

MAGNUM  
OPUS

# **Magnum Opus**

An Anthology of Fiction

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## PREFACE

As the COVID-19 pandemic struck at the beginning of 2020, all lives began to change. Our need to express ourselves was trapped inside our minds, just like we are inside our own dwellings. Thus, the creation of this anthology started. We pour our ideas and creativity from the stressful situation the pandemic caused into this book. The name Magnum Opus was then chosen as this book's title.

Magnum Opus is the greatest masterpiece that we, the sixteen authors, created and cherished. This anthology, filled with various stories of various genres, is a tribute from us to the world. Though small or insignificant, these stories are proof that we can survive in the chaotic situations that we experience.

We'd like to thank God for making it possible; our beloved mentor, the firm and kind Ma'am Wedho who gave the opportunity; and each other, for hanging in there and making this book to be something more than just an idea. We'd also want to thank the Faculty of Letters of Sanata Dharma University for facilitating these great minds in publishing this anthology.

Now, let's take a peek inside our minds. It's dark, but stars shine the brightest when it's pitch black.

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Slice of Life

# A PATH

Valerianus Yudhistira Aldi Nugroho

Ryker loves train ever since he was a child, he always went to the station an hour earlier in the evening to pick up his dad from work, because he wanted to see the train stops and passing by, and ever since his family moved to the new city, he did not have the chance to look up the train in there, leaving the memories of stainless steel boxes with iron wheels and the sound of “Deg-Deg” every time the train goes fast but not only that, he also left his four only friends. He was lived in his new town for three years before his dad’s work needed his dad moved back to his hometown, he was extremely happy to come back home.

A minute ago, his new lecturer at his campus contacted him to come by at the campus tomorrow morning, and he was very excited to hear that he was going to explore his new campus and ride on a train again. His brother, Ray come to his room and said, “Hi short-stack! I have never seen you seem so excited before; it is about tomorrow?” and he answered, “Well... yes, new start new hope”, his brother chuckle and ruffled his hair and then back downstairs. He woke up at 5.00 since the train he was going to catch is scheduled at 6.30, and he needed to prepare the documents to be given at the campus, at that time, he was going alone because he did

not want to bother his friends who already have a class that morning.

It was a little bit crowded when he reached the Solar Station because the commuters mostly take this train at 6.30, the train came with the 4 cars and he went to the last car and stood at the left door since it was easier to go out and reach the exit gate. He stood there and wandered around him when he saw a group of friends chatting and he wish that he had his friends going with him. When he was about to put his earphones in, there was a boy standing in front of him right the moment the door closed, on the riding to the Lunar Station, Ryker threw some glances towards the boy, the boy was tall – taller than himself, he has wavy hair and cut both of the sides and his expression that caught him the most, the boy was zoned out when he noticed him for the first time.

After Ryker went to his campus to complete the documents, and he thought that riding the train will be his favorite everyday routine since he had not had the chance to take trains in his previous town. A few days later, he finally started his first day on his new campus with his friends and he texted his friends to meet at the Solar Station to catch the same train together, thus he can chat with his friends even he had the same classes with them. After the second class ended, they headed to the restaurant nearby called Rambak to have some lunch since there was a break to the third class, and while he was waiting for his orders to come, he noticed the boy from the train the other day sitting not afar from him with

his friends. Later that day, Ryker needed to catch up on his assignments and decided to go to the campus' library right after his last class, he went there alone because his friends have non-academic activities to attend.

Ryker decided to take the train at 8 p.m. since he finished his tasks at 7 p.m. and he directly went to the station from the library. He took the first car and standing at the door on the left side of the train, it was less crowded considering it was almost late night and as usual, he used his earphone to entertain him along the journey to home and wandering around him before the train departure, he noticed that there was someone who has luggage with him, probably back home after going on vacation. The train was about to depart when the boy from the other day standing in front of him, and the train was speeding up out of the blue and make us a little bit jolted thus the luggage was sliding through the back of the car and he and the boy were mumbled "Pffttt....", while turning their glance to the window and cover their mouth with their hands to cover the laughter to burst out because it was not appropriate time to laugh. While chuckling, the boy was leaning down to him and mumbled "That was so funny, but we have to shut up".

Ryker was shocked by the sudden conversation and put his earphone off, but he menage to shut his mouth and calm himself down. The boy started the conversation by introducing himself.

"Hi, I'm Ricky, you?".

“Oh hi, I’m Ryker”. Answered Ryker.

“I think I have seen you somewhere”, Ricky said with his right hand on his chin and looks confused whether they have met before.

“Uhhh..., yes I think, I saw you yesterday at the train and the Rambak though”. Ricky’s eyes were widening, and his mouth made a shape ‘O’ and then back smiling.

“Do you take the train every day to get to the campus? I mean, you saw me the other day, so I thought we are on the same age.” asked Ricky.

“Yes, I do take the train to the campus since I live nearby the Solar Station. How about you?”

“Same with you, but I live a little bit far from the station, and commuting every day to get to the campus will reduce the consumption for boarding house, or gas in each month,” said Ricky with a smile.

“Yes, I totally agree with you. Do you always take the train at 6.30?” Ryker asked.

“Yes, and then take the last car and stand on the left door because one, it is easier to get out from the train, and second, because I’d rather give the seat to the priorities.”

“Yeah, so do I.” Ryker said right the time when the train almost reach their last destination and Ricky suddenly asked Ryker and gave his phone to Ryker, “Can

I have your phone number? Because I found talking to you was fun rather than looking through the window while zoned out and it feels the journey to home is going to be long, sorry I'm rambling."

"That is okay" answered Ryker with chuckling while typing his phone number to Ricky's phone. After they switch each other's phone numbers, the train almost reach the station while they say goodbye to each other, and Ricky promised to chat with him later when he reached home. Ryker was walking to his home while thinking about what had just happened, "Since when I can make a conversation easily?", "Can I handle one more friend?". His thought made him realize that he just broke his boundaries for having friends, he was wondering if he should tell his friends about what had just happened.

Later that night, Ricky and Ryker were chatting about tomorrow's plan and surprisingly they have a lot in common, especially in the 'train world, they planned to go to the Solar Station and meet there at 7 a.m. since the class started at 9. a.m. thus they still have plenty of time to chat, Ryker also decided to tell his friends about having one more friend beside them and they seemed happy about it, "That's okay, Ry", "There is nothing wrong with having one more friend", that was what they said to him that made Ryker's happy and when Ryker told them about his tomorrow's plan, apparently, they also take the same schedule but his friends usually take the middle train so Ryker decided to be separated with them and ride in the last car with his new friend, Ricky.

He met Ricky at the entrance gate later that morning and got inside the train together while chatting until the train's departure time, he also saw his friends and smile at them. Along the journey, they were chatting about trains until they reach the Lunar Station, after that, they went on separate ways again and Ryker joined with his friends again and told them how happy he was.

# THE TIME SHE CALLED CEREAL

Theresia Benedikta Laksya Tri Satya

It was a regular morning in Cereal's Castle—that is what she called, a place where she can be a princess. She woke up when her dog barked, fed the cows, took shower until her sister banged the door, and ran down the stairs to have breakfast. But princesses can be disappointed, especially when their Mom serves the least food to start the warm day.

"Can I just take the salad?" she hissed with anger. The cereal bowl was pushed aside when her mother let her guard off. She took a spoonful of Caesar salad and mumbled.

"No... not the cereal again," Mom sounds annoyed. She poured orange juice on every mug on the table. Cereal knew her mother glimpsed intensely at her but she decided to keep the focus on her salad. From across the table, her sister sent S.Y.S code—stands for save your soul.

Mom sighed. "This is froot loops!" She rammed the bowl back to where it was. Too furious that it spilled a few drops.

Cereal rolled her eyes dramatically. "This is still cereal!" And this is when she used to troll the comeback hot topic for the past weeks. "You know how to make me touch that," her voice increased. That was familiar,

happened as a sign of the 10 years old girl who was ready to sulk.

"Oh Zeus, give me patience," Mom acted as she fainted. This time Dad rolled his eyes while wiping the drops. Being the only man in the gang could mean you are the leader or you are the listener. Dad was in the second category that morning.

"Zeus has no patience!" Cereal stabbed her Caesar salad, created some noises. She wished her mom would listen to her this time. "Do you still remember what happened last week on Pet Day? I almost got detention for Calvin and this look!"

One week after the summer break, the school held Pet Day. The students were invited to bring their pet that was raised during the break. And just like any other princess, Cereal adopted an animal as her companion on an adventure. Abe, her corgi, has officially been crowned as her partner in a mess since two years ago. They would run on the wheat field, jumping on the mud, or role-playing as Queen Elizabeth and Furgis.

Right two days before the event, they played catch and run as usual. Abe ran too fast and furious that he hit a wagon. Well, clearly Abe learned those from Cereal. On D-day, she brought her 8-week old calf with insecurities because everyone will stare at her twice longer than usual. Cereal was completely aware of the consequences and decided to just sit and listen to her classmates initially. Yet, of course, Mom was madly disagreed.

"We have a barn of cows, two little calves, a clutch of chicks with their momma, Fred and Gladys are ready to go, and you still insisted not to bring ANYONE to Pet Day? You said you're a princess!" Well, actually Mom was worried that the horses, Fred and Gladys, freak out at the school.

If Cereal could choose one princess to share her situation with, it is Cinderella. Not because of the Moms, hers is the best anyway. It is because they both have expired time to be a princess. In the morning, she would check how her cows' doing, greet the wheat field and pick fresh grapes with Dad. But, just like Cinderella's midnight finitude, reality would hit her at 8, dragging her out from the comfort content palace to a crazy crowded place named school.

Maddison George was the one who started the chaos by saying, "Miss Roberts, I can't see the difference between those two," then pointed at Cereal and Calvin.

Cereal was so ashamed and offended. Even though she wore an oversized cardigan and covered her neck with her hair, the vitiligo patches marked her face as well.

"What? Miss Roberts said we can ask anything," and the class started to laugh. Miss Roberts needed two minutes to calm them down but Calvin, all of sudden, ran off to little Miss George and butted her. Everyone started to panic and ran around the room, Maddie roared and cried, Miss Roberts froze, and Cereal laughed out loud.

The incident is over when Cereal finally pats Calvin's back gently after the laugh break. Mom was not so happy when she got called.

Granola, her sister, choked recalling that day. "Okay, that was my fault for coercing you to bring Calvin but the silver lining is Maddison George got what she deserved!" Mom handed water to Granola. "You can't blame your appearance all the time, Cereal."

"Well—I would stop if only my name is not Cereal!" She stood up but finished her juice then strapped her shoes. Cereal always wondered why on earth Mom and Dad came with this idea. Cereal Holland! It was the most nonsensical name in this universe and she believed that her vitiligo showed up ever since.

On Sunday morning, Cereal and Granola came to the barn and started milking the cows. Unlike Cereal, Granola was ultrafine with her call. She always explained patiently the philosophy behind the name. Never at once, she explodes when people made jokes about it and even laughed with them!

Cereal was all in the poles apart when it comes to naming issues. When someone asks why she ended up with the "Cereal" name, she's exploded. "I believe that is a very not proper thing to ask. Don't risk your life by asking such a question. My pop kills people." According to Cereal, kill mean let someone suffer 'till Hades opens his gate. Pop caused a cheater to roll lots of rock up and

down the hill and even set the other labor at a field full of crows.

"Do you know what Grandma fed Mom back then? I wondered why Mrs. Dimitry Holland didn't just like her mother," she asked, with a low voice to not interrupt the cows.

Granola gently squeezed the teat. "Really? You want a cold, strict, and calm Mom?"

The thought of Mom being a firm woman, laughing just for showing gratitude, and didn't have sparkling loving eyes, intimidated her. Grandma loves her family more than anything. She and Pop together created the overprotective program for their daughters. Dad went through complicated things to marry Mom because of them. Luckily, Mom was insisted enough to make Grandma give their blessing.

"Urgh, no!" said Cereal. "You know, sometimes she just did not have her mind together."

"Well—look to who that weirdness passed down." Granola chuckled. "Honestly, I don't think you have a different sense from Mom."

Cereal gasped. "You dare!"

"It's true, right? You even get insane because you're obsessed to change your name," Granola giggled. No answer. Only the sound of milk flowed to the chamber.

She knew that was irritating so she decided to execute her plan now.

"Uhm, hey," Granola cleared her throat. "I actually have this idea to make your wish come true, princess."

"Listening," Cereal replied. Once Granola summed up her idea, she was so shocked that the cow she's being milked surprised and mooded beastly. "Mom might wanna put me on adoption after that!"

Granola raised her right eyebrow. "Thought you desperately want to?"

She DID. During the school trip day, Cereal went on her mission trip. Granola succeeds in persuading Mom to drive their Ute and drop her sister at the subway station. "You sure wanted me to leave this with Harry?"

Cereal jumped out. "Positive! Just don't let Mom and Dad know this." Abe followed. "Come on, Abe! This is a brand-new adventure!"

Granola laughed. Cereal always sounded funny when about to go on an adventure. She is always surprised at how mature and childish her sister is at the same time. "Don't be too excited, Miss. Sent my hug to Harry. Call me if you need anything, kay?"

Cereal waved her hand and nodded. She tightens her cardigan. Again, make sure people would notice her less. Now's time to find Harry, her cousin. She remembered jumping out the bed when Harry agreed to

take her side on this mission. When Granola said Aunt Aneth might have gone out, her eyes got bigger.

"Did you forget? Aunt Aneth worked as a lawyer. It is supposed to be easy to change someone's name if you work in the field of law," Granola started. "But she might be complicated as Grandma. You need something to induce her."

"Olive pizza? Olive oil? Olive fried chicken?" Cereal mentioned all things she knew with olive as a topping or the main ingredients. Her lawyer aunt is obsessed with olive. If she was her mother, Cereal might have ended up called Olive.

Granola shook her head. "Uh oh. Olive seed. And golden fleece wool. When she agreed, you came home with a new call!"

With olive seed, it was effortless to get. Cereal can ask Dad to get it from the market, 'Hey Dad, I need olive seed for biology class' but golden fleece wool was another level. "And how would I be able to find those golden-what was it again?"

"Call Harry. Sure he has a lot," said Granola. She paused for a second. "You can recruit him to come."

Someone was excited. "This is awesome!" She stamped her feet. "And if I failed?"

"Aunt Aneth had this stemple on her table. It made every paper legal. Just take over it. Carefully." And that was when Cereal freaked out.

Abe barked when a huge and muscular shadow appearance came in their direction. He looked like he's 20 when actually five years younger. It must be his muscle that made him look mature. "Hello, hello!" The shadow's master spoke.

"Haaaaarrrrryyy!!" Cereal screamed in mutter but still gained attention. A muscular boy and a little vitiligo girl hanging out together was the weirdest combination they've seen that morning. "Love to see you again!"

Harry grinned. "Little Cereal! Your patches looked OK today!" Someone needed to call 911 because Cereal was ready to bomb the station. Harry seems to have forgotten to control his silliness and immediately change the topic.

"Ready to go? I didn't know Uncle Dion raised such a bad girl. You know that your mission will make both of us grounded, right?" asked Harry. He slung his big bag over one shoulder. "That's why I'm in. Did nothing but home-schooling and weightlifting anyway."

Cereal tried to walk confidently beside Harry so people wouldn't think he kidnapped him. It was the stare that made her want to finish this mission immediately. She started to understand that look in kindergarten. Except for her family, she didn't know people had such fair skin. The

first day was a disaster. No one wished to sit next to her, some of them cried, and Cereal was completely clueless. She didn't understand why her name made them laugh. Though she finally got recognition, she tried to smile. "You indeed look like cereal!"

Mom always told, she was called Cereal for she has a sweet and likable aura. Never come to her mind that the real reason was that her Mom was obsessed with that kind of food during pregnancy. This vitiligo must come because she ate too much. Since then, she never let the cardigan off from her skin—except for swimming. She would apply sunscreen oftentimes, wished to cover the patches, never skipped weekly swimming to get tanner, and bombard her parents to change her name.

"You should've drunk a lot of milk or at least didn't PLANNED called me like this," she screamed at the top of her lungs after the first day of first grade.

Before Cereal sank deeper into her insecurities, they already arrived at Aunt Aneth's firm. Everything flies when you daydream. "Didn't sure you listen to me all the way, huh?" Harry's voice awoke her. His hand carried Abe.

Less than five minutes and they came out of that space. No pet allowed, first thing first. No appointment, no adults, and no ID. "We have no hope," said Cereal, desperate.

"We sure have. There always will be. Now we know that Aunt Aneth works as a lawyer. What did they do? Exactly. Give their client to an innovative solution. Who? The bad guy. We need a bad guy immediately," he explained fiercely. Cereal really thought no one in her family is normal.

She agreed. "Let's see if we can find a mess."

Harry presented his villain laugh. "We are the mess!"

And thus, they re-entered the building with fewer obstacles. Harry managed to push the fire alarm button. They ran out and back in together with the other. Abe even tried his best to act panicked.

Aunt Aneth was startled to discover the three inside her room. The second after she realized who created the local shock. "I believe the Moms didn't know you are here."

"Hi, Aunt Aneth!" Harry greeted. "We tried to keep it secret. We acknowledged you to join."

She rolled her eyes. Guess it was a thing in their family. "And what brought you here?"

