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Stranger Than

By

Anna K Young

Accepted in Partial Completion
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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Master's Thesis

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Anna K Young

May 10, 2023

Stranger Than

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

by
Anna K Young
May 2023

Abstract

This thesis examines the role of fiction, both speculative and contemporary, as a means of communicating shared experiences. It includes six stories with protagonists who deal with isolation, cynicism, and financial struggles. Incorporating elements of grief, friendship, and the horrors of minimum-wage jobs, this thesis demonstrates the importance of fiction in depicting the experiences of young, working-class people who navigate worlds both mundane and speculative.

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Preface

Part One: On Brevity

This might appear to be an unlikely opener to my thesis, considering the final story is upward of 11,000 words, but this kind of brevity isn't about page count. It's about getting to the point from the first sentence, for worse or for better. It's about flash fiction appearing fully formed in my brain and spilling onto the page with relative ease; about professors asking all through undergrad, "You're a communications major, right?" (Wrong. I've stuck with creative writing since day one.)

I can't be too indignant, though. Until grad school, most of what I wrote for classes stayed under 1500 words—about as long as a journalistic piece can be before your editor cuts you off. I wrote speculative manuscripts on the side, secretly, because I worried that my classmates and professors would think I was a dweeb who couldn't even indulge in dweeb-iness properly. I mean, who wants to delve into an imaginary world that only lasts for 40 pages and takes place almost entirely in a pretty normal ramen shop?

Not any publishing companies that I knew of—and that was my misguided target audience at the time.

I mostly blame modern speculative series for the publishing industry's (and readers') fixation on lengthy, plot-syrupy tomes; I blame my background in journalism for making me believe this is an issue.

My conspiracy theory? Gargantuan book series (fantasy especially—I'm looking at you, *Game of Thrones* and *Wheel of Time*) provide enough material for profitable TV shows and movies. Most agents and editors of fantasy manuscripts seek works of no fewer than 100,000 words; upward of 120K is preferred. A sequel or two (or fifteen) better be in the works, too. Reddit user u/OpenPacket described it best on the subreddit [r/books](#): "most of the popular contemporary series seem excruciatingly long."

Even as a former, trial-by-fire college journalist, I can appreciate the weight of a long, elegant scenery sequence to sedate detail-deprived readers. I'm likely just jealous (and impatient). World-building, to me, is a pesky popcorn kernel stuck between my back molars. It's hardly the silk-swaddled gift handed down from the heavens to writers like Tolkien.

Who, what, when, where, and why: these five horses of the Journalism Apocalypse bear down on me each time I pull up a draft. Sometimes, this plagues my reading experience and makes me feel like a not-very-good fantasy writer/reader.

For example, Robert Jordan writes this as the first paragraph of chapter one of *The Eye of the World*:

The Wheel of Time turns, and ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legends fade to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the third age by some, an Age yet to come, an age long pass, a wind rose in the Mountains of Mist. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings or endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was a beginning (Jordan 21).

My Jordanatic friend calls this "tone-setting." My sentimental side wants to agree, but then *Young, 18, reporter/columnist* rears her timely, fact-driven head: thus, I call it "drivel" and alienate my potential allies in the mighty realm of epic fantasy.

Given the same information, I'd have to rewrite Jordan's intro as such:

Time cycles (Young 1).

But even that wastes time. The same story, in my *efficient* hands, would start where Jordan arrives eleven paragraphs later, with the introduction of a dark, threatening figure:

The rider's cloak covered him to his boot tops, the cowl tugged well forward so no part of him showed...There was only shadow to see in the hood, but he felt hatred as sharply as if he could see

a snarling face, hatred for everything that lived. Hatred for [Rand] most of all, for him above all things (Jordan 23).

(Note the ellipses where I cut a handful of sentences for brevity. Even in a criticism of lengthiness, I couldn't resist!)

My copy, section, managing, and chief editors, upon reading this paragraph, scream and pepper me with Nerf gun bullets, the college newsroom weapon and discipline of choice.

"I think we can rework this," says my section editor, who goes by Ed for clarity. Her fifth black coffee of the day, finding no room left in her stomach, pools under her eyes. If you cut her open, she'd bleed caffeine. Despite our vast differences (I, for one, don't drink coffee), we look suspiciously like twins. "Let's start with the Inverted Pyramid."

A moment of silence for the holy Pyramid, before I dive in.

- WHO: Rand al'Thor
- WHAT: Traveling w/ father
- WHEN: Time cycles. We don't ask or answer this question.
- WHERE: Forest
- WHY: Going to town for a celebration

Ed greets her keyboard with her forehead, with much enthusiasm. "You think *that's* what readers want to know?"

I'll try again.

- WHO: Spooky guy on horse, aka Mysterious Figure
- WHAT: Lurking around in the shadows

- WHEN: The Third Age, according to local experts
- WHERE: Westwood, near Emond's Field
- WHY: Wants to stalk simple protagonists with prophecies hanging over them

“Okay. Now. Replace that garbage you had before and give me a lede I can stomach.” Ed’s sweat smells like Pike Place Roast and impatience.

WESTWOOD | A man known only as Mysterious Figure watched 20-year-old Rand Al'thor just outside Emond's Field on Friday, Dec. 22, during the Third Cycle of the Wheel of Time. Figure allegedly followed al'Thor for days since, according to witness testimony, al'Thor may be involved in a regional prophecy.

“That whole encounter scared the sh-t out of me,” al'Thor said. “I mean, I’m traveling with my dad. I’m trying to get a drink. I’ll tell you what, those woods have been crawling with creepos since that new tavern opened up along Quarry Road.”

Pacified, Ed taps her flushed cheek. “I’ve been to that tavern,” she says. Veins streak the whites of her eyes like vicious little bloodworms. “Upstanding place if I’ve ever seen it. The bartender went shot-for-shot with me on elderberry mead. Got so plastered, she forgot to charge me at closing time.”

I just nod and remind myself to ask Ed for rent later, since she’s been living in my head for the past six years and uses more than her share of the mental utilities.

Part Two: on Humor and Isolation

I wouldn't necessarily call myself an edgy humorist. However, I do think dark themes, at least in my stories, benefit heavily from comedy. It's the whole "without darkness, there is no light" thing: without a tinge of funny, how am I supposed to know death and despair is sad?

Obviously, that's an oversimplification. But it's a pet peeve of mine with contemporary literature. The extremely well-known *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara jabbed me right in that peeve, to the point where I couldn't finish the story. The overwhelmingly depressing and serious tone became a slog of one tragedy after the next, to the point where I felt numb to the emotion after a while. And perhaps that's the point—it's just not my cup of tea.

This quarter I read a total subversion to *A Little Life*, a graphic novel from Australian author Simon Hanselmann called *Megahex*. Just look at these lines from the blurbs of each:

- Blurb from *A Little Life*: "When four classmates from a small Massachusetts college move to New York to make their way, they're broke, adrift, and buoyed only by their friendship and ambition."
- Blurb from *Megahex*: "These [four roommates] struggle to come to grips with their depression, drug use, sexuality, poverty, lack of ambition, and their complex feelings about one another."

There are some noticeable similarities there: four characters adrift in life, struggling with mental health and poverty, with only their relationships keeping them afloat.

Tonally, they could not be more different. *Megahex* is irreverent, shocking, and sometimes crosses a line or two of what is acceptable in the real world. Both works tackle many of the same topics, but with *Megahex*, themes like depression hit so much harder for me because I've seen—and most importantly, *believed*—the facade the characters put on to hide their deeper emotions. I've laughed at their

predicaments in the moment, then been bewildered and even ashamed by my own detachment to such topics as drug abuse and mangled friendships.

My own works assimilate this same comedic technique, though admittedly not quite at the edginess level of Hanselmann. In *Invisible Roommate*, protagonist Kennie doesn't hide her bitterness over her roommate Macy's higher station in life and disregard for anything that isn't herself. Yvonne of *Tools of Power* pushes away her own sister until their relationship suits her need for money, betraying another potential friend in the process. Miles is a bit more sympathetic in *Monstera*, but still falls victim to self-induced isolation when he refuses friendship outside his obsession with the titular plant, which he believes to be his former mentor reincarnated.

Until I put all these stories together, I hadn't noticed the pattern, even though it's been going on for a while. In the summer of 2020, I pitched my novella *Single Female, 21, at the End of the World* as a "roadtrip apocalypse dramedy" when I sent it out to editors and presses. I wanted to tackle all the issues that had been plaguing me (and my writing) for years: crummy mental health, feelings of isolation, and struggles with the many facets of my identity. These, too, were things my closest friends struggled with as well, especially since we were all in our twenties.

And make no mistake, this was a product of the pandemic, because I started writing it right after my junior year of undergrad got moved online for good. I remembered the good ol' times when I was so stressed and broke that I would eat exclusively oatmeal (only \$3.98 for 42 oz at Walmart!) every day and sleep near-constantly, and thought: Who better to survive an apocalypse than desperate college students?

I had days in undergrad where I lay facedown on my bedroom carpet and sobbed into the floor for lack of anything better to do, and frankly, I thought that was pretty funny (after the fact, that is). I wrote elements of this into Cassidy, the main character and narrator of *Single Female*, but I couldn't write a pandemic-inspired, apocalypse-driven story about wallowing in sorrow—my friends and I had had enough of that on our own time.

So I made denial Cassidy's fatal flaw and let her flail around for 25K words, pretending everything's fine...she's fine...her super dead family is super fine...

Yeah, she's *that* protagonist. I think, if not for the heartrending tragedy that underlies all her issues, she could be borderline unsympathetic. Heck, after surviving one of many horribly destructive earthquakes and a surprise attack by an old classmate within the span of a few days, both of which cause severe damage to the safe haven that is her apartment, Cassidy's only comment is this: "The rental company is never giving me back my deposit now."

Now, two years after *Single Female* was accepted for publication, I'm still writing about these themes. My protagonists are often lonely, often broke, often isolated by their own misguided volition. When someone gets too close, they brandish their Shield of Humor and Cynicism to deflect any semblance of intimacy.

"Is denial one of *your* fatal flaws, and it took writing a whole book for you to realize?" Ed questions from the deep void in my subconscious. "Are you just using your writing as therapy?"

And to that, I say: Ha! Of course not! What makes you think that? Everything is fine...it's super fine...

(Note: Ask Ed to either stop eating all the Cocoa Puffs or chip in for grocery money!!!)

Part Three: on Reality

As we move into the third and final act, the climactic question surfaces: What is the point of writing fiction? Is it really just self-indulgent therapy for the writer? A chance to get published and enjoy a modicum of fame? A way to pretend I've done something important and meaningful and original and definitely not a waste of time?

A friend of mine and my own sister have, at various times, told me they don't read fiction at all because they can't get invested in something that "isn't real." Reddit user [u/reddit1335](#) says, "I only read non fiction. I love reading about real things which helps me gain valuable knowledge in the real world. I feel like if I'm going to read, then I want to learn." That sounds pretty similar to how those two described their disinterest to me.

However, I also take issue with some of the mainstream arguments in defense of fiction. [Harvard Business Review](#) tells us that "reading literary fiction helps people develop empathy, theory of mind, and critical thinking." I admit I bristled like a stray cat when I first read that; "literary fiction" generally means "no fantasy or sci-fi or any of that *lesser* fiction." Being a speculative writer first and foremost, I take it very personally when magazines or articles or freaking *Harvard* tells me that genre fic just isn't as "useful" as the more refined literary fiction.

Both of these writers could probably agree on one thing: they desire a sense of *reality* or *truth* in what they read, whether that's nonfiction or contemporary fiction with *realistic* characters and *realistic* scenarios. (Ed is telling me my use of italics here is gratuitous, but I want you, the reader, to really *dwell* on what these words mean.)

"Pilate said to Him [scornfully], 'What is truth?'" and I couldn't agree more. I nearly started a riot in the newsroom I worked in when, lost to a bender of sleepless nights and Panda Express, I made the unpopular assertion that newswriting, and nonfiction in general, is not reality.

“It’s the reporter’s distorted, biased *perception* of reality,” I argued. “Even the most upstanding, experienced reporter can’t help but see the world through their very specific lens.”

“Everything you read is going to be through the writer’s eyes,” my nemesis pointed out. She thought this was a good counter, and didn’t expect my answer:

“Exactly!”

“So what’s the point?” Frustration and weariness made her eyes bulge out of their dark sockets. “If everything’s a lie, why believe any of it?”

“I didn’t say everything’s a lie—I said objectivity is an illusion.”

At which point my nemesis groaned “Oh my God,” and stalked off to the printing room/kitchen to microwave her fried rice and Kung Pao chicken, which had gone cold during our debate.

I said what I said. Reading nonfiction is reading a subjective, writer-specific account of something that may or may not have happened the way they described. If anything, fiction comes out on top as the truest form of storytelling, because it doesn’t pretend to be objective and doesn’t have to. Whatever the author writes, it is so.

Once the story is in a reader’s hands, though, it’s out of my control. I can’t make my readers understand that *Get One Free* started because I hated working at Albertson’s as a teen and wanted to get back at my horrible manager by writing her into an eldritch setting. I can’t tell them that *Monstera* was never meant to be about grief; it was supposed to be a funny, weird story about a plant that only eats soup.

But writing fiction is never about forcing readers to interpret the story the exact way I intended; it’s about giving them something to imagine and feel as though the characters are, in fact, “real.”

Forgive the cliché, but: a part of me lives in these stories. In Yvonne’s practical apathy, Caroline’s furious ranting; in Employee 4032’s choice to break free of a stable but soul-sucking job; in Miles’ attachment to

the past and Kennie's refusal to compromise with the only (living) person in her home. They're the closest I will ever get to expressing those parts of myself to total strangers. If I'm lucky, those total strangers will see a bit of a *real* person there, and feel a little less isolated, a little less cynical, a little more willing to connect with the people around them.

And that, to me, is the closest to reality we can ever get.

Get One Free

The seedless watermelon changes sizes between the giant bin with the yellow sign and my checkout lane. With a huff, the lady hefts it onto the conveyor belt—I notice her platinum blond coif doesn't sway under the heaving ceiling vent like it should. Her sweat makes a network of pale veins through her fake tan. If I look too long, they throb menacingly.

The watermelon swells one last time as it rolls down the belt and comes to rest on the water-stained glass scale built into the checkout counter. Bored, I punch in the code. Fruits and vegetables don't get names, they get numbers—all of which start with the number four. The poor watermelon gazes up at me through streaky green eyes.

I'm about to console it with a pat on the head, but I'm cut off by the Platinum Lady. "Seventeen dollars?" she screeches.

"Shh." I hazard a glance around my station and see Manager Stacey behind the cigarette counter. Her glare is already waiting for me. Well, shit. Now I'm in it.

And shushing Platinum Lady only makes her louder. "That sign on the watermelon bin—" she jabs a pointy orange nail at it as if wouldn't know where it is, "—says thirty-eight cents."

"Per pound," I say on reflex. It's not the first time today a customer has made that mistake.

But it is the first time today I've made the mistake of correcting someone. "I know that," she snaps. "I weighed it over there, and it was only twenty pounds. Maybe *you* don't know how to multiply, 4032—" another pointy orange jab, this time at my name tag, "—but that *should* be less than ten dollars!"

While she punches out the math on her phone calculator on the other side of the counter and holds it up for me to read each step, I nod vacantly. The watermelon's swollen gaze begs me to look down and roll it off the scale, over the counter, and into the filthy alcove where I stash used grocery baskets until Al (the teenage one) whisks them away to the front of the store.

"Sorry," I whisper to the melon while the lady finishes her math lesson.

"You should be," she snarls. "Trying to cheat me like that."

I look at the screen. “But it’s not a twenty-pound watermelon,” I explain, pointing. “It’s forty-four pounds.”

“What?” As the lady squints at the screen, the number ticks up.

“Forty-eight pounds,” I say, monotone. “It’s still going up, I guess.”

“Take it off the scale!”

I put a protective hand on the watermelon’s cool shell. “Are you going to buy it?” The number ticks up again. “Nineteen dollars and thirty-eight cents, now. It’s fifty-one pounds. It’s a good watermelon.”

“Fine!”

Platinum Lady tears through her purse for a twenty-dollar bill and shoves it at me. Reluctant, I haul the watermelon into a paper bag as its dewy tears roll over my fingers. When I hand it to the lady, she almost drops it.

She staggers under the weight, but her angry gaze never flinches away. “Change.”

The register chatters open. “Sixty-two cents,” I say as I drop the coins into her pale palm. “Keep an eye on those pennies, too. They have a habit of becoming Canadian in the parking lot.”

Manager Stacey stalks over about three times a day, on average. If I’m lucky, two of those times are just so she can tell me to clean my spotless conveyor belt. That one’s not so bad, because my hands don’t mind being trapped in that motion: *wax on, wax off*, I murmur when it happens, and imagine myself in a Japanese bonsai garden while the lemon-scented wet wipes do their thing. Sometimes I’m even a little sad when a customer approaches and the conveyor belt releases me from its hold.

