The Broken Teacup - Volume 7

Table of Contents

The Sky Bruises at the Edge by Ben Macnair

It is that time,
when clouds hurry hope,
rain goes dancing,
and the puddles become
a slalom of fun for four year olds.

It is that time when snails meet crushing boot,
droplets ricochet and umbrellas are busy.
Windscreen wipers provide the metronome,
people become darkened shadows in cagoules,
the Sky bruises at the edge,
and strangers say, well Summer was good,
when it lasted, for a day.

R. James Sennett Jr. lives, works, breathes and chases his muse in Louisville, Kentucky. His poetry has appeared in numerous publications for which he is grateful.

Cometary by R. James Sennett Jr.

tail
thrusts its thumb
into the eye
of darkness
hitching
a galactic
ride
never to be seen
again.
A reminder
of so many
who split—
only visible suddenly—
like a match,
blown out
then tossed.

Kevin Boyce is a poet, photographer, children's book author, and lifelong resident of New England. He volunteers in his hometown, leading a community-sponsored contest and publication for emerging authors.

SAVING TIME by Kevin Boyce

I drove you to the Post Office
in the rain and waited while
you zigzagged puddles, and
tap danced up gray granite steps.
Sporadic wipers painting
a rain-washed watercolor-
their portrait of you.

The moment suspended
like a slow-motion fall.
My AM radio scratchy low
Jim Croce[1] grieving
his grip on time—
the kite string slipping
through both our hands.

I sensed that this
ordinary errand, a
transient instant had
folded a corner of the page.
That this photograph would
stay in the album with
the other bits and scraps
of my seventeen-year-old self.

Decades later, as rain ripples
down my window, I open
the bottle and write
and wonder if my words
could make wishes come true.

[1] *Jim Croce 1943-1973 wrote "Time in a Bottle," his posthumous #1 hit song*

Erin Jamieson's (she/her) writing has been published in over 100 literary magazines and nominated twice for both the Pushcart Prize and Best of Net. She is the author of four poetry chapbooks, including *Fairytales* (Bottle Cap Press) and a historical novel, *Sky of Ashes, Land of Dreams* (Type Eighteen Books).

Amaryllis by Erin Jamieson

brushstrokes
at dawn

painter draped
in black chiffon

shaking fingers
blistered canvas

yellow of a
raw egg yolk

warmth radiates
from her worn
limbs

a body that
has abandoned
her

for a moment
she can create
any world

Chris Wood draws inspiration from Southern landscapes, etymology, and the rhythm of everyday life. Her poems appear in Heart of Flesh, Salvation South, and other literary journals. She is the author of Yesterday Echoes, a poetry chapbook from Finishing Line Press. When not writing, she serves as a Director in Operations Services for a real estate investment trust and enjoys life with her husband and their pack of fur-babies. Learn more at https://chriswoodwriter.com.

What Wakes Me by Chris Wood

There is beauty in routine,
in the predictability of knowing
what the next moment holds—
the slow rise of your wake up song
or when wet noses startle you awake,
paws shuffling around the bed
eager to face the frost-filled landscape
still hidden in the shadow of dawn.

dan raphael's chapbook, *How'd This Tree Get In?*, will be published this spring by Ravenna Press. More recent poems appear in *Unlikely Stories, Red Tree, Abstract Magazine, Indefinite Space* and *Mad Swirl*. Most Wednesdays dan writes and records a current events poem for The KBOO Evening News.

"too much lingo for the banjo" by dan raphael
(doug marx)

I am tinder, tender, untanned, all my thunder suppressed
occasionally the stomach or the anus release
never lightning but always the possibility
of a quick, intense, local downpour,, sudden wind
lurking around the corner, running a red light

it's a good thing my car's not wind-powered
if it was powered by poetry I wouldn't get far and
there'd be nothing left to write

there's no creativity on-switch and the battery doesn't last long
a spark, a pressure differential, a sale that expires in an hour
when did my car learn to turn without me

a big corner lot empty forever is a family squabble
nothing to do about the food that seems to have consumed itself—
an improvised, nameless casserole combining the new with the left over.

like a book that way. with a missing chapter no one notices
I would rather talk into your eyes than have your eyes
reading my words think you can see me, into or through
as if telling a revised experience enough times
will change the past, as you're not reading this
but someday might think you did

Jeffrey Zable is a teacher, conga drummer/percussionist who plays for dance classes and rumbas around the San Francisco Bay Area, and a writer of poetry, flash-fiction, and non-fiction. He's published five chapbooks and his writing has appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and anthologies, more recently in *Uppagus, Beach Chair, Dark Winter, Ivo, Once Upon a Crocodile, The Raven's Perch, Bramble, Moss Piglet* and many others. His selected poetry, *When I'm Dead and Feeling Blue* is now available from Amazon or directly from Androgyne Books.

ONLY IN SAN FRANCISCO by Jeffrey Zable

Standing near the entrance to Goodwill is some guy around thirty—
decently dressed—holding a large sign that reads I LOVE YOU!

Just before passing him, I say—more to myself— “Okay… now what!?”

Obviously hearing me, he answers, “That’s entirely up to you!”

“I don’t make rash decisions anymore!” I say with a smile
and continue into the store—surprised that he’s still standing there
when I leave around a half hour later…

Cithara Patra currently lives in NC. They've written for a few literary journals including P*oetries in English, Instant Noodles,* and *50 Word Stories*. In their spare time, they travel, solve logic puzzles, and check out local restaurants.

Dandelions by Cithara Patra

In your little hands, you grasp dandelions

Blowing them apart, letting them sail in wind

Your laughter follows as each little piece

flies far from your fingers, floating to the sky

You jump up and down, unable to grab them

though your laughter never fades

Those little dandelion parts continue to fly

Continue to evade you until they disappear,

fade into the empty gray sky

And my vision of you, full of life and laughter

fades as well

Catherine Schnur is a writer living in West Virginia. Her poems have been published in *Antonym Lit* and *Boats Against the Current.* She enjoys moving in loops, painting small portraits of food for her friends, and dancing in her kitchen.

Our Kitchen at Sunset by Catherine Schnur

I bet that arch way is still smiling. Many
long years could never build
a barricade more powerful than talking
over brewed tea like children devouring
watermelon down to the rind. Our
mouths sticky with laughter. The whole
kitchen flame filled. Even the floor
was warm to the touch.

William Ross is a Canadian writer and visual artist living in Toronto. His poems have appeared in magazines and literary journals in nine countries. Some of the U.S. publications include: *Rattle*, *Bicoastal Review*, *The Write Launch*, *Neologism Poetry Journal*, *Heavy Feather Review*, and *Third Wednesday*.

Rain Shower at the Wrecking Yard by William Ross

the junkyard is ramshackle
to the sky and the men
walking the paths know the shape
and location of all the heaping

the crankcase torsion bar
aluminum siding wiring array
radiator engine block
lighting ballast heatsink harness
and copper tubing

baking in the heat after the rain
the rising smell of mud hot metal
propane exhaust
and wet german shepherd

Huina Zheng holds an M.A. with Distinction in English Studies and works as a college essay coach. Her creative work has been published in *Baltimore Review*, *Variant Literature*, *Midway Journal*, and other literary journals. She has received multiple honors, including nominations for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, Best Small Fictions, and Best Microfiction. She lives in Guangzhou, China, with her family.

Still Not Retired by Huina Zheng

When I read the news that the delayed retirement policy had begun to take effect, I found myself calculating how far away that day still was. Nasolabial lines had already crept toward the corners of my mouth, but when I wasn't smiling, there were still no fine lines at the edges of my eyes. I thought of years ago, when my mother was plucking gray hairs in front of the mirror, my father mocked her, "You really think thirty is young?" I had believed that thirty was already old. As for me, aging still felt separated by a vacuum stretching ten thousand light-years.

The tenth year of working from home. My days unfold in front of a laptop screen. Sometimes I speak with clients by voice on Tencent Meeting. Occasionally, a parent asks to turn on the camera "just to see each other." The face in the video window looks unfamiliar, even to me. At thirty, I never imagined that saving two hours of commuting each day would mean spending every day alone at home. I hate crowded subways, hate gatherings, and grow anxious scrolling through waves of middle-aged unemployment on social media. While replying to messages, I think: if only the computer would break. The phone vibrates again, and I keep responding. That evening, my salary notification came in. For five seconds, I felt lighter. Then another message arrived. I drift through videos to glimpse the outside world, watching influencers' lives, colorful or turbulent, and sink into a quiet hopelessness: at least ten more years (if the retirement age isn't pushed back again) before I can retire.

I wake to the sound of morning exercise music from the kindergarten next to my apartment. Dozens of unread WeChat messages have piled up on my lock screen. A close friend from college tells me she's lost her job; her husband was laid off two months ago. My eighty-eight-year-old great-aunt, who insisted on growing vegetables until the end, has died. And I still have to clock in on the company group chat.

Megan Harris serves as a senior editor for Mud Season Review. She holds a degree in Literature and Creative Writing and is working on her first novel. She lives with her husband and four kids in rural Virginia, where she writes fiction and creative nonfiction for the pure joy of it.

BOGO by Megan Harris

It began with another money conversation. James had been going over their accounts and discovered Mary's secret.

"What is this?" He asked, raising a collection of crumpled papers.

A flush of heat spread across her chest. "I was going to tell you…"

"Six thousand dollars? What have you been buying?"

"I don't know. Groceries. *Gas*."

The conversation played out in much the same way every few months. Of course, this was the first time Mary had run up a credit card bill, and now James looked as if he might turn into a rocket and shoot off into space.

The problem was the medical bills. They were still paying for Jame's overnight stay in the hospital two years ago. Not to mention that mass Dr. Gillman found during Mary's routine checkup last year. "Probably benign," (thank heaven), but the doctor had insisted Mary get *three* more diagnostic scans to be sure.

Then their homeowner's insurance *and* their property taxes increased, adding three-hundred dollars to their monthly mortgage payment.

So, yes, they needed to tighten the budget.

But Mary didn't see how she *could*. She was already spending half of what the average household of their size spent on groceries, according to the National Economic Review. And the kids, bless them, rarely complained. They went without Air Jordans and all the stupid online fashion trends. Only occasionally did they ask for new sports gear or a couple of shirts to refresh their wardrobe, and then they were happy to shop with Mary at the bargain stores.

Their one vice was treats. Almost every time they were out, someone would ask for a small "extra." A bottle of Gatorade, or a Snickers bar. To Mary, it seemed unreasonable to refuse such tiny requests, considering all the things she *had* to say 'no' to.

Somehow, it all added up.

Of course, James played a part too. His little hobbies amounted to less frequent, but more costly purchases. But he worked so hard to pay the bills, how could Mary refuse him the money he earned to buy what he wanted when he asked for so little? So she made it work.

And then there were Mary's own habits. She enjoyed her artisan whole bean coffees and her monthly magazine subscriptions.

It seemed they *all* wanted more than they allowed themselves to have. Was it so outrageous to indulge herself and her family in each of their small pleasures?

Once James came back to earth, and the purple vein in his temple stopped pulsing, they sat at the table and made a plan. Groceries were the only large expense they could hope to decrease.

They created a list with two columns: *Necessities* and *Extras.* Each of them, including the kids, got to choose one item to place in the *Extras* column. These, Mary would buy only if that week's *Necessities* came in under budget.

Otherwise, James explained, there will be no juice. No cookies. No extras. Understood?

Mary adored her husband. But in certain moods, she felt she had more in common with the kids than with him.

The store where she regularly bought groceries and household items offered curbside pickup, so she always did most of her shopping on her phone. That week, she was delighted when the *Necessities* came under budget. Until Ashlyn asked for deodorant *and* toothpaste.

I swear I just bought some last week, Mary said, before writing *toothpaste* on the list of things she'd need to go inside the store to get, as it was too late to add to her order.

By the time she left home, she'd also added cat food, two bottles of shampoo and conditioner, trash bags (*how had she forgotten these when she'd been hanging plastic grocery bags in the trash can for two days now?*), and a set of dish towels to replace the ones the dogs had used for tug-of-war.

Apart from the convenience, grocery shopping online prevented her from making impulse buys. Whereas inside the store, a simple box of frozen waffles might spark some desperate craving that wouldn't shut up until she gave in. Then she'd have to buy not just the waffles, but the extra butter and maple syrup too.

Not today.

She pushed her cart toward the pet food, wishing for blinders like they use for horses in New York City. This was not the time for new throw pillows. Or mascara. Or that wrinkle cream she'd been wanting to try.

She selected the smallest, cheapest bag of cat kibble and smiled at her frugality.

On the way to the toothpaste aisle, she spotted a display of the granola bars her mother used to buy for her when she was little, and which Mary occasionally bought for her kids. Not the crusty, over-baked ones they sell in the cereal aisle. No. These were more *candy* bar than granola bar, and they cost twice as much. There were two flavors: Chocolate Chip and Coconut. She grabbed a box of each and kept moving.

A few aisles down were the crackers AJ liked to take to school. Would it really matter if she bought him a small box of those? She studied the price of the brand-name crackers that were shaped like little fish. Next to them were the off-brand ones, shaped like monkeys. These, she knew, contained two times the sodium to make up for their two-thirds less cheesy flavor. She put them in the cart anyway.

Despite the indulgences, she was proud of her discipline. It *had* cost her something to put that seven-dollar bottle of vanilla-scented home fragrance oil back on the shelf. She'd carted it around the store, glancing at it now and then, telling herself she could decide later. In the end, she put it down and headed straight for the self-checkout lane, where she would not be forced into making small talk with a cashier.

She scanned the 3lb bag of cat food. The trash bags and toothpaste. The box of off-brand crackers. Then stared at the number on the screen. How could so few things add up to so much money?

Mary considered what remained in the cart. The dish towels could wait. That left just the boxes of granola bars. She didn't *need* them. Certainly not *both* of them. But if she bought only one, they'd be gone in a few hours, as was always the case when she brought home special treats.

She felt the impatience of the other shoppers waiting for their turn to pay. The girl who watched over the self-check was busy helping another customer two kiosks down.

Mary reached into the cart and stacked the two boxes, one on top of the other, neatly lining them up. Her heart chimed. Her face tingled. Without looking to see who was watching, she scanned them as one and dropped them into a bag.

The muscles in her jaw tightened to a dull ache, and her fingertips went numb. She expected an alarm to sound any minute or someone from security to tap her shoulder. So what if they did? She could claim she'd made an honest mistake. And such a small item hardly made a difference. In the last month alone, she'd given that store what? Close to two-thousand dollars? Plus, they already compensated for these small losses by raising prices on *everything.* She was hurting no one.

When she finished paying, she placed the four small bags into the child seat of the shopping cart and headed toward the exit.

The employee checking receipts at the door was the same slightly-older-than-Mary white woman with long brown hair who kept watch every Thursday. Mary looked directly at her and smiled, keeping her expression warm and friendly. The woman glanced at Mary's cart, then nodded and smiled in return. She did not ask to see a receipt. She did not ask to inspect the bags. She just stood, hands clasped in front, like always.

Mary breezed through the automatic doors into the damp March air and hurried to her car.

She drove around to the curbside pickup area and parked in one of the designated spots. While she waited for two teenage boys to load her groceries into the trunk, she pulled a

coconut-flavored bar from its box, tore the corner off the plastic wrapper, and bit into the soft chocolate coating.

By the time she finished eating, she'd thought of six *Necessities* and two more *Extras* she could easily stack for next week's two-for-one special. Won't James be proud of how well she managed the budget now?

She pulled another granola bar from the box, they were smaller than she remembered, and nibbled slowly around the edges, stretching the moment of pleasure to see just how far she could make it go.

This is How to Say Goodbye by JB Shelleby

On the north side of the house, dingy snow still clings to the place where earth meets brick. But on the west side, below your window, shoots have broken the soil and tiny white bells have bloomed. It should be the other way. Your window should be on the side without sun.

I call it "your" window, but the room is still the office it's been the whole time my husband and I have lived in this apartment. The pale green walls are lined with secondhand furniture—a mismatched desk and chair, a tattered wingback, and three bookshelves of varied sizes and colors, each loaded to overflow.

The books are loosely arranged: literature, non-fiction, ESL curriculum. This last category has grown aggressively, overrunning the other books the way wisteria climbs neighboring trees. Textbooks lie across the tops of poetry and novels, asserting their importance.

For the past six years, after the library has closed, I've gathered with roughly a dozen students downstairs in the children's room. Surrounded by shelves of colorful, thin-spined hardbacks with beaten-down corners, I teach what comes naturally to a native speaker, what any child grasps intuitively.

This is how to express what is happening right now.

This is how to express what has happened in the past.

This is how to express what will happen in the future—as if we ever know.

Take, for example, this room. This room <u>is</u> now an office; this room <u>was</u> a bedroom when the previous renters lived here; and for a few short weeks, I declared, "This room <u>will be</u> the nursery."

I've been hoping for months to simply replace you, but here it is March, what was supposed to be your month and I'm as empty as I've ever been.

Many people would argue that you were nothing of consequence. Only a purple-gray knot on toilet tissue, the culmination of days of deep, gelatinous blood. Only some mismatched chromosomes, the rungs of your spiraling ladder uneven, destined to fail.

I try squeezing the books together to allow room for just one more on each shelf, the way we can always cram just one more person into a subway car, until everyone's more intimate than they'd like to be, disgusted by the sweaty smell between them. I manage to fit in a couple of volumes, but there's no way around it, something has to give.