Cereal step forward. "Well—I thought you could help me to solve my case." She's fidgeting her cardigan. Aunt Aneth really is the copy of Grandma. She sits down in her chair, ready to listen. "I really-desperately-wished you can change my name legally."

For twelve years of her career, Aunt Aneth has won thousands of cases, brought justices, collected trophies, but she never at once, met such a request from her own niece. She sighs deeply. "Zeus please give me patience," she whispered.

"Miss Holland," she started, acting like how her profession should do. "I would like to ask some questions and I wish for your conscience."

Cereal sat upright and nodded. Harry followed. Abe hollowed. "Have you ever asked your parents about your name?"

"Of course, I do," she tried to answer just like what she watched on TV.

"And what they said about it?" the interview continued.

"Well—they said I was named after this skin condition," Cereal spoke small.

Aunt Aneth tapping her finger. "And your problem is?"

"My name. Changing my name will change my appearance as well?" the client answered unsurely.

Now, Aunt Aneth has just come to the edge of patience. "Tell your mother to stop feeding the cow and teach her daughter science."

Harry, having held his laugh along with the conversation, finally busted it out. If someone filmed these, he for sure will upload it on youtube.

"I know science!" Cereal felt offended. "I'm just sick that people compare me to the real cereal."

Now the laugh finally stopped. "People always looked at me differently, asked why I was called this way, how I was born with this condition." Her finger curled. "If... if you need more horror to prove I can tell you one."

Last summer was Cereal's first swimming competition. Her first competition actually. Mom and Granola insisted she must join, that definitely being emphatically rejected by her. "I can't let everyone pay more attention to me."

"Cereal, you're talented!" Mom inclined.

"I never heard anyone tell me," Cereal started to play with her soup.

Granola rolled her eyes. "Because you ALWAYS make Dad rent the whole pool for you EVERY Friday."

Dad waving his index finger. "That's my love language." Cereal turns at him and smiles. If it wasn't because of him, she wouldn't be bold to go swimming.

Mom didn't give up. "Everyone must be surprised by your good, skilled, and swift move! You might go home with a new title, darling. People will no longer call

you Cereal but uhmm... Almighty Aqua Queen of Mariposa!"

Besides answering the math tests, that request is burdensome to be decided. Cereal loves swimming. The world was in mute mode when she swift and dive, and she likes that kind of world. Going to a swimming competition means revealing her skin and Cereal assured it would be another nightmare. The patches were asymmetrically beautiful genuinely. Its color matches her hair and eyes. Other than the skin, she got Holland's signature pointed nose and heart-shaped lips. Mom didn't stretch the truth when she said Cereal has a jovial aura.

At the end of the day, Cereal agreed to join only because she needed to get the title. Mom refused to bring her new non-revealed swimsuit. Instead, she told the whole family to come and watch her game. Grandma and Pop were coming. Aunt Edith brought her gallons of sunscreen. Aunt Aneth called to give her "support". Cereal really wished this time Mom's idea came to pass.

"Oh, look!" said a participant, pointing at Cereal, he just finished rinsing off before entering the pool. "I didn't know non-human people could participate in this tournament." His two other friends followed the direction.

Cereal pretended not to hear, she needed to calm herself until her turn came at least. Granola taught her to take three deep breaths and exhale them slowly.

"Maybe she's here to represent Choco Crunch—cereal floated in the milk!" the boy's friend added.

If Mom and Granola weren't there beside her, people would've heard a hard slap and the committee would have sent her back in disgrace. "Don't mind them." Mom stroke her hair.

That day, just like what Mom had expected, Cereal took first place! She felt uncomfortable and embarrassed that a lot of eyes stared at her, either to admire her victory or wonder what happened to her skin. But the most embarrassing of the whole day was not those stares.

It was an unexpected and not-so-funny title, given by the announcer. "...and we have Miss Cereal Holland, who indeed swam marvelously like cereal drift in the milk!"

Aunt Aneth tried to hide her tiny laugh and knew what happened for the rest. Her sister stops distributing wheat and milk to the announcer while The Holland is the only distributor in town. A lawyer and a gangster in a family.

"Cereal, if you came here to change your name for that purpose, I'm hundred percent sure the court will be a mass funeral because everyone died laughing," said Aunt Aneth, shift to her lawyer personality.

"How come you didn't laugh right now?" Harry asked, he's really trying hard to not laugh.

"What's funny?" Aunt Aneth asked and raised her left eyebrow.

Harry shrugged his shoulder. "Everything in life does."

After getting a quick lunch, Cereal and Harry walked down the street, to the next unexpected destination. Aunt Aneth said no, even after Cereal gave the "gift". Harry, who was in charge to take the stemple, missed due to Abe's bark. Cereal forgot how honest her dog was. Aunt Aneth told them to visit Aunt Edith's beauty clinic. "She might be able to help your problem."

Cereal wasn't so excited to get there because it's a beauty clinic! The atmosphere of "you're different" would be horror and intimidated. Besides, she doubted that Abe is allowed to walk in.

"Why were you so eager to change your name?" Harry, out of nowhere, asked. He pulled Abe close to his chest as his shield, just in case. "You have a cute and unique one. It was catchy...like umm... your appearance. Wasn't bad actually."

Being asked like that amid people that of course, looking at her, kinda hit differently. "Can't you see those stares?"

Harry looked around. "How come? Their curiosity was too loud to be ignored. But that didn't explain my question."

"Didn't you feel daunted?" Cereal was bemused.

"Not at all. They just... wondering. Just like Bell, Newton, or Tesla."

"They're different!" Cereal declined. "They never underestimate or be rude or mocking people or asking such offending silly questions!" She sighed. "This name, it's like wearing the itchy sweater that your Mom knitted."

"Yeah, your Mom should've taken the gold-fleece wool from our farm instead," teased Harry.

Aunt Edith's beauty clinic was no joke. There's only one seat left in the waiting room, the receptionists were busy serving the customers, and you can see all the achievements this clinic has across the waiting room. Cereal was wary that Aunt Aneth was about to make her ashamed, but graciously the owner approached them immediately after one call from the receptionist.

With great cheerfulness, she hugged her niece. "Look who's heeereeee!! Lovely grumpy bravery Cereally!" Cereal was relieved she didn't do it in the waiting room earlier. Aunt Edith's room was more welcome and smells like Grandma's house.

"...together with strong Harr Harry!" Harry was afraid he could break his petite aunt but bless him.

"You guys want herbal tea? Gluten-free muffin? Salad?" she offered excitedly. Abe was barked at the second choice.

"Thanks, Auntie! But we're in a hurry," said Cereal. "I'm on this mission. Promise us you'll keep it secret."

"I'll keep it under my hat, darling!" she said decisively.

Cereal told her mission passionately, with Harry's several nods on necessary detail. Aunt Edith was carefully responding to her plan now. "Ooh, sweetie... You know it's near impossible to... make it the way you want." She looked sorry after saying that.

"So you can't help me either?" Cereal near to meltdown. All of her desire to get a new call today has vanished. She needs to go swimming after this.

Harry patted her back. "C'mon little cousin. Let's get you home before your Mom found us hanging around. Anyway, thanks, Aunt Edith! I love your new hair."

"I'm sorry," Aunt Edith said to Cereal. "I'd like to give you a hand—but... I can't beat the fate that gives you this grace."

Cereal nodded and got Abe. "Don't tell my parents about today." She can see her Aunt smiling from her blurry sight. They were about to step out of the clinic when Aunt Edith ran from behind.

"Hey sweetheart," she panting. Clearly to see work-out wasn't her thing. "Maybe you wish to see your Grandma. I know she barely smiles but who knows? She

might help you to assure your parents to change your name."

Granola picked Cereal at the same subway station. They waved to Harry, hug him, said thank you, and went straight home. Dad greeted them.

"How was your trip, little princess?" he asked for hi-five with his dirt glove.

Cereal replied at once. "Nothing new. Everyone is still staring at me and I don't mind as long as they are not asking any further about my name. But hey! Everything will be different if I change my name, right?"

Dad grinned. "Nice, try! Go get yourself shower."

It was a tiring afternoon but Cereal still ran around the kitchen with Abe. Abe must haven't fully recovered that he hit Mom who was preparing dinner. She grabbed Abe and noticed he smelled like no other day.

"Granola! You said you brought Abe to school today?" she yelled as Granola was in the other room. Again, she sniffed Abe.

"Positive! What's wrong?" Granola ran to the kitchen. Her ears turn red.

Mom glared and called Dad. Oh, crap. Cereal totally forgot how great her parents were at noticing something different on their pets and crops. Well—they're blessed with Labrador nose and eagle eye level.

The next day, as Cereal predicted, she gets grounded. No swimming, no running, no sulking about her name for two weeks. Mom counted Granola as Cereal's henchmen so she wouldn't be able to hang out with her gang for seven days. After the truth was revealed that night, Mom seemed to have had enough of Cereal's obsession.

Still tired from what she was through that day, she tried to make Mom didn't explode. "Mommy, don't hate me just like my classmate does. You know I only got you and daddy and Granola."

The worst part of today's ground day was Grandma's visit time. Not running in the field was terrible enough and Mom must have thought Grandma's wise advice would make her mind sane. So here she was, sitting on the edge of the bed, next to her Grandma.

"Come closer," Grandma said. Nothing can make Cereal unease more than that utterance. "I didn't bite." Classic.

But Cereal moved closer and prayed Grandma couldn't detect her shaking. "Now you tell me why are you so determined to change your name? What did it do wrong?"

"Not too short of irony to tell," said Cereal. She glanced at Grandma and knew that she should've told it right away.

Grandma nodded as the story ended. "Right. So, you tell me, you desperately wish to change your name." She continued, "Right. Sure. Go change your name. But make sure you fulfill the condition."

Cereal's eyes sparkling. Now she sees hope. Oh my, did Edison feel this way when he invented the bulb?

"I would give you my blessing. Change it. But remove your family name as well. I'm sure there'll be a lot of change in your life as well." Grandma glanced at her granddaughter. Shock she is.

"Well?" Grandma asked. "There's nothing I can do with your skin, that's a blessin' if I might say. To make your name no longer Cereal Holland is, completely possible."

"But the problem is this!" Cereal pointed at her skin. "This is the reason I can't walk around freely, unable to swim in public, even I had to wear a cardigan in the summer!"

"Your skin is the reason or you are the reason?" Grandma was outraged. "Name was not the problem, the skin wasn't the obstacle. You breathe in all those toxic things said about you."

She stood up, knew that her granddaughter would meltdown right after this and she couldn't bear it. "Everything in this mortal world can irritate you, but your family won't. Thank your parents for giving you that name, to not see you as the world did."

And thus, Cereal was roaring and crying for a long time till she barely could breathe. Her nose filled up with "things". It became better after her sister brought up a warm towel and hot cocoa.

"You know, to me, you're unique," said Granola. "And I'm sorry for coming up with that plan. I knew it wouldn't end up well but I thought it would be a good lesson for you."

"Don't say you knew Aunt Aneth would make me go to Aunt Edith and ended up like thiiiis," Cereal started scrying-sulking and crying.

"My bad." Granola stroked her sister's hair.

"Nooo!! Stop acting like you're Mom!"

"Excuse me, I'm the copy of your mom." Granola raised her left eyebrow as her sister pushed her away. "You know you're our favorite, right?"

"I better be!"



Coming of Age

# THE CYCLE

Widi Murti Kasih

The weather was nice that day, not too hot and not too cold. The bright light of the sun shone slowly passing through the big windows in my bedroom, hitting my old eyes gently. I felt the warmth was 'just right' as if the sky knew that my granddaughter would come this morning. Perfect for my granddaughter, Renee, who wanted to learn to plant sunflower seeds in the garden. I like having a cup of tea and sitting in my backyard while looking at the garden to complete my morning routine. Yes, I have a garden on my own because I love looking at colorful – yet dominated by green – plants. It is refreshing for my eyes and my soul. Look at those beautiful sweet alyssum flowers. It makes me feel nostalgic.

Back in the days when I was young and naïve. I was fifteen years old. I cried my tears out over a guy unworthy of crying over. Then, it was the first time I heard the wise words.

I told my grandfather about the guy who I fell in love with several weeks before. I always spoke about this guy with gusto every time we spent time together. I regularly visited my grandfather and walked him around the neighborhood, refreshing our eyes by enjoying the beauty of sweet alyssum flowers that were spread along the sidewalk. And as usual, I visited and walked him one

day but it was a little bit different. There were no enthusiastic and bubbly conversations about my first love. There was just tears and disappointment. He fooled me by making me think that he had feelings for me. I found out that he had a secret girlfriend from a friend of mine. After a long lecture and comforting session, my grandfather's last sentence was giving me a new insight. His last sentence was:

“Lavie, there is good in the bad, and bad in the good. That is, my dear, what makes life, a life.”

At the time, I was so naïve, I only applied those words to deal with my broken heart and I thought that was all. I learned that finding out earlier that he had a secret girlfriend saved me from falling into a deeper hole of sadness and disappointment that waited ahead of me if I continued and had a relationship with him. That was it. I didn't think of the words in a broader and deeper understanding and moved on with my life.

The words hit differently when I was in my twenties. I was a tour guide at the time. I left my dream of becoming a professional singer because the competition was harsh and my parents gave up on me and asked me to get a 'proper' job. The years I had spent to master the strong vocals and the efforts I gave to reach the ladder of becoming a well-known singer, all went in vain. That night, when everything was quiet, I was laying on my bed when I suddenly remembered my grandfather's words. I went into a deep contemplation. I realized that I loved this job

and I was the type of person who liked to travel a lot. I enjoyed every journey and experiences of learning new places and cultures. I was understanding myself better. The reason why I pushed myself hard to become a singer was because of the five years old me who wanted to be a popular and well-known singer. This dream that grew when I was a child blinded me to the other possibilities and chances of what I might have become. I wasn't exploring enough and denied trying new things. Woken up by this realization, neither I regretted the years I had spent on singing nor got hurt because my parents told me to stop. At the end of the day, I was glad that I found this job and gave it a shot.

"Ding-ding-ding!" The high-pitched bell rang. Well, it had to be my granddaughter, Renee. She already opened the door and I hadn't even reached the front door yet.

"Where is your mother?" I asked.

"She dropped me off here and said that she's going to the florist nearby. I think she wants to buy another flower for you, Grandma."

"She better go to the bakehouse near the florist and buy you a cake. Happy birthday, darling. I made your favorite cookies, fifteen in number, like your age now!"

She smiled and hugged me before she walked straight to the garden. I guess she had prepared all she needed to start planting the sunflower seeds.

Where was I? Let me continue. Well, the words, again, hit differently when I was in my forties. I was living my life to the fullest and I was happy and satisfied. I was married and had more than enough to live a decent life even after my retirement. Also, I got addicted to reading and writing because my job required me to read and learn a lot. It was in autumn when I decided to write a fictional book about nature. Never did I expect that my book, *The Endless Cycle* would be famous. In a blink of an eye, everyone's eyes were on me and I was hunted down by the journalists asking for interviews. It took me less than a week to feel extremely uncomfortable. I didn't want to be in the spotlight and I couldn't live my life peacefully. So I decided to move away along with my husband. I did remember those words again during these times. I learned that it was not always pleasant to have all eyes on you and even a great positive achievement could cause such big discomfort. I considered it a big success but I was suffering. I chose to live away from people and have a comfortable life.

Of course, those are just a few of my experiences. For I've been through so much, now I can see the wise words that my grandfather said to me seventy five years ago in a bigger picture. I understand that those words are deeper and more meaningful than I thought when I was fifteen and those words are applicable for everything in this life. We will never truly understand wise words, until we experience it thoroughly. And I believe that living is

about discovering and understanding the universe within and outside ourselves.

“No, no, not that way, honey!” I just realized that Renee was wrong in planting the sunflower seeds. “You should plant the seeds no more than an inch deep and about six inches apart, sweetie,” I told her while I approached her.

When I got closer enough to see her face, I knew something was wrong. She didn’t answer me. It was unusual for Renee to be this quiet so I asked her what was wrong. Her cheeks became red and her eyes were telling me she was about to cry.

She said, “I didn’t win the singing competition, Grandma, and my friends left me.” Then she told me everything and I listened to her.

After quite a long talk and comforting session, I said, “There is good in the bad, and bad in the good. That is, my dear, what makes life, a life.”

# WHEN THE MEERKAT STOPS TO BURROW

Carolus Joses

It was the most exceedingly terrible dinner Tomo had ever had in that entire year. He sat peacefully while playing with his food. It wasn't like the food was bad. Indeed, his food was alright. He could have tempeh for dinner consistently since he loved to eat tempeh. It was the atmosphere that caused him to feel uncomfortable. Listening to his parents' words about school at the dining table made him not in the mood to eat.

"The point is, we can't manage the cost if you go to that school, Tomo," his mom said.

"Look, I realize that you want to go to the same high school as Debbi and Rian. But, can you at least consider our circumstances too?" his dad added.

Tomo just nodded his head and began to play with his food once more. His parents didn't seem to give him many options. The decision was either entering the school that his parents wanted or not entering the school that he wanted. Suddenly, his last moments as a middle school student didn't appear to be that exciting.

"Tomo!"

"Oh...yes, dad," he was startled. "I think I'm finished with my food," he left to his room.

