. There's nothing within reach.

Gael pales as he sees me react and makes cooing noises in my direction. He jerks his head at the doctor, indicating the door. "Doctor, Irving and I need some time to talk. Can we have some privacy?"

Doctor Shan nods and moves away slowly as if he's afraid, probably of me. He closes the door as he leaves, the edge of his coat catching the jam so that he has to open it again, tug at his coat, and close it a second time. What a numb nut, and they say he graduated from UCLA.

As soon he leaves, Gael turns to me. "Irving, sweetie, I think you probably need a second to think about what's happening here. It doesn't make sense for you to go home. Your bedroom is on the second floor of the apartment. It really would be hard for you to get up there. I wouldn't be able to carry you up." He examines one of his arms, and his bicep ripples, an involuntary response. One vein throbs in his neck. He smiles self-consciously. "I need to work on my cardio, Irving. You know this is just for show. I can't carry you up and down the stairs everyday. What about going to a hospice?"
He stands over me and plants a moist kiss on my cheek. I calm down. I lean my head against the thin pillows, and my neck feels like it's about to cramp. I take a good look at him. His gold-flecked eyes are glowing. I wish he had kissed me on the lips. His face is positioned so I can receive the full impact of his side profile, his chiseled nose, his perfect jaw. Gael steps into the light, framed by the window. It's dusk outside. The sky is full of rich LA hues, tropical orange and beach blue. My room overlooks a concrete parking garage; cars fill it to the brim each day. I guess Gael doesn't know his backdrop is a tin can, or hundreds of tin cans.

"Why are you all dressed up, Gael?"

"Oh, I made plans to go see Faust with a friend. One of the greats, you know. I wish you could come."

"And sit in one of those plush, red seats right next to you? Hold your hand?"

Gael flushes purple. He fiddles with the orchid he brought me. It hasn't bloomed yet. Its pink buds are tight and withdrawn against a dark and frail-looking stem. I never learned to take care of those silly plants, but I guess Gael never noticed.

"Even if I could go, you wouldn't want me to go, right Gael?"

"I do. I do. I wish things were different, of course." He turns to look out the window while he's talking. The pigeons are coo-cooing outside, making the same weak noises that Gael did earlier. "It's just that you've got a lot to think about, you know. You've got to prepare and everything."

Prepare for what, Gael? I think.

He stares at me from under his long, curling lashes. I want to pluck them out like the petals of a forget-me-not. He walks to my closet and starts rifling through my clothes,
mumbling about bringing me some nicer outfits. I watch his hard, round ass, and I feel myself start to get it up. I always get hard for Gael, every time.

"Gael, maybe you could stay longer, or go downstairs and buy me a book or something? A good book, not these trashy Star or People magazines they have lying around here."

"I could bring you one of your National Geographic's. They're pretty interesting."

He doesn't laugh when he makes this lame offer. I try to chuckle, but the sound doesn't make it past my windpipe. Instead, I start hacking and can't stop. I'm lurching forward. Coughs wrack my body, I'm shaking so hard. I have to get it all out, the phlegm, if not the emotions. Gael grabs me around the shoulders, his face wide like a child's. Spittle comes flying out of my mouth. A drop lands on his face. He wipes it off really fast. He stands back and waits for the coughing to stop. It does, eventually, but now I'm crying too.

"Just leave me alone, Gael. I know you don't want to be here." I'm not going to share my decision. I'm not going to a hospice. I don’t want to be trapped with those lonely people, all of us dying and alone. Behind the tiny rectangular window in the door, my regular shift nurse lifts up a cup of Jell-O and wiggles it as if she’s toasting me. She backs her ass away when she spies Gael in the room.

"Ok, Irving. Ok." He turns around and shrugs on a light sport coat. It smells like Clive Christian and cigars. He puts on a pair of leather gloves without his usual flourishes. Here in the desert it gets cold at night. He isn't going to torture me by pretending. He's almost at the door. I can see the back of his healthy, olive-colored neck.
His shoulders are high and muscular. I want to sink my teeth into them. I try to stand up, to touch the tips of his warm, manicured fingers.

I think about raising myself out of bed to grab him around the waist, spin him around, drag him by those tight curls across the room, force my tongue into his mouth, pin him down against the hospital bed, strip down his pants, grind my dick into his bowl-shaped ass, feel him warm and quivering around me, plunge and plunge and plunge, until he screams and begs me to stop. I'm not going to stop.

“Why don’t we fuck, Gael? No rubber.”

“No.”

He knows I'm not strong enough to fuck him. I try to remember the joke about the three guys who walked into a bar that he used to tell me. What else can I do? Gael loves to laugh. This new guy can't make him laugh more than me. He can't possibly be richer than me. "Hey Gael, the past, present, and future walk into a bar. What happened?"

Except his answer is "Ta-Ta." He's already out the door.

*

"Honey, why don't you go to your room?" My nurse squints at me through steel-rimmed spectacles. She looks slowly up and down at my scrawny, scabby legs. I'm standing at her station clutching my walker. The three tubes inserted in my arm are attached to an IV bag hung on the walker pole. The tubes are leashes. I can't lunge. I can't escape. All I can do is stand there, trying to catch my breath, and wait for Gael. I've decided not to go home to die.

My thin, cloth muumuu thing is slipping its way down my arms, and though it's been cleaned a couple times, it feels like that stain from shitting myself yesterday is still
there, an ugly brown patch. I've purposely left the back strings untied so that my ass shows. Why do hospital gowns always have to be floral print? I'm a successful guy so I don't give a shit how they dress me.

"Who's taking me for my walk? Somebody is supposed to come take me for my walk. Nobody does their damn job around here. I'm going for a walk myself."

"Mr. Lee, it's best if you go to your room and wait."

"I need my exercise. How else am I supposed to make it to another sunrise?"

"Mr. Lee, what you need is your rest."

She's a bitch, right? Trying to remind me of my mortality. It's true, though, and she makes a point in my book for calling it like it is.

"I'll be damned if I'm going to lie down and rot like the rest of them." I wave my hands in the air. There's a Styrofoam cup on her counter. I push my elbow into it and knock it over. Coffee spills all over the floor.

"Mr. Lee, why don't you go back to your room? Visiting hours are within the hour. You wouldn't want to miss any of your visitors, right?" She smiles widely, and her teeth are gray in the fluorescent light. She should use some whitening toothpaste.


*

I can't stop thinking about Gael. My nurse drops me off at the cafeteria. She helps me get from my walker to a chair, dumping me like yesterday's leftovers at a corner table. The surface is littered with crumpled plastic cups and unidentifiable crumbs. I stare at the
kids running around. Probably some of them live on the third floor pediatric ward where they keep the leukemia victims, the kids with the crazy bone disorders, the kids whose immune systems are eating them alive.

My nurse is relieved, I'm sure, to get rid of me. "What, you don't want to stay and talk?" I say. "Is this the kind of service you give to somebody who's in their last days?"

She lifts an eyebrow and says, "Of course, Mr. Lee. I'll see you in about fifteen or so minutes." She turns and heads out the door. I check out her panty-hosed ass. She probably has Spanks on. Her ass would be a lot nicer if she bothered to take care of herself. She sees me looking at her behind. "Mr. Lee, do you need anything else?"

I'm going to bash that polite smirk off her face. Right now, however, I don't want to be left for too long, so I decide to play nice. "Have a great day, nurse." I wink at her.

I sit there for at least a good half hour, bored. I can probably make it by myself to the elevator, but then I'd be stuck panting at the door and some asshole will come by who just loves pushing the buttons for the wrong floor. I hear a Code Blue over the loudspeakers. That means somebody's having a heart attack or stopped breathing. My nurse is probably doing CPR on some poor S.O.B. If it were me, and I was on my fucking back with her mouth-sucking me, my last move would probably be to roll over, reach into my pocket, and come up with some breath savers. I'm laughing to myself at the thought when I notice that the clock on the wall isn't even working. What the hell?

The vending machines that line the halls hum. I don't like it when the little sounds become noticeable. Gael used to tease me that one moment of silence was too long for me. I can be silent when I'm in my casket. I watch the scrolling dumbwaiter take all the cafeteria trays to the kitchen. People are leaving the trays with disgusting bits of
crumbled cookies, indistinguishable casserole masses, and upturned milk glasses. I count the trays.

The lunch crowd ebbs out. I fantasize about the fine hairs on Gael's arm. They glisten after he comes back from the gym. The more I think about him the angrier I get. I go back to counting the trays on the dumbwaiter. This one guy catches my attention because he's been waiting around since I got there, and he's also at a table that isn't clean, but he doesn't seem to mind. A bag of chips leaks out its contents right in front of him. He's in a wheelchair. He must be a lifer, somebody who doesn't have the strength to wipe off his own table. He's got the accessories, the plastic band, the flowing gown, the greasy hair and red eyes. What kind of self-respecting man would sit at a messy table for so long if he wasn't a patient?

He looks at me looking at him. "Do you ever go out to the courtyard and see the stars at night?" he asks. His question throws me off, and it's hard to understand what he's saying. His accent draws out his vowels and flattens his consonants. His question comes out like a song lyric, a melody. The guy is so damn friendly. I stare at him, hoping to give him the heebie-jeebies.

He's ugly by any standards. His teeth are crooked. His lips are dry. Flaps of skin hang like loose packages off his arms. He's obviously not an exercise fanatic. His maple-colored skin is pockmarked by acne, a total T-zone, oily in the forehead area and nose, dry on his cheeks. Somebody should take him to a dermatologist while he's here. His eyes, though, are lustrous and magnificently drawn. Like a doll's, they're shiny, dark, polished glass pieces, large enough to fill the cratered expanse of his face.
He returns my stare. He's obviously brain-damaged. I don't bother responding to rhetorical questions. Instead, I concentrate on a little bowl of Jell-O that remains on the dumbwaiter's return route. The Saran wrap is still on it, and the quivering, red cubes look refreshing and alive. A curlicue of whip cream is smashed on the top. I bet it would taste sweet and creamy if my taste buds weren’t fried.

"You'd think people wouldn't want to fly up to the moon anymore," he says.

Is this guy really trying to talk to me? The ones who are losing their minds are the worst. It's dementia, probably. They look like they're going to die, but they can just hang on for forever.

"Why's that?" I ask.

"Because people are trying to find something that they haven't discovered yet. If they've already figured it all out, then why would they bother trying to find it? Take the moon. Why would you want to go there when it's a place that's already been discovered?"

"Couldn't they be trying to discover some unexplored part of the moon?"

"No, no. Every part of the moon has been charted out using a complex series of algorithms and echo-sonographs. We know the depth, width, and height of every canyon, every mountain. We even calculated the water current flow from centuries ago."