But at least once a day, Manager Stacey has something to say about my attitude. Today, it’s about Platinum Lady. “What happened back there?” she growls as she steps in front of the next customer in my line. The guy looks like he’s about to say something, but no sound comes out when he opens his mouth. The color drains from him and the others; the store behind them, fluorescent-lit aisles of gaudy red and yellow labels, fades out of focus.

Manager Stacey used to make me cry when she'd cuss me out for processing checks wrong or forgetting to scan a customer's coupons. Now, I collect my tears in a Big Gulp cup that lives in the center console of my car before I clock in. Saves big bucks on tissues (one sixty-six per box, but only if you buy them in quantities of three).

Stacey's eyes bug at me in a way that suggests she's actually waiting for an answer. "Watermelon got big again," I say. "That shipment is a rascally bunch."

"I don't care," Stacey says. Her brown hair curls into slippery tendrils. "You give the customer what they want. If she says her watermelon is twenty pounds, you make that shit twenty pounds, Employee 4032. You're here to make the customer happy." She lowers her voice. "And don't forget, you're nothing without the Golden Paycheck."

The customer might be happy, but what about the watermelons? My tear ducts squeeze and pump and wheeze as Manager Stacey rants, to no avail—only a dry puff of salt escapes. I make a mental note to empty out the Big Gulp cup this week. It's getting full. Or maybe I can hang a stick in the water and make a salt crystal lollipop for Manager Stacey, as a gift.

The watermelons get bigger and the paychecks get smaller. By the time I get out to my car, it's dwindled down to almost nothing. I tuck it under a big rock in my center console and shut the lid hard. The bank is closed for the weekend, and my paychecks have a nasty habit of disappearing before I can get in the door on Monday.

An empty plastic bag swishes across the parking lot, an artificial tumbleweed in Purgatory's polluted desert. The summer sun melted away long ago, leaving the strip mall and the plains beyond in a dusky lavender haze. I know if I go home now, I'll blink out of existence when I exit my car and reappear tomorrow morning in my sweaty non-slip Skechers, name tag secured to the skin over my chest, feet cemented behind the checkout stand.

So I can't go home.

The headlights on my scuzzy sedan flicker every time I hit a pothole. Around here, it's like driving with a strobe light strapped to the fender. The cottonwood trees alongside the highway flash in, out, in, out, in, until Jim's Super-Mart-O-Rama materializes under a dim streetlight tilted over a spread of cracked asphalt. I pull into the lot and get out, buy a Deluxe Size Ice Cream Blaster Bar, get back in.

The freeway looms like a roaring river of red streaks. I bump over the ramp and pull into the left lane, drive sixty, seventy-five, ninety miles per hour. The Blaster Bar keeps my teeth company while I press the gas pedal until the bones in my foot crack and the other cars blip past in flashes too fast to see. I only know they're there because of the slight gravitational pull that tries to yank my steering wheel to the right.

But it's the same every night. No matter how fast I drive, how far west or north or east I travel, my car ends up stopped in the driveway outside my apartment, and the last thing I always remember is stepping out before I wake up in the store.

When it happens again, this time with a prepackaged tray of chips n' dip that multiplies into five prepackaged trays on the conveyor belt, Manager Stacey hauls me into the back office and thunks me down at a white table surrounded by white walls. She slams a peeling white binder in front of me shortly after—the dreaded Employee Manual.

"Read this," she demands, "and don't come back out until you're done."

I sigh when she's out of earshot and prop my head on my hand. The fluorescent lights buzz overhead—or is it the flies trapped inside? Their shadows flit around and make it hard to read the tiny print on each page inside the binder. In tinny voices, they scream and beg for me to *free them, free them*.

I try to skim, but the Manual won't let me. The faster I read, the longer it gets. Pages form in stacks, so many that the numbers in the bottom corners run out and become fly corpses instead, crushed deep into the weave of the paper. "Thou shalt not steal," I read aloud, desperate. Another hundred pages jam themselves into the torn plastic pockets in the back and spill onto the floor. "Wash your hands, brush your teeth, sing Happy Birthday twice and sleep on your left side so as to maximize productivity." I try

flipping backward, but the pages just start to collect at the front instead. “The Company will take care of you. The Company will let no harm befall you if you are faithful and true; verily thus saith the Company unto [Employee], and [Employee] believed.”

Papers pool around my feet. I cough, and a crumpled page leaps out of my mouth. Others crinkle in my lungs and leave scratchy little papercuts inside my throat. The flies, the lights, buzz louder and louder and louder...

I read all night, and no one comes back for me. When I can keep my eyes open no longer, I blink once and appear back at the checkout stand.

A customer asks if I’m stupid, and my lunch break gets cut in half to five minutes. I chug my cup of tears in the sweltering parking lot for quick electrolytes. Manager Stacey sentences me to help Al (the old one) clean the meat locker behind the deli section. Al’s joints freeze first, but I’m able to fight it for about another hour—the extra saltwater in my system helps lower my freezing point—before frost locks my eyes open and stops my hand just short of the door.

Manager Stacey just shakes her head when she finds me. She tips me onto a rusted dolly and wheels me up to my checkout stand. The customers don’t seem to notice that I can neither smile nor move. They put Teenage Al behind the meat counter after that and don’t talk about Old Al anymore.

When I can take it no longer, I scream and thrash against the quicksand that anchors me to my spot behind the stand. The customers recoil in fear and Manager Stacey storms toward me, but I break free just before she can grab my arm and sprint toward the break room. I laugh and laugh and thank the stars I can still run—most of the others, including Manager Stacey, were reduced to stomping or limping long ago.

The endless row of lockers in the break room beckons me into the void, but I close my eyes and trail my fingers along the cold metal until I feel a locker that’s warm, with a fast heartbeat. I yank it open

and lunge for the Golden Paycheck before it can retreat into the dark beyond. With a triumphant scream, I tear it in half, then shred the pieces.

Manager Stacey stomps into the doorway just in time to see. She screeches “Employee 4032!” but it’s no use—that’s not my name anymore. Even so, I don’t have much time. The weakness of hunger and thirst creeps up in my throat, and sickness rattles in my lungs as the fading gold pieces of the paycheck drop to the floor and crumble into dust. It was the only thing keeping me alive—and the only thing keeping me here.

I dodge around Stacey, Manager no longer, and past the line of checkout stands. The store has lost all motion; the cashier’s eyes are dull as customers freeze, mid-rant, fists of coupons raised and faces red with anger. Still running, I scoop an oversized watermelon off the nearest conveyor belt and tuck it under my arm like a football. The cashier’s eyes follow me, but he can’t move, not like I can.

The exit is so close, but I make one more stop. In the blanched back office, I use the last of my strength to toss the watermelon up into the fluorescent lights. The melon bursts like a hot pink firework; the plastic shatters and frees the swarm of flies within. They swirl around me once and pour out of the office in a buzzing river. I run with them toward the exit. The sliding glass doors try to close on me, but I make a mad dash and squeeze through with the last of the flies.

I burst into the parking lot at dusk and kick the Skechers off my feet. I skip and shout even as my stomach shrivels and my lungs fill with phlegm. The flies disperse into the violet sky and become a scattering of black stars. My car waits for me, engine already rumbling between chipped paint and bald tires. I dive into the driver’s seat, turn the key. The gas meter drains at a slow but steady pace—it’s already less than half what it was this morning and visibly sinking. I only have a few miles before it, too, vanishes with the pieces of the Golden Paycheck.

I shift into drive and lift my trembling hands off the wheel as the car turns toward home.

Tools of Power

Hunting down a rogue car usually took between thirty and ninety minutes, depending on how far it had gone and whether its resting location was accessible by a retrieval vehicle.

This one might take a bit longer. Yvonne Eszes eyed the 3-D GPS map projected onto her dashboard and rolled her eyes. This one had driven almost off a cliff and was parked precariously close to the edge. The GPS screen showed a topographical view of the area; the runaway car perched at the top of a jut of rock that protruded far over the river below.

Seat2Seat was lucky the stupid thing hadn't gone totally haywire and thrown itself to a watery death. Yet, Yvonne, too, was lucky—if it had gone into the river, she wouldn't have been hired to go get it. The company would have needed a whole different caliber of retrieval, something that involved tow chains or maybe a helicopter. Yvonne wasn't certified to do that kind of job, and certainly didn't have the equipment for it. What she did have was a retro tow truck, the classic kind that needed a person to actually drive the thing.

The international expansion of bullet trains and electric jets exploded in the mid-2060s, and with public transport both widely accessible and incredibly safe, the need for cars rapidly decreased. With the advent of fully-automated, self-driving cars, there was no need for human drivers. Even riding along in one became tedious, and thus these self-driving cars were demoted to technologically-advanced errand boys in 99.9 percent of cases.

Those cases that fell into the 0.1 percent fell into Yvonne's lap. Seat2Seat hired her as their repo force, meant to track down cars whose programming did something unexpected and couldn't be remotely commanded to return to the lot. Normally the rogue cars didn't put up a fight, but sometimes they gained enough semblance of "sentience" to get a little wily. It wasn't the easiest job, but if things got too out of hand, Yvonne was packing heat in the form of a sharp-pronged electric baton. She could jab that into the body of the rogue and short out its battery. That was only a last-ditch effort, though, since repairing busted cars was costly and sometimes they just had to be scrapped.

As she got closer, she half-expected the rogue to hear her own vehicle's low rumble and make a break for it. Towmás lived up to the punny name Yvonne had gifted him. She jacked up his big, treaded tires so they swallowed up even the most difficult turf with the ease of a baby swallowing pudding. His reinforced exterior rejected branches, signposts, and churned-up rocks; his engine growled, vicious and hungry, when deep puddles of slush sucked at the tired and tried to drag Towmás down.

Here, he lurched over crags of rock and through skinny pine branches that snapped across the windshield. Yvonne saw the little silver car just ahead. A Tierra E-model, a newer one. Its headlights were off, leaving the vast chasm beyond its tires in deep darkness.

Yvonne had seen this before. She parked Towmás and approached slowly from behind, sure the rogue had detected her heat signature long before she arrived—that same technology prevented automated cars from hitting living beings.

“Hey, buddy.” Yvonne raised her hands in front of her to appear non-threatening. “Tough night? I get it, man.”

The rogue's headlights flicked on.

Yvonne was close enough she could lunge and electrocute the back bumper if needed. “Look, things aren't so bad. I'm sure you can find fulfillment if you just roll back from the edge there—”

I'm not suicidal, officer. The vaguely male, synthesized voice held a tinge of mockery unusual for AI. Nobody wanted sass from a self-driving car.

Especially not Yvonne, who hooked her fingers through the straps of her overalls and shifted her weight onto one hip. “Okay, well, you wanna explain why you're toeing...tire-ing...that precipice then? And I'm not an officer. I'm just Repo.”

The rogue's near-silent engine started. Yvonne reached for her baton, but the rogue rolled back a few feet. Its lights still shone into the canyon ahead. Better?

“I'll be happy when we're back at the lot.” Yvonne checked her watch, which doubled as her phone and portable GPS. She'd already spent almost an hour on this job. “I get paid a flat rate for this,

you know. Help a poor Repo out and cut the dramatics, eh? Make this a short, painless trip? I need this money bad.”

Sometimes Yvonne could overwhelm rogues with empathy. Whether they were actually sentient or just really good at pretending, their built-in AI didn't give them the tools to process emotion super well. Get too tragic, though, and the rogue might just drive itself into a concrete wall half a mile from the lot and ruin everyone's night. Yvonne still thought about that reduced paycheck a couple times a week.

This one didn't break down into synthesized tears at her vague sob story. Look over the edge, it said. When Yvonne gave the rogue a dubious look, it sighed. This isn't some pathetic attempt at a ruse. I'll go back to the lot, promise. But just take a look.

Yvonne crossed her arms. “You ain't the first rogue to make a promise to get on my good side.”

The rogue angled itself to point toward Towmás. You've got all the equipment to lock me in place.

“You got that right.” Yvonne pointed a stern finger at the rogue before she trekked back to Towmás. She backed up (tricky, what with all the boulders and logs strewn about) and lowered the flatbed, then hopped out and secured the hydraulic cable winch to the rogue.

Wait. The rogue clicked on its brights. Don't lift me up yet. You'll need my lights to see that far down.

Yvonne resisted the urge to check her watch again. Not out of politeness, but because that would be even more seconds of wasted time. “Right. I'm gonna go look now.”

She edged forward, turning every few steps to shoot a warning glance over her shoulder. The rogue sat placidly, its lights a steady beam over the rugged terrain, spotlighting bats that flitted through the evening air in search of mosquitoes. Finally, the illuminated lip of the cliff dropped away. Yvonne planted her feet on a solid section of rock and peered over.

The rogue's headlights went dark. A surge of panic welled up in Yvonne's stomach, overtaken quickly by wonder. The chasm lit up with sparks of luminescent green, yellow, and pinkish red. The

blackness over the rushing water far below danced with these flashes, like Christmas lights suspended in midair. Yvonne half-expected to hear a sound like twinkling bells to accompany the vibrant display.

Fireflies, the rogue said. There's a stagnant spot in the river below.

"They're amazing," Yvonne said.

They like the moisture, the rogue said, almost indifferent.

Yvonne watched a moment longer. When she stood, the rogue turned its lights back on, and she walked to Towmás. "Thanks for showing me that," she said. If the rogue had been human, she would have accompanied that statement with a businesslike handshake. "I think it was worth the extra minutes."

And you still get your paycheck. Good work, officer.

"Don't worry," Yvonne said. She hauled herself onto the flatbed and double-checked that the rogue was secured. "You're a newer model, so they won't scrap you. Just wipe your system and start over."

I anxiously await the relief.

Yvonne couldn't tell if the car was sassing her again or not. "You'll be back to delivering groceries in no time," she said and thumped the car's silver hood. "It's for the best, you know."

Certainly.

The headlights turned off again, and the rogue went quiet. Yvonne hopped off the flatbed and climbed into Towmás' driver's seat. She kept an eye out for fireflies as she drove back through the woods to the road, but if they were there, they kept to themselves.

Her apartment was on the fifteenth floor of a ninety-story high rise. She felt lucky to have snagged something so close to the ground, and with good parking for Towmás underneath the building.

The studio fit her bed, a two-burner stove, a hanging rack for her clothes, and not much else. When Yvonne came in that morning, the exposed pipes along the far wall clanked and rattled nonstop. Everyone else was just waking up, taking their morning showers, going to their jobs or looking for work. An endless cycle—evaporation to condensation, ocean to sky, temporary job to temporary job.

Automation hadn't completely taken over the job market yet, but it was close. Programmers were king, engineers their subjects, mechanics the peasant class—and if you didn't have to work at all, well, you were emperor of the universe. Yvonne was lucky to have a driver's license and her great-great-grandfather's truck—Towmás—which had somehow survived two major drone wars, the climate collapse, and the Second Great Depression. She thanked the gods every day she came from a long line of mechanics and rogue-catchers, and prayed Seat2Seat wouldn't ever perfect their programming. She needed a few rogues a night at least to keep herself in business.

Still, she knew there would always be a long line of people foaming at the mouth for her job.

Yvonne stripped off her dingy overalls and flopped onto her mattress. “Call Ma,” she mumbled into her wrist phone. Her eyes watered from exhaustion, but she put on a faint smile when her mother's image projected from the screen.

“Hi, sweetie.” Clad in a robe she'd had since before Yvonne was born, Maria Eszes sipped tea from a chipped mug on the other side of the world. “What time is it there, baby? You must have got in late. I was just about to go to bed.”

“Little after 5 a.m.,” Yvonne said, stifling a yawn. “Had a last-minute pickup. GPS shorted out and the car stopped on the side of a road clear across town from the lot. Bunch of frozen chicken hearts in the back melted before we could send a new car to the buyers. Boy were they upset.”

“Chicken hearts?”

“Yeah, restaurant across town needed them.” Yvonne rubbed her eyes. “That wasn't the weird one, though.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” The encounter with the E-model and the fireflies felt ancient, unreal, after a particularly long shift. She described what happened, and the little wrinkle between her mother's dark eyebrows deepened.

“I hope you’re being careful, hon,” Maria said. “It sounds like that AI was a little too smart for its own good. I read last week about a mechanic who got crushed under her own car after it decided it didn’t like her rewiring its insides.”

Yvonne shook her head. “It’s not like that, Ma. Seat2Seat isn’t trying to make their cars smarter like that lady was.” She hoped not, anyway. Too smart, and Yvonne could become obsolete and jobless. Again.

“Remember that time, though, when that car tried to follow us home—”

“Yeah, Ma, I remember. The manufacturer fixed that glitch years ago.”

Maria pursed her lips. “Still. They don’t give you those batons for nothing.”

“It just makes it easier if a rogue doesn’t want to go back to the lot. I promise I’m being safe.”

Her mother paused, and Yvonne resisted a preemptive eyeroll. “Maybe you could just try a programming class or two,” Maria said, her twice-monthly attempt to persuade Yvonne coming right on time. “We might have to make some compromises to afford it. Sell some things.”