Atwood, McCarthy and Morrison need to make room for *Basic English Grammar* and *Easy English, Step-by-Step*. I begrudgingly pull some literature off the shelves, flipping the pages past my thumb, weighing each book's importance.

I'm being melodramatic. I'm merely moving them into basement storage. This is nothing compared to my students, who leave everything behind. No possession, no place—no person

even—is so precious that it can't be let go in the name of survival. When these students come to me, stripped of the familiar smells and sights and language of their home, I do my best to honor their courage and give them the tools they need to pull through.

This is how to follow street signs so you don't get lost.

This is how to write a check so you don't get evicted.

This is how to read a medicine bottle so you don't die.

I've read that you weighed less than an aspirin. Smaller even than the prescribed vitamins I took to sustain you. The vitamins I still swallow daily, just in case.

Here's the mystery: how can you be both completely absent from me and yet totally present? Months now since you left—your stay so brief, a barely noticeable blip in my normal cycle—and yet the space you consume continues to grow. Something has to give.

I head to the basement, carrying the stack of books I've decided to store away. I step carefully down the open wooden steps, trying not to brush against the dusty stone walls. The storage area is neatly stacked with plastic bins full of photo albums, journals, and old letters. Things we can't let go of but can't find room for in our everyday lives.

Dim light seeps through the high, small window trimmed with cobwebs. Through it, I see white, and have to stand on my tip toes to see which it is—snow or flowers? Bells, tiny as a newborn's fingernail.

Straining my eyes, I locate the bins of books and struggle to slide them from the shelf. Like everything down here, the weight is just barely manageable. I look inside each one until I find room for the additions.

On my way out, I notice my teaching archives, full of past students' folders. I lift the lid and run my fingers along the tabs, each name conjuring a face or a voice. This one, especially: Sandra Rodriguez, my first ESL tutee seven years ago, the reason I'm still teaching. It's easy for me to picture her thick lips that frequently broke into a smile, her heavy eyelids that were often coated with pale blue eyeshadow, and the Our Lady of Guadalupe pendant around her neck, tied with a worn, orange length of yarn. In another place at another time, Sandra was a nurse, but when I met her here, she was picking mushrooms all day for a dollar a basket. I remember our first lesson, her brown finger following the lines on the page, my voice, then hers, volleying the phrases designed to ease her entry into our culture.

This is how to say, I don't speak English.

This is how to say, How much is it?

This is how to say, I need a doctor.

This is how to say, It hurts here.

This is how to say, I don't understand. Try it. I don't understand.

I wish there were something left of you, a concrete, visible thing, a shape I could run my fingers over the corners of and feel the weight of in my palm. Something to mark your impossibly short existence. Something I could tuck inside a box in the basement, among the ragged letters and the photos that yellow against the sticky page, among the required-reading books and the secret-pleasure novels of my childhood, among the bloated student files and the scrawled lines of my youthful journals, all of it recounting the many lives that have intersected with mine. Only yours is unaccounted for.

Paging through Sandra's folder, I remember what a bright student she was. Though we'd begun with the simplest of phrases, by the end of two years, I was teaching her the present perfect tense. The present perfect! I couldn't have defined it myself before the day I prepared to teach it to her. I stumbled through the lesson, trying to make sense of its name—why was it considered the present tense when it described the past? What did it mean to "associate a past event with the present"? Honestly, I failed Sandra. I glossed over the lesson, told her it wasn't a tense she would need to call upon very often and left it at that. It's only now that I understand.

I have been mourning you since you left me.

I have tried to move on.

You have said goodbye to me, and have been waiting, patiently, for me to say it back.

Headmaster by Salami Femi

“We must act quickly!” one of the elder beings shouted, as the supernova's effects began to ravage their world.

The effect of the supernova had destroyed the planet, leaving only a few survivors who had managed to escape in a massive rock-like circular structure, but the effect of the black hole had pulled the structure in.

“Brothers, don't leave me!” Headmaster had cried out as his peers telekinetically threw him out of the structure.

“We're sorry, young one. It is too late,” they had replied. “You're the future of our kind. Live on, and never forget us.”

As Headmaster tumbled through the void, he watched in horror as his world was consumed by the supernova. “No! Why save me?”

Headmaster's hardened shell protected him from the harsh conditions of space, but he was alone and adrift. He floated for what felt like an eternity, until he spotted a comet hurtling through space.

“Perhaps...just perhaps,” he thought, focusing all his telekinetic energy on the comet. Slowly but surely, he was drawn towards it, until the comet's gravity pulled him in.

The comet carried him further into space, until the gravity of a blue planet, Earth, pulled him down towards its surface. Headmaster crashed onto the planet's surface, his hardened shell protecting him from the impact.

Upon landing, Headmaster found himself in the midst of the American Civil War. He remained in his rock state for so long that people actually thought it was just a big rock, until some people were killed and their bodies were dumped around him.

The humans around him were unlike anything he had ever seen. They had extensions (legs, hands, and bodies)—so different from his own head-like form. “What are these creatures?” Headmaster wondered.

As he observed the humans, Headmaster became determined to adapt to this new world. He removed his hardened shell and attempted to merge with a nearby corpse of a black male soldier. However, the process proved to be more complicated than he had anticipated.

“Why isn't this working?” he growled in frustration.

He decided to try a different approach and used his telekinetic abilities to remove the head of the dead body. It took several attempts, using a leaf, a stick, and finally a left over sharp stick, but eventually, the head of the dead body came off.

With his telekinetic abilities, he dragged the body towards himself and attached himself to the body. Suddenly, his massive humanoid head glowed and started shrinking to a normal human size. The dead body began to rejuvenate as well.

“It's happening?” he whispered, amazed by the transformation.

As he completed the process of attaching himself to the dead body, he felt a strange sensation. Minutes later, he woke up and tried to walk, stumbling repeatedly until he figured it out.

“Ah, I feel odd,” he said, still confused about humans. “But, I can speak, talk like them....Ahhhh.”

He took a deep breath and focused on his surroundings, using his powers to navigate this strange and weird environment.

“I'll make it,” he said to himself, his voice barely above a whisper. “I'll survive on this world, no matter what it takes.”

His first few months were a lesson in profound frustration. Humans, he quickly deduced, were irrational. They never said what they meant. A “fine, thank you” could mask a universe of sorrow. A “we should do this sometime” was a polite dismissal. Their communication was a labyrinth of subtext and unspoken rules, a maddening code he couldn’t crack.

Years later, he forged new credentials and found a position teaching integrated science at a segregated high school in a bustling, turn-of-the-century American city.

It was there he encountered Josh. The boy was a supernova of intellect, his mind a sharp, clear instrument in a classroom often clouded by adolescent distraction. But he was an island, socially awkward, his gaze often fixed on the middle distance as if solving equations on the inside of his head. Headmaster saw a reflection of his own alienness.

After class one day, he found Josh hunched over a complex medical text.

“The cellular regeneration of the Planaria is fascinating, isn’t it?” Headmaster said, his voice still unnervingly precise.

Josh flinched, then looked up. “It is, sir. It’s the key. The key to repairing tissue, to defeating disease.”

“Your ambition is medicine?”

Josh’s eyes, for a moment, flickered with a fire Headmaster recognized as pure, unadulterated purpose. “I want to be a doctor. I want to save lives.” Then the fire banked. “But…they say it’s a difficult path. For someone like me.”

Headmaster understood the subtext. The world, for all its progress, was still steeped in the poison of racism. The path for a black doctor would be a gauntlet.

Headmaster placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder, a human gesture he was still mastering. “Josh, listen to me. The universe does not grant a mind like yours by accident. Do not let the smallness of others dictate the scale of your dreams. You will save lives. You must.”

The words, direct and devoid of the usual human ambiguity, struck Josh with the force of a physical blow. He straightened his shoulders, a new resolve hardening his features. “Thank you, sir. I won’t forget that.”

Year 1939

The grime and gaslight of Chicago clung to Headmaster’s coat as he navigated the cobblestone streets. He was tracking a thread of brilliant, focused energy he’d once known. It led him to a small, smoky bar near the coastline, where he found Josh.

The boy was now a man, his frame filled out, his clothes well-tailored. But the fire Headmaster remembered was guttered, replaced by a weary tension. They spoke of old times, of the school, of medicine. Josh’s words were polished, his achievements listed like items on a menu. But Headmaster, an empath in a way humans could never comprehend, felt the jagged edges beneath the surface. There was pain in his eyes, despair in the slight tremor of his hand as he lifted his beer.

“Your work at the Aslan Institute is the talk of the scientific community,” Headmaster probed.

“It’s…groundbreaking,” Josh said, his eyes avoiding Headmaster’s. “We’re on the cusp of something incredible.”

“I should like to see it. To admire the new equipment. A tour, for an old teacher?”

The request hung in the air. Josh’s evasion was a palpable thing, a wall of static. But the weight of his former teacher’s expectation, that same directness that had once inspired him, now felt like a cage. Reluctantly, he agreed.

The next day, the Aslan Institute was a cathedral of white tile and gleaming steel. Josh showed him centrifuges, autoclaves, and microscopes of breathtaking complexity. But Headmaster’s attention was elsewhere. His senses, attuned to the psychic frequencies of living things, were screaming.

“And what is through there?” Headmaster asked, pointing to a reinforced steel door marked ‘Authorized Personnel Only.’

“Ah, just storage. Old archives,” Josh said, a little too quickly.

Headmaster nodded, feigning disinterest, but the psychic stench from beyond that door was overwhelming. It was a miasma of raw terror, agonizing pain, and the cold, silent void of death.

That night, Headmaster returned. A flick of his mind disabled the locks; a whisper of telekinetic force slid the bolts back. He moved through the sterile, sleeping corridors like a ghost, following the psychic screams to their source.

Behind the ‘storage’ door was a nightmare. It was a laboratory, but not one of healing. Glass chambers lined the walls, and within them…things that were once human writhed and moaned.

Their forms were grotesque, flesh bubbling with unnatural growths, limbs twisted into impossible shapes. The air reeked of antiseptic and decay.

In one chamber, a young black woman was strapped to a gurney, her eyes wide with a terror so profound it was a physical force. Tubes ran from her arms to a machine that pulsed with a sickly green light.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Headmaster turned. Josh stood there, his face a mask of anguish and defiance.

“It had to be done,” Josh whispered, his voice cracking.

“This? This is an abomination, Josh.”

“Her name is Regina!” Josh snapped, gesturing wildly to the woman in the chamber. “She is dying. A degenerative disease. There is no cure. This…this project…the funding, the resources…it was the only way!”

“To do what?” Headmaster’s voice was dangerously calm.

“To force an evolutionary leap! To alter the human genome, to make the cells accept any foreign organism, any repair mechanism! To achieve immortality!” Josh’s eyes were wild, lit by a fanatical light. “They failed, over and over. But I am close. I just need more time!”

“Immortality is not basic science,” Headmaster said, his tone laced with a sorrow as old as the stars. “Your minds, your very cellular structures, cannot handle the data, the endless accumulation of memory and experience. It is a void.”

“Liar!” Josh screamed, pointing a trembling finger. “You! You are the proof! You are not human. I knew it then, I know it now. Your perfection, your agelessness. You are immortal. If you can exist, then so can we!”

Headmaster was shocked, but not surprised. Josh’s genius had always seen too much. “It does not work that way. My biology is fundamentally different. This must end, Josh. Now.”

“I can’t,” Josh sobbed, pulling a revolver from his coat. “I can’t lose her.” He shouted, and heavy-footed security guards flooded the room.

Headmaster moved. He was a blur, his hands not touching the guards, but sending them flying backwards with concussive bursts of telekinetic force. They slammed into walls, crumpling to the floor.

A gunshot echoed, sharp and final.

Headmaster looked down. A bloom of crimson spread across his chest. The pain was a white-hot nova, a sensation his new human body shrieked against. He looked at Josh, who stood holding the smoking revolver, his face a canvas of horror and regret.

The pain ignited something primal within Headmaster, something he had kept carefully leashed. A lifetime of frustration with humanity's duplicity, its capacity for such beautiful dreams and such monstrous actions, erupted from him. He didn't think. He simply unleashed.

A silent, invisible shockwave of pure psychic force erupted from his core. It hit the glass chambers first, shattering them into a million glittering shards. Consoles exploded in showers of sparks. Steel support beams twisted like licorice. The entire laboratory was torn apart in a single, catastrophic blast.

Through the raining debris and the blaring alarms, Headmaster met Josh's terrified eyes one last time. Then, clutching his wound, Headmaster turned and retreated into the chaos.

The name was now Mr. Edwards, and the dust of Zaria District, in Jos, Nigeria, coated his worn leather shoes. The year was 1978, and the air hummed with the vibrant, chaotic energy of a community alive with gossip, commerce, and, beneath it all, a simmering fear. People vanished. Not many, and not often, but enough to weave a thread of dread through the colorful tapestry of the city.

His journey here had begun in a stark, fluorescent-lit police station in Kano, interrogating a sweaty, shifty-eyed man named Musa.

"I know nothing! I just found the car abandoned!" Musa had insisted, his eyes darting everywhere but Headmaster's face.

Headmaster had simply leaned forward, his gaze unwavering. The mental static of human deception was a familiar noise. He pushed past it, a subtle telepathic nudge, like a key turning in a lock. Tell me.

Musa's eyes glazed over. "The money…it was so much. A man from Zaria…he paid me to crush the car at the scrapyard. Said the owner, a university girl…she was a 'donation'. He said she was a donation!" The man began to sob, the confession torn from him by a force he couldn't comprehend.

Zaria. The thread led here.

Headmaster, with his forged credentials, as 'Mr. Edwards', and a calm, persuasive presence that was subtly amplified by his abilities, quickly found a teaching position at the local secondary school. He ingratiated himself, his mind a silent net cast into the sea of thoughts around him. The community was warm, but there was a secret they held close, a collective anxiety that pulsed just below the surface.

At the school, he noticed the anomalies. A handful of senior students, like a boy named Emeka, were…off. Their records claimed they were eighteen, but their eyes held a weariness that spoke of decades. The other students gave them a wide, respectful berth, a fear that was carefully masked as deference. No one ever mentioned their age. It was a silent rule, an unspoken boundary.

It was during lunch break that he caught the scent. A faint, coppery, cloying odor, masked heavily by pepper and spices. It was a smell his vast intellectual knowledge recognized instantly, a smell that had no place in a schoolyard. He traced it to Emeka, who was eating from a small, tightly wrapped package of leaves, his eyes glazed with something akin to relief.

Human myoglobin. Degrading neural tissue, the diagnosis clicked into place in his mind with cold, clinical certainty.

That evening, he followed Emeka home, his movements silent, his presence masked. The compound was large, well-kept, but the psychic resonance was wrong. It was a hollow echo, a semblance of life where there should be a vibrant pulse. He saw Emeka greeted by an elder, a man known as Mr. Smart, whose handshake was a little too prolonged, his smile not quite reaching his dead-fish eyes. The same faint, foul smell clung to them both.

The next day, they came for him. Mr. Smart and two other elders, their faces arranged in expressions of polite concern. They found him grading papers after school.

“Mr. Edwards,” Mr. Smart began, his voice smooth as oil. “We appreciate your…dedication. But a teacher’s work is here, at the school. It is not good to wander. The outskirts of our town can be…unpredictable. It is best you stay within the boundary of the community.”

The threat was velvet-wrapped, but Headmaster heard the steel beneath. He simply nodded. “I understand. Safety first.”

But he had already seen Emeka slipping behind the science block, the tell-tale package in his hand. The compulsion was too strong. Headmaster followed.

He found the boy hunched in the shadows, devouring the contents with a frantic, desperate hunger.

“Emeka,” Headmaster said, his voice quiet.

The boy spun around, his eyes wide with panic and a flicker of shame. Bits of the greyish, cooked matter clung to his lips.

“What is that you are eating?” Headmaster pressed, though he knew. “It is not food.”

“It…it is medicine,” Emeka stammered.

“Medicine for what? For the decay? To keep the skin from sloughing off the bone?”

The boy’s face crumpled. Before he could speak, a shadow fell over them. A heavy blow connected with the back of Headmaster’s head, and the world dissolved into static and pain.

He awoke to the smell of damp earth and kerosene smoke. His hands and feet were bound with rough rope, and he was propped against a mud-brick wall in a small, windowless hut on the outskirts of town. Before him, a heated debate was underway.

“We kill him! It is simple!” Mr. Smart’s voice was a sharp crack in the dim light. “He knows! A foreigner comes here, asking questions, snooping around. He saw Emeka. He knows what our food is!”

“And bring the entire Nigerian police force down on us?” countered a woman, Mrs. Ferdinand. She was tall, her bearing regal, but her skin had the same waxy, preserved quality as the others. “We survive by being forgotten, Smart. Not by creating a martyr.”

“He is not just a man,” another voice, older, rasped. “How did he know the smell? We mask it with the strongest peppers. No human nose can detect it.”

Headmaster stirred, drawing their attention. A dozen pairs of eyes turned to him, their pupils dilated in the gloom, glowing with a faint, sickly yellow light.

“You are awake,” Mr. Smart sneered. “Good. You can understand the price of your curiosity.”

“You are not alive,” Headmaster stated, his voice hoarse but clear. “Yet you are not truly dead. A parasitic symbiote? A viral agent that reanimates the neural tissue but requires a constant supply of fresh, compatible cerebral matter to maintain the host body’s structural integrity. You are feeding on their kind to maintain their skins.”

A stunned silence filled the hut. They were not used to being…defined.

