

THE GREAT COUNTRY OF ASIA

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*For my grandparents, living and late,  
working tirelessly to hold  
the foundation of this tree.*

*For my parents, sturdy branches  
that I swore moved like bamboo  
bending but never breaking.*

*For my siblings and my friends,  
sometimes fallen leaves  
but mostly became  
the wind, the rain, and the fertilizer  
along this journey.*

*And for my teachers who picked  
the fruits of our labor,  
May they taste just as sweet.*

## ABSTRACT

*The Great Country of Asia* is a collection of five short stories — “Café-22,” “The Avocado Tree,” “In Fashion,” “The Neighbor,” and “Where We Are,” each with an Asian American protagonist at its center. The stories are cultural critiques that tackle themes exclusive to critical theory like typecasting, the relationship between visibility and silence, Orientalism, and more. Within this project you will find stories that address the elements and major works that had paved the foundation for the creative work that I wanted to write, as well as acknowledge the necessity for representation of Asian American stories in Western media. These stories are created with the intent to share a dialogue, contributing to a bigger conversation, and not be the singular definition of it.

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# INTRODUCTION

“The Great Country of Asia” is the punchline to a running joke spoken between friends critiquing any exchange of one Asian culture for another, as though race, ethnicity, and culture in Asia were interchangeable. For example, someone mistakes Tae Kwon Do as Chinese or that a Vietnamese traditional garment is a kimono, and in response to being called out, said offenders say that it “doesn’t matter.” It is, however, clear that this interchangeability of Asian cultures is violent as the understanding of the Asian American identity is interlocked with their respective Asian culture.

Utilizing this punchline as a way to articulate the necessity for diversity and representation of Asian Americans in Western media, *The Great Country of Asia* is a collection of short stories which uphold one common theme: Asian American protagonists that headline their own respective narratives. There are five stories in total — “Café-22,” “The Avocado Tree,” “In Fashion,” “The Neighbor,” and “When We Are” — all of whom are cultural critiques that tackle themes exclusive to critical theory like typecasting, the relationship between visibility and silence, Orientalism, and more. These stories are created with the intent to share a dialogue, contributing to a bigger conversation, and not be the singular definition of it.

After taking courses in post-colonial literature and cultural studies, critical race theory had become a significant part of my understanding of literature and creative writing. These courses had been one of my first in-depth experiences with close reading, helping me to

comprehend beyond the words printed. To think that motifs and concepts could be used to project a stronger understanding than the dialogue that had taken place within the novels was inspirational.

One of the first novels that had introduced me to close reading was Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Focusing on pre-colonial life of an Igbo tribe in the south-eastern part of Nigeria, the novel filled its pages with quotes that painted an image of Africa that Conrad had failed to introduce. Achebe had also simultaneously referenced Africa's foreseeable future of the arrival of colonizers that would contribute to the fall of a tribal system. *Things Fall Apart* had not only influenced the concept of three-dimensional and complex characters, but that its author had spoken the words that I live by: "If you don't like someone's story, write your own."

Achebe had provided me the alternative to the stories that I had read, and with it, came the interest to write them and the methods to develop them. When I had started to write round and dynamic characters, I became eager to stuff the text with morals, symbols, and motifs as well as concepts that I had learned and loved, and it is by close reading the text that the reader may gather the nuances that make the character or the scene a little more developed. For instance, one of the stylistic strategies that I enjoyed the most in my studies was the use of material items or background props to convey a certain emotion or experience that a character endures.

In "When We Are," the cracked cabinet denotes the fracture in Ansei's relationship with his son, while the cigarette in the 1965 flashback symbolizes Roy and Three Jays.

In the first scene that focuses around Ansei, his solution to handling two underaged kids that tried to sneak off with alcohol was to get into a physical altercation with them. Sitting in his shop was a glass cabinet with a crack already in it and having made no prior move to fix the

glass cabinet, a fight had made it shatter. By perpetuating violence, it had made the situation worse, therefore echoing the fragile relationship between Ansei and Eddie.

The flashback scene with the cigarette that fell to the ground had represented a moment in which the two men became physically close and emotionally vulnerable. *It had not been a threat*— defines the moment being nothing that would have changed between them, and *the cold would not let it set fire to anything* could be interpreted as Donna or any other external force would have not allowed the moment to become anything more than what it was.

The glimpse of the mailbox toward the end of “The Avocado Tree” denotes a similar theme of revealing scene. We can infer that when Nora places her hand over her last name on the family home’s mailbox, despite its age, the lacquer protects it from fraying or chipping the name, therefore hinting that the family will be okay, no matter what.

Material items can be used as one factor of understanding a situation while the use of space can be another in strengthening the understanding of a character. This often occurs in film, under the broad term *mise-en-scène*, where set design functions as a necessary tool to tell a story. As Pramaggiore and Wallis reveal in *Film: A Critical Introduction*, the “primary functions of setting are to establish time and place, to introduce ideas and themes, and to create mood” (62). One way that space is used to expose a character is first depicted in “In Fashion.” As Bianca walks through Simone Martin’s Malibu home, she becomes increasingly aware of how the suspect puts culture on display, inferring that Simone’s home is a museum and alluding to the notion that people have and will become artefacts for her collection.

Hand-in-hand with the use of space is the use of lighting in cinema. Pramaggiore and Wallis add that lighting “furthers the audience’s understanding of characters, underscores particular actions, develops themes, and establishes mood” (77). In the case of “The Neighbor,”

the titular character's home operates under such labels. She presents to Jane a living space that rarely uses any light. As Jane ponders the number of guests who have seen her neighbor's home in its darkness, she also provokes the question of how many have seen it completely lit. This idea of light and dark in a home reference familiarity of a character. As the neighbor tells more about herself and becomes comfortable with Jane, she begins to light candles, incense, and brightening up her home. Likewise, as Jane begins to understand her neighbor does her vision adjust to the lighting.

When it comes to Western film and cinema, broad terms like *mise-en-scène* appear universal in the creation of media. However, it is the subject of style and the fear of being pigeonholed that the topic of aesthetics is up for debate. In *Asian America Through the Lens*, author Jun Xing quotes director Loni Ding regarding the definition of pigeonholing as “any classification of people tends to limit them to the extent that a category or a way you are framing who someone is or what their work is about and what their film is similar to,” and rejects it (44). Pigeonholing Asian American aesthetics is a way of typecasting the type of media that Asian Americans produce and tell their stories.

Asian American creators as well as their content often battle the phrase of “being Asian-enough.” In *Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences*, Lisa Lowe discusses the concept of being Asian-enough, or rather, its counterpart deemed feeling less than ethnic. Employing Diana Chang's short story “The Oriental Contingent,” a story which discusses a conversation between two Chinese women, Lowe highlights a line that one of the women confesses. She says, “The only time I feel Chinese is when I'm embarrassed I'm not more Chinese” (176). The concept of what the author calls “a failed Chinese” operates in the same vein as “Asian-enough,” both concepts striving to achieve a vague notion of what it means

to be culturally authentic. It is that fear of engaging with others of the same ethnicity and learning that they are more in-tuned with their culture that defines the less than ethnic feeling (507).

To deconstruct what it means to be “Asian-enough,” the narrator of “Café-22” is not described to be “glaringly Asian.” Given that the narrator is Asian American, they deny the checklist of stereotypes that are brought forth whenever a character is declared a person of color. Refraining from diving deeper into the narrator’s backstory to elicit some sort of relevancy, I refused to make the characters and the setting “glaringly Asian” just for the narrator to be considered “Asian-enough.” These “Asian-enough” traits are what contribute to typecasting in Western media, as it is not limited to cinema, but is also featured in prose.

Typecasting, like pigeonholing, focuses more on the subjugation of an individual to the same type of role based on appearance, as one way for Western media to control how representation can be applied globally. This creates the basis for stereotypes. By putting the type-casted individual (or character) into a fabricated scenario (plot or scene), it hereby offers a way in which the viewer (or reader) can expect to handle interacting with a person who looks or acts similarly to that of the character or role.

While typecasting and pigeonholing can be harmful factors to telling an Asian American story, Ding adds that categories, however, can be useful as a “way of understanding the significance of the work, in terms of what it relates to in the past, where it is now, and where it might be going next” (44). In short, Asian American aesthetics, roles, and narratives are not meant to be cemented, but rather, they should be added to, like a historical record, as a way of making sense of an Asian American story.

In the event that categorization fails to be only subjected to historical record, typecasting changes the way that the individual sees themselves or those who are of the same ethnic background as them. This contributes toward the discussion of diasporic feelings.

*The Oxford Dictionary* describes diaspora as the dispersion of Jewish people beyond Israel. In cultural studies, the term has been taken and broadened to apply to all groups of people who leave their original homeland. This dispersion leaves the individual or future generations longing for a sense of inclusion and belonging, as they perceive a treatment of “Otherness” from both their home and their citizenship. Usually, diasporic people are considered liminal, as they live in the space between — never fully one nor the other.

For Asian Americans, there has been an uproot from their motherland to America, at some point in their history. It is upon arriving in America that the image of their Asian identity has changed. In “The Neighbor,” both the titular character and the narrator deal with their own diasporic feelings. The narrator doesn’t recognize *kanji* or assumes that the beautifully-decorated cabinet in her neighbor’s home is a *butsudan*. Meanwhile, when asked about her immigration to America, the neighbor tells a short, chilling anecdote that begins with, “I left Japan like I had walked through a door.” Through the influence of Western media or the forced idea of assimilation, the Asian American lives with a dilution of culture.

By assimilating, this dilution of culture risks the ability to remain one-hundred percent tethered to tradition. Tradition is, as seen in “The Avocado Tree,” a reference to the past and how the world had operated. Nora sees the avocado tree as a connection to how things were when she was younger. She had a strong relationship with her parents and she could behave however she wanted (re: with cowardice). The story she tells lines up symmetrically, the destruction of the tree becomes the destruction of her relationship with her parents. As she had

seen the “fruit” become diluted, smaller, and poisoned, she imagines the same with her parents. This thinning of a relationship occurs when her brother outs her to their parents and she chooses to avoid them. Prior to the events that transpire within the story, Nora placates herself as the heterosexual daughter that her parents have assumed her to be, therefore, performing to the standards of her family.

Feminist theorist Judith Butler describes performativity as a “relative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (xii). While performativity is more inherently tied to gender, for Nora, she performs her sexuality, a rehearsal of being what society deems a heterosexual woman. She also performs to the expectations of her parents in lieu of leading the life she truly wants, for fear that her identity will be rejected otherwise. This creation of a whole new identity is one that Nora fabricates based on what she thinks her parents want from her. This identity is what writer Gregory Phipps coins as the ready-made identity.

The ready-made identity is defined as one that “lives in the white American’s mind and is comprised of stereotypes and impressions” (Phipps 327). However, in “The Avocado Tree” Nora’s ready-made identity is not outlined by a white American mind; it is one outlined by an Asian heterosexual’s mind. By that definition, she perceives herself to complete the necessary goals of her parents, by marrying a man and having his children (and therefore their grandchildren), regardless of her own volition. An identity invented by a racial perspective can be seen in “In Fashion.” The narrator utilizes an alias, thus protecting her own identity. This alias is one that is contrived to gain the trust of the suspect, therefore, weaponizing her ready-made identity. By abiding by the stereotypes and the impressions that comes with her “exoticness,” the narrator is considered “familiar” to the suspect and convinces her of her credibility.

The ready-made identity is not randomized, but selectively chosen from a history of micro or macro aggressions toward the oppressed individual, as mentioned in the discussion of typecasting and stereotypes. The identity is a product of a marriage between W. E. B. Du Bois' "double-consciousness" and the "collective white consciousness" also as defined by Phipps. Whereas double-consciousness is the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others," (Du Bois 2) the collective white consciousness is a "shared vision of white Americans and their perception of how the world and its occupants operate" (Phipps 327). This shared vision of white Americans is also dependent on a person of color's perception of what they know of White America. This is how the ready-made identity is formed.

In accordance to the cultural concepts that are utilized in "In Fashion," it is important to note how Black writing and theory influenced the way that this version of the story came to fruition. It was the spring semester of 2016 when I had first written "In Fashion." At the time, it was called "The Next Best Thing" as it maintained the vision of a fashion designer who wanted to discover what came after minimalism, re: the next best thing. The original draft had an unnamed narrator while the ending contained the gruesome finale of the designer wearing human skin to an event. Revision upon revision led me to write an equally disturbing version of the story in which the narrator lives, but at what cost. No matter how it ended, I wanted the reader to take away the violent nature of cultural appropriation.

Between the story's original draft and its final revision, I had watched a film written and directed by Jordan Peele called *Get Out*. The 2017 film was heavily revered for its execution of racial discourse and upon watching it, I was completely inspired to alter the ending for my own story. To those who had seen the film from start to finish, the final page of "In Fashion" would hold a lot of weight for the rest of the piece, its ending purposefully paralleling that of *Get Out*.

It was clear from the moment that I had watched *Get Out* the first time that “In Fashion” would become tethered to it. Since the content drew a lot of similarities to the film, I wanted “In Fashion” to stay true to the method behind the ending that Peele chose. Most importantly, I did not want “In Fashion” to ignore the significance of Black voices in critical race theory.

Black American writers and theorists have paved the road for the voices of Asian Americans as well as other People of Color (POC), as the history of Black America became a base for analyzing the treatment of all POC in White America. Their concepts and vocabulary introduced a language for POC like me to speak on discrimination, providing a platform in which to articulate polemical discourse. There is no discussion of race and culture that does not include the Black community. This is evident in the refurbishment of a concept known as Blackface to one that applies to the Asian (American) community: Yellowface.

Yellowface takes its name from the theatrical and heavily racist practice called Blackface, in which a white person is hired to cake their bodies in makeup and prosthetics to become a caricature of White America’s impression of a person of color. Although Yellowface looks like Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* when he puts on dentures and squawks in such an exaggerated tone that makes its viewer cringe, it also takes the form of Emma Stone in *Aloha* and Scarlett Johansson in *Ghost in the Shell*. Yellowface gives white Americans the opportunity to become an Asian American by gifting them the roles that should have been written for or could be given to Asian American faces.

In the Introduction of his book *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*, Robert G. Lee defines Yellowface as marking Asians as “unmistakably Oriental” and “sharply define[ing] the Oriental in a racial opposition to whiteness”; and like Blackface, Yellowface is not a demonstration as to what the Asian identity or what “Asian culture” is like (2). In Hollywood,

Yellowface presents itself as a mockery: thick accents are the joke while squinting glances are the punchline; while assimilation is desired, it is never fulfilled. The identity of an Asian is an accoutrement and Yellowface is a thievery of culture, a smock to put on and shrug off later.

However, before Yellowface had been coined as such, it was known by another name: Orientalism. Orientalism is the West's interpretation of Asian countries and cultures east of Europe and its practice enables the obsession of these societies and manifests it through an imitation or depiction of these cultures in a fetishized manner. It establishes the idea that any and all depictions that the West produces are fact.

As Karl Marx once said, "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented." This epigraph from Said's *Orientalism* underlines the cannibalism that takes place when the Occident speaks about the Orient, or when the West represents the East. In addition, Said explained that the concept of the Orient was created to dominate, control, and manipulate views and perceptions of the East. Meanwhile, polarizing the West and the East made the statement that the West had been civilized while the East were barbaric, a common attitude of colonialist behavior. While statements and stories of the Orient were being distributed among the Western world, the West had utilized resources and backdrop trends of cultural appropriation to market to their own consumers. In a way, they would say "buy this, it's authentic," and the Western consumer would purchase on the off-chance that they had received something "exotic."

What is discovered when learning about the relationship between the Orient and the Occident is that the Orient is not a real place, nor a place at all, but rather, a discursive formation that Orientalists — those of Western upbringing who study, depict, and imitate writing, design, and art of the East — have constructed and implemented power over. This discursive practice conducts a process in which the dominant narrative creates this "reality" of the Other and divides

it from the Western society. The Occident constructs a space that operates in the binary: The Interior (the West, the Occident) and The Exterior (the Other, the Orient). The Interior represents the middle or the center, in which all things, concepts, and beings encircle it, and the Western presence demands no different.

When it comes to Oriental art, there is what American art historian Linda Nochlin calls an absence of the Western presence. Even if the Orient is constructed to appear central, it is not the case. Instead, the Westerner is “always implicitly present,” referencing the painting on the cover jacket of Said’s *Orientalism*. The Westerner’s presence is “the controlling gaze, the gaze which brings the Oriental world into being, the gaze for which it is ultimately intended” (37).

This concept of the gaze is what E. Ann Kaplan discusses in her work, “Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film and the Imperial Gaze.” According to Kaplan, the Imperial Gaze “reflects the assumption that the white western subject is central” (78). It is my understanding that the Imperial Gaze takes many forms — the White Gaze, the Male Gaze, and so forth, as the Gaze is held only by those with institutional power — but what exactly is this gaze?

The Imperial Gaze is inherently tied to a concept known as visibility, which Michel Foucault defines as the “act of being seen” and that writer Henrietta Lidchi in chapter 3 of author Stewart Hall’s *Representation* notes is also a subjugation of “objects, persons, or ‘spectacles’ to the scrutiny of power” (167). Therefore, the Imperial Gaze is one that is utilized by the Observer, and the Spectacle is a person or thing that is the object of said gaze. The way that the Imperial Gaze is used in conjunction with Orientalism is that the story of an Asian national or an Asian-American is formed by the dominant narrative, not the Asian persons themselves and that the Gaze informs the Occident of the Orient, but only through a Western lens, not of one that the

East has constructed themselves. The Imperial Gaze, like the Observer, “sees” the Spectacle as an object and only understands and narrates its existence through its own point of view.

The Gaze is apparent within “In Fashion” — when a character has a voice, they are “seen” and are able to be looked at, to be a victim of interpretation. In the story, the gaze is depicted in how the suspect sees the narrator. The suspect sees the narrator not as she is, but as what the suspect perceives her to be, or rather, wants her to be. The narrator mentions that it does not feel like she is ever being seen for who she is, but rather “seen” in the way of being an item in a museum. This sense of warped visibility operates similarly to the relationship of Observer and Spectacle.

In *Representation*, Lidchi suggests that exhibitions and museum displays create the perception of a single and co-existing space that colonizers and the colonized occupy, despite large cultural differences. “The West and the Rest” and “Self and Other” are comparative concepts used to exclude and include European civilization with the ‘discoveries’ of ‘primitive’ cultures. These concepts keep Western society higher up on the evolutionary scale, based on the practices and artefacts collected of said ‘Other’ cultures. Using the peoples as props in museum displays, the West becomes the viewer and the Rest becomes a spectacle to be viewed upon (168).

As referenced in “In Fashion,” the politics of exhibiting tends to subject persons of the Other culture to be visible as a way of being seen and scrutinized. The West employs these living individuals from so-called ‘primitive’ cultures to perform and demonstrate an “authentic” re-enactment of their lives for viewing pleasure and hierarchical formation. The objectification of a group of peoples coupled with the outsider’s perspective of a single story becoming the only story of a culture’s history is not simply political but destructive.

The use of dialogue as a way of being seen, heard, or visible is found in both “In Fashion” and “When We Are.” In the first act of “In Fashion,” quotations are utilized in order to explicitly tell that Bianca is engaging in conversation with her roommate. By the second act, the quotations are omitted entirely, and the narrative only alludes to Bianca’s voice with italics. It is important to note that the difference in speaking and alluding to speaking represents the erasure of a voice, of a story. Choosing this form of style also showcases how actively Bianca is being gazed upon, as opposed to her being a full-bodied character or being actually visible. Finally, in Act Three, when Bianca regains her voice and the use of quotation marks, the narrative demonstrates that she is actively and aggressively visible once more.

Seeing is not simply subjected to visuals or stylistic choices, it can involve a specific choice of words, like in “When We Are.” The short story centers around characters who are vocal about their feelings. They purposefully proclaim their vulnerability in a way that matters to those who interact with them and likewise, they are given the same exchange. By vocalizing their emotions, they are seen as round characters with complex thoughts and feelings. While introspection has proven to be very profitable in revealing character, I find interaction to be equally just. Using dialogue and movement between characters both inspire and interest me as the exchange of Self and Other is what makes writing so real.

“The Neighbor” presents a different view of visibility. Along with the often eye contact between the narrator and the neighbor in later pages of the story, there are other allusions to seeing, like reflections and mirrors, but most importantly, people-watching. Unlike Simone’s Gaze, the Gaze in “The Neighbor” comes from the narrator’s husband. He peeks through the blinds of the window incessantly, as a way of looking down at the street as well as scrutinizing

and judging the neighbor. Hinted that the husband is of Asian descent, his act of looking is defined as the Male Gaze.