"Yeah, and you can buy them twenty minutes away in Hollywood." He doesn't laugh at my joke. His eyes shift toward the ceiling. His neck cranes upward like a swan before flight. I feel like we're at a planetarium, and he's the voice behind the microphone. He's looking at some invisible shift of the cosmos, about to start a lecture. I only want to catch the laser light show at the end. This guy makes me uncomfortable. I keep my eyes on the Jell-O and give him side-glances.
"You know, I think the Buddhism fad explains it. A lot of people are out there seeking inner peace. Haven’t found it yet. Seeking."

This guy thinks he's a mystic. Great. He also thinks he's deep. I want to curse him, shock him into reality so he knows the shit he's in, talking to a cancer patient about peace. "Look, buddy,” I say. “I get that you're into astronomy and world religion. As for your thoughts about Buddhism, I don't even get the connection. It's a de-stressing tool, so if it works, people should go for it."

"You see the moon every night. Does it make you want to be a Buddhist?"

"I never said that. Nothing makes me want to be a Buddhist."

He follows my eyes and sees that I'm still looking at the Jell-O. "Are you going to get that Jell-O, or are you going to just sit there meditating until it comes to you? I'd get it for you, but then you'd have to share it with me." He's frowning and gesticulating wildly. Maybe he has muscle spasms. His hand is a web of lines. The skin on his knuckles is so dry it's about to bleed. He keeps flexing his fingers as he talks.

I feel guilty that I can walk, and he’s stuck in a chair. It's weird because I'm only going to live maybe a month, but I feel pity for the guy. I'm also upset that I feel shame. I didn't think I could feel it again. I guess some emotions are like old friends, really loyal. Why couldn't I have only the good feelings before I die?

My joints hurt a little as I get up. With baby shuffles, I make it to the dumbwaiter. The red Jell-O plate is coming toward us again. It's revolved through almost a dozen times since we started talking. It's the only food item remaining. I pick it up, and since my hands are kind of swollen from the IV treatments, I have to hold it with both hands outstretched, like it's the last Magic 8 ball left in the world, like I'm giving it to some kid
for their last birthday. I put it down on the table next to the crumbled bag of chips in front of this guy.

"What's your name?" I ask him.

"Mario," he says.

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes," he says.

I may not be much good these days, but I concentrate my energy to that central point deep inside of me. I take a deep breath in from my nose, and breathe out of my mouth. It's something I learned to do to center myself from my mom. She was a Buddhist before she left my father and me and went to a convent to go find peace. I'm pushing fifty, but I still remember that bull-shit from when I was a teenager. I manage to hold the Jell-O still. I peel the Saran wrap from the Jell-O. I want to offer him the whipped cream on top.

Neither of us is in good enough shape to go and get a spoon. It gets really awkward and messy, so I won't go into details. Basically, I feed the Jell-O to him, as in hand to mouth. It seems like it could be really gross, but it's not. The whole time I'm looking at his face, the craters his acne made, and I'm memorizing everything, mapping it all out.

*

I want to talk. I page my nurse and let her know on a bright September morning. Out the window I see a motley crew of pigeons huddled together. They're shivering. They're also caking my window ledge with so much shit that I can't really wind open the window without letting in a foul odor.
I hear her voice, brusque and metallic through the intercom. "Irving, I've asked you more than once not to page me unless it's important. That means you're hungry; you're thirsty; or you need assistance with the restroom."


Seconds later, she is in my room with an American Diabetes Association approved oatmeal raisin cookie. She rips open the wrapper and starts to eat it. She's wearing a flower print dress that matches my hospital gown. Her eyes are bloodshot from the night shift, and she's wearing bright red lipstick, Mac Ruby Woo. Whenever I dressed up at home for Gael, I'd wear the same color with a matching dress. The thought escapes from my brain into the world the way a deflated balloon escapes from a child's hands along a parade route. I'm upset. I keep my face together because I don't want to think about Gael.

She sits on the bed, her legs too long to dangle, not graceful even a little bit. "Spit it out. I'm on a double shift, so entertain me before I fall asleep."

She loves hospital gossip. I see her in these busybody huddles with the other nurses on a regular basis. One time, I overheard somebody saying that my nurse's boyfriend left her. I don't know if what I heard was right. She did emerge pale, trembling, red-nosed, from a bathroom later that day. I think to myself that I could leave my nurse something nice in my will, but then again, she's not my problem.

"I met somebody, it's true," I say.
"Is it the guy with the burn mark across his face?" she asks. “Sexy and scarred, right? No, no don't tell me. Is it the paramedic who comes in here on Sundays? He's got muscles up the wazoo. I thought I caught you giving him the eye the other week."

"Ralph, the paramedic? No, everything about him is wrong. His legs are way too thin for his hefty man torso. He walks like he's got nothing better to do. I'm in a hurry, lady. Ain't got time for that."

"Ok, is it Dr. Shan? His mustache picks up some of his breakfast bagel, but he's a sweetheart."

"I can't pronounce his last name, so no," I say.

The litany of names goes on. She names a half dozen more doctors, discloses that Dr. Shan looks at her sometimes. Just that way, she says. She runs her hand along her lips while she's thinking, and I find it sexy in a defenseless way. I tell her she should smile more often even though it sounds corny. She scowls and smiles like a fallen cake. She doesn't brighten the room, but it's either stare at her or the pigeons.

I want to interrupt her, but it's hard when I can't totally move all my body parts. Yesterday it was my feet, but today it feels like it's spreading up to my arms. The words come out funny, but I get them out slowly. Each letter is like alphabet soup.

"I want to see Mario."

"Oh honey,” she says, “you know he's sick? He's sick, but not like you. He's got complications from AIDS, you know, but maybe the new medications will kick in. Maybe he’ll live…”

"I know," I say. "I don't care.” But I do.

*
Mario and I are inseparable. He's a lot of fun. When he grins, I see the silver caps and wide gaps between his front teeth, and I think he needs a dentist, but I also smile back, feeling like I did when I was in high school. I broke curfew and fucked the linebacker of the football team in the abandoned lot next to the auditorium. He was wild, like the weeds I could see growing between the cracks of the cement as I pushed his face into the ground.

Mario and I can’t leave the building, but we imagine being outdoors riding bicycles together. He bikes with me through Boyle Heights, pointing to the taqueria on the corner, the church his family has been going to for the last twenty years, to the apothecary that's being driven out by a CVS. "Look, Irving, over there, past the 5, you can see the LA River. It's beautiful, right?"

I visualize his neighborhood, the concrete block etched with street art that looks like the most wonderful skateboarding ramp ever. It’s filling up in the middle with currents of dirty water, reflecting the sunlight until it stretches into infinity as the cars sweep by on either side like a stream.

I tell him about places he's never been. I tell him about Barcelona and the wonders of Gaudi, La Sagrada Familia and the Park Güell, the Fundació Joan Miró and that singular moment in the gallery when I imagined that Miró’s jumbled lines were a slew of kites soaring from the wall. I share the time I went to a Turkish bath and walked out naked into the hotel lobby. He's a local boy at heart, so he likes it best when I tell him about the time I ran into OJ Simpson in Brentwood.

"What did OJ say?" Mario asks again.
"He said he'd sign my football." We laugh. We argue about local politicians. He tells me that I'm a rich cabrón, and that he hopes that next week we can drive together down the 101 in my vintage Porsche convertible. He stares out the windows of my room, but I can almost feel the wind whipping his hair, Mario peering over the edge of the sun-baked cliffs that are towers crumbling into the ocean, his eyes drinking in the sea. The tile floors gleam like square-cut jewels under the lights and his joy.

We goof off near the soda machines, laughing hysterically when we ram wheelchairs into a broken machine near the stairs. We zip away with a bunch of free chocolate bars and chips. We get the leukemia brats to push us on our wheelchairs through the third floor. We compete, and when a kid wins the race, we find a way to secret them to the basement, where the coroner and pathology labs and morgue are located. The kids love watching the lab techs bending over the dead bodies. The kid usually pleads for us to go into the morgue, but you need a key card and it's locked.

"Irving will let you in when he dies," Mario says, jerking a crusty finger in my direction.

"Really?" one kid asks, her eyes are red-veined like a marble.

"Oh yes," I say, "I can do anything when I come back as a ghost. I'll let you in for sure." The kid screams and runs away from us as Mario and I chase her down the hall, pretending we're zombies.

* 

Mario and I take the elevator to the atrium. It's morning, and there aren't that many people around, just a bleary-eyed couple holding a baby, a short-haired woman
who keeps scratching her arms and running her hands through her hair, and a security
guard whose feet are up on his desk as he plays with his radio.

In the background is an upright Yamaha piano, its black paint dinged-up and dull. 
It’s got an automatic feature, so it literally plays itself, the keys going up and down. 
Boring classical music filters through the air, mixing and matching with the whirr of the 
air conditioner. The atrium looks out onto the hospital courtyard. The hospital is on water 
conservation alert. Instead of grass, the gardeners put stones down for ground cover.

Mario tells me that he used to be a gardener, but it was hard working for all the 
rich people who treated him like shit. He takes my hand when he says this, and we smile 
at each other. He puts his head on my shoulder and tells me that he's tired. He closes his 
eyes, and we both fall asleep.

When we wake up, we go back to my room and play cutthroat with my nurse. It's 
a variation of three-player bridge. She's a shifty one, and the only way I can beat her is if 
I cheat, which I usually do. Mario's looking me right in the eye when he says, "Irving, I'm 
not gay." I snort when he says this, but I'm kind of pissed. I move my head to the side and 
don't look at him. I can feel Mario’s gaze, and heat shoots up my face.

"Mario, are you serious?"

"I don't know what I am, Irving,” he says. “Does it matter?”

I want to tell him hell yes it matters. I'm not falling in love with some asshole in 
the closet, dragging me back there with him. But then I look at him, and I feel like I don't 
know what I'm doing. I ask him, "Do I matter, Mario?"

He nods his head yes. "Irving, right now, this moment. No one is more important 
to me."
I feel something fall through my insides, like I have a trap door there. It hits in the center of my chest, and the hurt radiates through my body. I glance at my nurse. Her eyes are soft. Her mascara is running. Why didn't I notice that she had makeup on before?

*

It's been a few days since I heard from Mario. I'm worried about him. I ask my nurse through the intercom to take me to see him. At first she says it's not a good idea. I page her about ten times in a row. She comes in and says that she wants to help me get out of bed.

She empties my bedpan and washes off my cock with a soft, green cloth. I relish the moment the cloth rubs against my balls. Somebody isn’t scared to touch me. I scowl at my nurse when she gets a little rough.