Tomo adored his parents more than anything. He cared about them, but thinking about going to a different school from his friends, he was not prepared. Now, that his parents were not allowing him to go to that school made him extremely sad. He could not whine, asking his parents to pay for him to go to that private school. He couldn't bear to even ask for it again.

It wasn't that he didn't like to go to public school, but he had never entered the public school before. During the fifteen years of his life, Tomo went to private catholic schools, and that wasn't even the worst part. He was an introverted and shy person. He barely talked with his classmates. He had friends in school but not many, Debbi and Rian to be precise. Since kindergarten, they had been friends, but he just invested his time for them either in school during lunch break or in the bus that they took together after school. In short, Tomo was not popular in his school. All students in his school simply didn't realize that he existed.

He didn't know how to introduce himself to new people. In reality, he was hesitant to meet new people. He was afraid that people might think bad about him or think that he was an awkward person. Be that as it may, the longer he thought about it, the more uncomfortable he became. Sometimes, he was wondering about having so many friends but thinking about the idea of meeting new people in the first place scared him. Since he would not know anyone at his new school, he seemed very miserable to go to a different school from his friends.

After the school holidays ended, Tomo started to enter his new school. The day was like usual. He woke up at 5.30 am and went straight to the bathroom. He went down to the kitchen and had breakfast with his parents. Then, he walked out of his neighbourhood and took the bus all the way to his school. The first day of entering high school looked so ordinary except for one thing. He no longer met Debbi and Rian in school.

It was the first day of school orientation, and he was almost late for entering the class. He gasped for breath after a while, searching for his classroom. He saw a lot of new kids that he had never met before in his entire life. He didn't know anyone. He mustered up the courage and walked straight to a random empty seat. As he predicted, every kid near him attempted to begin a conversation. He had felt that this would happen, so he talked as briefly and necessary as he could to immediately stop the conversation. He was sweating a lot. Despite the fact that he had planned it before, he was too nervous to talk to these new kids. Luckily, the orientation went very quick, but he felt so drained both mentally and physically.

When Tomo believed that it would be okay the next day, he was wrong. It wasn't a physical activity that made him tired and uncomfortable, but it was the idea that he had to socialize with new people. Likewise, he knew something that had been bothering him the whole day. Tomo discovered from his homeroom teacher that joining at least a school club was obligatory for every student. He was afraid at the moment to even think about

the idea of joining a club and meeting new people. He was overwhelmed about it.

When he was looking through the list of school clubs, he suddenly had an idea. He was interested in one of the clubs. He would join a movie club because he thought watching a movie did not require any social abilities. Nonetheless, the genuine motivation behind why he entered the movie club was because he loved movies. Tomo spent the rest of his time, besides with his friends, hanging out in his room watching movies. He didn't have a particular film to be his favourite, yet he liked everything related to popular culture. He always admired people who loved to watch classic or complicated movies because he imagined that one had to be a genius to understand and love those kinds of stuff.

Several days had passed. Tomo didn't even know how he survived in his school without socializing. He never spoke to anyone at school, even to ask questions about places, assignments or simply ask questions about math or other subjects to his teachers. He generally made a decent attempt to recollect everything in his mind and surprisingly wrote down the seemingly insignificant details so he wouldn't forget. Everything he did so that he wouldn't have to ask anyone else.

Eleven days had passed since he first entered the school. That day was the first day of the movie club gathering. Thanks to his ears that could hear sounds from a distance. He wouldn't have known if that day was the

first gathering of the movie club he joined if it weren't for one of his classmates talking about it right beside him. It reminded him how fortunate he was.

Just after school hours, he went to the gathering room. He saw a lot of unfamiliar faces but one. It was the boy in his class whose conversation he overheard earlier.

“Hey! Over here!” the boy waved at him.

“Me..?” while muttering, he pointed to himself.

The boy gestured his head and arranged a seat for him. Tomo didn't have any alternative but to sit with him.

“I didn't know that you are a movie geek,” the boy said.

“Oh, yeah. I love that thing too... ha ha...,” Tomo laughed awkwardly.

“Oh, I'm sorry. Hi, my name is Toni,” the boy introduced himself. “And you are?”

“Uhhh..., I'm Tomo.”

Toni actively kept their conversation going, even though Tomo always talked briefly. He was very friendly, and without being noticed, they talked continuously until the end of the gathering. They discussed movies, and little did Tomo know, they shared their everyday life stuff as well. This was the first time Tomo had spoken freely with other people since he first entered this school. In any case, he didn't give a lot of consideration to this.

Tomo felt different after that day. He frequently spent time with Toni during the lunch breaks or simply sat together in class. Toni even introduced him to his friends. Surprisingly, he was glad to get to know them.

Toni and his friends had the plan to hang out at Toni's place to play a video game after school, and they asked him to come. That was the first time for him, the first time that he said yes to doing activities besides watching movies. Tomo didn't care about him being awkward or bad, about the school, and about anything else. He felt happy that now he had friends other than Debbi and Rian. Tomo just wanted to spend time outside the school with a bunch of new friends he made. For the first time in his life, he felt nice. He loved these feelings and wanted to experience them again all the time.

He began to wonder what made Toni different from other strangers. Why, at that time, did he want to continue his conversation with Toni until the end? He still didn't know why he didn't feel awkward anymore with him. Was it because of Toni, or because Tomo finally decided to come out from his own bubble?



Mental Illness

# IF ONLY

Genoveva Divastovia

Just a kilometer away behind me, the screech of car tires could be heard against the calm of the night followed by a loud crashing sound. My heart dropped and I felt a sharp chest pain starting to well up.

“Fuck.”

I stumbled to the nearest tree and leaned back as I hyperventilated. Hands around my mouth, I tried my best to breathe normally. Jesus Christ. Did I seem like I was running out of problems and stuff to think about? Did I seem happy enough to be bothered with this kind of thing? Did I? God had created billions, no, trillions being, and on this awful night He chose to mess with me. I was slowly losing the strength to stand up so I let myself slide down the tree and sat at the bottom of it. For ten minutes of hell, I sat there, having trouble with my breathing as I watched the police and ambulance coming from the opposite direction of the crash. I couldn't see the victims of the crash but the sirens lit up the sides of the building with red and blue lights, making it quite an eerie sight.

The winter had been quite harsh for the last few weeks and a snow storm had killed and injured too many people. I guess someone died again tonight. Or not. Why would I care if someone died? Their business was now with whichever celestial being they upheld, not with me.

That sounded really wrong, but I didn't care. I was never good friends with death, or the topic of being dead. Yet, as my breathing became normal once again, I stared at my feet at the thought of her face. I'd probably spend another night outside, shivering under the snow storm, if I didn't hear a noise from the alley next to me; meowing sounds. I got up from the ground and walked there.

At the end of the alley, 4 kittens cuddled up against each other, craving for warmth under the harsh snow storm. They shivered in the cold and their fur was covered in snow. I looked around the place and I saw not a single adult cat, not even their mother; they had nobody but each other. I quickly dropped my bag and grabbed a carton box from the top of a trash can. I put them inside the box cautiously and one of them meowed.

“Ssh... It's okay.”

I took off all 3 scarves hanging on my neck and covered them before I put a few hot packs I bought from a Korean store in between their bodies. I noticed that they stopped shivering when I poured the remaining warm water from my thermos and opened 4 of my canned cat foods. I put all that inside and they meowed weakly as if saying thank you.

“Don't mention it.”

When I patted their heads, I realized that my hand had turned bluish from the cold.

“Hell. I have to go. Keep my scarves safe, don’t chew on them.”

After I closed the lid of the box, I wrapped myself closer to my coat and walked quickly to my apartment. The siren had stopped, the storm had calmed down, and there was nothing but silence and cold. Ironically, I felt peaceful. The crash victims probably died and nature chose to be calm; mother nature has the tendencies to just kill and flee.

I entered my apartment building. There was a quite impressive Christmas tree but there was nobody in the lobby. The night guard was asleep on his desk, stains of melted caramel were all over his face. He just had eclairs again. I checked my watch and the time showed that it was two in the morning. Everyone was most likely asleep. I walked up the stairs to my apartment and took out my keys, the metal handle was freezing cold when I turned it. My apartment looked just the same as I left it, but it was cold and too dark to see, even under the light of the street lamp outside. My chest felt heavy as loneliness came to me, again. After closing the door, I turned on the lamp and heater before I left to have a hot shower.

When I walked past the bathroom mirror, I startled myself.

“Jesus Christ”.

Yeah, no, I didn’t see Jesus Christ in my mirror, but my appearance was quite similar to how He looked

when He was crucified in The Passion of Christ. I looked as pale as a corpse, my old scar on the side of my face made it worse, bluish skin from the cold, messy hair caused by the wind, and one black eye. The cold had numbed the skin of my face but as I got warmer, the pain of that black eye came back to me.

“Ouch.”

But I had no time to pity my appearance so I quickly took a shower before sitting down on my sofa.

It was Christmas, but I was not happy. Not a single cell on my body was happy. The only thing that would make it better was the cursed, small wooden box sitting in front of my face. Without any hesitation I opened it and stared at what was inside. Two packs of cigars and a beautiful lighter. I put one roll in between my lips. I took a moment to think. This would be the end of me, but I deserved that. And even if I was going to die, at least I got to see her. With that thought in mind, I lit it up and took a deep, deep breath. As I exhaled, the clicking sound of the door key could be heard and the door swung open. A pair of high heels walked in, and when I looked up, she stared at me with a frown.

“I told you not to smoke, didn’t I?”

It was Christmas Eve, two years ago. I got off at the train station but I sat down on one of the benches instead of going to my parents’ house. I sat there for hours

and read a book until the last ride of the day left and the speakers were blasted with an overly joyful announcement.

“To all commuters, the train station will close in 10 minutes. We highly suggest you go back home to your families, and do not forget to secure your belongings. If you happen to lose something during your trip with us, please inform our security headquarter on Monday, 26 December. Have a happy Christmas, everyone, happy holiday!”

So much for a happy holiday, I thought. I hated Christmas. It was one of the several days in a year that I always tried to avoid. Basically, every single event in life that required me to meet my family, they all sucked. But I forced myself to get up and walked to the exit. As soon as I was out, the first thing I sensed was a warm bagel from a nearby bakery. I was tempted to buy one but I’d get scolded by my mother for eating before a Christmas dinner. So, I walked past it.

From afar my house looked fine. A fake mistletoe at the front door, a bit of Christmas lamps here and there, and a Christmas tree standing next to the window. I arrived a bit too late and the dinner was already served, so my mother, my father, and I had dinner right away. It was just as awkward as any other dinner that we’ve had together. We didn’t talk much, just eating with clinking utensils at hand.

“How’s work, son?” asked my father without lifting his eyes off his plate.

Work. I hated my job as an accountant. So much. It paid well, but I hated what I did. I was never really good at that sort of stuff where you had to sit down somewhere, forced to stay like a dog. I always felt like I had chains up my neck and I knew that it was killing me. This had been messing with my head for years now, so I put down my knife and fork. I sipped my drink and got ready to talk. Seeing how I behaved, both my parents looked at me and stopped eating.

“I’m resigning.”

“Why?” asked my father after a while he tried to gulp down his anger.

I sighed. “I’ve said this to the both of you since I was in college. I didn’t like what I learned and now I do not like what I do. But you never listened and pushed me to graduate. I know you both won’t agree, but I just can’t see myself doing this shitty job for the rest of my life.”

My father was about to pour out whatever he was thinking but my mother was faster.

“And what would you do?”

“Write. I’ve always loved being a writer.”

“Honey, that’s not—”

My father stood from his chair so quickly that his chair fell behind, making a loud banging on the floor. I startled and my breath hitched a bit, but I tried to control myself.

“There is no way in hell I’m letting you do that kind of job. What are you going to eat? Papers? Scraps? No.”

I reminded myself to stay calm and be the sane one in the room.

“I wasn’t exactly asking for your permission. I’m old enough to decide.” I looked deeply into my stupid father’s eyes and he stepped away from the dinner table.

“I knew it. I knew that you made friends with the wrong people in your high school days; you changed so much. You were always with those nerds who knew zero shit about the world other than their books. You were always the awkward one, the one following behind, and do you know what happens to those who follow? They grow attached in a lot of aspects. Now you’re here talking nonsense, talking about how you would ruin your life, your stable job that anyone would kill for, just for the sake of your stupid happiness.” He walked to the front door, and opened it.

“Let me tell you, Arthur. You would forget all that mere happiness you try to pursue once you’re insane enough to fight over food like animals.”

For a moment the three of us grew quiet, the door still open.

“I’ve always known you never liked us, your own family. All you’ve always wanted to do was leave, and do

things your way. Go on then.” He pointed his finger out of the house.

I stood up calmly. “How long have you been holding this anger?” I asked with a bitter smirk on my face. “I’ve always done what you told me to do, all my life, putting my sanity aside just for you and mother. My biggest fear was if I let you guys down in any way. Right now, as an adult I stand here in front of you, I said a few words about me living my life the way I want it, and you, out of all people, told me to get out.”

I took a peek at a framed picture at the top of the fireplace; Alastair, my stupid older brother. He followed every single thing my parents said and he became the first one to jump off the roof of his own office. I knew he’d be proud of me to finish this slavery.

“I was never your favorite son, Alastair was, and he’s gone now thanks to you. You had two sons, one killed himself, and you’re going to lose another one. You’re just the best parents in the world.”

It was not the kindest words I’d said to my parents, and both didn’t reply. My father looked extremely angry but he seemed in pain, in shock, a bit guilty too, I suppose. But even if he said sorry to me, I wasn’t going to stay. I took my stuff and Alastair’s picture, and walked out. When I felt the cold wind of winter, I knew that it would be my last time standing there. I looked to my father whose hands were still firmly at the handle of the door.

“I’m sorry that we ended up this way. Thanks for everything.” I peeked inside the house and smiled when I saw my mother, who was starting to cry.

“Take care of her. She’s the only one you’ve got.”

Just like that, I left.

Weirdly enough, I felt a sense of freedom instead of sadness. I wasn’t thinking about how I was going to live, how I still left a bit of my stuff at home, how my parents had to live as if they didn’t have a son. My first thought was to go to that bakery near the train station, for their bagels. As I walked there, I felt how light my steps were and I was convinced that it was how Christmas should’ve felt.

The bakery was still open. There weren’t many people, but it gave me a sense of warmth that I was meant to be there. I felt instantly good as I stepped in. Small blocks of wood were burning in the fireplace, white Christmas tree at the center of the bakery, the smell of delicious pastry that went right to my nose, warm yellow lights and beautiful Christmas ornaments. It was the first time I was there, but that place was warmer than any place I’ve been.

I got myself a big box of bagels and hot coco, and sat by the window. I asked the shopkeeper and he said that the bakery was open for 24 hours since the owner and the staff were all atheists who had no Christmas agendas. For once I was thankful that people found the term atheists.

I spent quite some time sitting there, staring at the road, reading my book. The more time I spent, the more I couldn't focus on what I did. My book ended up going back inside my bag and I just stared at the road. I had to admit that I did slightly feel bad about leaving the house completely. I didn't regret cutting off ties with my family, but I should've done that in a better term, with lesser pain if that was possible.

The joy that I felt earlier finally wore out when a girl barged into the bakery and sat next to me, not even buying anything. Her blonde hair looked messy. She wore a beautiful white dress, perfect for Christmas Eve, but there were stains all over it as if she just fell down on the street. There were scars on her legs and arms. She just put her head on the desk and she trembled as if crying. I asked myself, who'd be crying on Christmas Eve? But then I wasn't exactly happy at that moment too so I just politely observed the girl to take my mind off things, and the longer I did that, the more I felt bad. It must have been a tough night for her.

The shopkeeper approached us hesitantly.

"I'm sorry, Miss, can we get you anything?". The girl didn't answer. "Miss... You can't stay here without buy—"

I tapped the shopkeeper's arm and smiled. "She's with me. A glass of warm black tea and a slice of matcha mousse cake would be nice. I'll have the bill too if that's okay." He nodded and let out a deep sigh, clearly feeling

relieved for not having to throw someone outside. After he left, the girl wiped her tears and looked at me without saying anything.

I smiled awkwardly at her.

“... Hi.”

She replied. “Hi.”

The girl's name was Helena. We spent the night talking with each other and ended up knowing each other's problems which made us pity ourselves on Christmas Eve. It was the first time I got really close with someone in just a few hours. She fell asleep on the table at 2 AM, and I followed right after. I woke up at 5 and Helena was still there, sound asleep. She looked peaceful despite the night that she experienced a few hours before. Just like me, she had nobody else now. I should consider myself lucky for still having a place to stay, proper clothes, and money. But she got nothing else, and somehow, I felt the obligation to help her out the best way I could.

I bought the both of us some coffee and suddenly she opened her eyes at the smell of caffeine and faced me with her messy morning look.

“Hi. Morning.”

I smiled. “Hi. Have some coffee.”

“I'm sorry. I've been such a burden for you.” She said, while at the same time sipping her coffee. “That felt great. Thanks.”

I just nodded.

“Helena.”

“Yes?”

“This is just an offer, you’re free to say no or even fuck off to it.” I looked at her eyes very intently to make sure she followed. She seemed to be as serious.

“I think it’s better for you to go with me.” Silence. Helena didn’t answer, as if still trying to take that in. The way she looked at me made me feel flustered.