The vocalization of visibility is portrayed in the epigraph of “Café 22.” Utilizing Borges’s final line of his short story “Borges Y Yo (Borges and I),” the quote informs the reader of what to expect of the story. “Café-22” follows the narrator on a journey of character development and self-realization, as its final passage reveals that neither narrator nor author can exist without the other. As Borges suggests, the narrator cannot exist if there is no author to write him, as an author cannot exist without a story to write or have written. However, in spite of this Catch-22, after which the story was named, the author was the only character to be “seen.” By not being “looked at” or “viewed” by the author, the narrator is proved to be non-existent.

In conjunction with the concept of visibility is its partner called silence. A character’s voice in this collection is equally as loud as when it is quieted. Sometimes silence can be a mode of style. Similar to the way that visibility played a role in “In Fashion,” Bianca is completely silenced in the second act of the story. She is neither permitted to be “seen” nor is she allowed to tell her story. Even the story about her trip to Okinawa that she tells Simone is not voiced by her, only alluded to. It is only in the final act, toward the story’s conclusion, that Bianca takes an active role in her silence as she and Maya wait for the police to arrive and for whatever is next to happen.

In other ways, silence can be motivation, as portrayed in “The Avocado Tree.” Nora and her parents grapple with the choice of speaking about what happened that night or continue to wallow in their silence. It is in their silence that all three characters carry their own shame. Nora is ashamed of her identity and her parents are ashamed of their behavior. Choosing to remain

silent is what propels the narrative to its head. The intimate relationship between shame and silence is what permits the dominant narrative to be written by another voice.

By utilizing these concepts as tools of resistance to these orientalist and patriarchal structures narrating our stories, I intend to bring attention to the destruction of suppression of stories in all spaces. The theories and concepts being used are not simply insulated to Asian Americans but extend toward methodologies constructed by all Persons of Color, and those who had been under the thumb of the dominant narrative. *The Great Country of Asia* is not written as the Asian American story, but rather, aims to be used and transformed in production with current representation of Asian Americans in Western literature and media. It is with great hope that this collection will stand with those who know and have their voice and will aid those who have yet to discover it, helping to carve a path in which many stories can fall out of its tongue and no longer need to be silenced.

## CAFÉ 22

*"I do not know which of us has written this page."*  
— Jorge Luis Borges, "Borges Y Yo"

I lifted the viewfinder to my eye and I waited. I waited for inspiration to hit me like a migraine or an automobile accident. A slow creeping into the intersection, met with a large truck barreling down the road. Either way, I felt as though I was deprived of something. I couldn't move, I couldn't click the shutter. Nothing was good enough. No matter which direction I pointed the lens, it all didn't feel right. Zoomed in, paused, zoomed out. It wasn't working for me. Lowering the viewfinder from my eye, I sighed.

In my lifetime, on the subject of photography, I had received guidance only once — keep shooting. If I took my camera anywhere and everywhere, I would find the inspiration I was looking for and I would have the opportunity to document it. Truthfully, I wasn't one to believe in that sort of thing. Carrying my camera everywhere I went had only left me with back pains and shoulder aches for weeks, zero photos to show for it. How was it supposed to have changed my life? It didn't feel like such a thing was possible.

But that morning, something convinced me to do it anyway. Pack my camera in my bag this one last time and take it with me. I wasn't sure what exactly prompted me to do so, but I stuffed it in my purse and locked the door behind me. I would let intuition guide me. Whatever and wherever my mind would have said yes to, my body would comply.

The moment I had left my place, I began to photograph everything in my sight. I couldn't help it, I didn't know what else to do. Was I supposed to just sit and wait or was I going to actively seek change? I chose the latter.

When my heart said, let's take a picture of that, I did. When my heart said, let's go over here, I did. And when my heart said, let's take a rest at this café, I did.

It was a quiet little shop with many tables and not a lot of patrons inside of it, but the moment that I picked a seat and set my things down, I could see the room begin to fill with customers. Most of them formed a queue while others picked a table of their own and waited to be served. For me, I didn't plan on drinking anything, just sitting, at least, so I had thought.

Picking up my camera again, I took the moment to turn it back on and start snapping away. The window sill, the open-faced cabinets of a variety of teas, the one table in the corner that still remained empty. I just shot mindlessly. And when I thought that I would leave, a waiter came over and placed what looked to be a cup of black coffee down in front of me. Pure and plain and just the way that I liked it. Only, I hadn't ordered it.

As I immediately attempted to rebuff the drink, the waiter then told me that it was a treat between customers. It had been the first time I ever experienced anything like that before. Sure, I had heard of secret menus and of customers in line paying for the orders before them, but this? It was all new to me.

It's a fun exchange between customers, he claimed. One customer will order a coffee from the menu and pay for it. The coffee is then delivered to the other customer but with a request. It is all depending on the coffee that was ordered on what the second customer would have to respond to the request. If they do, the coffee will be free to them. If they do not, they will have to pay for the coffee themselves.

To me, it appeared clear enough, but there was something madly intrusive about it, leaving me with a sense of vulnerability that I was never used to. I was hesitant to play the game. What would be asked of me? How invasive will the questions be? Would it be something that I would find myself enjoying?

The waiter then pointed out the customer who purchased my coffee. From the far end of the shop, I witnessed her chatting happily with her company, looking unbothered, not a hint of nervousness on her face. She didn't even look worried whether or not I received her gift.

Maybe, there was just nothing more to it.

So, I went for it. I lifted the cup to find the index card sitting beneath the coffee and read it quietly to myself.

*A Heart of Dark Roast (a cup of black coffee) asks you to describe an incident when you tried something new. Use the space provided for your answer and the coffee is free.*

I admitted that I was amused by this little bit of excitement at eight in the morning. It wasn't incredibly intrusive, was my initial thought, and so I began to write with the pencil that the waiter provided.

*If I were honest, I would say that this is something new to me. I moved further down the card to add more. Aside from this, however, I had sung in public for the first time ever. It was at a karaoke bar. The song was called "Shattered Dreams" by Johnny Hates Jazz.*

The waiter must have left sometime while I was coming up with something to jot down, yet, the very second that I punctuated the last line, he returned to my table to collect my answer.

After reading it over, his nod of approval was strong enough to give me a passing grade: I was free to enjoy my drink.

I then felt a light-headed giddiness, a break from the monotony, and happily, I gulped down my drink. Whether it was the surge of unfiltered straight coffee, I felt an energy I hadn't experienced in a long time. I waved the waiter over and excitedly asked to see the menu.

Before it came, I told myself that I would choose at random, and that the first one that I selected would be the one that I would send off to her. I closed my eyes and ran the tip of my finger down the list, landing it on one. I opened my eyes: Scarlet Latte.

With a shrug, I handed the waiter my card and settled back down into my chair. As he took off to deliver my order, my heart started to beat faster and faster. For some reason there was an insurmountable nervousness coursing through me. My thigh chimed in as well and vigorously began to bounce and embarrassingly enough, my cheeks started to grow hot too.

It was different. It was wild. It wasn't on-brand of me, at least, I hadn't thought so. I was interacting with what I knew to be a stranger and for what? There was nothing that I would truly get out of it. Just reciprocation, I assumed.

When the waiter came out from the kitchen with what looked like the latte I ordered, I couldn't bring myself to watch. Nearly just short of hiding my face behind a napkin, I made sure to block myself from view. I didn't want to be seen, I was too scared to witness myself being judged.

If I had to take a guess, it felt like I was in that position for an hour. There was no telling if my watch would have lied to me if I timed myself otherwise. Before atrophy kicked in, the waiter returned to me.

Without a word, he placed her index card down onto my empty plate and left again. I had the opportunity to read what she wrote in response. Did I want to know or was it all merely for reciprocation purposes? I peeked.

*I'm a writer, she wrote. I had kept reading. So, normally, the advice that I tend to receive is usually something along the lines of "just keep writing" and "write it badly" with the intention that I'm supposed to edit it all later. I don't think that works for me. Instead, I think that if you get stuck in that kind of rut, it's probably best to change your point of view.*

I sank back further into my chair and repeated what she last wrote. *Change your point of view.* In too many ways this answer had applied to me. From the index card that sat on the plate to my camera sitting beside me, my eyes moved between them as my leg bounced up and down rhythmically.

When it came to photography, I often spent so much time behind the lens that I didn't given myself the option of being in front of it. Everything else had been my subject and my muse, but for me to be my own? Impossible, I swore.

But I was about to try something different. My mind projected it. Let's try this, it said. I had yet to look at the woman sitting at the other table who gave me that little card. I wasn't sure if that piece of advice was something that she intended, but I wasn't about to turn it away. I picked up my things, pocketed the card, and left the coffee shop.

\*

A full 24 hours passed before I returned to the strange little coffee shop. I discovered it by chance the first time, so for me to find it again, especially without a camera in front of my face, was kismet. I soon learned that it wasn't too far from my apartment building and spotted the red-roofed structure and its large cherry blossom tree a few steps from the door. Enclosed by a stone fence-line guarded by these *shisa* statues, this coffee shop should have been more noticeable, but I had always been the oblivious type.

After I stopped by yesterday, I couldn't stop thinking about the shop and its little game. I had gone home and immediately set up a studio with the backdrops that I had and the props living as my roommates. I sat on a stool and pressed the self-timer. From that batch of photographs, I was filled with a sense of pride that couldn't have been replicated. That is, until I made the decision to come back.

The doorbell chimed when I entered the shop with an eager smile. I chose the seat near the window but facing the rest of the café. I wanted to know what it felt like to sit in an observant's chair. I wanted to watch the patrons walk in and out of the shop, study their faces, note what made them interesting as subjects and whatnot.

And then she walked in.

Carrying her notebook with her, she didn't look like she had any other company with her. Sitting at the same table as she did the last time, I watched her as she kept to herself. She opened her book and hardly looked up, her pen moving vigorously against a page. A part of me even thought that I should have approached her.

I broke the gaze of the interesting stranger and instead looked out of the window. The road became cloaked with cars in a manner of minutes and some of them turned in to come into

the coffee shop too. It was cold out, so I wouldn't have put it past them to want something hot to drink.

Just as I had the notion to order something for myself, a waitress came by. Either it was simply perfect timing or maybe intuition that exceeded expectations, I was handed a cup instead of a menu. I began to stutter, not knowing how to accept being a part of that game again, but the waitress left me with the only answer: read it.

*A Catcher in the Chai (a cup of tea) asks you to list three personality traits, good or bad. Use the space provided for your answer. Do so and the drink is free.*

It was at first a little surprising to see that there was an option of a tea on the menu, but I didn't mind it. In fact, it made me curious as to what type of tea it would have been. Was it labeled chai because it was Indian or was it just a fancier way of saying the generic tea? Regardless, the addition of tea left things a little more interesting than purely bean water choices. Taking the pencil in my hand, I tapped the eraser end of it on the table as I tried to brainstorm some adjectives.

*Professional, Punctual, and Perceptive.*

I didn't want to elaborate on them, nor was provided enough space to do so, but when I finished, I set the pencil down and anticipated the waitress to return. While I did, I thought that it must have been the customer from before, the writer. But when I looked up at her, she was furiously engrossed in her notebook. So, I considered against it.

But I could have been wrong.

When the waitress returned, I couldn't help it. I asked her to point out who had sent the tea to me and I was wrong indeed. The writer, somehow, between writing and reading in her book, had ordered something for me. I refused to leave without returning the favor somehow.

Again, I wanted to choose for her a drink by random, one that would thank her for her order, but also, one whose answer I secretly wanted to inspire me. As I did the last time, I closed my eyes and ran my finger down the list, stopping much earlier. When I opened my eyes, I read: a David Cappuccino.

Nodding toward the waitress, I handed her my card and watched as she made her way to the back kitchen and prepare the order. The nervous sweats started again. There was something tremendously exciting about the exchange between two strangers. From my perspective, I knew that it was a beginning to something, though I could only assume that neither of us knew to what exactly.

The waitress returned with the index card all filled out. I had been so immersed in my thoughts that I didn't noticed her deliver the drink to begin with. And when it arrived, I could hardly look at it. I was so curious, so anxious, but I did not have the slightest clue as to why. I pulled the trigger and read it anyway.

*Cluttered*, she scribed. And nothing more.

Foolishly, I didn't know what the question even was and for her to write such a short response, I had to look it up. Further up along the card, I found and skimmed the prompt to learn that the question asked her of her current state of mind. And then I read her answer again.

Cluttered.

It was so chic of an answer that I was almost colored jealous, but I caught myself. After all, she was a writer and if she couldn't sum up anything in the most appropriate word, I would be honest — she would have needed to expand her vocabulary.

The moment that I began to entertain the idea of leaving this answer behind, I heard my alarm going off in my pocket the moment. Completely forgetting the meeting that I had set up for myself, I was almost going to be wrong about my second trait.

\*

It was four in the afternoon and I exhausted the excited feeling I had the day before, and yet, some unknown force seemed to have brought me back to the same odd coffee shop. I tried to convince myself that the moment my last interview was over, I would be able to head back home, and into the comfort of my bed without a care in the world. However, I knew that in order to suffer through the monotony of day to day life, I would need a hit of good caffeine.

I pushed the door of the café open and slugged my way over to a table by the window. The thought of lining up in the queue to make my order and go had crossed my mind for a brief moment, but then I was persuaded by the comfort of a chair than to be on my feet. Sitting at a table gave me the opportunity to collect myself and to my luck, a waiter came by.

But with my luck, before an order could slip past my lips, the waiter placed a cup and an index card right in front of me. And so, it continued.

*A Grapes of Decaf (a decaf cup of coffee) asks you to recall the worst insult you have ever received. Use the space provided for your answer. Do so and the coffee is free.*

The type of coffee stared at me in the face like a capital offense to my current state. I could feel myself chuckle a notch below manically as I swore that I mentally checked out after reading the second word in the sentence.

Normally, there would have been a slurry of insults far worse than this — all the times I had slurs cast at me, for one — but the moment there was nothing more offensive than.

*This*, I said aloud.

As I dug in my purse for my wallet, I muttered incoherent words of *decaf needs to be considered coffee first* and *I can't believe the nerve*. When I passed the bill to the waiter, I couldn't help but ask to whom sent that request.

*Oh, the boss, huh*, he told me as he scratched the back of his neck. My eyes widened at his statement. *And it seems like she had left already*.

When those words left his lips, he faced in the direction of *her* table, as though he, too, looked for her. That alone answered my question for me, and so, I tossed another bill onto his tray and ordered a black coffee, two shots of espresso, to-go.

\*

A full week had passed before I came back to the coffee shop and returning to it all occurred by chance. In my defense, I was told to meet an exhibit curator at a quaint little place called Café-22. However, it was only then when I arrived at the address that I learned the name of the shop I had already thrice frequented. Just when I thought for a second that the strange game was behind me, it wasn't over.

I brought my portfolio with me, one that started with landscape shots and soon transitioned into my most recent work — self-portraits. Sliding into a booth with nothing but anxiety and impatience at my feet, I was to wait until my guest arrived. In a short moment to follow, a waitress set a small cup in front of me.

Immediately, I flinched. I knew what it was and what it meant, and I didn't want to read the note. To continue the game like that, especially without any word of apology or anything at all, I felt a little annoyed by it. There was a bitter taste left in my mouth.

But as I stared at the small shot of espresso and the card beside it, a larger part of me wanted to know what it said. I was too curious for my own good, but the more that I hesitated, the more excuses I came up with for myself. I settled on reading it for the single fact that I would still have to pay for it regardless. I lifted the card to read:

*A shot of The Count of Montespresso (espresso) asks you to describe something that a stranger would be surprised to know about you. Use the space provided for your answer and the coffee is free.*

Truthfully, I was a little taken aback myself. The prompt was easy on the eyes that time around. It was a little more positive than the last and came with something a little less slighting than a faux coffee, though if I had to admit it aloud, it was a little too broad for me. The options for answers were endless and, in some cases, I wouldn't know where to begin. *Something a stranger would be surprised to know about me.* I picked up the pencil and began to write on the card.

*Learning. I love the concept of it. I love expanding on what I already know, and I love starting an entirely new interest. There is an expectation of people through face-value. I think that by leaving your mind open to learning, not just about subjects but about people, that we allow them to reserve the right to live autonomously.*

At the end of it, I handed the card over to the waitress almost like I was turning in a piece of homework, and with another nod, she left me to enjoy my coffee and my solitude. In some

ways, it could be said that the cup was a peace offering of sorts. I should have tried to be a little more grateful for it. But something felt off.

As I waited for the curator to arrive, I brought the cup to my lips and swept my eyes across the coffee shop. They stopped at her as she clicked her pen and shut her notebook. And I could have sworn that she smiled before she got up to leave.

Evident that I would lose her if I did not reach her now, I stood up myself, leaving my portfolio and coffee, and everything, for the chance to get to her before she was gone again. Quickly, but not too noisily, I weaved my way through the many tables, but as the door had shut behind her, I stopped completely.

Maybe, this game that we played wasn't meant for me to know her.

My only question was, why?

\*

A macchiato is set before the woman, an index card beside it. The waiter offered her a choice between pencil and pen. Smiling, she picked the pen.

*I've been working on a character sketch. It has taken me so long to complete it. I haven't really settled on a name, a love interest, or even a full plot. But something tells me that when it's done, it might just be an interesting read. I'm thinking of calling it Café 22.*

# THE AVOCADO TREE

I had kept running. Even as it thundered outside, I had run out the door, crossed the graveled driveway, burling past the mailbox, and stopping only when I had reached the driver's side of my car. I could hear Nate calling my name as if it were an apology and I had felt my stomach crawl up my throat. By the time I had sunk into the seat, I had been a soaking mess. With shaky hands that took the wheel, I had started up my car and drove.

I couldn't go back, I was terrified.

...

It had always rained in Kāneʻohe. A city bordered by the Koʻolau Mountains and a large bay of the same name, Kāneʻohe was known for its wet tropical climate. Its abundance of rainfall had contributed to both the growth of plants and trees and was also what made it a significant aspect of the island's agricultural system.

"It was what made the fruit so big," I told my nephews. "Whatever you planted, bananas, apples, mango, avocado — you name it. It would be huge. When your father and I were younger, we had an avocado tree in our backyard."

Tyler and Alex had clutched their blankets and pulled them to their chins, open-mouthed and doe-eyed.

“The tree had been there long before Jiji and Baban had bought our house. I remember being your age and looking way up at it, its trunk was thick and solid,” I said, opening up the distance between my hands so that they could see. “It grew to be as tall as the house, if not bigger. But when I was younger, it was easier to climb.”

Alex had sighed. “I want a tree in our house,” he whined.

I had only smiled and continued. “All of our cousins and our uncles would come by and we would climb up the tree together. One by one, we would pick the fruit. Your dad could be measured out in four avocados, at least back then. They were always large and plentiful, and when we would have it with dinner, it would cut like butter, and tasted so sweet.”

My nephew scrunched up his face in repulsion.

“What, Alex?” I cooed, shaking his tiny shin softly. “You don’t like it sweet?”

“I don’t really like butter,” he shook his head.

“No, it doesn’t taste like butter,” I laughed as my smile grew on my face. “But it was creamy and soft. In fact, I think you would have like the avocados from our tree. Well, except that one summer.”

That time, both Alex and Tyler had tilted their heads in unison and I knew that I would have to explain.

“You see, one summer, when Jiji and Baban were still working, your dad and I were told to clean up the whole house. Now that meant dusting the counters, cleaning all of Baban’s knick-knacks, but most importantly, scrubbing the floors.” My smile began to drop and slowly tucked itself away. “I *hated* doing it. Your dad and I would fight every morning about who would do it and guess who would win?”

I had shaken my head in disapproval and lowered my voice. “‘I’m the older brother,’ he would say, ‘and you’ll do what I tell you to do.’”

Alex had looked to his older brother, and Tyler looked down, guiltily.

“I was so mad and sloppy with my chore that when I was done mopping, I took out the bucket and tossed it outside and in the backyard. Just imagine, all of that dirty mop water going right onto the base of the huge avocado tree.” I had let out a sigh. “We used chemicals to clean the floors and instead of running it down the drain, I took it out on the tree. I was so angry and bitter, that I had kept doing it the whole summer. I realize that it might have done more damage than good.”