Mr. Smart recovered first. “We are survivors! Our ship crashed here, forty years ago.”

“A weakness,” Headmaster corrected. “You are consuming the future of this planet to prolong a hollow past.”

“It is life!” Mr. Smart roared.

It was then that Mrs. Ferdinand stepped closer, her luminous eyes narrowed. She knelt before him, ignoring Smart’s protests. She studied his face, his unblemished skin, the strange, ancient calm in his eyes despite his predicament.

“Smart is a fool,” she said, her voice dropping to a whisper meant only for him. “He sees a human. I see…something else.” She leaned in, inhaling deeply near his temple. “You have no human scent. No fear. You detected it because you are not of this Earth either.”

Mr. Smart froze, his rage replaced by a dawning, terrifying comprehension. The white man wasn’t just a meddler. He was something else entirely. Something from the same stars as theirs, but fundamentally, uniquely different.

Headmaster met Mrs. Ferdinand’s gaze. The dynamic in the room had irrevocably shifted. He was no longer just a prisoner; he was a variable their precarious, monstrous existence had never accounted for.

The silence in the mud-brick hut was thick enough to taste. Mr. Smart’s face, already a mask of waxy preservation, seemed to harden further. Mrs. Ferdinand’s revelation hung in the air, a ghost that had just taken solid, terrifying form.

“So,” Mr. Smart finally said, his voice a low, dangerous rumble. He pointed a trembling finger at Headmaster. “Which is it? Are you with your own kind? Or are you with them?” The word ‘them’ was spat out, drenched in a decade’s worth of resentment for the humanity they preyed upon.

Headmaster, still bound, met his gaze unflinchingly. The rope dug into his wrists, a mundane annoyance. “Neither.”

A collective, sharp intake of breath echoed in the small space. Even Mrs. Ferdinand looked perplexed.

“Neither?” Mr. Smart scoffed, recovering his bravado. “What kind of answer is that? You are either one thing or the other!”

“A sentient being,” Headmaster replied, his tone unnervingly pedagogical, as if he were back in a classroom, “must be judged by the actions they take. Not by the species they belong to. Your identity is irrelevant to the horror of your deeds.”

The aliens—for that is what they were, a parasitic consciousness wearing human skin like a suit—stared at him, baffled. This was not a logic their survivalist mentality could easily process.

“Judged?” one of the elders rasped. “By whom? You? A lone wanderer in a backwater town? Why here? Did you think we would be hiding in London or New York?”

A dry, rattling laughter moved through the group. Mr. Smart joined in, a harsh, ugly sound. “This is not one of your human alien movies! We are not foolish enough to live in a place with cameras on every corner, where a missing person brings a swarm of police. Here, people vanish, and the world shrugs. It is the perfect shadow to live in.”

Headmaster gave a slow, deliberate nod. “That…makes sense.” It was a cold, clinical assessment that seemed to disarm them more than any protest would have.

His compliance, his strange logic, was a risk they could not afford. Mr. Smart’s eyes narrowed. “Enough talk. He is a liability. A loose end.” He gestured to two burly men. “Suffocate him. Make it quiet.”

They were upon him in an instant, pressing a thick, musty cloth over his nose and mouth. Headmaster did not struggle. He felt the human body he inhabited begin to fail, the oxygen deprivation triggering its primal alarms. He let them believe it was working. He let his body go limp, his eyes rolled back.

“He’s gone,” one of the men grunted, checking for a pulse in the vessel he had deliberately stilled.

They carried his ‘corpse’ through the dense foliage towards the rushing sound of the river. As they swung his body to heave it into the dark water, Headmaster’s voice cut through the night, calm and clear. “The current is strong here. It will likely carry me several miles downstream before I wash ashore.”

The men froze, their blood turning to ice. One of them screamed, fumbling for a pistol. A shot rang out, slamming into Headmaster's chest. He grunted, the impact a jarring shock to his system, and fell into the churning water.

The cold water was a catalyst, jolting his consciousness into full, furious focus. As the current pulled him under, a memory, sharp and painful, surfaced.

A year after the destruction of the Aslan Institute. A foggy Chicago dockyard. Josh, older, harder, his eyes burning with a hatred that had only fermented.

"You destroyed everything," Josh hissed, a scalpel glinting in his hand. "But my patrons…the ones who funded my work…they still see my value. They protect me."

Headmaster stood, ready for a fight.

Josh smiled, a cold, terrible thing. "Oh, I'm not going to kill you tonight. Revenge is best served cold. My protectors are old men. They will die of old age. And when the last one breathes his last, and I have all their resources…I am coming for you, Headmaster. I will have eternity, and I will make you watch."

The memory fueled him. He would not fall to a vengeful human, and he would certainly not fall to these parasitic alien scavengers.

His telekinetic power, a subtle force he usually wielded with precision, now erupted. The ropes around his wrists and ankles unwove themselves in an instant, the individual strands snapping outward like whips. One of the strands wrapped around the ankle of the man who had shot him, yanking him off his feet and dragging him, screaming, into the turbulent river.

"He's alive!" Mr. Smart shrieked, firing his pistol.

Headmaster was already moving, pushing himself onto the muddy bank. Bullets whizzed past him, tearing into the foliage. He was fast, but the shot to his chest and the waterlogged weight of his clothes slowed him. A searing pain exploded in his leg as a bullet found its mark, and he crumpled to the ground.

Mr. Smart advanced, his face a grotesque mask of triumph. "No more tricks, mister." He raised the pistol, aiming directly for Headmaster's forehead.

That was the trigger. The ultimate violation. The destruction of the core vessel. Self-preservation, an instinct as old as life itself, overrode all restraint.

Headmaster didn't raise a hand. He simply looked at Mr. Smart, and a wall of invisible force, raw and concussive, blasted outwards from his mind.

It was not a focused push. It was a detonation.

The air itself seemed to solidify and then shatter. Mr. Smart, his gun, and the other aliens surrounding him were lifted off their feet and thrown backwards as if hit by a truck. The sound

was a deep WHOMP that silenced the jungle for a moment. Trees shuddered, and bodies slammed into trunks or landed in broken heaps.

The effort, combined with his injuries, was too much. The world swam, and Headmaster's consciousness fled into a welcoming darkness.

An hour later, he awoke to the beam of a flashlight. The pain in his leg and chest was a dull, managed throb. He was propped against a tree, a field bandage already wrapped tightly around his thigh.

Standing over him were two men in impeccably tailored black suits, their faces impassive. They looked utterly out of place in the Nigerian jungle.

"Headmaster," the lead one said, his voice a neutral baritone. "We monitored the energy surge. A rather…significant telekinetic event."

Headmaster said nothing. He knew their kind. The quiet custodians, the cleaners of messes too strange for ordinary governments.

"The hostile extraterrestrial organisms have been apprehended," the other man continued. "All seventeen of them. The human remains in their cold storage have been recovered. Families will be notified that their missing loved ones were found after a tragic…accident."

It was a lie, but a clean one. A necessary fiction to preserve the sanity of the world.

Headmaster looked past them, towards the distant lights of the town. He thought of the fear, the broken trust, the empty spaces left at dinner tables. The clean-up was one thing. The healing was another.

"I would like to stay," Headmaster said, his voice rough. "The town…they will need help to recover. A teacher can be a steadying presence."

The men in black exchanged a glance. A silent communication passed between them. The lead agent gave a curt nod.

"Very well. Your cover remains. We will be watching."

They turned and melted back into the shadows as silently as they had arrived. Headmaster was left alone with the sounds of the returning jungle and the weight of a community's trauma. The war for this world was not fought in grand battles, but in quiet, dusty towns like this. And for now, this was his post.

It was the year 2029, and the atmosphere in the Munich conference hall was sterile, chilled by overzealous air conditioning. Headmaster, now using the name Dr. Theophilus Clifford, listened with growing disquiet. On stage, an American professor named Farouk was presenting a paper on "Localized Spacetime Metric Systems." To the assembled physicists, it was theoretical, speculative. To Headmaster, it was a precise, terrifying blueprint for wormhole generation.

During the Q&A, Headmaster approached the microphone. “Professor Farouk,” he began, his voice cutting through the academic murmur. “Your equations presuppose a stability factor that the Casimir-derived exotic matter cannot provide outside of a near-perfect vacuum. The gravitational shear alone would tear any vessel apart. What is the practical application you are not disclosing?”

Farouk, a man with a politician's smile, didn't flinch. “Dr. Clifford, we are in the realm of pure theory. The practicalities are, of course, for future generations to solve.” The answer was smooth, rehearsed, and a complete lie. Headmaster could feel the dissembling like a foul odor.

He spent the next week digging. Farouk' funding came from a labyrinth of US Department of Defense sub-contractors. On the surface, it was typical, shadowy government R&D. But it disturbed him profoundly. His own civilization, immeasurably more advanced, had been extinguished while tampering with the fundamental architecture of the universe. Humanity, who could barely manage a sustainable orbit, was now playing with fire that could consume galaxies.

He had to return to America. He hadn't set foot there since the 1880s. His journey took him to a quiet, overgrown cemetery in the deep south. He stood before a weathered gravestone, the name long since eroded by wind and rain. This was the first human, a casualty of a fever he could not, at the time, comprehend how to cure. The body he had borrowed. He placed a single stone on the marker, a gesture of quiet, perpetual apology.

The campus of Professor Farouk' university was a shock of manicured green and brutalist concrete. Headmaster confronted him in his cluttered office, but the man was a fortress of affable evasion. As he was politely shown out, Headmaster’s eyes caught a symbol etched on a folder hastily shoved into a drawer. It was a circle containing a stylized spiral, reminiscent of a galaxy being consumed from within. A cold dread, a memory from a dead world, settled in his gut.

Leaving the building, the familiar sensation of being watched prickled at his senses. It was a professional, patient presence.

Using an old, carefully guarded contact, he secured a meeting with Senator Vaughn, the man who had championed the funding allocation. The senator’s office was all dark wood and American flags, a stark contrast to the cosmic implications of their discussion.

“Dr. Clifford,” the senator said, his smile not reaching his eyes. “I appreciate your concern, but the details of Project Icarus are classified for reasons of national security. I'm afraid that's all I can say.”

It was time to bypass the politics. As the senator stood to usher him out, Headmaster focused, preparing to gently brush against the man's mind, to find the truth behind the placid lies.

The telepathic probe never landed.

A high-pitched crack echoed in the wood-paneled room. A searing impact, not a bullet but a specialized energy projectile, struck Headmaster in the back. His nervous system screamed, his telepathic focus shattered into a million shards of static. He collapsed, paralyzed, his body convulsing on the expensive Persian rug.

Through blurred vision, he saw men in unmarked black tactical gear enter silently. They moved with an efficiency that was almost robotic. As they hoisted his limp form, his eyes met the senator's. There was no surprise there, only a cold, satisfied finality.

He was carried out a service entrance and thrown into the back of a black van, its siren emitting a single, silent pulse of light. The doors slammed shut, plunging him into darkness. The van pulled away, carrying him not just from the senator's office, but from the world he had tried, for so long, to understand and protect.

The world swam back into focus as a big baton slammed into his face. Headmaster sputtered, the shock jolting him from the sedative's grip. He was strapped to a metal chair in the center of a vast, echoing warehouse. The air hummed with the potent smell of ozone and the deep, resonant thrum of a fusion reactor coming online. Before him, a colossal ring of polished metal and crystalline circuitry was powering up, its center shimmering with nascent, impossible energies.

And then he saw him. Leaning on a cane, his face a roadmap of a century of bitterness, was Josh.

Headmaster didn't struggle. Instead, a dry, mirthless laugh escaped his lips. “Josh. I should have known. The intellect, the resources, the sheer, stubborn arrogance. It was always you.”

Josh’s smile was a thin, cruel line. “You look well, Headmaster. Time has been less kind to me.” He gestured to his aged body. “My Regina… she died five years after you destroyed my first life's work. A slow, painful withering. But your blood… the traces that contaminated the lab…it had properties. It couldn't save her, but it elongated my lifespan. A final, bitter gift from you.”

He stepped closer, his eyes blazing with a messianic fire. “But I have learned. I am not trying to change humanity from within anymore. I am opening the door! This wormhole will connect Earth to the galaxy. Humanity will take its rightful place among the stars, trading, learning, evolving. And you…” He gestured to the shimmering portal. “You can go home. Search for survivors of your race. This is a victory for both of us!”

For a fleeting, heart-wrenching moment, Headmaster was taken aback. The idea that any of his people might have survived the gravitational cataclysm that consumed their world was a hope he had buried eons ago. But the feeling was instantly crushed by cold, hard reality.

“Josh, you are a fool,” Headmaster said, his voice straining against his bonds. “Wormholes are not a subway system! They are foundational mysteries, and traversing them requires a mental stability your species has not yet achieved. Your minds are young, chaotic. You haven't unlocked the higher cognitive functions needed to process the trans-dimensional data stream. You will not journey to the stars; you will shatter your own consciousness!”

“Fear-mongering relics of a dead age!” Josh spat, turning his back. He raised a hand to the technicians in the control booth. “Activate the primary sequence! Take the reactor to one hundred percent!”

The hum became a deafening roar. The center of the ring tore open, not into darkness, but into a vortex of blinding, chaotic light. It was beautiful and terrifying.

And then the screaming started.

It wasn't a scream of pain, but of utter, profound mental disintegration. A young scientist clawed at his own eyes, babbling in a language that didn't exist. A soldier dropped his rifle and began smashing his head against a console, over and over. The raw, unstructured knowledge of the cosmos was flooding their unprepared minds, burning out their sanity like a power surge in a simple circuit.

Only Josh, his genius intellect a fragile dam against the torrent, remained standing, his knuckles white on his cane as he stared into the abyss. “Just a few more seconds until it becomes self-sustaining!”

This was his chance. Gritting his teeth, Headmaster focused his telekinetic energy inward. With a sickening, wet pull, the specialized bullet was forced from his abdomen and clattered to the floor. He then turned the power on his restraints, the metal groaning and snapping apart.

He stood, wounded but resolute. Josh turned, his face a mask of fury, and raised a pistol.

“Let it go, Josh!” Headmaster yelled over the psychic storm. “Your pain over Regina is a ghost! Do not let it compel you to destroy your entire race! This is not salvation; it is a mass lobotomy!”

Josh fired. Headmaster deflected the first two rounds with shimmering telekinetic shields, but the third caught him in the thigh, sending him to one knee. Josh advanced, the gun steady. “You took my future. Now I am taking humanity's!”

There was no more time for words. Headmaster gathered every ounce of his remaining strength and unleashed a massive, concussive telekinetic blast. It wasn't aimed to kill, but to incapacitate. The wave hit Josh, lifting him off his feet and slamming him into the base of the reactor console. He slumped, unconscious.

But it was too late. A deep, stable thrum resonated from the wormhole. It was self-sustaining. On the floor, Josh began to laugh, a broken, delirious sound, before his mind too finally succumbed and he fell silent.

Headmaster collapsed, the warehouse now a charnel house of the mind. He saw his lost world again, the crystalline cities, the silent songs of his people. He felt the immense, eternal grief of being the last of his kind. And he knew what he had to do. To protect his new, chaotic, beautiful, and flawed world, he had to let that grief go.

He closed his eyes. He reached out with his telepathy and his telekinesis, merging them into a single, final act of will. He wrapped his mind around the core of the overloaded fusion reactor, feeling its savage power burn his consciousness. With a monumental effort, he telekinetically ripped it from its housing and hurled it, a miniature sun, directly into the heart of the wormhole.

The resulting explosion was not of matter, but of reality itself. The wormhole, forced to contain the catastrophic energy of its own power source, collapsed in on itself with a sound like a universe sighing. The silence that followed was absolute.

Everyone was dead. Headmaster, bleeding from his leg and abdomen, used the last spark of his telepathy to send a single, focused call into the void. Come. Then, he fainted.

Six months later, Headmaster stood in a quiet cemetery, leaning on a cane. He placed a single white flower on each of two adjacent graves: Josh and Regina.

“Your pain is over,” he whispered. “I will not let it define this world's future.”

He looked up at the vast, blue sky, now silent and safe.

“I will help them, Josh. I will help them achieve greatness. But they must learn. They must earn it. As all children of the universe must.” A gentle breeze rustled the leaves. “And as their Headmaster, I will be here, waiting to teach. Whenever they are finally ready.”

S.K. Stewart is an MFA student at the University of New Mexico where she currently serves as an English and creative writing instructor. She is also the 2024 recipient of Sewanee's Tennessee Williams Award for Creative Writing in fiction. As a mixed-race woman and proud southern lesbian, she makes it a point in her writing to hammer away at the monolithic idea of the Lost Cause South.

We Bury Our Dead by S.K. Stewart

We met back at the house after the funeral to start clearing out the last of mom's things. The lawyer said he would meet us there the next morning, and we decided we would start the packing process after he told us how she'd handled the will. As far as I knew, it had been months since any of us had been in the house, years maybe. I tried to recall my own final visit with mom as I sat in my car, the electric engine providing a quiet hum beneath the day's rainfall beyond the windshield. In an hour, the rain would stop, and the air would grow so humid, it would be impossible to stand outside without becoming delirious from the heat and moisture. I hoped the twins were already inside, that they were diligent enough to remember this facet of our hometown, but the absence of their rusted pickup told me otherwise. The haze began to fill my head, and any memory I attempted to draw from its place on the shelves became clouded. Vague impressions drifted into my mind of water, rotting wood, my mother's voice. Corrupted by the fog, the memory refused to take shape, and I gave up. The twins would arrive at any time, and we would no longer have the privilege of refusing; cold clarity waited just beyond the threshold.