“Not in a weird kind of way, only until you can figure out what to do next. I just think that after last night, going back home is just going to give you more bruises and I don’t want that. I also don’t want you to stay outside and be homeless, or sleeping anywhere—”

“I agree. Where should we go?”

Well, that was quick.

“Since the trains won’t operate on Christmas, the bus station.”

That was the start of how I became roommates with Helena. It took her a week to really settle in. As soon as we arrived at my place, she borrowed my phone to call her brother, the only person who took her side. The next

morning her brother arrived at our door with her essential stuff that would help her survive. We rearranged the apartment and talked with the landlord about how we'd divide the rent. Her first priority after moving out was getting a job on her own. She was pursuing her master degree before she got kicked out of her house, and there was no chance for her to continue her study. Helena decided to pursue a job with just her bachelor degree and somehow, she got in touch with a lot of people and found one in just 3 weeks. Helena basically dealt with everything on her own, and I was just a guy who gave her a place to sleep (and she paid for the rent so I was probably just a guy who showed her an apartment). I have to say that I wasn't even her roommate because Helena would leave the house early in the morning when I hadn't even woken up and she'd return when I was already asleep. She was busy arranging her life, living like a bee.

Before her first day of work, she got home earlier than usual. I was watching TV and she came in. Not saying anything, she just entered the bathroom and took a shower. A few minutes later she spent some time in the kitchen and later joined me with a box and two glasses of hot cocoa.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“How was your day?” she asked, as she put down the box and started cutting the cake inside. “You seem tired.”

I frowned. "I'm always tired, what do you mean?" She chuckled as she put down the first slice on a little plate. "But I should be the one asking that. You've been going around places for the last few weeks. We're roommates and I barely ever saw you at home."

She handed me the cake. "Yeah. Now finally, I can rest a bit knowing that I am not unemployed."

I nodded. "I know how that feels." As I put a bit of the cake in my mouth, I was surprised. It was warm, soft, and the matcha flavor melted in my mouth. "Oh my God. This is so good! What cake is this?"

Helena smiled.

"It's the same cake you bought for me when I got kicked out that Christmas Eve. It was life changing, Arthur, I hope you know that. I was just a weird girl who was crying, you had no business with me, but you bought me this. The way you took care of me, the way we talked all night long despite not knowing each other, the way you brought me to your house the next morning... You changed my life with your kindness."

I was touched to hear that from her, I really was, but something else came to my mind.

"Holy— Don't tell me you just got back from that exact bakery in our hometown?" When she nodded, I let out a deep sigh. "Helena, it's 3 hours away! Oh my God, you just took a 6 hour trip for this cake?!"

Seeing my reaction, she frowned. “A 6 hour trip is nothing compared to how you’ve helped me, Arthur.” She looked upset and I thought I shouldn’t be lecturing her when she was being that sincere.

I stared at her before saying, “Quite right. Have some for yourself, girl, I can’t finish all of those.”

She smiled and got herself a piece of cake. We finished them as we watched TV.

Living with Helena was fine. She wasn’t hard to deal with, she liked doing house chores as a stress reliever, she helped me out a lot, and when she got time, she’d cook for the both of us. The last one was the best part of living with her. She said she was still learning, but she made just the best foods I’ve ever tasted. She made amazing cakes, Asian home-cooked foods, American home-cooked foods, pasta, and a lot of others that I couldn’t even spell. Helena loved experimenting with recipes and told me to try them out. So far, everything she cooked was just excellent. I thought I was going to be even more lonely as I left my parents, but I felt at home instead. When I got home, I’d smell her perfume or her food roaming inside the apartment, and my fatigue was lifted.

She was really fun to be around with. Not only was she supportive, she also understood my weird ass jokes, and she laughed at them hysterically. She liked to be playful around me. She showered me with stone cold freezing water when I took a shower; she picked the lock to my room to borrow my hoodie; she put on a video of

cracked screen on the TV and made me cry; she stayed under my bed and grabbed my legs; when she got home and feeling tired, she'd lie down near the front door and fell asleep. All those things. It was never boring with her around, and I loved every single thing she did.

The only thing that made us fight sometimes was my tendency to smoke when I got stressed out. I smoked a lot after I resigned from my job and pursued my career as a writer. She hated it when I smoked and told me to leave the room until I finished. Countless times she took my cigar away from me and did not give it back even when I begged her.

"I'm not giving you those stupid rolls." She said to me, "Sit down, and talk to me instead."

I'd sulk before finally sitting down next to her, talking, and feeling better right after. As time went by, I became unconsciously attached to her and leaned on her when I had problems; and she didn't mind.

I lived happily with my best friend, and somehow, a year passed.

"Arthur?"

I heard a voice calling me. I wasn't sure if it was an angel voice.

"Arthur!"

No, it wasn't an angel. The voice was too familiar.

"GOD DAMN IT ARTHUR, WAKE UP!"

I sat up on my bed in shock. "Jesus Christ! I am your humble... servant." There wasn't a Jesus Christ in my room. Why would He be there?

Instead, Helena snorted next to my bed.

"No Jesus Christ today, honey, He's too busy dealing with someone better than you." She took a sip of her coffee and smirked. "But He is coming today. So put on some shirts and help me out in the kitchen."

"You're annoying." I sulked.

"And you love me nevertheless." She walked out of my room. "KITCHEN!"

"FINE!"

I grumbled about how I was still too tired to handle any kitchenware and got up from the bed. I wore any shirt I could find and walked to the kitchen. Helena was digging up the kitchen cabinet, trying to find something. She was starting to swear under her breath when I poured out some water from the fridge for myself.

"Oh my God, it's too early to swear, Helena. What is it?"

"We ran out of sugar." She said without looking at me.

“It’s on your right.” I frowned. The jar was clearly there.

Helena sighed deeply. “BROWN. Brown sugar.”

“Oh.” Something came up to my mind and I was so sure I was going to get cursed at by her.

“I did tell you to get some yesterday, right, when you went out?”

“... You did.”

“And you forgot?”

“... Sort of. Yeah. Sorry.”

Helena sighed. She left the kitchen and took her coat. “I’ll be right back. I should get those cookies ready by mid-day for Christmas exchange, and your part is doing the dishes.” She stopped at the front door. “And maybe doing the chores too if you’re truly sorry.”

When the door closed, I felt bad for her. It was me who suggested Christmas food exchange with the neighbors. I was planning to get some packed cookies from the store, but Helena said it won’t be polite, so she would make some cookies. Unfortunately, my stupid ass forgot because I was exhausted yesterday, and there was snow storm all over the city. I rolled up my sleeve and started to get to work on the dishes.

It took me quite a long time to finish the house chores, but even after I was finished, Helena hadn’t

returned. She often got distracted by a lot of things when she went shopping. I looked out the window and there was quite a harsh snow storm; she might've decided to wait for the storm. I was only hoping that she'd return soon.

I decided to call her and it went straight to the voicemail.

"Helena, put down whatever you're trying to buy. Don't get the stuff we won't use, man, just get the brown sugar and go home."

I set a table for two, with all the utensils that we needed for tonight's dinner. I turned on the TV and watched some cartoons, but even after half an hour, Helena hadn't returned. I called her again, and went to voicemail for the second time, which was very very weird.

"Dude, the snow storm stopped. You can go home now, or I'd pick you up if you want to."

I went back to waiting again and this time, I fell asleep.

I startled as I woke up from my nap because I heard some harsh knocking at the door. It was all dark outside, and there was still no sign of Helena. It was an insanely weird situation for me, I needed to know where Helena was as soon as possible, but the knock suddenly turned to banging and I ran a bit to get there quickly. I opened the door and saw 2 policemen; one was blond and one had darker hair.

“Good evening, Sir.” There was a grim atmosphere circling the both of them.

“Yes?” I became so worried of what I might hear next, and my mind was mostly elsewhere thinking about Helena who hadn’t returned.

“Are you Arthur J. Maxwell?” asked the blond one.

I hated my last name, but I nodded. “That is me, yes.”

They looked into each other’s eyes and sighed. The blond one said, “I am Officer Parker and this is Officer Dive. May we come into your place?”

I let them in and they stood awkwardly near the sofa.

“What is going on?” I was too anxious to let myself sit or leaned anywhere so I stood in front of them, walking in circles unknowingly. I was expecting something bad coming out of their mouth, but I hoped it had nothing to do with Helena being missing for 6 hours.

“We are here to inform you that Helena Gray was found dead this evening in the woods located a few dozen meters from Target. It seemed that she was a victim of hit and run.” said Officer Dive. “There was only your number in her Family category of her contact list, and...”

I didn’t listen to what he said next. I lost my balance and fell unconscious to the ground.

I couldn't really remember how I dealt with everything after that. There were several moments that I had in mind, but things were blurry to me. Both officers were still there when I woke up, and I helped them find Helena's actual family. I went to the morgue with her family a few hours after that to identify her body. The next day, she was buried.

I couldn't move from my seat when the ceremony was over, and suddenly Officer Parker came up to me.

"I need to inform you that she was still alive when we found her. We didn't know what could possibly make her survive that long, but she told me to inform you that she hid your Christmas present under your bed."

I went home and there wasn't her scent welcoming me. I didn't even bother turning on the heater. I just went straight to my room and checked the underside of my bed. A small wooden box. There were some packs of new cigarettes inside, alongside a beautiful lighter with my name carved on it. I found a letter too.

Merry Christmas, Arthur.

I'm giving you a few packs of shabby cigarettes and a far more beautiful lighter. I'm hoping that you would find the lighter more useful than the other one; to

give you light, to give you warmth, even when I'm not home.

The Merlin to Your Arthur,  
Helena.

I burst into tears. I felt cold, numb, in pain. People shut me out of their lives, but she stayed. Now she wasn't even existing in my life anymore. I still couldn't accept how she left me too. Out of all people, how could she leave me? How was I going to survive? No. She wasn't gone. She was still alive. I just needed something to trigger her to come back.

I took a cigarette out of the box and lit it up. When I exhaled, her scent came up to me again, just as warm as I remembered. I saw someone standing at the door of my room and I saw her, looking down at me with her hands on her waist.

"Seriously? I gave you a damn speech about not smoking and you have the audacity to smoke in your own room." She was there, scolding me. I inhaled more; she began to talk about her day as she walked to the sofa.

"Anyway, my boss messed with me today. She made me revise my report three damn times just to use the original one." I loved hearing her voice. I loved hearing her talking about her day.

“I need a huge pizza for dinner. I deserve it. You in?” Of course, I was in.

Smoking brought her back to me and it was all I did for months. I tried drinking with her when she felt tired, and she became annoyingly fun when we got drunk together. It was amazing. Smoking, and smoking, and drinking, and smoking, and another drinking; a bit of partying, a bit of pizza, a bit of movie night, more smoking, more drinking. She reminded me to keep working, so I did, but I told her to resign so that she could be with me all day. Others told me that I looked sick, but I gave no damn about what they thought when I had Helena with me.

But she suddenly told me, “It’s been a while since I ate that matcha cake.”

I lifted my eyes from the magazine I held. “Are you saying you want to eat that again?”

She lifted her shoulders. “Well yeah. But as you’ve said, it’s too far away.”

“If you want to go there, we go there.”

She looked so happy; I couldn’t forget how beautiful she looked. “For real?! Oh, hell yeah! I’m getting my coat!” She ran to her room.

With a smile on my face, I got up from the sofa. Yet, out of nowhere, my eyes blurred and my chest was in so much pain. I fell to my knees and coughed to my

hands. Blood. Blood all over my fingers, my wrists, the carpet was stained. It was so painful and I called out to Helena.

“He— Helen—”

I saw a pair of feet approaching in front of me, Helena was holding her coat.

“Come on, we have to catch the train soon! Oh, and you know, I think we should buy a big box of that matcha cake, just like the one I bought for you.” She sat down on the sofa again and just continued talking. “I think I have to ask them about the recipe if that’s possible, so that I can make one for us without having to go there.” I was losing consciousness, and she... She just kept on talking about the cake.

I was told by the doctor that I had lung cancer. I had no idea about cancer or stuff, but when the doctor told me that, he looked extremely in pain as if he was the one who was sick.

“Your excessive smoking, Mr. Maxwell...”

“Arthur.”

“Your smoking rate... It’s killing you, Arthur.” He looked into my eyes. “You’ve been... Smoking 5 boxes of cigarettes a day for the last eight months. That is... That is insanely unhealthy. But you are at the early stage and there is still hope for you to save yourself. Are you willing

to do this with me?” I needed some time to think, to digest that information, so I told him I’d get back at him when I was ready.

My landlord, who found me unconscious, was told by the doctor to get all the harmful substances out of my apartment, and he did.

I spent a few days completely sober and away from any nicotine, thinking about what I had been doing and honestly, I felt ashamed. Helena gave me that lighter so that I could find warmth when she wasn’t there. It wasn’t supposed to be used to light any cigarettes. I should’ve stayed away from the cigarette boxes, threw them away, never to see them again. But all I did was keep buying more and more and finishing them all. Instead of living in the warm light just like how she told me in her letter, I burned down my life instead.

With the feeling of being ashamed of Helena, I started my journey of trying to stay alive.

After a few months, I got better, and somehow, I ended up feeling very much alive. I was able to not only fix my health, but also my life in general. I got better at writing, I got a lot of offers as a ghost writer, I worked out a lot, I played with kittens, I begged for the matcha cake recipe and tried making it. But still, I didn’t get better socially; I drew myself away from people, worried that I might ruin their life just like how I ruined Helena’s.

2 days before Christmas, approaching Helena's death anniversary, I was still working that morning when my phone rang. I was waiting for my editor to call me so I picked it up instantly.

"Yes, Arthur here."

"Hi, Arthur. This is Jason."

Jason. Jason Gray. Helena's brother. I sighed deeply and answered. "Hi, Jason, been a while."

"We tried to reach out to you, but you never..."

"I know. I'm sorry about that."

Long silence before Jason spoke again. "We'd like to have you visiting our house to celebrate this Christmas with us."

"No." I answered too quickly. "I mean... I can't."

"Please. It's about time we talk about her." I grew silent.

I couldn't say no, because I thought so too. I was the only one knowing how Helena was before she died, and they deserved to know how she lived. Despite being the one who kicked her out, they were still her family. So, I agreed. That Christmas Eve I went to Helena's home and told her family how she was; what made her leave the apartment that day. I tried to pick the best words to tell the story but their reaction was just predictable. Apart from Jason, soon enough, I was blamed for her death by

them just like how I've always blamed myself for it. And when they finished blaming me for everything, I got up from the dinner table just like how I left my family.

“You can blame me for her death. It really was my fault. But if you guys hadn't kicked her out, if you guys had accepted her as who she was, a lesbian, a strong intelligent woman, a daughter worthy of praises and love, she probably wouldn't have ever met me with her bruises, her scars, her dirt-stained dress, and her broken heart.” I sighed. “She wouldn't have met me, the man who caused her death, and she probably would have been alive right now, sitting in this seat, eating this warm meal.”

They were completely silent when I walked out of their house by myself.

“I told you not to smoke, didn't I?”

I smiled. “Welcome home, Helena.”

FIN.

# THE SCAR AND THE SCULPTURE

Sadewo Rindu Aji

## Who I am

Dark and thundery night, I laid down on my bed, alone, thinking about what would be my next work. My mind had been stuck for a month. Why do I make sculpture, you ask? Well, it's been my hobby since then, I have created more than one obviously, I don't want to count it, and I have been sculpting since I was ten. It is all only for fun though, nothing else, even for my next work. What is my motivation for sculpting? Well, I'll tell you next time.

Anyway, my name is Ethan, Ethan Strangler. A twenty year old man, an amateur sculptor and a college student, a type of man that you'd find around you so easily, wearing glasses and messy clothes. I live in my apartment with my only friend, my soul mate, a girl that I met when I was a child, her name is Sophia. I have been with her for ten years now. Although I have known her for ten years, I do not know where she lives and who her parents are, and I don't ever ask about it, actually, well I think that's my fault. And now, I don't care about it, what is important is that we are happy together.

Speaking of the Devil, Sophia came and asked me.

“Ethan, what’s wrong? What are you confused about?” she asked.

“Well, I uh... confused about my next work” I answered.

“What’s wrong?”

“I want to create something different, something that out of the boxes exists, and, and, different from my other creations, a creation that changes, and would change my whole life with ‘it’.

Fuck it, I need some whiskey.”

She stared at me sympathetically as I walked away to the refrigerator, and took a bottle of whiskey. I opened one bottle, cling, it opened. I drank it, gluk gluk gluk... ah it tasted so good, as it went through my throat, I could feel it, so refreshing, with the peculiar taste of whiskey that felt hot down through my throat with such a strong taste of alcohol, and the intense scent of alcohol, Ah... how lovely it was! No man would refuse such a drink. After it all went down, I went to my Sofa in the living room, sitting there all alone while enjoying my whiskey. Not waiting for long, I drank another shot, and wow it tasted better than ever. Then, another one, again, and again, and again, finally I had drunk a bottle of whiskey in a minute and I was feeling so dizzy and sleepy.

As I was getting drunk and lost half-consciousness, I could see Sophia coming towards me. I reached out my hands to her as she fell down on me. We were hugging

each other on the sofa, and as I felt dizzy and sleepy, I suddenly fell asleep, in her arms.