“What happened?” Tyler had asked.

“Well, when the tree had finally bore fruit, it was the most rotten tasting it had ever been. Not a single one from that season had its soft, creamy flavor. Not a single one had been sweet. I had felt so guilty that I never dumped the mop water out on the tree ever again.” I had picked up an end of Alex’s quilt and ran my fingers over the design of a pterodactyl. “It seemed to have been fine by the next season. It tasted great again, but it still felt like something was different about it. It never grew as big as the others. And for the longest time, I really thought that I ruined the tree.”

Unable to pinpoint what exactly shrunk the avocados, I watched as each batch had been different from the last, some smaller than others, but never as it was from before that summer. It was like a crinkled piece of paper being unraveled again.

“Have we ever seen the tree?” Alex piped up. “I don’t remember it.”

I shook my head. The frayed edges of the blanket had become an immediate interest to me.

“No. A year or two before you were born, Jiji and Baban had grown old. Grown tired. Your dad and I, and all of our cousins, we were all too busy to take care of it. And so, they cut the tree.”

It had been after the cousins moved away and after Nate and I had lived in different parts of town and no longer in Kāneʻohe that the avocado tree, too, had shrunk. Whether it had been in the minds of the family or not, it became less important.

“So, then what’s the point?” Tyler asked, crossing his arms.

For me, I had been filled with a lingering emptiness. In the end, something that should have been taken care of and loved, had been neglected. I should have been the one to take care of it, I often thought. It had been the fact that we could not go back to how it was that resided within me. There had been only memories because nothing was left.

“I guess that if this were a Mother Goose tale, the moral would be that bad choices can lead to regret,” I told him, my hand softly pressed to his cheek. Looking over to Alex, I offered him a smile. “Especially if you’re careless.”

It might not have been the best way to articulate meaning into a story, but I was unable to resist the urge to tell it. The tree had been gone for years now, but it hadn’t stopped the lessons from being taught. It hadn’t stopped history from repeating itself either.

Tyler looked as though he had something to say but stopped short before he had said it. I lifted my brow and asked him what was wrong.

“Was Dad careless?”

Sharp as a tack at seven years old, nothing flew past Tyler.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I’ve heard him on the phone, telling Mom that he messed up,” he explained. “He’s trying his best, right?”

It had been very on-brand of Tyler to feel that he needed to take his father’s side. There was not a thing that my brother could do wrong in that young boy’s eyes. And to know all of the good and bad about Nate had made it so much easier to paint him as the flawed hero.

“Everyone can make mistakes, you, me, Alex, your dad,” I said to him. “Your behavior is what makes the difference. It determines what kind of person you want to be.”

As if I had finally stumped him, I then patted the boy’s knee and gave him a kiss goodnight. When I had gotten up to turn off Alex’s lamp light, I pressed a kiss to his forehead too, whispering, “Sleep well. I’ll see you two in the morning.” With nothing left for them to say but a mumble of goodnight, the two boys had pulled their blankets over their small bodies and buried their faces into their pillows. I had shut their door behind me and had let out a pent-up sigh.

The boys’ room had been one of few in that narrow hallway, as the rest of the white space had been filled with family photographs. There were some of Olivia and her side of the family, and there had been some of Nate and our family too. One had stuck out, as if it had been recently placed there.

It had been a simple picture stamped from the late 90s and featured Mom, Dad, Nate, and I, all of us much younger and piled together in front of a large tree, with smiles bigger than our faces could handle. While our parents had stood beside us, both Nate and I each had an avocado the size of our heads in our hands.

I could hear my mother trying to rally us together in order to pose for the picture. My father had just spent the afternoon picking the avocados, so he was tired and sweaty, but still did

what my mother had asked of him. Meanwhile, Nate and I had the grins of children who were to reap the benefits of what their parents had sown.

As the years had gone by and many things had changed, I could not help but to cling to them harder. I hadn't had the time to dwell too long on the lingering loss of nostalgia before the knob of the front door had turned and my brother's keys had hit the tray. I had come down around to the front just as he had dumped his shoes at the welcome mat.

From the stairwell, I could see the tired look in his eyes. He had only been a few years older than me, but I swore that he had the wrinkles of a 40-year-old. It must have been the number of hours he had been putting in the hospital.

He smiled. "Hey sis, how are my boys?"

"Out like a light." I told him.

"Good."

With a single wave of his hand, a famous gesture that told me to "walk with him," I followed him into the kitchen where he had opened the refrigerator. Choosing a glass bottled Diet Coke for himself, he then offered one to me, which I accepted.

"Thank you again," he said as he passed me my bottle. "Liv will be back on Monday and we'll talk things over."

"Right," I nodded.

He squinted. "They behaved?"

I nodded again without hesitation.

"Of course."

As Nate twisted off his bottle top, I did the same. It took me back to the late afternoons of our youth, camped out on the front lawn after a long day, just sitting together with our soda pops. We had clicked our bottle necks before we tanked half of our drinks in the first sip.

“Good,” he said again, but that time almost distracted.

His hand had drifted to the kitchen drawer, pulled it open, and began to fish for something. It had first piqued my interest, that was, until I had seen the familiar bright wrapping of a childhood candy. Hi-Chew Mango flavor.

“So,” Nate started again, as though he had been able to finally multi-task. “Which random story from our awful youth did the boys want to hear tonight?”

I chuckled lowly.

While Olivia had been off-island for the week, Nate had begged me to watch their sons. I had worked, lived, and breathed on campus during the daylight hours, so to make the ten-minute drive to Nate’s house after four p.m. hadn’t been an issue. But with sending them to bed had to come a bedtime story.

“The one where you’re about four avocados tall.”

“Ah, the tree,” he stated with a mouthful of Hi-Chew. He had crumpled up its wrapping paper and had shot it into the waste bin. With the taffy-like texture being mixed in his mouth, I had barely understood him when he asked, “Did you tell them about the time my little sister would climb those branches, just so she could say that she was taller than me?”

I had let out a little laugh and shook my head. “No, but I remember that. I especially hated when you would climb right up after me, so I had to go higher.”

It had been Nate’s turn to laugh. I could see him thinking the same thing I had — the days of when he had been entrusted to look after me to make sure that I wouldn’t get into any

trouble, coming to surface. The thought of how he would use our parents as an excuse to have authoritative control hadn't escaped me either.

"And then I would tell you that Mom was calling us, just so you'd have to come back down?" He had tried to make it sound like it had been a joke, that it was just a minute of fear for a 13-year-old boy and nothing more. "I think you knew that I was scared of falling out of that tree. But if you fell out of the tree—"

"And I did," I interjected. My hand had run down the side of my thigh. "If you remember. I still bear the scars to prove it."

Nate had stopped and stood in silence, as though he had led the conversation in a direction he did not want it to go and needed to re-route it. Or perhaps he had been reminded of something else that he had wanted to talk about.

"Tomorrow is Sunday," he began, knowing full well what that day had meant to us as a family and it had been an entire month since I had last attended one. "The three of us are going to Mom and Dad's and I think you should come."

The mention of our parents had been enough to bring forth the memory of me running out that night in the pouring rain. It was as though I had been pulled from my stupor, the reality of my brother's charm coming to light. Unable to meet his eyes, I had cleared my throat and tanked the rest of my soda.

"I have to go," I said to him quietly. "Please tell the boys that I'll see them later."

"Wait, no, it's late, sis," he had started to bargain with me. "You should stay the night at least, please. Not have to try to drive."

I shook my head no. "The dorms are not that far and I'm tired."

Nate had refused to give up and had placed his hand on my shoulder.

“Then, maybe it’s better that you stay.”

Despite his attempts, I would not fall for it. He could see it in my eyes that I was planning to go home, even if I had to take his hand with me. Stupidly enough, my brother then dared to use my name in a tone that suggested he had any authority over me.

“Nora.”

It hadn’t been said the same way as that night. The night that he outed me. It had actually sounded apologetic while willfully pleading with me to come back to the house and to stay. But at that very moment, Nate had just sounded dictatorial, as though it would have changed my mind. Instead, it made me angrier.

“Nate, stop,” I had snapped. Pulling my shoulder back with such a force, I wanted him to be clear that I wasn’t playing around. “You’re on thin fucking ice right now.”

In what world had he thought that everything was okay? Had it been the fact that I would still come around and do favors for him, especially after what he had done, gave him the guts to start bossing me around again?

Something on my face must have told him just that as he had retracted his hand back into his pocket and spoke in a smaller voice.

“I said I was sorry.”

I looked at him with disbelief.

“S-sorry?” I stammered. “Nate, you didn’t have to tell them. In fact, it was not for you to say.”

Raising his hands in defeat, he, too, had been flustered.

“It-it was an accident.”

My breathing had been slow, the memory of what happened one month ago had played over in my mind. I had just put the boys to sleep and Mom had asked Nate how Olivia was doing. The way she had asked him, I knew she was concerned, as if she knew better. As if she knew that Olivia hadn't been coming home most nights and that she and Nate were having problems. And then he had said it. I watched as my older brother had vomited all over himself the one secret I had told him to keep. My name had been a gunshot in a quiet house on that Sunday night.

*Nora's gay.*

It was a secret and a disgrace, all at once. And it was mine to tell.

"Was it really?" I had started to raise my voice. "Dr. Nathaniel Arakaki, medical surgeon, married the best damn litigator in the state! Father of two amazing young boys who idolize the fuck out of him for god knows what reason!" I couldn't stop the anger from seeping out of me. "You couldn't have written a better story for yourself if you had tried! And yet, you couldn't bear it if your life was anything shy of perfect in their eyes, could you?"

Our fight had begun to feel like a duel, one like we used to have on the front lawn of our home. Back then, we would wear hoodies and sweat pants and formed our swords out of rolls and rolls of tin foil. Now, we were only armed with our pain.

"Oh, come on, Nora," he had strained to plea with me. "You're the one who is telling stories here. You tell them, and you hide behind them like it's some metaphor we'll all understand."

I winced at his words, but it had been his turn to strike.

"And you know what? I may not be perfect, but at least I'm not a coward who always runs away from everything."

If he had been aware of our battle, then he had known that he was winning it.

“When was the last time you called them and actually talked to them? Seen them? If you’d just give them a chance—”

I hadn’t felt the tears in my eyes until they were halfway down my cheeks.

“No, I can’t,” I sputtered out.

I could picture the looks on their faces when I left the house. Shock and nothing more. I refused to stay to hear them tell me that they hated me. I refused to go back and hear them tell me that I had broken their hearts. I refused to.

“Because you took that away, Nate,” I said. “Not me.”

...

I had felt the wet wood beneath my palms. As I had struggled to lift myself from the bark, I hissed in pain. Bleeding from the knees, I had scraped myself somehow on the trek up the tree. The first thought that ran through my mind as I had bled through my jeans was how my mother was going to wring my neck for it.

“Come back down,” yelled my brother from an incredible distance. “You’re going to get in trouble!”

It had usually come equipped with some form of ultimatum, and that I had to obey his command, or I’d get yelled at from Mom or maybe he’ll throw away my toys. Typical threats of a young boy, but none of the follow-through. It was like I knew that, like he was full of shit on his punishment, and yet sometimes it had persuaded me. But not that time.

“If you don’t come down, I’m going to leave you up there,” he had bargained, although he hadn’t moved any inch. If anything, he had kept his eyes tightly fixed on me.

I had pressed on as if I hadn’t heard him, as if I didn’t want him to stop me. I had climbed that tree as if it were going to save my life. And I had kept going, until I had missed a branch.

The feeling of falling backward had been slowed down, for a moment, and then as my body almost hit the ground, did the movement finally speed up for the crash. At that point, I had begun to feel everything.

“Nora!” I heard my brother scream.

I had woken up with a startle and a looming headache. Immediately, I groaned in utmost pain and clutched the side of my temple. It had felt horrible. My eyes had barely opened, still left over and swollen from the night before. It reminded me of the fight.

Unfortunately, that had been real. It all had.

As I thought a little more about my fight with Nate, I decided to check the time on my phone. Instead, I had received an alert.

One missed call, it read. It had been from Mom and Dad’s landline.

They had tried to call. Whether it was Mom or Dad, one of them had picked up the phone, dialed my number, and waited for me to answer. A question had entered my mind: did I want to call them back? I hadn’t the moment to mull it over before my phone had buzzed again, but that time only once.

One new voice message, it said.

Shakily, I had pressed the play button before putting it on speaker. The sound of Alex and Tyler's voice, one after the other, in a harmony of cherubic voices, had filled my quiet bedroom.

"Aunty Nora, it's Tyler."

"And Alex!"

"Are you coming to Jiji's and Baban's?"

"Please? It's Sunday!"

"Remember, bad choices can lead to regret," Tyler warned.

"Love you!"

"Bye."

End of message.

I had stared at my phone for a moment, as if there had been more to the message than what was said, before I had chosen to lock my phone and dump it onto the bed beside me. Rubbing my hands over my face, I let out another sigh, pushing my breath out until I had been completely empty. Slowly, I drew in air.

When I removed my hands from my face, I had curled my palms around old scarred knees, visible in the sunlight without a pair of jeans to hide them. Some had been faint, aged by the years between the fall and that morning. Others had been thick welts, forever carved into my skin.

The dream I had that morning had been a memory, and an unfinished one at that. It had taken place the time that I fell out of the tree, however, it ended only when I had hurtled into the ground. What happened after that had been the sound of Nate calling for our parents and having them sprint over to us, worry flooded their faces.

As I had stared into the blue sky, too shocked to move, to find out if anything had been broken, Mom and Dad had checked me to see if I had injured anything. It had only been then, when we knew that I hadn't lost any feeling, did they relent. Both of them had picked me up and cradled me, cursing my foolishness.

After the first time I had fallen out of the tree, climbing it had been that much easier to do. Whether it was the knowledge that Nate had always been right there, or that he would call our parents for help if anything were to happen, I had felt secure. However, no matter the number of times I had gotten up on its branches and tried to go higher and higher, if I had ever fallen out of it, I knew that I wasn't alone.

That type of love had been what I wanted to hold onto. I had wanted the same old past and the same old ways, but I had needed to know that I had not been the same. If I had wanted to be happy, I couldn't live as though that night had never happened. Deep down, I knew that I would not be able to find peace until I had that conversation. If I had not tried to move on, I, too, would shrink and wither away into nothing.

...

When I had arrived at my parent's house, I stopped at the front of their lawn. My hand pressed against their mailbox, running over our last name, the painted letters smoothed into the aluminum with lacquer. A wash of terror had come over me and I couldn't bring myself to move. It was that all too familiar feeling of knowing that my fears were to be called out and I couldn't bear to face them.

"Nora," I had heard my brother say.

He had sounded both surprised and guilty to see me, as his eyes shifted to the ground. At the end of the day, I knew that he cared. He might have been careless, but somewhere inside that perfect son and perfect father had been my older brother.

My sneakers crushed the gravel as I had walked to him and pulled him into a hug. I had pushed all of my apologies into my arms when I held him, and I had felt all of his remorse for what happened too.

We took a breath together, and when I had let go, I heard him say to me, “They’re in the living room.”

I only nodded and walked past him and into our old home.

When I had entered through the front door, my eyes had met the steps of the stairwell I had come down a month ago. To my left had been the kitchen, and to my right had been the patio, where my parents had been waiting. I could hear the sound of my nephews playing in the room upstairs, broken only by the words of my mother.

“Please,” came my mother’s soft-spoken voice. “Sit with us.”

It was as if everything had gone silent, waiting for movement. All that could be heard next had been the creaking of my feet against the wooden floor. I took the chair across from the two-seat sofa that my parents had sat on. My palms went clammy and cold, shaking from the anticipation of what was to be said. Looking over to my mother, I watched as her lips pursed as she prepared to speak.

“We need to hear it from you,” she had said.

I could have lied. I could have told them that Nate had been joking and that we had conspired to pull this incredible prank, and everything could go back to the way it was. My

father could release that pent-up air in his chest and my mother could continue to wish a handsome man and several children for me in my future.

But I couldn't climb the tree anymore. I had to come down from its branches and face the truth.

"I'm gay," I said. "For as long as I've known, I have been gay. My sexuality was never a choice, but I choose to be honest with the people I love. But, I know what saying this will mean."

As I removed the cap of my bottled emotions, it all started to pour out. Struggling to maintain eye contact with both of my parents, I hadn't relented. The trembling in my voice had not stopped me.

"I-I'm disowned, I've dis-disappointed you both, and I'll never, ever be forgiven. I'm sorry, I'm so, sorry."

Neither of them had said a word through it all. They had listened patiently and still, their faces bequeathing nothing of how they had felt. I had never inherited such an ability to look and feel emotionless. Their silence had spoken.

"P-please say something," I had begged.

Truthfully, I had not prepared myself for what I was to hear. There would be nothing in the world that could.

"You're wrong," my father had said in a voice so oddly calm, yet incredibly stern. The mountain would have moved if he had told it to. My mother had looked to him as though she might have been inclined to disagree, as though she had some semblance of sympathy for me. Unfinished, he then said to me, "We are the ones who need to ask for forgiveness. If only we had made you feel more comfortable enough to tell us."

I had never believed that the obsession with feeling nothing could translate onto me. I had felt everything. I felt it come down like rain without gravity, and without condensing, all at once. At that moment, I had become breathless.

As the tears began to prick at my eyes like tiny needles, my mother dropped her façade and came to me. She had knelt down in front of me and gingerly took my hands into hers, as if one or both of us could shatter at the most abrasive touch.

“Nora, honey,” she cooed, bringing our hands to her cheek. “It was hard for you, wasn’t it?”

I could only nod. I would forever see the looks on their faces when Nate had told them that night, etched into my mind. An image of shock and nothing more. None of acceptance but also none of disgust. Before I had allowed them a second to say anything, I had run out the door and taken all of the guilt with me.

“It’s my fault,” I had told them. My hands came to my face to wipe at my eyes. “If I had just told you.” My mother’s hands were at my sides, drawing circles. “But I was scared, so, so, scared.”

It was quiet, nothing but the sound of my blubbering and sporadic hiccups. What would have felt like the spread of judgment eyeing my blithering form, had only been concern.

“We didn’t know what to say or if you wanted to talk to us. But if Nathaniel hadn’t said anything, would you have really wanted to live that unhappy life? If it didn’t disappoint us?” asked my mother.

“Y-yes,” I choked out.

Without a doubt, I would have kept it to myself. For my parents, I would have lived the life that they had wanted for me. However, it had pained me to keep it inside. Swelling at the

back of my throat had been every word that I had wanted to say — all of my thoughts, all of my secrets.

So, I did.

“I just wanted you to be proud of me.”

My father had stood from his seat and had joined me at the floor, folding his legs beneath his lap. I felt his palm on my tear-stained cheek.

“You are our daughter,” he had said to me. “We will always be proud of you.”

Years had passed since the last time they had both held me like this, and I was sure that years would pass before they would let me go.

We had ended our conversation with laughter and made the decision to join Nate and the boys. As we had walked out from the patio and toward the kitchen, I stopped at the window. My puffy-eyed reflection was the first to stare back at me, looking fuller and new. I smiled back at her and my eyes had focused on the view outside.

Sitting in the sunlight of a Sunday afternoon had been a patch of dark grass where a large stump had lived some time ago. Nothing had been there now, but one day, when the boys became old enough, something would grow there.

# IN FASHION

## *ACT ONE*

She had wrapped me up in blush pink satin. My vision became skewed and difficult for me to construct — everything I could see was set in this soft lighting and dreamy imagery, transforming thick opacity into sheer fabric. Suddenly, projected in front of me in a kitschy Ken Burns effect, there she was, an 80s bottled blonde with diamonds for eyes. Surrounded by sparkling lights and the witchy sounds of Stevie Nicks, I allowed myself to drown in the weird, almost euphoric, experience.

For a while, it felt like I was swimming, like I had been weightless, an ounce of nothing, just existence, and I enjoyed it. There was something freeing about it, no responsibilities or thought or even movement, just being, and only warmth consuming me. A huge part of me had been at ease. Red lips framed a laugh that sounded a room away, but the tightening of the material was intimate, until it was too much so, beginning to bind and constrain me.

In a panic, I sensed my movement slow no matter how swift I writhed, and immediately learned there was no way to free myself from the asphyxiating hold or to claw my way out of it. I shortly became an entanglement of limbs and the twisting and twining of movement had felt eternal. A chill coursed through me, raising every fine hair that stood on my skin as I felt myself plummet into a space unknown. The airy cackling abruptly stopped only to be replaced by what resembled the ringing sound of silence.