“Get up, Irving,” she says. Let’s get out of here.”

We walk up and down the hallways, me with both my hands on my walker, but she threads her arm through mine. I remember how Gael’s arm intertwined with mine on the day the doctor told me I wasn’t going to make it. My fat nurse feels more intimate somehow.

“Irving, I’m tired. Is it okay if I get a chair?” she says. She looks tired so I say yes. One of the brakes on the chair is broken, and it brushes the grey wheel rim with each rotation. It squeaks. The sound feels like it’s touching my nerves.

Her cankles must be stiff. She pushes the chair forward, but there seems to be some slight hesitation every few steps she takes. 1...2...3... Crick. The wheel squeaks a little louder. 1...2...3... Crick. We veer a little left. It's there, a stutter in her lungs. I want to ask her about it, but I can't lift my head up because it’s drooping against my chest. We
make it down several hallways that melt into each other like an afternoon shadow on
Bunker Hill.

She stops on the third floor and picks up a bag of M&M's.

When we get to the elevator, she leans over me. She whispers, "This is it. We’ll
be at his floor soon." I smell garlic and vinegar on her breath from some chicken adobo.
It's disgusting, and I want to buy her some mouthwash. That would fix her right up.

"Really?" I’m too tired to say everything I’m thinking.

The next two minutes feels as if we're falling asleep. I'm so impatient. I'm going
to see Mario's face. His bright eyes will shine at me like flashlights, ferreting out my
discomforts. This might be the last time I see him, so I intend to make the most of it. I
make no effort to move any part of my body. I don't want to exhaust myself.

She pushes the thick wooden door open. There's a rush of sound and laughter,
warmth, like bubbles in an ocean. We're in.

At least a dozen faces, half of them belonging to children, all turn to look at me
with varying degrees of surprise. I'm the monkey that wandered into the lion's den. The
talking stops, but the radio continues to blare a lively Maná song.

My nurse straightens her back. "I'm so, so sorry. I didn't mean to intrude. Irving
and I were just looking for a Mario Cruz."

"Si, soy Mario." The voice is thready and eerie. It seems to emanate from beneath
this crowd of people. The mob parts reluctantly as if it's protecting him. I see him in the
bed. He's sitting up but wrapped tight like a mummy, the blankets constricting. He's
looking right past me. His skin looks smoother, as if he'd received a cucumber mud mask.
His lips are moist, smeared with vasoline. His eyes aren't bright, penetrating my insides. They're far away, drifting clouds.

I would take a step backward if I could. My nurse does that for me. She must be squaring her meaty shoulders. We shuffle back together, one unit.

"Don't you want to say hi to Irving?" She projects me forward again while she asks. Somebody turns off the Maná.

Mario doesn't say anything.

I hear my nurse say, "At this hospital, we have a tradition where we celebrate the Winter Solstice. It's the longest night of the year. All the patients are allowed extra visiting privileges."

I can tell Mario doesn't believe her. It's Autumn. She's so dumb. I'll buy her a Farmer's Almanac. I look at Mario like he's Gael's lover. My nurse unlocks her spine and stands on her toes. “Mario, how about an introduction?” she says.

Mario gazes at some fixed point over my head. He must be absorbing my hate beams because his body is starting to fold into itself.

His mouth opens, and I hear, "Si, si. Escuchen todos, este es mi amigo Irving."

My friend Irving. I do speak Spanish. I'm not a total heathen.

*  

I pee in my bed. On purpose.

*  

I shit in my bed. It isn't on purpose. But I don't care.

*
I don't drink the orange juice, or the ginger ale. I don't drink the water. I don't eat the sandwich. I don't touch the double chocolate devil cake, but somehow I’m able to squish it into a pulp with a plastic fork.

* 

A *Star Trek* marathon is on television. I switch it off and flick the remote off the bed so that it lands on the floor with a crack. My nurse picks it up.

* 

They put me on IV fluids only. Dr. Shan says in his most chipper voice, "Mr. Lee, Irving. I have to tell you that your body has seriously weakened because you haven't eaten in the past five days. You can continue not to eat if you would like, but eating can be a comfort to you in this time. Either way, I'll have to leave this saline fluid attached. I don't think you will make it past the week. I understand that it can be very difficult. This time is always difficult. If you would like us to send for any family, we can. Also, I can offer you the services of our hospital chaplain, or a therapist. Would you like me to send for one? Wait, I don't understand. Can you say that again?"

* 

If it's the last thing I do, I'm going to knock over this Jell-O. It’s staring at me and I hate it. She'll pick it up.

* 

Being human in this world is strange. I guess that's why people are always looking up at the sky, trying to see the stars. You never think the last thing you're going to see is a telescope. But there you have it – the big death secret. My shame in life, in dying, is my expectation that things have meaning. You point the metal chassis over at
the moon, or Mars, or some other celestial body. If you're wearing glasses, you've got to take them off. We all come equal to a telescope; we all get another eye. You look through the long, cylindrical darkness. At the end of it are all these points of light. Maybe you take your eye away from the telescope for a brief moment because you're uncertain of what you're seeing. When you return, you notice how the moon is just a round ball. Then you look through the telescope again. You look at the dark spots on the moon until your eye gets tired. You pull back. You realize everything seems so small. Everything fits into that black circle.

* 

Is it Winter Solstice yet? No?

* 

Dressing me for my funeral is going to be hard. My toenails are long so she's going to have to clip them. The whole of me has curled up into a ball. I bet when Dr. Shan calls out the time of death, he'll notice my nurse is actually crying. He'll think it's relief, but I'll know that she's crying because we hung out and had fun, because I was really alive once. I'm going to root for him to kiss her, a surprisingly morbid and tender kiss. Morbid because I'll be a cooling corpse and their first kiss will be over my body as her gentle fingers tuck the blanket under my chin. Tender because he's never really seen her before, and the moment you see somebody that you see all the time for the first time, it's so tender you have to close your eyes. You press your hand against your chest. Gael won't be there because he and I both know that I'm not really leaving him any money. Once somebody leaves you when you're dying, that's the end of it.

*
When we get to the atrium, I feel a horrible pain in my chest. We couldn't take the stairs, but I push Mario in his wheelchair through the basement and then up to the first floor. It's midnight. The night guard is asleep, sneaking a nap. A woman with bloody hands in a surgical scrub keeps her head down between her knees. Another woman is holding a man against her chest. He's sobbing, and I can distantly hear him saying "My baby, my baby."

Everybody is distracted by grief. It feels like nobody else is in the lobby but us. I wheel Mario to the main opening where plush sofas rest under a high archway. We lift our heads, admiring the spiral staircase winding around and around, a seashell curving. We look up through the skylight. We can see the pink of the Los Angeles night, the almost-stars.

One entire wall of the lobby has been removed and replaced with glass paneling so visitors can view the hospital courtyard. In the center of the courtyard, carefully cultivated plants bloom, fragrant and dangerous, their coloring exotic. Against the glass, facing out into the courtyard, is a magnificent Kawasaki baby grand piano, buffed and polished until its black shines. The silence in the atrium is eerie, and I shiver a little and adjust the blanket around Mario.

"Irv," Mario says, "Irving, you know I worried when the doctor said that you've only got a couple weeks."

"I know," I say. "I'm worried too. I'm worried because I'm just an amateur astronomer, and you're a professional."

"Stop joking around. Stop it." His tone is sharp, and it feels like he's letting something inside unwind, get loose. I’m scared. I wheel him over to the piano, and
somehow between my lifting and his remaining strength, we get him on the piano bench.

I sit next to him, and I look into his eyes, a darkness that captures the light.

"Irving, I've got kids. My wife. I'm married."

I don't know where he's going with this. All I can get out is, "I know."

"I feel like I've been carrying around a terrible secret my whole life. So I'm glad I can be here. I feel like I can trust you."

"You're probably the only person who feels that way."

"You sell yourself short." I know he's trying to reassure me, but the way he says it seems unkind and angry. "Do you know what you're living for? The particles of time are infinite, but they trickle, you know, like sweat down our necks. It's so much work all the time, remembering to take medication. Everything we do feels like we're medicating ourselves. Go to work. Come home. Do the chores. Play with the kids. Repeat. Do you ever wonder what happens when time stops moving? Do you ever think that it doesn't matter what we do, only that we do what we're supposed to do?"

“Irving, you’re the surprise, the break in my routine. I don’t have much time, but I’m grateful a Dios, for you. My gift." Mario's eyes are wet. “But, I need to be truthful. I can’t love you the way you love me.” He's shivering. It’s cold out here at night, but during the day the sun rises overhead and scorches everything on the landscape.

I want him to shut up. Now. "You're not making any sense, Mario. You don’t love me? You can’t love me? Which one is it?"

Mario sinks backward into the wheelchair, wrapping the heavy blankets around him like a little kid afraid of the dark. He is already shrinking, becoming more distant. We are resuming our old orbits, moving apart.
“I’m good on the piano. Can you hear me?” I ask.

It’s an impulse. A neuron that fires in some faraway world but somehow reaches this one. My lifetime feels to me as if it is something I could never choose.

*

Gael isn’t here with me, I know, but I see him. "Let me show you something, Gael," I say. “Please.”

He nods his head.

I face forward at the piano. I fluff out my coattails. I lift my hands high and descend on the keys, hit them hard. I remember that this is how I used to start the music. I put my shoulders into it, bend at the waist, spin and rotate my hands in a wild loop. My fingers speed up and down, dancing. I close my eyes, concentrate, and drive through the repertoire of scales; I bend the octave, stretch my thumbs and pinkies, slamming the chords, running the trills. I diminuendo at the major notes and I crescendo at the minor ones, laughing. We smile at each other. The rhythm of our lives sounds just like this: the downbeat after the upbeat, the syncopation. He's kissing me, and everything is coming toward us, the steepest lift, the sheerest drop, here in the universe where we can glitter forever, a constellation blinking on and off, rising with the melody, crying out, sharp, high at the edges.

I keep playing the music, even though it’s loud and dreadful. I don't know how to stop.

