Boy, Wonder

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Better than Yourself

David Padilla nearly disposes of three uneaten figs, but Lexi tenderly touches the back of his arm and gestures at a boy across the ward’s multi-purpose room. The boy waves behind a shy glance, his eye contact so brief David doesn’t know if he should smile encouragingly or tease him about it. Brendan, he thinks his name is - they share a room together but don’t talk much. Even though everyone here is at least thirteen, Brendan’s timidity gives him a childish appearance. He looks younger than David’s little brother - and he just turned eleven.

“David, I think he wants some of your breakfast.” Lexi squeezes his arm now and repositions him with a surprisingly strong grip so that he faces Brendan more directly. Her hand reminds him of Vero, his girlfriend and best friend outside the ward. A pang of guilt crawls along his back with little needle legs. Vero would flip if she ever saw another girl touch him like this, and he wouldn’t blame her. Lexi almost has the same generous affection as her. But no one could ever match the exact potency of Vero’s love. She volunteered at the veteran center every weekend for a year and still found time to leave love notes in his locker at school. He wishes he could give as much as her. He points at the figs on his styrofoam tray. When Brendan nods, he produces his best, encouraging smile.

Brendan’s jaw drops open with ravenous delight. He lets it hang there like some kind of zombie, baring an off-white veneer where his canine should be. A fly could land on his tongue and he probably wouldn’t even know it.

“Jeez, what kind of meds are they giving to this retard?” But he honestly prefers him to the other kinds of crazy in here. He watched a tiny girl shit on the floor once, and another eat her nails off. One dude howled NOBODY NOSE at his shadow until his throat went sore.
“He’s been like that since I met him. I bet his mom drank when she was pregnant.” Lexi takes a fig and winks one eye closed. She holds the fig near her cheek as if she’s going to throw it like a dart, like Brendan has a red and white target painted on his babyface.

He watches her take aim. Her profile lacks the same ordinary beauty she has when she’s facing him straight on, but he can’t figure out why that is. “Do you think he’ll catch these? They’re a lot bigger than M&M’s.” David uses the quiet intimacy of this conversation to step closer to Lexi. He can feel her radiating excitement. Her sweat smells inviting.

“No clue, but at least figs don’t break teeth.”

“I bet I can put one in the back of his throat.” David mirrors her stance and closes one eye, taking aim. Vero would never play this game with him. She’d call the whole thing cruel, even though Brendan really does love to catch things with his mouth. Which was too bad, because she has a miraculous ability to nail anything with any kind of projectile. She pitches for both the softball and the baseball teams. He’d probably be as accurate as her if he got this kind of practice more often.

But before either of them can test their fruits, an adult yells out his name from the doorway. The voice is deep - almost fierce and threatening as if motivated by years-long anger. It must be Aniyan, the daytime orderly. David and Lexi drop their fig hands to their sides. Lexi folds her hands behind her back and looks sweet and innocent.

Aniyan pokes his head into the multi-purpose room. He pauses and stares at the pair, as if searching for contraband on them. “What did you two do?” His voice switches to a higher, friendlier pitch. “Silly children.” He reserves this octave for easy laughs among the kids. He can do impressions of Stevie Wonder and Doctor Cho, the head psychologist. It doesn’t match his face,
which is nearly always stern, a natural seriousness emphasized by the way his jaw bulges when he eats his figs.

“Nothing, Mr. Aniyan,” Lexi answers for the both of them. “We didn’t do anything.”

“I’m watching you two.” Aniyan’s gigantic hand snakes around the corner of the doorway, pointing at David and summoning him with his index finger. “Mr. David, I need to talk to you.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“I call you over and the first thing out of your mouth is being scared. When I call you, little man, you walk over here.” He pauses. “You’re not in trouble, Mr. David. You have a call from your mother.”

Lexi shrugs at David and takes his fig. “Talk to you later, alligator.”

He follows Aniyan down the hall, past the female bedrooms. As a boy, he’s normally not allowed to walk on this side of the ward, but it’s the quickest route to the visiting area, where the only patient phones and computers are. All the rooms have sheer curtains on the windows - enough to convince a patient that they still have their modesty amidst the omnipresence of the doctors. He wonders which one opens to Lexi’s space. Their rooms look a lot like his - stale and white, with four beds just a little too close to each other - but he feels that the rooms themselves permeate some inherent femininity. He drags his fingers along the polished, wooden doors. They are warm and soft. They remind him of Vero’s ribs.

“Okay, Mr. David.” Aniyan pats him on the shoulder. “You have five minutes.” He glides, light as a feather, to the office space. It’s at the center of the ward, boxed in by security glass. The entire ward is visible from this place, so even while Aniyan peruses patient records he can still keep watch over everyone. Through the windows opposite to him, David spies Lexi’s back mid-
throw and Brendan straight against the wall like he’s facing a firing squad. The fig barely misses Brendan and bounces off the wall.

He picks up the phone, surprised by its weight and the pleasant way it cups around his ear. He can hear his brother breathing. He realizes he’s never spoken to him on the phone before.

“Yeah, Nemo?”

“Are they listening?”

“No. Talk freely, man.”

“You told me to call if something happened.” His brother pauses. He’s probably biting his lower lip. “It’s about Vero.”

David looks up at the clock above Aniyan’s head. 7:55. “Shouldn’t you be getting ready for morning assembly?” Every morning, the middle schoolers lined up by grade like little Nazis. If you were late by even a second, everybody saw you struggle to squeeze into place. After a prayer and a salute to the flag, Father George preached like he knew the future and they held their perfect, straight formations until the principal finished announcing the latest bake sales and decathlon achievements. Then they administered detentions for the latecomers. David always stood near Vero, so as to secretly play with her braids or with the plastic zipper on the back of her plaid jumper. She had him follow her everywhere, ensured that he wasn’t ever late while they were dating. He didn’t sleep for three days just to pass the Iowa and get into the same high school as her.

“I’ll be on time, I swear.”

“You can’t afford another detention, dude. Where you calling me from?”

“Outside 7-11. The one by the school.” Not that that’s particularly close: the nearest 7-11 to the school is three blocks away. “Vero still drove me to school, but something happened.”
Lexi tosses another fig at Brendan. A couple of other kids join her, lobbing whatever leftovers they have, painting the boy in jams and juices and other sticky fluids. “Is she okay, Nemo?” Aniyan looks up from his paperwork. He points at his wrist and furrows his brows at David before resuming his scribbles.

“I don’t know.”

“Jesus, what the fuck happened?” David looks over at the other patients. Brendan catches as many of the leftovers as he can, stuffing each and every little bite into his mouth. He can’t eat the food fast enough.

“She was acting a little weird when she picked me up. I thought you might know what happened with her. She was angry.”

“She says you might not be a good person. She says you only care about yourself.”

But he does care about other people. Or at least he cares about her and Nemo. “I can’t believe she’d say something so god damn hurtful. I love her.”

“She says she needs people who’ll listen to her when she tells stories. I listen to her stupid stories in the car every morning, even when I don’t want to. I don’t think that’s any reason why she should break up with you.”
“She’s breaking up with me?” His teeth pull more of the avulsion than he meant, exposing raw skin underneath. He sucks on his finger and tastes copper. It’s a minor cut, but the wound yells his name at him repeatedly.

“Fuck. No, I don’t know. Sorry, David.” Pause. “Sorry. She said she wants to talk after altar service. She says she read all about how real, genuine communication between people is dwindling in this increasingly digital society.”

“Don’t get in the habit of cussing, man.” David couldn’t believe her. She didn’t even have the decency to wait another week for the social worker to sign off on him.

“Sorry, sorry. Do you think she’ll stop driving me to school if you guys break up?”

Aniyan stomps into the room and points at his wrist. There isn’t actually a watch there, but his face grimaces with such authority that no one questions him about the gesture, not even for fun. “You better be in the conference room in one minute, Mr. David.”

“Nemo, I have to go to group. Vero better not call me this afternoon and tell me you got detention. My head can only take so much.” The phone clangs satisfyingly and everything hurts. His knees, his fingers, his teeth. Tensing up when he’s angry is one of his worst habits. Aniyan says if he does it too much one day his brain is gonna pop. But that wouldn’t be such a bad thing. This news feels like someone just shut a door on his fingers, then locked it and threw away the key.

The only way he’d leave this headspace was when she tickled him. Vero could tame a bull with just her nails. If she knew he was mad, she softened him by slowly kneading his back, and then she’d let him touch her. In eighth grade, they reached for each other everywhere. On church pews, they communicated with their knees. When a teacher separated them, rulers and pencils became their intimate weapons. They fenced at recess, a melee that always evolved into wrestling,
then kissing, then pressing their bodies so tightly to each other they could become one. He missed her fingers playing piano on his spine. Her nails were always sharp - dangerous, but inviting - the same way one can squeeze the blade of a knife and not be cut. But then they started a really nice private high school. Pasadena girls invited her to their three-story house parties in the hills and they talked at length about what purses they wanted to buy next. He stayed the course and boxed his way to only three friends.

She liked being tickled less and less, especially at school. She spoke more and more with that rich asshole, Mikey Bulosan, and he preyed on her under the guise that he was her vice president. David did his best to hold on. He teased her with his touching, played with her the way she wanted to be played with despite the mask she put on for all the popular girls at school. “David, sometimes you don’t know when to turn off!” she yelled at him once, in front of the entire student council. “I think you should go.”

“Mr. David! Sometimes you are as deaf as a dead dog!”

“I heard you, Mr. Aniyan.” And under his breath, “Jesus.”

“There’s a difference between hearing and listening, Mr. David.”

At the conference room, everyone is mid-exercise: Gary, the nurse who runs group, is playing obscure German pop music from a boombox older than everyone there to lead the three retarded kids in calisthenics. The more salient kids dance half-heartedly and off-rhythm.

“Good, now that we’ve danced away all that extra energy, we should talk about goals.” Gary invites them to sit in a circle, “Indian style, everybody!” The circle of kids is a little bit too big for the room. At ten children in total, their perimeter has most of them with their backs against the padded chairs lining the walls in this strange, triangular room. David beelines his way to Lexi
so that they can sit next to each other. “I want everyone to say what their goals for the day are. Who wants to go first?” He looks at Lexi, so she goes first.

“My goals for the day are to get out of here alive."

A few of the children laugh, and Gary fakes a snicker just to fit in. “Yes, that’s the goal for everyone here, of course. You can’t live on Floor 6 forever. But what are you going to do to achieve your goal of getting out? Remember our talk about smiling, Alexis? And socializing with people other than your boyfriend? Why don’t you smile more, show the doctors that you’re getting better?”

“I wanna get out of here alive too!” Brendan shouts suddenly. “I wanna see my sister, I wanna see my sister, I wanna see my sister.”

“Michael, you need to wait your turn. Remember what we said about waiting to speak when spoken to? It’s how you’ll show Doctor Cho and all the social workers that you’re ready for your sister to take care of you”

David grins at Lexi, poking her flank. It was the kind of thing that always worked on him.

She beeps. “I want to work on smiling and talking to other people, I guess. I’m going to try to be nice to people and get along with people. Instead of hurting them.” She rolls her eyes when Gary looks away.

“Excellent work, Lexi.” Gary leads the group in applause. “Who’s next?”

They go around the room like this, Gary asking each of them if they remember what they were supposed to do to be more normal. A few of them talk about finally brushing their teeth and taking a shower, to look clean and healthy for the social workers. Brendan talks about all that and doing his homework. David talks about being more in tune with his emotions. That’s what Vero would want, after all.
“I’m glad you’re all walking towards the light and away from the darkness. But to understand the light, we must understand the darkness. You have to think about the actions that brought you here and figure out why you did them, and how you could have used that emotional energy for good instead of evil. In other words, we’ve all developed funny habits. We can’t change them all in a day. It’s about picking up new, but small habits. Better habits.”

Lexi, again, leads the discussion. “I’m here because I wanted to hurt myself. I spend so much time locked in my own room, not understanding why people ever liked themselves. I abhor my body. I think I’m too tall, so I take my anger out on other people. I want to make them as ugly as me. But people are always telling me I’m beautiful, Doctor Cho says so. I guess I could listen to them. I really like doing makeup. I guess I could make other people beautiful too.”

Most of the kids in the circle nod their heads. One girl, maybe fifteen, nervously raises her hand. “I know the exact feeling. My mom used to hurt me and I was just so angry at her. She was mad because her boyfriend wanted to sleep with me instead of her. I guess I’m glad that I have Aniyan and Miss Rosanna here. They showed me that isn’t all my fault.”

David clenches his jaw tight, surprised at the relentless honesty of his fellow patients, as if the secret really was as simple as calisthenics and German pop. He leans back as far as he can into the rubber chair behind him. It’s solid rubber, like one giant, tough eraser or something - someone designed the chair to be too heavy to lift for one person so that the kids don’t hurt each other. It accepts his impression warmly. He wants to reach out and touch Lexi’s back, to feel her tense and powerful trapezius and massage it into clay. But when his hand gets close, he feels her radiating. She might just burn him.

When it’s his turn to speak, he has no idea what to say. His life’s fucked up, but nowhere near as awful as the rest of them. As far as he’s concerned, he doesn’t even belong here the way
they do. He only takes medication so he isn’t so sad all the time. He doesn’t have to take some unpronounceable pills to keep himself from singing at the windows. He can control himself just fine. “I guess when my mom left, everything got a little harder around the house. Shooting squirrels sorta became a fun way to wind down every now and then.” He isn’t sure why he said that. His mom had nothing to do with shooting, it was just plain fun. They’re fuzzy rats after all.

“I see, David. You don’t have to take out your sadness on other creatures. While they are pests, you could use your compulsion to do something else.”

“Like what?”

“Do you like exercising?”

“I exercise everyday. I mean, I’m a boxer. I have to. My girl says I go overboard, but it’s the best way for me to calm down when I get angry.”

“That’s very healthy. You should keep doing that. But be careful about how aggressive you get in the ring. Fighting isn’t the only way to relieve stress. What other hobbies could you start? Do you like to build?”

“Well, when I was still a boy scout, I really liked starting fires. I met some firefighters from up north who were in charge of controlled fires to keep the forest healthy. I’d like to work in a forest someday, I think, keeping it healthy.”

Gary says something to him, but he isn’t really paying attention. He’s been here for two and a half weeks and knows the drill by heart: smile, stay clean, and follow the staff’s directions to the T. Today, Gary is wearing a nice khaki shirt. It looks like it smells fresh from the dryer. David looks down at his own clothes: torn, Navy-blue pants and a white cotton polo. He only has what he came in with - his school uniform and his gym clothes - because he doesn’t want his dad to have to go through the trouble of bringing him stuff since he’s so swamped as it is. He imagines
himself in a park trooper uniform, getting ready for work in his cabin home. Vero, who owns Google or something, hands him his rifle, all shiny and clean. She straightens his olive green tie and uses her spit to fix his hair. She calls him handsome and he calls her beautiful.

“David, did you hear me? Your finger’s bleeding. Go to the nurse and get that bandaged.”

His hand is covered in blood, like he just reached into the stomach of a small animal. A thick, dark crimson has pooled at the avulsion, tracing the outline of his fingernail in red. “Shit.”

Today’s educational activity has something to do with science. They each take turns with a donated microscope, inspecting slides of various plant matter. He sees why they’re called cells, these claustrophobic building blocks.

Aniyan speaks at length about how fungi that pop up in different places can, underground, be connected as one organism. Maybe people have their own underground connection. When he inhales, he feels the air that trillions of other creatures have recycled fill him up. He is suddenly aware of his own lungs inflating. This grand affirmation of his own existence swells within him.