Taking these precious moments of time to myself, I stared at the narrow, three story Victorian in front of me, its facade long grown over with tropical foliage and kudzu. Mom had tried for two years to beat back the invasive vines, but as its history predicted, it swallowed the house eventually. What most people don't realize about the stuff is that it's edible; in seasons past, when the garden failed to produce, mom would cut down a vine and follow it to its root, digging up the tuber to use in stew. I couldn't begin to count the times she washed the greens, insisting it's *just like spinach* or that the cooked tissues of its harder bits were a delicacy more filling than potatoes. Mom refused the grocery, even the locally-owned store, and when hard times came, it was daily meals of kudzu, huckleberry, and dandelion and nights filled with growling stomachs and restless legs. The windshield wipers slowed, and I could see its face better, this monument to my mother's dissidence.

It had been nine months since I'd last entered its green maw; mom had broken her arm trying to brace for the hurricane season, and she needed help finishing barricading the doors and carrying everything from the first floor into the upper levels. I told her then that she needed to leave, that I couldn't be here for every emergency, that she'd wind up dead in this house. She laughed. I'd left.

Pulled from my reverie by the growl of a real engine, I watched as the twins pulled up beside me, waving at me with ridiculous grins despite all three of us still in our funeral black. I squinted, and through the haze of rain I could imagine Marcy in the truck's cab with them, imagine the day they'd first rolled into our lives. I shut my eyes and turned off the car. As I climbed out and slammed the door shut behind me, I heard the window roll down and Ellen's voice calling out in her high-pitched whine.

“What’re we gonna’ do with all Cath’s stuff?” Her tone was jovial, and Marcus snorted and huffed behind her. It was a family joke that mom’s hoarding tendencies were only kept in check by Marcy, and when she died six years ago, the house seemed to swell from the sudden influx of plants, antiques, and tchotchkes. There was an unspoken understanding that the next few days would be spent sifting through junk and trying not to feel like we were desecrating the grave of our dead mothers. It was a wonderful way to begin the grieving process. I pulled Ellen into a hug while Marcus shut off the engine and came around to where we stood in the mist, the rain already beginning to lighten as the heat of the day picked up. We stared up at the house, a daunting shell of an impossible task. I thought of how the twins had looked at me while I gave the eulogy, how I’d noticed a sprig of gray hair in Marcus’s afro. Mom had always loved his determination to wear his hair natural even in the dead heat of summer, even as the sun bore down and scorched us working in the garden. I took the first step forward, then another, and soon my younger siblings were trailing behind me as I pulled the spare key from my pocket. I knew the door would be unlocked anyway, mom was like that, but I wanted to remember its impression on my skin, the metal teeth sharp and hot in my sweating palm. The door swung open, the hinges groaning from the years of water damage, from the swelling and shrinking with the seasons. The dusty, earthy smell of soil and dried plant matter drifted from the house’s open mouth, and we took a final look at one another before stepping across the threshold.

The house already felt dead though mom had been gone for less than 48 hours. Things moved fast these days, decay now setting into bodies as though the flesh had died weeks earlier. She’d spent a day alone in this house before the neighbor called for a wellness check, and already her skin had gone soft, the fat separating and seeping while the humid air and little bugs began their work. I didn’t let the twins see her. I’d been called first, the next of kin, and when I’d gone to the morgue I knew I couldn’t let anyone see her like that. It wasn’t our mother anymore, this melted candle of a woman. She would’ve wanted everyone to know that’s what death looks like, what nature does to a body, what it means to be taken back; she didn’t know what she’d look like, though, and I think if she could’ve seen her face, how her skin sagged and the jelly of her eyes had been punctured by the mouthparts of a hundred tiny bugs, she would agree with my decision.

The house itself seemed in its own state of decay. I traced my hand along the permanent waterline stained into the plaster, shoulder high and dense from the yearly flooding, freezing, and frying. We still got all four seasons in Alabama, or what’s left of it as mom used to say, but they were rapid, brutal. To hear her tell it, the years of the collapse were unpredictable, ice creeping into the tomatoes one day then boiling from within the next. I know my mother, how she bent the truth, hoping to rouse her countrymen to the frontlines of the climate fight. Still, I remember those early winters of my childhood, the years when the world was just starting to stabilize into what it would become. The snow could pile meters high, trapping us in the house until spring. Mom would tell me Alabama never got that kind of snow when she was growing up, and I believe her. Now fall and winter are brief in our hometown, but snow still falls with a vengeance for weeks before relenting once more to the baking sun. Most of the year was somewhere on the spectrum of constant rain, either dipping into sleeting mire or settling for poaching the inhabitants alive.

In the foyer, I approached the battered buffet cabinet, felt its rough wood grain under my skin and pulled back before it could stick me with a mold-eaten splinter. Too heavy and awkward, the cabinet stayed put year after year, its treated wood decaying slowly with every flood. I pulled

open one of the lower doors, bracing myself against its body with the effort of separating its swollen wood which no longer fit into itself properly. Inside, the bags still sat, their weatherproof red bright among the earthtones of the house. Mom had stashed these here from the time I was seven, maybe even before, but that was when the drills began. These were *bug out bags,* as mom called them, filled with emergency materials should we need to flee the house. Each pack was around twenty-five pounds and the size of a torso, and she insisted I practiced running from my bedroom, grabbing a pack, and escaping into the woods behind our yard where we would meet up should something separate us. When Marcy and the twins moved in, she made packs for them too, and soon, it was a family affair practicing for the already come-and-gone apocalypse. Though the cabinet stayed in place, we moved the bags upstairs when hurricane season came every year, until we kids moved out, that is. The first time I came home to visit after heading for a job in Chicago post-graduation, I was surprised to see the bags still behind the lower doors. I asked mom if there had been no flooding this year, she said there had, and I questioned the purpose of the packs if they were left to the elements.

“They’re waterproof bags, Corry,” she told me, exasperated by my concern as if she hadn’t been the one to instill it. I told her that’s not what waterproof means, but she waved me off. Now, I pulled out one of these ruined bags, mold embedded in the stitches. The main zipper wouldn’t open past a few inches, so I tore it from its metal tooth track and pawed through the soggy remains of freeze-dried foods, life straw packaging, and a wilderness foraging handbook. I shoved the carcass back into the cabinet under the row of drawers, and I chafed to think what was inside those too, the mementos of our childhoods lost to the shit-filled floodwaters that ravaged the house yearly.

Ellen found the first real loss as we made our way deeper into the house, a shrill, drawn-out wail of *oh no!* breaking the silence. Marcus and I hurried to find her at the backdoor, asking her what the trouble was.

“Mom’s monkey tail,” she said, her voice pitiful. She had pulled a hanging planter from the ceiling, a withered mass of mush trailing from the pot in her hands. It was unrecognizable, but we knew by its location that it was mom’s prized jungle cactus, fifty years old and dense with soft spines and meter-long appendages. When Marcy died, we had each taken on parts of mom’s plant collection to lighten her workload. Without a second pair of hands, she would need to focus all of her energy on the garden. Not only had she relied on the abundance it provided for herself and her family, but over the years, the surrounding community had grown dependent on her devout mutual aid efforts. More than 70% of our hometown ate the produce from our little homestead, the remaining populace farmers themselves. It was bitter work even when there were five of us to tend to the weeding, pruning, and harvesting, and imagining that mom would soon be the sole laborer made my stomach turn. Two years later, I’d returned to help rehome the rest of her indoor plants, but we agreed that the monkey’s tail could stay. It was a cactus, after all, and a single low-maintenance plant in an otherwise empty house seemed an easy compromise. Now, this too had shrivelled and softened, and as Ellen placed it on the floor, I could see the residue of mineral buildup gray against her dark skin. The terracotta made a dull thunk, and I turned away, finding it impossible to look at such a clear remnant of my mother left to rot.

“Let’s move upstairs,” I said to no one in particular. Still, I could see Marcus nod from the corner of my eye, and as I began to move, I heard the twins’ footsteps echoing my own. The air was sweeter as we moved to the second floor, the staircase plush with too much give as we each

settled our weight on the warped wood. I wondered how mom had carried on for so many years, how none of the steps had crumbled beneath her in the constant rearranging and floodwater. As we reached the top of the stairs, I was reminded by the missing chunk of wood and fresh stain that it had. I leaned down, pressed a hand to the rust-colored splotch and the thin trail of gore which fell away below. Marcus and Ellen paused, still a few steps behind, and I knew from their stillness that they understood what we were seeing. In the silence, the house seemed to groan out its own lamentation for this vile act of treason, as if begging for forgiveness, absolution. I stood and carried on, reaching the second floor landing and preparing for the real trial. Mom clearly hadn't moved her things back downstairs after storm season ended, and now we would face the full scope of her living tomb. I could feel the twins at my back, their breath heavy and warm against my neck. None of us wanted to open the door, to pass through the veil and reckon with the extent of our own neglect. It had been enough to see her mangled face, her weather-stained walls, her rotting plant. Now, we would see the life to which we consigned her, each of us abandoning her as time went on. I felt nauseous, angry. The guilt felt unfair even as I placed it on our shoulders. I thought of the years of absence, of toiling for a thankless community, of the vitriol thrown at her and splattered on us as collateral. The doorknob was damp as I turned it, and the door swung open with a guttural sound, releasing a new wave of stench. I covered my nose and mouth and heard the twins gasp and gag. Yes, whatever was here was far worse, and now it was time to face it.

II

Every house smells different. Even if all of the scented attributes remain the same –patchouli incense, fresh linen cleansing wipes, rosemary and lavender hung to dry– the house will still, inexorably, smell different. The place of skin and sweat, of hair and fabric sifting into thin layers of dust in hard to reach corners, even the kinds of garbage sitting in the bin, it mixes into something wholly new and impossible to recreate. As such, it is often better to describe the scent of a home as it relates to feeling, to emotion and memory and inhabiting bodies. My mother's home had been heavy, despite being very clean, and filled a person with a sense of earthy abundance. It was often overwhelming coming to visit and walking into the near-tangible wall of smell: damp soil, citrus, laundry, a faint impression of joints smoked not inside the house, but near enough that the heady molecules of marijuana settled into upholstery, into my mother's fingertips. It was impossible to separate this barrier of smell from my mother herself, but there was a distinct difference, and I'd always wondered how much of the scent was the house, how much was Marcy, and how much was my mom. Now, opening the door to the second floor living room, I knew the answer was lost forever.

What remained was an overwhelming stench of decay. The room was packed tightly with pillars of books, magazines, and research papers. Jars of brownish water topped some of the stacks, some containing once-living material, others sealed with black wax and stamped with dried herbs. Still others sat huddled in corners, no lid to provide a barrier between the liquid and the air, allowing its putrescence to fill the room and sink into the fabric of curtains and throw pillows. What exactly this liquid *was* was unclear and, as far as we could parse, non-uniform. As we moved deeper into the labyrinth of reference texts and began examining the jars, a startling truth began to dawn on each of us. It was piss. Not in all the jars, likely not even in most, but at least two of the unsealed vessels were identifiable as urine from the sharp smell and more amber

shade of the liquid. We didn't speak about the discovery, merely passed the jar from hand to hand, a new fatigue invading our bodies. The weight of the room sat on my shoulders, increasing with every dour discovery. Ellen's hips brushed one of the book towers, sending it clattering to the floor, and within it we found rat droppings, bite marks, and bug legs. Marcus revealed a corner which had been enclosed behind two piles of *National Geographic,* only to find a wealth of dead mice and their nest of chewed wires and stuffing. It was grim adventuring, and while mom certainly had an affinity for collection, this was far beyond the scope I'd believed her capable. Only nine months ago, this had still been a home, still resembling the place in which the tableau of childhood could remain. How could this have happened so quickly?

I supposed it wasn't unreasonable to imagine an intersection at which mom's collecting and the necessary centralization of items during storm season became this unheeded mess of things. She was, after all, only one person and growing frailer by the day the last time I saw her. Still, this was extreme, and the image of her drowning in this mass of obsession and death was so functionally at odds with my view of my mother that I couldn't bear to imagine further. I wanted to fall to my knees, to sob hard enough my eyes hurt. The room groaned underfoot as we found pile after pile of research, artwork, and memories. I pulled a paper from one of these piles after noticing its plastic border only to realize it was my own birth certificate, stained and creased. My mother had always been obsessive, often to a point of cleanliness and moral pontification about community, but this was something else entirely. She had been swallowed, it seemed.

I want to make it clear that my mother wasn't a monster. She loved us very deeply even from within the obsession. She was a dedicated woman and a dedicated mom. When I think of her, I like to think of summertime. I like to remember her in overalls and a cowboy hat, a pair of pruning shears in hand and a forehead covered in soil from swiping away sweat. It is warm, and she is smiling. I laugh and run through the garden, picking sweet tomatoes from the vine and freezing in her gaze before giving a mischievous giggle and running deeper into the mass of woven plant material she tended to so carefully. I am six. She has not been lambasted by news outfits as some commie-witch-psycho; she is my mother. Standing in the second floor living room amidst a maze of books, bugs, and piss, I could not reconcile this image of her. So total was the disintegration of herself that I questioned whether that version of my mother, the one who was a hippie, sure, but was generally in touch with reality, ever existed. Perhaps I was looking at her with rose colored glasses, remembering the time before everything began to escalate and accelerate as the world collapsed. Perhaps it was a fabrication, that I made it all up to pretend that my mother was not what she became. I like to think of it differently, though. Instead, we are girls together, holding tightly to ourselves and our happiness while the outside world crumbles away at our doorstep. Her obsessions became necessity, moral and environmental imperative, and I was her supporter, her biggest fan and greatest mirror of her failures. I wonder if this is what all daughters are to their mothers.

Marcus knocked over one of the jars, upsettingly, one of the unsealed piss-jars. He scrambled to right it, jerked his hand back as he remembered what the substance inside was. The smell was piercing and foul, and it was quickly soaking into the rug and floorboards beneath. We'd made it to the center of the room where the coffee table still resided in front of a sofa now bowing in the middle from the weight of books stacked on its cushions. I stared at the darkening stain and tried to remember another version of my mother.

When I was nineteen, I failed out of art school. I'd been told my work lacked identity. *Of course it did*, was my first thought. I was a teenager; I had no idea who I was. Still, the question sunk deeper. Relationships began to splinter, depression would set it, and I would recognize that I had spent my life reconstructing identity after identity while due dates passed me by. My mom understood that. She'd brought me home, got me help. The performance dropped away, and she was a mother scared for her daughter. I was here, and it was comfort, love, and support; the pressure was suspended. It wouldn't last, but it was beautiful.

The first truly important thing we found in that room was mom's banking information, although *found* is being generous. Marcus had picked up a book on ecology from its place on the coffee table and there, in a manila folder labelled as "money stuff" was, among other things, her mobile banking login information and her social security card. The title of the folder, "money stuff," was written in mom's rough script, something akin to a doctor's shorthand without the effort of code. Once we knew what was in the folder, I surprised myself with a moment of stern possession.

"Put that down," I said, "now." Marcus dropped the folder, unused to this sudden act of authority and obedience. Both twins looked at me from their places in the room; I still stood at the threshold, on the staircase landing.

"We should wait," I added, my tone softer now, "wait for tomorrow, for the lawyer." The two shared a look before Ellen rolled her eyes and turned to me.

"As if we need him," she said, an edgy undertone creeping into her breezy attitude. I looked at both of them, not understanding.

"Cory," she started, her voice unbelieving, maybe even patronizing, "we know where all the money's gonna go." I was baffled. Mom was a very private person in only one respect. She resented speaking about money and had refused, even at my prompting, to discuss any plans for her posthumous affairs. I started to say as much when Ellen cut into my thoughts again.

"We all know you were the favorite, Cor."

I was stunned, embarrassed, and I felt the heat rising in my face, cooking my skin from inside. The two were chuckling, clearly aware that a joke had been caught out, that something they'd shared as reality, as simple fact, had finally dawned on their older sister. I spat back:

"As if you two weren't Marcy's favorite." It was petty, reactive. I felt like a kindergartner on a playground full of eighth graders, threatened and taunted. Marcus threw up his hands.

"Maybe Ellen but never me," he laughed, "I made too much trouble for mom." I dropped my eyes to the floor, blinked away the burning shame and let my breath carry my anger away.

"It doesn't matter," I said, deflated. "They loved all of us." I had to pause and take a shaky breath to regroup. "Our mothers loved us. Besides, we all know where Cathy put her energies. She probably didn't leave us much at all beyond the house itself, maybe not even that. Beyond reproach," I ended with a sardonic chuckle, a snort of air and a head bob.

"Well," Ellen rejoined, "maybe not *beyond* reproach." I smiled, thinking this an olive branch, an acknowledgement of just how bad things could get in the household. Instead, when I met her

gaze, she was guarded. Again, I was on the outside looking in, picking up fast that some unspoken boundary had been crossed. I didn't say, moreso felt the word *what,* transmitted it through the room with emphatic silence alone. Then came the disgusting feeling of recognition like slime creeping down my back and into my jeans, cold, sticky, damp.