***
I AM RITA

MANUFACTURER’S WARRANTY

9 oz. cast iron steel
1 oz. extra (in case of mistake)
98 screws
57 bolts
16 washer rings
3 twisty ties
screwdriver
allen wrench
welding iron
3 boxes of band-aids

Welding the steel requires 13,506 days alone. Make a cylindrical shape 5 inches long, 3.5 inches wide, 2.5 inches from front to back. End product should be the size of your fist.
The hardest part is the screwing
Once you start, it’s therapeutic to screw without stopping
The twisty ties are handy if you accidentally lose a screw

The Allen Wrench is useful if something else in your apartment breaks while you’re working. Stay focused. When finished, polish the casing. Insert picture inscription.
The picture should be of your family, happy
before 1997

They’ll find you in the summertime, overcome by heat because nobody called the ambulance. Unfortunately, you’re probably dead. Your photo is on the Internet. People request interviews.
You could say:
I didn’t know I was asked a question
How would it feel to hold an iron heart in my hand?
It was cheaper to make a human heart than to heal one

When they find you in the summertime, overcome by heat, remarkably this part of you remains living. Remember it is NOT your fault. Did you hear me?

I forgive you
Did you hear me? I forgive you

Did I leave something out?
Review the instructions

3 boxes of band-aids
10 oz. cast iron steel

They will be amazed by the smoothness of the internal lining.
I’m Rita. I fucking hate myself, and I hate you too. Not that bullshit thing people say when they kind of want you to love them because they haven’t been loved enough. My hate is a raw and pounding hate. I could sneak up on you and knife you. Or mallet you. Put a screwdriver through your eyeballs, one after the other. I like cutting into myself, and cutting into you seems good too. Those stupid self-help books babbling about self-actualization. They don’t know. Sometimes, people ask me what’s wrong. You stupid fuck, I want to say. Can’t you see I’m dying?

Technically (and technicalities will save you every time), I was dying a long time before I actually got cancer. I was busy killing myself. I wanted out of my life, and I had a plan. That’s the sad part of my story. Planning a life is no way to go. Life is better unplanned. What a surprise when cancer saved my life. It’s what let me be me.

If you ever saw me on the street, you wouldn’t think I was walking past you hating your guts, wishing I could eviscerate you. Part of that is because I still look like a woman. I’m not even human. I walked by a bodega window the other day and stopped to admire myself. I’ve got the long, black hair. I’m pretty too: high cheekbones, big eyes. My skin’s the color of beach-tan brown. Exotic and beautiful, exactly the way a robot should be, while passing as human. Tons of men and women think I’m hot, though I won’t sleep with them.

This frumpy white woman shuffles by me pushing a stroller. Her brown hair is dull, not sleek like mine. She wears sneakers. So do I. I seize her arm. She shakes me off.

How rude! she says.

Ooops, my mistake, I say.
Maybe I see my father’s woman everywhere, the one he cheated with for years, and I hear somebody calling her name, Sandy. Sandy! She tucks her hair pertly behind her ear. Every night, before my sister and I fell asleep, the fan so insistent and noisy it sounded like somebody else was in the room, my father would check on us, tuck my hair behind my ear. His smile lifted me, his gentle hands. I hate that woman. She’s so generic. You all are.

You think that I’m honest? Or you’re dismissing me as angry? You don’t like it, right? Wish you could pack me back into my pre-assemblage box?

I’m a pretty objective person, actually. Truth is, us Filipinos, if we could be the ruling class, the way the white people are, then we would push white people down too, but that’s not the reality, now is it? We’re not the ones in charge. Oh, look at me, it’s just so sad that I’m prejudiced—please don’t remind me about how whitey has all this power because (if you’re white) you’re not worthy of it. No shit.

I read some spiritual bullshit about how the only way to combat hate and anger is with love and compassion. I’m pretty sure that’s a form of mind control, and I’m not falling for it. I know what to do if you’ve got a case of the shakes, if you’ve got power—me and my compassion, we’re coming for you. We’re going to relieve you of the burden of your power. That’s some compassionate care.

*

My sister, Sis for short, was born a little lopsided. She has these huge, funny-shaped eyes that slope down and toward the sides of her face. I was five when my mom gave birth to her and brought her to our tiny track home in San Diego. She cried all the time, ruining the routines I loved most. I couldn’t understand why my parents stopped
bedtime readings of *Where the Wild Things Are* or why my mom wasn’t cooking anymore, or why my dad fried eggs and SPAM for dinner.

One summer night, angry that my mom wouldn’t read Dr. Seuss to me, I hid under my bed with my stuffed bear, Bobo, who had one normal eye and one button-eye that my mom had sewn for him. I refused to go to sleep, and the floor felt cool against my cheek. My mom came in and sat on the bed; it sagged, then groaned. I thought she was going to crush me.

She was silent, as if she were waiting for me to speak first. I was stubborn. She would have to go first.

Rita, anak, she eventually said, I know you’re upset. Too many changes can be scary, and mommy and daddy have been busy with your sister. Please try to understand. Everything’s fine—

I hate her! I said.

Don’t say that, Rita. Your sister is special.

I’m special, too!

Yes you are, baby ko.

Why don’t you play with me more?

Rita, do you remember when your daddy and I took you to visit Mt. Apo? What we saw when daddy gave you his binoculars?

Of course I remembered! I was so excited, thinking about the trip, that I forgot to be mad. I scrambled out from under the bed. I ran to my drawer in the garage where I kept my most valued possessions. I grabbed the photograph of the three of us at Mt. Apo and ran back to my room. I sat next to my mom and showed her the photo.
Tell me about Mt. Apo again, mommy, I said.

My mom traced the photograph.

Mommy, mommy, I said, there was a tree. Do you remember? And the mommy bird stood up on the air with its wings. There was a nest with baby birds in it.

Rita, the mommy wasn’t standing. She was teaching them to fly. Your sister is like the baby eagle. Mommy and daddy are teaching her to fly.

I’m special too, I said. I want to learn to fly.

We don’t have to teach you, she said, pulling me closer. You’re so smart. You’re going to fly very far.

But mommy, I said, I don’t really know how to fly. I want to go back. You can teach me to fly again. Ok? Let’s go back?

My mom didn’t say anything. She rested her head against mine and murmured the beginning of her familiar prayer. Oh Mary, help us now in our time of need. I thought for a minute, and I wanted her to stop praying, anything that meant I wouldn’t have to accompany her and sit on those uncomfortable benches, in a scratchy dress, while my parents hissed at me to be quiet.

Let’s take Sis to Mt. Apo, too! I’ll teach her to fly! I can do it mommy ... I can teach her if you and daddy don’t want to—you always say that I’m smart enough to do anything. I squeezed my mom tight around the waist and scrunched my face around her stomach to get her to say yes.

No, baby, it doesn’t work that way. Her voice was serious. She spoke the way she did to the doctors, slowly, like they were speaking too fast. She asked them the same
questions over and over. What do you mean? What do you mean? What’s wrong with her heart?

You have to be a good bird, anak, she said. Your sister is never going to fly.

You’re her Ate, so you have to fly for both of you. Can you do that, Rita?

I can do that, I said, also very slowly, to show her that I wasn’t a doctor.

I hugged Bobo, whose fur was falling out, like my dad’s, and thought about all the ways I could teach Sis to fly. Maybe she could climb on my back. I pictured us screaming in delight, my sister’s face, her bowl-shaped hair and teeny ears peeking out behind me. I was sure my parents had not thought of this. When I described it to my mom, her eyes were closed, and she was snoring softly, but we were both sitting up. I leaned my ear to her chest and listened to her heart beating. I felt safe and loved.

* 

A precocious five-year old is still a five-year old, prone to stupid mistakes. Sis was a lucky baby to have survived my early childhood. My first response to her differences was to ask my parents all the time why Sis was so noisy and so sick. My parents’ silence told me something was wrong with her. I didn’t know what, but I wanted to find out.

One morning, at sunrise, I jumped out of bed and heaved Sis onto the red plastic skateboard my dad had given me for my birthday and tied a jump rope around Sis and the board to secure her. I rolled Sis along eager to find a doctor. We must’ve been a sight, Sis in her snuggly, me in my denim overalls. My dad discovered us an hour later, a few blocks away. I was tired of pulling Sis along and sat on the curb, behind some bushes, still pondering which direction would be the most fruitful. My dad spanked me ten times,
once for each year of his life and my mother’s life that he said they had lost during my
adventure.

In 3rd grade, I came to understand that Sis had been born with an abnormally large
heart. My mom told me the doctors had said it would be optimistic to expect Sis to live
past thirty-five. My mom warned me to be careful, not to do anything dangerous, or to
hurt myself. She said she didn’t want to have to take both her daughters to the hospital.

Who’s going to take care of Sis if something happens to you? she’d ask. It’s your
job to look after your little sister, Rita.

I’d beg to play with her, but my mom would ask, What are you up to? She didn’t
seem to like it when I was alone with Sis; she was constantly fussing over her and never
left Sis alone. Being my sister’s keeper meant she needed my help. How was I supposed
to help Sis if my mom never let me do my job? I plotted to spend time alone with Sis. If I
could fix Sis, I thought, then my parents wouldn’t be so upset at each other. My initial
plans were really unrealistic. I wanted to teach us both to fly.

I begged my parents to take me to the airport so I could study the planes. I ripped
my mom’s quilt, stripped Sis of her clothes, and glued the feathers to her arms and legs
and cotton balls to her butt (because I ran out of feathers). I tied her with string to
balloons, kites, and once, to a flag. They wave in the wind like wings. I used yarn to
attach a fan to my back. I carried Sis in my arms and ran as fast as I could.

Once, I marched Sis to the roof of our grandparents’ apartment building where I
climbed the cable antennae and lifted Sis up with me. I thought a bird would come by and
pick us up in its claws. We stayed the night because I didn’t want to miss the sunrise,
which is when I thought we had the best chance of attracting a bird. After they found us,
and the police had been called, my father spanked me again. His discipline only hardened my resolve.

In retrospect, it was also the luckiest time of my life because that’s when I developed a real bond with Sis. We were closer than most sisters. She followed me everywhere, and I let her. Sis inspired me to give up on flight and become a lover of all things robotic. Her favorite expression was: Beep, Beep. I watched Buck Rogers whenever I could, and we both fell in love with Twiki. More often than not, Twiki saved the day. I learned to help Sis with her homework assignments. She was frequently sick. I’d stay by her bedside all night while she clutched Bobo, and we would sing Twinkle Twinkle, Little Star. She’d clap her hands when we finished.

It was the time before I began to understand how much the word “normal” mattered, that ”special” had multiple definitions, before I started to feel a terrible pressure in the back of my head whenever anybody said I was smart, or whenever anybody called Sis stupid. At mass, whenever my mom knelt down and lit her candles for Jesus’s sacrifice, I would kneel down next to her and pray that a little bit of what I’d been given would be given to Sis. I was on the path to atheism. I had real faith: life was unfair.