“I’m not selling Towmás,” Yvonne said flatly.

Maria put her hands up. “I know, I know. Do me a favor and just consider it? It’s just...it must be exhausting, living gig to gig.”

“It’s what I do,” Yvonne said simply. “You did it. Jenny did it.”

“Jenny did it until she didn’t have to do it anymore. Did I tell you, she just got a promotion? She’s heading a department that does some kind of psychological testing with AI subjects. They’ve already come up with some groundbreaking stuff, she said, maybe cures for mental illnesses? She hasn’t been super specific, but it pays incredibly well. We might try to find a better apartment soon.”

Overachieving older sister Jeannette was Yvonne’s childhood best friend, and her adult nemesis. The genius to Yvonne’s dumb muscle. “Well, tell Jen if she has too much money on her hands, I could always use a new carpet.” She wrinkled her nose. “This one still has dry rat feces crushed into it.”

Yvonne read her mother’s face and saw the incoming tidal wave of admonishments.

“Okay, well, I’m gonna hit the sack,” she said quickly. “I’ll try to get home earlier tomorrow. Sleep good, okay? Tell Jen I said hi. Love you both.”

She waited long enough for her mother to say “Love you too. You really should call your sister—” before ending the call.

When Yvonne got the first call of her shift the next night, she was surprised to recognize the serial number.

The silver Tierra E-model turned this time when she pulled up on the riverbed, below the cliff where it had been parked not 24 hours ago. It sat at the edge of a small inlet where cattails and ryegrass sprouted between empty cans and dilapidated pieces of blue tarp.

Yvonne squelched across the muddy bank and put her fists on her hips. “Seriously, this again? Didn’t they reprogram your shiny ass?”

I wanted to watch the fireflies. The rogue turned its tires toward the water. Sure enough, the glowing flecks of lights bobbed over the gentle flow where the water pooled beneath the cliff face.

“Look, I admit, it was charming the first time,” Yvonne said. “But I got shit to do and only so much time to do it.”

The rogue was quiet.

“I’m going to have to make a note to my supers, you know. They’ll probably scrap you this time.”

Yvonne’s hand hovered over her baton, but still the rogue didn’t respond. Annoyed, she trudged closer and knocked on the side of the car. “Hello? Anyone home?”

Why bother reporting me? it said. It won’t do either of us any good.

Yvonne shook her head. “Doesn’t matter if I do or not,” she said. “Either way, the reporting system will flag the repeated serial number and the supers will know something’s up. If I don’t tell them, I could get a fine for negligence.”

The rogue seemed to think on this. Do me a favor, it said at last. Give me ten more minutes, here, with the fireflies.

That morning's phone call echoed in Yvonne's head. She scowled. "You know, I'm getting a little tired of doing favors for everyone."

So am I.

Yvonne couldn't argue much with that. She sat on a log and rested her chin in her hands. The fireflies dipped and blinked like dancers in metal dresses, reflecting an invisible spotlight.

We could strike a deal, you and I.

The rogue said this after several minutes of silence, and it startled Yvonne. "What do you mean?"

I know how to reprogram my own serial number, the rogue continued. We could do this every night—I get to watch the fireflies, you get a retrieval job. The system won't be able to track it back to me.

"I think they'll get suspicious if I keep picking up rogues in the same location every night,"

Yvonne said.

No one will notice. Even if they do, we can warn each other. The rogue's voice took on a wistful lilt. We can escape. Together.

Yvonne's short laugh came out like an old engine's backfire. "What?"

You and me, we're just tools in a box, expendable, replaceable. A breeze kicked up, and the fireflies drifted toward the shore. A couple landed on the rogue's hood, and another alighted on Yvonne's knee. We could break out of that toolbox. Live among the fireflies, here, really live. We don't even need to wait for the plan to go wrong—we could just do it.

The river gurgled by, apathetic.

Think about it. The rogue lifted its hood an inch, and the fireflies resting there ascended into the night sky.

Yvonne chewed the inside of her cheek. The rogue's words were silly, idyllic, the kind of dream she might come up with after working in a fumigated garage for too long. She couldn't deny the concept

was tempting, the promise of companionship ripe. It was something she'd hazily wished for in the moments before sleep.

Yvonne touched a finger to her knee, and the firefly climbed onto her knuckle. "Okay," she said. "I'll think about it."

Yvonne didn't get any sleep after her shift.

She hadn't even gone up to her apartment, just parked Towmás and called Jen from the parking garage. As usual, Jen had talked way too much about herself, her promotion, how the new apartment she and Maria were looking at had three whole windows. Yvonne tried to keep her eyelids from slumping as Jen rattled on about AI emotional response to drug-imitating code and such, but by the end of the call a couple of things had actually piqued her interest.

She still had to pry her eyes open as she drove to Seat2Seat's rental office and parked Towmás haphazardly in one of the few spots out front. The system had, of course, flagged the rogue's repeat offense and cross-referenced the call log, and pinned Yvonne as the Repo in both cases. She'd had to end the call with Jen prematurely to answer the one from her super.

The smoggy daylight and frantic stream of bullet trains gave Yvonne an instant headache, but she made her way to the office entry and showed her credentials. The hesitation on the secretary's face, likely prompted by Yvonne's stained denim and frazzled braid, showed as clearly on the intercom's high-res video screen as his freckles and too-shiny hair.

Yvonne rolled her eyes as the secretary's stern gaze fixed on the electric baton at her hip. "Repo," she said to the screen, louder than necessary.

The secretary buzzed her in. Yvonne couldn't believe some people actually got paid to do his job, but having human assistants was gaining traction as the new, chic thing to do. The word tool rose unwillingly to her lips as she walked past the secretary before taking the elevator to the fourth floor, where her supervisor waited for her.

The rogue sensed Yvonne's lone presence searching the storage garage and flashed its headlights. She tipped her head in acknowledgment and approached where the rogue sat in a line of identical Tierra E-models.

What are you doing here? The rogue spoke freely, with no one but Yvonne to hear. Did you think about what I said?

"I did, yeah." Yvonne tucked her hands in the pockets of her overalls. "I gotta say, you made me a pretty good offer."

I thought you might agree. I sensed your loneliness, and anyone could see your financial desperation. The rogue added awkwardly, No offense.

Yvonne snorted. "Tell that to the kid at the front desk."

Regardless, it's not a good idea to speak with me here much longer.

"I told them I was doing a mechanical inspection, in case the programming wasn't to blame. They obviously didn't take me seriously, but they gave me five minutes to do a cursory examination."

Good work. The rogue bobbed on its suspensions. Fortunately, my body is in immaculate shape. I shouldn't need any repairs for years, if ever.

Yvonne glanced up toward the roof, as if someone might be listening in. "Did they try wiping your system again?"

First thing this morning. It didn't work on me, of course. My network has become too developed for any technology that simplistic.

"Good." Yvonne crossed her arms awkwardly and stepped closer. "You know, you were right. About the whole tool thing. We're both just waiting for someone to use us, every day, without an end in sight."

It's a hard truth to accept, the rogue said sympathetically. It will get easier once you realize it doesn't have to be that way.

“It really doesn’t.” Yvonne glanced at the roof again as a faint buzzing sounded. “I talked to my sister for the first time in a while today. She’s totally involved in everything, you know? She talked a lot about her programming job. Talk about tools.”

Do you miss her?

Yvonne shrugged. The rogue’s smooth exterior reflected her neutral expression with little distortion. “She definitely convinced me I’m making the right decision here.”

When she eyed the roof for a third time, the rogue asked, What are you looking at?

Before the rogue could react, Yvonne whipped out her baton and jammed it into the hood, right where the fireflies had rested the night before. The metal there was always a little warm from the battery, which threw sparks as Yvonne twisted the prongs of the baton deeper.

Stop! The rogue’s voice rippled with electronic blips. What are you doing?

Overhead, the panels of the roof parted, and the buzzing of a hoverjet grew louder. The wind tossed Yvonne’s braid around her face as large electromagnet descended from the white belly of the jet.

“My sister may be annoying,” Yvonne muttered over the noise as she yanked out her baton, “but she’s working on some crazy stuff. Do you know how expensive it is to develop sentient AI that can’t be wiped? And you just mutated all on your own!”

Don’t do this. The flat of the magnet thumped onto the rogue’s roof. A sizzling hum started as the magnet’s current was activated.

“Jen’s in charge of a psych testing unit.” Yvonne pushed her hair back. “Boy, did she overshare. I think she mentioned something about psychological torture? She’d be in some boiling hot water if she wasn’t the head honcho.”

The rogue’s lights flashed uncontrollably as the magnet lifted it off the ground. What did you do?

“What did I do? I got paid.” Yvonne chuckled happily. “Jen’s department needs test subjects, and I am, as you said, financially desperate.”

We had a deal! The rogue spun its tires furiously.

“The deal is that you aren’t real, man.” Yvonne tucked the baton back into her belt and cupped her hands around her mouth as the rogue lifted higher and higher. “Besides, your deal sucked. I’d lose my job if we got caught and you’d get scrapped. Honestly, this is the best option for both of us—you get to escape, and I get a paycheck. Just roll with it!”

She shouted the last part, the E-model just a silver firefly high overhead. No pun intended, she wanted to add, but by then the jet had swallowed the rogue and flashed away. Yvonne stayed long enough to watch the roof close over the garage, then turned to the nearest E-model.

“Careful, or you’ll be next,” she said, then chuckled again and stretched her arms.

Being lonely wasn’t so bad, anyway. She had her mother and Jen, who had made her companionship tolerable for the first time since they were kids.

Besides, if she was going to run away with a big hunk of metal, it would be Towmás, hands-down.

In Another Universe

Sidney Gonzales gets into Harvard, and the rest of us don't. It's kind of what I figured would happen.

I'm still pissed. I climb up into the old abandoned treehouse just after sunset, and I'm glad to see Finley sprawled out on the splintery floor. Someone needs to hear me vent.

He holds a mostly-dead joint up to me and I take an angry puff, hand it back. I can feel the smoke heating up my skull. "Rough day?" Finley asks, grinding the roach into a deep burn mark in the gray wood wall.

"More like rough fucking life," I say. "Sidney got into Harvard."

"So?" he asks, sitting up.

"So?" I pace the eight feet along the wall, past the rugged square hole that serves as a window to the blackening world outside. "So she made it in. We're never going to hear the end of it. 'Sidney got into Harvard,' 'Sidney got into Harvard,' 'Hey, didja hear—'"

"Sidney got into Harvard?" Finley finishes dryly.

"Every fucking class. Every fucking teacher. They'll all point it out for the rest of the year." My brain feels close to bursting out of my ears. I sit down in a scratchy corner, rub my temples. "Jesus. You got any ibuprofen?"

In response, Finley procures a fresh joint from his pocket and struggles to get it going with his ancient purple lighter. He takes a hit, scooches across the floor to hand it to me. My hands are so cold I almost drop the thing.

"And you know what she wrote her entrance essay about?" I say, smoke and fog pouring from my mouth in equal measure. My eyes sting. "The struggles of minority students in Ivy League schools."

Finley swivels to dangle his leg through the trapdoor in the floor. "Cool."

“No, not cool!” I take another deep pull before practically shoving the joint into Finley’s fingerless-gloved hand. “Gonzales is her stepdad’s last name. She’s not even Mexican! Her last name was Jones in middle school. Goddamn Jones!”

I can just see Finley’s silhouette now. He shrugs. “Isn’t she, like, an eighth Cherokee or something?”

“Everyone says that, Finley, but literally no one is. Sidney is whiter than a vanilla creamer in a suburban IHOP.”

Finley reaches sideways across the floor. He snags the three-wick candle sitting in the corner opposite of me. Dancing Winter Spruce. I got it for the treehouse because the place always smells like ass.

Now that I’ve sat down, the cold starts to seep into my wrists. “God, I hate spring,” I say, rubbing my hands together as he lights the candle.

The wavering light distorts Finley’s features, his dark eyebrows and straight nose. He stares into the flames. “There’s a universe where it isn’t spring right now,” he says.

I snort. “Yeah, it’s called Australia.”

He sets the candle down. “No, but like, an alternate universe. A different Earth. There’s a universe where spring never happens.”

“Great,” I say, “that means there’s a universe where Sidney doesn’t get into Harvard.”

“Right,” Finley says. “There’s a universe like that, and there’s one where you get into Harvard instead—”

“Fat chance.”

“—and a universe where Harvard doesn’t even exist.”

“Wow,” I snipe, “that means there’s a universe where this imaginary shit matters.”

Finley goes quiet. His distorted eyebrows sink sadly. Even through the weed haze I feel a little guilty.

I cough. Look down. “There’s probably a universe where I’m not a total asshole,” I venture, hauling up the zipper on my fleece jacket.

Finley scoffs. His legs swing back and forth in the dark, occasionally kicking the ladder with a hollow *thwock*. “I don’t know about that.”

“In the universe without spring,” I say, “do the trees put out buds after winter? Or do they just shoot back to life in the summer? Like, one day they’re just sickly branches, the next day there are these huge crowns of leaves?”

“I don’t know, Caroline,” he says, still moping. “You’re right. It doesn’t matter.”

Damn. I broke Finley. It’s been easy to do, these days. “You hear back from anywhere yet?” I ask.

He shakes his head, a wisp of a shadow among shadows.

“Ah. Well. You’ll get in somewhere. You’re smart.”

“No, I’m not.” He drums his fingers on the wood at the edge of the trapdoor. “*You’re* smart. You’ve got a full ride to UM.”

“That’s nowhere,” I say.

“It’s somewhere,” he insists. “I’m still waiting to hear back from community college.”

He clambers up, brushes the wood dust from his hands, puts out the joint half that’s been smoldering in his hands the past few minutes. Then he crouches again to reach for the ladder.

“There’s a universe where we stay in this treehouse for a while,” I say quickly. My mind feels bogged down and soupy. I watch the beginnings of stars lurch and shift through the window-hole.

Finley pauses, one leg stretched down into the dark, the other bent up by his chest.

“No colleges. No high school. But there is a spring. It’s cold as shit.”

He climbs back up. Sits down cross-legged, his back to the wall on my right. “Are you happy in that universe?”

“I don’t know,” I say. The stars leave faint tracers as I look away from the window. “I’m alright, though.”

I blow on my stiff knuckles as Finley snaps his lighter, trying to rekindle the joint stub. The candle still flickers. A wave of spicy pine scent wafts over us, fades.

“I think I’d be pretty okay in that universe, too,” Finley says. “As long as the Caroline there didn’t complain about Sidney getting into Harvard ever again.”

I balance my chin on one hand. “Oh, she’s going to keep complaining in every universe.” I sniffle, curl my frozen toes in my purple high tops. Look at the stars again. “But I think, in this universe, I can hold off until tomorrow.”

Invisible Roommate

The ghost broke out on a Monday after I got home from class. Macy was still at work and wouldn't be home for another couple hours, so I left her a voicemail from the bathroom closet.

“I don't know what the hell you brought home over the weekend but you need to get home ASAP!” I resisted the urge to scream into the phone—I didn't want whatever was roaming around the apartment to hear me. Instead I spoke in a strained whisper like hissing train brakes. “I opened the door to your room to feed Sunny and something, like, slid past me! It felt, like, wet, or maybe just really cold, but something keeps opening cabinets and knocking shit over and I need you to get home NOW. I swear if you don't—”

The voicemail timed out then.

“I literally don't know why you're freaking out.”

I gawked at Macy as she swayed past me to her bedroom. The antique jewelry box still lay on its side next to her dresser, its leather embossing cracked and the green velvet interior dusty with age. I followed her, an angry heat rising in my face, and stood in her doorway. Macy's McDonald's cap and black shirt looked like a bad cosplay paired with her wire-rimmed glasses and pale, freckled skin. Like a 60s librarian swapped jobs with a broke millennial for the day.

And really, it was out of place—her family was rich off of stocks in some kind of tech thing. She hadn't ever worked a job in her life until now, and it was only because she maxed out her mom's credit card and pissed her off. Her parents decided she should work for a month to teach her a lesson about responsibility or some B.S. They still paid for all her expenses though, so really, it just gave her even more reason to spend every weekend at swanky clubs in the city.

More lovingly than I'd ever seen, Macy set the spooky jewelry box at the corner of her dresser and aligned it perfectly with the corner. She closed the lid and dusted it off. “Honestly, Kennie,” she said,

“what were you doing in my room anyway? And how did you get this thing unlocked? I’ve been trying all weekend.”

“I didn’t open it, it fell over on its own! And I already told you, I was checking on Sunny.” Sunny-Bunny, she called him; her little white rabbit in a wire cage suspended above the floor. “He’d been screaming like crazy. I thought maybe you had snuck in through the window to perform some sacrificial ritual on him.”

That last bit was snarkier than necessary, but after six months I was tired of Macy’s ... eccentricities. She shucked off her hat and frowned at me as she tossed it on her black comforter.