I had heard the story a thousand times in a hundred different ways, so I'd like to start with what my mother told me. When mom was twenty-nine, she decided she wanted a baby. Rather, she had always wanted a baby and at twenty-nine had decided she was tired of waiting for the puzzle pieces to fit together perfectly. She'd refer to this flippantly, saying there was no reason to delay one part of her life plan just because another wasn't turning out like she'd expected. She had always planned to get married and have her kids before thirty, and with the clock ticking, she'd say she didn't want to risk the regret, risk never having children at all. Self-insemination was rare but not unheard of, and she didn't have to put much effort into the issue of conception. A one-time donor, some appointments with her doctor, and she was off to the races gestating her little miracle. This was how she phrased it, at least. The first time I heard this story, I was four and didn't know or understand the words she was using, always so clinical and detached. What was clear, still, was the urgency of want. I was an object of desire from before I ever drew breath, and for ten years of life, it would be just the two of us in our ragged Victorian home. I spent my early life glued to my mother, always wanting to be touched, held, pet. Equally, she always wanted me, whistling for me to come sit with her on the porch, to feel my head against her chest and know I was hearing her heartbeat. We were needy, touch-starved bodies who had finally found each other, and for ten years we were cloistered together in never-ending love, touch, and abundance.

There is, however, another story. This one goes a bit differently, leaves a sour taste in one's mouth. Instead of some paragon of motherhood, my mother is a beast. She is the face of entitlement, of hypocrisy. Why would a woman so focused on the end of the world, so sure it was coming in a choking death, why would she *ever* bring a child into this world? The rumors spread about *that lesbian* having a baby on her own. She was something unnatural, something defiant. This bred whispers of accusation, that she was a Satanist, a witch, that she had unseemly desires, that she was dangerous. For a while it seemed it had been cannibalism, and when she didn't eat me as a baby, they had to regroup. By the time I was reaching middle school, full-bore panic gripped the media about how my mother was a pedophile in alignment with Satan. Goody Catherine has been seen dancing with the Devil, has been seen letting her hands linger on the child, familiar with her body. I realized now that the rumors hadn't just sprung up to destroy my tween years but had been brewing for a decade; mom had tried to keep me away from it all. At first, I defended my mother to the jeering children. Then I turned spiteful. I'd spit at people, fire off that my mother kept them fed. Finally, I just went quiet.

The twins knew this story, and they knew it wasn't true. Still, it seemed a favorite string to pull when they wanted to start a fight, get on their older sister's nerves. I swallowed the anger rising in my throat, churning in my belly, and took another deep breath.

"Still, we shouldn't touch anything that has to do with money until the lawyer gets here," my tone was level, gentle, slow. Ellen rolled her eyes. I sighed and thought to myself, *beyond reproach.*

III

Of the three rooms separate from the living space on the second floor, only one remained in use, this being, of course, our mothers' bedroom. The other two rooms had been sealed away in the years since Marcy's death, the first of which was the solarium, as Mom called it. The room was situated at the back of the house and had great, large windows along the walls which faced into the garden, and it had held the majority of Mom's collection of houseplants, many of which she'd had since her twenties and were, to her, near as children as ourselves. The solarium room had been a sort of sanctuary, a way for Mom to spend all of her time outdoors after the outdoors became miserable and sweltering. I had spent hours in that room with her, breathing in the fresh, cool air and letting the easy scent of cut greenery to seep into my skin, my hair as I watched her prune and coddle the endless specimens of philodendron, monstera, and pothos.

When we'd gutted it after Marcy died, tried to alleviate some of Mom's workload, she'd shut the door and locked it. The first time I visited the house after the initial dispersal of her collection, I noticed she'd drawn a white X on the door in chalk, and when I looked more closely, the wood of the door and frame now had a seam made of a sort of insulation material, sealing away the room altogether. How stale the air must be now, dead and entombed in that glass coffin.

The second room to shut its door for good was my mother's library room, and I had been the impetus for that one only two years prior to her slipping down the stairs. In truth, the name "library room" suggests a sense of grandeur and orderliness, and while that had once been the case, the last time I saw inside the room, it was essentially little more than a wall of books in piles like bricks fit neatly into rows. I had asked mom how she found anything in the solid mass of pages and hardback covers, and she'd shown me how she liked to pull over a stepping stool, crawl over the piles until she found the section she sought, and dig until whichever elusive title revealed itself. I stood awestruck as she demonstrated, shaking my head in horror at the sound of shifting weight, paper sliding against plastic dust jackets, imagined my mother at the bottom of an avalanche of memoirs, textbooks, and novels. She scoffed at my trepidation.

"You know me Cor," she'd laugh, patting her hips, "I'm sturdy!" She'd always been a strong woman, her body shaped by years of manual labor and ruddy survivalism, but it's difficult to look back at that moment knowing that only a year and some change later, she'd be alone with a broken bone, and nine months after that, she'd slip and fall on a rotted step, hit her head, and fall asleep to never wake again. I'd helped her pull a good number of books she deemed vital from the hoard and made her promise not to use the room any further until we could sit down and carefully work through it together. As we passed the door in the hall leading from the living space to the rooms, the small dresser Mom and I had placed there still sat, barring entry. Our mothers' bedroom was the last room on the second floor. The air grew sour as we approached, and Ellen breached the silence which had hung like a shawl over our expedition since the mentioning of the old rumors. Her voice was small, childlike.

"I don't know that I can go in there," she said before I could reach for the doorknob. I raised my hand, let it drop. I turned to her, mumbled that she didn't have to, but we both knew that wasn't true. We all had to, for ourselves and for each other. I let the silence drag out for a beat again then opened the door, releasing a new wave of sweet decay, a metal sting at its base. I looked back at the twins, took a deep breath, and pushed the door wide open.

The piles we'd come to expect by this point, and there were plenty more waiting in Mom's bedroom. The walls were hidden by ceiling-height columns of books, some looking more like journals with their leather bindings and titelless faces and spines. A deep musk of sour and decay hovered in the air, nearly tangible. I took a deep breath through my mouth in hopes of bypassing the smell, but instead the taste of death and rot bloomed in the back of my throat like fresh vomit. I covered my mouth and nose with a sleeve, hoping to filter the air just enough to make the room traversable, and the longer I lingered, gathering my strength to step across the threshold, the stronger a sickly sweet note of dried rose petals became beneath the stench. It was heavy, obtrusive, and as it mixed with the foul odor of a leaking corpse, I felt the sting of bile and the wash of saliva building up on my tongue. I blinked and forced myself forward, Markus at my heel, while Ellen decided to hang back.

"Someone's gotta be conscious to rescue you idiots when you pass out in that funk." She was trying to be funny, but I knew it was half hearted, and truthfully she simply couldn't bring herself to be so close to the heart of our grief. I made it to the bedside, squeezing myself between a wall of journals and the mattress. On the nightstand stood three more jars, these ones overfilled at some point passed, a red residue dried against their glass and staining the light wood of the table. Another of the leather journals sat next to them, a simple circle pressed into its cover. I delayed looking directly at the bed for as long as I could, but finally, my eyes came to rest on the sullied pillow beside me. There were rust colored stains, likely blood from the damage to the back of her head, but there were other stains too, the yellow-orange remnant of ooze, the blackish brown of involuntary expulsion, and God, how it reeked. Staring at the vaguely body shaped collection of bodily fluid and excrement stains, something deep inside of me cracked. It was as though reality itself were splitting, or that for the first time I could see the gap between reality and my memory. This was insane. I felt insane. My mother could not have died in that bed, could not be these streaks of human waste left for us to clean up.

Markus stood across from me, his hand resting on the other pillow, Marcy's. He shook his head, he, too, dumbstruck by what became of our parents' bedroom. My eyes drifted downward again, swept past the mattress to the floor, and it was then I saw another set of reddish stains. At first, I thought mom must have fallen again, perhaps while trying to crawl into bed concussed and injured. I thought of her ankle in the morgue, how the bone no longer met its socket. I sunk to a crouching position, went to touch the stain, but pulled my hand back. It wasn't a splotch, like I'd expected it to be, but streaks. The blood, I assumed still it was blood, had pooled to one side before whatever had been bloody or bleeding was seemingly pushed, or dragged, beneath the bed leaving four streaky lines of the stain in its wake. I lowered myself, coming to my hands and knees and leveling my head with the floor.

The smell of it was worse here, as though the stench of the room had sunk into a dense layer near the floor. It was sour and pungent, but through squinted eyes I saw it, a large lump around a foot from the edge of the bed. I reached for it, pulled my hand back with a yelp when my fingertips brushed it: fur. Markus asked what was wrong, what I'd found, but his voice was distant in my ears as the blood rushed to my head, making me dizzy from the heat, the reek of death, the fear. With a trembling arm, I reached back under the bed, felt for the soft brush of fur, and gripped my fingers into it, feeling the thing go taught from my pulling. Then, the weight of it registered. Even as I pulled on it, felt its shape under my palm, I could not recognize the animal, but I knew that it was, once, an animal. The head of a cat emerged, then its body, mangled and bent. I pulled

the wretched thing into my lap as I set myself on the floor, its limbs rigid in the cold cradle of death. I ran my hand over the beast and noticed movement in its bones, pressed on the small body's hind end and realized its back was broken. The spine bent in an odd angle, as though it had been crushed or folded backward until the bone, ligament, and muscle snapped. I wondered if it had been paralyzed from the injury, if it had happened before or after the creature's end.

I leveled its face with mine and felt another wave of horror crawl through my skin. In its mouth was the head of a cornhusk doll, the cat's jaws clamped just perfectly so that the pressure of its teeth kept the head from rolling out. I brushed a finger over the long, black hair sewn into the doll's head, wiry and straight. I touched a hand to my own matching wefts, the same dark head of hair my mother had. Amidst the accusations and finger pointing, there was one common refrain growing up: how much I looked like my mother. I was her twin, her mini-me, and at many points in my life, I'd shorn the hair from my head in hopes of distancing myself from her just an inch. When mom had seen my hair cropped to my ears after the first semester in Chicago, she'd shown me a picture of herself having done the very same thing her first semester of college.

"What the fuck is that?" Markus shouted, having made his way around the bed in the silence. I turned to him in a childlike muteness, sitting cross-legged with a corpse in my lap. He repeated the question, but all I could do was stare open-mouthed and shake my head in disbelief. He gestured at the animal, and in a dumb haze, I lifted the thing for him to see. He took an immediate step back, then another, covering his mouth and asking again and again what that fucking thing was. He was spiraling into hysterics by that point, and his growing instability shook my mind loose of its terror and shock. I shut my eyes, nodding gently and saying *I don't know what it is, Mark* until he stunned himself into silence. My head ached, a new throbbing taking up residence over my right eye and sending pulses of light scattering across my vision. I felt sick, old, like this final totem had severed the string of innocence that exists between a child and parent for good. There was no plausible deniability for the body in my hands. Our only indoor pet had died fifteen years prior, and mom had refused to bring another cat into the house because she couldn't bear the feeling of replacement.

"I think I need some air," I said, setting the body on the floor beside me and raising myself to my feet. Markus still stood, hands on his head, horrified by what I'd unearthed. I took his elbow softly, pulled him as I moved toward the door. He obeyed, mindlessly, trailing behind me through the narrow path. Ellen tried to ask, her face indignant.

"What was all that about?" She pressed, but I raised the hand not gripping Markus's elbow and shook my head.

"Not now," was all I could manage to hiss beneath the weight of the house and its contents. We pushed through the labyrinth of hoarded papers and books, moved down the staircase as though we were of one body. Night had fallen in the hours since we'd entered the house, and we burst into the dim twilight of the backyard, grateful for the fresh air yet drowning in its humid grasp. I let go of Markus's arm, let the twins take hold of each other, and sank to my knees in the moist grass. The stars had begun blinking to life above us, and far away, honeysuckle blooms clung to the dying summer air.

The darkness felt nice on my skin, the way it kissed and cajoled the soft parts of my face as I stared into the deepening sky, the first stars blinking to life and staring back. In another life, this feeling is what I associate most with my mother, and for those precious moments, I am living in the world she wanted to save. It always faded, however, and tonight, too, it fades into the grass, bleeding out of me in cool streams of tears and exhaustion. Soon I breathe only damp air and summer heat. Ellen's voice became distant, muffled by the humidity hanging like drying linens between us. She followed Markus closely, his stumbling trail of fear, followed his need to be as far as possible from the house. They always were too in-sync for my liking.

I stayed kneeling while the two of them talked, Ellen's hands on Markus's shoulders, coaching him to keep his eyes trained on her. The words were drowned by the wet cotton feeling in my ears, so I only caught a phrase here and there. It took a few minutes before I heard the words *talisman* and *witchcraft*, and when they came, I shut my eyes tight. My skin jumps, muscles twitching from the tension tying my flesh tighter against my bones and fat tissues. The wins went silent, and when I opened my eyes, they were staring into the darkened expanse of the back garden, mere silhouettes in the advancing twilight. Ellen was the first to move.

Her legs went quickly, a few long strides carried her far enough into the descending black that I could no longer see her face, her gestures, only saw the outline of a body moving fast. Then suddenly she was half as tall, and I knew he must've fallen to her knees too. I started moving, rising, the momentum of my lifting body carrying me toward the line of dark that was her. I tried to speak, to call out to her, but my mouth felt numb like after a long visit to the dentist. What came out of me was a mumbled shout of Ellen's name, then another grunt for attention. I stopped moving for a moment and shut my eyes, trying to take deep breath after deep breath and regain some control over the situation. The air was smothering against my nose and mouth, a wet rag and heavy hand pressing against me. I opened my eyes and moved still closer to Ellen, finally close enough to read her body. She sat on the ground, her legs bent beneath her and butt planted on the backs of her feet. She was reaching, half-pointing, to a spot of upturned earth. I bent into a squat beside her, lightly pressing my fingertips to her back. Her black dress was damp with sweat, and I could feel that sweat turning into humidity right under my skin. Her breath was shaky, and the sound coming from her throat was the beginning of a hoarse sob. I looked to where she was pointing and saw nothing of interest in the darkness, then, a glint, something metal. I stood, stepped closer, bent down again, my hand meeting the damp, loose soil as I traced the ground. Ellen's noises grew a bit, a few louder hums of unease. It was cool to the touch when my fingers finally found it. Then there were two of them, and as I clasped them between my fingers I understood from their shape exactly what I was holding: our mothers' wedding rings. An all-out wail broke from behind me as I dropped the rings to the ground. I shook and flexed my hand as if they'd singed my very flesh. Ellen's hand had retreated to her chest as she clutched at herself, face contorted from grief. Markus had joined us in the moments I'd spent searching, and he bent over his twin sister, holding her arms and pulling her body into his, eyes boring into the ground at my feet. I still stood on the upturned spot of dirt, and it took his fiery glare and his sister's agonized howls for me to understand what had happened.

I knew the twins had been back to the house two years ago, and as far as I knew, that was the last time either of them came to visit. I only ever heard mom's side of things, and it was tragic and frustrating, but ultimately had seemed no more than that. After the town's infrastructure and supply chains began their final crumble, the question of what to do with bodies of loved ones

became a bit more challenging. As funeral homes, mortuaries, and eventually morgues closed for business, and graveyards began to overfill, people would get creative with home burials, rites, and the like. For a time during our childhood, burying family members in the backyard or preparing a funeral pyre was normal practice. Then, as the town attempted to revitalize, restore structures of service, the idea of normal began to change again. Within the last decade, the stirrings of traditional graveyard and funeral homes began to settle into the town, and both of our mothers had now been buried under this new era of normal, though one not by her own volition, I'll permit.

Then, two years ago, Marcy's grave had been desecrated. At first, all mom would say was that vandals had taken their chance to strike a weak spot in the fledgling system. Then finally, she told me the real horror: Marcy's body had been taken.

Standing here now, I understood why she'd been so reluctant to mention it.

I knew the hot rushing feeling in the back of my throat well. I swallowed, pressed my lips tightly together, felt my stomach churn. My head swam in the wave of nausea which threatened to knock me to my knees. I shut my eyes, convinced that a moment of stillness could bring reprieve, that I could stave off the fear and anger and bile rising within me. Then I quickly knew this was more than that; Ellen's face had fallen open as she stared at me.

"Cor, you ok?" She asked the question quavering with a note of fear, like she was the final girl of a werewolf movie, and her boyfriend who got bitten two acts earlier is starting to change in front of her. She brushed Markus from her back and stood, then took a tentative step closer, and I again shut my eyes tight against the riotous sloshing and frothing I felt inside my abdomen.

"You're like, gray? Your lips are gray! Cory, are you alright?" I wanted to answer her, but I knew if I opened my mouth, something foul would spill out. I could feel it filling the pink warmth behind my teeth, pressing itself against my soft palate. Unwillingly, I gagged, then coughed. Watery blood spilled over my lips, but I knew that wasn't the worst of it.

It was solid, and it was lodged moving through my throat with every conclusion. Finally, it was in my mouth, over my lips, and onto the ground: an ear. A moment of silence passed before Ellen screamed. My eyes were filled with tears, and through that water filter I saw Marcus bring his hands to his head, shaking it in disbelief.

"We shouldn't have touched it," he said, mostly to himself, then, "you shouldn't have fucking touched it!" It took me a moment to realize he meant the doll, that he believed this was happening because I picked it up.