* 

Sis was the one who first gave me the idea to actually try and engineer a robot. It was a Saturday, and I was sixteen years old, sitting at the kitchen table, minding my own business, crunching on my morning cereal. I was excelling academically, as was expected of me. I’d informed my parents that I was going to be a doctor, that way I could provide Sis with lifelong care and treatment. I thought of her condition as a disease.
My parents were fighting again in their bedroom. I could hear them through the thin, cardstock door. My dad started in on my mom for forgetting to pay the PG&E bill. Our payment was weeks late, and now we’d been charged an additional ten dollars. That was bull, and actually his fault, but my mom was sick and tired of nagging my dad to pay the bills. She was busy with her night shifts as a home health care nurse.

How are we supposed to afford another surgery? my dad yelled. He usually stuffed all his anger back inside himself until it started to fold inward. He was a mechanic, and I used to wonder whether he spoke more often to his engines or to his family.

She needs it, Reynaldo, my mom said. She needs the surgery to repair her heart.

My sister’s moon face didn’t change in its expression. As a precaution, I went over to my drawer, which I still kept, and removed a pair of earmuffs. Sis, I said, put them on. She did. Then, she crawled under the table and started rocking back and forth.

Reynaldo, her heart’s too big. She needs this operation, or maybe a transplant, but they’ll put her on the bottom of the list. At least this way she can live longer. Don’t you care? Don’t you care if your own daughter makes it past thirty-five?

He yelled back that she only thinks of him as lazy and stupid. That he should be promoted to head mechanic, but his boss thinks immigrants like him are lazy and stupid. I knew that he’d wanted a promotion and was passed over for a former surfer named Austin, who was only in his late twenties. He called his boss a racist asshole and accused my mother of taking his boss’s side. I couldn’t hear the exact words, but I knew the swings of all their major arguments.
They usually ended with my dad saying it wasn’t his fault and my mom kneeling at an altar. She’d leave her prayers to go get more shit done. But this time, my dad surprised me.

No, I would never leave my daughters. It was nothing, nothing but a fling.

Do you think I’m stupid, Reynaldo? Do you think I have no idea what you’ve been doing? Under my nose, while our children suffer?

I swear, it was only that once, my dad said.

Shut up! Shut up before they hear you.

The idea of my dad having an affair swept through me and sickened me. I was trying to pretend, for Sis’s sake, that there wasn’t a raging hurricane happening in our home. Tears spilled from my eyes, and I laid my head on the table.

Sis could usually sense that I was feeling down. Right there, while I was eating my cereal, I felt her hands, clammy against my cheeks. She climbed onto my lap; a roll of fat pressed my side like a worm.

She was holding my face in both her hands.

Don’t worry, it’s okay, I told her. It’ll be over soon.

Ate, you’re scared? she asked.

Yes, I said.

Don’t worry. It’s okay.

What do we do if dad leaves? I said, thinking about our family’s finances. No way that mom’s job as a nurse could pay for Sis’s surgery. I needed to get a job. The old, familiar pressure was rising in the back of my head.

Beep Beep, she said. Beep Beep.
What the fuck? That’s when I realized my sister herself was a kind of robot. She was never going to get better. The disease didn’t have a cure. I’d have to find another way. In that moment, I had one prayer left in me—that I was smart enough to rebuild her into a better, smarter robot.

*

My dad acted like any other proud father when I graduated from UC Berkeley, phi beta kappa, with a dual degree in mechanical engineering and computer science. I went through the motions mutely, sitting in the stands, wearing a flowing black gown with the rest of the penguins. My mom barely smiled even though he had his arm around her.

I knew their marriage was a sham. My dad was only home every other weekend. He and my mother still had their spats, but they sounded like the whistle of a kettle after it boils, gradually dying down when there’s no longer any heat.

I spent more time with my dad than my mom. To further my goal of designing a robot, I volunteered to sneak in on Saturdays and help my dad at the garage. His boss only worked weekdays. There, I learned everything a girl could want about hydraulics, actuators, pistons, valves, batteries, and engines. I was a natural, and with my help, my dad was able to earn extra cash from side jobs.

One afternoon, when I was working on a vintage Pinto, replacing transmission fluid, a plain, brown-haired woman stopped by the garage carrying a paper bag. She seemed young, maybe in college.

Can I help you? I asked her, wiping my hands on an oily rag and moving toward the counter.
Yes, I just came by to see Reynaldo and drop something off for him. Is he here?

she asked.

Is this your car? I asked. It’ll be ready soon. Sorry, my dad went out for lunch.

She didn’t look like the type to drive a Pinto, but she paled more and more as I spoke. Red patches blotted her face. I didn’t have to be told that this was her.

I-I’m sorry, she said, but I didn’t mean to disturb you. I’ll come back a different time. She backed away.

My dad and mom were so estranged that he clearly didn’t care enough to hide her. I was furious. She’d left the bag. I opened it and found a sandwich, a cookie, and an apple. She’d packed him lunch. I tossed the sandwich into the trash, ate the apple, and gave my sister the cookie.

My sister clapped her hands and cheered for every single graduate that walked up for a diploma. People’s mouths hung open; they smiled the first few times she got up out of her chair and said, Yay! By the hundredth time, they were annoyed. One man shoved her to the side in his eagerness to get into the aisle and take a picture of his son or daughter. I considered the scene that would erupt if I ran down to the seats and smacked him upside the head. It wasn’t worth it.

In all the photographs, my dad’s smile was grand. Only years later did the thought occur to me that he wasn’t smiling because he thought I’d accomplished an important thing. He was smiling because he was relieved. He knew that I would make bank with my profession. He wouldn’t have to foot the bills for Sis’s numerous medical visits any longer. He could begin a new family. Maybe he’d even have other kids. Lord knows Sandy was young enough.
I placed the photograph of my mom, my sister, and me in my drawer. In the picture, my sister was wearing my cap and gown. Her arms were spread wide in victory, and she’s giving two thumbs up. My mother’s right hand is clasped over her chest, as if she’s sore there. I have my arm around my sister, and I looked angry, as if I’d swallowed my dad’s pride.

*

I met Ernestine, the almost-love of my life, in front of the Ding-Dong machine at Berry Energies after I’d been working there for nearly five years. Berry was ideally located in a technology park in Sunnyvale, California that housed fifty plus innovation companies in identical black and metal glass buildings. These businesses were primarily involved in semiconductor, computer, and telecommunications research. A technology park shares expensive laboratories and production zones, as well as testing facilities, between companies to create its own economy of scale.

I’d been eating ramen for dinner nearly every night of that month, cramming in the overtime hours because Sis, who had chronic respiratory complications, had been hospitalized again for pneumonia. My mom’s insurance was only contributing to half of Sis’s stay, which left me to foot the rest. By then, I was making more than my dad and mom combined. Filling the financial gap left me very little time for my robot project, but it also fueled my determination to create a mechanical system that could replace Sis’s ailing body.

Since I already worked twelve-plus hour days, I set aside Sundays for my personal work. Because there were only a smattering of cars in the lot, it was the easiest day for me to sneak into the design labs in the building next door. Advancement Biomed,
which specialized in developing prosthetic limbs for amputees, owned the building and a full bionics lab. I needed their AutoCAD machines in order to properly edit my robot blueprints.

I had to keep it a secret because I wasn’t supposed to be using technology park resources for a personal project. If the folks at Berry found out that I was borrowing Advancement’s equipment, they’d try to claim intellectual property rights on my robot. Advancement would also want a piece of its design. I’d resolved many of the major bugs in the software algorithm. I had a perfect data recall script, but for some reason, the memory chip kept erasing itself. This problem had consumed me since I’d started at Berry.

The Sunday I met Ernestine began no differently than the rest. I was working in the design lab, unsure if the problem with the memory chip was a routine error in the storage device, a Tracer 5000 (a top of the line CPU). There were plenty of bytes left in the device, but it was still erasing itself, even after I test-downloaded five minutes worth of memory. I was using my memory of Sis—trying to climb onto a swing set with the skill of a baby panda. She was sixteen at the time, and while my mom said, It’s so cute that Sis is trying, I couldn’t bear to watch for long.

I was stumped so I went to grab a Ding-Dong at the vending machine. There was Ernestine Carillo. She was lean and long, a stick figure. Her glasses had slipped to the end of her beaked nose, and she pushed them up with one hand while with she gripped a Ding-Dong fiercely in her other.

I already have your Ding-Dong, she said. As she spoke, she waved the Ding-Dong defiantly in the air, as if challenging me to say I didn’t want it. She pulled off this
statement without blushing, and I found her boldness immediately endearing. She said she’d seen me in the lab before. When I was tight-lipped about what I was doing, she didn’t pursue it any further. Instead, she said, You’re busy composing on the AutoCAD, how about we grab a Boba when you’re done?

Of her many great qualities, the one I came to appreciate most about Ern was how taciturn she could be. That’s not to say she wasn’t expressive or that she didn’t talk a great deal when we were alone. Her underrated gift was that she knew when to shut up and when to speak up. If Ern had probed further into what I was doing in what turned out to be her lab, I wouldn’t have agreed to go out with her. It would’ve been my loss.

After a couple flirty Boba dates, Ern asked me to a retro drive-in screening of *E.T.* We went in her car, a sporty Toyota Celica. When *E.T.* said, E.T. phone home, Ern cried facing forward and didn’t apologize for it. I looked the other way because I was crying too. I said, Sorry, but *E.T.* reminds me of my sister.

Ern put her hand on my lap and left it there for the rest of the movie. She was reassuring me. After the movie, as the credits rolled, she didn’t make a move on me. She dropped me off at my apartment in San Jose and said, Go ahead, phone home.

I called Sis at the hospital room and told her about how I’d seen *E.T.*, one of her favorite movies. She brightened right away. I also told her that I’d met someone.

Who’d you meet? Sis asked me.

Her name’s Ernestine.

Who’s Ernestine?

She’s a girl, and I like her.

What’s Ernestine? Is she an alien, Ate?
No, E.T. is an alien. Ernestine is a human. She’s a girl, like you.

You like a human? Sis asked.

I laughed and said, Sis you can’t tell anyone, not even mom.

Because only kids can see her?

My sister was quoting *E.T.* I went into a mild state of shock. What did it mean? Then, I realized that Sis was nearly twenty-three years old, and I felt that ache in my head that I’d never have a sister in whom I could confide. All I could say back to her was, Sis, you’ll really like her when you meet her.

Ate, I like E.T., Sis said.

*

As physically attractive as she was, Ernestine’s sexiest quality was that she could match me I.Q. point for I.Q. point. She was the head bio-neurologist at Advancement, with a specialty in nerve endings. She was interested in phantom limbs and nerve sensations. She’d formulated most of the skin covering the bionic limbs at Advancement.