It was the sort of annoying pitch that screamed for what felt like hours, until it had decided to morph into the sound of my least favorite ringtone. It was only when my hardwood floor came to fruition beneath me that my senses became mine again. My grip that had previously wound itself so tightly to fight its way out was now spread open and desperately reaching for something stable and secure to lift me up. As my wits came about me, I fought to grab my phone, the source of the irritancy, at the edge of my nightstand.

The Caller ID glaringly flashed on the screen. *Boss Man*, it said. I flung the covers off me and scrambled to my feet.

Coming from the other side of my bedroom door, I could hear muffled laughter. It must have been Maya laughing at something on the television. I groaned loudly. Thanks to my lazy roommate, I had been the one to insufferably clean the entire apartment the night before after downing half a bottle of rosé and I paid for it with a severe throbbing in my temple. Meanwhile, she, I'm sure, had been gladly wallowing in a couch full of Doritos, disturbing the cleanliness with a mess. As soon as I had shut the door and sank into my desk chair, I took the call.

*We need you to check out this case*, came the short voice of my boss on the other end of the line. *I'm sending you the details*.

*And back to work*, I thought to myself.

As much as I wanted to be bitter about it, I couldn't — after all, I did just come back from a three-week trip to Japan (thus, the cleaning). What did I expect? Sighing, I had lighted my cigarette, another uncontrolled and nasty habit of mine, and let the nicotine burn while I turned on my computer. An effort to be calm, centered, and professional was made. With my boss still on the line for further instructions, I had signed onto my email, clicked on the most

recent message, and skimmed. I took a legal pad from my top drawer, snagged a pen from a cup, and started scribbling.

*Two missing reporters, identified as women, 25-30 years old. The first missing reporter had been a 27-year old African-American woman named Tanya Jones, who was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. Specializing in the topic of cultural appropriation, there was a notation on her file that she had been arrested at Coachella for “disorderly conduct.” Based on her writing focus, I could have only guessed that maybe she was passionately against that year’s festival attire and it sparked an argument. Whoever had cuffed her didn’t find it reasonable enough to let her go. Other than her stunt at the festival, it appeared that her record was clean.*

Unfortunately, I wasn’t provided any further information about Miss Jones, other than a few photographs — one of her reporter’s pass, her mugshot, and one recent photo given by her sister. As expected, her identification photo had been very composed and serious, a vacant look in her eyes, though giving an idyllic shape of her strong cheekbones. Her mugshot, however, was a bit much. Rude to receive, even. But even then, it spoke a justified anger and passion that someone who thought they were doing right would have felt. In the third photo, the one that her sister had given us, Tanya was sitting down on a lawn with a dog in her arms, hair unbraided and natural, freckles dancing above a shining smile, the epitome of pure happiness.

On the phone, my boss had made no hesitation or stops when it came to segueing to the other missing woman and I had just had to keep up. *The second missing reporter was Kaleo'okalani Chin. Twenty-nine years old and of Hawaiian-Chinese descent, she was born and raised in the state of Hawai'i. It stated in the notes that she was a well-known activist, particularly in her home state, but not much else. Usually, more information would have been provided, a backstory of some sort, but as it was her boss who had filed the missing person*

report, I could understand why. Surely, the boss didn't know too much of Miss Chin's personal life to submit that sort of information or only noticed her absence when she hadn't shown up for work for a certain amount of days. *What a cloudy impression.* I supposed I should have been grateful when they sent over as much as *two* photographs of Miss Chin.

The first photo had been her identification, much like the last reporter. It was always like that. They send a professional image, or one they could use for a particular narrative in the media, and then, they accompany it with something from the family, something heartfelt and meaningful. For Kaleo'okalani Chin, it hadn't been quite like that. Her identification photo provided her heart-shaped face, small brown eyes, and long trembling dark hair, but left out a smile, or some semblance of human emotion, the latter an expectation. Meanwhile, the second was a photo from a protest — there she is, unmistakably in the front row screaming or yelling something, but I wouldn't use the word 'aggressively' the way most people would associate rallies with. It looks like a chant, like a passionate declaration of something or some song. By the looks of the posters, it was located back in the islands. This gives me the impression that she maintains relations with her past.

The two reporters worked for different magazines, which wasn't a curious thing at all. If it was a serial kidnapping or an assault of some kind, it would be too easy to target one specific brand. Despite their differences, I focused on their similarities. Both reporters moved to Los Angeles for more occupational opportunities. Looking around my condo in the valley, I'd have to agree. Even if Maya and I didn't split the bill, with my pay, I might have enough to be out on my own. It didn't stop there; it wouldn't have been enough of a motive regardless. Boss Man added that in recent months, the two reporters had both attended fashion week only once before and both had been scheduled to interview iconic designer Simone Martin.

The sound of the fax machine printing out the information I had received over the phone was the only reaction coming from my end of the line. A tight ball pressed heavily in my chest. The use of *her* name had stunned me into silence. Upon learning who I would have to speak with regarding the women, I had to pick up both my pen and my jaw.

It would be a lie if I said that I didn't want to meet her. I did. Simone Martin has always been one of the most influential women in modern-day fashion, a real-time Coco Chanel. As strange as this case was, for it to land on my lap so miraculously, I couldn't believe it. It was surreal to me that everything fell into place so perfectly that it had to have been meant to be. I convinced myself that if I spent too much of my time thinking about it, the opportunity might have just disappeared. The stars aligned, and fate wished me well so that I could be given that opening and I did not want to take it for granted. Simone Martin had been the reason behind every appropriately color coordinated outfit I own and why I had purchased as many pairs of leggings as I had to begin with.

It had made sense — Boss Man had arranged for an interrogation staged as a fake interview and if it wasn't for my reputation and honorary nickname, "the Fashion Police," I couldn't see him calling me otherwise. It was no secret that I had been the only one in the department fashionably-educated enough to go undercover and host a lengthy conversation with her and I could feel the strain in Boss Man's voice to ask me. It also didn't help him that I had just returned from my two-week trip to what Maya and I like to call the "Great Country of Asia" and needed a case. I reassured the man that I would do excellent work to retrieve the answers or a confession, either which he sought, all the while not to sound too eager in the process.

It had felt like reliving the childhood moments of adrenaline rushing through my veins all at once, the soft heat coming onto my skin, lifting the tiny hairs on my arms just thinking about it. It was an opportunity to meet a longtime hero and nothing could prepare me better for it.

In the several hours that I had been asleep, my roommate Maya had migrated from her room to the communal couch, taking the non-communal party-sized bag of chips from our pantry and burst it open all over my no-longer-clean coffee table and leather sofa. Not to mention, the bookshelves that I had taken a good hour and a half or so to organize for her had already been out of order. From being alphabetized by author's last name to being categorized by course load, I could see Said and Foucault beside each other as though she took out the books she needed for her night lecture and simply shoved them back in when she was done. If I had the energy to scream or to acknowledge her act of vengeance for using the last bit of her favorite shampoo, I would have. Instead, I picked up the makeshift remote and changed the channel to search YouTube on the T.V. Without a moment of hesitation, she moans in a streamline of complaints.

"I know your admiration for the woman is borderline disgusting, but did you really need to change the Chanel?" I ignored my roommate's sad excuse for a pun in favor of struggling with the Xbox controller, searching for the last interview I had seen of Simone Martin's. Meanwhile, the goofy grin on Maya's face was her staple and she tried again. "Get it? Channel, Chanel?"

Honestly, I barely wanted to give her a glance. "That was terrible," slipped out of my mouth in a half-hearted retort, even as my eyes darted over her sloppy form, taking over half the couch in increments of Fritos chips. What was more upsetting than the way she completely tarnished my hard work was that it was almost 9am and she didn't even look presentable. Too quickly, a viperous remark shot out, "How are you a woman and not care an ounce about fashion?"

It might have sounded accusatory and instigating of a fight by the way that I had phrased my question, so much that her voice dropped the way it usually did when she was angered by something. This normally consists of those who whistle from their cars, when she locks her car keys in the trunk for the second time that day or when older individuals call her a “nice, young man.” By opening my mouth and letting something as problematic as that was fall out, I knew I was in for a discipline. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, B, that’s toxic behavior and you know it.” I turned to look at her and raised a brow in a fashion that read, *Oh, we’re doing this now*. Maya didn’t relent. “One, I’m a woman, not a victim of capitalism. And two, since when have either of us cared about subscribing to the patriarchy’s standards of beauty?”

The interregnum between her question and my lie had felt like an eternity, and within that time frame, I had thought of every bleaching session of skin and hair that I had done to reach some semblance of self-worth. I had thought of the hours that I had spent in front of the mirror, wondering if anyone could consider me, or even I could ever consider myself, attractive. The last-minute dress repairs that Maya and I would do when we chose to go out together at night, fawning over each other in compliments, raving about the other’s appearance to encourage each other with the notion that we were going to bring home a man that night. Whether it did or not had become immaterial when Maya swung the first blow. She was a victim of the standard, we all were.

“Since it became my job,” I lied. The truth was, I never stopped caring, and Maya only looked at me with distrust, but settled further into the couch. After pressing play, I cuddled in next to her, reaching into the bag of scoops and taking a handful to put into my mouth.

Simone Martin’s face flooded the screen from a YouTube video entitled “Simone in Seoul.” Immediately, I had recognized it as one of the pre-fashion week interviews as it had

been taken place outside of the building. If there was any doubt, the presence of street style-aspiring fashionistas cluttering behind as they attempt to be captured on screen was evident. They called her the Coco Chanel of the modern world, and with those perfectly cut cheekbones hidden behind thick lashes and a big, floppy hat, had adapted the silhouette of her appearance. Her lips pursed and pouted, movement slow and intimate as she answered each question delectably. One look at me and Maya nearly had to pick my chin up.

“I still don’t know why you’re obsessed with her,” she shook her head as she took two chips — one for her, one for me — and then reached back again into the bag. “She reminds me of those white women at Coachella. Don’t be surprised if you see someone’s quilt on her wall.” Maya rolled her eyes. “Gross.”

As I watched Simone Martin smile pleasantly to what the interviewer commented on, I wanted to object to Maya’s claims. She didn’t seem to be the type to hurt anyone; belonging to the fashion industry or not, driven by ambition or not. I wanted to nudge Maya and send myself into another one of those thousand-page dissertations about how wrong she was, but I was never strong enough to tell her off. Never confrontational enough to say otherwise. So, I sat quietly like a doll, eyes trained to the movement of Simone Martin’s lips, and began to construct the image I wanted to project.

## *ACT TWO*

Having a glass of red wine on the couch at half past nine pm was, in most ways, very *Parisienne*, and by definition, very Simone Martin. Allowing me into her summer home on the cool and frosty beach in Malibu, it was a once in a lifetime opportunity to spend in the intimacy of Miss Martin's space. Being a fashion writer with a proclivity for short pauses and clipped answers, Simone had admitted to spending a good portion of her time with something dangling from her lips. Whether it was the mug of her morning coffee while she scrolled through social networking sites, or the critique waiting behind pressed Chanel rouge lips — something had always teemed at the woman's mouth.

Immediately, she settled me in, the comfort of her home radiating a certain kind of warmth. Contrary to popular belief, Simone had exuded "relaxed" as she reclined on her sofa, not at all coming across "uptight" and pompous," as she was usually described. Spread out in ankle grazers and a slouchy jumper, there was something dramatically American about her that left her burning a certain level of "cool" and "collected," unlike the intimidating Parisian woman she was normally expected to be. Topping the look off with her signature silk-like hair styled into a blonde knot, she had looked absolutely effortless.

As she had downed the rest of her glass, there must have been something on my face that had told her to ask me, because she did.

"Can I interest you in more wine — I'm sorry, what was your name again?" Tucking her bangs behind her ears, she had shyly smiled and added, "God, I'm so terrible at names."

I had been so distracted by her meek embarrassment that I had almost forgot my cover.

*Nala*, I lied.

She had immediately met me with compliments in return, saying “how pretty,” and that it was “cute, like *The Lion King*.” It made me consider putting that on my résumé, if that had actually been my real name.

“You look like her too, with that tawny tone.”

A shy word of thanks had slipped out in reply.

My humility must have been an open door for her as she began to really fawn over me for a bit, pointing out my gold bracelet from my mother (“Trés chic,”) and my white romper (“How minimalist of you!”) until the conversation had focused on the navy kimono-styled cover-up I tossed on before walking out of the hotel. It was a last resort added onto my ensemble, and it seemed to have really caught her eye. She leaned in toward me, eyes danced over my clothes with interest.

She inquired to feel the material of my kimono. As if my fifteen minutes of fame had just started the clock, I recounted the story of the past two weeks in Okinawa. Although I was there for my grandfather’s funeral, I had spent a lot of time with my grandmother who had given me a chest full of items collected before the 1900s from their years together. Knowing of my passion for clothes, I went through the large selection of traditional garments and picked out one in navy. Hours I had spent with my grandmother as we planned, snipped, and hemmed that one piece from my grandfather that I could wear in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, by turning it into a cardigan of sorts.

Upon hearing my story, Simone had placed her hand over her chest.

“That’s poetic,” she had said to me. “The Japanese are so chic.”

I had felt such a rush after I had told her my story, that I had stammered on my way back to talking about her. When I asked her what her favorite motivational phrase was, she quoted

Karl Lagerfeld: *Change is the healthiest way to survive*. She confided that Lagerfeld's "dry wit" and "renaissance-like intelligence" had forced her to look at the fashion world differently.

The mention of Lagerfeld as a source of inspiration had prompted me to ask about what sort of writers inspired her. She speedily replied, "Well, of course, the ones who write."

It was that kind of quick-witted responses that had excited me and encouraged me to continue our engagement.

My attention to the way that she had downed the rest of her glass had provoked her to offer me another while she replenished her own. I refused her. Instead, as a part of my script, I asked her what her closet must-have was. When she had answered me with a coy "Anything that makes you feel filthy rich," she accompanied with a wink. It had been the first wink she had ever given me, and only then did our exchange begin to feel less of an interview or even a covert interrogation of an un-sub than it was a sleepover with one of the most influential women in fashion. After all, she had shortly after permitted me free reign of her place.

As I had the opportunity to move between rooms, I had just imagined the looks on my colleague's faces, all of them saying at once — *was this the sort of life you wished to live?*

While Simone had filled the tub with hot water and a Lush branded bath bomb, I took the moment to document what living like a celebrity looked like. There was something incredibly enchanting about the lifestyle she had lived, it was something intangible or perhaps just only tangible for her and her alone.

Anything from a Native American headdress hanging on Islamic tiled walls, to a Buddha head sitting on an end table, to a dark-skinned sculpture of a woman laid out in her foyer — Simone Martin had it all. If there wasn't enough proof that she had traveled the world, Gauguin's *Zombie* would suffice.

My eyes trimmed the painting that resembled a cover jacket of one of Maya's textbooks and I nodded in approval, clearly impressed by Simone's collection. It looked a little more three-dimensional and that instead of a simple print, certain elements of the painting had been lifted and accented. I resisted the urge to feel it. Beneath the work read the name, artist, and date on the placard: *The Snake Charmer. Jean-Leon Gerome, late 1860s*. I hummed quietly to myself, hardly thinking out loud, *How French of her*.

Approaching the sculpture of the woman out of all of the pieces, I discovered it to be the most striking in terms of what was interesting. She was bare and unclothed, except for a colorful barrette in her straw-like hair. Her skin tone dusk in comparison to mine, and yet, with features as sad as hers, I couldn't help but feel overwhelmed with grief. I touched her face softly and a rush of pain swallowed me when I looked into her lacquer-covered eyes. The longer I had stared at her, the more I had the feeling that she had been real. The longer I had felt in her presence, the more I realized that I didn't want to be in it. While saddened by the beautiful art, I had also felt incredibly terrified.

My fingers returned to the barrette, running over the grooves just as it began to follow my touch, slipping off the statue's hair. When I heard Simone's footsteps, I tucked the barrette in my bra and retracted my hand innocently. Simone found me staring at her "prized Igbo artifact" and explained that it was an image of a queen "of something, somewhere," but that it "didn't matter — there were more thought-provoking pieces." I figured she had meant the Buddha head instead.

She added that if I were to take photographs of her place and her things, she requested that I did not use flash. In that sense, it had felt more like a museum, than a home full of antiques. The question I immediately had were along the lines of, why would I bother to do so?

Had others done that when they had visited? While I had considered asking about potential visitors, I had lost my nerve.

Eventually, she led me through a short hallway of more cultural pieces on the way back to the bath where instantly the open room had been infused with a strong peppermint aroma. Within seconds, the little blue ball floating in the water had turned into a galaxy. We had moved from guest area to in-suite bathroom as the nonchalance of her invitation told me that she never had felt invaded in the least. She had brought a new bottle of rosé with her as well as her preferred red, when she had allowed me to join her in her privacy.

“Nala dear,” she said in a voice that had appeared untrusting. “If there is anything that I have learned — and that you will learn — in this business...innovation is when you give the people what they want before they know they want it.”

Simone had dropped her jeans and pulled off her top in favor of a silk robe. Instantly, I looked away and shut my eyes, as though I had never seen a naked woman before, realizing that in the next heartbeat, just how childish it was. Fortunately for me, she hadn’t noticed my immaturity.

She tied the fabric around her waist while I had found a stool to sit on. Given her French nature, one would have assumed that she always wants a lit cigarette between her fingers, but she was the sort that refused in favor of more wine. As she had asked for the red, I had poured her a glass and returned to my stool to continue to take notes.

“The hardest part of fashion is looking for the next best thing,” she clearly stated. “The last few decades are still so much more powerful and defining that doing anything that resembles them would be an obvious copy,” Pouring makeup remover into her palms, she gently began to massage it into her skin. “The 70’s was our father’s old VW van to coast from flowing pants and

vibrant colors. The 80's gave us big hair and bold, flashy prints, and the nerve to steal our mother's favorite lipstick. The 90's were a transition from grunge and rock and roll days to the late 00's minimalist couture. But what comes after the basics? The blacks and whites, and crisp lines?"

For a few seconds, I toyed with the idea that her question was rhetorical, but in the same breath, I then told her that *culture is the future*, like an idiot.

She looked up, face still lathered in her cleansing water, but lit up, black ink smeared around and down her cheeks. The look on her face left me scrambling to explain myself in ways that made me feel like I was starting to blubber. I slowly felt insecure in what I was saying and pleaded with myself to just stop talking altogether.

However, in that ocean of a pause, it was as though she had witnessed something in the mirror before she looked at me through it. Simone tilted her head and turned around to walk toward me. I tried not to flinch as the running mascara made her eyes pop unbelievably. She opened the untouched bottle of rosé and began to pour me a glass of it before offering it to me, like she knew that I couldn't refuse it once served. "Would you like some wine? There's something that I want to run by you."

As I took the glass and gulped it down with the hope that it comforted my nerves, I saw that she took my other hand in hers and it felt like oil. She fingered my gold bracelet and I refrained from showing my disgust — she could have washed her hands first.

"There's something very peculiar about you, Nala dear," she said. Peculiar, as in, belonging exclusively and only to her. I wanted her to look away. There was something about the way that she stared at me that made me become increasingly uncomfortable. Her eyes didn't come off me, no matter how much I had wanted her to blink. "Something peculiar, indeed," Her

thumb continued to glide over the back of my hand and I offered her a strained smile. “I can do so much for you, you know.”

I couldn’t speak. My head started to feel light and an immense pressure crushed my chest.

“I can popularize you, commercialize you even,” she said, a Cheshire-sized smile spread out on her lips. “Is that what you want?”

*No, I don’t want this,* I begged to say, but couldn’t hear anything come out of my mouth. *I didn’t ask for this. I wanted to know what you did with those girls that came to you. They trusted you. What happened to them?*

“They became art.”

I could not speak my cry of confusion as I was cut off by her smile and the wine that took its effect on me. Letting it all sink in with what minimal faculties I had left, it all made sense to me in the most grotesque way — the painting on the wall, the bronze statue of the Nigerian woman, I could hurl.

“Would you love to be a part of my collection?” My body had forgotten the use of my limbs as I crashed onto the floor of her bathroom, glass shattering beside me, and the urge to apologize overcame me. She took down her hair in a curtain of blonde curls, her lips painted blood and her eyes shining like diamonds. Her voice sounded a room away and I could not help but plea to no avail. She told me, “Don’t fret, my dove. *You’ll* do just fine.”