Gary and Aniyan pass around magnifying glasses. The kids delight in the sudden appearance of an alien world - their world made foreign. David spies an ant crawling along one of the window sills. Outside and down the street, a girl climbs her father and stands on his shoulders with a triumphant smile. She’s almost as small as the ant, but her erect stance and proud wonder reminds David of once feeling that big.

“Anyway, David, I think she’s moving away.” Lexi won’t shut up about some girl she used to know. “I’m just scared of not having her around. I basically depended on her to support me while I finished school. But without her I might move back with my parents, and they’re not exactly looking forward to seeing me.”
David follows the ant on its impossible journey. The ant, made gigantic by the magnifying glass, is such an ugly thing. Its monstrous mandibles pinching with such unpredictable animal irregularity. It’s comprised entirely of shell, its locomotion seemingly unnatural by virtue of such a hollow body. David can’t believe they share a planet. Aniyan once talked about how an ant without its colony rarely survives for more than a day, as if being so disconnected from its fellow ants destroys its survival impulses. He presses his thumb on the ant. He can barely feel it crumple beneath his weight, though for a moment he it seems to squirm. The corpse under the magnifying glass is a sorrier sight: wrinkled, its soft innards spilling through its broken chest, so much liquid it could be crying.

“David, you’re a bit of a space case.”

He goes through the motions of being good for the rest of the day, buying time until the doctors open up visitation hours. Typically, the doctors allow the patients only one call a day, to limit their distractions. But Aniyan’s on his side. David fist bumps him every chance he gets. “Mr. David, my man!” he roars back heartily. He tells him that his girlfriend’s supposed to call, and that he’s desperate to keep her while stuck in the hospital. He’s scared she’s going to leave him. He can tell that this generous honesty pierces right through Aniyan’s heart. David’s got him locked down. “Of course, Mr. David. I’ll make sure your call has priority.”

When visitation starts, Aniyan lets him be the first one in. One by one, the parents and siblings and friends trickle in to see the other kids. It reminds him of a prison, the way they talk. The way Aniyan has to hover with his hands behind his back. The way the families keep their distance as if everyone and everything contains contraband.

Brendan’s older sister pats him on the head, the closest thing to intimacy in the crowd. Someone pretty’s talking to Lexi. He imagines sitting between the two of them, making them
laugh. He avoids her, avoids his temptations. Vero would like that. Ladies have always loved him. He’s a funny guy. He can’t control the power of his own charisma. He can only control where he aims it. Vero, on the other hand, openly flirts with other boys. He caught her giggling way too hard at Mikey Bulosan. That squeaky-voiced kid even had the gall to ask her to dance at winter formal, right in front of him. She talked for hours about his brown, leather brogues. He could never afford shoes like that.

Then she starts wearing make-up, all of a sudden, even though she’s so naturally beautiful. Blush, eye-shadow, and all this expensive mess that he doesn’t have the time nor patience to remember. He bought her something that cost him a paycheck from the MAC store and the best she had to say was, “That’s so thoughtful of you, but that isn’t my color. Besides, my mom bought me what I needed already.”

He wishes he could will the phone to ring. The clock above Aniyan’s head reads 6:03. Vero should’ve called him by now. He waits all the way to 6:50. Everyone else’s family and friends have left. The kids walk away with fast food, new books, and some puzzle games to keep themselves active. A migraine creeps from back to front from boredom. He does jumping jacks to pass the time.

“Mr. David!”

He quickly picks up the phone, almost dropping it. “Hello?” Dial tone responds.

“Mr. David, come over here!”

“Why?”

“Come over here.”

He hesitates but eventually steps away from the phone and approaches Aniyan.
He puts his finger to his lips and smiles. “Here’re some quarters. Call her. I’ll give you
some privacy.”

When Aniyan’s gone, David drops the quarters into the machine and thinks about Vero’s
number. He doesn’t know it by heart. She’d moan about that if she was here. She was always trying
to get him to memorize phone numbers in the event of an emergency and the sudden realization of
her wisdom angers him and makes him lover her more. He looks down to find that the quarters
came back out. He takes them and before he can try again, the phone rings. He lets it ring twice.

“Hello?”

He rechecks to see the room is empty. “Hiya, babe.”

“Oh.” She pauses. Maybe she’s trembling. “Hello, David.”

His own hands are shaking. He locks the phone tightly between his ear and shoulder. “You
wanted to talk?”

She doesn’t respond immediately, sniffing just a little bit too loud. Could she be crying?
He wishes desperately to see her face. He could comb her brunette hair behind her ear and pinch
her delicate chin between his thumb and finger. He could carry her just like that, he bets. She
always became weightless in his hands. “How’d you know?”

“Well, you called.”

She pauses again. He hears what might be the jet of air right before her quiet laugh. “Yeah,
I guess I did. I’ve been really stressed with school. How’re you? Are you doing better?

“Better than yourself. I hope you’re doing okay. You don’t have to carry the whole world,
you know. You can let go once in awhile.”

“I know, I should. Maybe I can relax these last few months of school. Dip into senioritis. I
got into UCLA.”
“That’s amazing, babe. Never doubted you for a second.” He feels his pride swell. “My social worker told me about how Valley or Pierce or somewhere has a program that lets you take college courses and get your GED at the same time. Like the rest of my senior year just gets clumped into my freshman.”

“That sounds great. But that’s kinda far from where I’ll be.” She exhales sharply as if she’s deadlifting two-fifty. “I also got into Stanford.”

“I knew you would, you’re so god damn smart. I told you not to worry about that. That makes you really competitive, I bet. Like I’m sure you’ll get a big scholarship if you make ‘em fight over you.”

“I’m thinking about going, David.”

“Vero. Long distance sucks.”

“That’s why I called. I wanted to talk about us.” She waits for him to say something, but he has nothing to say. His heart speaks for him, an urgent, thumping pleasepleaseplease. “These phone calls don’t feel like enough. If this is a taste of long distance, I’m not sure I can do that.”

“You can’t live in Palo Alto. You hate how fake and out of touch those tech geeks are. You’re a born and bred Angelena. You need to feel the sun on your toes, that’s what you always said. You can’t leave that.” He hears her smile.

“I can’t imagine living anywhere else. But that’s why I need to try.”

“I know the last few weeks have been tough. But my social worker just complimented me today about how healthy I’ve been. And honestly, I like our calls on the phone. Even if I can’t see or smell you, hearing you feels like I can.”

“That’s very nice of you to say. But I can’t pretend that our history is enough to fix a broken relationship. I mean, my parents don’t even want me talking to you anymore. Hanging on to you
has completely ruined my relationship with my friends. This isn’t about going to different colleges, David. None of them have talked to me in weeks.”

“Your friends? Like who? Lila and Mikey? What do they know about genuine friendship? They’re always glued to their phones. They have no loyalty except to themselves.”

“Jesus, they know more about it than you.” She struggles to find the correct words. “They’re full of love, David.” There she is quoting some magazine again. Full of love. What is he full of then? He got into the same high school as her by sheer vigor, motivated just by his love. He could probably land Stanford too, after an associate’s. Vero once told him that repeated undertakings of big projects meant dreams of grandeur or a manic devotion or something. But that’s what love is: the dream of being better than yourself for someone else.

“I’m full of love, Veronica. My heart feels so big it could break my ribs. I’m better than those friends of yours. They’re just using you for your money.”

She sighs softly, but audibly. “Davie.” The sound of her breath drips from the phone and touches him inside. “If you want to live a certain kind of lifestyle, you have to immerse yourself in that social circle.”

“Where did you read that bullshit?”

“David, you aren’t hearing me.”

The rest of the evening becomes a blur of autonomy. When Aniyan asks him if he got any change from the phone, David lies. He needs it to call Vero tomorrow morning. If he’s using to use the money for the same good, it’s not really lying. But all the same something in Aniyan’s sad eyes sparks a pang of guilt in him.

Dinner comes in all its spectacular styrofoam plainness. More hardboiled eggs, more chewy figs, an ice cream ball of potato, wet green beans, and a half-baked chicken thigh with
barely any meat. The animal crackers might be the only tasty thing on the plate. Its bright, pink packaging is the only inviting color at least. The sound of crumpling plastic sets off his appetite. Brendan hovers over David and Lexi. He smells dirty - the vague smoky smell of Los Angeles. “You guys gonna eat your crackers?”

Lexi scowls at the boy. “Fuck off, dude. I haven’t even touched my food yet.”

Brendan slouches on to the next table. He and three others make their usual rounds at meal times, asking people for their leftovers. The nurses tell them to eat their own food first, but they never listen. They don’t care much for diet and nutrition plans. They’re too used to cholesterol and saturated fat and eating until their bellies burst.

“They’re like animals, I swear.” Lexi shovels her creamed corn around with a flimsy spork. “They can have everything but the crackers. This food makes me sick.”

“I can’t wait to have real food again. I’m so hungry I could eat a deer.”

“The first thing I’m going to eat is the biggest burger I can find,” she says, her eyes intent on something behind David. It’s as if she’s looking through him.

David follows her line-of-sight to the small, television cube hanging on the wall. Some commercial about a new Texas burger is on, and the camera’s so close they can smell the barbecue sauce. His stomach grumbles with anticipation. A beautiful brunette takes a generous bite from the burger. Her face crumples in ecstasy. Aniyan must have turned on the television for everyone to watch while they eat. For once, David wishes he didn’t.

“How long’s he been in here?”

“Who?”

“The retarded kid.” He nods at Brendan.
“Longer than me, I think. He was here when I got here. Let’s see. I got out after a week, and then came back a month later. I don’t know if he ever left and came back, but I never saw it.”

“Hey, kid, come over here.”

Lexi smiles at David. Her eyes share the same tempered intensity with Vero’s - that knowing, piercing glance that bores into him and violates him with insight. She would know if he was lying. She would know if he was omitting a piece of the story.

Brendan stumbles toward them, coming to rest when his pelvic bones knock the table.

“You want these animal crackers?”

Brendan beams at the two of them. “You’re really nice!”

David thinks so. Vero once took him to the soup kitchen when they were still in middle school. She had him serve similarly shitty food to the sad lot, but he didn’t mind because it meant being next to her. In the fury of the food line, he touched hips with her the entire time. He also got to watch her. She always talked about the Spirit entering her in these moments, but to him she just seemed tired. She didn’t connect with any of those people. It was a job she had to do, nothing more than that.

“What’re you looking forward to when you get out of here, David?”

“Just seeing my girl, I guess.” He can’t tell if she’s hurt by this comment. Her blue eyes almost change color, become a shade lighter, as if someone calibrated a hidden knob on the nape of her neck. He doesn’t want to lose her too. “If she’ll let me. She’s mad at me for some reason but I’ve got no idea why.”

“Not one bit?”

“I think she’s tired of me.”

“Tired of you? How’s that?”
“There’s this rich, straight-A’s kind of guy who talks to her all the time. Mikey Bulosan, the perfect Asian boy. Son of two doctors, gonna be a doctor one day, I bet.”

“She’s not gonna fall for a nerd.”

“He’s not bad looking. He has nice clothes for the weekends, can afford that shit. He takes her and her friends out to fancy restaurants all the time. ‘Bonding,’ she calls it. ‘Building memories.’ But high school’s shit. Who’d want to remember any of this?”

“Relationships don’t do very well when one of you gets 5150’d.” She breaks eye-contact with him. She chews on the ends of her hair. He would too if he could, but he shaved his head when he got here.

“I know, but I thought we had something special. I think she might break up with me.”

“You’ll survive. Or at least the meds will stop you from feeling like you want to die.”

“What, is that from experience?”

“What if it is?”

“What’s his name?”

“Her name was Sam. She left me for some asshole named Daniel from Bakersfield, first time I came in here. Turns out she was the confused type.”

“Oh. I didn’t know you were gay.”

“Jesus Christ, David. Not you too.”

He furrows his brows, wincing as if he just took a blow to the sternum. As a boxer he wants to hit back. But he thinks of Vero. He thinks about how she can deflate any tension by being empathetic. “My bad, Lexi. Bad of me to assume anything like that. You’re just really cute and I don’t really know any lesbians. I wouldn’t know how to talk to one if I ever met one.”

“It’d surprise you to know that you just talk to them like anybody else.”
“Damn, I said I was sorry.”

She exhales loudly through her nose. Her nostrils flare in an ugly way. She wants him to know how disappointed she is. “I’m a bit tired. I think I’m gonna use leisure time to finish the book my cousin gave me.”

David takes her hand and pulls her close to him. He thinks about how soft her hand was when she touched his knee once. “Wait, I didn’t mean any of that. Sometimes words just vomit out, you know? You can’t control nausea.”

“Let go of me or I’ll scream so loud you’ll be eating figs for the next three months.” She says this with a smile.

Her stride back to her room is long and slow, like she wants a pursuit. He shadows her down the hall and around the corner without entering the female zone. She doesn’t look back. She eases her door open and three separate snorings emerge as gentle as the rhythm section of an orchestra. He can’t see her roommates, but he imagines them all, delicate and small girls, curled in their beds. Lexi stands at the window, hesitating with the sheer curtain. He wants her to look at him, to wink at him coyly and invite him in. He wants to show Vero that she’s wrong. They could just lay quietly next to each other. They don’t even have to touch. Lexi closes the curtain and disappears into a silhouette.

He storms back into the common area with restless determination. Aniyan is leaning back in one of the rubber seats, cross-legged with a biology book covering his face. He is so still he could be a statue of the Buddha rather than just a student. Right next to him, Brendan is watching a Lifetime drama or news or something on the cube. David sits next to him and completes the trio. “Who’s the kid with the gun?”

“That’s Levi Jenkins. Just fifteen. He defended his family from a psycho intruder.”
David looks on with jealous admiration. He needs a moment like this, a moment of unambiguous heroism. But there are no more villains here. Society has gone the way of conceited cowards who delight in trick questions. “I like that Levi guy. He’s a good character. Need more of those.”

A detective interviews Levi Jenkins, calls him by his full name because he’s not a kid anymore. He’s a suspect and a hero. Brendan picks his nose. “That’s not a very happy ending. He’s gonna remember this forever.” The credits run with a triumphant flair of horns and violins, which wakes Aniyan. He sends them both to bed.

David can’t sleep. He prefers total darkness, but here in the ward, the outside lights are always on. He sits up and stares at the kid sleeping soundly beneath his thin cotton linens. This breathing silhouette beneath the blankets barely looks like a person. A hungry restlessness swells inside of David, something bigger than him waiting to be expelled. He hasn’t had real food or a real workout in a month and the toll of cabin fever finally infiltrates his legs and shoots him up like a bullet. He slowly slides his feet toward the window impressed with his own quiet stealth.

Outside, Aniyan sits in the middle office, his head drooping up and down over his book. He spots David peering out at him and returns a knowing gaze. He produces the saddest smile that David’s ever seen.

Behind David, his three roommates snore violently. The entire ward, it seems, is a cacophony of apnea. His stomach wrings itself, the result of days of unimpressive meals. He yearns for the days of midnight snacks with Nemo and Vero. The brothers would sneak out late at night armed with a magnificent joint and then rendezvous with Vero at the neighborhood park. There they’d blow bold clouds full of their youthful laughter and watch them dissolve into the violet night sky. When they were done, they’d dissolve too, the three of them in a tangle of warm
embraces, lurching toward their rapturous future in Vero’s aluminum sedan. She told him once, over greasy fried tacos, that she could live this way forever. He believed her.