### **How I have become**

When I was very young, my father left me and my mother with his death. I don't know how he looked or how he treated us, for he died when I was so young, I can't remember it at all. I know all of that because my mom told me once, once... When? Ah... no I can't remember it at all, something's probably wrong with my head. After that, I only lived with my mom, but how was it going? How did it feel? How did mom treat me that time? Did she love me? Ah whatever, I can't remember it at all.

Also, ten years ago, when I was ten, my mom had a new boyfriend, they nearly got married. His name was Dave, an alcoholic, jobless, abusive scum. I remember the first time he started hitting and kicking my mom, she was the first victim of his violence, and I followed up next.

That time, I peeked on the living room's door. They were arguing first and I unfortunately couldn't hear about it, then my mother started screaming painfully, he was drunk. He hit her, kicked her, slapped her, all as hard as he could with no mercy. I was scared, my feet were shaking up to the tip of my hair, seeing such a beast beating my mother, I was scared that I could not go back to sleep any more. And somehow, I did not know what I

was thinking about, I ran towards him and hit him as hard as I could so that he would let my mom go.

“Get off her!” I yelled with rage and fear inside.

“You son of a bitch! Get off me you little shit!”

He grabbed my hand with such force, and threw me away to the wall. He came right to me. I was scared.

“Mom, help me! Mom! Mom! Mom!” I did not say it, I yelled inside. As he came right to me, he started beating me just as he did to my mom. He kicked my belly and I screamed painfully and cried so hard. Then slapping me in the face with his big hand, almost as big as my face. It made a sound so hard plakk plekk plakk plekk and my mom only sat right there with confused blank stares, unable to help me for she had already been beaten badly. It happened almost every day, every night.

One day, somehow, my mother started drinking with him. I didn’t even want to call him a father, and beat me up too along with that scum. All I remember was that she was the only person that had a job in this house, and she was the one that gave us food, water, and the rest. I kept on thinking that she was probably stressed due to her job, and having such a scum in this house, and probably for having me.

“Come here you rascal!” She dragged me away from my room to the living room.

I was scared, what would she do to me? I cried, I cried, I cried, but I could not speak a word, even when she started slapping me in the face. The scum was watching us, and laughing. Oh, how I hated him so much. She kept beating me, again and again and again and again. As she got tired, she took me to my room and left me there. Then she walked away, without saying a thing, at all. I cried all night, I couldn't sleep, my face hurt.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry"

That was all I could say that night, as the tears flowed on my cheeks. I kept on saying it again and again until I fell asleep.

"I don't want this, I don't want this, I don't want this.

I hate it, I hate it, I hate it, I want to be happy"

As the time went by, those were the words I said. And every night before I went to sleep, I kept on imagining having an ideal person for me, a beautiful, kind, and soft-hearted person, probably a girl. Every day I kept on doing it so that I could get away from this shit in this house. That probably I started getting deluded that time, I don't know. I kept on going inside my own world, my own mind, I enjoyed it. It felt... so relieving, warm.

The abuse kept on going for about 6 months now. Every day I got a slap on my face, got hit by a stick on my hands, and such. And one day I met her, Sophia. I was at

the park all alone after school not wanting to go home. She came to me.

“Hi, there.” She greeted me.

“Hey.” I answered

“What are you doing all alone here? It’s 5 now, your parents aren’t looking for you?”

“Nah, they won’t. What are you doing here by yourself?”

“Nope, my house is around this block”

It kept going on, although it was such simple conversation, yet comforting for me. For the first time, I was feeling so happy that it got dark already and I need to go home now.

“I need to go home now.”

“Okay then, See you again, Ethan.”

“See you.”

I left her behind and ran to my house, as quickly as I could before I got beaten again.

“Oh no, Oh no, I’m scared, hurry, hurry”

As the sweats ran down all over my body, I kept on running. And finally I got there. I stopped in front of the door to catch some breath first. As I entered my house, I saw no one. How lucky I was. They hadn’t got home yet.

Behind the door, I found a bunch of wires. A thin yet strong wire, I tried to bend it, wow I did it! It wasn't that hard though. Then I took all of it to my room, and probably it was no use. I took a pair of pliers in the toolbox, right next to my room, and used it to cut the wires. I knew that pliers could cut it, because I saw my teacher use it to cut the wires at school to fix the fence around the basketball field.

I tried to make something out of it. But, somehow, I created a masterpiece, it became a device for me to let all of my feelings out. I created two fists. Probably I created it because it gave me a lot of memories thanks to that. I was so tired. Since I was running all the way from the park and home, making this masterpiece of mine with such excitement that I had not felt for a very long time. I should go to sleep.

When I woke up in the morning it was the day that my neighbor told me that my mom and that scum had an accident, the night before. I did not know what to feel, I did not know what to express, I just... Did not know. Should I feel sad? Happy? Excited? Desperate? I did not know. I went to the funeral, and there they told me that I should stay with my Grandmother. Well, okay, I had no problem with that.

After that I went to the park, and saw Sophia for the second time.

"Hey, Ethan, what happened?" she asked gently.

“My parents died last night, in an accident.”

“I don’t know what to feel, what to do, nor what to express.” I answered with such a flat tone that it was even flatter than a flat earth.

She stared at me sympathetically. Then she started speaking.

“I don’t know either. You should understand yourself. All I know is that I’ll be your friend and will always be there for you.”

“Thank you.” That was all I could say, nothing else.

Then, I woke up from my sleep, with tears running down from my eyes. What a dream. Why was I dreaming about that just now?

## **How it ended**

As I woke up, I did not see Sophie anywhere. She probably went outside with her friends. I took a seat on my sofa before standing up, and stretching my body. I stood up and went to the bathroom, to wash my face and brush my teeth.

And anyway, I have had trauma from my parents in the past. It has been haunting me for ten years. I can’t escape from it. It keeps on coming and coming at random times. I can’t say that I’m used to it because it is very frightening.

When I was starting to walk down to the bathroom, they came, the trauma, the ghosts inside of my head that I can't get away from; my mom and that dead scum although he is dead I still hate him, and of course, afraid of him even more with that appearance. With a big bulking body, and holding a baseball bat, like he was ready to beat me up. He was standing right there, right in front of the bathroom, along with my mom, luckily with normal appearance, just as when she had lived. A dark long hair, and a black uniform from her workplace. They were staring at me viciously. They started walking right to me.

"No, not again. Please stay away, please go away, it's been like this for ten years. Please, just leave me alone"

I panicked, stepping away from them slowly because my feet were shaking. I couldn't control it any more, I fell on my back and crawled to the back of the sofa. I was crying, crying so hard that I could not bear with these feelings, memories, and scars. Slowly I crawled to the back of the sofa. Yet they came to me slowly, slowly, now with a laugh that haunted me even more just as the witch and those vampires in movies.

"No, I am crawling too slow, they are going to catch me up." I thought.

"No, no, no, no, Please go away, please, please, please." I said.

I couldn't hold it any more. Sophie used to come when it happened, but she did not come. I didn't know what to do.

"Sophie, please, help me! Where are you?" I said it loudly.

Nothing happened, and the ghosts kept coming closer, closer, and closer. How do I fight them? How do I face them? Where should I go next? As they approached me, the scum lifted the baseball bat right above me and would hit me, it would surely hit me. He moved the baseball bat, and ah he hits me on the head! It hurts! I touched my head and I saw blood on my hand as I touched it. Then, my mom grabbed my head, and was ready to slap me. She slapped me so hard that my cheeks felt so hurt.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry" I said loudly, nearly screaming.

Because Sophia did not come at all, I tried to fight them back. I pushed my mom's ghost as hard as I could, and she was pushed away. When she was pushed away, I tackled the scum and beat him as hard as I could so that his face would break, and nothing was left. I let all rage and revenge towards him out, I kept punching, punching, punching, and punching that he just laid down there, unable to move.

Next, I looked at my mom's ghost. She stood not so far from me and she stared at me. I could feel it, although her eyes were covered by her long black hair.

"What is that water? It's dropping from her face?" I wondered.

Then I started running towards her and tackled her. As she laid down and I sat on her to punch and slapped her face, her face-covering black hair slowly revealed what actually happened behind those hairs. She was crying, but why? For ten years I had never even realized and those waters were the first time I saw it dropping.

Looking at her face, I remembered everything that happened when I only lived with my mom. She cared for me, never even slapped or punched, but she put her hand on my head and rubbed my head as she taught me how to read and gave me some snacks after. She cared for me. She loved me. I was her world.

"How could I forget about that?" I was feeling regret.

As I was remembering those memories and looked up above, the ghosts faded away, and I was feeling relieved, relieved that I remembered all that. My tears were slowly dropping off my eyes, with a smile on my face. When I was enjoying those moments, Sophia came to me and called me.

“Ethan...” She called me from afar, with a gentle voice.

“Sophia, Thank you, for being with me all these times. For letting me face my past. Thank you.”

She only smiled and faded away. For ten years, she was just a delusion that was made out of me and she was also a part of me. The person that I had been dreaming of.

## **New Life**

After everything had ended, my mind was clear and I knew what to make for my next project. I had a theme for it and the visualization for it. All that was left was just to create it.

I took my old pliers, and a bunch of wires. I cut some, and bent it using my pliers, and sometimes with my own hands. I slowly tied the wires to other wires, slowly, with high details. I was sure it would be the real “Masterpiece” of me.

For 4 hours I’d been working on it. It was almost finished. I could already see the form. The form that I had been dreaming of. I took a bottle of wine and drank it and lit a cigarette, then continued the work. I bent the wires on top of it, bent it again so that it shaped just as I imagined. Slowly but surely, I did it. I made a real masterpiece.

“Part of us. That’s your name.”

A sculpture with a feminine hand of a woman facing up and a baby’s hand holding on its middle finger. Perfectly bonded from wire to wire that also made it stand strong.

“Finally! I did it!” I said it proudly. “What should I do next? I’m feeling so relieved right now that nothing feels heavy, and nothing I can think about.

Ah I know.”

I went to the living room, took some ropes, and a chair.

“Hello, 911. I found a body.”

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—FIN—



# CRUEL LIFE

Citra Murni Susilawati

Staring at the window, looking at the droplets of the rain was Oriana's new hobby. The droplets fell through Oriana's window, competing with each other to reach the bottom of her window. This situation reminded her of what happened to her four years ago in her parents' house. Gathered in their family room and saw what happened outside, that day it was raining like showers. It was cold. Hot coffee and tea were set on the table, ready to create a warm sensation in their belly. A conversation happened suddenly when her sister, Astrid, delivered her plans after she graduated from college.

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*"Mom, Dad, last night I was thinking about what I really want, and now I know what I want. I wanna run my own business."*

*"What business? You can work at my office, I will give you a great position as you are my daughter," answered Oriana's daddy. [sipped the tea]*

*"Food. You know I like cooking, right? I wanna open a restaurant, if it is successful, I would love to open a bakery," said Astrid happily.*

*“Lovely thought, dear. I root for your success”,  
mom answered*

*“Thanks, mom. Riri, what do you think?”,  
Astrid asked Oriana her opinion.*

*“That’s great! I mean, you’ll run your own  
amazing business! The most important thing is  
that you love the job. Just remember, if you enjoy  
doing what you are doing, it means that you are  
already successful”, Oriana answered her sister.*

*“Awww, thank you, Riri! By the way, what are  
you guys gonna do? It’s almost holiday, right?”*

*“She’ll go visit Belipa island with her friend”  
Dad answered the Astrid question. [pointed  
Oriana]*

*“Again? Oh, c’mon, you’ve been there like  
three times!?” Astrid had no idea of Oriana’s plan.*

*“Yeah, I know. But Vanieya wants to go there!”*

*“I’ve told you many times, just stop being her  
friend! Don’t you realize she loves you because  
of your money? Oh my gosh”*

*“I don’t care, she is my best friend,” answered  
Oriana indifferently.*

*“Mom, Dad, look at Riri!”*

*“If it makes her happy, just let her,” Dad answered Astrid.*

*“Yeah, your daddy is right. If Vanieya is not good for her, time will show it to our dearest Riri. The most important thing right now is your both happiness, Astrid with your ongoing business and Oriana with her holiday plan” Mom added.*

\*\*\*

Oriana regretted herself for not listening to her sister's opinion of her best friend. Vanieya left Oriana after Oriana forgot to bring her card and could not pay for Vanieya's room. Vanieya felt angry and she posted the problem to her social media. She even stated that she was friends with Oriana because of her money. Since back then, they never communicated with each other. Oriana felt sad, very sad. It was because Vanieya was her only best friend that she thought was always there for her. She never thought it was all because of money Vanieya being friends with Oriana.

[sighed]

“If only I could turn back time,” said Oriana to herself.

[shook her head]

“I need to clean up my room, tomorrow is my first day of work, I will not have enough time to

clean up my room after that,” Oriana said to her mind.

Oriana then cleaned up her room. She loved everything that was set in its position. She would be mad at herself if she knew something was missing in its place. That was why her apartment was always neat. Yes, she was eighteen and lived in her own apartment all alone, apart from her family. No, she did not run away from home, her parents knew it and they agreed as they thought Oriana moved to an apartment because she wanted to be more independent. Well, it actually was all because she did not have a good relationship with her parents after her senior high’s graduation as her parents did not attend the invitation while all her friends’ parents attended the graduation. She was in the top 3 in her school, that would be an amazing day if her parents came, that would be her greatest memory of her senior high year, but luck was not on her side. Her parents chose to help her sister in preparing the grand opening of her sister’s restaurant.

*4 hours later . . .*

Oriana smiled with satisfaction as now her apartment was completely neat, all set in its places. Now it was her time to finish all the tasks that had the closest deadline, after that she would love to re-write the materials

she got from the class. This habit helped her a lot to face the middle semester and final semester tests.

*In the next morning . . .*

Oriana felt more motivated than before because it was her first day of work as a barista in one of her favourite cafes after being a trainee there for three months. After finishing all her class that day, she, accompanied by Mallina, her best friend, went to the cafe.

*On the way to the cafe . . .*

“Oriana, you have everything, why are you looking for a job?” Mallina couldn’t help her curiosity.

“No one knows what will happen next. If someday my parents’ company collapse, if I don’t make my own money, I would die”  
[laughed awkwardly]

[silence]

Mallina agreed with Oriana's thought.

“The Wood Cafe,” Mallina said in a whisper as they arrived at the cafe.

“C’mon! You will be my first customer, Mallina!” said Oriana, grabbing Mallina's hands and entering the cafe.

Oriana then went directly to the room where it was written “staff only” on the door to put her things and change her outfit. She greeted all her new friends she got since her first day as a trainee and started to stand behind the storefront, ready to serve the customer. A big smile was always on her face that day, she did a great job on her first day of work, the manager of the cafe and all her barista friends congratulated her on her first successful day.

*On her way to the Mallina apartment*

[phone ringing] Mom

[loud speaker on]

“Oriana, how are you doing? Let’s have dinner on Saturday to celebrate your sister’s restaurant anniversary! We’ll wait for you, dear,”

“I can’t. You know that I have regular practice with my band every Saturday, right? I’ll send a gift for Astrid, she will understand” answered Oriana.

“Oh, c’mon Riri, we miss you,” her mom begged her.

“I’m sorry mom, but I can’t. I’ll visit you the other day. By the way, I am driving home right now,” said Oriana.

“OK then, I cannot force you. Be careful dear, take care of yourself. Mom loves you,”

“I love you too, Mom,” [beep, call ended]

[phone ringing] Momma

“Hey, mom” Mallina greeted her mom.

....

“I’m fine, yeah sure, you could come to visit me. I am free on Friday, yeah sure”

...

“Love you too, mom! See you on Friday,”  
Mallina ended her call with her mom.

Mallina wanted to say something but she held it. She knew what happened to Oriana and why Oriana acted like that whenever she was invited to her family dinner. Mallina tried to think about something that could make Oriana forget about her conversation with her mom. She suddenly remembered what happened and what she heard at the cafe.

“Ririii, you should know that almost all of the customers were all talking about you! They said that you are so beautiful, some of them even thought that you are a fashion model! You are the hot topic at the cafe!” Mallina said passionately.

“Oh, c’mon Mallina, don’t make up a story,” Oriana replied and blushed.

“I am not! Besides, your coffee is good. You are a newbie, but it tastes good tho! That is why your friends there congratulated you!” [Oriana shook her head]

“It is not a joke. It is okay if you do not believe me, I said the truth.”

After she’s driving Mallina home, Oriana drives straight to her apartment to get some rest. On her way to her apartment, she was thinking about Mallina's conversation with her mom. She felt jealous as she did not see any clumsiness between Mallina and her parents, not like her.

That was her new routine every Monday to Thursday after all her classes she would have shifted to her workplace, drove Mallina home and she drove home

at max at 10 p.m. On the weekends, she would have band practice with her friends at her apartment. Even though that was only a regular band that they made to fill in their spare time, they had a regular practice every weekend and that made her and her bandmates very close. Oriana sometimes felt exhausted but she enjoyed her activities.

*A few months later, on Oriana's third semester of college . . .*

"Anyone wants band practice?" Jonah asked.

"Yeah, sure. It has been a while since our last practice tho," Stevan answered.

"Couldn't agree more! Next Saturday?" Gea suggested.

"Saturday looks great," Mallina agreed.

"How about the other?" Oriana asked.