We were comfortable with each other because we had so much in common. When she was in high school, Ern explained, she developed a tumor on her right arm. They eradicated it with radiation and chemo, but she went through a scare when she thought she’d lose her arm. She taught herself to write, and even to throw, left-handed. I even taught myself to sew left-handed, she said, in case I had to help my mom out. Her cancer drove Ernestine the same way wanting to help Sis drove me.

Brainstorming was fun and productive with Ern. Over the next two years, she became as invested in my robotics project as I was. Unfortunately, we made little to no headway trying to solve the memory problem. I once asked her how they operated the
arms when they fitted the prosthetic on an amputee. Sadly, she said, all our body parts came with people attached. She suggested I try borrowing a data mainframe motherboard from Berry. I told her that I hadn’t reached the point of stealing.

After we had a good laugh, I informed her, in all seriousness, that I was close to creating a new open source system I was naming RITA. The system was based on an algorithm I’d developed as the basis for a positron neural net, one of the trickiest aspects of artificial intelligence. The algorithm relied on my own brain, my memories, to formulate learning patterns. The downside and the upside of a completed RITA were the same: it could only learn what I had already learned.

Ern couldn’t follow all of my engineering or computer science speech, but she had a fabulous contribution of her own. For Christmas, she gifted me with a polyfoam latex kit. They use the same stuff on actors, movie magic. Her company was in the process of securing the patent for it. She ran her fingers up and down my arm.

You know how smooth your skin feels? Well, robot RITA can feel the same way, she said. We’ve overlaid the polyfoam with silicate. It reproduces the immaculate nature of human skin. It’s flexible and responsive, the way your skin is.

That night I had the best, most glamorous sex of my life.

In the new year, I became enraptured with the thought of a walking, talking being who would closely resemble a human. Everything was functioning so smoothly in my life, it seemed. I didn’t notice that Ern and I were drifting apart. It started with tiny things, like, who was going to cook; who was going to clean; when would we take that trip together to Hawaii? Ern received a promotion, based in Alaska, of all places, to run a prestigious offshoot of a Johns Hopkins limb replacement research center. Apparently,
there was a higher concentration of amputees in Alaska than anywhere else in the U.S., something about the fishing industry. The tension between us escalated.

When I told Sis, she said that we could see the end of the world if we visited, and bears. Rita, is there snow in Alaska? she asked me. I love snow! Living in Southern California her whole life, Sis had never seen snow.

There’s no snow in Alaska, I lied to Sis.

I had zero interest in moving to Alaska, a backwater when it came to robotics advancement. As well, Ern knew I would never leave my family. She paid attention to my concerns: my mom withered, thinner and frailer each time I saw her.

I visited Sis and my mom once every couple months, taking the quick hour and change flight from San Jose to San Diego. Ernestine pestered me about meeting Sis. I didn’t want Ern visiting my mom’s place. Even though I was paying for a caregiver for Sis while my mom worked, the stress was eating away at my mom. She was depressed. My dad had called in October, saying that he and his new wife were expecting a baby girl. Their old fights often consisted of blaming each other for Sis. My mom was devastated by the news.

My mom had taken up collecting and, for the most part, rarely cleaned her home. There were piles of newspapers and old books from secondhand stores that stretched to the ceiling, columns and columns of papers rose from the floor. Collectibles, such as dolls and figurines, crowded together, bumping elbows on the shelves. If there were an earthquake, my mom and Sis would be crushed instantaneously. I worried all the time about the two of them. Ern protested that she wanted to meet my family anyway. She didn’t mind the hazards; she wouldn’t judge.
But I do judge, I said.

You barely seem to care about cleanliness at our place, she retorted.

I was irritable, having pulled several all-nighters to work on the robot, aware that I was close to yet another breakthrough: synthesizing nerve endings that would allow a robot to experience the sensation of touch.

Rita, I’m worried about you. You need a break, or at least some sleep. All you ever care about is that damn robot.

That damn robot is going to save Sis’s life, Ern. If I could only figure out the memory storage problem.

No, Rita, wake up and smell the fucking shit. You aren’t taking care of yourself. You’re not taking care of us. Your sister’s fine. She’s happy. You’re the one that’s consumed. This obsession is ruining both our lives.

I told her to go fuck herself. She walked out on me. Two weeks later, she gave notice at Advancement. One month after that, the movers were packing up her belongings in boxes. I couldn’t look her in the eye as she walked around, shoulders hunched. I slipped my face into a mask, no expression, but I was furious at both of us. We’re supposed to be so smart. Why couldn’t we make it work? I knew Ern hoped for some small token that I wanted her to stay, but I didn’t understand her unhappiness, only that she wanted a change.

A lone cardboard box was still on the coffee table. Maybe our pictures were in there? Ern was giving last directions to the movers. I opened the lid. Inside were ten polished glass jars with black lids and a light brown powder inside. It was technically
sound makeup, the kind they use at movie studios to make their animatronics come to life. I wanted to thank her, to throw my arms around her and ask her not to leave.

Ern, I began, then reconsidered. She’d called my robot an obsession. I regretted my last words to her as soon as I said them.

I-Would you send me any research you come across on bone fabrication?

Her face fell. Sure, Rita, I can do that for you. She hugged me and patted my back. If you ever want to come visit me in Alaska, let me know, ok?

I knew she was crying. Ernestine’s head was bowed as she slipped into her Celica and far away from my stupid questions. How do I do this? How do I do that? Come home Ern, I wished.

*

Over the next two years, I worked even more hours. I had good reason. The environment was sobering. People were worried about lay-offs. Lockheed Martin, a major defense contractor and aerospace firm that funded much of the research at independent tech labs, including Berry, had fallen on hard times. The entire Bay Area was freaking out. I stopped visiting my mom and Sis as regularly.

I was deep into building the exoskeleton for my robot. When I wasn’t working on the robot, I moped about, ate more and more packets of ramen, and felt sorry for myself. Ern had done most of the cooking. She said it was soothing, but back then, I considered cooking a distraction from whatever robot part needed my attention. I’d given up on the memory problem because Ern was right. I’d never find a data storage system large enough. My robot would be less intelligent than Sis.
Rita, my mom said, maybe you could visit Ernestine. Her tone was kind as she ladled steaming arroz caldo into a bowl. Its rich scent rose through the air. She hadn’t heard from me for weeks and had finally convinced me to fly down to San Diego.

I thought you hated Ernestine. You never even visited us.

Somebody needs to watch Sis, my mom said. Rita, you know that I won’t be around forever.

I’m working on repairing Sis. I let my mom know I was close to completing my prototype. The easy part, relatively, is the body, I said. They’ve made giant leaps, but I wanted to duplicate human memory, which is required for learning.

My mom stared at the cobwebs on the ceiling. Dios, Rita, you are a scientist. You are not God. How was I given a daughter like this? You need to drop this craziness. Sis misses you. You should visit us more.

Sis will be fine once I finish the robot. I’ll give her a perfect, healthy body after this one fails. You can retire, not take care of her all the time. She’ll love the robot. It’ll be like a toy.

I didn’t understand how my mom could be so dense. It’s not like I was trying to change Sis’s personality. I was giving her a chance to live longer, without sickness, in perfect health. I was tired of all the check-ups: heart monitoring, ear and respiratory infections. I could perform regular maintenance on the robot myself, and with less frequency than Sis’s visits to the doctor.

Rita, my mom cupped my face and said, quite solemnly, a robot like that would be an abomination, a sin. You can never replace the human soul. I will pray for you.
Mom, don’t be ridiculous, I said. Pray for Sis to live long enough for me to finish, or pray for me to successfully build this robot.

I couldn’t have endured this—your father, Sis being sick—without you, Rita. She threw herself on the sofa and began sobbing. I didn’t know what to say so I didn’t say anything. The Mary statue on the end table kept her mouth shut as well, even though her hand was so close to my mom’s head that it seemed to be patting her, comforting her.

I felt betrayed that my mom misunderstood why I was building a robot, but I still had work to do. I returned to Sunnyvale the next day, only to be abandoned again. There was Berry’s version of a pink slip, a letter granting me two months severance pay and laying me off.

We will be locking the doors at close of business, the letter stated. Please clear out your belongings.

An arm, a leg, a few turbines, the Cervo mechanism, wires, cords, steel—I wheeled it all out to the parking lot in a cart, piece by piece, a tablecloth from an old Christmas party depicting hundreds of red-nosed reindeers slung over the top. Nothing to look at here, folks, I thought, only the next leap in human civilization.

* 

Six months later, I’m in my mom’s fucking garage. Even with the door open it was heated up in there like a nuclear reaction. I was thirsty all the time. We kept my dad’s old ice chest filled with soda and water. I had a persistent summer cough, and was fatigued. The heat induced a lethargic, mellow feeling. On hot days, I didn’t feel like performing manual labor. Instead, I detailed theories of memory construction in my lab
notebook or let my mind wander and write down whatever ideas popped into my head. It was the closest I’d ever come to laziness.

Sis was wearing a garish, bright yellow dress my mom purchased at Goodwill. Her hair was in a ponytail, and she pretended a styrofoam cup was a telescope. She would only speak to my mom and me with one eye closed and the other peered into a hole she’d cut in the cup. I couldn’t stand these girlish outfits that she chose to wear. She was twenty-four for Christ’s sake.

I’d spent most of the morning at an auto salvage yard with Sis. She skipped up and down the groaning aisles that were piled with metal and nails, a bobbing buttercup among the weeds. I picked out an L-shaped slide sheet and gathered up the stray washers and bolts that littered the ground.

After the salvage yard, I dropped by a bodega on the way home to buy Sis a Flintstone Push-Up bar, her favorite ice cream. She would only eat the orange flavor. An average, frumpy white woman passed me pushing a stroller. She was about my age, wearing the same sneakers. For a split second, I almost had a heart attack thinking it was Sandy. The woman frowned at me when I stopped her. I apologized for my mistake, but the encounter left me shaken.

When I returned home, I stayed in the garage and slumped down on my lab bench. Half-heartedly, I took out my lab notebook and began writing a few observations. Eventually, I read what I wrote, and next to the equations were all my thoughts about seeing Sandy. I wondered where my dad was, how he’d feel about the use I’d made of his garage, a far cry from my days puttering in his shop.
The ice chest was low on drinks. I didn’t want to get up. I wanted to keep writing. I asked my mom to bring me an iced tea. She’d been in my way today, nosing around the parts and pages I’d spread throughout the garage, on the shelves, the floor. There was barely a path to wind through, I’d taken up so much space. My mother held her tongue about not being my servant, still glad to have me back at home. Our house was a wreck. I’d cluttered the garage while she stored her crap inside. I thought my collection was marginally less garish than hers.