His stomach growls now. His nose picks up the smell of something piquant from Brendan’s bedside table. The kid vultures so much food from the other patients, he can afford to hoard some of it. David’s animal crackers and figs might be stashed there. He stands next to the kid, watching him stir from some nightmare. His legs amble, tangling him in his viscous sheets. David shakes him awake. The kid blinks back in abject confusion. “I want my crackers back, Brendan.” But the kid only gives him a dumb, cross-eyed look. He pulls him out of his bed by his wrist. “My crackers, dude. My figs. I’m hungry, Brendan.”

But he still doesn’t respond, trying a purposely defiant stupidity. He offers his timid smile and a nervous shrug, mocking David with this imitation of pacifism.

David hides him in his shadow. He can barely see him, but he smells his panic. He hears his annoying hyperventilation. “Brendan, stop being an asshole.” He gives him a light punch on the arm to convey his seriousness.

The kid caterwauls like an injured fawn and grabs David by his collar, as if he could shake free of a big guy like him.

He puts his hand over the kid’s mouth to hush him up. It doesn’t do any good. This is his way of getting David in trouble. “Brendan, stop you little retard.” David feels the salty sting of a dried tear on his cheek too.

The kid crumples into a pathetic defense. He heaves out the bizarrest thing from behind his whiny, blood-clogged nose: “Michael! Michael! Michael!”

David crumples him further to shut that awful noise. “Brendan,” he begs in a howl.
Crumpled Paper

The bougainvillea that grows from the patch of bare dirt in the side yard has bright violet leaves this year. The way its branches curl provide a purple shade for Nemo and his father, who stand beneath it for the small reprieve it gives from the summer Los Angeles sun. The two are laying down fresh, uneven cuts of sod. Their hands are muddy.

His father wipes his brow with the back of his wrist, which leaves a smear and highlights one eyebrow over the other.

“Tatay, you’ve got dirt on you.”

“Where?”

“Let me get it.”

“I got it, Boy. Take this brick over there and even it out. No. Think of the grass as puzzle pieces. They’ll fit together perfectly. Your brother always knew what I meant.”

“‘Tay, you made it worse. Your eyebrows look so funny. It looks like you lost an eyebrow and painted it back on. Like you look like you’re confused after a night of way too much drinking.”

“Use the trowel to make it even.”

“Actually, the purple light makes it look like you have a bruise. Like someone just whooped your ass.” He laughs behind closed lips.

His father licks the sweat off his mustache. Nemo, perhaps instinctively, does the same for his own mustache. It tastes so salty he continues laughing, each chuckle leaving his mouth in strong gasps. His voice has gotten louder, his chest broader. He still has less hair on his face. “Wish I had a beard like yours, ‘tay.”
“It’s growing in just fine for a Padilla two years out of high school. I didn’t get this bushy thing until I was twenty-five. It’s why your grandpa called me Boy too. Trick is to just let it grow. Don’t believe the myth that if you shave it, it’ll grow back thicker. Doesn’t work like that.”

“Did you know when boxers get real wrecked in the face, they have to shave off their hair before doctors operate? You can still see the crack in Z Gorres’s skull where the hair hasn’t grown back right. And then AJ Banal’s right eyebrow is way thinner than his left.” Nemo holds his trowel in the air like a toy airplane, closing one eye as if taking aim at his father. “You look like him a little bit.”

“Good thing you don’t box then.” His father adjusts his glasses so that they rest high on the bridge of his nose.

“How come you’re not wearing the contact lenses I got with you?”

“I like my glasses.”

“They’re broken. Too big for your small face.”

“You don’t need to buy me things, Boy. I should be buying things for you.”

“Don’t you hate being blind?”

“I see perfectly with these glasses. I’ve had them for years, no fail. I can see the television as clear as I see that you don’t know how to lay carpets of grass.” His smile is crooked, accentuated by the mud on his face and a chipped canine.

“I saw you reaching for the remote and missing it. You’re playing Marco Polo with the small shit around the house.”

“Well, you need to save your money if you’re really going to move up north. What I really need is someone around the house if I’m going to keep it standing.” He straightens himself as much as he can but he isn’t as tall as he used to be. He’s an inch or two shorter than Nemo.
“I can go to school somewhere closer. Long Beach has a good program, so I can come on the weekends and it won’t change a thing.”

“No, you’re not doing that. I’ll even cover your security deposit.”

“You absolutely will not. David never needed any help.”

“Of course he did. And that’s where I failed him.”

Nemo holds a rectangular cut of sod. He hesitates, waiting for his father to tell him exactly where to put it.

“I’m going to get a beer.”

“I want a San Miguel.”

“If we have any left.”

Nemo puts the block down. The grass looks like a brick wall, if the bricks were different lengths and sizes. As if they might need mortar to hold the grass together.

His father returns with two brown bottles, one of them San Miguel, the other a Bud Light.

“Last one, you’re lucky.”

“Do you want a sip?”

“It’s all yours, Boy. I drink American.”

“Bud Light’s barely American.”

“I think I know American.”

The bottles are covered in streaks of mud from his father’s hands. His father holds the Bud Light up to the sun. The beige light coming through dances on his face like a campfire on a windy night. He squints whenever the wavy sunlight hits his eyes, but he keeps it held up. Nemo takes his bottle and looks at the world through the beer lens. Despite the drought, a few stalks of bamboo have sprouted at the foot of their front window, where Nemo’s room is.
“What’re you thinking about, ‘tay?”

“Z Gorres doesn’t have much to worry about. It’ll grow back one day and he’ll be handsome again. Trust me on that.”

“You still got that scar.”

“San Miguel is stronger back home than here in the states.”

“But they make good whiskey here.”

“Don’t talk about whiskey.”

Nemo balances his bottle on the grass and goes back to laying down more of the lawn.

“You’ll need to move the rectangle grass over there. No, that one. Actually and the triangle one. It doesn’t fit like that. Nemo, think of them as puzzle pieces.”

Nemo picks up a scalene stack and does as he is told. He rotates the uneven piece, looking for two edges that might line up right. “They don’t all fit perfectly. We have to cut some of them up so that they’ll fit better. Throw a couple away. Don’t know why you need this much grass. City says you have to scale back. Put in some nice rocks or something.”

“No point in wasting anything living while it’s here. You can always recycle everything, use every piece. Just rearrange them like, soften the edges just a bit.” His father takes his trowel and rearranges three pieces until they fit more squarely. He presses them hard against each other, molding the mud to make room for more. “See, Boy. You gotta make a mistake before you know what to fix. Then when you fix it, it’s like the seams aren’t even there.”

“I can still see the gaps.”

“Yes, but they’ll grow into each other in a month, you’ll see. You’ll see just a lawn.”

“You’ve never lain a new lawn before, how do you know?”

“Just trust me. You live long enough and you figure these things out about the world.”
“Yeah. Okay, sure.” The son twists the cap off his beer and takes a long swig. “Heads or tails, ‘tay?”

“Nemo, please.” Beads of sweat distort his mud-eyebrow, pulling the line into ripples on his face so that he looks watercolored. He looks so funny Nemo can almost see the young soldier who once wrote a whole play on legal pad paper and performed it for the family back in 1988. His mother kept the only proof of it: his father caked in exaggerated makeup, face a blur of blue because he could not sit still for one Polaroid. There was once a time where he was always moving, leaving one project for the next, the youthful restlessness of an artist desperate to record the world. A race against age. You wouldn’t know from looking at him now. This stiff taskmaster, this monolith hunched in a semi-permanent shrug, this twice-broken back.

Nemo walks the bottle cap across his knuckles like a coin. “Heads, we take a break.” He flips the bottlecap and it rings in the summer air satisfyingly.

“Take it easy, anak, that drink is so strong and we still have so much left to do.”

“C’mon. I’m tired. I promise I’ll be here every weekend. We can finish this next week.”

“A couple more feet and we’ll take a break. Promise.” The mud on his father’s face has dried into a crust.

Nemo takes it off in one strip. His father’s face leaves a print on the mud. It’s a dishonest fossil: the print didn’t pick up all the wrinkles.

The two press the sod closer together with their trowels. Nemo uses all his weight to squeeze as many inches as he can. He loses his traction, slips, and eats a mouthful of grass. “Why don’t we just cut these into even squares? This’ll go by so much faster.”

“Concentrate. The world isn’t squares. Grass is wild. It only comes together if you guide it, not force it. Figure out what pieces work together and which ones don’t.”
“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Never force anyone to do anything. They’ll do what you want if you guide them. They’ll resent you if you try to change their ways too quick. Sure. Let’s take a break already. It’s getting real hot.”

“Nemo.”

“The lawn looks good already. We’re basically done.”

“Okay.” He sits next to Nemo and drinks with him. They watch the wind scatter the bougainvillea leaves over their lawn, crumpled little violet brushstrokes as light as feathers. They color the wind, following it down the street and around the corner where someone else lives.

“When me and your mom first moved here--.”

“You were nothing but a gas attendant.”

“I was nothing but a gas attendant. $4.25 an hour, dead shift.”

“Graveyard shift. You didn’t even own a car.”

“Not that 600,000 pesos a year back home was much more, but you could live well like that in Cavite. Your mom and brother were happy.”

“Seven hundred.”

“Seven! Right. When we first moved here, we couldn’t even afford this house. But I’d come to this neighborhood everyday after work and I knew one day I’d have a lawn to lay and a bugambilia tree to take care of and I knew you and me would sit here just like we are, watching the leaves roll.”

“Bougainvillea.”

“Maybe it was your brother I saw, but a son is a son. And a dream is a dream and they can always be different. Not everyone’s gonna be there. I always thought Daddy Ben and Mama Lita
were gonna live with us when they got old. I thought we’d have a dog. Nothing is exactly the way you picture it, but the feeling is still there. And I feel good, Boy.”

Nemo looks at his father. “I remember when your hair was black.”

“Daddy Ben used to say that every gray hair was a minute you made your children smile. Every wrinkle is a unit of youth you gave away. And I look like crumpled paper.”

“Yeah, but you throw crumpled paper away.”

“You gotta keep it so you see the difference.” His father holds his trowel up to his face and spreads some mud on it, shaping away his wrinkles. He grins widely, exposing a veneer that’s too white for his nicotine teeth. “If only I could make myself younger.”

“Would you even change a thing?”

“I took your mom back home once, to spread her father’s ashes where he was born. You two were too young to take the trip with us. Let alone remember, I guess. We left you here, with Tita Angie and your cousins.”

“In the states?”

“In the states, yeah. We left you in the states. When we still lived at 303 Doran.” He takes a quick sip and sighs with satisfaction. Nemo can smell the beer on his breath. “When your mom’s family grieves, they grieve. They walk back up the mountain with no help from machine or animal and they find the house where the dead was born. All the governments in the world can change where villages and jungles grow, but if you know where to dig you can find proof of ghosts.” He holds his beer up to the sun again, then the bottle cap, as if in solar eclipse. “I didn’t go with her and I didn’t see her for forty days. She wasn’t the same when she came back. She stopped telling stories to me. If I could change anything, I’d change that. I’d walk that slippery, muddy trail and
pray the rosary and dig the hole for her father’s ashes. And I’d listen to her until she fell asleep. I’d make her remember that she was never alone. That was strike one, and I didn’t even know it.”

“You never told us why she left.”

“She left - she left her journals, but I threw them out. Should’ve at least read them. That wasn’t fair to you two. I threw away too many things, Boy, and I’m afraid I’ve got nothing for the world to remember me by.”

“This lawn’s the most beautiful on the block. No one’s got a thumb greener than yours. You kept her garden. Plus you got me, ‘tay. You still got me.”

“I’m afraid of the drought. I’ve never lain a new lawn before.”

Nemo squeezes the back of his father’s neck and smiles. The tendons are thick, Nemo’s hand not even half the circumference.

“She loved to sit out here and record the orchids. Kept leaf samples in all those journals of hers. Remember that? She was a little weird, my collector.”

“Yeah, she kept blades of grass inside her books. Let me and David paint with them. You’d put on big band and dance with her, and we’d color.”

“The thing about grass is that you can unfold it and find smaller and smaller, greener and greener leaves. Leaves that are like the outer layers but untouched by chinchas or grubs. That aren’t purple or brown, that haven’t seen the sun. She was always so good at getting to the smallest leaf. She loved to unfold it to the last leaf. Then made me open the last one. I always expected there to be a secret message, but there was only nothing.”

“I’m sure there was something if she insisted on it. You know mom.”

“Maybe.” His father unfolds a few blades but cannot penetrate past two layers. He tries and tries but only tears the grass. He throws a fist of them into the air and they rain down gentle as
“Your brother had your mom’s hands but was always gonna be more like me. Throwing things away.”

“David did love the mud more.”

“I made you two boys smile right?”

“All the time, ‘tay, all the time. You never gave us hand-shaped haircuts. You let yourself be the last soldier.”

“You think he would’ve said that to me?”

“‘Tay.”

“We should finish before it gets dark. Get back to work while we still have daylight.”

“Tatay, it’s barely five o’clock. And summer. And I can still see in the dark if it gets that bad, you know.”

“But I can’t. We can make it if we work smart. You take that half, I’ll take this half.”

“What we don’t finish today I can help you with next weekend.”

“I can handle this side all by myself.”

“You know. You do look like crumpled paper.”

His father finishes the rest of his beer in one gulp. He turns the bottle in his hand, as if to spread the mud on the bottle more evenly. He leaves his handprint.

Nemo grabs the bottle from his father to put into the blue bin. Before he tosses it, he sees how much smaller his father’s handprint is than his. He feels old for the first time in his life, like he knows that things could only go one of two ways after this: either the world is gonna flip upside down or the sun’s gonna shine on this land the way it always has.

Within an hour they are almost done. Nemo raises his hand up to the horizon and measures how many fingers he can fit between the sun’s position in the sky and the far border to the west
where the 2 Freeway cuts Glendale off from Eagle Rock. He can fit three hands between the sun and the freeway, which means there are still three hours of sunlight left. “Three. Tatay, see. We have all the time in the world.”

The father counts his hands on the sky. “You didn’t do it right. Your brother could do it without using his hands. You might need to one day.”

“Really.”

“I count two, maybe one and a half. We still have to lay down the mix to keep the dog piss from killing our hard work. I know the kids by the postoffice let their lab use our lawn.”

“What else is a lawn for but that? It’s the drought, ‘tay.”

“It’s not. Bautista over waters his palm trees. Probably caused the whole drought by himself. Don’t know how he affords it. And anyway his lawn is dying too, so if I need to cut out some of this lawn, I’m sure he’ll help if I ask.”

“You hate that guy.”

“It’s the things that we can’t control, our neighbors’ dogs, the fungi, the chinches. So much work to be done, but it’ll be done if we’re patient. Can’t waste a minute, can’t waste an inch of lawn.”

The two grab the last brick of sod. It is a big trapezoidal piece and requires the both of them to carry it. It barely fits at the foot of the bougainvillea tree, its awkward obtuse edges refusing to bend to the wild roots. They press their rough hands into it, to squeeze as many inches of it into the space available. Despite the purple shade, his dad sweats profusely. Nemo has to finish the work by himself.

“Ay nako. I’m not as strong as I used to be.”

“No, ‘tay, you’re not. But it’s why I’m around.”
“No, Boy. If I’ve learned anything in this world, it’s why I’m around.”

Nemo watches his dad watch him press the last piece of grass in place. He bumps his head on the trunk trying to do so, shaking a few drops of violet onto them. For a brief second, it eclipses his father completely.