[Jonah and Stevan nodded their head]

"OK. I'll prepare everything. At 4. Is that okay?" Oriana, as the householder wanted to make everything clear.

"Great!" answered Jonah, Mallina, Stevan, and Gea together.

"OK. Saturday at 4 in my apartment," ensured Oriana.

“Don’t forget the pizza!” [Jonah and Stevan laughed]

“Duh!” [Mallina, Oriana, and Gea chuckles]

*On Saturday . . .*

At 4 sharp, Oriana and her bandmates started their band practice. It was already 5 and now they were taking a break. As usual, they ate the food that Oriana ordered and talked a lot about college, tasks, work, lovers, and others. They laughed hard hearing each other stories until Mallina said,

“Guys, can I record our practice?”

All of them became quiet and looked at each other. They are confused as they never record their practice.

[Oriana clear her throat]

“For what? Are you planning on something?”

Oriana broke the silence.

“No, I just want to have a memory of us. We never record our practice, right? We just take a picture of ourselves. C’mon guys! Ok?”

“OK then, let’s go!”

Oriana felt something suspicious, but she tried to believe Mallina. They recorded three performances of their practice and at 8 they went to their own home.

The next day, everything was still normal for Oriana and her bandmates. Oriana still went to her workplace every Monday to Thursday and on the weekends she and her bandmates were doing their band practice, even if they were not practicing, they still visited Oriana apartment to finish their college task together or just having fun together.

*Two weeks after . . .*

Oriana, Gea, Stevan, and Jonah looked Mallina in the eyes, and asked for her explanation on what was going on. Why did people talk about them all of a sudden and why their practice videos were all over the internet? Mallina started to cry and explained what she did after she asked them to allow her to record their rehearsal at that time. She said that she enrolled their band in a competition where the winner could perform as an opening act for her favourite band in Modeerf City, Summer VibeZ. They all became speechless as they did not know what to say, they were mad at Mallina as they did not have an intention to be famous. Well, it happened and there was nothing to do but accept it.

“I am so sorry,” Mallina said over and over again

“Well, it is no use crying over spilt milk anyway,” Oriana answered.

Agreed with Oriana, Gea, Jonah and Stevan nodded their heads. Oriana was right and what they had to do was accept the fact that they were now known by several people in the city as they were in second place in that competition.

Two months after that day, they started to think about making a YouTube channel as they saw support from the people for their band. They haven't created their own song, so what they did on their channel was cover others' songs. The people were very enthusiastic as the engagement of their video was always great. They also, sometimes, were invited to The Wood Cafe, Oriana's workplace, to do live music there.

*A year later . . .*

Oriana and her band, The Ormanage (taken from each member' name), became more famous. Not only once they were invited to a local concert. Most of their

fans loved them because they were not only good at music but also had an attractive appearance. Jonah and Stevan both were long-haired and well-shaped, Gea was always stylish with her short hair which gave a tomboyish impression, Mallina with her long straight dyed hair, and Oriana with her long black wavy hair which was very healthy and shiny. Both Gea, Mallina and Oriana were well-shaped which made them gain more love from the fans. They were the inspiration for young people who wanted to look cool and stylish.

There was one boy who tried to be close to Oriana. He always visited Oriana's workplace either to buy a drink or two or just to see Oriana's beautiful face. He was told by his friends that Oriana was one of the members of The Ormanage, a new famous local band. Oriana remembered him when he ordered his drink.

"Iced americano and tuna bread, right?" Oriana said before he listed his order.

"Yeah, you are right. Do you remember me? I feel so honoured," said the boy.

"You visited this cafe for a whole week and never changed your menu," answered Oriana with a smile, a sweet smile that melts every person who sees it.

“Gosh, you’re right. Do you remember all your customers?” asked the boy, handing the money to pay his order.

“Not all, just some people and one boy who visited here for a whole week without exploring other menus,” answered Oriana with a little laugh

[machine noise]

“Here's your receipt, just wait until your name is called and enjoy your meals!”

*An hour later . . .*

Oriana ready went back to her apartment but it seemed like she should wait a little longer as her car wouldn't start. The boy saw it and helped Oriana. He called his friend who is an expert on car engines. While waiting for the boy’s friend to come to the cafe, Oriana and the boy settled and started a conversation. The boy, whom Oriana knew as Mario, was such a fun and interesting person. They both had the same taste in music and food. They talked about a lot of things that made them forget about time. It was already 8 p.m. Oriana’s car was fixed and they had to say goodbye.

*A month later, in August . . .*

Oriana and Mario's friendship were getting stronger. Mario frequently visited The Wood Cafe and watched The Ormanage concert and live concert. Oriana's bandmates know that she was close to this guy but they felt something strange about Mario. They wanted to tell Oriana about what they felt but they were afraid Oriana would be mad at them so they just kept it for themselves. Besides, they saw Oriana happy with Mario and nothing changed within her, they tried to think positive about Mario.

*September 9th, Oriana's birthday*

Ready to leave her house, Oriana was about to go back to her apartment before her mom asked her.

"Where are you going? Isn't it too early to leave your house on your birthday?"

"I have a plan with my friend, mom. Can I go now?" Oriana asked for her mom's permission.

"It would be better if you stay here. It's Sunday and I think it is a nice day to have tea or coffee together. It's been a while since our last quality time, Ri,"

[silence]

“Okay, I’ll cancel my plan, I’ll stay here,”  
Oriana made her decision.

Oriana then sent a message to Mario, told him that she would stay at her parents’ house and asked him to rearrange their plan. Mario agrees and Oriana feels relieved.

Time passed by, yet Oriana felt nothing. It was her birthday, but she felt like being left out at her house. Her mom who at first asked her to stay now focused on Astrid. The topic of today’s discussion was Astrid.

“*Can they look at me even just for a second?*” said Oriana in her heart. She was tired.

At dinner, she did not finish her meal and went directly to her room. Astrid noticed her sister’s weird act then followed her.

[knocked the door and opened it]

“Hey, what’s up? What’s on your face? Smile at me, it’s your birthday Riri,”

[Oriana looked away]

“Hey, what happened?” Astrid tried to find an answer.

“Is it my birthday? Yes. Did our parents care? No. They just care about you. They keep talking about you. You are their world, Astrid. I’m done with this,” answered Oriana.

“I am sorry,” Astrid did not know what to say but was sorry.

“It’s not your fault. Can you leave me alone?”

“Okay, but please be happy. Smile. Happy birthday, Riri. Sorry for our parents,” answered Astrid, walking away from Oriana’s room.

### *The next day . . .*

Oriana was already back to her apartment, and now she was ready to meet Mario. At 9 a. m. Mario arrived at Oriana’s apartment and they hung out. Mario invited Oriana to have lunch with his parents at his parents’ house, they were so nice to Oriana. She felt love from Mario’s family. Not only that, Mario gave Oriana some gift that made Oriana fall deeper with Mario. At 5 p.m. Mario drove Oriana home as he knew that Oriana’s bandmates prepared a birthday surprise at Oriana’s apartment. The surprise went well, Oriana was so happy that day.

Since that day, Oriana and Mario were getting close. They were doing a lot of things together. On

Monday to Thursday, if he had spare time, he accompanied Oriana at The Wood Cafe. On Friday, they will visit a lot of places like the beach, waterfall, and other natural tourism. On Saturday, they would not see each other as Oriana was practicing with her bandmates and on Sunday, sometimes, they spent their time at Mario house. Mario's mom asked Mario to invite Oriana every Sunday to their home as her love for Oriana is the same as her love for Mario.

*October 21st . . .*

Mario and his friend went on a trip. Mario invited Oriana and allowed her to bring her bandmates. They went to Galigi beach, one of the most beautiful beaches in Modeerf. They were separated in two cars, Mario with his friends and Oriana with her friends. When they arrived, they were amazed because the beach, which is usually full of people, that day was so quiet. It turned out Mario had rented the beach along with its cottage.

They spent their day with joy and laughter. At night, Oriana felt bored so she decided to go for a walk. When she stopped for a while, she saw an old man sitting under the big trees that seemed like he was starving. With her piece of bread in her hand, she approached the man and gave it to him. She was glad to see the man eat the bread, she was happy to help the old man, it was good for

her to bring a snack while walking around the beach. After that, she walked back to the cottage.

Everyone was busy looking at the waves as they did not realize Oriana was already there. Mario saw Oriana just back from out of nowhere and he approached her and gave her a drink. He looked at Oriana's friends and they were all busy with their own business, he drew a smile on his face. Oriana felt something strange as she lost her balance. Mario picked her up and brought her to one of the cottages he rented. He did not immediately leave Oriana in her cottage, instead, he started his mission.

On the other place, Jonah, Stevan, Mallina, and Gea felt sleepy and they went to their cottage. One cottage could be for two people, Gea with Mallina and Jonah with Stevan. They were not curious about who Oriana slept with because they knew that Oriana did not like to sleep with other people, they thought Oriana slept in her own cottage.

*October 22nd morning . . .*

“Aaaaaaaaaa!”

Screaming was heard from the very end of the cottage. Gea who always woke up early started to wonder what the scream is as it sounds familiar. She then woke up

Mallina and asked her to accompany her to the very end of the cottage. When they arrived, they felt unsure but an old man was saying that the scream was from that cottage. They then opened the cottage's door. They were shocked after they opened the door of the cottage. Oriana was crying with a blanket covering her body, her clothes were on the floor. Mallina then told Gea to wake Jonah and Stevan. Mallina did not want to ask further about what happened to Oriana, she knew exactly what happened to her, she just wondered who did it to Oriana. She helped Oriana to put her clothes back on. Mallina then asked Oriana to move to Mallina and Gea's cottage and Oriana agreed. Before Oriana and Mallina opened the door, they heard Jonah and Stevan cursing and mentioning Mario's name over and over again. They knew that the situation was not good either for Oriana or them, so they decided to leave the trip and go back to the city. Oriana sent a message to Mario, told him that everything had been over and blocked his number.

A day after, Mallina visited Oriana as she did not want something bad to happen to Oriana. She knew Oriana tried to call her parents as she needs her parents in this situation but her parents did not answer the rings. Mallina then asked Gea, Jonah, and Stevan to frequently visit Oriana. They knew Oriana tried her best to look fine, but her eyes did not lie. There was fear in her eyes. After she was raped by Mario, she always blames herself for loving a bastard boy, for trusting him, for believing that

he was the one. Oriana changed to a quiet person and she often forced herself to smile and laugh. She, after the accident, never answered Mario's parents call or message which asked her to come to visit them again, because it would never happen. She would not go back to where that bastard lived.

Mario. Every time Oriana heard this name mentioned or every time she remembered this name, she felt anger inside her. She felt a strong disappointment with Mario. She trusted him, loved him with all her heart but he raped her and it was all only because of the money. She was only a joke to Mario. On the other side, she felt blessed because no one knew about what happened to her, only her and her bandmates who knew.

Days by days passed. Oriana started to live again, but still; she could not forget what happened to her on October 21st. The bruises, the abrasion, and the other disgusting mark were still there. She, indeed, already forgave herself for what happened to her. She received love from her bandmates and her friends from work. Her friends from work did not know what happened to Oriana but they tried their best to make Oriana smile. When she was alone, she started tidying up her room again, as after she met Mario, she rarely did that again which now she realized that her room was such a mess.

A month passed. She became active again in her band as she often skipped her concert and live music after that accident. Mallina, Gea, Jonah and Stevan felt happy for Oriana. They felt relieved after they saw Oriana find herself and slowly forgot about what happened to her that day. This Saturday, they went to The Wood Cafe as they had a schedule to do live music there. Oriana's friends there felt happy to see Oriana's happy face, a big smile and laugh just like what she has shown to them on the first day of her training.

*Two days before New Year . . .*

[phone ringing] Mom

"Good morning, dear, how is your holiday?"

"Morning, Mom. It's great. I've been busy with my performance schedule, but today is the last day as tomorrow I will get a day off" Oriana answered.

"Great to hear your good news. I'm glad your day goes well as always," Oriana's mom was relieved to hear that her daughter is fine.

"Mom, do you have any plans to welcome a new year?" Oriana asked her mom about her family plans.

[silence] Oriana's mom felt astonished as this was a rare occurrence. Oriana rarely asked about her family plan as she usually refused to come to any event that her family held.

"Mom?" Oriana asked her mom as she heard nothing.

"Oh yeah, yes Riri, we're going to do a little party on New Year's Eve. Would you like to come?" Oriana's mom asked Oriana happily.

"Of course! I would love to come, mom! Just wait for me!"

### *New Year's Eve . . .*

Oriana is now at her parents' house. She decided to celebrate this new year with her family. She felt like it was her time to rebuild a good connection and relationship with her parents. She tried to forgive all her parents' mistakes as she believed that there were no parents who hated their children. Every parent loves their children, they just showed it differently.

Oriana, together with Astrid, helped her mother to prepare foods for New Year's Eve. There was a lot of food served such as steak, burger, spaghetti, and french fries. The food was made by Oriana's mom and has a special taste, different from others. At 7 p.m. they were all

gathered in their garden to celebrate a new year. They enjoyed the food while staring at the beautiful sky, which glittered with stars and the moonshine beautifully. They talked a lot, and this time the topic was not only about Astrid. After a long time, she finally felt like she was home. She felt warmth and love from her mom and dad. Her parents said sorry to her, they said that they did not mean to choose Astrid over her and she got the point. Her parents and Astrid also felt sorry for what happened to Oriana that October, they felt sorry for not picking up her call and Oriana forgave them. They tried to fix their relationship together as now they wanted to forgive and forget the past. Oriana felt blessed, she was happy, very happy.

*January 1st . . .*

Oriana went to her apartment happily. She promised her family to visit them every Friday. On the way back to her apartment, her phone rang, there was no name on it, only a number but she answered it anyway.

[on the phone]

“Hello?” Oriana asked the caller.

. . . [no answer]

“Excuse me? Hello? Are you there?” She asked the caller one more time.

“Hello, Oriana?” a raspy voice that was very familiar to Oriana.

“Y-yeah?” Oriana answered unsurely.

“I am so sorry for that night. It was my fault. I was blinded by the money offered by my friends; I am so sorry Oriana. I know it is hard for you to forgive me,”

[silence]

“I would do anything for you to forgive me, please Oriana, I am so sorry” he added.

[horn noises] Oriana blanked and was not focused. She did not realize that the lights turned green.

“OK, whatever. I’m driving, sorry. Bye” [threw her phone]

Those were the only words that came to her mind. Oriana did not know what to say. As she tried to forget that night’s accident, but this raspy voice and his apology just opened her old wounds.

*January 3rd . . .*

At the airport.

“Happy holiday, my Riri! Don’t forget, you have me!” [Astrid blinks her eyes]

“I know, don’t worry. I’ll bring you home a lot of food and you will be a giant food monster!” [both laughed hard]

*[Oriana hugged her family tight]*

“Orianaa! You serious?!”

“What?”

“You’re leaving today and why the hell did you just tell us last night?”

“Gea! Why are you so upset?”

“She hasn’t made a list. You know, for emm” [Mallina gave Oriana a code]

“OMG! Don’t worry, I’ll buy you Niall James’ merchandise, Gea!” [Mallina, Oriana, Stevan, and Jonah laughed]

“OK, I think I have to check-in”

*[Oriana hugged Jonah]*

“Bye, Jonah. Please take care of Gea, she’s a bit careless sometimes” [chuckles]

“Ok, take care of yourself too. See you in two weeks!”

*[Oriana hugged Stevan]*

“Bye, Stevan. Thanks for everything and sorry for not being able to give you the love you want but I love ya!”

“Thank you, hope you’ll find your spirit back after this sweet escape! See you in two weeks, pie! It’s okay. Just remember that I’ll wait for you. Whenever you’re ready”

“Thank you, I hope I can love you more than this, right now”

*[Oriana hugged Gea]*

“Bye, Gea! Take care of yourself, love ya!”

“You too, Ri! Don’t forget my merch, love you!”  
[both laughed]

*[Oriana hugged Mallina]*

“Thank you Mallina for always being there for me. I am very blessed to meet you. I love you so much! If I am a boy, I would love to be your boyfriend for sure! [chuckles] Bye, Mallina”

“It’s my job as your friends. I am happy to be your friend too. See you in two weeks, Ri! You’re stronger than you think. Love ya!”

Oriana looked back at her family and delivered her farewell. After she hugged her family, she checked in.

Minutes before boarding, a message popped up on her notification.

“Hey, I heard that you will spend your holiday in Aurbite. Have a safe flight.”

“Once again, I am so sorry, Oriana”

. . .

“I forgive you. -O”

*Seven hours later . . .*

The Ormanage group chat

“GUYS! TELL ME WHAT I SAW IS FAKE” – Mallina

“OMG PLEASE NO” – Gea

“No no no no, please it can’t be true” – Stevan

“That’s not her plane. Don’t scare me” – Stevan

“Guys.

It’s her plane. The ticket she sent us said it all”  
– Jonah

[silenced]

“Stevan, are you there? Please don’t do something stupid, okay?”

“Idk. I don’t believe it”

*Oriana’s home*

“Is that Riri’s plane?”