Then I was choking again, more blood, viscous and hot, pushing itself from my body. Another solid thing wormed its way up my throat, feeling as though it were crushing the soft delicate parts of me as it climbed. It fell from my mouth with a dull thud, and I stared for a moment at the impossible thing, a thumb attached to the lower part of a palm. I shook my head and began crying. I couldn't understand, didn't have time to, as blinding hot pain shot through my body. I would swear I'd been skewered, that a white-hot poker was lodged into my intestines and swirled like a straw in a milkshake. More blood pushed itself over my lips, bits of soft tissue and clots getting stuck as they raked through my teeth. I bent double from the pain, and all I could hear over the throb of the pain was screaming. In my ears it echoed, pounded, and I knew one scream

must've been mine. I knew the others had to be Markus and Ellen, but the screams were so many and so continuous, that it felt more true that more than three sets of lungs could produce such total cacophony, that there must be more voices adding to the sound. Then all was silent. All was dark.

V

They'll hate me for this, I know it.

I'd been burying myself since the day I was born. Even loose soil is a solid, and its fluid moments quickly become heavy and thick once again. I hadn't meant to bury it so deep, in such oppressive damp; still, the climb commences. The tendons and muscles of my hands tense and release until finally the dirt gives. As my hands wriggle upward in the shifting earth, the soil falls to fill the gaps again. It is interminable work, pushing and rocking my flesh slowly, and I wonder as I begin to ascend if this is what it would feel like to walk through a wall, the overwhelming contact with every particle within its matter, until I come out the other side.

It is a finger at first, like missing a step on a dark staircase, expecting to meet more ground only to find vacant air. Then my nose, shaking my head from side to side until dirt is sliding away from my eyes, and my arms are free, and the sky bursts into existence above me. I take shallow, coughing breaths. The air is humid, and my skin is covered in a layer of damp soil. Sweat clings to me like spider webbing. For a time, I hear nothing, my ears dull and muffled. My head feels like someone has taken cotton and stuffed between the folds of my brain, and now it is too dense and full for my skull. I spend my first few breaths lying in the gravedirt, whispering my gratitude to the stars. The first thing I hear beyond my own breath are screams.

I knew they'd be screaming. My body moves in ways I do not recognize, clawing itself upward, first onto all fours, then standing on two feet. My shoulders feel as though propelled by strings, and it takes me a few moments to register just how close the screaming is; she's right in front of me. If my ears weren't packed with soil, she could've burst an eardrum with how near and guttural her cries are. I shake my head, move my arms to grip her, open my mouth to calm her down. Dirt falls from my tongue as I cough, trying again to say her name. Her eyes, I find them darting in her skull; her brother is not far behind her, but his body is still. He is my little statue, stock still until the storm passes. He won't forgive this time. I know that.

Finally, I follow Ellen's eyes to the ground. My sweet Cory lays there, blood stains covering her lower mouth, chin, neck. Lower, her abdomen appears gored, splitting her from between her legs to her belly. The image is far more violent than I'd imagined, but I am shocked to realize I feel very little for the body. It is pitch black, and the twins disappear into it while I stare at my daughter's body. I frown, kneel beside her. She is lighter than I remembered. How long had it been since I'd held her? I pull her closer, rest her head in my lap, and with her face turned I can imagine she is alive. I run my fingers through her hair, rock her side to side. When I begin to cry, I lift her further onto myself, holding her head to my chest. The regret comes too late, only when I feel her skin on mine is cold. I bury my face into her hair and sob, the remaining clumps of dirt falling from my mouth as I press a kiss to her forehead, letting the warmth of my breath wet the skin under my lips until she is soft again, even in just this small place. In the darkness, I sit like that, rocking my daughter, whispering to her gently that *everything would be alright now, mom was home.* She'd hate me for it if she could hear me; I know it.

Grace Cen is a Writer and Municipal Researcher, based in New York. Her work explores the fissions of climate change, family obligation, and Asian American identity. Find her at graecenpens.substack.com or flitting between writing project and chocolate treat. This is her first publication in a literary magazine.

Scrawled in Dust by Grace Cen

Dylan coughed into his black cardigan, two enamel pins strategically inserted into tiny moth eaten holes. Dust trickled in from the windows. The particles fell on his bed sheets, a collage of a decade's worth of wear: the indigo ink stain from his first high school all nighter, the mahogany patch from his sister, Maggie's, scraped knee, and gray fuzz on the corners from washing it however many times.

For the first time in four years, all five Wu's were back in their two bedroom on Orchard Street, a space that, in Dylan's mind, was perpetually frozen in the 1970s. Sometimes, he was certain his family could outdo any circus. Never mind being impressed by a clown folding itself into a box; he and his sister had managed to crinkle themselves and the contents of twenty something years of life into two repurposed file cabinets. It was a game of Tetris meets the floor is lava.

For if Pó Pó saw anything of theirs in her Amazon boxes turned overflow containers, the ferocious little woman would not hold back. There was a sharp temper lurking behind those crescent eyes and no filter remaining. Her patience whittled down to a stub over years of manning bakery registers.

Dylan bumbled down his bunk bed ladder. As the most low maintenance of the bunch, he had been voluntold to stay in the living room with Pó Pó. "Fine," he'd shrugged, after mentally shuffling through various family-member plus grandma pairings and wincing at each one.

Pó Pó was already up. Her laugh was giddy, though tinged with morning rasp like sawdust. The blue light from her cell phone weasled its way through Dylan's eyelids. He crinkled his nose. Reluctantly, he peeled an eye open and caught the top of her head, two inches from the screen. The husky voice from the screen delivered his punchline and her white shag shook in delight.

When Dylan reached the floor, she didn't so much as glance up.

He checked his watch, eyebrows cresting up in surprise. Was it really 6:50 am?

Being back home tended to do that. Rhythms would unintentionally sync, and unfortunately for Dylan, always in the most stubborn soul's favor. He begrudgingly acclimated to Pó Pó's rooster hour mornings. Praying for his eyes to crust over the sound worked for a time, until it didn't.

"Mmmm," he muttered into the dusty air.

He wandered into the hallway, yelping when he jabbed his toe against Dad's bucket of miscellaneous shit…some concoction of batteries, screwdrivers, and drills. Dylan righted himself, his fingers trailing the stuccoed walls. He passed the door to his sisters' room. Maggie must still be asleep. Lucky her. Then, he rounded the hallway corner to the bathroom. Just a little further to the opening to his parents' bedroom. He glanced in, reading the contents of the room

through the leaflet of the bathroom mirror. Dad was still out cold, one leg on top of the duvet, mouth agape on the mattress. Mom was clearly already gone.

Dylan splashed water on his face, then slathered on a pump of Costco body soap, before rinsing it off. Soft light streamed in from the bathroom window and caught on Dylan's hands. His eyes followed the beam towards the window ledge, to the dusty bamboo plant sandwiched between two overflowing baskets of grooming products. Travel sized shampoo lay on the shoulders of giant jugs of diluted soap. The bottles clambered from out of the basket and onto the arms of the bathtub, and no, did not stop there. They crawled down to the floor, lined the tops of the mirrors and stackable plastic storage tubs. Now their dusty scent trapezed to the top of his throat and itched at the tender patch under his Adam's apple. He reached for his neck and pawed at it. The pink splotch grew.

Dylan pulled out one of the plastic grocery bags from the box of bags and shut the door. Never had he felt so suffocated. Never had he felt that the bags were wrangling his throat the way they were now. He grabbed the expired and unexpired bottles all the same, dumping them into the bag without a second glance.

It was as if a shadowy figure, made of powdered debris, had seized him. The ashy guardian jostled him by the shoulders, if only to ignite a forgotten wilderness: a compulsion to grab everything and put it in this bag. Ten year old bandaids—half of which had lost their stick, a box of used ziplock bags, Maggie's skin products from god knows when, all of it went in. It was open season, and he was a ravaging huntsman.

He knew the operation had to be swift. He couldn't be sure how long he had before someone barged in. In the Wu household, a closed door was, after all, a mere suggestion.

He loaded up, swiping an entire row of sunscreen bottles into the bag. He emptied out another plastic storage bin, filled to the brim with fabric scraps, for Pó Pó's projects. The ones she swore she was getting to whenever he would bring it up as being an eyesore. "Do you think we're made of money?" she would holler, pushing Dylan's hands out of the way. And Dylan, being Dylan, always sidestepped her—like a nimble leapfrog, vaulting out of conflict's way.

Kak! He hacked up buckets of the chalky musk collecting in his lungs.

Why were there markers in here? Did any of them even use jumbo markers anymore? Where were these even from? Definitely stolen from a fifth grade science classroom by someone. In the trash they went, along with wads of dust and hair. Well of course. He was immune to the repulsion but not to knots of annoyance.

Still chucking everything in sight, he grinned. If everything disappeared, would anyone even notice? Would Mom really, when she couldn't find anything now anyway? Would Pó Pó, who kept adding to her mountain, piling on merch from some poor insurance chump's table?

What if he just threw it *all* away? How he hated the thinginess of things sometimes, and their needy insistence to stay exactly where you left them.

The irritation flickered into something else, and then, like a vision, the potentiality of destruction rose up before him: burning haybales collapsing into straw and dirt.

It had always been there, he realized– the option of soot, of flames, of blaze. The orange-black thrill of it propelled him forward. He inhaled, certain he could smell the smoke, the spry singe skittering across their belongings, until all that remained was a char-coated clearing.

Professor Chevez had called this slash and burn agriculture. To return nutrients to the soil so new life could thrive.

Dylan gripped a lotion bottle and wrenched the sides together. The bottle coughed in response, leaving puffs of air and off-white in his hand.

Then, he let himself stew in the fantasy of having his own place. After the burning, there is new life! His mind was a projector, casting the image of an unfurnished field of hardware floors, as far as one could see, onto the bathroom mirror. It was a hodgepodge of the photographs that he had seen many times over many an open Streeteasy tab. White walls, white furniture, circular tables, a smattering of tiny lamps everywhere. He was reminded of his college classmate, Cassidy, and her minimalist studio in FiDi. How were they the same age? She seemed so much farther above the trail of life. From where he stood, she was but a speck, shrinking and out of reach.

He chuckled, a grainy guttural sound, like a pestle smearing garlic across the mortar.

It struck him, not for the first time, how it was always the people who had more who chose to keep less. They had leeway to stretch and grow and wander, a spatial wealth to live and tumble through.

The privilege wasn't the problem. He could handle the unacknowledged privilege. What got him was the privilege paired with the complaining. He rolled his eyes so far back, they nearly scraped bone. The ranting to him about what to do with their empty walls. *"It's not like I'm not fine with them as is." "The blankness is bothering me but I'm just like too swamped with work right now." "It's a later problem."*

What a waste! An absolute waste of a gorgeous New York shoebox.

If, no—*once* he had his own place, he knew exactly what he'd want mounted. A perfect home gallery from his last Wong Kar Wai Cinema style photoshoot. The color scheme: a spectrum of shifting reds and blacks.

Dylan loved watching DIY home makeover videos – though the places the decorators chose always seemed to have the perfect base: gorgeous hardwood floors and natural light. He didn't even know where to begin with this old tenement unit, a matchbox where the kitchen sink pipes snaked around to the downstair's neighbor's bathtub.

The pipes here spoke and as a New York native, he was fluent. This type of hissing meant his upstairs neighbor, Mr. Chung, was running a load. That clicking meant someone was taking a hot shower. Was it even possible to retrofit 1970s plumbing? He wasn't sure.

All he *was* sure of was that the bottomless pit of things was too heavy for him to keep wallowing through, and no one was doing anything about it!

He sucked in his breath, then exhaled deeply, fully. It felt as if even the simple act of exhalation pressed the sides of his ribcage right up against the narrow walls.

Eyebrows knit and lungs heavy, Dylan ran his fingers through his jet black hair. He plunged his fingertips into the pool of dust and scraped them across the length of the storage drawers. Five lines drawn like war lines in the sand.

To hell with being subtle. It was time to make a point.

With a new spurt of determination, he chucked everything he saw from the rest of the clear drawer into the garbage bag.

Two blocks away, Mrs. Wu tenuously handled the tray of piping hot sponge cakes with one hand. She set them down on the top of the glass display case. She watched as the steam rolled off the tops and the boiled sugar set into the centers. Her eyes slipped into the amorphic figures of the steam, shifting and curling up and away. Her mind trailed with it, dragging her back decades to a sweltering Saturday afternoon. She was what? 9 or 10 or so?

She pictured her mother's hand wrestling with the handles of grocery bags as they twirled up her wrists. Her mom leading them to the quieter edge of the vegetable market and holding one of the straps out to her. The plastic ripping lines into her small palms. Then, she looked over and saw her mother's fists, taut and white, and was determined to hold on a little longer.

Another memory, clear as that day. The sun bearing down on her back as she lay there, curled up on the bamboo mat. Next to her, Ma Ma screeched, "Two dollar! Umbrella," in front of the Fine Fare.

One afternoon, two policemen strode up; "No permit, no selling merchandise on the street," they enunciated, as if they had syrup stuck in their teeth. She had found it sort of funny then: the idea that they didn't know their one and only language as well as she did, c'mon! She hadn't digested the puckered condescension.

Other arbitrary details clung to her fifty year old skull too. The taste of the sticky orange sherbet on her tongue, for one. Pó Pó had ushered her away with $2. She was to head into Fine Fare and stay put.

In this daydream, her younger self stared at the freezer doors, scanning for the iconic purple push pop box. She had always been quite sensible; she knew better than to ask her mom to add it to the cart. Pó Pó's answer would be a resounding, "No money" in English, followed by a hearty laugh. Young Mrs. Wu snatched the box with glee. She ripped the houndstooth side with her teeth and after the satisfying push, sank her fangs into the soft orange.

Mrs. Wu took in younger her's thick hair, which had thinned in years since, and the way the skin under her eyes held taut. Time moved apathetically forwards, especially for those perpetually jostled by the day to day.

The waft of vanilla crept under her eyelids. Mrs. Wu peeled them open. It was quite ironic how she, who growing up could never afford the opulence of a sweet, wound up owning a bakery. Her

theory: that adulthood was just repeatedly throwing yourself against the architecture of your childhood, determined to become anything *other* than what shaped you. She could see that sometimes in her children now. The way Maggie vaulted onto every random opportunity to travel. The way Dylan now spent more time in Brooklyn with god knows who doing god knows what. When she was growing up, venturing into Brooklyn had been purely logistical, the smart way to shop and shop in bulk. Now, 8th avenue was full of hip coffee shops and small eateries with even smaller portions.

She did what she could to remind them that the streets she had known could be dangerous. “Come back before 9 pm,” she prodded. But she couldn’t keep them under her thumb anymore. She knew that. They knew that. They had grown into these looming bodies that towered above her 5 foot frame. Their willfulnesses swelled too.

Then, Mrs. Wu remembered how she’d left the oven door open and shimmied her way to the back, past the boxes of bags, label makers, and cellophane wrap that lined the edge between the floor and the back wall. The supplies were very keenly covered from sight with wooden boards. She pressed her cheek to the industrial fridge and smiled. Her gaze roamed down the oven racks, where the small pockets of gold batter lay. She had this place now, a lovechild in its own right, blossoming into its own neighborhood landmark.

From the outside, Wu Wu Sponge was a tiny hole in the wall. One of the only remaining no frills, specialty bakeries in Chinatown. Not one of those cafes where you spend $8 on a coffee to sit and bask in natural light for hours. For one, there were no windows. Only a fingerprint clad glass door and vents for steam. The smell of warm sponge curled and soared. Sometimes, in the throes of a stroll or on the way to the canal street station, an unsuspecting passerby inhaled. Then, they wandered in, following the delicate trail of vanilla. 60 cents for a sponge cake. What else could you buy in the city with dimes anymore? So they bought 10 for $6 and, hearts thawed, came back the next weekend for more.

Mrs. Wu sighed. It was a feathery thing, soft and lilting. She leaned her left hand across the glass and swept her right arm across the surface. A thrumming warmth bloomed across her chest, diffusing to her jaw, behind her eyes, releasing all tension gathered there. It was worth it, this place. The byproduct of sweaty Sundays with Pó Pó and chilly mornings opening up so the delivery guys could funnel in their cargo. Easy comfort lifted the apples of her cheeks, still round—the essence of her youthful glow. At the Chinatown Chase branch, the teller would always dwell on the fact that Mrs. Wu had three fully grown children. “You look like you could be my daughter,” he’d glibly proclaim before shuffling Mrs. Wu to a personal private wealth cubicle and handing her a pamphlet on managed funds.

Mrs. Wu adored the quiet hour before the rest of the neighborhood woke up, when she could glide into the routine of waiting for each tray to cool before slipping ten into a small plastic baggie, sealing it with her signature slip knot.

Ching a ling! A gust of cool air darted in. The first customer of the day was always, without fail, Yi Duo, or as the kids called him, Uncle Yi. He was wearing a flannel button up and khakis. “Mei Tong, zhao,” he announced gruffly. “One cup of coffee.” The “to go” hung in the air. There were no seats aside from the one in the kitchen, but Uncle Yi liked to stay for a bit. The coffee made the seventy year old chattier. He poured 85 cents onto the glass counter.

After reopening post-covid, Mrs. Wu had to announce that they had raised the price to $1.20. While other customers grumbled into acceptance, Uncle Yi fought back. His face was all jaw and black, Othello-marble eyes. He would park in one of two counter stools, then lean over towards the next inconspicuous customer, releasing his spew of how 85 cents used to be able to buy multiple cinema tickets or a full, satisfying fan he (rice box with a full array of sides).

Once, he had loomed over a mother and her two tweens, the seat bolstering him beyond his hunch, like a king on a throne of questionable lumbar support. He must have felt particularly wronged that day. One of the sisters, sporting a denim set, looked into his eyes.

“So why *are* things so expensive now?” she asked, naively egging him on.