She had me wrapped up in blush pink satin and it all felt like a dream.

### ACT THREE

Everything I could see was set in this dimly lit room, blurry and hard on the eyes, straining to focus. With my breathing slow, it had felt like there was a full ton on my chest, keeping me held down and paralyzed. As I struggled for some semblance of consciousness, a queasiness settled uncomfortably within me. I could vomit or disgustingly enough, what if I already had. I heard a graveling moan escape me, but I swore that it was too distant to actually feel it come from me. There was nothing but darkness and chill, the waves of the beach crashing against the pier — or perhaps that was what I wanted to hear. My bones felt heavy, the weight of my muscles surely pinning me to what resembled cold metal, until I realized that what cuffed me to it *was* cold metal.

Far from me, I could see a silhouette of a blonde manic mane and what was the back of it as it moved to my left and then to my right and then back to the left again. It made me feel dizzy, the spinning and dizzy sensation in my head not stopping, not even for a moment. There was nothing pleasant about what I was experiencing. All I could think of was trying to get out of there, but how? I could barely remember what prompted such a thing. *We were talking and drinking, we were holding hands, we were* — I stopped as images of our lips meeting and our bodies clashing flashed in my mind.

Immediately, I shot up to see what I was wearing. A white bed sheet had been the only thing separating me from the sixty-degree weather that encompassed an evening in Malibu. I was chained to a metal table with a single piece of cloth wrapped around me like it was some olden-day operating table and I could barely feel any of it.

The blonde must have heard the wrestling of the handcuffs and her attention drew back at me. If I had thought that her hair was frenzied before, the look in her steely blue eyes made me even more afraid of her.

“Oh, you’re awake,” she said, her voice soft and almost tender to the ears. But it was all a ruse. She couldn’t be trusted, and neither could her actions. At this stage, I knew I would be walking on eggshells with her. There was something in the shine of her eyes that told me that one word or phrase could have set her off, spiraling in a dangerous direction. “Remind me to get the K again. Can’t have you awake for this part of the fun.”

I shook my head, partly because I was trying to get some clarity, and partly because I didn’t understand what she meant by that.

“What — why —?” I couldn’t help myself from saying.

She came over with a tray of what looked like gloves and a couple of knives and set it on the small table beside me. They weren’t kitchen tools either. They sat, freshly sharpened and shiny, glimmering in the terribly dim lights. It all looked right out of a psychological thriller and I was going to be the next victim.

“Do you know how to skin a deer, sweets?” She asked, her voice still light. Putting on a latex glove, I winced at the snap of the band to her wrist. “First, you make sure it’s dead. And then,” her forefinger drew a line down the middle of my torso. “You slice it down its chest.”

I gulped. *Was she referring to me?*

“I can’t be too hasty and do something to damage the texture of my latest creation, so I won’t be using bullets. After all, I haven’t decided what to do with your pretty face yet, but I have such plans for the rest of you,” she admitted. My chest started doing compressions when I heard what she said. “I can just picture walking the red carpet with you on my arm. Reporters

will want to know everything about you and my concept. What am I wearing, they will ask me,” she wistfully said, her eyes looking off into her fantasy. “And I will tell them, the future.”

She had completely lost it.

Or the sad truth was, she had been like this the entire time, these thoughts a permanent resident in the back of her mind, living such a disgusting truth.

Meeting my eyes once more, she asked me, “Can’t you just imagine it?”

It was frightening. I could. I could imagine being draped over her shoulders like my grandparent’s jacket as bursts of light would go off and the camera shutters blinding me. Deafening voices clamoring for her attention and she stands like a grinning cat, refusing to answer anything but the questions she deems worthy enough. But I cannot speak, I cannot move, not unless she tells me to, not unless she manipulates me herself. My being will adorn her like the smock that I am, able to be shrugged off by her at a moment’s notice. And I am unable to do a single thing about it.

All I could think about was how to get out of there. I didn’t want to become art. I didn’t want to die. I wanted this to end. I wanted justice for those girls and all the others she would ever prey upon. I needed to get out of there and stop the madness. And then her phone rang.

Again.

And again.

As irritation set in, she answered it.

“What is it?” She snapped into the phone.

It was a blessing in disguise. Looking over at me, she gave me a once-over before she mumbled something into the receiver and started toward the staircase of what had appeared to be her basement, leading her up to the main part of her home. Taking deep breaths, I started to feel

some clarity for the first time in a while. Shifting on the table trying to figure out how to get out, I felt my bra strap cascade my shoulder, giving me an idea. What I thought was my bare body beneath the sheet was something that would have been my savior. Her failure to strip me would be her downfall.

Contorting my body as best as I could, I reached for my right hand to the best of my ability and fiddled with pulling the statue's barrette from my bra. Clawing at the fabric to do so, I managed to loosen it out and glide into my hand to pick the lock on my right cuffs. Freeing my right hand, I could hear her coming down the stairs and fixed myself to hide under the sheets.

"Look what I brought!" she cheered. Since I knew better, it sounded more hysterical than it did encouragingly. In her hand was the bottle of wine we enjoyed earlier, and a much smaller bottle of medicine pills. It was what she drugged me with. I wanted to be sick. "Let's celebrate our collaboration."

She turned to get the glass for me, surely to pour the wine and drop the pill into it for me again. Reaching over, I picked up the blade that had rested on the small table beside me, slipping it beneath the sheet. She came up to my bedside again and I clamped my mouth shut as tightly as I could, but not as hard as the hilt of the knife.

"Drink," Simone cooed in such a voice, it twisted my gut. "Come on, now. Aren't you excited?"

She clenched her bony fingers around my cheeks, forcing my mouth to purse and take the spiked drink. I refused to, shaking my head back and forth as a distraction. With one quick move, I took the knife and swung it into her back. Gasping, as I pulled out the blade, she fell backward and onto the ground, the glass falling out of her grip and shattering beside her. With

blurry vision, I swung the blade again, but this time at the cuffs on my left hand, freeing myself from the table.

Coming off of the table, I could barely stand and looking over at Simone, neither could she. Watching me coming toward her with the knife in hand, she tried to crawl backward, but to no avail. Drugged and all, I was moving much quicker than she was. Staggering over to her, I launched myself at her and drove the blade into her gut and twisted, causing her to bubble up with blood in her mouth. Those cold, blue eyes wide open and glazed over.

Wheezing, I felt my heart completely sink to the pit of my stomach. Shaking, my near naked body straddled and huddled over her body, I couldn't bring myself to move. I, too, was frozen still. Not a single thought ran through my mind for what felt like hours but had only been seconds. Until I heard it.

"B?" Faintly, I could make out a voice that sounded more and more like Maya's and I couldn't tell if it was all a part of my imagination. In the short second, I wondered if I had just convinced myself that it was the drug that caused me to hallucinate until I heard her call out my name again. "Bianca?"

It was her.

"Maya?" I croaked. Giving it my greatest attempt not to blubber and cry, I sniffed and shouted her name as loudly as I could muster. "MAYA!"

"Bianca!" She yelled for me again as she came in to find me on top of Simone, blade still in hand. A wave of nausea and dizziness crashed over me, causing me to drop the knife and tip over. Maya rushed toward me.

"I've been — I'm — roof." I could hardly choke out.

Maya, being my best friend, knew what I was trying to say anyway. The single fact that I could hardly stand was a clue. The queasiness returned, and I had felt the lump surge up my throat, my body doing all that it could to suppress it. I didn't see my kimono in her hands until she had wrapped me in it. Catching me in her arms, she had slung one of mine over her shoulder and walked me out of the basement.

"You didn't call," Maya said, worry dripping in her voice. "And I had this, this feeling to come and find you."

As I looked at the worry that slowly faded from her face, I tried to hold back the tears that bubbled up. Leaning on her, I felt her embrace, warm and comforting.

She had led me up the stairs as though it were the only way out. Together, while we trudged down the hallway leading to the foyer, we passed the large painting and the assortment of wall décor, just like Maya had imagined. And then I saw her. The sculpture of Tanya Jones stared lifelessly toward the front door as Maya closed it behind us.

When Maya led us to the steps of the Malibu house, she helped me down. Between us sat the heaviest truth that neither of us acknowledged and frankly, for once, I was perfectly content with silence as the sirens of the police cars wailed in the distance.

# THE NEIGHBOR

I can hear the voice in my head telling me what to do and it sounds an awful lot like my husband's.

Don't cut it, he will say, otherwise you'll look ugly.

My fingers run over the handle of the scissors and I stare into the mirror for a while. My reflection wears her hair long and dark, her tresses cascading down my shoulders like calligrapher's ink, falling at the pull of a pin. I stare long and hard at her until she does not look like me anymore.

This is not the first time I have pondered this before.

Putting the scissors back in the drawer, I shut it and leave, before I do something I might regret. When I exit the restroom, I find my husband at the window again. He mumbles as he lifts his watch to his face.

"Here comes another one," he says. "It's like clock-work."

It has become a game of sorts. Whenever a car pulls into the neighbor's driveway, one of us will peek through the window blinds and check the license plate, knowing full well that it won't be the same as the last. It never is.

I take note of the different makes of each car. Ford, Cadillac, Chevy — they are usually American — however, on the off-chance that her guests drive a BMW or a Mercedes, my eyes

light up. I begin to think that the maintenance fees that each house pays for, fees that include the gate man, is going to good use.

The community that my husband and I live in is a small, gated cul-de-sac, a home to only the richest of Kim's, Li's, and Tanaka's. Everyone knows everyone. All, except her.

"This is her fourth customer and it's only eleven," my husband adds.

He calls them her customers, as they arrive on the hour, as if her guests run off an appointment list. In my observation, they will come and go as they like, but do not stay particularly long.

I come over to my husband, wrap my arms around his waist, and press a kiss to his bare back. When he seems unmoved, I let him go. Instead, I then walk to the kitchen and open the refrigerator, picking out a beer for him and a snack for me.

As my eyes fall upon the apple pie that I picked up the other day, I entertain the idea of introducing myself to her and formally welcoming her as a part of the neighborhood. I will say, Hi, it's a pleasure to meet you. My husband and I have the most awful impressions of you, so would you like to clear the air?

The sarcasm stops.

Opening the beer, I take the first sip for myself. It tastes mostly of foam and steeped grains and reminds me of tea. Truthfully, I have never been one to care for tea.

He does not have a minute to enjoy his beer nor the comfort of his couch before I hear him opening the blinds again.

"That was quick," he tells me, just a second before I hear the sound of the engine roar. I do my best to not be tempted to look out of the window beside him.

I fix my eyes on the pie, the debate still occurring in my head of whether or not I should go. The scales are tilting, there are no other distractions, at least for a little while. It is the weekend.

As I am about to shut the refrigerator door with nothing but the open beer bottle in my hand, I can hear my husband from the living room.

“I wonder what she charges,” he scoffs. It is in such a way that he almost feeds the notion of it.

There is a kettle whistling in my head.

“Alright,” I say as I take the pie out from the refrigerator. “Alright. I’ll be back in a minute.”

He drops the blinds and turns to me. “Where are you going?”

I give him a look that reads, “Where do you think?” quicker than his third-grade reading level could process and shut the front door behind me.

Save for the cackling leaves that have fallen from neighboring trees, the street is quiet and empty. It is different, peaceful even, making it a strange occurrence given the usual circumstances.

As I walk up to her door, a slew of leaves run across the pavement, catching beneath my shoes. I stomp on them with the hopes of hearing them crunch, and when one of them simply flattens without a sound, I stop. I bring my other foot and crush the leaf between my feet before I let it go. I ring her bell.

Nothing.

After I give it a few seconds, I ring it again. I resist the urge to check to see if my husband has his eyes between the blinds. But as I think it, I can hear her feet catch the carpet, making her way toward the door.

Before this very moment, I had never made eye contact with her. Frankly, there had never been any inclination to, seeing as I had never had the will to interact with her at all. She had always done her best to keep to herself and never bother anyone on this street. Just intrigued them.

It will be the first time that we will have ever met, face-to-face. As I wait for her to answer, I begin to shiver, like a chill had passed through her porch. I hold my breath.

Clutch, turn, pull.

“Hello?” comes a voice so tickling, it is as though she speaks from beneath a blanket or right up against my ear.

With a tug of the door, she hesitantly draws it back as though she hadn’t been expecting company just yet. She comes out of her home, partially, the sunlight pouring onto her petite form, permitting me to take in her details.

The first to strike me is every piece of red in her appearance. Red lips frame the words that she wants to say as long ruby-painted nails attached to fingers hold open the door. Her crimson silky robe envelops her body in a way that the darkness of her home fails to.

There are no lights lit behind her, nothing to tell me that she doesn’t prefer it that way.

“Hi, my name is Jane,” I tell her, lifting the pie in my hands. “I’m your neighbor. I just wanted to stop by for a quick minute, if that’s alright with you.”

She tucks a bit of her fake blonde hair behind her ear. “Anna,” she says.

When she opens the door, I am met with more shadows than darkness, the morning light providing some comfort for me to walk into. It is that looming thought of her closing the door behind us that begins to weigh over me.

The moment I make the decision to trail behind her, I take a step forward and catch myself before I trip. She doesn't hear me because I do not yelp nor make a sound, and then I look down. There is a pile of shoes beside the door, most of them neat from what I could make out, but one had been sloppily dropped. It is a reminder for me to take off my shoes in her home and so I do.

"I don't like a lot of light when I'm home by myself," she explains. "I prefer to leave it all outside."

Her voice travels to the far end of her patio, closer to where a paper lamp sits, and when she ignites a lighter do I see that she presses the flame to the wick of the candle inside of it. The light illuminates a smaller radius of the room, but enough to keep it blanketed in shadows.

"Do you mind?" She asks me.

I shake my head.

However odd it is, I won't allow it to bother me. Instead, I begin to wonder just how many of her guests have seen her home this way, a place secluded in darkness, an unconventional setting. Then, in my next breath, I think of the contrary: just how many of her guests have seen it completely lit?

"I have made some miso soup," she informs me. "And I had heated up some green tea too. Would you care for some?"

I shake my head again as I follow her to the dining area, made up of two white couches with a *kotatsu* between them. It embarrasses me that the last time I have seen a *kotatsu* was in

my grandmother's house, years ago. I would spend a week or two there, try to study during the late hours, the warmth filling my thighs, and then I would fall asleep.

“Do you like tofu, or could I interest you in a snack instead?”

She gestures to the bowl of various snacks, unfamiliar characters labeled all over them in vibrant colors, and I pretend that I cannot feel the weight of the apple pie in my hands.

My reply is as quiet as I can make it before I set the box down on the tabletop. “No thank you.”

When she takes the seat across from me, she smooths down her robe, adjusting what needs to be, assuring that she indeed looked presentable and appropriate. Her legs hang over the edge of the couch, folded to the side like a princess. She reaches down, picks up the kettle and pours herself a cup.

“So, Jane,” she starts to say, blowing gently on her hot drink before asking, “Were you born here?”

For some reason, the way she speaks makes it sound less accusatory and more of genuine curiosity. This doesn't happen often for me that I don't find a question like that a threatening one at all.

Nodding, I answer her. “I've lived in this community my whole life.”

The way the shadows fall on her face, I can tell that a mode of study is taking place. She looks at me, her eyes grazing over my features like she's reading a book. I am just not aware if she knows its language.

“Do you speak in another tongue?” she then inquires.

I shake my head. “No.”

She wordlessly nods, as though it is a satisfactory answer, one that she may have predicted. She then purses her lips like she has more to say, and so she does.

“Do they expect you to?”

Immediately, I am taken for a joy ride on the number of times that people have either openly conversed with me in another language or have complimented me on the one that I knew fluently. They didn’t even have to know whether or not that English was my first language before they had placed their assumptions.

As I tell her yes, she gives me that all-too-familiar feeling of knowing what that was like, only in her eyes. To me, it feels as though she is pouring into my soul just by occupying the same space as her.

“May I ask what languages they are?” She requests.

I look to the tea that sits between us, knowing that I had never taken a sip, and still speculating if I had been given some sort of truth serum, because I answer her yet again.

“They don’t usually know,” I say. “They don’t always get it right, and sometimes they do. If I tell them that my mother and father’s families were born in Japan, then they will either think I, or expect that I, know Japanese.”

My eyes haven’t left the pot and I decide to make myself a cup anyway. When I reach for them, she retrieves them first and shoots me a look. Silently, she tells me that she will do it herself. I slowly retract and watch as she pours the green liquid into a handle-less mug, then offers it to me.

I take it and thank her, a small and grateful smile spread along my face. Looking into the cup, I see the light refracting, a glimmer of my reflection inside of it. I see my own makeup, a feature-flattering appearance, and I blow against it.

She watches me intently as I do, and I notice that her shoulders had dropped a little, like she has released the tension in them. She appears more comfortable to me, despite it being her own home.

It remains just as quiet and dark, but the longer I am in it, I see our surroundings more clearly. There are patterns stitched into the cushion of each couch. There are simple cherry blossom paintings on the lamp shade. I can see the art on the dark panels behind her, each one depicting a story to tell. I look to her as though she, too, has her own story.

“Could I admit something?”

At first, she seems taken aback by my sudden interest, as though she has not predicted me proposing a question of any kind regarding her. She brings the cup to her lips. As she takes another sip, her lipstick smears, its color blotting and rubbing away.

“Sure,” she says.

Little does she know that there has been at least one thing on my mind when it comes to the topic of her. I begin to struggle to find the words that I want to form and the question I have been meaning to ask her.

“You see, my husband and I — well, he — I — have this idea that, maybe, please don’t take this the wrong way, that you’re —” I can’t find the words. “Are you, um, selling your body?”

“Yes.”

Her answer is firm and as sure of itself as I could never bring myself to be. I don’t know how to respond nor where to go from there, as if all suspicions had been answered, however, I doubt that it is the answer that I’m seeking.

Written all over my face, I'm sure, she must see that I am failing to grasp what she has said. Offering me a smile as her way of condolence, I patiently wait in the hopes that she explains herself.

"We are all selling our bodies," she states.

I am left more confused. "I don't get it."

She sets her tea down onto the *kotatsu* and stands.

"Come with me."

The direction she turns to is darker than where we had been, and I hesitantly keep pace with her as she navigates the secluded part of her home. As I explore her hallway with her, my adjustment to the lightless structure leaves me able to amend it quicker. She picks up what I assume to be another lighter and strikes it, putting the flame into another lamp for us.

As the light illuminates another large portion of the area, she leads us into a bed room. Inside of it, she shows me what I at first believe to be a *butsudan* but as she opens it do I learn that I am wrong. Unfortunately, and to my chagrin, it is just a cabinet with a beautiful design on the front, and not an altar at all. Again, the shame swells.

However, she does not allow me to wallow in my embarrassment for too long. The cupboard she opens is the home to a handful of wigs, brown, black, a bob, one with bangs, and an empty stand.

"Try one on, whatever interests you," she tells me. "You can be whomever you want to be with one of them on."

I am aware that she believes it as I can only assume that the blonde she wears normally hangs on that last wig stand. She holds up a hair net, given the long hair I have, and I begin to pick up the Rapunzel locks, gather it all, and have it flattened beneath the netting. Securing my

hair, for a temporary amount of time, I choose the bob, as it reminds me of what I know to be the closest I'll ever get to having short hair.

I put it on just as she reaches in to take something from one of the cabinet's compartments. Just as I am in the adjusting period of my wig, she holds up what she has picked up: a mirror.

"My body, my identity," she says with a slight gesture to herself before she returns to fixing the bangs of the bob. "It is a product to be sold, marketed only to get cash. People come for the entertainment, the joy, the exotic nature of the Asian woman," she tells me. "They live in this fantasy and become engrossed in it for as long as they please. I live in it for a short while, and then I shrug it off and wipe my face. It is not me at all."

But when I look into the mirror that she holds up for me, staring into my eyes that shine in the flickering light that dances with the shadows of her home, I think the opposite. I think that she is the closest to me that I will ever be.

"Why would you do it?" I dare to ask.

Her eyes pour into mine through the reflection.

"Why," she questions me in turn. "Why would you put up with people that would never, will never, think that you speak English first? It is the same reason."

I want to tell her that it's not, that if I don't believe it is, it will be true to the way that I see it.

"Pretty, isn't she?"

She is talking about me, I am sure, and I only nod.

Thinking my wordless response as a sufficient answer, she says, "Come, your tea is getting cold."

Returning to the dining area, we take our respective seats and she picks up the pot again to pour us both some fresh cups of tea. I manage to swallow some down when she has some for herself.