“Oh god. Oh god, no, please, NOO” [Oriana’s mom screamed painfully]

[Oriana’s sister went downstairs, confused about the situation then she looked at the news]

“Oh god. Why?” [crying]

Oriana’s dad felt nothing. He even did not have the power to say a word or to cry. He remained silent. All of her family and friends were crying hard. They refused to believe that Oriana was already gone. A day after they heard the news, they got an official statement from the aircraft company about the accident. Oriana’s family made a funeral for Oriana in hope that if one day they or Oriana’s friends miss Oriana, they can visit her funeral. The family, friends, even Mario and his parents came to the funeral ceremony.

Oriana was now finally free. She was relieved to know that a lot of people love her. Throughout her life,

she thought only a few people loved her but she was wrong. She even saw Mario cry over her death.

Oriana said to herself,

After all this time, I finally understand that life was so unexpected, someone whom you thought loved you unconditionally, wanted something from you. Some people who made a mistake were forced to do the mistake. Last, someone, who did not seem to love you could be someone who really loved you. Now, I can leave earth to have my real life.

End.

# KNOWING WHEN TO SLEEP

Yosef Limas N. D.

I was sitting there for as long as I can remember, there was nothing. There was no light to be seen, but there was a sound. A sound that I can barely recognize, but at the same time seems so distant and hazy.

Was it a scream, or a laugh, or cough? I should know! I should know th...i...s....

Blinded by the light, I realized that the sun was already risen and I needed to prepare, for there are classes that are needed to be attended. The class as usual didn't take my interest as this is the first day of the week. I still have not recovered from the weekend. Janus and Bonny were here while Riksa was probably still lost in his dream as usual. The professor explained some theories but my mind was not here as I tried to remember the dream that I heard.

"Ah yes," I mumbled as I remember.

After the class was probably the happiest time of the day as we hang out and Riksa had already awoken from his slumber. They talked from America to Persia in their free time, so much so that I always had the urge to listen. I'm usually not engaged in that hot talk as interesting as it is, I didn't have many opinions to go against or agree with their opinion. You could say that it

is already been my habit to listen to someone or something in many conditions, good or bad.

I went to my house. My house? My uncle's house, to be exact and probably other's house after someone is willing to buy this house. But before that, there were still rats that are needed to be handled, and luckily, I caught one today. The bucket filled with water and this little one's end was near, just like its oxygen. I watched it until the end. I guess I will sleep well tonight.

Once again, I slept here like any other day. The sound still can be heard, but now I remembered. There was someone there, laying down. It wasn't a scream, nor a laugh, she was... coughing. Now I know, and still, it was there. It was there as he asked "Is she okay?"

"Seno, how was your condition?"

"It was okay I guess, nothing new at the campus," I replied.

"So, Seno, did you already decide when you will visit grandma's grave yet? We know that it's still hard for you, but you know that she will be happy if you visit her, right? Just like in the past."

"I know. I will visit her this weekend."

"That's good then, just call us if there is any problem, okay."

"Okay, mom."

They should've known the reason why I didn't want to go there, but I guess it was already long enough. Five years was long enough for my first grave visit.

I could still hear the sound, the air that was being pulled in and out. As long as I can remember, it's been a long time for it to lay down in that bed. I waited there, wondering what I should do, then he asked me "Will you stay?". I know it's not right, but maybe it's better to end it this way.

Right?

Seems like I will stay, as Thursday night was like another busy night. There were a lot of work that needs to be done, and it must be finished before the weekend. Well, I should be glad that the others were also suffering with me. On this occasion, two more people came, Rosa and Ayu. But it seems like they had another business for them to go here, and I was right.

"Hey, do you guys have time on the weekend?" asked Rosa.

"As free as my heart. Yes, I do have time," said Riksa.

"Same," said Bonny and Janus.

"I will pass, I need to go to visit my grandmother's grave on the weekend."

I have a bad feeling about this situation.

"Well, it's a shame. But at least now you finally visit her after a long time, right." Said Bonny.

"Yeah, and for this celebration, you will need to drink your favorite drink," Riksa said that while holding a cup of coffee that he ordered earlier. There Bonny and Janus were already standing and surrounded me like a pack of wolves hunting their prey. "I should not have come here" that was my thought at that time.

"Oy, did you just want to take revenge from last week's accident, and you do know I don't like coffee for one big reason, right?"

But words had no power here, and I was forced to drink a cup of coffee. Both of my hands were held by Janus and Bonny while Riksa grabbed my mouth and poured it right through my throat. There on I tried my best to swallow it, then

I swallowed it, then

I swallowed it, then

I coughed, then

I coughed, then

I coughed, then

I coughed, then

I coughed. Then

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So, that's how it felt. Now I know.

The taste of the coffee was not bad as sometimes I like bitter things, but I hate it for a different reason. These things called caffeine would wake me up more than I needed. That night I was awake until the sun peeked through the horizon. As much as I closed my eyes and

hoped to sleep, I couldn't until it was too late. I really missed stories before bed as it always makes me sleepy.

Once again, she started to tell her story of the past while her hand moved from left to right. Sometimes she even jolted while telling the tale she talked about and shouted like one of the characters in the story that resent God. She told a happy story, sad story, as someone praised, as someone beg, as someone live.

"A long time ago when I was still . . . . ." she said.

"He throws his sword right through the demon. . .  
" She shouts.

". . . the princess and. . . ." she told with a gentle voice. Then as how storm raged out all of its rages, it started to disappear. One by one it depicts its lightning and its roar, but before long they start to disappear.

"Hissssss" and then the silence back.

He asked "Is it over yet?" and the other one spoke,  
"Took her long enough, huh."

I parked my motorcycle and then walked. Five years was long enough that I almost forgot her way of life. Sometimes asking if she would be happy in these five years or not. still, I miss her tale.

Unexpected figures appeared in the grave. Aunt Santi probably was one that feels more guilt than me as someone who was always taking care of grandma. After five years, it seems that she still regularly cleaned and visited this grave time after time. She saw me and looked surprised but also a smile can be seen on her face.

"I thought you won't come here." She asks with a gentle voice.

"I decided to not avoid her anymore."

"Well, I can't blame you as you were there while she was away. Just don't blame yourself for it."

"Thank you, I will keep that in mind."

I was here, I am here. I knew it's been too long but it seems now I can finally let it go.

So, we prayed there together and I said my last goodbye.

"Hello, it's been a long time. I know I am late in the present nor the past as I can't decide fast enough. I bought you some chicken wings as it is your favorite part. I know it is insensitive, even if you like it, this also what end you. Well, I just bought them for souvenirs and lunch. There are things that I want to think about and I probably will stay here for a couple of days in the usual room next

to yours, hoping that this will be my last time having a nightmare."

"I'm sorry, I hope you are happy, and please have a good night."



Crime

## AFTER HOURS

Ratih Alifya Pinasti

“I almost got fired,” Elliot said through the blaring sound of the bar where his flatmate, Jean worked at. It was Saturday night, Elliot had just finished his shift. Well, technically it was not his shift. Elliot was supposed to be free from his duty as a police constable in London that day, but one of his co-workers had approached him the day before, asking Elliot to cover his shift because he got a date with his girlfriend or something. Elliot agreed because apparently, he did not have the courage to say no.

“What happened?” Jean asked curiously after he finished making a drink for the customer.

“I was patrolling through the street, and suddenly an old lady screamed saying that someone snatched her purse.” Jean listened to his friend, noticing the curly hair sticking out messily and the pair of round eyes staring at him soullessly, “so I ran after the thief, and long story short, I almost put a civilian’s life at risk because I was not paying attention to my surrounding. They nearly got run over a car. I did catch the culprit though, but Boss was not impressed,” Elliot said with a sigh.

Jean stared at his friend with pity. It had been four months since Elliot landed his job, his dream job, as police. Though Elliot never explicitly admitted it, both he and

Jean knew how hard and demanding his job could be. Not to mention that Elliot had to leave his mom alone back in Manchester and adapting to the new environment and lifestyle did not make it easier either. People who did not know Elliot that well would never notice. Elliot had mastered the ability to mask his own emotion after all. But Jean had spent a good amount of time with his best friend since high school and he noticed how stressed and restless Elliot had been these past few weeks. Jean had met some of Elliot's fellow police officers and they often said how cheerful and energetic Elliot was all the time, a happy virus, one of them once said.

"I'm tired," Elliot said while hanging his head low.

"Tell me about it," it was a rare opportunity for Elliot to open up and share about his problem, as well as for Jean who got the chance to hear about Elliot's problem.

"My boss is giving me a hard time, I barely get enough time to rest. Once I get a chance to rest, I'm still feeling tired. Even when I wake up it's like I have been walking for miles." Of course, it was Elliot's boss, Jeremy. He often misused his power to be free from his responsibility and passed his tasks to Elliot, which he accepted reluctantly.

"I should have known that today was going to be a bad day since I failed to get my usual morning tea because I did not have enough money with me and apparently, they do not accept card payment." After hearing more about Elliot's issues and worries, Jean

suggested that it was time for Elliot to relax and be free from all duties whatsoever, at least until Monday came.

Living in the heart of London surely had its own benefit. Elliot was lucky that Jean was currently searching for a flatmate and Elliot happened to search for a place to stay in London. Though located in the middle of the city, their apartment was a little tucked away from the hustle of the city and only a good five minutes' walk would bring you to a row of stores and markets.

Sitting at the corner of the street was Elliot's favorite café named Little Indian. It was the place where he would get his morning tea and a sandwich. That morning was a little different though. Instead of lining to get their order collected, there were people gathering around the café curiously talking to each other about the robbery that had happened at night. Elliot tried to overcome his own curiosity and walked past the café and went straight to the police station. By the time Elliot arrived at the office, one of his co-workers informed him that his boss wanted to see him.

"Elliot, I'm sure you already noticed the incident that happen on your way here, yes?" Jeremy talked while sitting on his chair.

"Yes, sir. I heard that there had been a robbery at a café, that is all I know so far."

"Correct. It happened around 1.30 AM, there was no witness and the café does not have a CCTV camera

installed either. We still have no clue about the thief, but apparently, the culprit took a few boxes of tea bag and a handful of pennies.” Hearing the detailed information about the robbery made Elliot a bit skeptical. Why on earth would someone rob a café only to steal teabags and coins?

“I know you have been good police, Elliot. Although it is only been four months since you started, I can tell that you’re very dedicated to your job. That is why I trust you with this simple mission to find the culprit who robbed that café. No need to worry, you will not do this alone because I was planning to assign you with Rory, the Chief Inspector’s son,” Jeremy explained further.

Although Elliot was beyond excited upon hearing his newly assigned task, he could not hide his shock when Jeremy told him to work in pair with Rory. Rory was notorious for being the Chief Inspector’s son and rumor had it that he was a spoiled child and rarely got his job done properly.

“If you both succeed, Rory will make his daddy proud and you, Elliot, will get a promotion.”

“I will do my best, sir.”

“Good. You can start working on your operation tomorrow.”

With that, Elliot exited Jeremy’s office in silence, he was still stunned about the conversation and the possibility of him getting promoted. Elliot made a promise

to himself that he would succeed in his mission no matter what. After his shift had ended, he met Jean at their favorite pizza restaurant and walked around their neighborhood.

“Whoa, I need those shoes,” Elliot said pointing at a pair of Jordan shoes from outside the shoe store.

“Get them once you receive your paycheck,” Jean nudged Elliot’s side jokingly.

“Yeah, but I’m planning on saving my money to buy a present for my mom’s birthday though.” As one of the most important persons in Elliot’s life, he wanted to give something meaningful for his mom’s birthday. Elliot was planning on buying his mom a ring or necklace, so he needed to save some of his money.

The next morning, Elliot woke up feeling tired as usual. Sometimes the tiredness made him contemplate his life choice on becoming a police officer. That day was supposed to be the first day of Elliot’s mission searching for the thief and also meeting the Chief Inspector’s son. But that day Rory failed to show himself at the office. But he did notify Elliot over the text, saying that he was not feeling well and would meet Elliot the next day. Finally, on Friday morning, Elliot entered his office and found a man sitting on his chair.

“So you’re Elliot,” said the man while twirling Elliot’s pen that he left on the table. There he was, Elliot’s partner for their special mission. Elliot assumed that Rory

was about the same age as him, maybe a little bit younger. They finally shook hands, Elliot's fingers grasping Rory's slender fingers firmly, marking their new partnership.

"You know you're late right?" Elliot stated.

"Whatever that is. I'm already here." Rory said nonchalantly.

The thing was while waiting for Rory to show up and Elliot poorly tried to formulate a plan, there had been a robbery in two different places, in two consecutive days. The first place was the shoe store and the second place was the jewelry store. The CCTVs from both places were failed to catch the thief's face, but Elliot assumed that it was the same person that robbed the café because the CCTV managed to record the thief's backside and it was identical.

With little information about the thief's identity, aside from their backside appearance and that they usually targeted stores around Elliot's neighborhood, both Elliot and Rory were having a hard time putting together an efficient plan. At last, they agreed to monitor and roam the area around Elliot's neighborhood, especially at night.

During those sleepless nights of investigation, Elliot and Rory often took a break and had some drink at the nearest convenience store. When they were on a break, Rory learned a lot about his partner, including the fact that Elliot has a sensitive stomach, was lactose intolerant, and could not drink coffee. Same as Rory, Elliot learned

many things about the infamous Chief Inspector's spoiled son. He knew how the other police often underestimated Rory because of his father, as well as the other prejudices that Elliot himself could confirm that were not true at all after spending a lot of time with Rory.

After one week of non-stop investigation, they still had not succeeded in catching the culprit, and it was getting hard for both of them to focus because of the lack of sleep and tiredness. So they decided to take a one-day break from investigating.

It was Monday morning when Rory got a phone call from Elliot that there had been a robbery at the convenience store near Elliot's neighborhood. Both of them agreed to meet at the crime scene right away. The owner of the store said that the thief stole a few cartons of almond milk. Though a little bit skeptical, Rory and Elliot asked the owner if there was any CCTV installed in the store. The owner who was an old lady said that her child did install a CCTV camera not long ago, but she did not know how to check it without the help of other people.

So there they were, in the tiny room at the back of the convenience store, in front of them was a computer that saved the data of the CCTV recording. In the video, at 1.10 AM, showed a familiar figure walking into the store, wearing pajamas. He stood soullessly in front of the milk section cabinet and grabbed several cartons of milk. Finally, Elliot thought to himself. Weeks of sleepless night and he would finally find out who the culprit was in no

time. Then, the figure turned its body, Elliot could see the face! Who is it?

“Me?”

“Isn’t that you?” Rory said in unison with Elliot.

There he was. Elliot stood with his eyes closed, body unstable like he could collapse at any moment, wearing his pajamas, while clutching cartons of milk and leaving the store just like that. Too stunned to speak, Elliot reminded silent while Rory asked the old lady for the footage of the video and leave the place after that. Elliot did not go to the office that day, he went straight to his apartment where he found Jean sitting in the living room, enjoying his breakfast.

Elliot broke down in front of his dear best friend. Jean, not knowing exactly what had happened, gave Elliot some time to calm himself down. Elliot then told Jean about him unintentionally being a thief that he himself tried to catch. Though a little concerned, both Jean and Elliot found the situation funny and absurd. Little did Elliot know that Jean actually noticed that Elliot had been sleepwalking during the night and sometimes Jean would hear Elliot shuffling through his bedroom. What Jean did not notice was the fact that Elliot tends to steal things whenever he was sleepwalking, he managed to sneak out of the apartment because Jean often forgot to lock the front door.

The first time it happened was robbing the café, taking packs of teabags and a few pennies, because Elliot was not able to get himself a cup of tea that morning. The second time it happened was at the shoe store, the night after he saw a pair of shoes that he wanted to buy but could not. The third time it happened was at the jewelry store because he wanted to buy his mom jewelry as a birthday gift. The fourth time it happened was at the convenience store because, in the morning, Elliot was running out of milk and could not eat his cereal for breakfast.

Out of curiosity, Elliot searched for the things he unconsciously stole. He searched all over the apartment but he found nothing.

“Maybe under your bed or something, have you searched there yet?” Jean suggested.

Jean was right. Under Elliot’s bed, he found packs of oolong tea bags, a handful of pennies, a pair of Air Jordan shoes with a size way bigger than Elliot’s usual shoe size, a necklace, a ring, and three cartons of almond milk.

Though Elliot found the situation absurd, he was reminded that no matter how, he always found a way to get what he wanted. Even unconsciously.

# KARMA

Marcelino Aldrian Alfandy

“Ai?” So my name is called by a man, though it is not my real name. It was only my childhood name, which my old man gave me.

“So it's been two months, since the last incident..” He continued.

“Yes, Sir...”

“Why? Why would you put an end to their life too?” He asked with a grin on his face, a grin that was possessed by anger.

“Their life?” with a glass of fine wine in my hand, though it was a bit bitter.

“Oh, don't you forget, Xin Mei and Shun Er... Won Sam's girls... Oh, it was such a waste! you killed them! Why don't you let them free and bring them to me?” He drank his wine in one shot. What a waste, a fine wine in the hand of a jerk.

“Why? Better let them die rather than give their life to you. Aren't they happy if they come back to heaven?” I smiled, but not to this jerk, to the fine wine in my hand.

“Ho? Is that so? Would you like to replace them on my side, then?” He looked at me with such pervy, low-life eyes.

“I feel sorry that two years ago I didn't cut your tongue...”

“Such an elegant bitch we have here...” with a gun in his hand, he slowly took it and kissed it.