When the sod doesn’t fit, his dad gently shapes it with his trowel until it finally settles underneath the tree. Not one blade wasted, not one gram of dirt thrown away. It took the two of them to lift the last brick of grass, but his dad could probably keep this whole place standing by himself, while Nemo was up north. His dad was clever like that. He’s seen the sun rise 20,000 times.

In a month, the grass grows in just fine. It looks like one, continuous lawn.
Tips for Sleeping

Don’t ask your dad what goes bump in the night. You will not like the answer. Instead, tell him to check underneath the bed, which he’ll bravely do without flicking on a light. Tell him to tuck you in tight and to never, ever let the bedbugs bite. Which he will do. For once, his mustache bristles will not scare you. Don’t think of the shadows on your walls. Never mention their length, or the way they scatter at the end of your bedpost. Pretend their length is indeterminable. Pretend they are not long enough to touch you. The shadow that engulfs the sky at night has never reached you here on earth. So remember: only the stars will kiss you, if you remember to pray for that. Remember to ask your dad for a kiss too, because you never know if it will be the last touch you ever get. Always let your last touch be a kiss. It’s tradition in your family to kiss the lips of the dead.

When your dad closes the door behind him and leaves you to the dark, feel free to use your phone as a light. A good white light will make any object ordinary again. Blue is the only color your phone radiates. Blue is your favorite color, so paint your entire room with a blue cast. Everything looks dead in blue, even the dreamcatchers you keep between your mother’s books. But let this still be your favorite color.

Crawling across the picture of your parents, you will see a shadow that does not disappear. As if your mother’s long, black hair is spilling ink. It doesn’t reflect the light. It just accepts the blue hue. Do not stare directly. Avoid eye-contact at all costs. Report its presence quietly to your notes. I see a ghost. Type silently, because it will surely hear you typing. Give it a name. Go with the second name that comes to mind. The first name is an invention of your imagination, but the second name is the spirit talking to you. You will hear the second name between the ellipses of your heart.
If you listen long enough, you’ll realize the ghost is telling you a story. It’s not like any story you have ever heard before. Pay close attention, but don’t write any of it down. When you contain something in writing, you bury its voice inside yours. Your voice replaces its voice, and then it becomes your own story. You don’t want a ghost story for your story.

Instead repeat the lines silently to yourself like a prayer so you’ll remember them forever. Do not stray from its language. Do not translate or conflate. To wander is to dig deeper. Remember that digging in your backyard has only ever produced bones.

The only important part about stories is the act of telling them. When one soul, for a brief moment, engulfs another, just like the last time your mother embraced you underneath the blooming blue jacaranda. We call this transmission love. Dad once called it God. A ghost is a ghost because it still has stories. A ghost is a story. Sometimes a ghost is a ghost because it’s scared that nobody listens. Sometimes it lingers to provide a conclusion. Listen closely.

“I remember being afraid of the dark.” This is the critical moment, where the ghost remembers you. Where you remember the sky is also blue. Where its soul kisses your soul and leaves a mark. Never forget the stories your mother used to tell you in the park.
Nemo and the Speedster

The parish has a tradition for the dead. Every mourner is to meet with the departed's immediate family and share an intimate memory, as a way for the entire community to cope with the loss. When Sister Joe invented this tradition as a young woman over sixty years ago, she only had in mind those who died of old age. They always had an abundance of tales. But Sarah Sherman was seventeen, and most of the mourners - fellow students from Our Mother of Great Nursing - only have their shallow experiences to share. The girls have to hide the fact that Sarah was a bully. The boys have to hide the fact that every one of them wanted to fuck her.

Thus, they each give the same vague memory: a litany of epithets like smart and beautiful, and that other word - precious. They remember her running every morning, or doing her homework before church, or making people laugh in detention. He marvels at how life is just a series of disconnected and repetitive moments. The only memorable stories are deviations from the schedule. Sarah had few.

He hopes his feelings for her will give him something more substantial to say. Nothing comes to him, even as he watches each of his classmates fail at their attempts at seriousness. Most of them aren’t even wearing some kind of black. They sport the only bit of formal wear they’ve purchased in their entire lives: their prom dresses, their graduation suits. None of them had anticipated death in their final year of high school. The church pews are a rainbow of bright and excited neons that cut too high above the knee. Their eyes are on each other.

When it comes time for the boy to share his story, Mrs. Sherman is already as red as a tomato. "Nemo, I'm so glad you made it."

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Sarah, that light of mine--"

"You know, Sarah really must have liked you."
Nemo pauses. "She did?"

"Yes, she wouldn't stop talking about you in the hospital." Mr. Sherman laughs as if it was an important memory.

The boy feels his ears go hot. Normally the chapel has a draft, or at least the church's large and numerous stain glass windows depicting the stations releases a lot of heat during the winter. It’s as cold as hell in there, but he nonetheless feels the weight of a bead of sweat threatening to leave a trail along his face. "What? What did she say?" He hopes it was a declaration of love. Maybe she spent her final weeks penning a response sonnet to the ones he used to leave in her locker.

"Oh who knows. You know how she was in her last weeks."

Nemo doesn't. Sarah never invited him to the hospital. "Yeah, of course."

"She did say something about a book you borrowed. Some silly little fantasy of hers she gave you a few years ago? She wanted to read it but never had the courage to ask you for it."

"What book? You mean Doctor Dash and the Dangerous Den?"

The Shermans laugh a little too long. Maybe they’re looking for any excuse to laugh. Mr. Sherman has to excuse himself, he cannot stop laughing. "That book exactly," Mrs. Sherman says eventually, with the help of Nemo's handkerchief.

"I haven't seen it in years." That is the truth, even if Mrs. Sherman's stern eyebrows do not lend him an ounce of belief. Nemo sold the book after the collapse of his friendship with Sarah back in middle school. Her interests turned to sports and taller boys. He stuck with video games and acne scars. The book was the last connection they maintained until she got a cell phone. He never asked for her new number.
The book contained their contributions to the mythos of Doctor Dash in its marginalia, the fan-fictions of their youth. Most of these fictions just entertained the titular character’s powers of speed and time-travel - what would they do if they had his powers? She wanted to meet the Buddha. He wanted to see humanity reach another galaxy. One story promised that the one thing that could transcend time and space was their friendship. But her handwriting became too painful to keep.

* 

"Well if you can find it, we'd really appreciate it. We feel as though she’s disappearing. Little things to remind us of her go a long way. She was quite insistent on this book."

"I can definitely get it to you tomorrow." Nemo isn't certain why he says that, but before he can correct himself, Mrs. Sherman wells up and wails and wraps herself around him. Everyone is looking, and a few think he must be a pretty swell guy for comforting her like this. Jesus watches him from the cross.

* 

On the bus ride home, Nemo listens to a fat man sing like Pavarotti in the back seat. His voice is loud and sonorous, a tenor that could match the Italian at any aria, any day. It was as if the singer didn’t even die.

He shouldn’t have sold the book.

Doctor Dash was their favorite superhero, and Dangerous Den is the last book in Harold Gleick’s trilogy. They had discovered the author together; where everyone else had attached themselves to more mainstream superheroes, Doctor Dash was uniquely theirs. The trilogy couldn’t have sold more than 200 copies in total.

*
Doctor Dash’s power is some complex and science-fictional thing about quantum entanglement, but what it really means is that he can run faster than the speed of light, which he uses to travel back and forth through space and time. Sarah must have been afraid to die if she was contemplating time travel. Everyone speaks of her heroism in her last moments, but Nemo doesn't see it. He imagines she cried. He's never actually seen her cry, only heard it once behind a closed door.

Maybe she missed Nemo. He really likes this theory the most.

The moral of every Doctor Dash story is that one should never run away from their problems, which always takes 375 pages to reach. Remembering this moral inspires Nemo. He could check the local bookstores the next day, just to see if it’s still at least in print.

* 

Doctor Dash is out of print. Most of the stores only keep used copies of the first two novels. *Dangerous Den* simply does not exist. On every shelf, there is an absence where the book might be. Someone is always faster than him.

The last bookstore he checks is three stories tall. Most of the popular books are in the lobby so that no one has to trek up to the top floor where the bargain pulps are kept. When Nemo climbs the final step, there are only two people there. The wood creaks under every footfall, and the noise reverberates in the entire room. Different floorboards produce different squeaks. They sound like an untuned piano. He tries to sneak around like Mr. Sherman, but his noise is too obvious. He gives up.

He enjoys the privacy of this floor a lot and makes a mental note to return when he completes his task for the Shermans.
The signs on this floor are all handwritten on Date Due slips in pink permanent marker, in hard and sharp lines. The font must belong to the cashier. She has pink streaks in her black hair. Something about that makes Nemo really like her, even though she doesn’t react to the loud steps announcing his arrival. Maybe her handwriting is a reflection of her personality. Her face is buried in a biography on Nietzsche.

The other person on this floor is a tall, thin man, balding and smelling of onions. His shirt reads, WORK HARD, PLAY HARD in bold white letters, but it doesn’t match his pair of pinstripe slacks. In his hands are several self-help books, one of which is written in Chinese. He’s reading a book called The Enlightened One’s Guide to Finding Love. When Nemo walks past him, he catches a glimpse of one of the section headings, “Part 5: A bird cannot always fly, but it can eat a seed.” Nemo doesn’t have a context for what this means, but its importance weighs on him, and he thinks about how beautiful it is to watch a bird eating.

Nemo dwells on the image until the bookstore employee acknowledges his presence at the counter.

“Hello, welcome to Frank’s. How’re you today.”

Nemo says he is good, even though he isn’t. “How’re you?”

Her eyes return to the book. She mouths a line of philosophy quietly to herself. Her lips have a piercing.

“I’m looking for a book.”

“You’ve come to the right place.”

“A Doctor Dash. The last one. Dangerous Den.”

“If it’s not under G, I can’t help you.”

“So you know exactly the book I’m talking about.”
“If it’s not under G, I can’t help you.”

Nemo leaves the bookstore disappointed. In the sky, he spots a biplane with a long banner trailing behind it. “Sarah, will you marry me?” the sign reads.

*

On the bus ride home, Nemo dreams. The summer before senior year, he managed to swing an invite to a party hosted by the previous year’s graduates. There was a lot of alcohol and kissing. It was the most intimate Nemo had gotten with a girl in a single evening. His friends were proud of him, even though she wasn’t Sarah.

Later on in the evening, he watched Sarah try to get into a car. She couldn’t even open the door. Nemo opened it for her, but didn’t let her keep the keys.

“I don’t need your help.” Yet, despite her protests, she couldn’t even sit up straight. She only crawled over the center console and rested her head on the passenger window. Nemo drove the car to a darker spot of the neighborhood. He parked beneath an oak tree that obscured the moon. Without the headlights, the street looked like a tomb closing on the two of them.

“Hey,” she kept saying in her sleep. “Please. Don’t.” She blew saliva bubbles and hiccuped in and out of consciousness. Her dress pulled to her mid-thigh, where Nemo spotted a tattoo of an arrow piercing a heart. He covered it with his hand. Her skin was warm.

He can’t remember much else about her skin. The touch of her dead cheeks at the funeral replaces the feeling, and his stomach turns as the bus hits a bump. She felt like silly putty. He doesn’t know what happened after that, except that he only came to when she called his name.

The last thing she said to him, the last thing he recalls of her: “Thank you.”
Nemo wakes up early the next morning to the smell of decay. Though his only approximation of the odor comes from literature and film, his instinct makes him certain of the pungent air weighing heavily on his nose. He needs to sneeze, as if an early spring has come bearing allergies. He shuts his window and lays down, begging himself to go back to sleep. No matter what he tries, he can only think of Sarah: in her schoolgirl skirt, spreading her legs open, Sarah curling her brown locks while thoroughly masticating a variety of phallic food objects. He only has these short images of her. It makes him sick.

He doesn’t remember the stories they wrote. He hasn’t cried in a long time. The shudder of his own shoulders catches him off guard.

Whatever is rotting permeates through his window. Or perhaps once death enters one's room, it is irremovable. Hoping that an orgasm will relieve his insomnia, Nemo reaches underneath his bed and pulls out a bottle of lubricant that he hopes to someday use with someone else. But masturbation doesn't help. Every time he touches himself, he only feels silly putty.

* *

His father tells him that he has a message from the Shermans. They probably want the book, so he doesn’t listen to the voicemail. He deletes it, but immediately regrets doing so, believing that they might have had some new information regarding Sarah. He prepares a bowl of Cheerios silently.

* *

In the world of Doctor Dash, there is an island of pygmies who’ve lived uninterrupted for thousands of years. They are master hunters and pathfinders. But their ability to navigate the island exists solely in their language. They have no system for writing, only a system for oral tradition. When British colonists visit the island and desire to map it for their empire, they find that
geography is untranslatable to the natives. They can only speak about the jungle. It never occurred to any of them to record it.

To the colonists’ translator, the map is just a piece of paper with strange and meaningless symbols. “But can’t you see these lines? They correspond to the part of the river you can bathe in. We want to know where to put the lines representing the part of the river you can drink.”

This made no sense to the translator. “The lines are not big enough to represent the river.”

* 

Nemo wonders how accurate his cartography would be. He wanders his neighborhood, inventorying it. This is the tree where homeless dogs pee. Further down the sidewalk, past the houses themed like Spanish villas, is the plaza with the post office and the three-story bookstore.

But it wasn’t always like this, and he realizes how insufficient his map would be in a month, when they finished building the Walmart and the Vons. Things are never fixed.

* 

Nemo checks the bookstores again. No one’s even reshelved the cases so that something could fill the absence of Dangerous Den. At least the three-story bookstore has a note where Gleick’s third book would be.

“Sorry,” it reads, in pink.

"It's okay," he writes underneath.

* 

Today the man in the pinstripe pants wears a shirt with a picture of an egg on it. BE EGGSTRAORDINARY, in big block letters. It’s enough to make Nemo laugh. Something about the wood on this floor must be wet, because his laughter does not echo the way the wood creaks
do. He clears his throat, but the man in the pinstripe pants continues to read his book as if Nemo isn’t there.

“That’s a good yolk,” Nemo adds.

“Huh?”

“Nothing,” and Nemo realizes he really means that word.

The man closes the book and pinches it between his knees. Along the spine, in gold cursive font: *Seven Notes for the Believer in the 23rd Century*. “The book I’m reading says that the path to happiness does not come from within, but from without. It is the lack that will make us happy.”

Nemo doesn’t understand what this means, but he nods convincingly enough for the man to continue, “I don’t think the girl is working today, but I come by on my lunch break anyway just in case she takes extra hours. Isn’t she precious?”

*"

She’s the fastest woman alive.

*"

A 626 number shows up on his mobile: Alhambra or Pasadena. The number likely belongs to the Shermans. Nemo’s father must have given them his number. Disliking the people who have their intimate conversations on the bus, he lets the number go to voicemail. They immediately called again.

“Hello!”

They wonder where he’s been. They would really like her book. They're having a family party tomorrow evening to memorialize Sarah's room. He's invited.

He's distracted by the memory of Sarah's room. He wonders if it was still the dark navy blue that the two would pretend was the Los Angeles nightsky, or the leagues deep beneath the
Pacific. Outside the bus window, the rain falls at a slant because the bus driver is speeding. Doctor Dash can run so fast that the rain looks horizontal to him.