He didn’t miss a beat: “Because the new president hates the Chinese and is cutting off our supply of good ingredients.”

There was a pause. Then he added, almost wistfully, “Which is why you’ll never taste a proper bao bun again, kid. We’re living in the dark ages now.”

The girl blinked. The mother blinked. The other tween asked if this meant Hot Cheetos were endangered. He just sighed, like a man who’d seen civilization collapse before him.

Mrs. Wu swept his three quarters and two nickels into her palm that day, if only to shut him up. Ever since then, he became the only regular who received discounted coffee.

After handing him the cup, she asked, “So, how was Mahjong last night?” He took a swig, wincing at the temperature.

“Not my best,” he admitted. “Lao Wang, that slippery serpent really knows how to lie to get you all riled up. He’s the worst, that little cheater. But that’s why there’s Thursday. I’ll make it all back.”

“Sure you will,” Mrs. Wu teased, but her eyebrows were stern. “Why don’t you play with new years candies? You know, once money flies away, it's hard to draw her back.” She paused, purposefully adding, “and then you’d have enough money to pay for a proper cup of coffee.”

He coughed, as if to say, oh so that’s how we’re gonna play today, huh? He dialed up the charm. “Your coffee’s all I need and I stand by that. Don’t I go around telling everyone your coffee’s the best? And then you get more customers.” He winked at her, then pointed to the liminal space between them as if *he* were doing *her* a favor.

She tsk-ed, but the corners of her mouth betrayed her.

“Now tell me,” he asked. “Will your mom be joining us at the park today?”

“Go ask her,” she replied. “You know that she’s her own person. Pó Pó doesn’t listen to us.”

Pó Pó rubbed her nose. A clump of dust darted into her mouth. She stared at the overhead light, shooing away her sneeze. She couldn’t help but wonder if someone was talking about her. She pressed 2 on her Samsung keypad.

“Mei zhi (Mrs. Wu’s maiden name). 哎呀我的微信好像不行了。怎么办？(My WeChat’s not working. What do I do?)” These days, her phone would only let her pick up calls according to its mood. She tugged on the rubber band around her wrist. Cell phones were as fickle as rubber bands. If only it were as simple to understand the mechanics of them.

She wound the elastic band around the sink nozzle. When she came to the states, she had no rubber bands. She kept her bundle of toothpicks together in a plastic cup. Every single plastic cup was one more item that she could use to build a life here. That’s all she wanted. A simple life here. And so it was built, by saving dollars and rubber bands and cups. The stress of fishing for five dollars in her pocket and only having four singles came back to her in daily jolts. It didn’t just wash away with time.

Not to mention the foreignness of the retiree lifestyle. How could one go from working 12 hour days to stopping all together just like that? Pó Pó slept a lot more now. She had so much more time to sit with the chaos of her thoughts. She stacked used coffee cups. She went out on daily walks and stopped at every table advertising free merch. A tote bag here, a fan there, another free pen to be added to her bundle. Everything went into her oversized messenger bag.

The iPhone went quiet. Pó Pó shook it violently. Then, she lifted it to her eyes and inspected the charging port. The edges had black bits on it and she still didn’t know what it could be from. Likely something sticky from the bottom of her Mary Poppins-esque bag.

She recalled how the guy from the iPhone store had quoted her $200. “A lot of times it’s just dust that builds up in the port. We’ll try to get it out,” he said. Dylan had filled in as impromptu translator.

But after the iPhone employee took it to the back “for closer inspection,” the narrative had changed.

“So,” the man started, his tone grave. “Dust can sometimes be the problem, but unfortunately, it looks like somehow liquid has gotten into her phone and it’s cemented the dust in. The port needs to be replaced entirely. Tell your grandma she’s lucky, kid. $200 is a steal. I’ve seen them quote liquid damage for triple, quadruple even…” Dylan sighed in resignation. He knew how this was gonna go.

Pó Pó’s was not about to squander her hard earned savings on a charging port. Instead, back at the apartment, she pulled a dusty toothpick out of her pocket and jammed it into the lightning cable. She found that if she held the cable’s neck at just the right angle, just like that, it could hold a charge. Her hands shook and the lightning symbol followed suit, disappearing as quickly as it came. But still, she kept gripping.

If Pó Pó charged at night, Dylan would hear the iphone vibrate every few minutes, alerting her when the charger was reconnected.

“赶紧把那个破接口换掉吧 (Why don’t you just replace the dang port already?),” he’d occasionally yell.

“With your money?” she’d zing back. That would always shut Dylan up real quick.

One night, Dylan quietly slipped $200 dollars in an envelope on her nightstand. Scrawled on the top in clear black ink were the characters “因该换了.” (It’s time for a replacement). Pó Pó snuck it back into his camera bag the morning after.

Mei Zhi rang again. This time, Pó Pó’s phone did register the thumb pounding on the screen. “哎哟, 妈, 您总算接了。猜我现在到底跟谁? (Oh Mom, so you finally called. Guess who I’m with right now?)”

The voice on the other end sounded echo-y at the end, which was how Pó Pó knew she was on speaker.

Despite this, Pó Pó continued to scream into the iPhone. She couldn’t be sure that her phone, statically as it sometimes was, could catch everything. ”不管是谁, 应该不是什么好的。(Whoever it is, it can’t be good).”

“那就对了, 哈！伊叔叔想问你今天打算去公园吗？ (Well you’re right about that. HA. Uncle Yi is wondering if you’ll be joining him at the park today.)”

“你跟他说我一个小时就到了。我现在还在餐电视剧。(Tell him I’ll be there in an hour. I’m watching a drama.)”

Mrs. Wu shrugged. “听她的, 听她的。(You heard the woman).”

When she clocked his raised eyebrows, Mrs. Wu grabbed a stack of napkins and shooed him out the glass door with them. The door chimes shimmied after him.

Maggie could smell stale crackers hidden in rests of vanilla notes (once you notice, you cannot un-notice), and rushed to the register.

“Mom, 怎么回事 (what happened)?! Did you take my perfumes?” The twenty four year old narrowed her eyes. Her slim eyes and lips gave her a pixie-like appearance. She had inherited her mother’s round cheekbones, but on her, they carried a different season. What had once been springy youth now fell into late autumn. Up close, the twenty four year old’s eyes were hollowed, framed by thick concealer that had begun to cake.

“‘Hi Mom, how are you?’ ‘I’m good, thank you’,” Mrs. Wu replied. Maggie stared back.

“How would I know? Where did you put them?” Mrs. Wu’s eyes widened with emphasis.

“I put them in the bathroom, in the second drawer of the plastic storage bin! They were new bottles, Mom! I bought them when I was in Paris!”

“My god. How much did you spend on them?”

Maggie knew a trap when she saw one. “What does it matter? I purchased them already. And besides, the VAT refund.”

“Oh well of course,” Mrs. Wu repeated. “The VAT refund,” flinging her arms in mock absurdity.

Maggie knew that her mother thought she was one of those people who could never find anything anywhere.

“Maggie, how can you be so forgetful? Aren’t I the old one? You can’t be losing your memory before me.” She would deliver this with a wry smile.

To Maggie, her mother just never wanted to help her look, and instead loved making a mountain out of a molehill.

Ever since moving back home, Maggie had stopped counting the number of times she was pushed to crocodile tears from their “where’s waldo” encounters...

“Where’s the oyster sauce?”—“It’s in the fridge.”—“I can’t find it in the fridge.”—“You have to look”—“I swear I looked.”—“You have to actually take everything out and look.”—“Mom, don’t you think I’ve done that? Can you please just help me find it?”—and then Mrs. Wu would pull it out in 10 minutes, but not without a lengthy “I told you so” spiel attached. By then, the “help” hardly felt worth it. Why did asking her own family for help feel like a herculean task?

Maggie gripped the edge of the counter, and swallowed her retort. This is just temporary, she breathed. Prolonged patience was a price she expected to pay when she decided to move back in, but damn did god test his strongest warriors.

Her eight months in banking felt like ages ago, back when her primary concern was why the net supply numbers were not matching up or why that mysterious meeting had popped up on her outlook. She remembered the way HR had ushered her out, telling her that she needed to leave the building effective immediately and that they would *gladly* ship the belongings of her tiny file cabinet to her personal address.

Maggie scrunched her hair into fists. Four months later, the box still sat at the foot of the fridge, strangled in packing tape. It was accompanied by twenty other smaller boxes– these ones for the straws, paper towels, and whatever else Mom had ordered from Amazon.

What had she spent those 2 am nights in the office for? Running to gag in the bathroom and staring as her glassy reflection swirled clockwise. She still remembered every crevice of the third stall. There had been a groove in the laminate wall that she’d press her head against, for a quick power nap or to check her texts. The groove had been there far longer than her. Maggie always wondered if it was simply a design flaw or the result of repeated wear – some other female analyst or troubled MD, bending their heads down for support. But any momentary relief in the lady’s room was always interrupted by the crippling worry that her boss, Cohen, who sat next to her, might notice her twenty minute escapade.

But when no one else called or texted, it was Mrs. Wu who kept checking in. When everything went to shit, it was Mom who had pulled her out—of the toilet. Pun not intended.

Mrs. Wu was the one who noticed. How during their twice a month family Facetimes, Maggie’s boba pearl eyes were empty and her tone flat. How her forearms looked thin and her collarbones protruded, in the way those models from the Pell Street hair salon photos looked.

Maggie had snapped before on call, and both mother and daughter could read the changed power dynamic, the silent understanding that Mrs. Wu could no longer force Maggie to elaborate if she didn't want to. That Maggie was financially independent and that she could let her unhappiness crust over like candle wax if she wanted to. Mrs. Wu had adopted a honey lemon tea tone for these calls.

"You're doing great," Mrs. Wu begun, while matching tupperware covers to containers. When Maggie didn't answer, she looked up, then continued with a rare out. "You don't have to do this, you know. Remember that I'm not like the other Chinatown Moms. You can always come work at the bakery with me." Mrs. Wu's eyes mined her identical ones for clues. When Maggie stayed silent, Mrs. Wu plowed onward. "How were the 月饼 (mooncakes)? Were they too salty?" referring to the red plastic bag left on Maggie's doorknob.

Likely because the siblings had grown up in Wu Wu's Sponge with its overavailability of yellow cake, they preferred salty pastries to sweet ones. Maggie always loved the flakey crust of Shanghainese mooncakes. When she was younger, Mrs. Wu always side-eyed her, criss-cross applesauced on one of the floor mats, chowing on the golden husk until all that was left was a naked meatball on the paper plate.

The mooncakes were the perfect balance of plump and crisp. Still, Maggie hadn't known how to tell her Mom that her mouth had dripped over the puddle of it that afternoon. The guilt mixed with the acid in her throat.

"They were good, Mom. I'm just tired." On-screen-Maggie turned her head to the wall to her right.

"I know, I know honey." Mrs. Wu stared at her fingertips, raw from dish soap. "I wanted an easier life for you than me, you know that right? I think I've changed my mind. I just want you to be happy. I know—your dad and I, it's our fault. We don't have anyone we know working at a hotshot bank who can help you, 我的宝贝女儿 (my precious daughter). You're all grown up now, but you don't have to be."

Maggie stared harder at the white wall.

"You can always come home."

Mrs. Wu's words clung like a square of single ply toilet paper to water. Maggie's passive veneer shriveled away at the edges. Her mom's delivery, and its delicate restraint, as if she saw Maggie as a ticking time bomb—Maggie's eyes began to brim…

Maggie swallowed back a sob, but her chest was so overcome with them that she briskly hung up. She hated letting people watch her cry.

This stew of guilt, salinity, and Mom's penetrating lemon-honey tenderness was enough to make up Maggie's mind. She would finally put in her two weeks.

Those two weeks had been the happiest she'd been in months. The air was light with the promise of rest. Maggie had snuck out for a coffee break on a random Tuesday and bid farewell to her

favorite office hideaways. But then the reality of coping with burnout was less ideal. She had moved back home.

Sometimes, she still felt like gagging, especially when she saw Dad cut his toenails with scissors. Other times, she felt drowsy and all she could do was curl up in a fetal position on her twin mattress and let the mental fog pass. Pó Pó often wandered into her room, which felt like both of theirs and neither of theirs at the same time.

She'd complain but thank god, she'd think, for sometimes it was Pó Pó reaching above Maggie's head for a sewing kit and asking Maggie if she would take a turn around the block with her that would break her out of her own thick reverie. The overlapping voices, the intersecting appendages, and then someone in the family hollering, "Maggie, dinner time!!" reminded her that the world was not just in her head.

Maggie took a slow breath. "No, Mom, I would know if I had moved them. Obviously, someone else moved them."

"How did the other bank interview go?"

"It went, Mom." There had been no interview. She had pushed it back. "They still haven't gotten back to me. You'll know when I know, ok?"

The ends of her mom's eyebrows sloped down and at this, Maggie added a quick, "I promise. Can you just please go check if it's there? I can watch the store. Please? It's not like I can ask Dad."

"Alright, just remember to take the cakes out of the oven and wrap them," Mrs. Wu replied, rising to her feet but still, standing on business.

Dylan rummaged through Pó Pó's white basin of miscellaneous crap. A collection of DVDs. Did they even own a DVD player? Honestly, they probably did, thought Dylan. Stodged away in a corner somewhere and corroded by rust.

He was shoveling DVDs and loose pens into a bag when he heard the lock of the front door pop open.

Oh crap, he thought, before panic-bounding into his sisters' bedroom. He swung the door shut.

Mom walked into the apartment and inhaled sharply. She was struck by something being different…but what? She could not put her finger on it. The dining room table was still a mess, but less of a mess somehow. All the furniture was still here: the chunky display cabinets, the bunk bed, the rice cooker. And yet…something…

"Dylan, are you there? Did you clean?"

"Mhm! Doesn't the space look looser, freer? Changed?" he yelled. He wouldn't go as far as to say "having breathing room" but progress was progress and progress was incremental.

"Definitely, cleaner." Ms. Wu nodded. A rare nudge of approval.

She strolled past the living room, into the hallway, glanced around at the bookshelves and a particular buckling ledge that had righted itself. She stepped past Maggie's bedroom, and into the bathroom. It was a quick two minute walk. There wasn't that much ground to cover.

Mrs. Wu's heels hesitated at the bathroom entrance. She scanned the surfaces, stunned. Everything was unburdened. The top of the white cabinets were empty, aside from patches of dust and old cream paint, off of bad advice from a cheap contractor years ago. The arms of the bathtub were cleared off too. She hadn't known that was possible. She found herself nodding. Wow, Dylan *had* been quite productive these last few hours.

Dylan squeezed his knuckles, listening from his sister's bedside table.

"到底在哪儿？到底在哪儿呢。。。(Where could you be? When could you be…)" The sound of his mother's hands rummaging through plastic bottles. More rustling.

Then there was the wheeze of the plastic drawer being pulled open. Dylan held his breath, sitting on the wriggling in his gut. He pressed his thumbnail into his palm, trying to pierce the waves of nerves as they came. The premeditated stress of being busted.

Dylan winced as if Mrs. Wu were already shouting, a shard of a memory, the sting of her palm against the back of his hand and the tender red and shock of it all. Had he been five then? God, being back home really brought back the childhood spiders. For crying out loud, he was a college man! He cleared his throat, shifting into a deeper register. Then he stretched his ear out.

"我是香水的话，我到底会在哪儿哪？(If I were perfume, where would I be?)," his mother repeated. A few more minutes of the thunking of things against other things.

"Dylan!" He sucked in further. "Did you see your sister's 香水 (perfume)? Maybe 在你打扫之间？ (Maybe before you started cleaning up)?"

"Oh fuck," Dylan muttered under his breath. He dove to unfurl Maggie's blanket, under which was an entire marketplace of household collectibles: yellowed mini tissue packs, hard candies, razors, assorted boxes of musty skincare, eyedrops. And then there! Lying among the retired electric toothbrushes was the smallest black box. It was wrapped in translucent film, framing an embossed pair of Cs.

"I have it! I have it!" He hollered out as if his life depended on it, proceeding to pull down the covers over his guilty loot.

"Oh really?" He heard footsteps start in his direction.

"Yeah, it was just on Maggie's desk," he rushed to explain. "She must've left it here or something and forgot."

Mrs. Wu knocked. Five hefty clacks against wood. Dylan knew well enough that these knocks were not asking for permission but rather a concise warning that someone would be entering shortly.

“Come in!” Dylan answered, surrendering to fate like a deer in front of a cargo truck. He was suddenly hyper aware of his hands—oh god, where should he put them? He settled on half in half out of his trouser pockets and froze. Mrs. Wu tilted her head and glanced at him sideways.

The beat of silence as she scanned him made Dylan squirm.

He rocked his knuckles against the inside pocket of his jeans, finding calm in the rhythmic friction. Her lips were pursed.

Then, finally—“Thanks. My boy’s growing up. He knows to clean the house and help out now.” Her eyebrows softened into hills and her shoulders dropped, the tension slipping off of them like a shawl. It was only then that he read her arched figure as unfiltered surprise.

The cerulean blue from Maggie’s window flooded the room, carrying particles of dust, a cloudy luminosity, carving out Mrs. Wu’s eyes and a triangle of a cheekbone. Dylan squinted and above the rim of his glasses, saw the camera shot. A wide shot, with his mother off to the side, amongst blurred rows of books in the hallway. A horizontal head on portrait with her looking at him through the camera just as she had before, head sloped and as if re-observing him for the first time. A low shot, catching the elegant line of her chin, a snippet of her hooded eyes, cutting off right below her shoulders.