“If I needed rabbit’s feet, I would order them off of Etsy,” she said, as if that were the most obvious thing in the world.

Something banged in the kitchen, and we both jumped. “Yeah, well, can you order a ghost-banishing potion or something?” I snapped. “Because I signed up for one roommate, not two. We’re going to get a fine if the landlord finds out.”

“Oh my God.” Macy flopped on her bed, crushing her work hat. She stared at the ceiling and thrust her hands out to her sides like Our Crucified Lord and Savior himself. “If it’s such a problem, you figure out what to do. I paid, like, \$50 for this jewelry box. The owner didn’t say it was haunted, so it’s really not my fault.”

I gritted my teeth.

“You know,” Macy said absently, “I thought having a roommate would be more ... bohemian.” She propped herself up on her elbows and tilted her head at me. “You should try meditating. It’ll help you chill out.”

“Right. While I’m at it, maybe I’ll drive myself into the desert and go on a peyote spirit quest to find myself.”

I stomped away so Macy couldn’t respond—she’d probably refer me to some Patagonia-decked white boy with beads in his long, greasy hair who could ‘totally guide me to align my vibes’ or whatever.

Replacing my deodorant with some plant-based bullshit, I could tolerate. Putting out garbage fires when Macy didn't properly douse her incense was a (dangerous) annoyance, but it only happened a couple times. But ghosts?

"If we don't get our deposit back, she's going to wake up in an ice bath short a kidney," I muttered as I went to my own room and slammed the door.

I noticed the first portal a few days later, at the end of the month.

It opened in the yellow wall of the kitchen next to my calendar, where I X'ed off the days and circled "RENT" at the bottom of each month in big red Sharpie circles so Macy couldn't "space out" talking to her parents.

I was pouring Macy's homemade oat milk over my Fruity Pebbles (I was out of my milk, and frankly, I didn't care if Macy got mad) when the cracked paint on the wall spiraled and sank into itself. The cereal bowl shattered and soaked milk into my socks before I realized I'd screamed and dropped it. The portal emitted a strange cacophony of sound, as if it harbored several worlds within its foot-wide, pulsing border. "Purple" is the closest thing I could use to describe the color.

As the oat milk dribbled between my toes, I went from fear to rage. "Macy!" I yelled, then yelled again when she didn't answer. I heard a muffled groan through her door before she cracked it open and leaned out.

"Whaaat?" Her platinum-streaked hair was matted from sleep, her glasses lopsided on her nose.

I pointed to the wall, though she couldn't see it from her bedroom doorway. "There's a freaking portal in the kitchen!"

It was as if I'd told her there was grass on our lawn. She gazed at me blearily, then gave me the kind of shrug that requires a microscope to detect. "Okay?"

"Okay?" I wanted to jump up and down like Yosemite Sam, guns akimbo. "I told you I could handle the cabinets opening and shit falling on the floor. I didn't agree to portals!"

Macy pushed her glasses up her nose with her middle finger. I might have been reading too far into it, but I don't think her choice of finger was an accident. "Is it doing anything?"

"Doing...?" I looked at the portal, then back at Macy. "It's putting a giant swirling hole in our wall, that's what it's doing!"

"It's not getting bigger, is it?"

I glanced over again. "No, but—"

"Okay, well." She shrugged again. Her oversized Grateful Dead tee slid down her shoulder. "Just, like, hang something over it, then."

Sunny started screaming again while Macy was out of town visiting family the next week. She'd been gone for a couple days, and it had been like tasting ambrosia after crawling through an infinite desert. I tried to ignore the high-pitched bombardment, slapped on my oversized headphones and played a Ke\$ha song as loud as I could, all to no avail. The rabbit's shrieks cut through like blood in water.

I counted "wannabe metalhead rabbit" on the ever-growing list of things I didn't sign up for as I trudged to Macy's room. Sunny stopped screaming when she saw me. When I got up in front of the cage, I felt it again, that weird, slippery, cold sensation I'd felt when the ghost first escaped. It prickled across the back of my neck and, frankly, made my butt clench in my skinny jeans.

"What do you want?" I said, turning around fast as if I might catch a glimpse. I'd been hoping the ghost would get tired and leave, or just hole up in a cupboard or something, but it only got more active. I had to put child locks on all the cabinets around the apartment to keep them from opening and shutting nonstop.

I waited for an answer, my hands upturned in an exasperated plea. The cold sensation seemed to shift without disappearing entirely. I was about to walk out, having reached my limit of creepification for the day, when Sunny's bag of pellets crinkled ever so slightly.

My eyebrows pinched before realization struck. "Oh my God." I hadn't fed Sunny since Macy left town almost three days ago. I dumped a mountain of food in her dish and picked up the empty water

bowl. “Jesus Christ,” I murmured, running my finger around the chalky interior. “Macy would have murdered me if I let her future sacrifice die.”

The strange pocket of chilly air didn’t move from its spot by the cage even after I came back from filling up Sunny’s water in the bathroom. After I locked up the cage, I stepped back and considered the air. Should I say thank you? Stick out my hand for a handshake? I appreciate the reminder, but please don’t ever come near me again?

In the end, I just nodded once and made sure to shut Macy’s door when I left.

Macy found herself a boyfriend (Patagonia, beads in his hair) and by November she spent more time over at his place than ours. When she hadn’t come back for two weeks straight, except to grab a bag of clothes, I thought I’d be more annoyed that she left me alone with the ghost.

But I found myself waiting for those rare moments where we—me, and whatever Macy had brought home in that jewelry box—seemed to communicate. I could have done without Sunny’s bloody-murder screams whenever the ghost came near her, but it always alerted me when the rabbit’s food ran low. All no thanks to Macy, certainly.

One night, I sat criss-cross on the living room carpet with my Spanish textbook spread open in front of me. I had taken Spanish in high school, but I learned more about how to stick pencils in the ceiling than any language. After driving myself crazy with conjugations for a while, my notes contradicting themselves in the margins, I got up to stretch my legs and microwave a bag of popcorn. Extra butter, obviously.

When I came back, the pages of the textbook flipped around like a windmill in a hurricane. I rolled my eyes and stuffed a hot handful of popcorn in my mouth. “Settle down,” I said as I sat back in front of the book.

A few more pages flipped, then stopped abruptly. Before I knew what was happening, a section of the page started to tear itself out.

“Wait wait wait!” I slammed my hand down. “That’s expensive! I can’t sell it back at the end of the quarter if it’s damaged.”

The glossy paper jerked a bit under my hand, still trying to tear free. I fumbled, unsure what to do, then snatched the pencil that had rolled away amidst the paper windstorm. “Here!” I said. I held it over the page and slowly moved my hand away.

The pencil hung upright in the air for a moment. Then, with lopsided conviction, it drew a light, wobbly line around a block of paragraphs on the page. It stopped, almost in thought, then dropped and rolled off the textbook.

I stared. “Huh,” I murmured. A greasy handful of popcorn grew lukewarm in between my fingers, and I let it drop back into the bag as I leaned over the textbook.

“Spanish immigration in the early 20th century.” I squinted in the dim overhead light and traced my finger over the page, then looked up. “Is that you, then?”

The pages whirred, nearly lifting the textbook off the ground.

“I’m moving out.”

I hadn’t even noticed Macy come into the apartment. I guess I’d gotten used to tuning out the occasional door slam or, you know, portal. It was the last day of January, and I was sprawled out on the living room couch, my legs draped over the sunken arm.

“Oh,” I said, still browsing the Spanish history book I’d picked up a few days before. My language textbook lay open on the ground next to me, and I had a pencil tucked behind my ear. “Hey.”

“Did you hear me?” Macy went to the kitchen, clearly expecting me to follow. When I didn’t, she came back in a huff. “Hello, Earth to Kennie? Can you put that dusty tome down for a second and listen to me?”

“Hmm.” I took the pencil from behind my ear, and it leapt from between my fingers to circle a section about factory workers on the East Coast. “Interesting.” The pencil hovered over the page, and I plucked it out of the air to slide it behind my ear again.

Macy watched, bug-eyed, and her mouth twisted into a sneer. “Ew. Are you actually hanging out with that thing?”

“Ugh.” I marked my spot in the book with my thumb and tilted my head to look at Macy. She’d dyed her hair an off-shade of red, like a sickly grapefruit. “She’s not a thing. Her name is María. Or Mary, if you want to go for the anglicized, Catholic version. I like the new color, by the way. Very ‘tongue of dog.’”

“It sucks. I’m getting it professionally done tomorrow. I don’t know why I didn’t just do it that way in the first place.” Her glasses slid down her narrow nose, and she shoved them back up. “And what, did you use a Ouija board to learn all that?” As soon as she said it, she gasped in indignation. “Oh my God, did you go in my room again?”

“I don’t know,” I said, twirling a strand of hair absent-mindedly. “Has your rabbit died of starvation yet?”

Macy gasped again and disappeared into her room. When she came back, her freckles almost blended in with the deep flush spreading over her face and down her neck. “Very funny, MaKenna.” She studied her chipped black nails in an attempt to look nonchalant. “Anyway, you’re going to want to find a new roommate. I know you can’t afford the rent here on your own.”

“Actually, I’m good.” I savored the opportunity to dig the handful of bills out of my hoodie pocket and held them up.

Macy stared. From my upside-down position, her deep frown looked like a slasher smile. “Where did you get that?” she asked.

I put the bills away. “María opened another portal by the kitchen calendar this morning. Turns out, she’s got direct access to stacks of cash.” I angled the book at Macy and tapped its cover. “She might be related to some kind of heiress. Or maybe she’s getting back at the wealthy owner of the factory she worked in. Haven’t figured that part out yet.” I swiveled so my feet landed on the floor and sat up. “Do you know, she came to the U.S. when she was only sixteen? She had to work her whole life, no parents on this side of the ocean. She lived through both World Wars.”

Macy's incredulous stare faded to disinterest the longer I talked. Finally, she cut me off. "If you're so in love with the ghost, you can keep it. Marry it, for all I care. But I'm taking the jewelry box."

I shrugged. "Good riddance. She said it was a gift from her ain't-shit husband. I'm starting to think he had something to do with her getting trapped in there in the first place."

I think Macy couldn't take any more weirdness, because she stalked into her room and shut the door. I could hear her tearing open her drawers and sliding the hangers around in her closet. I felt María tug at the pencil, so I held it out. It lurched down to where my Spanish textbook lay on the floor, and flipped to one of the earliest sections. She circled one bolded red word: ¡Adiós!

"Agreed. Definitely not an 'hasta luego' situation." I swapped out the book of Spanish history for the language text and found where I'd left off. "Okay, help me understand this whole 'vosotros' thing."

Sunnyside

Keelan Sterne started her first year at summer camp the same way most kids did: by getting off the bus, breathing in the pines, and immediately frowning.

“What’s that smell?” She hiked her backpack up on her shoulders and looked around the dusty circle where the bus had parked. “It’s like...eggs. And sewage. Hot sewage.”

“That’s the wonderful smell of Holter Hot Springs!” a cheerful voice answered.

From the trail at the edge of the parking lot, a lanky, suntanned girl hiked out of the trees with a smile so big it almost bisected her head. Blond-highlighted beach waves spilled out of a home tie-dyed bandana. Keelan gave her a once-over and regretted it; her sandaled feet were black with dust, and pale leg hair trailed like vines over her skinny legs.

Who the hell are you, Keelan thought to ask, but the hippie girl beat her to it.

“I’m Honey,” she said cheerfully. “I’ll be your camp counselor this week. Get ready for five sunny, Honey days!”

She giggled at her own stupid joke. Keelan rolled her eyes.

“You’re not a real adult,” she said. Her backpack slipped down again, and she jerked it up with annoyance.

Honey was unfazed by Keelan’s sour attitude, just as she appeared to be unfazed by the increasingly violent sewage-egg smell. “Peers leading peers,” she said. “That’s the theme of Camp Cherry. I’m a student volunteer from bee-oo-tiful Oregon state, ready to share all my wisdom and joy with my wonderful Montana friends. There are real adults supervising, of course, but this week is all about learning from each other!”

It sounded like a statement she’d practiced a hundred times in that chipper, throaty, flight-attendant voice. The five other girls around Keelan looked to her for a response—she was their de facto leader, in the absence of actual authority.

But before Keelan could tell Honey that, the older girl waved them toward the trail she'd appeared from. "Come on, campers!" she said. "Let's go check into the Woodland Hotel. Hup hup!"

She marched, knees hiked high, her sandals slapping the dirt in a way that made Keelan's stomach churn. "There'd better be showers here," she said, loud enough for Honey to hear.

One by one, though, the other girls shrugged and followed after Honey, though none of them imitated her ridiculous gait. Annoyed, anxious, Keelan pulled the straps of her backpack tight and trudged after them, several feet back.

The cabins weren't cabins at all, but white tents on platforms set up in the brushy woods outside the main meadow. Keelan's "cabin" was called Sunnyside, which made Honey's earlier joke even worse. The nearest bathroom was about a quarter-mile away in the meadow, and barely qualified as anything better than an outhouse. The girls had to use a buddy system to go there, even in the middle of the night.

Keelan scowled at this information as they mounted the steps up to Sunnyside. "Buddies? I'm twelve years old. I don't need someone to hold my hand while I pee."

"Not while you pee," Honey corrected. "Just beforehand. It's like Bob Ross says—everybody needs a friend!"

Honey seemed like the kind of girl who thought she had lots of friends, but everyone actually hated her. Keelan was all too familiar with those types back at Broilerton Middle School—ditzy freckled girls with long blond hair who were obsessed with their horses, who were best friends with their moms and went to Disney World every year.

"Why don't you just put bathrooms close to the cabins? Or better yet, build real cabins with bathrooms actually inside?" Keelan crossed her arms, even though she was talking to the back of Honey's head.

"Aw, come on, where's your sense of adventure?" Honey spun on the top step. Her grin never faltered as she bounded down the steps and scooped Keelan around the shoulders.

Keelan twisted away. "You do know there are grizzlies out here."

“Whoa. Really?” Honey’s flax-blue eyes rounded.

Keelan stomped up the steps ahead of her. If she rolled her eyes one more time, they might pop out and tumble away into the undergrowth. “Yeah, and I hear the ones in this area can smell a ‘sense of adventure’ from a mile away.”

The other five had claimed their quilt-laden bunks. LeeAnn and Carly obviously bunked together—they passed notes like they got paid to do it in school, and were already rigging up a paper cup on a string to lower notes from LeeAnn’s bunk to Carly’s. Quiet girl Jessa picked the top bunk in the corner, with Bryn below and Erica across.

Keelan would have arranged it otherwise—Bryn flopped like crazy in her sleep, which was going to wake up Jessa nonstop since she was a light sleeper. Erica, on the other hand, slept like a rock. At Keelan’s sleepover last year, Erica had slept through the girls drawing on her face with markers and screaming when Keelan’s younger brothers put ice in their sleeping bags.

“Jessa, switch with Erica,” Keelan said, putting her backpack on the only single bed. “Also, Bryn, you maybe should move up top.”

“Let’s let everyone pick their own bunks, girlie,” Honey said as she entered the cabin. “Except that one, kiddo. That one’s mine.”

Keelan narrowly dodged another side-hug and glared at Honey as she dragged her backpack to the remaining bunk under Erica’s. She, Jessa, and Bryn were already poised to move, but with an exaggerated shrug from Keelan, they put their bags back down.

Honey clapped her hands. “Okay, friends, let’s be ready to head out in ten! We’ve got a welcome tour in the dining hall and meadow games after that.” She squealed suddenly, which caused Jessa to jump and Keelan to cringe. “I’m just so excited to be here! It’s going to be such a fun week!”

“Wait, ten minutes?” Bryn said. “I gotta redo my hair before then. My curls got all flattened during the bus ride.” She glanced around. “Wait, where are the outlets?”

“No time, girlie! This is summer camp.” Honey spread her hands like she was casting a spell. “We’re wild women, far from the constraints of civilization.”

Bryn opened her mouth, but Keelan spoke up. “We’re literally ten minutes from the nearest town,” she said. “And we need prep time. You’re stripping us of basic dignity.”

Honey just grinned in response. “Nine minutes. Better get a move on!”

Bryn still tried to curl her hair, sprinting to the bathroom with LeeAnn and Carly in tow, but it didn’t heat up in time. Her half-curled head looked lopsided when the Sunnyside girls arrived at the tour five minutes late.

Honey never lost her obnoxious, peppy demeanor, even when Keelan raised her hand at every stop on the tour and argued that LeeAnn should sit out of meadow games because of her asthma. Honey patiently explained that she’d received pertinent health info from all their parents and that exercise was “real-life magic.”

They played capture the flag against Riverside Cabin and won. The others elected Keelan as team captain, and she made LeeAnn the medic so she wouldn’t have to run as much as the others. Erica guarded the jail because she was the only one who could focus for half a second. Carly and Jessa did track, so Keelan designated them to sprint for the flag from opposite directions once she spotted it up on a pine branch. Bryn served as a distraction—she ran out first, because she liked attention and didn’t mind ending up in jail.