At the next bus stop, he spots a flash of pink underneath a black umbrella. The bookstore cashier is waiting there in the rain, her head buried in another book. She looks up and sees Nemo, but pretends not to notice - in fact, she gets up and walks away as fast as she can without looking insane.

The book’s jacket is unmistakable: standing proudly in bright green spandex is the muscular form of Doctor Dash, surrounded by three scoundrels and their daggers. It's the one where he meets the first time traveler: the vizier's wife, jailed in the most dangerous den.

Nemo doesn’t get off the bus in time.

* 

He doesn't have any more milk, so he eats right out of the box of Cheerios while relaxing on his couch. He thinks of all the witty things he will say to the cashier. His reflection stares at him from the television. No longer wishing to confront himself, he switches the tv on to some news. A basketball player broke his leg during an important game. They play the clip of his injury over and over again, in slow motion. The man's shin folds like origami. People are just meat.

He finishes the entire box of cereal and falls asleep with a stomach ache.

* 

A good speedster maintains a healthy diet and exercises regularly. Nemo, the second fastest man in the universe, has trained for years in preparation for his race against the good doctor. He knows he will lose, but the mark of a good hero is never giving up in the face of adversity. To help him along, Doctor Dash runs at just 99% of the speed of light. The two are neck and neck. The first to reach the Andromeda Galaxy wins.
Nemo pushes himself over the edge. Before Doctor Dash can warn him of his hubris, the younger speedster hits light speed and disappears into another time period. Can he be saved?

*Nemo cradles Sarah dead face. A life-size, wooden Jesus hangs from a cross above Sarah’s casket. He is colored with acrylic paint. From far away, he looks detailed. But standing this close, Nemo can spot the heavy, uneven brushstrokes that must have belonged to Sister Joe, whose old and shaky arthritic hands the boys used to imitate during her scantron exams. Christ’s head leans to the right, which the nuns say foreshadows his seat at the right hand of the Father. It is an artistic liberty sculptors take. Here, Jesus looks as though he is staring down at the boy, judging him for touching the girl’s face for so long. It isn’t sexual, he tells himself, but he does remember how smooth her thighs are as he caresses her cheeks. He tries to ignore the eyes of Christ by concentrating on Sarah’s. Her eyes were blue, he remembers, brighter than the Son of God’s beady black dots. He can see them even with her eyes closed.

Would anyone notice if he opened her eyes? Would they still be blue? He used to dream of them in high school. He used to dream he could get this close to the girl, to cradle her cheek as he does now. Even this intimacy with her body is only allowed precisely because of her absence. The softness of her skin surprises him. She feels like silly putty. Whenever he’d hallucinate her body in his arms, he only thought of what they would look like as a couple, from far away. In other words, he transplanted his face onto her previous high school boyfriends; he wanted their bodies as much as hers, in a way, since common to each of those boys was the broad chest of an athlete. He’d study them in the locker rooms and soccer fields, taking note of their locomotion with the eye of a zoologist and the wonder of a much younger boy. He’d take these images home to his bathroom
mirror, where he would compare their biceps to his, pushing around his fat to most resemble their muscle mass. Most of the boys were only this to him: meat, with a deeper voice.

That’s all that was left of Sarah too. When he traced her lips with his fingers, he could only think of spam, of roast. They were dry and starting to chap.

*

She apologizes before Nemo can even get a word out. She apologizes profusely. “I steal books from the store. Usually no one notices. They’re the bad ones that haven’t been touched in years. I’ll bring it to you tomorrow.”

“I need it today!”

“You’ll have to wait.”

Speedsters shouldn’t have to wait. “You could’ve told me that you took it! I demand a discount. I demand that it come with a free book.” He wishes he was smooth enough to blackmail her on a date as well, but the attention of the man in pinstripe pants keeps him honest.

He says some foreign-sounding word that somehow soothes them both, but ruins it by adding, “we cool, dudes?”

*

He keeps at a distance. Out here, the asphalt and concrete absorb his otherwise loud steps. He tries not to imagine himself with a pompadour, to keep himself from laughing.

The girl with pink in her hair doesn’t seem to mind the volume of her feet - she walks fast. She wears hiking boots with a rubber tread that squeaks every time it rubs against the ground. That she drags her feet only makes her walk that much louder and that much easier to disguise his own steps. He matches her pace and goes on undetected for about a mile.
But she only needs one cautious turn over her shoulder to spot him. He didn’t stick to the shadows as he planned just to keep up with her. “You really followed me, kid?”

She doesn’t seem that much older than him, if she even is older than him, but the name makes him feel two feet shorter anyway. “I seriously want this book. You don’t understand.”

She rubs her forehead. “I really don’t think I do. My copy is horrible. Some kids scribbled illegible nonsense all over it.”

* *

She makes him wait on her front lawn. It isn’t much of a lawn; whoever was in charge of keeping the grass watered missed more than a few spots. He sat on the only green bit.

Her house is in much better shape. Her parents keep a few California-friendly cacti in potted plants along the window sills. The front porch has two ceramic wind-chimes that make him feel whole. There’s a driveway that stretches into a backyard that Nemo assumes fits at least two cars.

The lawn might have had a tree at one point - the house’s white paint is unevenly faded.

* *

In the distant future, Doctor Dash stumbles upon a Buddhist Temple orbiting a foreign sun. A monk floats toward him and greets him with great enthusiasm in a familiar yet unintelligible tongue. The hero tries to stop himself from spinning in place, taming his dizziness by rubbing his stomach. Vomit without gravity would be an unfortunate mess.

Everything was foreign to the speedster. And yet, from the alien signs and symbols along the wooden panels, he could discern the subtlest pattern that had retained the language of his time and place. This language could no longer be called English, but it had within its strange clicks and
stranger moans the phonemes that formed the basis of his own tongue. How strange the things that survive us, he thought.

The monk gives him a tour of the station. It overlooks a system roughly called Washington, which the monk tells him is an ancient word for “explored,” or at least “discovered” - that is to say, “uncovered.” In the old English of the 20th century, the act of exploration was celebrated by the declaration of this word so much so that many places retained the sound of the word’s utterance.

The monk is working on a thousand year old bonsai tree. One wouldn’t immediately recognize it as a tree at all; growing free from the earth and its gravity, its roots and its branches have grown indistinguishable from one another. It looks like a series of an old man’s arms folding in on each other.

“So where is the trunk?” the speedster asks. “In that tangle, where is the center that binds those branches and roots together?”

“I do not know, but why begin the impossible task of finding an absent center? Why not just revel in the infinite and beautiful leaves it has produced?”

“Aren’t you afraid of the tree overgrowing, of losing the temple to its wildness?”

“No. Only the universe and the mind expand unpredictably and infinitely. Everything else ends, just not where you intend.”

* 

The spine has a large crease where the book must have lain open for a long time. Nemo opens the book to that page, wondering what scene must have stopped the cashier from proceeding. It is an empty two-pages, a pause in the story before the final chapter.

“You didn’t even finish?”

“I hate finishing books. I always stop at the last page, so that the story never ends.”
“I’m also afraid of dying,” Nemo admits.

They stare at each other for a long time, as if they could wrest from each other’s eyes the secrets they kept to themselves. Nemo searches for something to say, as if the right thing were written somewhere on her face. She leans forward and kisses him between his eyebrows. He’d never been conscious of that space before.

“Go home.” She leaves him on her lawn and unlocks her front door. She stops and smiles at him before entering. Her teeth are normal.

Her name is Lizzie.

*

Nemo does not ring the doorbell to the Sherman residence. Instead, he stares at the blank pages before the final chapter. He can see the first paragraph through the blank page. “In the end…” it begins, but he does not read the rest. Try as he might, the boy cannot recall how this novel ends; all he remembers is the disappearance of the hero.

Next to it, in the margins, is Sarah’s familiar handwriting. Hers: “Even the universe must fold in on itself and close.” He can recollect her fiction much more clearly in his head. Her story ended when she finally achieved faster-than-light travel and opened up all the timelines simultaneously, chasing Doctor Dash in each one, hoping to catch him and gain his secret to immortality.

Nemo never wrote his ending. He remembers now: Sarah expected him to write his ending to his version of events. He had it all mapped out at one point, but he doesn’t know where it all began. He threw away his drafts a long time ago. So he starts again. So he wanders the neighborhood, inventing it.
Only Ever Yulia

Everyday, Mrs. Yulia Wilson dissolves two cubes of sugar in her afternoon tea. She stirs with intention, like she’s been practicing for a long time. She loves watching the angular corners soften into curves. “The cubes reveal spheres,” she tried to explain once. I took this as a metaphor, but I’m not certain for what. I try not to press her on the matter. Her aphorisms mean she has an explanation but doesn’t want to tell me. She prefers the silence, as if in a perfect vacuum of sound, she might hear the sugar disappearing granule by granule.

Lately, she’s reduced all of our conversations to these spare exchanges. She wears more clothing than usual, as if she was suddenly embarrassed about all those tattoos. Sometimes she leaves handwritten post-it notes for me to find around her house. Today the refrigerator says, “the cold hinders harmful bacterial reproduction.” The toaster: “extreme heat is just as effective.” The conversation continues into the living room: “the light does not come from this switch.”

She never said these kinds of things to me when her husband was still alive. If she said these things at all, Dr. Wilson never told me. He rarely spoke of her at our weekly dissertation conferences. Everything was always Plato and Shakespeare. Everything was the grand quest for pure language. Yulia - she was just his wife.

She’d even joke that he loved me more than her. He had a habit of bringing his favorite candidates around the house to discuss the latest criticism. We’d sip eighty-dollar whiskey at his tea table in his back patio while his wife maintained their greenhouse. Their house was a sizeable wooden Victorian, supposedly a century old. The sheer number of rooms made the whole thing look haunted. There was no way they could occupy every room.

No one knew the source of the Wilsons’ wealth. A few alumni began a rumor that Mrs. Wilson was the daughter of a Texan oil baron, or a financier in Manhattan. She might have married
a rich architect before settling on Dr. Wilson. Perhaps she played the stock market. None of these identities seemed to fit the woman who danced ballet in the greenhouse. She never wore shoes. When I first met Mrs. Wilson, she already knew who I was.

“Nemo Padilla. You’re a lot taller than I pictured.”

Even in her bare feet, Mrs. Wilson towered over me. Our conversations rarely got further than this.

We only started speaking when I had to drive Dr. Wilson home from campus. Sometimes he got too drunk in his office after class and needed help getting back. While he knocked out on the bed, Mrs. Wilson would pry into my life. “One memory for another,” she would say. So we traded secrets. She had no siblings. She grew up in an almond orchard. She painted every member of her family. She keeps their canvas portraits in rolls in the attic. “In a way, it’ll help us feel like we’ve lived two lives.” Most nights, Mrs. Wilson made me stay in one of their many empty rooms until the wee-hours passed. Every surface in those empty rooms had a thin film of dust.

The night Mr. Wilson died, he left his office without me. After a particularly lengthy discussion on Nietzsche, he wanted to make it home unassisted. He yelled *ubermensch* all the way to the parking lot. The next morning, the neighborhood patrol found his car crumpled in-between two sycamores.

The department had me clean his office because I was his only graduate assistant. All of his books were to go to the campus library, according to his will. All but one, a first edition *Powers of Horror* that had attained a variety of wine and coffee stains over the years but was the least dusty tome in his collection. Dr. Wilson was a self-trained sommelier and every page, it seemed, held a different drop of red from his spectrum of wine. It wasn’t on the list of books to be donated because I removed it. Inside was a scattering of his notes, various drawings, and a few photographs.
It was an essay left unfinished. Among the marginalia and loose scraps of paper was a single, folded paper addressed to his wife. *Yulia*, it read in his familiar cuneiform-like handwriting. I gave it to her without reading it.

She protects that note, never lets anyone else read it, never hints at its contents. Ever since she moved here for him, her only other friends have been gym and yoga acquaintances. Brad, the blonde Californian yogi, occasionally makes visits to the Wilson estate to give her private lessons - but these have been rare as of late.

No one visited her after the funeral except for me. Instead, the table by the front door accumulated a pile of letters apologizing for her loss. On top of the pile is one of her notes, quoting Simone Weil: “love is not consolation.” She reads that every morning before she leaves for work. In the evenings, she comes home alone and places the note on top of any new letters that have arrived in the mail.

Declining to cook for just one, she decided not to bother eating dinner anymore. She even celebrated her forty-fifth birthday alone - almost hid the fact of it from me if I didn’t know she was a scorpio. I had to ask her. She didn’t care, of course. She distracted herself with bad television and formed attachments to superhero cartoons and police dramas. Understandably, she looked away during “scenes of extreme violence.” Having been called to identify her husband’s body at the morgue, and subsequently seeing his mutilated face, Mrs. Wilson associated any excess of red with “the too-scandalous.” She had to promptly remove herself from any room containing the offending image “to visit the vomitorium.”

“Vomitorium,” I told her over tea once, “is a mistranslation. The Latin ‘vomo’ merely means ‘to spew forth’; thus vomitoria were simply large amphitheater pathways for crowds to leave quickly and efficiently. They were not vomiting rooms.”
She bit her thumb at me when I said that. “You remind me too much of my husband, you little snake. Shakespearean scholars are all the same bores. Always arguing definitions and semantics.”

“I’m not actually a Shakespearean scholar. My real interest lies in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. That we could be immortalized by deferring the consequences of our vices onto representational painting of ourselves fascinates me.”

“Sure,” she said, which meant she didn’t want to talk anymore.

I don’t think Mrs. Wilson seeks to hurt me with her criticism. Her yogi calls the entire act a form of projection. There are things she should have told her husband. Because she can never tell him now, she projects these feelings onto the world.

Or perhaps the opposite is true for Mrs. Wilson in her grief: the world relentlessly projects images of Dr. Wilson to his poor widow. Even a minor reminder of Mr. Wilson’s mangled corpse can send her into hysteria. She cannot have tomatoes in the house any more. Pasta and pizza are no longer lunch options during my daily visits to her office. One time she squirted ketchup onto her fries at the wrong angle and had to take the rest of the week off from work.

This is strange not because of her overreaction, but because she only overreacts to certain things. In the living room, Mrs. Wilson displays all the replica art nouveau pictures she has been collecting ever since she received a Tournee du Chat Noir as a wedding gift. She keeps her favorite, a Jules Cheret poster of the dancing Loie Fuller, centered across from the couch. Tucked neatly into the corner of the poster’s frame is Mr. Wilson’s final note to his wife.

The painting reminds her of “female exuberance,” she says. But all I see in the contorting body of Mme. Fuller and Cheret’s contrast of orange, green, and white is Mr. Wilson struggling to rise from the street after being crushed by the moving van. This is the painting I’m forced to
contemplate whenever I turn Mrs. Wilson over and fuck her from behind. I suspect she contemplates the painting too, without much fear of hysteria.

Yulia, I sometimes catch myself saying aloud during our nightly sessions. But what Mrs. Wilson doesn’t realize is that I’m actually reading the only word I know of Mr. Wilson’s note.

We don’t always have intercourse in her home. While she says a queen memory-foam mattress most effectively imitates the rhythm with which Mr. Wilson fucked her, neither of us really like to do it there. Most mornings she takes me to the greenhouse, where we argue about fractal systems for hours before she unbucks my belt and unbuttons my pants and expects me to do the rest. We usually begin somewhere in the roses and end somewhere in the rues. Yesterday, she cried Mr. Wilson’s name. After that fleeting moment of ecstasy, she silently cried her own: “Oh, oh, oh. Yulia.”