Dylan would have loved to grab his DSLR and snap an unsuspecting picture, but he knew better. At the first sight of the lens, Mom would likely shuffle from this mesmerizing stance into a wrinkled peace sign pose.

What a shame, he thought. And no amount of repositioning would coax her back into this state of natural candor. That’s how she and Maggie always were, so acutely aware of the lens and socialized into the same few Asian photo stances: spine unnaturally straight and hand covering some part of their faces.

“It makes your face look smaller,” Mrs. Wu had explained once, as she cupped Maggie’s hand in hers and brought it to her face.

Instead, Dylan nuzzled the perfume bottle up against his sleeve, buffing away the debris. Mrs. Wu reached for it. “Thank you, honey.”

He returned her appreciative smile with one of his own. His fingers stilled. This could work. This could totally work.

Right before dinner, Dylan hovered over the payment confirmation button for a 7x10 set of 5 custom frames from CVS. The button turned emerald green. He squeezed his eyes shut and clicked it.

Maggie let her eyeballs roll up and behind their sockets. She combed back her baby hairs with her fingers and pressed the tips further into her scalp to squash the blooming headache away. The pressure felt like a wrinkle being smoothed out, rolling over knots she hadn’t even known were there. She reached for her eyelids, enjoying the heat of her palms. That’s it. Enough for today. She folded over her laptop and huffed into her air conditioned room.

The second application would not be getting submitted today. After uploading a resume and cover letter, she clicked next to reveal yet another page of short response questions! She knew in her head this was partially a numbers game, and that she shouldn't take these hoops personally. She'd even gone through this circuit before when recruiting the first time. You'd think it gets easier, she thought, and yet, this time felt equally soul sucking. For all her effort, there was always the possibility that she was writing into the ether as application #2501 or something, never to be seen. But she also—well, did she even want this—did she want to crawl back into corporate husk? She was applying to marketing roles, strategy roles, design roles, because they'd be different…right? She needed different.

This time, she buried her entire head in her hands, and exhaled deeply, trying to picture the poison spewing out of her body and floating along on its merry way to some dumpster fire elsewhere, the way Dr. Anderson had recommended.

He had actually instructed her to imagine it disintegrating into clean air, but Maggie didn't buy it; the idea that her thoughts, as dark and multitudinous as they were, could just go poof like that, replaced by glitter sparkles seemed naive, juvenile even. She could hear Pó Pó's voice in her head. "We swallow our worries like bitter tea. Why pay someone else to talk to them? Pay me then!" Maggie shook her head and let the words scatter to the corners like dust instead.

Another long exhale, slow and steadier this time. Maggie let the air pass through her belly, then her chest, her lungs, scrape behind her brain, and push itself the rest of the way down her nasal passageway. Better.

As Maggie stared ahead, mind a little less heavy, her chair buzzed. She shuffled around the contents of her vibrating leather pouch. Her fingers brushed past her MacBook cables and keys, rolling across ballpoint pens, both capped and uncapped, before gripping onto her phone with relief. Dear god, I should actually organize my bag tonight…like for real this time, she thought.

A missed call from Mom, followed by three texts in "Pineapple Buns", the family group chat.

From Dad New #: Do you want to go out to eat for dinner?

From Dad New #: Pick up. Call back asap

From Dylan: yo we are walking past Yuyuan noodle village. Come thru.

As she began dialing mom's number, Dad's call blitzed through.

"Dad," she answered, voice flat.

"Finally. You finally pick up. What have you been doing?" She could hear the pop of him sucking his teeth. "Do you want to eat dinner outside with us or what?"

"What? Wait—why? Right now? What's the special occasion?" Her voice flicked up, wound up with incredulity.

"Your mother doesn't want to cook."

"Yeah, I just don't wanna cook tonight," chimed a voice from behind.

“See? Your Mom’s feeling lazy—”

“Hey!”

“And I got off work early to help her close up. You know what I walked into today?” he started, voice rising an octave then sitting there for dramatic tension.

“Your Mom was reaching for the mixing bowl, under a stack of baking sheets, but she was standing on the bucket of white paint y’know?”

“Mhm. Oh god.”

“And she slips and grabs onto me with this death grip,” he barked and Mom started giggling. “And somehow she ends up pulling me on top of her so the metal baking sheets knock me in the head. And now I have this red bump.” By this point, Mrs. Wu had broken into full on hysterics in the back. She could hear the thunk of her mother slapping against something, doubled over in guffaws.

“Yeah the bump is kinda hilarious. You need to come see it!” Dylan adds.

“And Dylan? Did he meet you guys at the bakery?”

“Oh we just happened to run into him.”

“What? By where?”

“Can you just come already?” demanded Dylan. “If you’re late. I’m just gonna eat yours.”

“My what?” Maggie challenged.

“I mean I’m gonna eat enough for the both of us.”

“Dylan, be for real, you do that already. You big back.” Dylan chuckled, impressed that she had so casually inserted the phrase he’d taught the family earlier with such ease, not that he’d ever admit it.

Her chest bubbled and her hands flew to her mouth, caught off guard by the sound of her own unfiltered joy.

Her sense of humor had always been slightly off kilter, she thought—leaning more towards the unhinged than the polite. The kind that made people pause before laughing, unsure if they were supposed to. But her family always understood it, somehow. With them, she could piss herself laughing, even at a crime scene as revolting as a rat running into her shoe. So she stuffed a sweater in her pouch and locked the door.

It was a slow Wednesday night. 8 pm. One of those city nights when the sky drowsily reaches forward to close its blinds but doesn’t do so all the way. A silky cornflower blue.

When she reached Hester Street, her family spotted her first. “Maggie!” Dylan belted, waving over her mom’s head. She had once been oh so embarrassed by the way her family inadvertently announced their presence, voices big and red, like a billowing Chinese flag, but boy, had she

grown to love it: the feeling of being part of a unit, of her presence or lack thereof being noted – she now craved it.

Because she couldn't trust herself to do anything when alone. Sometimes, Maggie couldn't quite recognize herself anymore. She didn't understand who this large behemoth was, squashing her in bed until it became oh so hard to get up and get anything done. Then, she'd stare out her window and the sky would already be navy.

"Hey guys," she said, falling into lockstep with them. As they moved, they shifted seamlessly into an intimate array. Maggie and Dylan plowing the way and Mom and Dad trailing closely behind. Maggie felt the breeze tickle her neck and climb into her jacket. She watched the other Chinatown farers strolling ahead: the man carrying a red bag, bulging with takeout; the couple that stopped at the corner to check their phones; and two older women running across the sidewalk before the streetlight hit zero. Her eyeballs relaxed against the familiar sights and the real people's faces emerging from the darkness, strolling about, a welcome change of pace from the words warping together on her laptop screen. She felt her breath in her whole body again.

She drank in the colorful awnings: vibrant yellows, greens, blues, amidst Dylan's excited recount of the new film he'd just seen.

"And the music. It was like 70s 80s pop rock and soul. Vibey surfer music!" It was fun observing Dylan sometimes, seeing him grow into an adult who could articulate his appreciations. When had he gotten so big? So tall? And yet, it was still there: the incessant spark that made him him.

"Yeah, it was a really great movie. We should watch it again with you, Maggs," Mom added.

And there it was again, the flush of warmth from her name being called, of another set of plans being made for her, of belongingness, and of interloping chaos blooming forth into adventure.

"Yeah oh my gosh, Mom started crying."

"She always cries though."

"But like within the first twenty minutes this time!"

A random Wednesday, whilst taking out the trash:

A rat whined near the dumpster out back. Mr. Wu was ready to swat it away. He held a long broom in one hand and shuffled in the direction of the sound. He chaffed the sidewalk with the straw once, then several more times. The squeaks stilled. The dark grey tail poking out of a trash bag rose and the chittering rodent scurried away. He left behind a gnawed hole from which the silver mouth of a Phillips razor glinted. Mr. Wu took a few steps forward and leaned in. Hey! That razor looked so familiar…He had the same one—wait wait wait a minute…was that HIS razor?

His eyes briefly glossed over the clear bag's contents before it hit him. These were his things. The rat had been nestled in his things, and upon closer inspection, all of the family's things!

What the actual fuck. His disgust furled into a ball of annoyance, gathering volume. The longer he sat with it, the more it expanded—stretching taller still, widening, spinning out at the base. His thoughts were amorphous but the disbelief jutted out into a spindle of "how could someone—who would even touch my—and why? Why? Why? How dare they?"

His fury was a thundercloud, which he marched on over to Wu Wu sponge, shoving the door so hard it clanged against the bracket and ricochetted right back against his heel. "Stupid damn door," he muttered. Mr. Wu knocked on the counter. "Lao po!"

The sound travelled into the kitchen, where Mrs. Wu was huddled over her phone, plugged in at an outlet in the corner. "Mmm Mmm 什么 (What)?" The response was halfhearted. She was a little mouse to be swept along into a tornado.

"老婆 (Honey), you will not believe what happened today." She heard the heat through the heavy exhalation of his wide nostrils.

"Sit first, honey. Let me pull up a chair for you." She fished a stool out from a thin gap between a pipe and the wall.

But Mr. Wu remained standing, heat collecting in his beard by the second. "No listen. All our stuff was in the dumpster. And I had to go in there myself and pull it out!"

She rose to her feet. "Excuse me, what?" Mr. Wu reached for the half eaten sponge cake on top of the microwave, and swallowed the rest in one bite.

"One of our ungrateful little monster kids threw our stuff in the trash."

"Wait a minute now. Could it have been a robber?"

Mr. Wu scoffed. "Why would a robber throw away his loot? And it couldn't be Po Po either. When was the last time she threw away anything?"

"Okay stop. So what exactly was in the trash? And was anything else missing? Our laptops, the tv, the stuff in the safe?"

"I don't know. I came here right away. Do you think I had the time to stop by and answer all these questions? Come on!"

Mrs. Wu crossed her arms over her chest. She felt her arm hairs stand up, but stayed silent. She knew better than to provoke a brown bear. "Brown bear lie down. Black bear fight back," she recounted from Dylan's boy scout days.

"Family meeting!" he screamed. He crushed the cupcake liner with his fist. "Family meeting! 八点钟 (8 pm)!" he texted into the family group chat.

Five Wus were assembled in a 90 square foot cluster in the living room. Pó Pó was on the pullout couch, Maggie was fingering the grooves of the bamboo floor mat, and Mrs. Wu was seated at Dylan's desk chair. Mr. Wu was the only one who remained standing, an effective way to make sure his overhead snarl could penetrate through to every single Wu member. He paced back and

forth from the fridge to the mouth of the hallway, his footsteps like lead, until Dylan finally bounded in sheepishly and joined Maggie on the bamboo fringe.

“Glad you could grace us with your presence, Dylan.” Uh oh, Dad was in a mood.

“Sorry, I was coming from a friend’s house.” Dylan winced, mentally readying himself for the heat to come.

“You know the rules. The family meeting text means get your butt back here. 风雨无阻 (Be it snow or rain). I know you’re twenty now and you think you know everything but 你还住在我的屋顶下 (you’re still living under our roof). What do you think this is? A hotel?” He gave his son a pointed sideways glance, his lips flattening into a blade thin line. “If you go out into the world treating people like this, you’re fucked, Dylan.”

“I didn’t even say—”. Dylan let the words die in his mouth, opting to stare at his shoes instead. The fact that Dylan wasn’t meeting his eyes felt like ammunition for a final alpha dog statement.

“That’s right. You don’t say. You listen.” Flames rose to Dylan’s chest in a plume.

“I would listen if you got to the point instead of just attacking me,” Dylan muttered, raising his voice just a smidge above a whisper. He glanced up at his dad. Maggie was staring up at them. Before the words could register to her Dad, Maggie cleared her throat. She tugged on Dylan’s pant leg.

“He didn’t mean that.”

“Alright, alright,” Mrs. Wu intervened, also sensing the invisible tripwire under Mr. Wu’s feet. “That’s not what we’re here for. Now that we’re all here, we can start.” She clapped her hands like a teacher. “Your Dad and I found several bags of our stuff in the garbage out back this afternoon. And we know we did not teach you to be so wasteful and *so* disrespectful.”

“So 到底是谁干的 (which one of you did it?)” Mr. Wu cut in.

Pó Pó clutched her heart, “哇, 这比麻将更心疼 (Well this is more heartbreaking than a bad round of Mahjong).“ “Aiya aiya aiya,” she clucked. “你们这些不知好歹的小孩 (You ungrateful kids).” Her spit flew between her short gapped teeth. Bits of moisture landed above Maggie’s eyebrow and on Dylan’s neck. The kids swiped the saliva away but the throb of the insult lingered like a zit. The comebacks may have been right there, but like every twenty something’s acne, all the professional advice pointed to *do not* scratch it.

Maggie stared at Dylan, rapping his knuckles against his vibrating thigh. His gummy eyes were downcast, and she could see herself in him, so acutely– her 5’3” body warping into his 5”9 frame, as if bits of her were glitching into his black tee.

When she was sixteen, Mom had found out about her high school boyfriend, Jason, from the family iPad. An “I love you, goodnight” text from a codified “Janice” hadn’t been able to save her. Mom promptly called the attached number and Jason apparently, at least as the urban legend goes, answered with a, “so already miss me huh?”

Maggie remembered staring a burning hole into this very spot at the family meeting later that night.

“So you thought we were so 蠢 (stupid) that we wouldn’t understand what was happening right under our noses did you?” The mat and her parents had seemed so big and hard and brittle then, all the thin bamboo straws wound only by string.

She remembered hiccupping uncontrollably, and the tackiness of the tear trails that she refused to swipe away. Those had been her small acts of defiance against these stuccoed walls. She remembered how they felt like they were caving in on her, smushing her into those tiny vacuum sealed storage packs.

Now things were different. Maggie was calm and numb as a cucumber, and it felt almost as if she were a third party, watching a nature documentary unfold through watchtower binoculars. She waited to see if she needed to step in.

Perhaps growing up was like eating enough mala spice that it gave you just enough gas to see your life from six feet above, she thought. Now that she had tasted what a 9 on the Scoville scale was: the stomach emptying feeling of spending twelve hours a day with rude coworkers, the blaze of a family meeting felt laughably small. This, she could handle.

She bit into her overgrown pinky nail. “It was me,” she volunteered, rising to her feet.

Dad’s hands flew to his temples. Pó Pó sucked in her gut. It sounded like a sharp “swoosh.”

But Mrs. Wu was still staring at Dylan. Something just wasn’t adding up. Dylan’s eyes were raised at Maggie, and Mrs. Wu could see reels in his pupils as if taking stock of the situation and all the involved constituents. She couldn’t quite see through the reels. They clouded over as he turned his head back to stare at the floor.

The silence was a weird heady thing, hanging in the musty air. Mrs. Wu hoped Maggie might say more, might give any more small shreds of context that might be useful. Instead, the girl puffed her cheeks and blew the floating particles away from her face. The five Wus watched them disperse into a delicate veil of smoke.

Maggie could feel how pivotal a moment this was, literally, as if the mat and then the room were swaying with them, balancing on a point, lilting towards one future and then shifting to another, an alternate timeline.

She willed herself not to look at Dylan, lest the jig be too obvious. But in the corner of her eye, in the soft blur of her periphery, he began to trace patterns in the dust coating the hardwood.

At first it looked like an L-shaped block—just another idle doodle. But then he added a small rectangle, and scratched out two little lines for legs. Oh. A table. Another rectangle appeared beside it, and then a narrow ladder-shape. And that—she realized—must be Pó Pó’s desk. The long horizontal smear above it? The bunk bed wedged into the living room.

Maggie felt a sting of recognition; he was mapping the house. She didn’t dare look up.

Mr. Wu's nostrils flared. "What are you doing? What is that?" His curiosity came out sharp, punctuated with anger.

"It's our home," Dylan said quietly. "At least…the home that lives in my head."

Maggie finally craned her neck. The crude dust-sketch sharpened into sense. "These are the big markers around the house," she explained, trying to soften the blow. "The bed in the living room, the couch, my room, Dad's toolboxes, Mom's ramen stacks—"

"And those lumps?" Mrs. Wu jabbed a finger at the three uneven mounds Dylan had drawn where the bathroom should've been.

"All our heaps of stuff," Maggie said, filling in before her brother could wilt. "And all of it enshrouded in dust." She added a cough—half real, half performed—to underline the point.

Dylan swallowed. "I just thought…what a mess. Maybe I could clean it all up. Maybe I could help us escape it. Or maybe I could at least try and fight back against the clutter." His voice thinned, but he kept going. "I know you and Dad are always too busy to keep inventory of everything, but… we're overstocked. Way over."

He glanced up, surprising even himself with the steadiness of his tone. "And I think we need professional help. But I know we can't afford it. Or we won't pay for it. But I need more space. We both do."

Silence, a dense one.

Mrs. Wu exhaled first—long, slow, as though deflating.

Mr. Wu's jaw tightened, then loosened. The two parents looked at each other, and something passed between them: the mutual, reluctant acknowledgment that this wasn't rebellion, wasn't disrespect, but truth. A truth they'd skirted for years, maybe decades. Maybe this was the start of getting hoodwinked by their kids.

Maggie sensed the shift, the fragile possibility of change. So bamboo could bend, she thought. The room was still cramped, still cluttered—but something in the air had cleared, like dust settling after a long shake.

Dylan blew gently across the floor, scattering his own sketch. Not erasing it. Just making room.