My mom said she’d be right back with drinks, and as she walked away, she said over her shoulder, Anak, I’m so glad you moved back in with us. Sis and I have a little present for you.

Sis laughed and leapt up from where she’d been hiding behind a heap of bolts and the old laundry machine whose innards were exposed. I had disassembled it months ago. Ate, you’ll love the present. It’s from me to me, she said. I laughed too.

Sis had been functioning like my little tech assistant. I found I was more resourceful with her around. I didn’t have the sophisticated equipment of the technology park anymore, but I had our childhood memories. I’d spent a great deal of time with my dad in the garage, Sis tagging along, the edge of my t-shirt wound around her hands like a security blanket.

We had fun, resuming the roles of our childhood. We fell into a MacGyver routine. Everything can be useful. I was able to extend and shorten the bones of the robot using PVC pipe and duct tape. Old modem cables and telephone wires are like any other wiring. It’s a simple job to separate the plastic tubing and splice it down to the red, green, and blue wires. I improved the bipedal function by dismantling the weed-whacker and
fashioning a minute engine that operated separately on the robot’s joints. I stripped the engine from the lawnmower as well, but that was to build a fan for Sis in the garage. It was too hot for her to be running around, as she was prone to do.

When my mom returned, holding iced tea, as well as a gift-wrapped box, I was still writing. Sis was playing with the cast iron heart model I’d made. She’d retrieved it from my special drawer, but I didn’t mind. I’d soldered the heart and fastened it together with a crude method. It was made of leftover specialized semiconductor strips from Berry, patched with cast iron strips that I’d sheeted down into peels, and tied with steal wool. It was the best prototype I’d constructed since moving in with my mother.

Before she could give me the package, Sis ran up, swiped the box from my mom, and opened it. Inside was a scarf, a wool cap, gloves, a pair of hiking boots, and a soft, leather bound diary. Pressed between the pages of the diary, my mom had placed a voucher for a ticket to Alaska from Ern. Sis put on the boots and stomped around the garage.

Ate, I’m going to visit Alaska, Sis said, snatching the ticket triumphantly.

That’s for your sister, my mom said to Sis. Don’t you remember, Sis? Rita needs a vacation. She’s always taking care of us, so we’re going to take care of her.

Sis went to a shelf, grabbed my old skateboard, held it aloft pretending it was one wing, and said, let’s go fly and see Ernestine, Ate. Even though she’d never met Ernestine, Sis was smitten with the idea of her.

Kissing my cheek, my mom said, We wanted to do something nice for you, Rita. Ern called. She mailed over the ticket. Sis and I bought you the clothes and the journal. We see how much you write in your notebook. You must love it. She was sniffling. I
turned to look out the small window at the side of the garage so my mom wouldn’t see that I was about to cry.

Sis was standing behind me, and poked me. She had ripped out several of my notebook pages. She flung them in the air.

The fan whirled away. The bits of paper flew all over the garage, like ashes.

My mom and I watched silently, our tears stopped.

Snow! Snow! my sister screamed, and clapped.

*

I’m a robot, like RITA. I’m not God.

It was a routine check-up because, despite the summer, I was sniffling and sneezing and worried about the pollen count. The doctor was an allergy specialist. I had a thing for doctors, so I dressed up a little. I’d lost weight from all the stress and thought I looked pretty good.

She had a pleasant face and a light touch. She reminded me a little of Ernestine, a sexy doctor version of her. I sat on the bench and straightened my back. I had bad posture, but no use letting her think I didn’t have a little pride. Or breasts. I do have them. Tiny ones, but they’re great.

I let her pat me on the cheeks and up and down my neck. As she worked, she hummed low in her throat. It comforted me and reminded me of the motor whirring in my robot. I closed my eyes and pretended she was a blind woman touching female flesh for the first time. Lower, lower, I kept thinking.

It was a great fantasy.

She stopped at my throat.
It’s a fatty cyst, I explained to her. That’s what my regular doctor says.

She started to knead the bump. We may have to do a biopsy, she says, I’m concerned that this might be indicative of cancerous activity. For your age and gender, it could be lymphoma or leukemia.

I’m sure it’s nothing, I said.

We won’t know for sure until we take it out, she said.

I shifted my hips from left to right, and for a second, I thought she was going to lay me out and have sex with me, pity sex, right there on the hospital bed.

Don’t worry, she said. If you have cancer, and I’m not saying you do, then we’ve caught it, and now we can do something about it.

I wished in that moment that I had a cane, the kind that comes out of the curtains, and takes the performer away.

*

There was no answer in sight to my boondoggle of a memory capacity/learning function for the robot. Maybe I was going to fail. It was like somebody challenging you to a chess match. You’re pretty good, but then your opponent whips out a timer and sets it next to the board.

Maybe RITA would never exist; this part of me would only exist in a series of algorithms in a notebook. Maybe that was the only part of me that would ever exist outside myself. If I couldn’t figure this out, the robot would be a perfect form, but it wouldn’t learn. Instead, it would draw randomly from whatever happened within the first five minutes of its existence. RITA’s life would be nothing more than a loop.
I needed an outlet. Instead of listing hypotheses and noting experiment parameters, I wrote about my feelings:

I’m Rita. I fucking hate myself, and I hate you too. Not that bullshit thing people say when they kind of want you to love them because they haven’t been loved enough. My hate is a raw and pounding hate. I could sneak up on you and knife you. Or mallet you. Put a screwdriver through your eyeballs, one after the other. I like cutting into myself, and cutting into you seems good too. Those stupid self-help books babbling about self-actualization. They don’t know. Sometimes, people ask me what’s wrong. You stupid fuck, I want to say. Can’t you see I’m dying?

I put down my pen, ashamed of the intensity of my feelings. It was like all the anger I’d bottled was finally coming out. I’d also never felt so free.

After the diagnosis, writing sustained me. I thought maybe it could sustain my family as well. I’d made good money at Berry, but even my savings would run out soon. The worst part about the diagnosis was realizing that the robot still couldn’t learn. With the exoskeleton parts I’d rescued from my time at Berry, as well as the cosmetic wonders that Ern had developed, I was satisfied with my progress on a materials level. But who was going to work and help support my mom? What would happen to Sis after I died? Would anybody be able to repair Sis if I wasn’t around?

At first, I started writing an instruction manual, and then I realized how closely I had documented the journey of developing RITA. I re-packaged the manual to become a memoir, using the pages of my own diary for inspiration. I considered it a new genre: speculative memoir. I paid careful attention to the sections about robot building. Now that the robot wasn’t able to communicate like a person, I wanted to make sure everybody understood my design—understood so that future generations would be able to duplicate RITA for themselves.
I had an ulterior motive other than money. I was hurting and very, very angry toward my father. My dad hadn’t called once since my lay-off. I couldn’t believe he would just replace Sis and me. Writing was therapeutic. Besides, when Sis was a robot, she’d outlive me. I wanted to give her something to remember me by. I wrote furiously, day and night. I began to call and e-mail agents. No bites.

People love real stories, and they’d love the robot element, even if they’d think I was either crazy or it was fiction. You can give somebody something real, and they won’t know what to do with it. You can give somebody something unreal, and they tell you how reading it makes them feel alive, as if the story actually happened. Don’t tell me it’s not an unbelievable world when you come right down to it.

As I wrote, I gained insight that to most people, my life was closer to fiction than reality. I re-imagined my speculative memoir into a speculative sci-fi thriller. The protagonist was a woman building a robot.

*  

Because of the lymphoma, it was slow going with my novel. Right after the first radiation treatment, I started to have bizarre dreams. My mom would come into the room. She’d wipe my brow with a soft cloth. She’d say I was okay. It felt great to have my mom taking care of me. Most of the time, though, I worried.

Sis asked me, What’s wrong? What’s wrong?

I almost wanted to smack her out of frustration, but I couldn’t. I felt so weak, like parts of me were leaking out onto the floor. My robot assemblage was lying in pieces all over the garage.

My dad would call me on the phone. How are you doing? he’d ask.
I’m great, I’d lie to him.

He was so far away, in Oklahoma. Still, he sent me a card every day, more than he’d done in years. Sometimes they’re funny. Sometimes they’re sad. Often, they’re homemade with photos of him and his new wife and kid pasted on the front. I read them and traced his face, then tossed them before Sis could find them.

One night, I had a dream that I was flying toward him in an airplane. I ran out of fuel, and the plane sank onto the plains of Wyoming. The cattle didn’t see me coming. I was just a burning comet in the sky, and when I landed, I left rows and rows of singed grass like in the movie Signs.

The next night, I had another dream. Ernestine was taking care of me instead of my mom. My mom had somewhat jagged nails because she bit them to shreds; Ernestine had long fingers, perfectly manicured nails. I somehow know it’s not my mom, but I was too curious as to what Ernestine’s doing in the dream to make myself wake up.

I asked dream-Ernestine what she was doing.

I’m taking care of you, she said. I’ve been writing you every day, sending you my love, but you haven’t written me back, not even once.

I was thinking, Did I lock her out of my e-mail? Did I even get her e-mails? Ernestine, I said, I didn’t get any of your messages, or I would’ve written you back.

She’s floating above me, and we’re taking one of those kayak tours on the L.A. River. It’s an urban river, and the water was pooling under us, shallow on top of the concrete surface, barely enough for our kayak to float. I was the only one paddling, and she’s kind of hovering there above me. Did you get this letter or this one? She’s holding a stack of these letters and lets them go one by one. They drifted like leaves in the eddy the
kayak made. Hands started to come out of the water and grabbed the letters. I recognized these hands. They belonged to my family. They belonged to Filipino migrant workers. They’re bony and emaciated, the flesh clinging to the skin for dear life. People I knew have these hands. They started yelling at me. Traitor! Traitor! Traitor! I had no idea why they are calling me this. I started to argue.

Read this one, Ernestine said. It’s a note from her.

Dear Rita,

I miss you so much. Some serious stuff has been going on with me. I’m sick. I know you are making progress with your robot. I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind contributing to my fundraiser. I’m raising money because I don’t have enough health insurance to cover all the costs, and I need some more care. I don’t want to leave my family in debt. You know how it was for me—being sick that first time really changed my life. Just please send along what you can to my friends. They know what to do. I’m sending you an announcement from Alaska. I still care about you. Will you come visit sometime?