I think this is how well I know her body. There are portions of skin - here and here and here - that respond like language. She expects me to squeeze her until she feels better - I do it often, long enough for her to close her eyes and go to sleep. “Suffocate / the melancholy, please wring / my soul” she once wrote for a local literary magazine.

We held this position, this nude Pieta, until the sun disappeared.

“I wonder what we look like from afar.” Her eyes remained shut.

“The man who watches from afar wonders what it looks like to cradle you.”

“Fair. But one day the memory of your arms will fade. I don’t remember touch as easily as I remember image. You understand.”

I traced the Cyrillic tattoo scrawled across her upper thigh. In Russian, it read “love is light.”
“I wish I had a picture, you know? You used to take such lovely pictures before my husband found you.”

“Barthes wrote that photographs replace memories. The act of taking a picture was the erasure of memory.”

“I don’t agree with that exactly. Maybe it’s an alternative to memories. Maybe our brains are just a series of individual images. Maybe a photograph is the most genuine memory.”

Mrs. Wilson once practiced photography too. She loved showing me her work. They often employed stark contrasts of light and dark. Her composition always emphasized binaries: left and right, up and down, foreground and background. My favorite picture of hers is a blurry, old woman - “someone who reminds me of my grandmother” - walking along a tree-studded avenue in the fall. The streets and trees are in full focus, but all the compositional angles point to this nearly invisible woman.

The best photographs she has are of herself. One time she showed me her family album. The most alarming part about this album is how little Dr. Wilson appears. The last picture she thought worth preserving is of the married couple at a hiking trail in Korea - a single picture meant to represent their honeymoon.

Otherwise, it is strictly a history of her. I look at it every chance I get. It feels more like historical text than celebration of life. I watch her skills accumulate: her first bike ride, an essay competition ceremony, a valedictorian speech. I watch her legs grow longer through a variety of shorts and dresses that document the fashion through the 20th century. I watch them accumulate ink. Every new picture featured a new tattoo, it seemed. It was like watching a canvas draw itself.

Her shirts become progressively tighter, her teeth gradually straighter, her smile more precise, until finally, by her last picture, I am sufficiently seduced: she sits on the hood of a blue
Subaru just moments before she’s to leave for college in Oregon. Her eyes seem indifferent because of a pair of wayfarer sunglasses. Her lips are pursed into a blowing kiss, no smile. She simply cocks her head to the side, as if curious about why the camera is even pointed at her.

It’s impossible to tell where her sadness began. There are a few empty pages before she chronicles her early relationship with Dr. Wilson. If she intended the placement of every photograph - which is something she would do - perhaps what she most means to say with this album is that she was happy, once.

Sometimes I think of that younger woman’s big, red lips in the middle of that blown kiss when Mrs. Wilson climbs on top of me. I think of her when I should be investigating the ontological origins of Basil Hallward’s painting of Dorian Gray. I think of her when I have the privacy of my own shower, or shortly before I go to bed.

I think I’ve memorized every picture from her life, or I’ve at least gotten down the order of the pictures. The order is important. Every week, I steal a different set of pictures from Melanie’s latter life and take them home with me. I’ve never met her, but her life feels inextricable from mine - which one of us had ice cream in Paris? Which one of us crossed Death Valley on a bike? Which one sat on the hood of a car and pretended to not be scared of tomorrow?

Suddenly she was my first crush in fourth grade. Suddenly she was my first kiss, sitting across from me in a tent in Ventura as I snaked my arms around her. Her hands, not Sarah’s, fit between my waist and belt in my sophomore summer. Her ears, not Maia’s, heard my first confident “I love you.” Her chest, not Mrs. Wilson’s, breathes heavily against my lips. Sometimes I pretend I’m an older man. Sometimes she pretends I’m an older man. Or at least, this is how I explain why Mrs. Wilson still hasn’t removed her ring. When she fits her hand into my fly-zipper, it is the only thing cold about her touch.
When I asked her why, she stopped talking to me for days. She only left aphorisms around her house.

Yesterday, after the greenhouse, I asked her again. Her forehead was still damp with sweat.

“I’m grieving.”

“I suppose they’re not as permanent as tattoos. Rings.”

“Tattoos aren’t permanent. ‘Diamonds are forever.’” She twisted her ring on her finger. It was surprisingly loose.

“Okay, well, the process for removal is quite painful.”

“Of course! Forgetting is painful. The body hurts because it trusted that the message would be permanent. To extricate meaning from the flesh requires incredible physical pain. In many ways, a tattoo can be a reminder to never hurt oneself with that cold act called forgetting.”

“It’s not about forgetting. It’s about moving on, don’t you think? Moving forward even with the memory of something painful.”

She still reads Dr. Wilson’s last note. I know because I hear her get up off the bed every night to go downstairs. I hear her sobbing to herself. What use is guilt? What could a man’s small note contain that could keep her loving him?

I don’t ask Mrs. Wilson what her newer tattoos mean anymore. Her first tattoo since her husband’s death was a Sierpinski triangle between her shoulder blades. She didn’t have an explanation for it. When I pressed her for one, she simply shrugged.

“Not every tattoo contains a meaning. They’re not lines in a hand. That the tattoo exists is meaning enough. Should I get more tattoos, they will slowly define this one. Should I listen to a new song or read a new book, should I meet a new lover…” She looked at me and for once I
noticed how green her eyes were. “My tattoo’s meaning is renewed with every conscious moment in my life.”

Sometimes the tattoos mark erogenous zones: kiss me here, and here, and here. I kiss every triangle and circle, trace every indentation. I know her topography by heart. I am at least thankful that Mrs. Wilson did not get birds or feathers. When I brought this subject up to her, she laughed and told me that the only animal worth getting inked would be me. She tasked me with finding my favorite quotation, and said she would have it done immediately, in a spiral twist snaking up her calf.

When I sat across from her the night after her husband died, she was a broken woman. We had spoken before, but only at special department events, and only ever with Mr. Wilson present. In his absence, I feel like an intruder in their house. Their front door has five locks, but I slipped in with only a single password: Yulia.

A cross hung from Mrs. Wilson’s neck almost weightlessly the night I gave her the note - she hasn’t worn it since. I remember the dread I felt in thinking that she might expect me to pray with her. But we didn’t. She wasn’t capable of much speech after I told her my account of her husband’s death. She was so exhausted that by the time I gave her Mr. Wilson’s note to read, she simply looked at me with contempt as if I was the author of all her misfortune.

But she didn’t make me leave either. After carefully refolding the note along its creases, she asked me to stay. She “had prepared lasagna and taken out a bottle of wine, after all” and expected me to help her finish the meal. She didn’t expect me to say grace with her. The momentary pause when she closed her eyes before partaking did not seem like any kind of prayer that I knew. If she uttered a word, then that word was "please."
I wish I could blame our subsequent affair on a progression of wine, but the truth is that we didn’t even finish half of the first bottle. I left immediately after dinner with a dizziness that made me tremble at the sheer quantity of stars in the night sky. WebMD says I shouldn’t have had alcohol so soon after experiencing trauma. I did, however, leave Mrs. Wilson my phone number. And I admit to flirtatiously writing it on her hand. We had no paper around, and I wouldn’t dare stain Mr. Wilson’s final note. I only did this in the fleeting moment of inebriation following a particularly large swig. I attribute my dizziness to this, that I would show such poor form so soon after a death. It was the first time I saw ink on her skin.

She always dressed so conservatively for her husband. That night was the last time I recall the floral gown that covered everything but her arms.

How do I explain falling in love with her? It was exactly that, a fall. She once left one of her aphorisms on a vacuum cleaner: “a pure vacuum is impossible to create. the container of the vacuum will inevitably vaporize, collapse. it is the tendency of atoms to fill a void.”

It was the last time Mrs. Wilson prepared dinner for herself. Weeks passed without a call and I did my best to not return to that haunted house. But she did eventually call, to my surprise, one night. She asked me to come over immediately. When I arrived, she only had gin on her kitchen table. She seemed like she had lost a lot of weight, an unhealthy amount that made took away her dough and gave her angles. I gave her my snack for the day: a meager apple. I held it to her face until she took a bite. The first bite snowballed into a ravenous devouring, and soon I was taking nightly trips to the grocery store to bring her new fruit. Pomegranates and apples slowly became stir fried vegetables. The vegetables started to include rice, and spices, and meats I’ve never cooked. As Mrs. Wilson’s health returned, her participation in these dinner preparations slowly
increased, until all of a sudden I was just her errand boy, and she the chef. She experimented with new flavors.

Then, one evening over bourbon tea, while we waited for the rutabaga to boil, she accidentally called me Mr. Wilson after I made her laugh. And then, after rutabaga mash, she showed me her art nouveau poster collection, and I contemplated Mme. Fuller’s dance for the first time.

We still have our dinners, but less and less does sex follow them. Sometimes we don’t even go into the greenhouse. She dwells more and more on the future, more and more on that note.

“Do you think we should tell people?”

I always find a way to avoid the question. She’s been asking it with increasing frequency. Even the objects around her house ask me: the dining room table, the mirror in the main bathroom, the door to the kitchen, the door to the patio, the doors, the doors. What will become of us? What will become of us? What will become of us?

School is a convenient excuse for my disconnection. Essays, those long-winded bores, take away my libido, not the fear that this is some impermanent fling. And then one night, I don’t show up to her house. I let six more nights pass, using Wilde as my excuse for not visiting. My pictures of her are enough to sustain me through a particularly rough finals week.

I came back today. Her notes are everywhere. She’s been talking to herself. I search and search through the big house, through the many unused guest rooms and the aviary and all the outdated entertainment rooms that are now bare and dusty. She’s in none of them. I find her in the first place I should have looked: the living room, contemplating Mme. Fuller. She’s eating ribs. She’s gotten so good at cooking that the meat melts off the bones.
“Oh, I didn’t know you were coming over.” But she clearly prepared enough meat for three. She doesn’t even look at me. Her attention is on each bone. Only when watching a person eat a rib does one remember we are animals. I feel sickened by the way she holds the meat in her fists. I cringe when she takes a bite. It awakens something primal and uncomfortable that I fight to keep down inside my gut. I think of Mr. Wilson’s body, the way a broken rib can easily pierce through one’s own skin. Something in my torso is amiss: it is as if she is eating my ribs. Each bite makes her bolder. “You’re welcome to stay, but I’m all out of tea.”

“I don’t want the fucking tea.”

She paused a moment. I caught her off-guard. “Go. Get out.”

I can’t remember if I’ve ever made her smile or if I’ve borrowed pictures of her smile and implanted them into my memories. She’s so angry, she’s gigantic. “Mrs. Wilson - Yulia - please tell me what that note says.”

She lets the rib drop to the plate. “That’s none of your business.”

“It is exactly my business. As Plato says--”

She rolls her eyes.

“--the ideal love is between partners. Those who share everything so that they can unite as one mind.”


Her fingers leave red barbecue stains on my Oxford shirt when she removes it from my shoulders. My torso, exposed, is subject to her whim. She mumbles into my skin. “Please don’t read that note.”
I promise. I feel sickened, dizzy as I was the first night we had dinner. But I let her continue. I let her feast.

I even perform my part correctly, productively. She sleeps satisfied underneath the kitchen table. She cannot stop me from going to the living room. I quietly take Mme. Fuller off the wall and find privacy in a hallway. The frame slips off easily, the cardboard backing as simple as a fly-button. I open the note carefully, unfolding it with such attention to the creases that I feel as though I am practicing origami. My mind starts to guess what the note must contain before I’ve even seen the writing. Perhaps it’s a last love letter, his last gesture of romance. Perhaps it’s a last will naming me the heir to some incredible fortune. Or maybe it’s an admission of guilt. Maybe he wanted a divorce. This last part I conceive most enthusiastically.

But before I can finish the last crease, I hear Mrs. Wilson call my name. She tries to say it sternly, but her voice cracks on the second syllable. I wish her eyes are covered with wayfarer sunglasses. “I think I’m going to get that new tattoo. What was that quote you chose for me? Oscar Wilde right? ‘To define is to limit?’”

Suddenly her eyes lost their color, a subtle change I could have missed if I was not looking. I’d seen those eyes before, sitting across a table from me only a year ago. She wasn’t just hurt. She was betrayed. “I’m sorry, Yulia. I just wanted - I want you to stop trying to change who you are, worrying about what you look like. Can’t we enjoy this moment without worrying about its record?”

“We are always changing,” she says. “We are always in a state of transition.”

“I promise I’ll never leave you. Stay with me. Tell me what this says, why you want to hide it so badly. Please. I will still love you. I swear by the moon -”
She stamps her foot. “Don’t give me that Shakespeare shit. Don’t swear by the moon. What good is the moon between you and me? What power does it really hold, your symbols and metaphors, without the feeling of right now. I’m the only one who knows where to kiss you. You are the only one who knows which triangles to kiss. If that is not pure language to you, then I do not love you.” She tries to grab the note from me. She is flexible, much stronger than I realize. She uses her size against me, wrestling me to the floor. But for some reason, I am still stronger. I hold fast even as she beats her hands against my chest.

“Fuck you, Nemo.”

I look in her eyes, afraid that I’ve made her cry. Instead, the color has returned. Holding me down by my wrists, she leans in for a kiss.

Mrs. Wilson and I - we are a dangerous narrative to tell at holiday gatherings. Family and friends would dismiss us as anomalies, a “crazy period” to get over once we returned to reality. But perhaps, it’s precisely the extraordinary that I desire with Mrs. Wilson, her strange perception, her bright mind. Her startling sensuality when it comes to art and body. Is this who Mr. Wilson saw? A text to read but never understand.

After sex, she leaves for her yoga class. She wants “to meditate on the events that have just transpired.” If I love her, if I trust her, I’m to put the note back in its place and never speak of it again. “We’re okay if you leave it alone.”

I prepare tea nervously. Two cubes of sugar dissolve in Mrs. Wilson’s cup. It’s strange to see perfect geometry become so nebulous. The sugar is invisible a few seconds later. I stir it so thoroughly one would not even know that there was any sugar in the tea if not for the taste. How much of Mr. Wilson is left in the world? I try to reconstruct the event of his death in my head. I
try to understand how I’ve reached this moment in my life, preparing tea for my dead mentor’s wife while she’s out getting a tattoo.

His note mocks me at the table, still folded, still keeping me from its content. I peruse it for clues while the rutabaga softens in a pot on the stovetop, but all I see is Mr. Wilson’s handwritten Yulia. Only ever Yulia. And perhaps, I realize now, this is the only part of Mr. Wilson’s note that concerns me.

I finish my tea. I finish Mrs. Wilson’s and realize how much I prefer her cup’s taste to mine. I finish the whole teapot and test varying amounts of sugar. Two cubes is my perfect cup.

A key struggles with the front door. Normally, I help with the door’s many locks, but today I hesitate. Who would be the woman standing on the other side? What if I can’t see her soft skin because it’s obscured by all those geometric shapes? I’m afraid that when that door opens, I’ll see a woman I no longer love, a woman whose body has been edited beyond recognition. I’m afraid I’ll see Mr. Wilson, mangled and bruised, demanding penance for my sins. I’m afraid I won’t see anyone. I’m afraid I’ll see myself.

The moulting of snake skin sometimes happens on a monthly cycle, though this depends on the species of snake. The process is called shedding: the snake crawls out of a layer of old skin by rubbing itself against rough surfaces until the whole epidermis, all at once, comes off like an article of clothing. Most animals go through a similar process of moulting. Humans do not moult in the strict, biological sense, but we do leave traces of ourselves everywhere. When we regenerate new skin cells, the old ones flake off our bodies as a natural defense against parasitic fungi that root themselves in our pores.