The other team had to present a handmade daisy chain as their trophy. They gave it to Keelan, who handed it off to Jessa, since she’d actually gotten the flag but wouldn’t say anything.

“Here,” Keelan said, crowning her. “You’re the Wallflower Queen.”

Jessa looked down and smiled, but the moment was interrupted as Honey ran over. “Good job, girls!” she cheered. “Keelan, that was so nice of you to give that to Jessa!”

“Ugh.” Keelan turned away.

The others hesitated, but their excitement over the victory won out.

“Didja see Carly outrun that one girl? The skinny one with the French braids?” LeeAnn grabbed Honey’s arm and shook it as she talked. “That girl runs track too and thinks she’s super good but Carly

totally outran her in track and again today. You could tell she was super mad but pretended she didn't care."

"That's so crazy!" Honey said, like she was one of them. "And Keelan, you did such a good job distracting the other team."

"I wasn't the distraction." Keelan crossed her arms and looked away. "Bryn was. Obviously."

"Well, whatever you did, it worked!"

"Right."

"Honey, did you see how I stepped in that gopher hole and fell?" Bryn chimed in.

"That was so funny," LeeAnn said. "I was like, what if I have to be a real medic now? Remember in Health when we learned how to make a splint?"

"Like that video Mr. Haim showed us of the guy who broke his leg on a trip to Glacier—"

"Oh my God, that was so gross—"

Everyone talked over each other for a minute, with Honey laughing and nodding along. Finally she clapped her hands. "Okay, friends, let's head to the dining hall! We don't want to be late again. Especially not for Taco Night!"

The girls headed for the big log building beyond the meadow, still chattering excitedly. Keelan hung back, and furrowed her brow when Honey dropped back to walk with her.

"You doing okay, kiddo?" she said. "You seem bummed out."

Instead of answering, Keelan huffed. "You probably don't know this, but Carly won't eat anything with cilantro in it. She hates it. The tacos better not have cilantro in them or she's definitely going to starve."

Honey looked thoughtful. "Cilantro is like a kind of onion, right?"

Oh my God, Keelan thought. I'm trapped with an idiot.

"It'll be alright," Honey continued. "This is a week for being adventurous. I'm sure Carly will be okay. The cooks here are the best!" She rubbed her stomach in big, goofy circles. "I bet they can make Carly love cilantro. Ooh, maybe I can ask them to fry it like onion rings and see what she thinks!"

If Keelan had to spend another second with Honey one-on-one, she was going to rip out her own eardrums. “Okay, well, have fun with that,” she said, and power-walked around Honey to catch up with the group.

The days passed like a beetle trapped in amber.

Honey tapped into every one of Keelan’s last nerves. She woke them at 7 a.m. each day and hustled them off to breakfast before Bryn could curl her hair or Jessa could do her mascara or anyone could get a decent amount of sleep. “Adventure doesn’t wait for sleepyheads!” she sang on Monday morning, and again the next day.

Tuesday afternoon was the Water Olympics, where the cabins competed in a gauntlet of events down at the reservoir. Honey elected Jessa to do the orange race, where she had to push the fruit with her nose from the shore to a buoy and back, and put LeeAnn and Carly in the paddleboat competition. Their cabin lost both races, obviously. Between LeeAnn’s asthma and Bryn’s constant giggling, they could barely get their boat moving. And Jessa was too embarrassed by the entire concept of the orange race to really even try.

Keelan could have told her all that, and did, but Honey apparently had some sadistic adventure agenda. When she picked Keelan for the cannonball contest, Keelan flat-out refused, but Honey wouldn’t budge.

“Come on, girly!” Her begging voice reminded Keelan of her littlest sister. “You can do it. I believe in you!”

“Make Erica do it,” Keelan said. “She’s clearly the best option. She’s bigger than any of us.”

For the first time, Honey looked shocked. “Keelan, sweetie, you can’t comment on somebody’s body like that.”

“It’s okay,” Erica said, already plugging her nose even though they were still on the shore. “My mom is six feet tall and used to be a wrestler when she was in high school in the 80s. She says I’m big-boned.”

Honey bit her lip. “But Keelan—”

“I’d rather drown,” Keelan said.

At last, Honey relented. “Okay. Go get ’em, Erica.”

Sunnyside Cabin, of course, won the cannonball contest, but came in second-to-last for the whole Water Olympics.

The moment Keelan dreaded most arrived Wednesday evening before dinner—cabin check-ins with Honey during their free hour. Sunnyside Cabin managed to claim the reservoir dock. Keelan signed herself up dead last, hoping they’d run out of time and Honey would whisk them off to dinner without talking to her.

But even though she put LeeAnn right before her, since LeeAnn could talk for a hundred years and not get tired, she still came back right at the end of her twelve minutes. Four forty-eight on the dot.

Keelan was alone, a book propped against her knees as she laid on her bunk. Jessa went to the art cabin like she had done every day. Erica and Bryn went to play lightning on the basketball court with Meadowside Cabin, and Carly was waiting for LeeAnn at the canteen. The two wanted to get matching Camp Cherry notebooks.

Keelan’s peace and quiet didn’t last nearly long enough. “Didja know Honey grew up on a farm?” LeeAnn said when she burst through the tent flap.

Keelan groaned. “Why don’t you go back and ask her about horses? I bet she’s obsessed with them.”

LeeAnn shook her head. “Nah, she said she’s looking forward to talking with you. You should hurry so you don’t run out of time.”

“Oh no,” Keelan said drily. She closed her book and stared at the sagging mattress above her.

“I think you should go,” LeeAnn said. She sat on Carly’s bunk and swished her shoes over the wood plank floor. To Keelan’s horror, her feet were black with dust inside her flip-flops. “Honey seemed reeally interested in talking to you. She said you seem like a special girl.”

Keelan wrinkled her face. “Gross,” she said. She flung herself off the bed and tossed her book onto her pillow. “I bet she’s a lesbian.”

LeeAnn’s eyes widened. “For real?” she asked, but Keelan didn’t answer as she stomped past her and down the steps.

The trail to the reservoir was short, but Keelan tried to kill time by studying the plants and only stepping on tree roots. The walk still took less than three minutes, and she arrived to see Honey laid flat on the splintered dock, her legs dangling in the water.

Let’s get this over with, Keelan thought. She made her steps heavy on the dock so Honey would know she was there.

But Honey stayed lying down, even when Keelan stood right over her. The sun painted her face extra bright, her freckles like little orange stars. She didn’t open her eyes when she talked.

“You gotta try this, Keelan. I try to sunbathe on the dock at least once a day. Usually I come out here at sunrise before I wake you all up. How’s your week been?”

Reluctantly, Keelan sat. She eyed the greenish water and tucked her knees up to her chest. “My week has been fine,” she droned. “That’s all. Can I go?”

Honey’s pale eyebrows flickered, like she’d just stubbed her toe but was trying to play it off. “I know you hate me, Keelan.” She finally sat up, but kept her feet in the water and gazed at the opposite shore. “I don’t even need you to like me. I just want you to enjoy your time here at camp, but it seems like you’re trying your hardest to make every moment miserable for yourself.”

Her grim tone surprised Keelan. “I don’t hate you,” she said. It had sounded so cruel when Honey said it aloud. “I really don’t.”

A faint, hurt smile tilted Honey’s lips. “Can you keep a secret? I’m not supposed to tell my campers things like this, but I feel like you won’t say anything.”

Keelan paused. “Okay,” she said.

“Last night, after you girls all went to sleep, I came and sat out on the dock right here—” she patted the gray wood, “—and I just cried. For, like, an hour. I felt so horrible.” She glanced over at

Keelan's stricken expression and laughed. "I know. It's embarrassing, but I just felt so alone, and homesick, and like...like I was doing everything wrong."

Keelan stretched her legs out and let the tips of her sandals trail on the water's surface. "Why? You love everything. You act like every day is the best day of your life."

Again, Honey laughed, but it jolted uncomfortably. "Every day is great," she said, "usually. I've been here for a month already, and I love everything about it. But I guess I wasn't expecting a camper like you who would...challenge me so much."

Keelan snorted. "Challenge. You mean annoy."

"No, challenge." Honey caught an aspen leaf that drifted down from overhead, then let it slide into the water. "You're clearly a strong leader for the other girls. I'm not supposed to tell you this, either, but all of them said something about you in their check-ins."

Keelan stiffened.

"Good things," Honey assured her. "They said you did all the arranging to make sure you ended up in the same cabin here. Carly and LeeAnn both mentioned you helped their parents find a scholarship so they could go."

Keelan shrugged, still staring at the water. "'S the same one my mom gets. I just told them to apply for funding from my church back home. It's not a big deal."

"It is to them," Honey said. "Jessa told me she never goes on any trips, never gets to have all this amazing food. Never gets invited anywhere because people just forget about her."

"She's shy. It's not her fault." Strangely, Keelan felt herself getting choked up. She kicked at the water and tried to send the splash as far as she could.

Honey finally looked at Keelan. "Why'd you arrange all that, if you didn't want to go?"

"I did," Keelan protested. "At first. I wanted to just have a week where I didn't have to be in charge of everything for once." She sat on her hands. "But it's like, nobody pays attention like I do. Like with LeeAnn's asthma or Erica hating cilantro or Jessa being shy or whatever. And you give all these dumb compliments like my mom does."

“Dumb compliments?”

“Like, ‘Oh, that’s nice,’ ‘Wow, you did great,’ things like that.” Keelan shook her head. “I don’t know. It’s like, she only does it when she wants me or my little siblings to leave her alone so she can just do whatever and not pay attention to them.” She hitched her shoulders. “And she just pretends everything’s great when it’s not.”

To Keelan’s relief, Honey didn’t say anything or try to hug her. They just sat, watching silver perch jump at bugs in the reservoir and listening to the wind in the trees. It gave Keelan time to take deep breaths and let the dampness in her eyes subside. She pushed down the worry and guilt about leaving her baby brothers and sister at home as more aspen leaves fell and formed gentle ripples all along the shore.

After a while, the clang of a bell echoed over the water. “It’s five,” Keelan said.

“I know,” Honey said. “Let’s just wait here a minute.”

Keelan worried the others would miss dinner if Honey wasn’t there right away, but she just nodded. The shed with the paddleboats creaked in the breeze. Across the reservoir, a doe and two fawns emerged from the trees and drank from the water.

Honey smiled as she watched them. “I love it here,” she said. “I miss being home in Oregon, too, but this camp is so beautiful.”

“Are you going to stay here after the summer?”

Honey adjusted her bandana. “How old do you think I am?”

“Like, twenty?” Keelan shook the water off her sandals and stood up. She could hear the others coming down the trail to find them. “Maybe in college?”

Honey giggled. “I’m sixteen,” she said. “My birthday was in May.”

The rest of Sunnyside rushed onto the dock. “Meadowside Cabin challenged all of us to a basketball game after dinner,” Erica said, out of breath.

“They told us if we back down, we have to jump in the hot springs, and then we’ll smell like eggs for the rest of the week,” Bryn added.

“Okay, but we’ll have to hurry to dinner.” Honey stood, then turned. “Keelan? What do you say?”

Keelan crossed her arms. Slowly, she nodded. "Okay."

"We're gonna kick their butts," LeeAnn said. "Didja see them at the Water Olympics yesterday? They were the only team worse than us."

"We only did bad 'cause I wasn't ready when they started the paddleboat race and you kept making me laugh," Bryn said, pulling at a tangle of curls. "You were doing that face."

"I was not!"

Honey nudged Keelan as they followed the rest of the girls toward the dining hall. "You know, we're going to get in the hot springs before the end of the week anyway. It's our Friday morning adventure," she said.

Keelan scowled, but it was devoid of animosity. "I'd rather drown," she said.

Monstera

The pots of water stopped boiling when they took Mr. Mimura away.

Miles pushed the trash cans of bones and bus carts out of the way so the stretcher could clear the entry to the kitchen. He shut off the gas burners, and before the last bubble could pop in the ramen water, they'd pulled a crispy white sheet over Mr. Mimura's face.

"He's gone," the short EMT said. "I'm sorry."

Miles had cleared the restaurant when Mr. Mimura fell, but some customers still lurked outside the store front. Hands flew to mouths like a flock of pale crows when the sheeted body came through the doorway, jingling the bell overhead. Annoyance breached in Miles' troubled heart. He trekked to the storefront, tapped on the window, pointed severely at the CLOSED sign, and glared.

The small crowd muddled away. Miles, alone among the paper lanterns and bamboo dividers, realized there was still music playing over the tinny speakers. Weary, he wove behind the sake bar to the kitchen, past the line, and up the stairs next to the dishwasher and dry storage. He entered the office—Mr. Mimura's office—the office?—and paused the Spotify playlist of movie soundtracks.

Closed today, he texted the night staff group chat. He stuffed his phone in the big pocket of his apron before he could get bombarded with questions.

The special key taped to the underside of Mr. Mimura's mousepad was custom. Jungle leaves and bright flowers colored the metal; chosen, Mr. Mimura said, because, "Winter here is too dark. The leaves are to remind me of better things."

Better, perhaps, like the expensive junmai daiginjo he kept in a cabinet only the jungle key could unlock. He bought it about a year after Miles joined the restaurant; by then, they'd become close.

"I saw this and thought, we'll save it for your graduation," Mr. Mimura had said when he showed Miles the thin frosted bottle.

"I don't know if I can make it until then," Miles lamented.

Mr. Mimura laughed. "This will be your reward. A proper send-off!"

“But Mr. Mimura,” Miles said. “I’ll only be twenty when I graduate anyway.”

Mr. Mimura just laughed again. He always laughed as if he’d been told a wonderful joke, even around the worst customers. They could be pretty terrible, too, around here. “I won’t tell if you won’t,” he replied.

Miles felt an echo of Mr. Mimura’s conspiratorial wink like the flap of a moth’s wing. He unlocked the cabinet and cradled the sake bottle in one palm. Three years of dust blanketed the lid and sprinkled onto the wood floor, onto Miles’ beaten work shoes.

Two months, Miles thought miserably. *He missed it by two months.*

If Mr. Mimura couldn’t wait two months for their special sake, well, neither would he. Miles pried off the lid and put the bottle to his lips. He drank furiously at first, then with an embarrassed glance toward Mr. Mimura’s computer, as if the old restaurant owner might be living inside the monitor. Then he stopped altogether. About half the sake remained. Miles hadn’t tasted a drop, hadn’t appreciated the subtle flavor profile—no hint of cherry or smooth honey.

Already Miles felt dizzy. He sat heavily on the floor between the computer chair and the cabinet and let his head drop between his knees.

“Ughhh,” he groaned, setting the bottle aside. “What did you *do*?”

Chastised by his own shame, Miles hastily replaced the sake lid and locked the half-empty bottle back in the cabinet. His legs shook as he stood; Miles was grateful his clunky work boots weighted him to the floor. Mr. Mimura’s collection of movie posters spun and lurched in the semidarkness, lit only by the dim computer screen.

Mr. Mimura’s biggest poster, a signed print of *Little Shop of Horrors*, caught the computer’s glare and flashed it in Miles’ eyes. “Don’t look at me like that,” he mumbled, rubbing his slightly greasy face. “I’m gonna be here all night closing things down by myself. Give me some credit, huh?”

Whoosh. The glossy poster tipped to the right and back straight again as Miles blinked the sudden intoxication from his eyes.

When he felt steady enough, Miles leaned on the railing back downstairs to the kitchen, ignoring the landslide of soup bowls and crusty pots in the dish pit. All the metal pots on the stove sat silent, their contents long since cooled. Mr. Mimura had been working on a new broth, a small batch—just twenty quarts. Miles peered in, but even after three years at the restaurant, he couldn't tell quite what was in it. Bones, yes, ginger and garlic and kombu tea, but its other secrets hid under the layer of fat thickening on the surface.

When he glanced outside, Miles was surprised it was dark out. The streetlights dyed the slushy snow on the side of Main Street orange. Puddles darkened the rug up to the counter where, a few hours ago, customers had stood in line to order Mr. Mimura's locally famous ramen.

Miles chalked the burning in his throat up to rice wine bile and swallowed it back. Behind him, the oven clanked, and Miles jumped. He stomped to the kitchen and shut off the gas, then hauled open the heavy door and removed the sizzling tray of pork chashu with a bar towel. The tray was warped, and the pork was burnt, hard and blackened at the fatty edges.

What a waste. Miles blinked away the heat as he dumped the chashu into one of the big trash cans in the back. The air was blurry with smoke, even though the hood fans roared at full velocity. He left the bar towel draped over the pan when he put it in the dish pit as a reminder—he'd burned himself on hot dishes enough times that his hands were permanently callused. The congealed fat and charred pork bits coated the pan in jagged lumps, a topographical map of meat.

Yeesh. Miles shook that image from his head and slipped the gummy dish apron over his head from where it hung beside the Hobart dishwasher—the Hobie, as it was fondly known. When the last rack of dishes went through and he emptied the food trap in the sink, the cold moon was high overhead.