The thought of her cabinet and her relationship with these guests provoke me to ask her another question. I am unable to contain myself, beginning to see her as a person who will share as much as she inquires.

“What was it like?” I ask. “What was it like to come out all the way here and start a new life here?”

It is a moment of quiet for her, a second to think and to gather her thoughts. As if this is the one question that she had the most intimate answer for.

“I left Japan like I had walked through a door,” she confesses. “I went through it and watched as it closed behind me. Between breaths, I heard its lock turned, until the click. One day, I knew that if I had ever found the key, neither me nor the Japan I knew behind this door, would ever be the same again.”

I do not tell her this, but I cannot imagine what that is like. I do not know the fear of leaving your home for another nor practice the attempt of cutting edges to fit into a round hole. I do not know what changing everything about myself is like either. I should, but my parents and grandparents have been those who have made that sacrifice. I am the only one who benefits from it.

“When I had first heard of the American dream, I had wished to live in a huge castle with a vast courtyard. I had willed every person I met to be nice and that they would get along perfectly with each other. Anything that I imagined, I wished would just happen or appear to me,” she admits. “But it was the American dream, and like all dreams do, none of them ever

make sense. I learned that dreams are meant for children. They are hopes and wishes that whether they come true or do not, it is not something to mourn.

“But goals, they’re different. Goals,” she tells me. “You’ll do anything in your power to achieve.”

I think of the pair of scissors in the bathroom drawer and then I try to focus back onto her. Something on my face tells her that inside, I am screaming. Screaming at myself to say it and screaming at her to notice me. She does.

“What do you want to do?” she asks.

It sounds so stupid, I want to say. It sounds like a child’s dream.

I tell her, “I want to cut my hair.”

Her eyes outline me, catching every detail in this dim light. I follow them as they imagine cascade the long dark tresses I have kept pinned down beneath this wig. I see her raise her gaze back to my face, meeting my eyes with a smile that begins to warm me. I don’t need to hear her say it for me to know what she will tell me.

She picks up her wig by its hairline and pulls it without much effort, slowly and carefully as to not harm it. Beneath it, she reveals a hair net that matches mine, only, when she removes that too, do I see that her head is completely shaven down to the scalp. I wonder if this is a choice she has made or if it is one that life has made for her.

“I don’t normally let anyone see me like this, but you,” she begins. “You must be different. Or you must remind me of me.”

She sets the wig gently on the spot of the couch beside her. She lets out a sigh and I remain quiet, anticipating her next admission.

“My name is actually Tsuruko,” she announces, her attention then trained to the incense on the table in front of her. “I tell everyone that it is Anna, because I know how hard it is for them to say it. However, I use the name Anna because other names are hard for me to say.”

I try not to step on her name by breaking it into fragments.

“Tsuruko,” I say at once.

As the sage holds the flame, I can see her face clearly, a look of pleasant wonder spreads across her cheeks. The flame does not have a second to become whistling smoke before a gong makes its resounding chime. It comes from somewhere on the wall and interrupts our peace. While I did not make an appointment, I feel like I have.

She puts her blonde hair onto one palm and then holds out the other palm, expectantly waiting for the one that I am wearing. If I am honest with myself, I want to live out the fantasy a little longer. It seems as though she reads my wishes and whispers something to me.

“It is yours if you wish.”

When I come home, he is at the window again, peeking through the blinds. From the door, I look to hers and for a brief moment, I can see her wave up at him, allowing him to view her in all of her beauty.

“Who is that—” My husband asks.

I ignore him. For the first time ever, I ignore him like I have never done before. Instead, I brush past him as though he had been nothing but a fallen leaf that had crunched beneath my feet on my way to the bathroom.

I turn on the light, pull open the drawer, and I pick up my scissors.

## WHEN WE ARE

She had felt like a fool. Four threatening words sat across the header of the page like a title of a book, glaring at her with such a collective ferocity that demanded to be answered. It had been menacing, intimidating, and challenging, and all at once.

*Write what you know.*

Mari had felt defeated for the first time in her academic career. How many times had she just sat there in front of her computer and groaned, the looming threat of a deadline of a first draft had weighed heavily over her. If she had been asked, too many more than she would have liked to admit.

After having set aside time in her schedule, making a hot cup of black coffee, and putting on some smooth jazz to get her creative juices flowing, working in otherwise complete solitary to write something, to write anything — Mari had been staring at the blank screen for three whole hours. Three hours and with nothing to show for it.

To her aid, the final paper that she had been asked to produce had only required one thing of her. Provided at the top of the page was a one-sentence prompt that had been meant to steer the class in an inspiring direction: *Write what you know.*

“I’ve got 69 years of knowledge!” Mari had groaned, steam almost coming out from her nostrils. She threw her hands up in surrender. “Where do I start?”

Running her tongue over her teeth, Mari tapped the tabletop with a firm index finger, staring at the blank page in deep thought. And then it came to her. She had been aware that she would be drinking later that day — it was a Wednesday tradition to meet at Shiro's, a bar owned by an old friend — but until then? She had felt more than inclined to treat herself.

Getting up from her chair and heading to the kitchen cabinet, she chose the bottle of Kahlua, came back to her workbench, and poured a little over a shot into her mug. Setting the bottle beside her, Mari took a large, healthy sip from her drink. She placed it gingerly down onto the coaster and turned to her empty page.

*Write what you know.*

Mari sighed again and shut her laptop, picking up her mug once again. Her thoughts began to drift, moving between plans for the rest of the day. *I should go to Sambo Dahn. And maybe, I'll visit Ansei*, she mused as she took another gulp. She glanced once more at her closed laptop and then not at all, as she had not wanted to be bothered anymore.

\* \* \*

They couldn't have been older than 15. Two Portuguese boys walked in Ansei's shop with a sort of prowl that left the man following them in with his eyes. At the register, he kept a firm stare on the two before picking up a broom and moving around the counter to trail after them. Ansei began to sweep, his wrinkled hands gripping the pole as his vision monitored each of the corner mirrors in his shop.

The two boys headed from the chip aisle toward the frozen section, hardly inconspicuous in their attempt to bee-line for the alcohol instead of the carbonated drinks. It spelled trouble,

given their ages. Shifting as quietly as he could in iron *getas*, Ansei raised a brow as one of the boys tried to block the reflection off a mirror.

“Need any help?” Ansei propositioned.

“We-we’re good!” They chimed in unison, proceeding to mumble amongst themselves in a way that failed to convince Ansei.

Doubting the boys, Ansei started down the aisle and the sound of rustling backpacks competed with the clacking of his *getas*. When he had made his way over, Ansei had caught them with several bottles of beer poking out of their bags. Just before he was to reprimand them, one of them had pulled out a switchblade from his pocket, raising the shop owner’s brow.

“We said we’re good, old man!”

Putting his hands up, Ansei set the broom to the side, leaning it up against the corner of an endcap. He knew that they were young and with a blade in hand, he couldn’t suspect how agile they were with a weapon. However, what he did know was how good he was in defending himself. He moved backward, as though he had led them toward the front of the store.

“It’s okay, you can have all the alcohol you want,” Ansei told them.

“On your knees, old man.”

“Okay, okay.” He acquiesced, eyes shifting between the one with the knife and his friend.

Getting on his knees, Ansei spotted the exchange of one head nod from the boy with the knife to the other. The other had looked more worried, sprinting toward the cash register and unzipping his bag in the process as though to collect. Without looking, Ansei could hear the struggle of the kid at the register, not able to immediately open the till.

“You didn’t plan this very well, did you?”

“What—?” asked the kid with the knife, brandishing his weapon as he came a little closer toward Ansei. “What do you know, old man?”

Not a second of hesitation passed when Ansei took the boy’s wrist in one hand, turning his arm in one swift move as Ansei’s right palm came down against the kid’s elbow, creating a loud popping sound from the boy’s arm. Having forced him to drop the knife, Ansei kicked it away, further deep into the aisle as the boy wailed in pain.

The other swiveled around the counter to the aid of his injured friend, picking up the wooden bat that Ansei kept by the register for just in case. He had gotten to his feet by the time the kid came around and when he pulled back to swing, Ansei timed his round-house kick perfectly, meeting the curve of the bat with the iron of his sandal. The kid’s eyes grew wide, even as his grip wound tighter around the bat.

“Strike one,” Ansei teased, despite not even a hint of smile graced his face.

Sensing that the shop owner had been playing with his food at this point, the kid swung the bat again, this time wildly and violently, narrowly missing Ansei every time. It was only when Ansei had felt the cool glass of his cabinet behind him that the kid mustered a smirk. He pitched the bat again, and while Ansei had managed to dodge the blow, it however, landed against the cabinet that already had a deep crack in it. Having been damaged from a previous incident, the impact had shattered the glass, inciting anger in the shop owner.

The next swing had left Ansei with enough adrenaline to catch the barrel in his hands, and when he did, he snatched the bat with enough force that he seized it right out of the kid’s hands. In a quick move, he knocked the knob hard into the kid’s gut, sending him back to the floor of the shop with a squeak.

By that moment, the kid who had the knife had gotten to his feet, clutching his limp arm as tears swelled up in his eyes. In disbelief, the kid stammered out, “What-what the hell, man?”

His friend curled over, attempting to get to his feet after having the wind completely blown out of him. Ansei gripped the bat in one hand, wiping tiny shards off his brow with the other.

“Get the fuck out of my shop,” he said.

Taking a seat on the stool behind the counter, he pulled a rolled joint and a lighter from his drawer. He flicked his thumb a couple of times before getting the lighter to flare.

As the flame singed the paper, Ansei added, “And don’t ever do this again.”

The two scurried out of his shop with so much as a groan of deep physical pain at the same time that Ansei kicked off his *getas*, shook his head, and let out a stream of smoke with a pleasant sigh. Catching his breath with a hit, he felt something wet dripping off his forehead and wiped it away.

Sweat with a streak of blood.

*Of course.* He respired.

He had bathed in silence, preferring it to the distraction of radio DJs or news stations that spoke in nostalgic monotony. He wasn’t too interested in relay of baseball games either. For Ansei, it all turned to white noise anyway. The quiet was comforting for the moment, until the doorbell chimed, and a voice cut into the emptiness of the shop, calling for him.

“Dad?”

It was Eddie.

*Shit.*

He could explain reason if it was Mari that came into the shop — but Eddie? While Ansei could almost hear his girlfriend worrying over what had transpired, his son had always been the worse option. In short, Ansei knew that he was fucked.

Scrambling to his feet with the joint hanging from the corner of his mouth, Ansei went to sweep the floor and at least clear the glass that fell. Only, he had barely made it to the broom before his son caught him reaching for it.

“What-what happened in here?” Eddie asked, even though the look on his face stated that he knew better. He could write the narrative better than his father could ever try to defend himself.

Ansei picked up the broom, shifting his eyes away from Eddie’s. “Just a little accident, that’s all.”

Stuffing his hands into his work slacks, Eddie pursued. “What do you mean *accident*?”

“Well,” Ansei began, still unable to meet his son’s gaze as he had continued to sweep. “Just two boys came in here —”

“Another fight?” Eddie injected.

The condescending tone in his son’s voice provoked a tighter grip around the broom handle, causing Ansei’s knuckles to go white. But Eddie wasn’t done with shaming him.

“Was anyone hurt?” His face turned a little pink and he cleared his throat. He wasn’t sure if there was anything he wanted to say to defend his actions or his behavior. Ansei’s face had said enough, earning a disappointed sigh from Eddie. “Dad, this isn’t the 70s. They’ll sue, you know.”

*Of course*, Ansei thought, finding the strength to look at his son. *The lawyer knows all about sue jobs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

“Look, dad,” Eddie started, his hand coming to the back of his own neck, rubbing it gently. It was his turn to not meet his father’s eyes. “Sean and I were thinking...”

*Oh great, Tweedle-dee and Tweedledum have a plan for dear old dad,* Ansei had bitterly thought. *What now?*

“If this place is causing you so much trouble, why not sell the store?”

Convinced that the world had stopped at those words, Ansei gulped down those of which he had wanted to hurl at Eddie and “are you fucking kidding me?” was ready to headline the barrage. In the second of silence that had sat between them, there was one thing that Ansei needed to tell him.

But the shop door had chimed, interrupting the tense altercation between them, and within moments, Mari had joined the two men.

Eddie had been the first to move, saying a gentle hello to Mari, before addressing his father. “Please think about it, Dad.”

Ansei didn’t want to give it thought and so his reticence had left Eddie in resignation and Mari with confusion. Only a nod, Eddie exited the shop, leaving the couple alone. It was when the door had completely closed behind him and Mari and Ansei stood in the quiet shop that she had spoken up.

“Ansei, is everything alright?” Mari had asked.

Looking around the shop, she had seen the glass on the floor and Ansei’s attempt at cleaning it up had still been in-progress. It hadn’t taken a detective to know that Eddie and Ansei had been in yet another tense argument when she had walked in the shop. As far as the eye could see, nothing had been alright and Ansei didn’t know how to go about telling her so.

As if he had a moment of being saved from such a conversation, he felt his cell phone buzz in his pocket.

*Three Jays.*

A one-worded question sat in his inbox:

*Thirsty?*

\* \* \*

“How was your sleep?” asked Rosie.

She did not have to look up as the small ruckus of movement in the kitchen told her that her husband was awake. It was six in the morning when Three Jays had woken up, shuffled over to the kitchen, and poured himself a cup of coffee. Rosie hadn’t expected a response from the man until he had that first sip. As soon as she heard the “ah,” she knew that he was on his way out to join her in the adjacent dining room.

“It was okay,” he had replied, yawning a little before coming over to plant a kiss to his wife’s head. “And yours?”

“Could have been better,” she sighed, shrugging.

Normally, he was one to have played his record player in his room, but there was something too quiet about that particular morning that had changed his mood. Turning on the old radio, Three Jays had shifted the station from baseball re-runs to the music station of the late-50s. He particularly liked that era, having spent most of his youth then. When he had rolled the dial to the spot with the least amount of static, *It’s Not for Me to Say* could be heard clearly from the radio’s old speakers.

Having finished fiddling with the music, he started to dance a little in an attempt to grab Rosie's attention. Instead of getting up to dance as she would have, she only smiled for a brief moment and then sadly reported, "There was a fire in Nānākuli again."

She had been reading the paper. He took that as a time to resort to seriousness and had sat down beside her. As he went to join her, Rosie had started to fold it back together, handing it over for him to look at his leisure. Gratefully accepting it from her, Three Jays began to leaf through the sections, as if he had let his gut pick one for him. It stopped at one: *Obituary*.

*How odd*, he thought.

Both he and Rosie were the type of couple to be comfortable with their routines — he had his sports bar and she had her newspaper. While Three Jays was never one to pry open the news, every now and then, like any man with a newspaper subscription pushing eighty was inclined to occasionally go through the Obituary section.

There was something dark but intriguing about searching for a recognizable name at that age. It was as though they had existed, and ceased to, all at once.

Three Jays pulled the section out from the collective and as his eyes had scanned over the array of entries, he couldn't help but spot one small photo of a familiar face, one that had stopped him in his tracks. Beneath the image was a name that he had recognized too well, causing his heart to race uncontrollably.

"What time will your friends be at Shiro's today?" Rosie had asked, but her husband failed to hear her. His heart had beat a thunderous roar, swallowing the sound of her voice, the sound of Johnny's from the radio, even as Rosie had kept talking. "Was it at two or three?"

He had read the whole short bio in a matter of a few seconds. He read it again. And again. He read the name printed in bold capitals: ROY ALVAREZ.

The lump that began to swell in his throat wished he hadn't. His eyes had trained to that smiling portrait of a man. Mumbling words of excusing himself from the table, he had surprised Rosie who dared to ask him if he was feeling alright. Without saying a thing to her, Three Jays went over to the radio and shut it off on his way out.

Rosie looked around the corner to see where he had gone and watched as he walked to their bathroom and shut the door behind him. Within seconds of closing the door, she had heard the shower turn on. Knowing that he wasn't going to come back, Rosie had peered over at what Three Jays had been reading. Out of all of the entries that were published in that week's obituary, she hadn't recognized a single one of them.

\* \* \*

"Isn't she a beauty?" Peter asked, beaming like a proud father of a newborn child. With his phone in hand, he had been swiping through a collection of photos of his latest purchase, a Harley Softail, and showing anyone and everyone who had walked in the bar. There were no words for the amount of excitement pouring out of him. "I just had to get her. She looks right out of a 40's film."

Three Jays, who had been drying glasses, lifted his eyebrow.

"And guess what? I just brought her home and the first thing out of my boy's mouth is," as expected, Peter lowered his voice to make the distinction between father and son. "'Hey dad, are you having a mid-life crisis?'" The look on his face told the group that it wasn't a comment he had foreseen. Without missing a beat, he picked up his usual, somewhat-whiny tone. "A mid-life crisis at 42? How old does he think I'm going to live to?"

Taking a swig from his beer, Ansei chimed in and said, “Well, according to your kid...84.”

“Eighty-four!” Peter exclaimed, shaking his head. “You know, my great-grandfather lived to be 102,” he took a quick chug of his Heineken, capping it with a satisfying ‘ah’, before rubbing his stomach. “I have a good amount of years left in this engine.”

Being the youngest out of the four old friends, Peter had done his best to maintain his slim physique. In fact, if it weren’t for his growing beer belly, one that Wednesday’s at Shiro’s had attributed to, he wouldn’t have had what his daughter Kayla called a “Dad Bod.”

It was Ansei’s turn to shake his head and smile as Three Jays had come around from behind the bar to sit in the booth beside the two men. “So, is the engine your heart or your brain?” he asked.

“No, Peter is right,” Ansei teased. “He lives by his stomach.”

“And don’t you forget it,” Peter said, raising his bottle.

The three friends had cheered their beers and shot back a good half of their bottle before setting them down on their respective coasters. Peter held his phone in his hand, staring at the black screen before cracking a huge smile. *It was his.* Catching the dopey look on his friend’s face, Three Jays sighed.

“Okay, show us again,” he offered.

As if his smile could get any bigger, Peter surprised them, and unlocked his phone. “Glad you asked.”

In that moment as the three men had huddled around Peter’s phone, Mari had managed to enter the bar without so much as a sound. She had found her friends with ease, as they had always managed the same spot the same day, every week. As she had chimed in without context,

she caught the unfiltered and unanswered part of the conversation that had left her wanting to know more.

Peter sighed. “And what’s good is that she’s smooth on your ass too.”

“Into BDSM, Pete?” Mari asked.

“Hey now,” he teased right back. “*Hey now*. Watch your language.”

Grinning like a cat, Mari had taken the seat in the booth beside Ansei and across from Peter. Three Jays, who had been sitting next to Peter, had gotten up and went behind his bar to pop open a Primo for Mari. Coming back around with her fresh beer in hand, Three Jays offered it to her with a smile. She thanked him softly for that. With the gang of them all together, they cheered their bottles, and all four had tanked a quarter of it in one swig.

Congregating at Shiro’s had been something that the four of them had done at least once a week. It was a ritual of sorts, a way of relieving the stress and tension of the day-to-day life they had all faced. Sometimes, they would even meet bi-weekly, under the guise of keeping Three Jays company as he tended the bar.

Normally, the group had preferred Wednesday’s, as the middle of the week deterred a massive number of patrons from coming in to drink. It left them with all of the shots, the pool games, and the music to play for themselves.

That Wednesday, however, had been different for all of them.

After that first cheer, the group had gone their separate ways — Three Jays had returned behind the bar, Peter and Ansei had started up a round of 9-ball, and Mari had gone to the jukebox to change the tunes.

Amid the quiet country music that had infested the bar, had been a few blue-eyed military men of various ages. Mari and the guys hadn’t noticed them or how drunk they had been, having

single-handedly tackling both the 12-pack of Bud Light and bottle of Crown. As they had demanded another round for the three of them, Three Jays had gone to the back to grab another two cases for the bar.

As though the break in drinking allowed them to soak in their surroundings, one of them had landed his eyes on the only woman in the bar: Mari. She had been in close proximity, the jukebox placed within arm's reach of where they sat.

Unfortunately, she had been too sober to feel the man's gaze on her, and so she kept her attention fixated on the screen. At first, she was trying to look for *September* as quickly as she could so that she could join her boyfriend at the pool table. And then, she became frustrated with the fact that she had been scared to stay in a public spot without a man's presence.