Yours Always,
Ernestine

All of a sudden, Ernestine was just by herself. She’s on some kind of water ride on the kayak, like in an amusement park or a water park. She’s floating around and around, and everything around us was dark, except for bright yellow and white specks, like outer space. She’s in the last car of the water park roller coaster, and it spun off the tracks. It started to whirl around really fast in circles and changed into a drain. Ern was drowning. She tried to scream, but she took on water. Then all of a sudden, she’s calm, and she’s floating down, and I knew she was dead.

I woke up shivering. I didn’t know if I’m delirious or if I’m dreaming. Nothing felt right. My mom was in the room. She’s still wiping me with that soft cloth.
Rita, anak, you were dreaming, she said. What’s wrong?

Mom, I could barely get out the words. Did something happen to Ernestine?

Rita, you know what happened to her.

I don’t. I don’t know. The room was starting to close up on me, squeezing shut like the aperture of a camera. Why couldn’t I remember? Did I block it out?

It spilled into my consciousness without me understanding it. Mom came into the room, telling me that Ernestine has died. The cancer had come back, and it had taken her really fast. She only had a few months, but she never stopped fighting.

I’d kept meaning to write Ern that summer. But I hadn’t. I was a bad friend, a bad ex-girlfriend. She always reached out to me, and usually I responded. I was never going to get a chance to apologize. The thought choked me up, and I cried. I should’ve spent my time with her, not building a damned robot.

*

My mom continued to take care of me. She practically moved into the hospital. I took long walks with her and figured out which candy stripers were helpful: some of them would get the barf pan quick, would run to get me water, would pick up magazines, and some of them would disappear for hours on end. The unreliable ones were only doing it for high school credit or because their parents made them.

Sis would stare and stare at the catheter coming out of my breast. She would ask me if she could use it to look into my boob.

No, Sis, I’d say—it doesn’t show you the inside of my boob.

What about your heart? Ate, can I see your heart?
I didn’t have much energy, so I’d just kind of shake my head at her and tell her she could watch television. That always made her happy. She would hold my hand while she did it.

We were both eager to get back to my robot, but unlike Sis, I wasn’t easily distracted. I knew I was racing against the clock. Fortunately, I had finished radiation a month ago, and it was just the chemo ahead of me.

One of the doctors came in one day to talk to me about my options. We’re not able to contain your lymphoma to the extent we thought, one doctor said. It’s an aggressive type, so it’s imperative to start chemo immediately.

How far has it spread? I asked. How long do I have? The latter was my new favorite question. I asked it every time I saw a doctor. The inexperienced fellows always looked a little shaken whenever I asked. There aren’t a lot of jollies at the hospital, so I took it where I could.

The doctor said, You could have a longer life if the chemotherapy works. She left the room.

My mother was sobbing.

I can’t do the chemo, I said. I’m going to die and leave you two alone. I can’t fix myself. How am I supposed to fix Sis? I did so much wrong. But I have that robot, and maybe she can help you take care of Sis. You won’t be alone.

Of course, not understanding and frightened, she guilt-tripped me, Anak don’t say that. You must do the chemo. You have to do it for your sister and me. God made both of you. Everything is perfect. You’ve been given such gifts. You shouldn’t waste more time on that robot. You’re chasing a dream.
I missed Ernestine. Ernestine. I remembered my dreams and Ernestine. That was it. Something clicked. While we were still together, Ernestine had gifted me with issues of *Psychology Today*, and I’d never cancelled the subscription. I secretly enjoyed reading about the power of no and steps to self-care. Years ago, I’d read an article explaining that humans needed sleep.

In deep R.E.M., the human mind practically resets itself. The brain is like a giant filing system. The hippocampus is a part of the brain; it sorts information and determines its value. It then encodes the valuable pieces with specialized markers. Everything else, the hippocampus sends to the trash bin. This process happens while humans are sleeping. This process has another name, dreaming. The revelation stunned me: humans need to sleep because some memories are important and some are not. Sleeping was the equivalent of a reset function. I’d become obsessed with the article, but even when I’d programmed shut down and rest functions, the memory chip continued to erase after five minutes.

All along, it wasn’t sleep that mattered. The ability to dream, I now understood, was the mysterious factor controlling human intelligence, our ability to learn, to prioritize. Only in our dreams do we live out our anxieties, our tensions and fears, our desires, and hopes. In our dreams, we get rid of the memories that are taking up unnecessary space.

There’s a tissue layer inside the human heart. It’s called cardio-neuro tissue, a dense material that works much the same way that neurons do in the brain. It allows the heart to communicate with the brain and vice-versa. The cardio-neuro tissue emits a series of electrical impulses between the brain and the heart. During the dream state, this
tissue is active. Otherwise, the tissue is dormant. Dream activity depends on the brain-heart connection, the existence of this tissue, deep within the lining of the heart.

To date, I knew of no synthetic version of this tissue, although scientists were attempting to clone it. The RITA interface needed to be connected to a human heart because cardio-neuro tissue would maximize storage efficiency. The tissue would allow my robot to dream, and as a result, to learn. It would be a simple transfer. In order to fix RITA, I needed a human heart.

I could be the donor. I could gift RITA my mind’s pattern-recognition ability. I could replace myself after death.

Mom, remember that puzzle I told you about, I said, speaking so rapidly that I was tripping over my own words. I’d rarely felt this sort of excitement, the sense that everything was connected. I solved it! I did it! I don’t have enough time to fix the robot and to undergo chemo.

Alarm ringing in her voice, she asked, What do you mean, anak?

I hated hearing her ask that same question, all these years later. I explained to her that with the type of lymphoma I had, it was too risky. If I went through the chemo, it didn’t mean that I’d be cancer free. There was a likelihood of recurrence. I might be too weakened to continue.

Please, anak, she cried. Please, something’s wrong. I’ll call the doctor. What you’re thinking—it’s not right.

I pushed the nurse button, and I started the process of checking myself out. I was sick, but I was tired of being coddled. It was my job to take care of Sis. It was my job to take care of my mom, not the other way around. I could do better than to give Sis a robot
body. I could still be there for my family because God, in all his wisdom, had decided that, one way or another, I was going to die.

* 

I don’t think anything I could say would really help you understand. Either you’re the kind of person who thinks building a robot is great, or you’re the kind of person who thinks building a robot is weird. Maybe, before, I didn’t understand the real reason I was building RITA. I think the how was so damn hard, but it was always easier than the why. I thought that I was building a robot to give my sister a new body, to make her whole. Now, I understood that I was building a robot so that there would always be somebody to watch over Sis.

Honestly, I did regret it initially. The actual transference process was very painful and very messy. I still think about it sometimes. I rushed home as soon as I was released from the hospital. It took me about a month to understand how the mechanism might work. In the meantime, I tried to write my novel about building RITA whenever I could. I had to finish so much before the cancer infected my thinking. Knowing I couldn’t finish the robot and the book, I slipped the incomplete pages of my story, which included my lab notes, into my drawer.

When I’d finished most of my preparations, I found an old floppy disk drive in my dad’s stuff. I put it in RITA’s chest cavity, on the right. It whirred to life. It wasn’t pretty, but it wasn’t meant to be aesthetically appealing. In fact, the disk drive, because it was such old tech, was like a metronome. It didn’t function smoothly like modern products did; instead, it had ticks that you could barely hear. It was my signature, something for my mom and sister, to make RITA more realistic. I imagined that when Sis
would come to hug me, she’d be able to hear the sound of my heart beating in RITA’s chest.

My mom would barely speak to me. She did fix me all my favorite meals as if I were a death row prisoner. Her chicken adobo is amazing, yes, but it was sinigang, the nilaga, tinola, and this one wilted salad she made with yam leaves, tomatoes, and onions that did the trick. Not having chemo, I was thinking clearly. I could work. My mom didn’t seem to care about my improvement.

Mom, I told her, you do realize I’m going to save my life.

She cried late into the night. One time, she even called my dad. Rita’s going to do whatever she wants to do. We’re not going to be able to stop her, he said. He’d never fought for us, and my cancer hadn’t changed him.

Reynaldo, do something! My mom started shrieking. Just the thought of them fighting like before made a part of me want to give up, but I was so close.

The model was ready. It looked just like me. On the final day, my mom couldn’t even eat dinner with me. Please, Rita, don’t do this, she said.

Mom, I’ve got to do this. It’s my dream, I said. I love you.

Rita, you’re my daughter. I’ll always love you. Now, I’m going to go watch the stars in the backyard, she said.

That’s probably the calmest my mother’s ever been. It scared me.

Only Sis was willing to go with me. We went into the garage together. The window was open, and a faint breeze was coming in, rustling her hair. It was springtime again, I realized. I love the spring, all those signs of life, crickets, birds, the trees turning green. It made me happy to think that my mom was outside in this season.
And me, I was going to get my life back.

I told Sis to turn around.

Sis, don’t turn back around until you hear a thump.

What kind of thump, Ate? She asked.

It’ll just be the same sound as when you fall down, okay?

She accepted this explanation and went to the window, turning her back to me, playing with the contents of my drawer, examining my notebooks, fiddling with my old prototype of a heart.

I had a full-on hospital bed for the robot. I had my blood ready, type O. All I had to do was start the transfusion. I uncapped the needle, and I stuck one point into the robot and one point into me. I was dying.

I took out an x-acto knife. I dripped in the anesthetic through an IV, which was for me of course. I plugged all the right color-coded wires into the head of the robot. I hooked up the central processing unit to my head. I started the transference. The timing had to be perfect.

It’s how I imagine Alzheimer’s; the recent memories go first. I could feel them all being sucked out of me. My mom’s cooking. My dad’s phone calls when I was sick, and his cards too. Sis watching television and sitting next to me, sometimes crawling up onto my bed and lying there with me, her hand in mine, curled into a little ball.

The last memory that I remember being whirred away:

We were in the car, and my parents had just picked me up. Rita, they said, this is your sister. She was wrapped in a pink baby blanket in a car seat. Her face was a scrunched-up red circle. Her eyes were closed. There was a little black fuzz crowning her
forehead. She smiled, and I put my finger close to her perfect hand, which closed on mine.

Right after that, I remember the robot getting up and coming to stand facing me. It was kind of freaky how good a job I’d done replicating my image. The model of the iron heart lay useless on the bench. She took the knife and cut a neat square into my chest, where my heart was, and I barely felt her lift the skin back. When she raised the mallet, I panicked a little bit.

Wait, I said, Wait.

I’m sorry, the robot said. She took the heart, and instead of putting it into the hollow compartment of her own chest like I instructed her to do, she put it in the ice chest.

I watched her fall to the ground, and I waited, breathing.

Turn around, Sis.

***

1 “I AM RITA” is a story inspired and informed by an interview with Jennifer Derilo, a dear friend and cancer survivor. Without Jennifer, RITA would never have existed.