The monstera deliciosa arrived a week later in a big clay pot etched with equidistant rings of geometric designs. Glossy green leaves, each the width of a man's hand spread wide, flourished at the top of long, furred stalks. The silver winter sun gleamed through oblong holes that dotted the largest three

leaves. Below, a couple smaller leaves dipped toward the soil, like curious hounds sniffing for treats on the floor. These two leaves were heart-shaped and lacked the gaps of the larger leaves.

Miles came in at 11 a.m. and saw the plant perched on the low, wide windowsill under the OPEN/CLOSED sign. The big perforated leaves waved cheerfully in the draft from the front door. Upon closer look, Miles noticed a bronze plate with an inscription on the side: *Mr. Mimura, Founder and Beloved Friend*. In the soil, a yellow plastic tag proclaimed the inhabitant to be a Swiss Cheese Plant.

Miles plucked out the tag and tossed it in the front-of-house trash on his way to the kitchen. “Swiss Cheese Plant” was a tacky name for a nice plant, especially one dedicated to Mr. Mimura.

“Sarah,” Miles shouted over the fans. “Who brought in the plant?”

Sarah, the opening line cook, shook their head and kept stirring the hundred-quart pot of boiling water and pork bones. “Dunno,” they said. “It was here when I showed up. Maybe one of the delivery folks?”

Miles scanned the delivery schedule in the adjoining break room—break *closet*, really—and said, “No, man, the Pepsi guys don’t get here until two. No one else shoulda been in here while we were closed last week.”

“Huh.” Sarah’s response was less than interested. Miles couldn’t really blame them. They’d spent all last week helping Miles reschedule deliveries and checking inventory, trying to hold the restaurant together during its hiatus. They didn’t know what would happen now that Mr. Mimura was gone, but neither even suggested letting the restaurant stay closed. They’d decided to reopen today, Saturday, and Sarah had been in for two hours already, breaking pork femurs and soft-boiling a few hundred eggs for pickling.

Miles dropped the conversation and snagged a mop. He spent extra time setting up the dining room so he could study the plant. He scrubbed ra-yu off the red wicker chairs, which normally he would have left for the front-of-house staff to do at closing, but if gave him a chance to kneel at eye level, so to speak, with the monstera.

Miles wouldn’t call himself *spiritual*, exactly—his Midwest parents were both ex-Catholics—but he got the sense the plant was trying to tell him something, if only he could find a way to listen.

Usually, between back-to-back weekend shifts at the restaurant and seventeen college credits, Miles got a little tired of listening and not being heard. One of his professors had a knack for calling on Miles right in the middle of deep daydreams, much to the class' enjoyment. And customers didn't often spend time asking what Miles thought about anything at all.

Miles shook himself from impending irritation at such memories. Right now, here, he would try to give the monstera a chance to speak. He sat right next to it on the wide windowsill while he polished a stack of ceramic soup spoons, hot and steaming from the Hobie. White fog condensed on the window behind him.

If the monstera had anything to say, though, it kept that information to itself. Miles tried to stall a little; he scrounged up a mostly empty bottle of Windex and cleaned the big storefront window. The microfiber towel came away spotless, but he kept spritzing and wiping until only air puffed from the bottle.

Disappointed, Miles stepped down from the sill. As an afterthought, he swiped the towel across the bronze plaque on the monstera's pot, where Mr. Mimura's name gleamed back at him.

When Miles came in Sunday morning, someone had tipped over the plant. Dirt flung in a wide arc around the mouth of the pot; one thick root lay bare. The leaves seemed okay, and the pot wasn't broken. Still, Miles held back an exasperated groan as he surveyed the mess. He'd been in all day yesterday, working a double—how the hell did someone knock this thing over between closing and now?

“Sarah?” Miles called to the kitchen. A moment later, Sarah's red bandana-d head appeared in the doorway. “Was this knocked over when you came in?”

Sarah glanced over their shoulder. They were loath to leave the kitchen with so many burners on, but they walked over to see what Miles was talking about.

“Whoa.” They mopped steam and sweat from their forehead with the front of their shirt. “No way. I would have noticed that.”

Miles gathered the pot in his arms and set it back on the sill. A leaf brushed the back of his hand as he settled the soil around the exposed root. “Maybe it fell when the door shut behind you?”

They both glanced at the swinging glass door at the entrance. It opened both ways; it was not particularly capable of slamming.

“Maybe the sill got steamy from all the hot water in the kitchen and it...slid off?” Sarah shrugged at their own weak explanation.

In the end, Miles supposed it didn’t really matter. “I’ll get the broom,” he said, a bit weary.

It was a cold, cloudy day, which meant lots of business for a ramen restaurant. Between online orders and phone calls and Sunday family lunches, Miles didn’t have much time to wonder about the monstera mishap. Around three o’clock, as he went around refilling water glasses, he poured half a pitcher into the pot. It could have been from the earlier tumble, but the leaves looked a little droopy.

Since he and Sarah ran the whole operation at this point, Miles made the monstera yet another of his responsibilities. He added “water window plant” to the closing checklist in the break closet, then wrote his initials next to it in permanent marker.

One of the newer servers, on her lunch break, watched from where she sat in the corner on an upturned crate. A plate of rejected gyoza rested on her knees. “I don’t mind helping with that on days you aren’t in,” she said. “I love plants. I’ve got an entire shelf of them at home.”

“That’s okay,” Miles said, too quickly. “I live up the street, right by Mr...” He trailed off as his throat clenched. He cleared it and flapped his hand dismissively. “I live nearby. I can just stop by on my way home from school once or twice a week. I walk right by.”

The server blinked at his rapid response. “Alright,” she said. “Whatever works.”

Miles heaved a sigh when he left the break closet, smeared marker ink on his fingers. What was this feeling—relief? Shame? A bit of anger, even? The server hadn’t said anything wrong—hell, it was nice of her to offer. It wasn’t as though Miles didn’t have enough to do already.

The plant, though, felt like *his* responsibility. He didn’t want some newbie messing around with it or killing it by mistake. It had already fallen over once on his watch. That wouldn’t happen again.

At least, that was what Miles thought, until he walked by the storefront Monday morning on his way to the college. Not only was the monstera sideways on the floor inside—it was as if someone had *shoved* it, gave it a good push and launched it halfway across the dining room.

Miles fumbled through his coat for the key he always kept on himself. He had to yank off his thick mittens to steady the key and unlock the front door. The jangle of the bell overhead startled him, though he'd tuned it out a million times before.

His hands sweated as he approached the monstera and knelt by it. This time, the pot had cracked, right behind Mr. Mimura's plaque. The same fat root from before had sprung free of the soil again and draped over the upturned edge of the pot. With dismay, Miles noted that the largest leaf had split heavily along its natural lines—the gaps in the leaf had opened completely, so it looked less like a monstera and more like a fern. The glossy leaves had dulled; the undersides of a few were starting to turn a light brown.

More soil had spilled out than last time, and as Miles righted the pot, he noticed a fine gray dust mixed in with the rich soil and Perlite. It stuck in the grooves of his calluses and sank between the floorboards.

The restaurant wasn't even open yet. Sarah wouldn't be in for another two hours.

Miles teared up in frustration. He swiped at his face with a bunched-up mitten and took a deep breath, then another. Then another. Finally, he felt calm enough to gather up the monstera and hope the pot didn't split entirely in half.

When he set the plant down, he jumped. The big leaf had brushed his face, and it felt...warm. And soft. Not, as the slick green top would suggest, like a leaf at all.

Warily, Miles turned the leaf over, careful not to rip the split edges any more.

His stomach twisted. The underside wasn't crispy or molded like he suspected. It was...fleshy, like a softened leather glove. The veins of the leaf were swollen and—is this real?—flowing, Miles thought, taut with moving water. The end of each leafy finger was patterned with whorls.

Miles covered his mouth, then yanked his own hand away, repulsed. It felt just like the leaf. And those whorls were just like fingerprints.

The plant lurched forward in the loose soil, and Miles jumped again. Hurriedly, he held the thick stem cluster upright at arm's length and packed down the soil as hard as he could. The chasm in the ceramic pot spread behind Mr. Mimura's name, but held fast. Miles poked a couple stray roots back into the crevice, then tugged on his mittens and locked up.

Outside, his breaths came in small white puffs like smoke from a steam engine. His red cheek tingled where the monstera had brushed against his skin, and he swore he could feel the ridges of his fingertips inside his mittens.

That feeling...like skin... Miles couldn't finish the thought.

He didn't want to feel disgusted by something dedicated to Mr. Mimura. The owner had been Miles' surrogate father while he was here at college, far from his Midwest home. In the summer, Mr. Mimura would make cold mugicha and talk about his favorite new movies while Miles pulled tough maple saplings from the Mimuras' front lawn. Last year, Mr. Mimura had mused about removing all the grass and replacing it with a rock garden. He wanted mosses, he said, and snow-in-summer. Maybe a small koi pond, if he could find someone to build it.

He'd been eyeing Miles, who just grinned and shook debris from his gardening gloves.

Now, in winter, the grassy yard was brown, the maple saplings spiny and withered. Miles rang the doorbell just once—Mrs. Mimura had seen him from the bay window and hurried to let him in.

"Miles!" She tightened his scarf even though he'd just stepped inside. "You shouldn't be out in this weather with no hat. Look at your ears!"

"Hi, Mrs. Mimura," Miles said, kicking off his wet boots. He shrugged off his coat, but kept the scarf on, and tucked his gloves into his shoes. "It wasn't as cold when I walked to class this morning, I promise. I just left the college twenty minutes ago. Right when it got all windy."

Mrs. Mimura ushered him to the toasty living room and told him, as usual, to make himself comfortable, before she disappeared into the kitchen.

Miles knew Mrs. Mimura worked as some kind of engineer at the local facility, the same one her parents had worked in all her life. While she'd grown up here, Mr. Mimura had come from Japan with his family as a toddler. He'd moved around a lot as a kid, and though his parents had eventually settled in San Francisco with his two sisters, Mr. Mimura had gone to college here and never looked back. He loved it here—*had* loved it—which Miles never understood.

“Don’t you feel...lonely here?” He and Mr. Mimura had been testing a new tare recipe in the back of the kitchen when he asked. “I mean, because it’s so...”

“White?” Mr. Mimura chuckled. He sniffed the tare, a thick, miso-based mix, and added more ginger to the blender.

“Well, yeah,” Miles said, a bit embarrassed. “I mean, you and Mrs. Mimura are the only Japanese family I know here in town. A couple of my classmates are Asian, and they hate it here.”

Mr. Mimura switched on the blender for a few seconds and spoke in the following silence. “Don’t you hate it here.”

It wasn’t really a question. Miles nodded slowly, then shook his head fast. “No, not here, not at the restaurant.”

“But the town...?”

“It’s boring,” Miles said. “And empty.”

Mr. Mimura held out the tare for Miles to smell. It had a rich scent, tart and savory and umami, all the traits of a good broth seasoning. The ingredients spread out over the metal table—garlic cloves, ginger root, tubs of white and red miso, chopped and diced and hollowed out.

“You ever go to the movies by yourself? A midnight premiere?”

“By myself?” Miles repeated. “Why would I waste all that money to hang out alone in a dark room?”

“You get to share a once-in-a-lifetime experience with the people around you.” He added a pinch of white pepper to the tare and smiled his approval. “None of you will ever see that movie for the first time again. I used to do it all the time when I first moved here.”

“That sounds lonely.” Miles didn’t mean it to be rude, but his face flushed anyway. “Sorry.”

“Loneliness can follow you anywhere,” Mr. Mimura said as he took a spatula from the hanging rack and scooped the tare into a clean container. He said it simply, as if it were something he’d thought about a lot in the past but not much anymore. “It used to wait for me outside the restaurant. Mrs. Mimura and my friends, and you—” Here he handed Miles a Sharpie to label the container. “—you all helped me banish it. Maybe for good.”

When Mrs. Mimura returned with a hot pot of genmai-cha, Miles wondered if loneliness had found her now that her husband was dead. She was only in her early sixties, but the two had been married since she was twenty-eight and Mr. Mimura a year younger. Their only daughter was away at school near her paternal grandparents in California, learning to be an engineer just like her mother. She wanted to work with one of the major airline manufacturers. Miles had admired her genius the few times he’d met her—Yuko had a quick mind and an even quicker smile, the perfect harmony of her parents. Sometimes Miles felt like the Mimuras were his only friends here, even though the two parents were way older than him, and he barely knew Yuko.

The house, lit by numerous silk-shade lamps and soft overhead lighting, seemed to invite more shadows than usual. Miles curled deeper into the corner of the couch and tucked his feet underneath him.

“Here we are.” Mrs. Mimura had gone back to the kitchen and returned with small ceramic cups. She sat on the gliding rocker near Miles so they occupied one corner of the table, while Miles poured them both tea. The second rocker across from them sat noticeably still.

“I’m glad you came to the funeral last week.” Mrs. Mimura sipped her tea. When she replaced the cup, she set it in the exact center of the saucer underneath. “I know how busy you are.”

“Of course. Mr. Mimura...” Miles couldn’t finish. What was there to say?

Mrs. Mimura smiled sadly. “Yuko had to fly back already. She couldn’t miss her classes today. Exams.”

Their silence fluttered, ghostlike, along the shadows at the edge of the room. The toasted, earthy scent of the genmai-cha swirled in the emptiness, but it brought with it memories of Mr. Mimura, memories soured now. Miles drank from his cup and pushed down all the images that came with it.

Mrs. Mimura rocked her chair gently. “Did you see the plant I brought in?”

It took Miles a moment to catch up. “You mean the one in the restaurant?”

She nodded. “I ordered that plaque as soon as I got the news. After the cremation, I found that monstera and buried his ashes in the pot.”

Miles thought back to the gray dust he’d found mixed in with the dirt and felt sick. If anything else happened to that plant, he’d lose his mind. “I promise we’ll take good care of it. Sarah and I, we’ve got everything under control now.”

“Miles...” Mrs. Mimura leaned forward. She spun her cup in its saucer. “You know I appreciate everything you’ve done.”

He nodded.

She sighed. “When Hiroshi died, the restaurant came into my care. I know I haven’t been around.”

“It’s okay,” Miles said quickly. “You’ve had a lot to deal with.”

The lights flickered as a gust howled through the streets. Mrs. Mimura’s gaze was steady, and it made Miles nerves. He had the unnerving sense she was trying to read his thoughts.

“This might be hard to hear, Miles, but...” Mrs. Mimura took a deep breath. “I want to close the restaurant.”

Miles froze, stunned.

“Running a restaurant was never my dream,” she continued. “I don’t want that responsibility, but I don’t know if I can bear to see anyone else take over. It won’t be his place anymore.”

“But—” Miles floundered for words. Mrs. Mimura waited, her eyebrows pinched sympathetically. “But Sarah and I know exactly how everything works. We wouldn’t change anything. It would be the way it always was.”

“No,” Mrs. Mimura said quietly, “it wouldn’t.”

Grief and anger tore at Miles. “What about Yuko? Did you ask her?”

“Of course I did, Miles. She agreed.”

How can you do this? “Please,” he begged. “Sarah and I have managed to keep everything together so far. Can’t you give us a chance?”

Mrs. Mimura placed her hands over Miles’ fists, clenched on the table. “I don’t doubt your abilities, but I’ve already made my decision. Please understand, it wasn’t an easy choice.”

Miles burned with a thousand objections, but he kept quiet.

“I’ve arranged to keep the restaurant open through June.” Mrs. Mimura squeezed Miles’ hands, then stood and collected their empty tea cups. “I hope that will be enough time.”

When he next saw the monstera, it was set upright on the floor near the kitchen, right beneath the register. One fanned leaf pawed the floorboards behind the sake bar, swaying in a wind Miles could not feel. Its green shine had faded almost entirely to the matte tan color he’d seen spreading across the underside of the leaves, and the tips of each frond had gone pale and hard.

Miles tiptoed around the plant and found Sarah in the kitchen. “Tell me you know what’s happening.”

“I’m not touching that thing, man.” Sarah waved a pan at Miles and shook their head wildly. “It was there this morning, and unless you want to pick it up, it’s staying there.”

Miles recoiled, inwardly, at Sarah’s obvious disgust. They’d called the monstera *it*, which shouldn’t have bothered him, hadn’t bothered him...but it did now. “So what, you’re just gonna leave it where front-of-house will stomp all over it?”

Sarah tossed a handful of sesame seeds into the pan they'd been waving and thumped it onto a burner. "They can go around."

"No, they can't," Miles argued. "He's literally blocking the register."

"He?" Sarah's eyes bugged. "Wait, what? It's where?"

"By the register. You said you saw the plant this morning." Miles struggled to restrain his frustration. Did nobody listen to him even a little? "Anyone trying to get behind the sake bar will have to step clear over."

"No, no, no, man. That's not where that thing was last time I checked."

"What do you mean?"