She purposefully moved slower in her search, an act of defiance to prove that she had every right to be there. Paying no mind to the way he had grossly ogled her, she sighed and shrugged off his wordless advances. That is, until he had made his intentions verbal.

"Can I buy you a drink?" He asked.

Mari didn't even want to look at him or give him the attention he had appeared to crave, and said, "No thanks."

She heard the other two, who had been watching their friend be a nuisance, just snicker when she had rejected him. *Disgusting*, she had thought. Neither of them had even tried to reign him in.

"Come on," he tried again, that time a little whinier in his tone. "Let me buy you a drink, Mama-san."

She had finally found and selected *September*, adding it to the queue. She turned to him and looked him dead in his bloodshot eyes. He had pre-gamed before coming over, she presumed. “I said no.”

When his friends shook their head and smiled, clearly finding entertainment in his assumed failure, he had grabbed Mari by her arm. It was then that his friends had stiffened and so had she. She had been so alarmed that she hadn’t heard the sound of both Ansei and Peter coming from around the pool table to join them at the jukebox.

Ansei had stepped in first, taking the guy by the wrist and crushing it within his grasp until he had let go of Mari. He could hear Mari calling his name, but it had been a faint and distant sound. To Ansei, it was just between the guy and him.

“Un-Say?” the other had failed to pronounce. He held onto his wrist as he winced in pain. “What kind of shitty name is that?”

“And what is your name? *Brad*?” Ansei teased as he forced himself between the guy and Mari. He could see that Peter kept her behind him as well, in case he needed to stop Ansei. But knowing Peter, he wouldn’t want to. “Come on, big boy,” Ansei chuckled. “I’ll even give you the first crack.”

One swing and ‘Brad’ had hit Ansei square in the cheek. He could have sworn that he had felt his dentures move a little and it only had made him angrier. Everything that Ansei had experienced that week started to ball up in his fist and in a swift move, he had chucked it directly into Brad’s gut. Pushing the air right out of him, ‘Brad’ had cowered over, allowing Ansei to take him by the back of the head and shove his knee into his face before tossing him head first into the nearest pool table. Ansei moved toward him to continue the fight when he had felt Peter’s arms around his waist.

Three Jays had returned and put the beer down in order to separate the group while Brad's friends had stood up. They raised their hands as if they didn't want any trouble.

"Then take him out of here and go," Three Jays had sternly said, pointing to the groaning mess on the ground that was 'Brad'.

Obliging, they had picked him up and left the bar, and the group's attention turned back to Ansei, who had calmed down enough to cradle his face.

"Fuck, he really dropped his weight into that punch," Ansei had said under his breath.

"You good, my man?" Three Jays asked, to which Ansei just nodded.

When he had looked at his girlfriend, Mari had her arms folded, shaking her head. There it was, the look he had received every time something like that had happened. It was a sad repeat of the same thing, as if he couldn't take the needle off the vinyl.

"Don't 'Ansei' me," he threw over his shoulder as he went to pick up the pool stick he had discarded before the altercation. Standing it upright, he then carried it to the mount and set it back into the frame. "What kind of man has that level of disrespect?"

Mari had stood behind him, calling his name once again. "Ansei."

She took him by the arm and he followed her toward the back kitchen. He stayed by the door until he had seen that she went to the refrigerator to grab a small bag of frozen peas, and then came in to lean against the counter. Taking her face in his hand, Ansei had watched her sigh as she pressed the pack to his cheek. Just below his eye had been a burning red patch.

"You're not going to stop, are you?" she asked.

He didn't know how to respond at first, but Ansei being himself had given the most candid answer he could muster up. But it was never the sort of answer that Mari needed or wanted to hear.

“I’m 71, Mar. When we were younger, this was how we took care of things. How do you expect me to change?” He asked. As much as she would have thought he would regret it the moment it came out of his mouth, Mari knew better. He only began to question it when her face changed from worry to disappointment. Ansei turned his head from her a little. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” Mari feigned ignorance.

He shook his head, telling her he didn’t believe her. “I can only be me.”

“But Ansei,” she had said as the kitchen light shined a defeated look that flickered in her eyes. “we’re not young anymore.”

\* \* \*

Three Jays had been sitting at the side of his bed for hours, just as the day before. No words had wanted to come out, no tears either. Just, silence and brooding. Even as Rosie had placed a tray full of breakfast at his nightstand, he passed it over in favor of walking to the corner of the bedroom and leafed through his vinyl collection. Choosing one of many from his youth, he unsheathed the record and had set it on his player. He balanced the needle on the vinyl and turned the machine on.

Closing his eyes, Three Jays began to picture a young Roy Alvarez walking into the ballroom as Doris Day’s voice played from his vinyl. It was 1965 and standing at six-foot-one with a Clark Gable-likeness to him, Roy had stunted the breath of every woman there. The moment those shiny wingtips stepped into the room, it was all over. Any person with a pulse

would have thought that a Beatle came to his sister's wedding by the amount of drool dripping from the lips of each woman.

It was a moment that made Three Jays scoff at his best friend. Not only had Roy been late to the event, but he hadn't even dressed up for the occasion. Slung over his shoulder had been his dress shirt and tie, still wrapped up from the cleaner's — but it was like every mother was so entranced by his good looks that they hadn't the time to reprimand him about it.

Three Jays watched as Roy was greeted by his mother with a loving kiss and not a single word of scolding for wearing a leather jacket at a black-tie event. Had it been him, he would have never gotten away with it. He could imagine how his mother would grab him by the ear and lock him in the men's room until he was proper. But Roy? Walked on water, that guy.

As his friend had sauntered over to his table, Three Jays couldn't resist to tease, posing the question of "Where's your tie?" before pressing the bottle of beer to his smile.

Roy chuckled and peeled off his moto jacket to sit on the back of his chair before reaching over to grab the one Three Jays had worn. "Around your neck, Jacinto."

As the two men shook their heads with beaming smiles, a waitress came over with a tray of assorted beers and requested Roy to pick one. He chose the same one that his best friend had been drinking, twisted off the cap, and raised it to cheer. Three Jays shrugged and clicked their bottles.

"So, why were you late?"

"Landed late," Roy answered, rolling his eyes. "We're coming from Beale, right? It's a little rainy, a little thunder, and man, the weather really buzzed my co-pilot."

*Ah, yes*, Three Jays had thought. An Air Force pilot, how could he have forgotten?

Sensing that his friend could only feign his relatability for so long, Roy had chosen to drop the subject of flying. Instead, he gestured to the group of people on the stage, setting up their instruments.

“I’m surprised you’re not up there getting ready to perform.”

Three Jays lifted his brows. “Why is that?”

“You know,” Roy continued, removing the lip of his beer from his mouth. “I can’t imagine Auntie and Uncle would pass an opportunity to showcase your talents.”

“If that’s the nice way of saying my parents would want to impress yours by hiring me for your sister’s wedding,” Three Jays had said, a small pained smile remained on his face. “then I should remind you that I have put away my saxophone.”

For a moment, if he had looked at his friend, Three Jays would have seen the sadness in Roy’s eyes when he had said it. The second that Three Jays had looked up, Roy had painted it over with a smile and tried to kid the other.

“*Pinoy* pride, my friend,” he joked.

Three Jays had wanted to laugh.

There was something about their community that had always suggested a brotherhood mentality — a nepotism of some sorts — and for Roy to have acknowledged it only made him chuckle. After all, Roy had always looked like a Spaniard to anyone who had a pair of eyes, the least Filipino out of the two of them. However, any time that Three Jays had brought it up, he would be told in turn that he shouldn’t have been one to talk because Three Jays had “looked like Sinatra, but with one flat nose.”

“*Tisoy* pride for you, my friend.”

As they had drank together, young women in groups of two and three had passed their table, some of whom had said a shy or giggly hello only to Roy and some to both. Three Jays could only assume that they had been friends of the bride and knew Roy from family photographs. But no matter their relation, Roy had kept it simple and light, as if his attention had been elsewhere or fixed on something more important than conversation with them.

“So, what?” Roy began, turning back to Three Jays when the last group of two girls had left. “Anything new?”

“Fortunately, no,” Three Jays said, adding a sigh. “No matter how much Mom wants me to give her a grandchild. She hardly pays attention to one child.”

“You?” Roy asked, downing more of his beer.

“Yeah, me.”

Laughing amongst themselves, Roy cheered his bottle with Three Jays’ once more in mutual agreement.

It was in the dying down of their moment that Three Jays had noticed his mother coming up to the two of them with a fervent passion. Tapping his best friend’s shin with the tip of his shoe and having him respond only in whines of pain, he had leaned into and tried to whisper to the other, “Speaking of the—*hey, mama!*”

“Roy,” she ordered, placing both hands on the young man’s shoulders. It looked as though she had sunken her long nails into him when she did. “Can you *please* make my unsociable son social?”

“Mama, no—”

Witnessing the look of distaste on his friend's face and eager to repay the bruises surely to form on his shins, Roy couldn't resist. "Come on, J," Roy grinned, taking Three Jays by the arm and leading him toward the dance floor.

In a moment's notice, Three Jays had felt his whole face flood with a bashful smile, matching in length to the devilish one hanging off Roy's. As embarrassed as he had been to be forced into the center of the floor, being with Roy had relinquished a lot of the weight that he had carried with him. There was something easy about being in the presence of someone who looked like he had it all together. It was like he, too, was great by association.

As the song had changed, turning into an upbeat version of *The Way You Look Tonight*, Three Jays caught the bright-eyed look on his best friend when Frank Sinatra's voice came out of the speakers next. Without a moment's hesitation, Roy took Three Jays by his hands and immediately began to jive to the beat of the crooner's serenade. It made him laugh, being led by the much more talented dancer to the sound of said dancer's favorite musician.

Until something had caught his eye.

It wasn't much. All his father had to do was a quick little brow lift from the far distance of the room and Three Jays knew. When he had seen the look on his father's face, Three Jays ached to shrink into nothing.

Spotting the way that his best friend recoiled, Roy had hesitantly let go of his hands to put them in the pockets of his slacks. A second after, he had pulled out a lighter from one and a cigarette case from the other. "Smoke with me?"

Shooting one glance over at his father, who had now been engaged in conversation with another guest, Three Jays nodded.

Without another word, he had left with Roy, crossing the dance floor and headed toward the balcony of the venue. By some luck, the two men had slipped away unnoticed, allowing them a break from the celebrations. Although they had shut the glass door behind him, Roy motioned Three Jays to follow him down the staircase. Only when they had reached the foot of it did Roy light up. One for Three Jays, one for him.

They inhaled, the ends of their cigarettes burning, their heads cocked back, and then a slow exhale. The first hit had always been one that the two men enjoyed. It had become much quieter, both able to still hear the music coming from inside.

“Johnny Mathis, right?” Roy asked the other, eyes glazing over him as his head gestured to the song that had played in the background. “More of a Sinatra fan myself, but how do you like him?”

“A bit of a queer, isn’t he?”

Roy took another drag from his cigarette. “How do you figure?”

“Listen here,” Three Jays said, stopping all but breathing as the verse from *Chances Are* had played from the ballroom. “He sings, ‘when I sigh, hold me close, dear.’ Sounds like a girl’s line.”

“And so?” Roy cocked his brow. A slight smile slid onto his face as he added, “You notice everything, don’t you?”

Three Jays shrugged. “I try to.”

“What else do you know?”

Another drag.

“Quite a lot.”

There was a playful lilt to Roy’s voice. “Oh?”

Suddenly, Roy stepped forward, closing some space between them, and when he did, Three Jays had felt his cigarette fall from between his fingers and onto the ground. Seconds were passing and neither of them had bothered to move to extinguish it. It had not been a threat; the cold would not let it set fire to anything.

Looking up and into Roy's eyes, Three Jays had seen a flicker of realization. There was a shine in that hazel-colored warmth that spoke of a possibility, an overwhelming feeling that something was left behind and in it, lived a desire to go back for it. As though it had mattered to him. He had watched Roy's lips start to form his name when he had heard the glass door open.

"Juan—"

"Roy, darling," came a woman's voice.

She had poked her head out of the door to spot the two men, one of whom moved back from the other at the sight of her. Roy took one more hit from the cigarette before he dropped it to the ground and smeared it and the other cigarette beneath his shoe.

"I want you to meet her," he said, then calling for her. "Donna."

As she had descended the stairs with elegant steps, Three Jays couldn't help but be seized by her beauty. She was a stunning blonde in a red dress with a charming smile framed by lips of the same color. Roy smiled as she came into his arms, cupping his face in her hands when she kissed him softly on the lips. It was the second that Three Jays laid eyes on the ring that he had felt his foot shove itself directly into his mouth.

Roy Alvarez was engaged.

It became clear that in the years to follow, Roy Alvarez eventually had gotten married, had a family, and lived a full life. And then, well into his 81<sup>st</sup> year, Roy Alvarez had died. The

portrait of his youthful smile was printed in that week's Obituary and it had sucked the feeling out of Three Jays to read it.

Opening his eyes, he had sat up from the bed and walked over to his closet. Deep in the back of it, he had picked up the instrument case and carried it out. It hadn't been too dusty sitting there. Placing it down on the foot of his bed, he flicked open the snaps and pushed the cover up. He ran his fingers over the brassy gold body of his saxophone and relished in the shine of it. Selecting the reed and the mouthpiece, he began to assemble the instrument as he would.

\* \* \*

He was wrong. It wasn't simply because that was how Mari made him feel, either. In fact, the more that Ansei thought about it, the more he had realized that he had lived on immediate response. He resorted to rashness like a crutch, finding comfort in talking with his fists and Mari was just one of many to point it out. And after the night before, she had every right to say something about it. Even though he had thought it was the best move, he wasn't too much of a fool to know that he was wrong.

When he woke up that morning, he got out of bed and washed his face. Looking into the mirror, he noticed all of his facial hair starting to sprout out. While normally he would have taken a blade to it, he decided against it. Maybe, he figured, he would give it a chance to grow out. He had put on some clothes next, choosing a pair of chino pants that Mari had given him one Christmas and a sweater, before heading downstairs for breakfast.

Among the spread of hot coffee, eggs, rice, and Portuguese sausage, waiting at the kitchen table was both Sean and Eddie. Seeing Sean was to be expected — both he and his

family lived in the addition of Ansei's property — but Eddie, of course in his suit, was a small surprise.

“Good morning,” said Ansei quietly, eyes shifting between the two of them.

“Morning, dad,” Sean greeted with a mouthful of eggs.

Eddie sat with his coffee and newspaper, his words must have been tucked somewhere in his briefcase. Ansei tried not to call his oldest son out for bad table manners and went to the fridge for a bottle of his favorite cream. Ansei ignored the look that Sean gave Eddie when he noticed that his older brother had said nothing.

Upon getting his cream, Ansei poured it into the mug before putting the bottle back into the fridge. He shuffled back to the table, taking his seat at the head of it, next to Sean and across from Eddie.

“Slept well?” Ansei offered a smile.

Sean raised his brows. “Y-yeah. You, dad?”

“Alcohol must do wonders for the body.”

Both Ansei and Sean looked to Eddie whom interjected with the remark. Ansei watched as Eddie's fingers clenched tightly around the newspaper he was holding onto, and as if he had gotten caught doing so, Eddie loosened his grip. He cleared his throat before continuing.

“I know you came in late,” he told Ansei. “Partly because I was waiting up for you, but then ended up putting you to bed.”

What would have been a wash of beet red stain across Ansei's face was nothing but knitted brows and a stone look. He didn't know when it began, but one day, Eddie had begun to speak to Ansei as though he was not smart enough, was not calm and sophisticated enough, to engage in a civil conversation with him. Strict comments and a condescending tone had left

Ansei with a sense of shame that he could not shrug off. But something had been different about that morning.

“I came because I wanted to have the three of us here when we talked about this,” Eddie said, setting the paper down flat on the table.

Sean sighed and sunk into his seat, as though he planned to physically avoid the prickly confrontation he knew that his brother was about to unearth. Eddie seemed immovable about the topic and it left him wincing in his chair. It was Eddie’s choice in seating arrangement that had left Sean between the two.

Ansei sipped his steaming coffee before he sat it down in front of him, face devoid of an expression. “There is nothing to talk about.”

“Right, because talking requires some sort of compromise,” Eddie snarked.

Looking over at his son, Ansei’s eyes remained dark and piercing, forcing Eddie to meet its menacing gaze.

“Compromise,” Ansei mused. “I know that you came here to tell me to sell. Why? Is it so you don’t have to take care of it? *That* would be compromise.”

Eddie’s mouth fell. “That’s not—”

“Eddie,” his father commanded. “There are a lot of things that I am wrong about. I am wrong about my temper. I am wrong about the way that I react to things. But wanting to keep the shop and my family’s legacy? I am not wrong about.”

The stentorian tone in Ansei’s voice had left Eddie bowing his head in contempt. While not a part of his original plan, or of any plan at all, Ansei sensed that he had gotten his point across clearly and chose to push his chair back softly, standing up. Sean also took to his feet as

he carefully watched his father take a large gulp of his coffee before he set it back down. “If you’ll excuse me.”

Sean took his father’s comment as one of departure and went to get Ansei his *getas*, but Ansei stopped him.

“I’ll wear my sneakers today,” he said with a smile.

As though the jingling of keys had snapped Eddie out of his stupor, he shot out of his chair to meet his father at the door of the house.

“Dad,” Eddie meekly called for Ansei. His eyes could barely meet his father’s when he added his apology. “I’m sorry.”

If Ansei had to guess, those two words were for more than that morning’s incident, but for all of the micro-aggressive comments his son had been making over the years, for however long it had started.

Ansei nodded. “I know, son.”

\* \* \*

“He’s been like that for a couple of days,” Rosie’s voice could be heard from the other side of their bedroom door. “I don’t know how he is when he’s at work, but when he’s home, he just sits in our room and plays.”

It had seemed as though Rosie had been intentional with the clarity in her voice when she talked to the visitor, but Three Jays had no proof of it. She had not seen him all day to know whether or not he had turned his hearing aids on. However, despite having them on and active,

Three Jays hadn't been in the mood to socialize. He had only wanted to sulk with his sax in his hand.

Slowly and with a smooth swing, Three Jays had begun to play the opening notes of *Misty*, his tenor sax bellowing a beautiful tone. Closing his eyes, he began to imagine being on that stage and playing for a small crowd in a jazz club, the way it used to be. He remembered Roy being on stage with him, his smile dazzling the audience before he took the mic to sing. His memory started to fade away with the rapping of the bedroom door and he stopped playing.

"Juan," Rosie called. "There's someone here to see you."

Before he could muster the right words or turn to send her away, she had opened the door. It was Mari.

"Hi," she offered him a smile.

He raised his hand weakly in a defeated hello. Unable to find it in his heart to dismiss her, Three Jays had moved his instrument to the side, providing space for his friend to sit beside him. Fidgeting with the strap of her purse, Mari had a look of concern on her face.

"I had originally come to apologize for what happened at the bar the other night, with Ansei," she said. "I-I don't mean to impose."

Three Jays had forced a smile. "You aren't."

Despite him saying so, he watched her as it had been written all over her face, and that she had borne an incredible weight, as though she knew that she had been obtruding. In some way, she had been right. More than anything at that moment, Three Jays had wanted to be left alone and not engage in company. However, it hadn't stopped his friend from trying.

"Do you," Mari began, slowly, as though not wanting to push him before he was ready to answer. "Do you want to talk about it?"

He shook his head.

She had only nodded in response, not saying much more as she had held true to her unspoken promise of not prying. Three Jays could see her eyes searching the interior of his bedroom, as though she had been looking for some avenue of conversation, preferably one that wouldn't rely on explaining his recent behavior. And then her vision landed on his hand, resting on the body of his tenor sax, piquing her interest.

"I love the saxophone," Mari started with a smile. She brought her arms closer to her chest. "There's something about jazz that makes me feel right at home and brings out my best in writing." She looked to him to gauge his reaction, if he had any at all. "I just wish I knew how to play."

The distraction of her conversation had sent his thoughts riling. In truth, it sent him surging back to the past and when it had all started for him.

"I don't know why I picked it up."

"Were you feeling nostalgic?" Mari asked.

He shook his head again. "No, I mean, why I started to learn it."

Lifting the instrument off of his bed, Three Jays sat it in his lap and ran his palm over the bell and across the keys.

Remembering his 5<sup>th</sup> year of school, he and his class were asked to participate in after-school activities. While his friends had all chosen various sports, Three Jays had resigned to signing up for baseball. It was what his father had wanted, but he had felt no particular way about it. It was on his way to sign up that he had passed a music store.