Sometimes the dead skin cells accumulate into the dust we see in abandoned areas. Were it not for the wind and the busyness of our bodies, the entire world would be covered in a thin layer
of our dead skin. Or rather we are already covering everything, sneaking our way into every crevice, every nook, every hole open to pieces of ourselves. We simply don’t see it because our constant stir makes it imperceptible.

Our lungs are filled with each other’s molecules. The vapor of every breath we take has in it the breath of everyone else in the world, of everyone who has ever lived before us. When we die, the carbons and nitrogens we exhale and flake off with indifference will find their way into the lungs of our progeny. When I breathe into Mrs. Wilson’s ears, I think of the dead. When I die, I hope someone breathes and thinks of me.

Because of this process of shedding and regeneration, we are, every seven years, a completely different and unique set of cells than we were just a decade earlier. The only thing that sustains us, we strange materials, is an expectation: what binds this mass of independent cells that we exchange like language is a breath - is a soul.

When I open the door, I see the only person I should have expected to see the entire time. Just as I remember her too. Smiling.
Yellow-Headed Amazon

Nemo and his big brother David sold two parrot eggs to their grandpa. He bought them both for a whole hundred dollars. The money - a crisp, single bill - came in a crimson envelope. On the front of the envelope were gold Mandarin symbols that the brothers knew meant luck.

“Boys, buy yourselves some new clothes,” he wrote on the accompanying card. “Brand name, because you deserve it.” Their grandpa believed in names. “I’ve got a couple of friends at the country club who’ll pay the same next time you come out to Victorville.”

What those men intended to do with the eggs, he didn’t say, but their grandpa had his reasons for things. He always helped them out. Nemo and David saw him so infrequently because they lived eighty-five miles west, in LA, but the love their grandpa felt for them nevertheless manifested itself in the billfolds that filled their pockets twice a year. The family road trip became an extra holiday, third only to their birthdays and Christmas. All their dad ever seemed to do was drive them there.

The first thing Nemo bought with his money was a pair of ten-dollar Chuck Taylor knock-offs. It was the first purchase of the new outfit he’d wear for his first day of high school come the end of summer. The clerk in the outlet store asked him if he was sure when Nemo paid with the Benjamin. After all, they had the real deal on sale for only forty-five bucks. But Nemo’s parents raised him with the usual frugality of Filipino immigrants - and of course most of the money was David’s, on account of that he was the one who had the idea to steal the eggs in the first place.

“But don’t worry, we’ll get more. And I promise next time you’ll get a bigger share, Little Boy, since you’ve spent so much time practicing your aim.” David knows where to find parrot eggs. They nest in the hollows of oaks and eucalypti, trees common to the nearby suburbs of Pasadena and Arroyo. Every Sunday morning in June, they bussed it east and shook up every tree they could get to before sunset, hoping they’d find their treasure. While feral parrots are common
in Southern California - they visibly outnumber pigeons on the telephone lines - nests seemed fairly rare. They hadn’t gotten a new egg since their first go. But the whole enterprise felt new and exciting to the two, especially to Nemo. Perhaps it was the illegality of the action, the kind of tough, boyish activity their father and tiyos conducted in *their* adolescence and remembered for decades. But mostly he revelled in the time spent in close proximity to his brother and, yes, even Naranjita, his brother’s girlfriend, who condescended down to Nemo as if he was a dumb baby. Hunting parrots was precisely the kind of story he could tell his own sons one day, something outside the predictable routine of lawn mowing and leaf blowing. So they kept it going. The brothers’ system is simple: David shimmies up the trees and digs his hands into the heartwood for chicks and eggs while Nemo waits with an air rifle and looks out for any parents or people that come to defend. Naranjita just posts nearby with whatever book she’s reading at the time.

David is shirtless and twenty feet up a eucalyptus when Nemo yells his name. The suddenness of the yell stirs his brother and the nearby parrots on the upper branches. The commotion of the flock taking off all at once causes the tree to sway as if the trunk is made of rubber. His brother looks tiny dangling on the tree, against the clear, open sky.

“Why the fuck you yelling?” David yells back, not so much in anger as in embarrassment that he is vulnerable in front of his little brother and, especially, his girlfriend. The laurel on his head, comprised of bright green parrot feathers, slips off. It floats down slowly, giving Nemo enough time to catch it with the barrel of his rifle.

“Well, at least we know there aren’t any eggs up there, or they would’ve attacked.” Naranjita doesn’t even look up from her book when she says this. Today she is reading something interesting with myth in the title, which she chose from the library because the frontispiece pictured a bird. She used that word, frontispiece.
Nemo waits for his brother to slide back down before continuing. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I was trying to tell you that a cop was coming, but you didn’t hear me.”

“Where?”

“Well, he turned down a different street. Really thought he saw you for a second.” Nemo looks at his feet, his shoes still clean, jet black. The white trim immaculate.

“Oh, don’t worry about it, Little Boy. You’re just looking out for me like I taught you.” He presses his palm on the back of Nemo’s neck. It is rough and calloused, but also comforting in the same way a flat slate might be when looking to rest on a long hike. “Breathe, man. Chill out. Wooo-sah, you know? Slow down. You’re going a mile a minute. I can feel it on your neck.” When Nemo looks reassured, his brother squats down next to Naranjita and puts her free hand on his knee. “We should take a break anyway. We might have to walk further north. I doubt there’re any eggs on this block.”

Nemo holds the feather laurel out. “Caught this by the way. Still nice and crisp.” When David just bows his head, Nemo slings the rifle around himself and crowns his brother. For a moment Naranjita smiles cheerily, although maybe she read something funny.

“My two boys,” she says, glancing down at her book as she closes it to memorize the page she’s on. Her sigh is audible. “I take it that we’re moving to another place then.”

“Oh come on, we still have a lot of daylight left.” Nemo rubs the strap of the rifle with his purlicue. The canvas material burns satisfyingly. If she’s so eager to get home, then maybe she shouldn’t have come. “We really should get moving.”

“In a moment, Little Boy.” David takes their map out from his back pocket, unfolds a piece of it like a paper puzzle, and studies the land. It’s little more than a few library printouts from mapquest and a bus route pamphlet taped together, but it covers most of Eagle Rock to the Angeles
Mountains when fully laid flat. David colors a block with red highlighter, “500 California Street, done.” Entire swaths of neighborhoods are covered in red, marking their progress. The amount of red zones remind Nemo of the designated infection areas on a smallpox map of the early United States.

“I really thought we’d find more nests closer to the river.” Naranjita presses her lips together and squeezes her eyes shut in thought. Usually she looks ugly whenever she does this, but in the afternoon sunlight she is sweet as mango. “You know, boys, I think we should really stay out of places with people. Maybe they’re just here for the food. Maybe we’ll have more luck closer to the mountain. Or, you know, at Devil’s Gate.”

“That’s the opposite of luck. We can’t go there. If a park ranger sees this,” Nemo says, holding the rifle close to him, “he’s gonna confiscate it. Maybe even lock us up.”

“Our dad would go apeshit if something happened to us. You know how angry he gets.”

“It’s easy to get in at night. Lila and I trip there all the time. We talk to the parrots.”

“Yeah, but Lila’s white. And she lives there.”

Naranjita rolls her eyes. “So? We’re brown. We’ll be harder to spot in the dark.”

The brothers look at each other. Nemo isn’t nearly as dark as David, but he could improvise a ninja mask out of one of his black t-shirts. And the idea of stealth is appealing. “Maybe she’s right, David. It’d be worth the risk if we find a lot of nests.”

Naranjita plays with her curly blonde hair, wrapping strands around each of her fingers on her right hand, while the other bounces up and down with David’s knee. Her hair was the result of a bleaching gone wrong. Supposedly dark hair takes three weeks to reach the desired color, but she’s been orange all summer, like she ran out of hair dye. She leans firmly on David’s knee to stop his shaking and smiles at him.
They agree to be at the trailhead for the Devil’s Gate Dam by midnight, when the park rangers are likely to have finished their second round of patrols. Naranjita drops the brothers off at their house, blowing a kiss at each of them. “I promise we’ll be in and out, Davie. You won’t be late for work by a single second.”

Their father’s car isn’t parked out front, so the boys enter carelessly, the rifle still slung on Nemo’s shoulder. David slams the door shut and flicks his fist like he’s revving a motorcycle engine. “Make some coffee, Nemo.”

“I’ll cook something light for us.” By light, he means Filipino: sweet bread, microwaved empanada, a couple fried bananas; the little snacks their mother taught him how to make. It was like eating their heritage in tiny bites. “Dad can have the rest of the chicken ‘cause I bet he’ll be dead tired.”

“We’ll be dead tired in the morning. You and her don’t get it. You guys get to sleep in tomorrow, watch your cartoons.” David rubs his head with the palm of his hand, over his buzzcut. He used to have such long hair, like a fierce Chinese general. “Well, I mean that’s a good sign anyway, that you get to sleep. Tatay always talked about how he was working at your age back home.”

Nemo wants to call him tatay too, but David always makes fun of his accent. He tries, but taut-eye sounds wrong in his mouth, and the way he winces when he tries the tongue of his parents betrays his American upbringing. “Dad doesn’t know we’re working. I mean, we’ll have a big haul. There’re these real nice flannels I saw the other day. Real wool, soft like butter.”

“I’m not so sure, man. You shouldn’t get your hopes up like that, only to be disappointed.”

“What if we get like a hundred eggs?”
“If we can get one, the money’s all yours, Little Boy. Get you some nice clothes for the new year so you can pick up some fine ass high school girls. Pop your cherry. How much does the flannel shirt cost? I probably have some old shirts you could wear.”

“I really wanna buy my own.”

“I get that, man. I get that.”

After dinner, they split a joint in their room, blowing their smoke out the window.

“I can’t wait to move out, man. We can get a room together, somewhere cheap. Don’t know why tatay insists on keeping this place when houses are so hard to keep.” He used to want to go to college, but gave that up. Every now and then, Naranjita brings it up, but he ignores her.

When their father gets home, David does all the talking. Nemo got into the habit of cooking because it was the only way he could hide the tell-tale glazed, red eyes from his dad. If his father pried extra hard, then he could just chock it up to onions, or something like that. Nemo grew up being allergic to everything.

“You boys should get some rest.” Their dad slouches over his meal. There was a time when Nemo thought his dad could lift anything. He even used to lie to his friends about it, talked about how his dad could build a whole F-15 by himself if he had the parts. That’s what an engineer in the Navy can do, that’s how smart he is. He imagines his dad lifting a fighter plane missile across his shoulders like a monk carrying water up flights of stairs, like a little brown Atlas carrying the whole entire world.

While their father eats, they go through their closet and remove four black shirts. They change into David’s long-sleeved turtle necks, the shirts he used to wear when he ran every morning. For Nemo, the shirt is just an inch too wide around his chest that he looks like he’s sagging. The sleeves cover his hands. David ties another shirt around Nemo’s head. “Little ninja,
that’s what you look like.” David wraps his second shirt around his neck like a scarf, like he’s also hiding something.

“What if dad checks up on us while we’re out?”

“I don’t think he will.”

“It doesn’t hurt to be safe.” He wraps his pillow in his blanket, tucking it in. From the door, it actually looks like a real boy sleeping. It’s so convincing that Nemo kisses where its forehead would be.

“Don’t do that, man. That’s gay.”

When they hear their father click-on his recording of Jeopardy!, they make their way to the front of the house. He’s usually out by the second round.

They each carry a messenger bag full of the supplies they might need tonight: a hand-shovel, a hand-pick, ten feet of rope, a crowbar, and extra super-point pellets so anything out there goes down in a single shot. Nemo’s out of the house first, the rifle slung on his shoulder. He feels a certain authority sneaking like this. His new shoes serve him well, the rubber absorbing the sound of each step so well that David gives him a thumbs-up.

David is about to lock the door when their father opens it. Nemo can’t make out what they’re saying, but from the way David stares back at their father and nods, he must be getting away with it. David shrugs and puts on his usual impatient face whenever their dad does something embarrassing. For a moment, Nemo feels like his dad can see him. He clutches his rifle tightly, feeling sweat pool under his arms.

The moment passes when his dad shrugs back and hugs his brother, his face the same resigned smile the day David got back home. He goes back inside and closes the screen door but not the wooden one. He watches David for awhile before disappearing into the house.
“Don’t worry, I told ‘tay not to bother ‘you.’ He thinks I’m going out to pick up some smokes.” David winks, pulling up the black shirt around his head so that he too is a ninja.

Naranjita picks them up two blocks away. As usual, Nemo sits in the back by himself, but he doesn’t wear a seatbelt this time, the kind of thing SWAT members do so they can get out of their vehicles that much faster. Naranjita doesn’t even turn around to remind him of his seatbelt. She just drives. In fact, they don’t speak much on the drive at all, content with the white noise of their lone car on the wide, open streets.

The transition into the richer, more affluent Linda Vista neighborhood is so quick, it’s easy to miss. Usually Nemo catches the dirty yellow sign of the auto-body shop and the huge steel transmission lines before the ascent into the San Rafael Hills, but he must be so tired he missed them. Instead, when he looks out the window, he sees the American Craftsman and Mission Revival homes tucked in the safety of their municipally maintained trees. The canopy is so thick that it doesn’t look like Los Angeles outside. The street curves so sharply, it feels like a rollercoaster, especially with the way Naranjita drives. At a particularly long red light, a tall SUV’s headlights flood their cabin. It maintains a regular distance away from them.

David rests a hand on Naranjita’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, it’s not a cop. You can tell by the headlights. Trust me.”

When the single-lane street widens into two, the SUV pulls up next to them and drives at nearly the same pace. Drivers have a subconscious tendency to do this, to group of with others on the road, like they want to see into each other’s lives. The passengers in the other car are a family of four, some happy rich folks on their way back late after a vacation, no doubt. In the backseat, the two kids - boy and girl, of course - sleep soundly while some cartoon plays on the headrest monitors.
“Can’t believe people are driving that kind of shit with gas the price it is. People like that are why everyone else is getting kicked out of their homes.” David shapes his fingers into a pistol and mimes a few shots at the other driver.

Naranjita steals a look back at Nemo in the rear-view mirror. She gives him a smile. He doesn’t understand her.

The Devil’s Gate Dam isn’t nearly as frightening as Nemo thought it might be at night. The devil’s face, which is supposedly carved in the rock at the entrance, looks more like a blind old lady. The forest is dark, sure, but there’s enough moonlight and light pollution from the city to see where they are going. Flashlights would be an unnecessary risk.

They make their way through the trail, following Naranjita’s lead.

“Are you sure we’re going the right way? What if we don’t find anything?”

“Well, not with that attitude. Be more positive, Nemo,” she says, as if that made a difference.

Nemo mostly watches his brother’s feet in front of him, following the way his feet curve to maintain balance on the rocks and knotted roots that weave in and out of the mud. When they scale a steep hill, he plants his feet in his brother’s footsteps, exactly. He wants to take in the woods around him, but Naranjita and David press on, and a moment of lingering leaves him behind by too many paces.

When they go off-trail, they have to mount a felled tree. David gets over the log in a single bound, while Naranjita has to use her knees. Her shorts ride up on her thighs when she makes the climb, and Nemo realizes he’s wearing the wrong kind of clothes. His mask makes him feel like a crab cooking. Struggling to breathe, he loses traction on wet bark and falls on his ass. He shakes the mask off his face and pounds at the mud with his fist.
“Davie, you can’t make him the packmule for the whole trip.” Naranjita grabs a strap to one of the messenger bags on Nemo’s shoulder, but he shrugs, pinching it between his neck and collarbone.