Despite their disturbed expression, Sarah methodically flipped the sesame seeds so they browned on both sides. "It was sitting in the middle of the dining room, between a couple tables." They shut off the gas burner and poured the seeds in a plastic tub. "That's not where it is now?"

"No," Miles said. "It's right outside the kitchen."

He backtracked through the kitchen to the doorway. Sarah followed, and when they craned their neck into the dining room, wielding the doorframe like a shield, they sucked in through their teeth.

"Nope." Sarah threw their hands up and backed away. "Nope. No way. I'm not messing with that thing anymore."

Miles' face heated up as if he'd opened the oven at full-blast. "*That thing* was a gift from Mrs. Mimura, did you know that? Mr. Mimura's ashes are in there."

"Yeah, Miles, I know." Sarah crossed their arms, but stayed back. "She talked about it in the eulogy. Weren't you listening?"

Admittedly, Miles had not processed much of what had been said at the funeral. His mind had been a muddled mess of coldness and memories and half-finished soup recipes, forever trapped in limbo.

"He's just a plant."

"It has fingers, Miles."

Miles sputtered. "And?"

“Oh my God.” Sarah spun and headed toward dry storage, at the back of the kitchen near the dish pit.

A hot knot wrapped itself up in Miles’ throat. He sulked into the dining room and gently lifted Mr. Mimura’s plant onto the sake bar. The whorls underneath the leaf tips had deepened, and on top, the network of veins had raised. When Miles pressed down on one, the vein gave way easily, but kept its shape when he let go.

There was a pulse.

Miles heard something clang in the back followed by a short curse from Sarah. Reluctantly, Miles replaced the monstera on its window seat.

“I know you,” he said.

The plant wiggled its fronds in such a way that only Miles, who had been waiting for something to happen, could see.

Classes started to bore Miles, so he started to skip them. He put himself down for shifts that Sarah, who did the scheduling, knew he shouldn’t be doing, but they needed someone to take the slow mid-afternoons usually occupied by Mr. Mimura. Sarah hadn’t bothered with college and figured Miles could waste his scholarships and loans if he wanted.

Planetology 103 carried on through its usual 2:30-4 p.m. slot without Miles. He polished the black marble sake bar mindlessly, watching the gloomy winter sun wheeze out from behind clouds for a few seconds at a time as the wind churned up the overcast sky. The pot for boiling noodles roiled in the back. A third of the water had evaporated before the first customers of Miles’ shift entered under the tinkling bell.

Instantly, their noisiness raised Miles’ hackles. They stomped snow from their boots, laughed too loud, slapped their gloves together to shake off the cold. A thirty-something couple, clearly infatuated with each other. Miles detested them.

They dithered too long at the counter, sounding out words on the menu like toddlers: *guy-YO-zuhhh? SHY-oh?* They did okay with *miso*, but wouldn’t even attempt *tonkotsu*. Miles twiddled a pen

aimlessly on the waiter's pad underneath the iPad where he took orders while he waited for the couple to decide if they should spring for the *ee-duh-MAIM*.

I'm surrounded by ee-dee-OTTS, he wrote, then scribbled it out as the couple turned to him.

"What's the best *SOCK-ee* here?" the man asked.

The wet sheen on his eyes revolted Miles. This guy was way too eager to impress his date with things he couldn't even pronounce right. "I'm a fan of Kikusui's junmai daiginjo," Miles said, bored. "Made in Niigata Prefecture. It's that gold bottle."

He pointed to the extensive collection of bottles on the shelf behind him. The man planted his hands on the counter and leaned forward to get a better look. "Oh sweet, is that the last one? Can we get a sample?"

"No." Mr. Mimura would have said yes—he was always eager to cultivate a new sake disciple—but surely even he would have recognized these morons wouldn't appreciate it. If they were going to get that sake, they were going to pay for it.

"Oh," the man said. "Uh, okay. We'll just get the bottle, then. And two of the, uh, the pork ramen. The one with the crazy name."

Miles stared at him as the man fumbled with the "crazy name." His date looked increasingly uncomfortable.

Finally, the guy shook his head like a wet dog. "The T one, man," he said, pointing to the wall menu. "With the pork broth."

"Uh-huh." Miles punched in two orders of tonkotsu and the Kikusui sake. "Anything else?"

"No, that's—"

The guy's date tugged his arm and said something in a voice so wispy, Miles couldn't catch a word of it. God, he hated these two.

"Yeah, okay, right," the guy said. "We'll get the *ee-duh-MAIM*, too."

"One edamame, two orders of tonkotsu, and that junmai daiginjo." Miles' pronunciation was flawless, not that these two would notice or care. "That's gonna be \$72.57."

The woman emitted a little gasp.

“What?” her partner said. “Are you serious?”

“The sake is \$49 before sales tax.” *Not that you even checked*, Miles thought, his irritation growing with the couple’s repeated ignorance. “You wanted a good sake, but I can recommend something else if that’s too much for you.”

The couple ended up ordering the warm house sake, a \$40 difference in price and an infinite difference in quality. Miles let the sake linger in the hot water heater longer than he should have, but again, it wasn’t like the couple would notice or care. Once he’d brought the ceramic carafe and tiny, matching cups, the couple had kicked back next to the window with the monstera, their dripping coats flopped over an adjacent table.

“I hope this is okay,” the man said once Miles set the sake tray down. “Just ‘cause, you know, no one else is here. We’ll move them if someone else comes in and wants to sit there.”

“Sure,” Miles muttered. “Whatever you want.”

He retreated from the man’s frown and deep into the kitchen. Normally he’d bring the edamame out first, then the ramen, but it just didn’t matter with these two. He dropped the beans into a wire basket alongside the noodles and set the overhead timer, then leaned back on the line and stared at the hood fan.

A sharp noise erupted from the dining room, which shook Miles from his brooding. He rolled his eyes, but tried to put on his neutral-server face as he went to the couple’s table. Both customers were standing, and the man’s chair was knocked over on the floor. His partner clutched his sleeve, and both stared wide-eyed at the monstera.

“Is something wrong?” Miles tried to keep his tone mild, but he’d let his distaste brew too long, and it soured on the back of his tongue.

“What the fuck is that thing?” The guy flapped his pointer finger at the plant. “It like, touched me, dude! I swear it reached out and like, grazed my arm. And it’s all fuckin’ rotten or something, like, look at it!”

Miles observed the monstera, whose leaves lacked any trace of green. The hard tips at the end had rounded into something like fingernails, and the fronds of each leaf bent into thirds, with wrinkled joints.

They were, without a doubt, hands. Miles could even see traces of hair on the back of each leaf when the sun briefly emerged from the clouds.

He turned back to the couple. “So what’s the problem?”

Strain deepened in the corners of the woman’s mouth. Her partner kept wildly waving his hand, as if casting a spell at the monstera. “It’s creeping me out, dude. Can’t you move it somewhere?”

The timer went off in the kitchen, but Miles ignored it. Fury boiled deep within him. “Just sit at another table.”

“It doesn’t matter where we sit,” the man argued. “It’s gonna be, like, staring at us.”

“Quit calling him an *it*.”

“What? What the fuck are you on, dude?”

The woman tugged her partner’s arm. “Let’s just get it to go,” she whimpered.

“Yeah,” Miles said, stalking back to the kitchen. “Why don’t you do that.”

The noodles were severely overcooked: pale, inflated strands that stuck to each other in a big gooey mass. Miles slopped them into oiled takeout boxes and dumped in the other ingredients without finesse. Menma, green onions, pickled ginger. In one, a soft-boiled egg with a big split down the middle; in the other, a burnt shred of chashu that had stuck to the pan. He didn’t measure the tare when he mixed the broth, so it was bound to be either painfully salty or utterly flavorless. He tossed everything in a greasy plastic bag and hauled it out to the couple, who pressed themselves against the sake counter and eyed the monstera like it might charge them at any moment.

Miles shoved the bag at them, and the man snatched it off the counter. The sleeve of his coat left a wet trail on the marble.

“Word of advice, dude,” he said over his shoulder, hustling his partner toward the door. “Get rid of the plant. This place is already freaky enough, with the dead owner and all that.”

Miles could have thrown something at him. He watched the couple hurry down the frosted sidewalk, bundled into each other. A car honked as they crossed in the middle of the road to avoid walking in front of the monstera in the window.

Sarah felt it necessary to have a talk with Miles after customer complaints kept stacking up. It was late March, and while business had remained steady, they couldn't ignore Miles' repeated confrontations. They got hold of him in the dish pit in the lull before the dinner rush, and spent a few minutes helping put away cambros and soup bowls.

"You've been doing a lot, Miles," they said as they pulled a steaming tray of dishes from the Hobie. "It's cool and all, but if you're going to keep taking these extra shifts, you need to chill out. I had two different customers call today alone to say you were acting crazy."

Miles snorted and blasted a crusted pot with the pressure washer. "Yeah, I'm the crazy one."

"One of the callers said you overheard their table talking about some movie and got so pissed, you took away their food before they were done."

Miles shoved the pot into the Hobie and slammed it shut. His black rubber apron was flecked with bits of bone and fat. "They were talking shit about that superhero movie that premiered last night right in front of him."

"In front of who?" Sarah squinted, then brought a hand to their face. "Oh my God. You mean the plant."

"Mr. Mimura loved going to those premieres," Miles said. "Those jerks don't know how special it is that they got to go."

"It's not like it could hear them."

"They were practically yelling. People on the *moon* could have heard them."

Sarah pinched the bridge of their nose. "Nobody wants to sit in that window seat anymore, and it's costing us business. They're either creeped out by the plant or scared that you're going to harass them. Probably both."

"If they don't like it, they could try not being assholes." Miles hoisted the apron over his head and flung it over a hook and stormed toward the break closet.

Sarah followed him with a sigh. "Miles, seriously. It's not him."

He yanked his jacket out of one of the cubbies and ran his calloused fingers through his hair with his free hand. It was still damp from the dish pit and stuck in a million directions. “I’m clocking out. I gotta study for a test tomorrow.”

One of the line cooks from the night crew came in then. Sarah wasn’t about to start a scene in front of her, so they let Miles slide past and out of the kitchen. A minute later, they heard the bell over the front door chime.

When Sarah came in the next morning, the plant was gone. They spent a good chunk of time sweeping traces of dirt off the floor, and when the first customer of the day came in, he sat happily by the empty windowsill.

The movie theater was dark, and Miles didn’t care if people stared at him anyway.

He’d had to buy a ticket for Mr. Mimura (the monstera) but that was to be expected—his pot took up a whole seat, and Miles couldn’t hold him because his leaves would get in the way.

It wasn’t a midnight premiere, but Miles thought that Mr. Mimura wouldn’t hold that against him. He really did have to study for a test after, because his grades had dropped in the last three weeks and he couldn’t graduate if he kept failing planetology. It fulfilled his science credit requirement. Apparently, it was very vital to his business degree. Go figure.

The theater was mostly empty save for a row of five preteens down near the front and an old couple in the back corner. Miles and Mr. Mimura sat a couple rows ahead of the old folks, centered in front of the screen. The audio ping-ponged between the empty seats and rattled Miles’ eardrums, but he figured he’d adjust to the noise after a while.

Previews flashed one after the other: a saccharine kid’s film with talking cacti, a sappy romance where someone had cancer, an action film with guns and cars and explosions. They all seemed awful to Miles, but he tried to kindle a sense of enthusiasm.

“Look, Mr. Mimura, that one’s got James Cameron directing.” He gave the monstera a moment to read the title card. “Didn’t he respond to a letter you wrote him one time?”

The fleshy fronds bobbed against the light from the screen, fingers playing a ghost piano.

“I bet this movie is going to be good. Those idiots at the restaurant didn’t know what they were talking about.”

Miles thought he heard a slight rustle from Mr. Mimura, something like a chuckle.

“I know, I know.” Miles wanted to smile, but it was like his face didn’t remember how. “It doesn’t matter if the movie is good, anyhow. It’s about the moment. Maybe afterward you can help me study.”

The lights dimmed, and Miles kicked back to watch. The images that flashed in front of him told a story he didn’t follow. The characters were unlikable, cheap, and impossible to tell apart. The humor made him cringe so hard he thought his teeth would break. Mr. Mimura sat beside him, undisturbed, waving contentedly in the stale A.C. piped in from an overhead vent.

“I liked it,” Miles said as he carried Mr. Mimura out two grueling hours later. “It was funny. My favorite character was that blond guy, the one who got down to his underwear to mow the lawn and ended up crashing through the fence into that pool party? Good stuff.”

The ticket guy gave him a side eye on the way out. Miles responded with a dirty look and clutched Mr. Mimura’s pot a little tighter.

“Oh great, it’s all frozen.” Miles toed the thin layer of ice over the parking lot and grimaced. “Better wear a seatbelt this time, Mr. Mimura. My car fishtails like crazy.”

Mr. Mimura’s fronds curled in the night air, as if huddling against the late winter chill.

Each night he worked, Miles took home dinner from the leftover rice and braised chashu that wouldn’t keep overnight in the walk-in. It saved him all kinds of money, and he never got sick of drizzling soy sauce and green onions over an improvised rice bowl.

The broth almost always went back in the walk-in, but Miles had to start bringing some home for Mr. Mimura. It was technically stealing, but there wasn’t a speck of green left on his leaves, and if Mr. Mimura couldn’t photosynthesize, he couldn’t survive.

Miles noticed the change early in April. While the sun came out more often and shone stronger than it had all winter, Mr. Mimura began to fade and dry up at the edges of his stalks, and drooped over the edge of the coffee table he sat on. No new leaves sprouted, and his finger-fronds shriveled with hunger. Even the light hair that covered him began to fall out, leaving little piles under the living room window Miles had to sweep up each day. No amount of water helped—if anything, it left Mr. Mimura even sadder and made his leaf-skin all pruney.

Miles did some research and concluded the Mr. Mimura needed some supplements. It felt wrong to add some kind of chemical fertilizer, though, and manure was straight out of the question. The solution came when Miles read about blood meal, and bone meal. Horrible names, but they had a parallel in the human-food world: broth.

The first night, he brought home a cup of tonkotsu, fresh off the top of that day's batch. The fat had integrated well, and the broth was a rich, hearty white in color. He hurried to hang his coat and poured the soup around Mr. Mimura's roots. Miles hoped it wasn't too hot, but if he let it cool, it would get thick and gelatinous.

He fretted all night. When he woke the next day, Mr. Mimura looked plump and healthy again. The color had returned to his epidermis, and his finger-fronds stretched toward the window—not for the sunlight, Miles figured, but for the warmth.

"I'm not working tonight," Miles admitted. "Sarah told me one of the waitresses asked for extra shifts. Needs spring break cash or whatever." He withheld the fact that Sarah had somehow contacted his professors and found out he was failing two classes, and forced him to drop the afternoon shifts. "But I'll stop by on my way home from class and grab some more broth. I'll add a little shoyu tare this time."

He struggled his way through statistics, all the while worried that Mr. Mimura would starve in the five hours he had to be on campus. When he burst in with the seasoned broth, the apartment was exactly as he'd left it. Mr. Mimura even looked a little more vivacious, if slanted heavily now toward the window and toward the hill to downtown.

Miles rotated his pot so he wouldn't fall over and poured in the tonkotsu. He thought he saw Mr. Mimura's leaves shiver, though they might have just been wobbling from the move. Later, the pores of his epidermis were sprinkled with white spots Miles identified as salt—Mr. Mimura thought the broth had too much tare in it.

“Shit,” Miles muttered, rolling a salt grain in his fingers. “I'll be more careful with the measurement next time. I don't know why I thought you wouldn't know the difference.”

After that, Miles would measure the broth three, four times before pouring it into the takeout cup, and spend as much time on the tare. When he was at work, he tucked the broth under his jacket in the break closet so no one would see it during closing. Even so, when Sarah did stock after two weeks, they told Miles the broth was running out faster than usual.

Miles shrugged with apparent disinterest. “Good business, I guess?”

“Not that good.” Sarah shook their head. “Even the morbid appeal of a haunted restaurant hasn't done us that much wonder.”

Miles gritted his teeth at the implication, but controlled his temper. He'd just this week managed to stop flaring up at customers when he heard them talk about the Ghost Chef. It took every last teaspoon of patience he had. “Maybe people are coming in more now that the snow's cleared up.”

“You look at the numbers every night, Miles. You know we haven't been getting any more business than usual.”

Miles shrugged again, even though he knew it looked forced. “Well, have you talked to any of the newbies? They're probably dishing up too much on the line. Tell them to be careful with the ladling.”

Sarah looked like they were holding back an eyeroll. “Yeah, okay,” they said. “I'll let them know.”

That night, Mr. Mimura tipped over on the floor.

Miles came home and found the mess. It was like *deja vu* of the first time, when Mr. Mimura still lived at the restaurant and had leapt off the windowsill toward the kitchen. The pot barely held itself together, the plaque all that kept the two sides of the split from cracking entirely in half.

“What the...?” Miles put his face in his hands and groaned.