How many times he had walked that street to head to school and not a note had chimed out of it until that day. Inside, there had been a man at a piano, playing something classical and

intricate, to what he learned to be *Fur Elise*. He hadn't fallen in love with music at first sight or hearing. Instead, it was a graceful decline, like a pulling of a trombone's slide.

"It's not easy. It takes a lot of breath control," he added, then clearing his throat. "And I have asthma."

Mari's brows had raised. "How did you overcome it?"

"I didn't," he answered. "I just really wanted to play it and for a while, I did, until I stopped. I couldn't play and smoke at the same time. I chose to smoke instead."

From Ansei, Mari had learned that Three Jays used to smoke, but hadn't they all at some point? She had never thought he was addicted or bothered to ask why he had quit. Likewise, he had never asked her why she had. It was just a shared trait that existed between the two of them, without needing any added information.

"I wanted to smoke with Roy instead," he confessed.

As if her silence had required an explanation, Three Jays stood up from the bed and went to his dresser where he produced a section of a newspaper. It was the one from the other morning and sat it down between the two of them. Mari's eyes had trampled over the page and when she had come across it, mouthed his name when she read it: Roy Alvarez.

"Oh," she immediately said, soft and discreet.

When she had met his gaze, she had been filled with an overwhelming sadness, and she had moved to place her hand on top of his. Three Jays had wanted to break away before his own eyes started to tear. He hadn't wanted to cry, he refused to do it in her presence. By avoiding her, she was allowed to look away from him as well and fixed herself onto the entry once more.

"Why don't we go and visit them?" Mari proposed.

Three Jays had looked up to her. "W-what?"

“His family. Roy’s,” she clarified. Looking back onto the page, her finger ran across each line until the bottom of it. “They usually — ah. See? They have left an address.”

The idea of walking up the steps and asking for the family of his late friend had absolutely terrified him. What if the address had been wrong? What if they had looked at him with disdain? Uncertainty had been enough of a fear to him. More importantly, it had left Three Jays with a simple question that he hoped that Mari could have answered. “Why?”

“Because,” she said, more sure than ever. “I think you need to.”

\* \* \*

*Hi, you have reached the number of Jessica Halim.*

The sound of her voice had been a blanket in the cold night and Peter became a dumbfounded kid again. He had pictured being fourteen again, seeing her for the first time and watching her as her red hair had curled around her face, bouncing as she had walked up to him. Before her, he had never seen anyone, let alone a girl, with both fiery hair and ocean eyes. There had been a shine to them, an endless charm to them that he couldn’t swim out of. He remembered thinking that he could stare in them forever.

*If you leave your name, number, and a brief message, I will get back to you.*

While he had looked like he had crawled off an 80s Stallone centerfold, she had always been in style — borrowing her brother’s leather jacket and her best friend’s lighter. The contrast of in-fashion and out-of had made Peter hate the way his mother had dressed him. He despised being a decade behind. It was because of Jessica that he had traded his tracksuit pants for a pair of jeans that he could stick a pack of her favorite cigarettes in the back pocket of.

*So, leave a message after the beep.*

He was in love with the way that Jessica knew his order from McDonald's and had teased his smaller eyes. He had hated when his mother served *siomay* and wanted him to date within race. He had admired Jessica's fearless and unapologetic approach to anything and everything. He had been embarrassed by his mother speaking anything but English in front of others.

Most importantly, when he had invited Jessica over and heard his mother refer to her as what she had called other white people. There were a lot of things that he had disliked about his mother, but it had been the worst.

Jessica was *ang mo* to his mother, and nothing more.

A part of Peter only felt that foolish because somewhere deep down, he had thought that his mother was right. But he was too infatuated with the way Jessica had always smiled only for him.

*Beep.*

Or so he had thought.

"Hey Jess, it's Pete," he began, his phone pressed up to his ear. The silence of the voice recording had been deafening. He then cleared his throat. "Got your message."

He should have known that she wouldn't have picked up, they had a two-hour time difference between them. It was what had made calls between the two of them always increasingly difficult to arrange.

Upon picking up the dossier he had received that morning, he read the front page over once more. Three simple words had spread across the top: PETITION FOR DIVORCE, in bold, strong letters. He hadn't mentioned any of what he had been going through with his friends nor his kids, even if they had all expected it to happen.

“I’ll send them back after I sign-um,” he told her.

His eyes fell on the photo of their high school prom. It had been there since the day that the two of them had moved in, even as all of the other pictures on the walls had appeared and disappeared. It had looked so dated in comparison to where they had been now. But the solemn sound to his voice wasn’t about her. In fact, it wasn’t about mourning the past either. It had been about moving on, and of turning a page of a chapter in his life that she would no longer be a part of.

“Bye.”

He had ended the call and locked his phone, setting it down in front of him on the kitchen table. Sighing deeply, Peter had run his hands over his face, before resting in the palms of his hands. He sat like that for a while, slowly finding his mind fade, his thoughts grow incoherent, until his phone began to ring. Quickly, Peter had picked up and answered the call without looking.

“Hello—”

“Hey, Pete,” came Ansei’s voice from the other end. “Can you do me a favor?”

\* \* \*

He had read the address again.

Provided at the end of Roy’s obituary entry was not a funeral home or a church but a location of an actual residence. The lawn had been kept well, the size of the house was modest, nothing too large or flashy. Still, it managed to intimidate him and make him feel smaller than he was. However, with Mari beside him, it had seemed a little less scary.

Swallowing thickly, Three Jays approached the front door slowly. Right about to knock on the door, he saw the bell beside the knob and chose to press it instead. He quickly pulled the fedora from his head and smoothed down his mostly-salt and little-pepper curls, just as the door had opened.

Standing at the other side of the door had been a man no older than 30, towering over Three Jays both vertically and horizontally as his broad shoulders had blocked most of the interior of his house. As if the visit itself hadn't been nerve-wracking on its own, the owner of the house had such a presence. Looking over at Mari who had waited behind him, Three Jays had cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said, his fingers running over the brim of his hat. "But I happened to notice that this address was in the paper for—"

"Roy Alvarez," the young man interjected. "If you don't mind me saying, you look very, very familiar."

Three Jays had wanted to say the same, but the man in front of him had been a jigsaw puzzle of features: tanned skin, large in both height and muscular build, with almond-shaped eyes. The only thing that could be recognized was that nose. He knew that nose anywhere.

"You must be Jacinto," the man said, snapping his fingers. "Juan José Jacinto, right?"

"Y-yeah," Three Jays had choked out. Only one person would have known that around these streets and he was six feet under.

"Granddad never really shut up about you," he said with a small laugh. Removing his hand from the door knob, he offered it forward for Three Jays to shake it. "I'm Julian, Julian Alvarez. Please, you two, come in."

When the two of them had walked in, Three Jays had unlaced his sneakers and sat them at the entrance with the other shoes that had been neatly piled together as Mari had been enamored with the structure of the living area. Julian asked if they wanted anything to drink and while they politely declined, it didn't deter the younger man from heading to the refrigerator and bringing out a pitcher full of water.

"This place had belonged to Granddad," he said as he came around with the pitcher on the tray and some glasses. By carrying the tray over to the living room and planting it down on the coffee table, it was as though Julian had led them to sit on the sofa there. "Bought it in the 70s. I had no cousins, no siblings. So, he had left it to me as a wedding gift."

As though the word "wedding" had triggered an important piece of information for their conversation, Julian called for "Andy!" from his spot on the sofa. He looked over to Mari and Three Jays, both of whom had preoccupied themselves with the décor and the family photographs that hung across each wall.

"If you don't mind, I'd like you to meet my husband," Julian explained.

It took a moment for Three Jays to process the concept that Julian was, in fact, married to a man. While it was the 21<sup>st</sup> century and Three Jays was not unaccustomed with the LGBT community, it hadn't occurred to him that Julian was a part of said community. Mari, who had taken enough college courses and immersed herself among the youth, must have been familiar with modern relationships.

Before being caught, he tried his best to muster up a valuable question. "Oh, uh, how long have you been married?"

Just after taking a large gulp from his glass, he answered Three Jays. “A few years now. This is Andy,” Julian said, taking his husband’s wrist gently as he had joined them. He turned to look at him. “Andy, this is Juan José Jacinto, Granddad’s best friend.”

From where Three Jays sat, it looked as though Andy had been about his own height or a little taller, but nowhere near that of an Alvarez. Three Jays politely smiled.

“Oh, hi. Mr. Jacinto, pleasure,” Andy offered his hand with a bright grin of his own, as though they had been previously familiar with each other.

“And who is this beautiful woman?” Julian asked, referring to Mari.

“Hi, I’m Mari,” she had introduced herself with a shy smile. Gesturing to Three Jays who had fell silent for a moment, Mari added, “We’ve been friends for a while and met through my boyfriend Ansei.”

The couple had nodded and smiled, looking to their two guests before Julian had piped up once more.

“Oh, right, so, Andy, he was just asking about us. We’ve been dating since we were what? 15? 16?”

“Since Junior Prom.”

“Right, when we won as Prom Royalty.”

“Don’t skip over the best part,” Andy had said with a smile. Putting his hand to feign blocking Julian from hearing what he was to say next, he looked directly at Three Jays. “My bet, personally, was that the whole school had conspired to shame *star athlete Julian Alvarez* to be voted Prom Queen.” He then shrugged before meeting Mari’s eyes. “Boy were they in for a shock.”

They had been so kind and candid with the two of them that the easiness of conversation had warmed Three Jays. It reminded him a lot of the times that he had spent with Roy. The two of them kicking back with a six-pack and a couple of cigarettes each. Watching the way his nose crinkled as he smiled from ear to ear. Sitting the radio between them and when an upbeat tune had begun to play, he'd get up and start jiving. He didn't care about the audience around him, as long as it had made them laugh. Mostly everyone had been so charmed by the man that they enjoyed his energy. Just one of many things that Three Jays had both envied and loved most about him.

"Is it pathetic?" he had asked, cutting the comfortable silence with a thought. He didn't know if he had the strength to tack on the next part but managed to once he had shut his eyes. "Is it pathetic that I loved my best friend?"

Unable to see the glances that Julian and Andy exchanged with each other and with Mari, Julian had left his seat to sit down on the spot beside Three Jays. A knowing look had washed over Julian's face. He had been way too familiar with such a conversation.

"So, you loved Granddad," Julian said. "It's not something shameful for me or for him to tell you that he loved you back."

Three Jays looked up. "In one way or another, right?"

"No, it was quite gay," Julian declared.

Andy added, "The man was clearly obsessed."

Immediately, Three Jays turned to Mari, whose eyes had widened before they closed again, her smile filling her face. The blatancy of the couple before them had answered a question that surely crossed his mind more than once.

“He’d haunt me for handing them over, but I swear on my life that he wrote more about you than Nan,” Julian confessed, lifting his hand as though he had the other on a bible. As his joke died down a little, he paused, dropped his hand, and took another sip of his water. “But I know that you both hadn’t come out all this way to find out if your crush on Granddad was reciprocated.”

Three Jays had met his gaze. Julian was right. There was nothing that he wanted to know. Nothing that he was desperate to learn, even though, in a way he did end up gaining something. However, it was more like there were things that he had wanted to confess and atone for.

“I’m not mad that Roy got married or had a family, or even that I wasn’t told,” Three Jays had said, his eyes shifted to his hands in his lap. He knew that if he looked up, Mari would be giving him the most encouraging smile. Just the thought of Julian and those photographs that remained in the house had told him that Roy had a great family life. “I think I’m just sad that I missed all of the milestones in his life, down to his death.”

He had recalled the short conversation after meeting Donna that night. He remembered that it had been one of the longest that he and Roy would ever have. He would learn that Roy and Donna had gotten married on a hostel terrace in Italy, spontaneously, of course. There was one family photograph with an infant baby girl between the happy couple, and that was that. Three Jays hadn’t heard from them since.

Granted, Three Jays hadn’t been one to talk about disappearing. He had moved since the last conversation, stopped going by his given name, and went by one that he had earned at a bar. By all means, he had disappeared just as quickly and as easily as Roy had. As much as he had thought that he hadn’t inherited much from Roy, Three Jays had surprised himself.

Julian smiled. “Granddad was anything, if not, unapologetic.”

\* \* \*

“Oh, come on,” Mari groaned.

The sound of an engine ripping through the dead of night had torn her focus from the paragraph she had been writing over. She had concentration problems to begin with, needing her reading glasses to be able to look over what she had just written, but furthermore, she didn’t need any sort of distraction tearing her from what little patience she had for that chapter.

Usually, she would have put on music as a form of ambiance as she slipped into her own writing world, but for once, she had been working well with the silence. That is, until her neighbor must have come home. She was familiar with the way that a motorcycle sounded, as someone who lived a few doors down owned one.

The problem wasn’t so much the loudness it made but that it riled the dogs in their neighborhood. As soon as Muffy started, everyone else’s dogs would join in, and none of them would shut it for the next ten minutes. Ten minutes of valuable time that Mari needed to stay motivated. It made her massage her temples in agony.

Shaking her head, she went back to her earlier paragraph in order to gain focus once more. In fact, she had been somewhere in the double-digit page count of her writing when she heard the knock on her door. It was a rapping in the dead of night, as though cutting through the peace of the evening, one that had only been meant for her to hear.

But it wasn’t.

She had gotten to the door and answered it without checking the peephole, mostly because she had a feeling of who it would have been.

“I know that you’re mad at me,” Ansei began and Mari had immediately crossed her arms. “And if you weren’t hurt about how I treated you, I know that you would be going off on me. But I’m sorry, Mari,” he told her.

She seemed immobile by what he had said.

“I was wrong,” he continued, partly to fill the unnerving silence that her refusal to speak had left him with. The other part had to do with the fact that he wanted her to apologize to her for what happened the other day. “I was wrong to behave that way. You were right, I’m not young anymore. Not just because my bones ache and it takes a month to recover from a concussion now. But because I’m supposed to be more mature than that. I’m 71 for god’s sake.”

She hadn’t moved an inch, not in her face, not in her posture. She gave him nothing in terms of how she had felt about his apology.

He had looked down to the ground, unable to meet her penetrating gaze. He ran his hand over his bruised cheekbone, wincing softly at the touch of it. Her silence had been worse than her streamlined arguments — he was used to that. It made his gut twist.

As though he had managed the strength to meet her eyes, Ansei then asked, “Have you got nothing to say?”

Mari had uncrossed her arms to fold her robe in, wrapping it tighter around her body as she knotted it shut. Licking over her lips, she then cleared her throat. She watched as her boyfriend laid in agony, unknowing of his fate or what she had to say.

Without a smile to her face, but decidedly placing one in her tone, Mari finally broke the silence.

“Can’t believe you trust me to come to the door when you knock,” she told him. He crinkled his brow in confusion. She pressed on. “Couldn’t have called with your cell phone, Ansei? You really are an old man, you know that?”

Shaking his head with a lingering smile, he came up to her, putting his arm around her waist and pulling her toward him. With no objections, she had looked up at him with that doe-eyed look he had always loved, and he murmured softly, “Please kiss me, darling. I’m wounded.”

And even as an equally soft, “Quiet, you,” came from her lips, she had kissed him anyway.

\* \* \*

He needed to talk to them, but he didn’t know how to approach the subject. Should he come across blasé about it? Peter shook his head. *No, that’s not it.* But, if not nonchalant, how else could he bring himself to talk about it? With a sigh, Peter ran his hand over his shaven head, and then down his short beard. He licked over his lips and shook his head again. *Fuck.*

The jingling of the keys in the front door had caused a spread of red to paint Peter’s cheeks. *It was time.* Was he ready?

“Hey dad,” Kayla greeted first, tossing the car keys into the bowl.

Trailing behind her was Cody, mumbling some word of acknowledgment to their father as his eyes had been fixated on his phone. The view of Peter sitting on the sofa had provoked

Kayla to grab her brother by the hood of his sweater, harshly swatting and his arm in a “focus, Cody,” sort of way. Both kids read the solemn look on their father’s face and immediately came around to take a spot on the loveseat across from him.

“Want to talk about it?” Kayla prompted, knowing her brother wasn’t going to add anything to the conversation.

Peter fidgeted with his thumbs, as if the movement of his fingers were going to suddenly scribe the words that he wanted to say to them. He took a bite of his lip before he let it go and swallowed thickly.

“Look, I know that you kids think your old man is really losing touch. I mean, buying a bike, right?”

Neither of them said anything in response, as if they knew that Peter’s monologue was unfinished. Enough years spent with their father taught them to not be strangers to this sort of conversation. However, a confession had been new to them. Peter pushed up his sleeves.

“But there’s something I want to admit.”

“Dad...” Kayla started.

“I like to play pool and golf and occasional ball. And I have always been interested in motorcycles. So, when I saw that Softail, I knew that I wanted it and I had to have it. But,” Peter dipped his head. “I’d also be lying if having the bike didn’t cover up one insecurity that I had.”

The silent breaks began to worry Peter for the single reason that he had no idea how his kids would feel about him opening up in this way. He didn’t know if his shame would be infantilized or trivialized. The furrowed-browed look on Kayla’s face didn’t seem to relate to either reaction, while Cody gave nothing.

That is, until he spoke. “Is that why it’s gone?”

Kayla looked at her brother, more in shock that he noticed such a thing what with his head being buried in his iPhone.

Peter relieved a sigh and shook his head. “No, it’s with a friend right now.”

Cody made an ‘o-shaped’ face, nodding.

“Look, this whole thing with your mom, the divorce. It was a long-time coming,” Peter began. In fact, just saying it aloud didn’t change how he felt about it. All four of them knew that when Jessica took the job in San Francisco, it was one large order of diet-divorce for Mr. and Mrs. Halim. “However, there are just...some scars that won’t heal. Going back into the dating pool again? Man, it’s like I was 14 again, coming to America with no experience speaking English.”

When Peter had talked to them about high school, he only mentioned the dates that he and their mother went on or the few jobs he had as a 3<sup>rd</sup> year student. Rarely had he ever brought up the struggles that he went through. Coming to the states as a young adult and not knowing the language was one experience that neither Kayla nor Cody had to go through. It was to their benefit that English had been their first language and that all countries they had visited growing up had catered to it. It was one part of them that they would not have to worry about when meeting new people.

“There’s a lot that comes with the prospect of dating again. Am I cool enough? Does she think I’m a moron with the way that I sound? I know it’s not perfect. And I know that having a motorcycle isn’t going to change any of that either.”

The Softail would mask a lot of the discomfort of meeting women for Peter. It would help him with an ice-breaker. It would show them that he wasn't some nerd, like how he felt long ago. More importantly, it would check off one of his life goals: owning a Harley.

Kayla came over to sit beside her father. "This isn't the 70s, dad. You don't have to meet girls the old-fashioned way anymore. Have you heard of Hinge?"

"*The 70s?* How old do you think I am!" Peter loudly joked, throwing his hands up in the air to the amusement of his children. Cody feigned a shrug and Kayla shook her head with a laugh. "You lucky I don't ship you off to your mom for that."

As the laughter died down between father and daughter, Cody's brows knitted together, and his hand went up.

"Wait, hold on a minute. If you didn't get rid of the bike," he began, a small smile forming at the curve of his lips. "Does this mean that I can borrow it?"

Kayla looked to Peter.

"You get your driver's license?" Peter immediately retorted, earning the fall of Cody's smile, to which Peter added, "Then no."

\* \* \*

She had been tying it all together somehow. Curled up in bed with her computer on her lap and her boyfriend sleeping soundly at her side, Mari swore that she had all the content she needed for her last few pages. The influence from the past week left her with a multitude of stories to rope together. Transitioning from her segment about her youth, she began to script what the world looked like now that she was pushing seventy.

*I guess the difference of aging is recognizing that when I pull the excess from my sides, I should be careful, lest it stay there, she wrote. When you hear about stories centered around people my age, you immediately think that the story has got to be about death or dying. And sure, it's a fact of life, one that is eventually going to happen.*

Mari looked over to Ansei, smiling as she brushed back his silver hair and tucked it behind his ear. It was getting longer, as it would be. She turned back to her paper.

*But in the meantime, we're still living. We're still breathing, talking, laughing, learning, and experiencing life and all that it has to offer as a fully-developed and three-dimensional person, not as a presence. We're not going to give up because we're not the main actors on the stage, because we still are. We're the writers, the producers, the main cast of our own stories. And we're going to show you how to experience life by being an example of it.*

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