“I can carry these just fine.” He winces at his own voice cracking. He always sounds like a chicken around her.

“Brave little man.” She looks at David. “If only you were more like your little brother. It’s not so bad being soft, you know.”

“If he doesn’t want help, I’m not gonna force him to take it.”

“Yeah, I’m fine, I swear.”

“Nemo, baby, you’re not even wearing the right shoes.”

He isn’t. He’s in his new high-tops, but with all the mud and wear they look years old. He wore them for her, hoping she’d notice. She did.

David forces a strap free from Nemo and shoulders the heaviest bag without so much as a grunt. Nemo’s knees straighten with the relief.

“He’s a strong kid, isn’t he? Stronger than I was at his age anyway. Come on, Little Boy, you must be tired.”

“I’m not.”

Naranjita shakes her head. This is the first time he’s seen her with her hair tied back. Her bare forehead makes her look like a different person. “Sure you are. We can rest here and still be out well before sunrise. We have a lot of time, okay, Little Boy?” Nemo’s nickname sounds wrong on her tongue, like she’s trying to speak Tagalog for the first time. His dad is Big Boy, which makes him Little Boy - just the type of nicknames Filipinos give each other. But the way she says
boy, mouth curving out like she’s gonna leave lipstick on his forehead… well she just isn’t related to him, so who is she to use that name?

“I don’t wanna fucking rest.”

She flinches at him, but he doesn’t feel as big as David when he scares her the same.

“Well all right then,” David says. “I’ll take the other bag just to be sure.”

“I wanna pull my weight.”

“You can carry the gun if you want.”

The rifle is mostly plastic, but it is heavy in his hands.

“Look at you, soldier. You look like tatay.”

Naranjita kisses his cheek. “Mi soldadito.” Her lips are cold and wet.

He rubs the spot vigorously until the dirt on his wrist gives him a darker complexion.

“Too old for kisses from your big sis? I’m just wishing you luck.”

What did she know of luck? She was the type of idiot who opened her umbrella indoors. He watched her do it once. “Me and David could’ve made this trek out here by ourselves.”

“Well, when either of you can drive, let me know. Plus it helps to have someone who knows how to fight.”

“I know how to fight.”

David hushes the two of them. “You hear that?”

“Things live here, Davie. It could be anything. Probably a mouse or a warbler.” But just in case, she whispers.

David pulls the three of them down to the ground, behind the log. Two lights emerge from the trees, going along the trail. Nemo squeezes the rifle close to him like a doll. His brother gives him a wink and holds a finger to his mouth. The lights scatter over the log, like they’re coming
right toward them. The footsteps are difficult to make out. Everything out here seems much louder: the wind, the leaves, the creatures rustling, living, breathing. Nemo imagines that the flashlights catch a pair of eyes in the darkness. For a moment, that’s a strange comfort, until he realizes just how big the forest is.

“I think they’re gone.”

“Davie, I think we should go. Normally no one’s here at this time.”

He holds his phone up over the log, using its screen as a mirror. The lights are clearly gone, and all that reflects back is the night. “Let’s go.”

They wander for what feels like an hour. “Do you even know where you’re going?”

“Lila and I always go to the same spot when we trip. It’s a safe place.” She looks behind her at the brothers. “We get there sober, so I know where we’re going. It’s near the Frog Palace.”

Each step feels like a wet sponge, like they’re sinking into the ground. In fact, Nemo is sinking into the ground. Every time he brings a foot up, some mud comes with him. The forest gets darker and darker the further they walk, the canopy thicker and thicker until even the moonlight disappears. They cannot see the ground, but they tether themselves to each other with a rope. “I feel like an astronaut out in space,” Nemo says into the darkness in front of him, where the rope disappears into what he hopes is his brother. A hundred yards away, he hears Naranjita’s stupid laugh muffled behind her giant hands.

“Bush up ahead,” she calls out, before the rustling of leaves and the snapping of branches fills the air in front of him. “This is definitely where the parrots are.” He could feel her jinx taking hold.

A second snap of branches, his brother’s heavier feet.
Then suddenly all at once, the foliage scratches at his arms and he tramples along a plant. The blackness above him perforates, revealing the moon in little twinkles. He can see the forest again. David’s already untied himself and unloaded a few supplies, signalling at Nemo to hurry his ass up. He dons his laurel of parrot feathers.

“There, right there. Can you see them?” He puts his arm around Nemo, pulling him close so that he can follow his line of sight. They almost look like the leaves themselves, there are so many of them. They’re all bright green, most of them red-headed with a couple lilac-crowned among them, all sitting perfectly still except for the undulations of the branches beneath them as a wind blows through the clearing.

David climbs a tree at the edge of the clearing, a large oak. Nearby, a brook babbles along. There was once a river here, where the Tongva fished salmon, but the dam erased that. Nemo kneels down, his knee sinking into the mud. He feels it bleed through his pants, almost as cold as ice. He does his best to control his shivering, but the wind is relentless. He tenses, trying to become hard as rock. Naranjita crouches down next to him and wraps her sweater around his shoulders. She holds him tightly, resting her chin on the top of his head. “Be still,” she says. “When it’s time to really shoot, then you hold your breath.”

The parrots don’t notice David’s slow approach. They don’t stir when he grabs one of them and wrings its neck. Nothing is as inelegant as a bird falling dead. He kills three more before he reaches a hollow. Pick in hand, he makes the hollow bigger by quietly scraping chunks of bark off. A few birds stir, watching him with the intensity of raptors - they don’t have brows and their eyes are perfectly circular, masking whatever emotions they must be feeling. They lightly caw, but it isn’t enough to wake the entire flock. They don’t panic until David pulls out two eggs with a single hand. He rolls them in his hand like baoding balls.
He pulls out three more and brings them down. The entire flocks swirls around them, but the brothers work quickly, Nemo and Naranjita offering their shoulders to David so he can shimmy up a tree efficiently. He has to swat at a few birds with his pick, stunning a couple out of the sky. The birds thump around them. “Finish them off, Little Boy.”

Nemo looks at Naranjita but her face is blank. For the first time he notices that her eyes aren’t squinty because she’s high all the time - or well not only because of that - but because she’s tired. Really tired. He steps on the parrots until they stop moving.

He picks at one parrot, trying his best to remove its feathers delicately, but they don’t come off. Finally he takes a handful and yanks as hard as he can, his foot leveraging the head. The feathers pull free, but comes with pale skin stuck to the quills. He watches the river spill down his fingers, along his wrist, and under his elbow. The droplets at his feet remind him of an archipelago at first, before they coalesce into an island, and then a continent. Soon the uneven rocks that stick out from the small pond he’s created look like the islands instead.

One bird flies right at David’s face and forces him off the tree. He lands on his back, spreading mud everywhere. He’d laugh so loudly if the air wasn’t knocked out his lungs. She is bigger than the rest, her chest puffed out, her feathers flared. Her colors are different from the others, her head a neon helmet made of yellow. She squawks, almost as if she’s laughing, but the boys are familiar with the gesture: she issues out a challenge.

“That’s the most beautiful bird I’ve ever seen.”

She calls out a song. She repeats a single word. Go, go, go. The other parrots caw out louder, yelling in cacophonic unison. They sound like the wrong halves of an orchestra put together, no melody, but thundering. They erupt in a whirlwind. David takes the gun from Nemo and shoots one out of the sky. He pumps the rifle and prepares a super-point pellet.
Before he can kill the yellow-headed amazon, Naranjita shoves the barrel toward the ground. “We gotta go,” she says.

The parrots leave en masse. The entire canopy seems to take off with them, revealing much more moonlight than they had anticipated. It reveals their carnage.

Flashlights shine toward them, intermittently interrupted by the weaving tree branches. “We see you assholes,” the flashlights call out.

David points up at the trees. Naranjita shakes her head signalling the opposite direction of the lights with alert eyes, but David ignores her and scrambles up a tree.

The other two climb up after him, hugging the oak closely as the flashlights get closer. “They’re definitely gonna see us.”

“Davie, we can’t just sit here.”

“Let me think.”

“Davie.”

“They can’t catch us all.”

She grabs his knee. Her grip looks strong enough to crack walnuts.

“It’s just 5150. I love you.”

“All right.”

He wraps Naranjita with the strap to his messenger bag.

“Davie, this is evidence.”

He kisses her on the forehead and just like that she lets him go, not even a fight. He runs straight for the flashlights, his bright green laurel shimmering in the moonlight.
Eventually the flashlights face away from them. They follow the sound of David squawking like a parrot. Caw caw, he calls for a good long while, until the forest settles back into its quiet breathing.

Naranjita and Nemo split a joint while they wait. They don’t make a noise for a good long while, perched in their trees. They ride the branches swaying and listen to the grasshoppers mate. Every now and then Nemo taps Naranjita’s shoulder and then his ear, but the sound he hears is nothing. Probably just the wind.

“What if they find your car?”

“Don’t be such a Negative Nancy. Your brother…”

They come down off the tree, Naranjita first, then Nemo. He doesn’t like the way she helps him off, but he doesn’t say anything. He’s too high and too sick with himself. He throws up on himself, watching bits of fried banana ruin his brother’s shirt. The blood on his arm is crusty and maroon, so he scratches it off. It gets stuck beneath his fingernails. He starts to scratch compulsively. He remembers reading that parrots picked their own feathers when they were nervous, and he scratches harder. Naranjita has to pin him on his back to get him to calm down. Her hair has come undone, its curls bouncing up and down on his face, tickling his nose. He sneezes, gets a little bit on her.

“Gross, dude.”

“I’m sorry.”

She cleans what she can, but the havoc has them both covered head-to-toe in mud, so she resigns. She takes Nemo’s hand in hers, interlocking their fingers. “Come, we’ll probably have luck over this way.”

The sky is lightening, preparing for twilight. “Do you think we’ll find David?”
“I don’t know.”

They reach the edge of the marshes, where the forest disappears and opens into wetlands, and further, some chaparral. They can see for miles. They can see the Angeles Mountains, which orients them. “Did you know that JPL is up there?”

“Oh, no, I didn’t realize it was right there. Do they launch spacecraft from there?”

Nemo looks up at the sky, almost expecting a rocket to emerge on the horizon. “I know everyone says they want to be an astronaut when they grow up, but for a long time I really wanted that. To study engineering like my dad and then go beyond and fly a rocket.”

“Why don’t you?”

He just shakes his head. “It’s stupid.”

Naranjita frowns at him but doesn’t say anything. They cross the marshlands. A couple times, they each sink into quickmud, but they use the rifle to help pull each other out. It isn’t so thick that they need the rope all that much. Their hands are strong enough.

In the distance, a grey fox watches them behind eyes as black as the night around it. Nemo points the air rifle at it and stares right back. “I’m not scared of you.”

“Should be. They’re clever little things. They know how to attack from the cover of trees. They’re smart enough to catch birds.”

Just the same, Nemo keeps his rifle trained on the fox and the fox stares right back, not blinking once. He shoots it with a ball bearing - not enough to kill, but enough to send it yapping.

Naranjita shoves him to the ground. “What the fuck was that for? You can’t go around shooting things just for hell of it.”

“This isn’t for the hell of it. This is so they stay away.” Nemo stands back up and puts his face in Naranjita’s. He’s close enough to smell her sweat, close enough to see the cuts along her
hand from climbing the trees. “You’ve been jinxing us from the start. This was supposed to be a quiet operation, a quick mission, in and out before dawn and now my brother’s gone and it’s your damn fault.”

“I’m only trying to help you two. You guys need all the help you can get.”

“You’re the reason he was put away the first time. I don’t need you. You’re just bad juju.”

He chases after the fox, sprinting now. He isn’t sure what he’ll find in a dead fox, but maybe it’s enough to hold something dead again. Tolerance was, after all, bearing that which makes him weak and becoming stronger for it. He can hear her yelling out his name after him, over and over, but he keeps on running. He runs through the pain of his calf muscles cramping, right through the burn of the canvas strap on his neck, right through the fog settling around his eyes, weighing his head down so hard he could just timber over and sleep for a good long while.

And then he stops. That last call of his name wasn’t her voice. “Boy! Little Boy!” She catches up to him, panting, her hands on her stubby knees. The sweat running down her face traces the mud across her cheek and makes her look more gaunt than she actually is. “I heard it too,” she says.

They follow David’s voice through the woods. “Little Boy! Little Boy! Little Boy!” he calls from deep among the trees, as if he was the very forest itself calling all at once, the voice carrying on the wind as it weaves through the leaves. “Little Boy!”

Perched on a high branch of a eucalyptus stands that yellow-headed amazon, proud and smiling behind its purple-grey beak. “Little Boy,” she squawks quietly. Nemo blinks back a tear and steadies his heart rate. Slow and easy does it.

But he can’t maintain his aim, he hasn’t seen a bird so bright and beautiful before. She flares out her wings and caws a song just for the three of them. Naranjita rests her hand on the back
of his neck. It is soft, like butter. “It’s okay,” she says, and he believes her. She takes the rifle from Nemo and points it at the parrot. She inhales very quickly and holds her breath.

In total, they have thirteen parrot eggs. It’s impossible to tell what eggs belong to which species, but they’ll charge the same rate for all of them nonetheless. They speed east toward Victorville, the road long and straight like the train tracks. The morning sun pouring through the windshield momentarily blinds them. Nemo instinctively looks away, at Naranjita, but she maintains her gaze on the road, squinting as if she’s deep in thought. She looks as sweet as carabao mango.

“How come you don’t speak Tagalog like your brother?”

“I don’t know,” Nemo responds. He covers his eyes with his hand before staring out the window. He thinks about his brother, thinks about what his dad is gonna say. “No one bothered to teach me, I guess.”

“That’s a shame. It’s really useful knowing another language.”

“Grandpa says he’ll teach me a few words.”

“That’s nice of him. It’s a shame your dad’s too busy.”

“Yeah, all he does is drive us there. Feels like grandpa does all the work.”

“That’s nice of your dad, you know. It’s good that he shows you how to be a man.”

“What do you mean, Naranjita?”

“You don’t have to call me that. That’s just Davie’s stupid little nickname for me. Please, call me Veronica.” She waves her hair with her hand. “I wanted to have blue hair, but when I got to this bleached blonde hair, I liked it. He thinks he’s being cute by calling me little orange.”

“That’s Spanish.”
“Yeah. My dad taught me Spanish on long road trips like this. He’d point at, like, that red car over there, and he’d be like ‘mija, what’s that called,’ and I’d have to respond with ‘coche rojo.’ And that’s how we’d pass the time, just the two of us.”

“Coche rojo,” he repeats. “All right, what’re these called?” He holds the bag of eggs up.

“You should know this. Huevos. Like the food.”

Nemo shakes his head. “I mean how do you say bird?”

“Pajaro.”

He says that word too. Nemo looks around the car for things for her to name. She has a label for everything: rojo, oro, pequena. “How about me? Do I get a nickname?”

“Muy guapo.”

“I mean, like a real nickname. What’s my name in your language?”

She looks over at him, her tired eyes calm. She stares at him a little too long for someone who’s driving, but she keeps the car straight. She stares at him as if she’s expecting him to answer, but before he can think of anything clever, she looks back at the road. “Just Nemo.”

“Just Nemo,” he repeats back at her. “Nemo,” he keeps repeating, stunned by the sudden foreignness of his own name.