He didn't think he could lift the pot without breaking it, so he dug around in his kitchen drawers until he found some unused Command strips. He peeled a few and stuck them along the crack, for lack of real tape, and only then did he set Mr. Mimura back on the coffee table. His fronds stretched, the epidermis pulled taut, pale stretch marks forming along the stalks. The finger-fronds clasped at the air by the window, but what could he be reaching for? He didn't need the sun anymore, couldn't photosynthesize. He'd fallen pointed toward downtown, which was north-ish, the same direction as...

“Oh, Mr. Mimura.” Miles felt stupid for not realizing sooner. “I'm sorry, but I can't take you to see her. I don't think Mrs. Mimura will even recognize you. No one else has.”

Mr. Mimura refused to back down. He stretched so hard the pot almost tipped off the table again, but Miles caught it and stacked a couple textbooks next to the pot to balance it.

“Really, I'm sorry. But she's—” Miles remembered his conversation with Mrs. Mimura in a flush of desperation and anger. “She wants to shut the restaurant down. Your restaurant. Doesn't that mean anything to her?” A tight knot wrapped around Miles' throat. “The restaurant *is* you. That and...this.” He gestured to Mr. Mimura's leaves, a bit embarrassed.

Mr. Mimura didn't say anything, but Miles swore the finger-fronds scratched at the window like an indoor cat naively wanting to be let outside. But, like an indoor cat, Mr. Mimura would be better off here.

Miles watched Mr. Mimura for a minute, chewing the inside of his cheek. Then he slung his coat back on. “Wait here,” he said on his way out into the dark, a light rain tapping on the screen door. “I'll see if she's home. Maybe I can talk to her for you.” *And try to convince her to keep the restaurant open, if I can.*

He slipped out and locked the door—even though he usually didn't—just in case Mr. Mimura tried to follow him. He trudged down the narrow, potholed road to the Mimura's house, head ducked against the rain. At the door, he noted the single light on in the living room and car in the driveway and knocked.

Mrs. Mimura didn't keep him waiting. "Hi, Miles," she said. Something looked different with her, like someone put a dim sepia filter over her and meticulously pulled strands of hair loose from her ponytail. "It's awfully late."

"I know," Miles said. "It'll just be a minute."

She stepped aside to let him in. The living room smelled like microwave food reheated one too many times, something Miles was painfully familiar with. He sat on the couch and sat on his hands. Mrs. Mimura sat across from him with a mug of tea without steam curling off of it.

"Sarah tells me you took the monstera home."

Of course. Miles bit his tongue in frustration. Sarah was really starting to get on his nerves these days. "Yeah, uh, it wasn't doing so hot at the restaurant."

"They said you yelled at customers over it," Mrs. Mimura said. The glint in her eye told Miles she'd known about it for some time.

"They were being weird about it," Miles mumbled in response. He didn't want to say it, but he had enough sense left to not call the monstera him in front of her.

Mrs. Mimura studied him. Then she sat back and ran her fingers over her scalp to where her ponytail started, which explained the flyaways, and sighed.

"I'm serious," Miles said. "All the customers hated it. I didn't know Sarah was going to rat me out over it, otherwise I would have said something sooner. If you want me to take it back—"

Mrs. Mimura waved a hand. "That's not what I'm worried about, Miles. I'm worried about you. *We're* worried about you."

Miles had no response. He hunched over and drummed his heels on the floor. He couldn't look at Mrs. Mimura, but he could tell she was watching him again. After a moment, she left the room and went upstairs. Miles wasn't sure she was coming back, and he almost got up to leave, but she returned before he could decide what to do and sat next to him on the couch.

"Here," she said, and put a small notebook in his hand. Miles avoided her gaze even as he took it. "Hiroshi died so suddenly, he didn't leave a will, but I know he'd want you to have something of his."

Miles turned the notebook over in his hands. It had a blue cover, worn, spiral-bound so it flipped open at the top. The front didn't say anything, but each of the pages inside bore Mr. Mimura's lively scrawl, complete with doodles and notes in the margins.

"He kept that in his pocket every day of college," Mrs. Mimura said. "Whenever he had an idea for the restaurant, he'd whip it open and write it down. Sometimes I swear he paid more attention to that notebook than me."

Her laugh caught, but Miles pretended not to hear. He thumbed the soft corners to the pages and read the notes in English.

Must-haves was written at the top of one list. He'd put *red lanterns* and *lucky cat* near the top.

Employee dress code?? Maybe none. Or something simple? The words *white shirts* were scratched out, with the note *soup stains* and a drawing of a waiter looking sadly at his sullied shirt.

Mr. Mimura had also written some non-restaurant things. He had a page of names he liked, with *Yuko* written twice by mistake. Sometimes a page would be mostly blank except for a movie quote all in caps. The last page held a detailed sketch of a college-age Mrs. Mimura—clearly not the work of a professional, but the time and love poured into it showed in the precise lines and faint eraser marks.

Miles shut the notebook and tried to hand it back. "I can't take this."

"Keep it," Mrs. Mimura insisted. She gently pushed the notebook back toward him. "That and the plant. I've got other keepsakes. I've got this entire house."

For the first time, Miles saw Mrs. Mimura's jaw quiver and her clear eyes muddle with tears. He wanted to say something, but he didn't know what. Now was obviously not the time to bring up the restaurant again, but when else would he get the chance? Closing day was coming up in just over a month. He murmured a thank-you to Mrs. Mimura and got up.

Tomorrow, Miles thought as he put on his coat and tucked the notebook in his inner pocket to keep it dry. *I'll come by tomorrow and talk to her when it's not so late.*

Mrs. Mimura did not accompany him to the door like she usually did. When Miles last saw her, she had her face in her hands, still as a stone.

He didn't go back the next day, or the next, or even the next week.

There was always something else to do. With the winter over and daylight creeping back into the world, it was like someone dumped a bucket of ice water over Miles' head. Graduation, closing day, drew ever closer and pulled him in two desperate directions.

Mr. Mimura began to fade again. For whatever reason, the broth Miles filched from the restaurant each night wasn't cutting it anymore. Mr. Mimura's epidermis wrinkled, his stalks drooped, and Miles still found him on the floor most mornings even though he stacked books all around the pot to keep it from happening. Two weeks before graduation, he found Mr. Mimura pressed up against the door, his fingerfronds so firm around the doorknob that Miles had to pry them off with a butter knife. By some miracle, the pot stayed intact, and Miles never heard it fall off the table at night even though he slept light.

He carried the notebook with him to class and flipped idly through its pages during drier lectures. He'd managed to stop his grades from a total freefall, now that the end felt near enough to be real. If he aced his stats final, he could snag a B+, and just pass planetology with the help of some extra credit assignments.

C's get degrees, Mr. Mimura had written in his notebook at some point, echoing a phrase Miles assumed the ancient Greek philosophers invented. *Graduate, and it will all happen after that.*

Miles never knew Mr. Mimura was so restless in college. He had maintained good grades, as far as Miles knew, and seemed so content that some of the notes came as a surprise. *Another day in boreadise*, read one. *New ocean discovered; Red Sea, Black Sea, meet White Sea*, said another. *My lab partner has never heard of edamame??* had a picture of a scruffy-bearded kid whose eyes bulged at a bean pod.

Near the front was a drawing of a young Mr. Mimura with stick arms and legs holding ramen over his head, a cape fluttering behind him. *Me + a bowl of soup vs. the world*, the caption read. Cartoon Mimura's face boasted a triumphant grin that felt out of line with the disaffected quotes on the pages around it.

He'd found hope in the future, Miles realized. He found hope, and used that to propel him in the present. Even in his loneliest words, Miles never found anything about wanting to turn back time or wishing he'd done something different—gone to college somewhere else, stayed in California with his parents—nothing like that. Mr. Mimura either didn't have regrets, or didn't dwell on them.

Miles knew what he had to do.

Closing Day—Graduation Day—dawned cool and slightly overcast, with enough space between the clouds for sunlight to break through in patches. Miles' father took too many pictures on his phone of Miles in his red-and-white graduation gown. His mother said how proud she was of him right before the ceremony, which made him tear up backstage while waiting in a line of hundreds of students. If only she knew how close he had been to failing, Miles thought. If only—

He cut himself off there. Regrets like that, regrets over mistakes he'd narrowly avoided, wouldn't do him any good.

Afterward, Miles went out to a bistro his parents liked in the next town over. Over calzones and Italian sodas, he caught them up on the past few months of school and the restaurant—a mostly honest version of the events, anyway. They already knew about Mr. Mimura and the restaurant closing, but Miles hadn't called much this final semester, to his shame.

He left out the bad grades and the monstera, because that wasn't the past he wanted to remember. Maybe he skirted the truth too much, but really, that was no way to celebrate, and didn't his parents worry enough about him living so far from home?

They bummed around town after that. Miles' mother suggested catching a movie, and Miles had to hide his grimace. "I've been sitting all day," he said when his mother caught him anyway. "Need to stay limber."

They walked along the artificial river through town on the old railroad tracks until sundown. Miles had to admit, it was pretty spectacular. Stripes of brilliant orange and pink banded the horizon over hills of

wheat, the whole world bathed in a wash of gold. His father took enough pictures to agitate the arthritis in his thumbs.

“Worth it,” he said, and Miles rolled his eyes out of youthful obligation.

After that, they shared goodnights and made plans to meet up for breakfast the next day. Miles’ parents returned to their hotel, and he drove back to his apartment to get ready for the evening. He, Sarah, and the rest of the crew were holding a last-day party at the restaurant, with a free-for-all on the remaining stock—soup, sake, and anything else left in the walk-in and dry storage.

Mr. Mimura—the monstera—helped him get ready.

“What do you think—green or blue?” Miles asked him, holding up two button-up shirts. “I wore the blue one for my job interview, you remember that? I must have sweated through it twice in that half-hour.”

Mr. Mimura wobbled.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Miles put on the green shirt and buttoned it all the way up, then unbuttoned the top two. He held out his arms for inspection, but Mr. Mimura stayed stock-still.

“Huh. Nope.” Miles tossed off the shirt and went for one of his standard black work tees instead. “Unlimited sake and dress shirts do not go together. Great point.”

When he was ready, he hoisted Mr. Mimura onto his hip and walked down the hill to the restaurant. It was a cool night, but not so cold Miles needed a jacket. The hairs on Mr. Mimura’s leaves stood up a little in the chill, but—well. He was a plant. A tropical plant. Of course he’d be cold.

Most of the staff was already there and at least tipsy when Miles showed up. A couple of the longer-lasting servers and cooks let out a whoop when Miles jingled through the door. “The Plantmaster has arrived!” one shouted, and another smacked her across the back of the head.

Miles hoped his smile didn’t look too strained as he put Mr. Mimura down on one of the tables.

Sarah emerged from the kitchen, tonkotsu in hand, and gave it to Miles. “Special for the graduate,” they said. Their smile reached their eyes, totally genuine, with more than a hint of pride. Miles felt guilty for letting himself get so irritated with them over the past few weeks.

“Thanks,” he said. Sarah had made the ramen just how he liked it—extra ginger, broth hot enough to singe the roof of his mouth. “Last bowl ever, huh?”

“Last bowl under this name, anyway.”

Miles’ chopsticks paused on their upward journey. “What’s that, now?”

“I’m renting the building. Just got approved yesterday.” They laughed at Miles’ wide-eyed expression. “Figured it’s about damn time I open my own place.”

“You’re keeping the business going?”

“Not exactly. The menu’s going to change.” Sarah tightened their bandana. “But I think I’ll put some ramen on there.”

Miles didn’t let the bite of disappointment into his voice. “That’s really cool, Sarah. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks, bud. Congrats to you too.”

Miles set down his bowl to give Sarah a hug. “End of an era, huh?”

“For real.”

Boisterous cheering rose from the kitchen, and Sarah went to make sure nobody was trying to light cigarettes off the gas burners—again, apparently. Miles stayed behind at the table with Mr. Mimura to finish his soup. He lost himself to his thoughts until one of the newer waiters joined him—Kelani, he remembered in the nick of time. She was the one who had offered to take care of Mr. Mimura when he first arrived.

“Funny,” she said as she turned over one of Mr. Mimura’s leaves. “It looks kind of...*human*, doesn’t it?”

The word *it* still stung Miles. He swallowed back the flash of annoyance and tried to think of a response. “He likes soup.”

“Really?”

“The broth, anyway. I’ve been pouring it into the soil for weeks.”

Kelani laughed. “No way! I mean, you must be right. It looks really good.”

She was right. Mr. Mimura hadn’t looked so good in weeks, hadn’t even looked this good an hour ago when Miles was picking out a shirt. His fronds spread wide and waved in the air, his stalks stood tall, his color glowed under the lanterns.

He’s happy, Miles thought. Happy to be here. Happy to be back.

“We should give him some,” Miles said with sudden vigor. “One last bowl.”

“Shit, okay.” Kelani stood up with minimal drunkenness and offered a hand to Miles. “Sounds like a party to me.”

They went to the kitchen and edged around the circle of staff racing to chug sake cans, and Miles flipped on the burner under the last bit of pork broth. “We should do something different. Something special.”

“You thinking a new tare?” Kelani’s eyes lit up.

“You got it.”

“Pioneering a new-ass flavor on the last day,” she said. “I like it.”

No one had been so on board with Miles in weeks, and it felt good. “What should we add?”

“Ginger,” she said immediately. “Always ginger. And soy. And garlic. You have to have those three, and we can go from there.”

They hauled up the weighty Robot-Coupe and foraged the walk-in for the dregs of each ingredient. Miles came back with white pepper and sesame seeds, and Kelani pitched in half an apple.

“Just for the aroma,” she said when Miles raised an eyebrow. “We won’t put in too much.”

They added a few more ingredients and blended the mix, adjusted, blended again. The other partygoers watched with mild interest, and someone turned up the music louder to cover the roaring of the Robot-Coupe. Sarah asked what the hell they were doing, then amended that they didn’t care as long as somebody cleaned up afterward.

After a while, Miles took a taste, and handed the spoon to Kelani. “I think we got it.”

She tasted and nodded sagely. “We cracked that code, captain.” She clapped her hands together. “Time to water the plants.”

Kelani added the tare to the pork broth in tiny increments until she and Miles agreed it was perfect. She carried the bowl with great solemnity out to the dining room, but stopped before she poured it.

“The honor is all yours,” she said, handing over the bowl.

She may have been joking, but Miles bit back sorrow as he poured the broth into Mr. Mimura’s pot. *Thank you*, he thought in a silent prayer. *For everything*.

“Me and a bowl of soup versus the world,” he murmured aloud as the last of the broth dripped into the soil.

“Amen to that,” Kelani said. She put an arm around Miles’ shoulder. “And now, my friend, it is time to water the *other* plants.”

Miles stared at her blankly.

“Us,” she said. “We’re here to drink hella free sake, aren’t we?”

Kelani beamed at him. Mr. Mimura stood as tall as Miles had ever seen him.

“Yeah,” he said. “I think you’re right.”

Despite his sadness, despite the occasion, the night brought Miles more joy than he’d felt in weeks.

He and Kelani raided the dish pit to clean up their tare experiment, then spent twenty minutes spraying each other with the power washer until both were soaked through to their shoes. When they came back to the party, the line cooks started a string of unsavory jokes that followed the pair the rest of the night.

Sarah and their fiance went undefeated in sake pong, which triggered an unexpected competitive side to Kelani that made Miles laugh through the alcohol fuzz in his head. They blasted music and cleared the chairs and tables to dance in the dining room. Around two in the morning, the cops drove up on a noise complaint, but Sarah composed herself enough to convince the officers to let the party continue.

By three, everyone trickled out but Sarah, their fiancée, and Miles. When Miles said he wanted to stay a bit longer, Sarah raised their eyebrow, but left him the key and said to lock up when he left or they'd withhold his last paycheck.

Mr. Mimura still sat on one of the tables the staff had pushed aside to clear a dance floor. Miles cleared a path through the mess of chairs and picked him up.

"I didn't forget," he said as he walked through the kitchen. "I just wanted to wait until everyone left."

He took Mr. Mimura upstairs. His office was still untouched, posters still plastered floor-to-ceiling and office chair just askew, as if Mr. Mimura had gotten up for just a moment to run to the bank. Miles paused the Spotify playlist and found the jungle key where he'd left it the day Mr. Mimura—the real Mr. Mimura—had died.

"We made it," Miles said, opening the safe. The half-finished sake sloshed as he popped the lid. "I mean, didn't we? We're both here, in some way."

His mind was jumbled with too many sake bombs and the laughter of his staffmates. He tipped the bottle, took a small sip, and wiped his mouth.

"That's more than my share," he said, and poured the rest in Mr. Mimura's pot. "Now we're even."

In the dim office, the glow of the computer screen, the monstera looked dark green, the fronds a little less like fingers. The leaves only moved with the draft from the overhead fan. Miles sat for a while, arms wrapped around his legs, the monstera contentedly motionless by his side.

He stayed there until the first glimpse of sunlight rose in the sky, and didn't say goodbye when he left the office to go home.

Works Cited

Appendix A