“Say, what do you want from me?” my beauty glass out of water.

“I have a job for you...” He put his gun on the table, then his face became serious.

“Who is it this time?”

Then he started to explain everything. He showed me a picture of an old man, with a familiar face. He asked me to gun this old man. I asked this old man's name, and he spilled a name that I don't want to hear, ever. Sin Kwok, it's been a very long time since I heard that name. Elementary School, was the place I saw him for the very last time. I will never be able to forget that name.

It is true that my father was one of the mafias. No wonder when my father was gone, people tried to wreak some havoc on me. Some people tried to kidnap me, some tried to kill me. It was Sin Kwok, who was a principal at my elementary school at that time. He tried to help me, with a ‘cost’. Once he called me to the principal's room, then he offered me help, he could help me, at least,

materially. Nothing came into my mind at that time. I accepted his offer, but then he asked me if I will be his 'girlfriend'. I was shocked, then he said sorry. Yes, a sorry came out from that stinky tongue.

A few days after, he called me to his house. I still believed him, what a fool I was. He said he wanted to talk about my school fees. Once I got there, two cups of tea welcomed me, and of course, Sin Kwok. He talked much, about his track record, his life, and lastly, about family. I didn't know where that conversation would lead. Then, comes the big trauma of mine. He suddenly grabbed my hand, took me inside his house, then he hit my head with something, I don't know. The only thing that I realized after I woke up, I didn't wear a single cloth. Then I also realized that I was not in his house anymore, I was somehow on the riverbank. It was hurt, really hurt, in my crotch. I couldn't walk properly, but surely I must walk somewhere safer. Then my dream to be a doctor drifted away. Since then, I have never gone to school. Nobody even cares about me, nothing I can care about either, friends? A mere fantasy in fairy tales and children's films.

Then that man told me, Sin Kwok was a leader of a little syndicate, part of Blue Lanterns, which means I have to deal with San He Hui or Triad.

"How much can you pay?" This was a serious job, dealing with Triad merely just the same as throwing yourself alive into a hell full of tigers.

"48.000, 8.000 for operational." He said it slowly.

“You better know that I'm dealing with San He Hui.” A bit scared, it was seriously no joke. It's like a mantis trying to kill a pack of tiger cubs.

“I know,” He closed his eyes.

“40.000? Are you sure? Lower than your head?”

“Hahaha, I know! I know! They pay you 100.000 for my head, right? Surely it's overpriced for you! No wonder you take the job!” He laughed, “Fine! 128.000 for this time.”

“I will think about this...” I closed my eyes. Trying to take a big breath.

“You scared? Hahaha! The Crimson Daughter just scared?”

“No, I was...”

“Crimson Daughter, Ai. How many lives have you taken?”

“Shut up...”

“Take it.” He threw me a knife. “Song Jun, you know this name?” He asked me, once more, with a grin. I was silent, this is my old man's knife.

“How did you know? Where did you get this?” I shouted a bit.

“Hahaha! See, I was the same as your father, Bai Pi Shu Feng Shan's former member.”

“That's not answering my question!”

He put an act of thinking. “Let me see, Ah! He gave me! If I remember correctly, this knife was inside his jacket, then he gave it to me without saying anything! He laid down under a bridge, his eyes opened wide, his body was full of red paint! Looking at me with anger, but didn't say anything!” He smiled.

“Bastard!”

“Easy, girl, easy...” he laughed, seeming so satisfied. “Listen, it will be yours! If, and only if, you take this job... and if you come back alive, of course.” A very satisfied grin grazed his face.

“Mo San, surely I will cut your head after this!” Then I tried to calm myself.

“Ya! Sure! I will wait! It would be amazing if I could see your ass before I die!” He laughed so hard, I seriously will kill him after all of this. “Well, I'll take that as a yes! See you, don't forget to take off your clothes when you come after me!” He walked out.

“Sin Kwok, Mo San. For Heaven's sake, I will be their karma!” I bite my tongue, as proof of my oath. Man, what a cursed creature they are. No difference, men only seek wealth, thrones, and sex. I was born as every man's karma.

It's already been two months. Time for execution, I disguised myself pretty well, people shouldn't be aware

of me. 8.000 for a disguise isn't that much. I went to a party that was held that night, Sin Kwok was there. It was a big party to celebrate the success of a political party. I joined the party, alone. Then I realized, Mo San was there too. Surely he wanted to make sure I would finish the job perfectly.

It's 11 o'clock. People started leaving the party. Sin Kwok is still drunk and getting worse. Which is a good sign for me. I walked to approach him. Then he welcomed me, ``Come, girl, what a beautiful night, right?" He laughed so hard. Then I sat next to him.

"What is your name, beauty?" He put his hand on my shoulder, then the other hand started to grope my lower body. What a low-life. "You don't have a name? Don't worry! I will call you baby!" He laughed so hard, he's happy for sure.

"Come, sit on my lap!" I followed his order. "Come on baby, are you alone?"

"Yes..." I had to act like a 'baby' for him. I was disgusted about myself being like that.

"Oh, what a beauty... Do you want a drink?" He asked. "Sure..."

"Now, let's go to a hotel, it would be improper if we do it here" He invited me, with a force, as he pulled my hand to follow him.

Then we went to a hotel, He was guarded with his boys, around 9-11 persons. I have to be careful. A single miss will lead me to the mouth of tigers. Lucky me, he invited me to a hotel. This will be easier for me. For a minute, we arrived in a hotel. He took me to the room. He drank really bad. He started taking off his clothes. Disgusting.

“Wait... where are the drinks?”

“Oh! You're right, you want to drink first, right?” He laughed. A disgusting laugh came out of his mouth. He took out the drinks and offered me to drink first.

“Thanks...” I said and drank a glass of it.

“I want it too!” He said it loudly, well, he is seriously drunk.

I put four sleeping pills inside the drinks. It would be enough for him to slow him, so he wouldn't recognize me later. “Here, drink it...” It's time to put on some acting.

“Do you think I'm that beautiful, Sir?”

“Just like a white lotus in the middle of a river!”

“Such a fine man you are...”

“So this is your true nature, o' little snake?”

“You said that I'm a white lotus?!”

“Ah, yes! Yes!”

He started to lose his consciousness. I have to continue acting. Suddenly, he tried to kiss me. Well, I have to continue my acting, or else I will be figured out. He kissed me, he groped me everywhere, upper body, lower body. He also tried to take off my red gown.

“No, sir...”

“What’s wrong my lady? Is this your first time? It must be not, right? Your body and lips told me everything...” Then he started to lose more of his consciousness.

“Whoa, my head...”

This is the time.

“Sir, let’s do some more...” I put my hands on both cheeks. I prepared sharp Chinese Manjha on both my hands. “Sure, honey...”

I wrapped the Manjha thread on his neck, then I pulled both sides of the string. His head fell on the floor. The bed became crimson-colored. “Thank you.” I said to him, even though I knew he couldn’t listen.

I went away from the room, to the backstreet, Mo San was there, waiting for me, then he said

“Well done, now it's my turn.”

Then he brought his men, equipped with fuel oil. He lit his smoke and his men put the fuel in some location. Then he burnt the hotel. I already ran away when that happened. A big boom and the night lighten up. A case full of money in front of my basement, pretty sure Mo San put this here.

Some days after, I went to Bai Ruo Pu, a valley in Hunan, Changsha. I went there to meet someone that I knew, an old woman, Chu Ma, a principal of an ‘almost’ abandoned school.

“Chu Ma, take this case...”

“What is this, o’ daughter?”

“Something useful... Take a use of it to revive the school...”

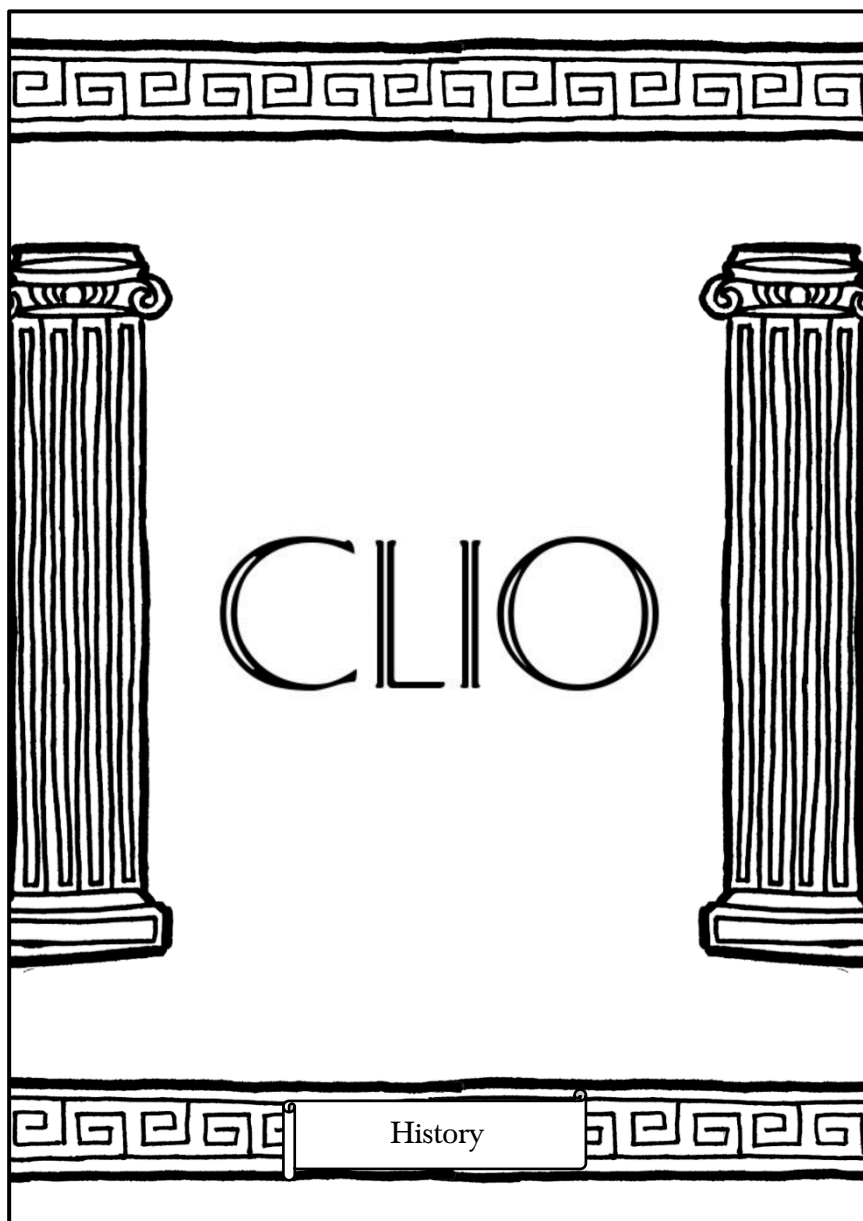
She was silent and shed tears. “Thank you so much o’ daughter, may heaven bless you.” Then she grabbed my hand, showing her thankfulness, then she asked me; “Do you love children?”

“It is not about whether I love or hate them, I just don't want to see their dream just gone because they couldn't be educated in a proper way.”

“Why do they care about their dream?”

“I once didn’t care enough about my dream.”

So, there would be no more of me. I was the only one, and the karma itself.



CLIO

History

# THE WANDERING CYGNET

Danielle Kristeva

She named me Baeg Jo. Eleven years ago, my mother was infatuated by the fleeting starry skies when the constellation of the swan appeared in front of her wandering gaze. Thus, she named me after that. I did not recall much since I was very young like a rosebud, yet I remembered my mother was astonished at how I looked, but how could I instigate her reactions? I was born with a crystalline appearance of porcelain skin, long tousled silver hair that resembles the morning frost, and eyes like the bright amethyst gems. I was different from any other kids, but my mother still treasured me like any other parents even though I am the unwanted son that she conceived from a person that she did not love at all—hardly. She even named me to be ‘the dancing swan of the celestial realm’.

That was how my dream recalled the past before the curtains of my eyes suddenly were stirred to open, revealing only myself buried below by the white snows.

[ ... ]

As far as I could remember, it was another day where I was awoken by the chilling thoughts that crept onto my skin. Other than its coldness, a sting of fresh pain

slowly moved the instincts to gather my energy left within this body. Perhaps I received another bruise, which was mostly caused by those men that mother always warned me off before. I tried to pull myself off from the ground, but the swollen violet marks started to flick the balances that I finally leaned toward the wall to support my wobble legs.

“...Another morning bruise, another day to spend”, were the words I muttered before I took off from that place by dragging myself beside the cinnabar-bricked walls.

[ Night, the streets of Xinjing. ]

It likely happened the night after I went out from the brothel, to collect the littlest portion of food that could be found at the main city hall. As I made sure to hide my most apparent features, which was my long-tousled silver hair, I tried to stray away from the public as much as I could. But again, how could I foresee the outcome precisely when the alley I usually used as the shortest route was occupied with those men. The ‘Japanese’ soldiers, they were the ones whom mother referred to. In this town called Xinjing, we considered them as the superiors— why? They claimed ‘their blood flows with the rising sun’ was what my mother explained to me. Apart from where we were standing, I could smell the scent of horrible danger coming from their half-gaping mouth. They reek of cocktails.

Ah, I should not have taken this alley at all.

As I tried to move backwards from entering the alley deeper, that moment of accidentally bumping to someone's side caused me paralyzed to the core that I could not move my muscles instantly. I would rather not turn my head back to see the person but the repugnant scent of vodka tingled the tip of my nose creating a quick shriek upon my skin. Even though I tried to remain silent, those hands suddenly crept onto my shoulders while he moved closer. That man bent his back behind me, with his chest leaned against mine and his scorching breath melted my cold ears. A movement to sniff my hair happened that my arms became so tense that I could not push him away— yet a sudden force was put to my body that I never realized how that man shoved me against the wall that the back of my head collided with the bricked walls. I came too late to realize how unable I was to cry out the pain that I almost fainted to the snowy ground, and the only movement I could do was to bite my lips hard before letting out another wailing of mine.

“This kid reeks of a dead rat!!” Said the first man who was a soldier yet drifted to his drunken fantasy. “He looked nothing but a wretched one that almost resembles those beautiful whores.”

“Ha, you mistook a kid for a whore, lad?” One of his fellow mates approached him, wobbly he was that he leaned to the first fellow as his support. He shoved his

tipsy mouth with an intoxicated gaze judging my positions. He crouched down, with his hands pulled my covered hair which made him snort as he noticed my face. "Well, the one you almost embraced was that brothel's famous whore's bastard son! Can't you look at their similarities?"

"You meant that this little white rat is that Korean whore's son? Why would I know! He looked nothing but wretched compared to his mother's lovely facade. He irked me unlike his mother who asked nothing yet would open her legs for my delight!"

I was taken aback by his statements. His statements irked me the most that I wished to have a stronger body so I could bite that manhood of his just too to humiliate him to the core of his languishment (like, imagined that I could castrate him instantly with these rotten teeth of mine!). But as I tried to move my body, the first man launched a hard kick to my stomach that I vomited. The second man eventually stood up, spitted his sputum which poured to my face. The first man also eventually moved forward just to knock me with his stomp upon my head that it gave me an instant fade out from the cramped scenery.

"Just leave that poor midget boy covered by the snow, my friend! He has found his little personal gravesite!" Said the man with laughter, was the last quote I heard at that time.

[ ... ]

“... It’s painful, eomma. Every day, I would feel my guts slowly destroyed into pieces. Yet, being unable to wail it out is even harder compared to this unnecessary painful sensation.”

It was hard to move away from the alley, as the swelling bruises covering my body felt like carrying tons of stones. Deliberately I felt this frail body would not last long enough just to escape from this hellish alley. What should I do to escape from this little town that almost no one outside of this place knew this place ever existed? But again, for me, the pain that would slowly cripple my body was nothing compared to my inability to voice out every word from my mouth. It was even depressing because this voice of mine would arouse their desire to beat me again if I begged them to stop. When I managed to reach the streets, what my eyes caught for the first scenery of this day was nothing but felt eerie within my heart. There were children, accompanied by their parents with slick warm outfits clothed their entire body, and smiles pampered their naive-looking faces.

“... It looks warm, and nice in them... I wonder if I can be in their position someday.”

Unlike many children who could walk happily around the city accompanied by their parents, I could never afford such a moment with my mother who was kept behind the doors of the suffocating brothel. Unlike any naive children of my age who were able to wear such

fine clothes, I could not even afford a single piece of warm fabric just to wrap this little tired body even under the frigid bitter of winter falls in Xijing. Unlike the pampered kids who can wail out their fuss toward their parents in busy streets, I would only receive more than a ‘slap’ on my face. I could never— never be able... ah.

“But I have no right to say that... for now.”

—I sighed. Why in such a condition and time I would envy another kid who was with their parents. Perhaps it created an emotional turmoil in my still-in-pain body and the best treatment I could ever do was to continue my activity of dragging my body back where it should be; the brothel where I grew up, that was placed in Xijing’s heart of the red-light district.

Also, now to think of it, why should I envy them? I should be the one who pitied the fact of their happy life would probably be a fabrication to hide their father’s side stories because I did tend to remember all faces of those who sometimes sleep their night inside the secret of our brothel. He was one of them.

[ One hour later, red-light district.]

Bit by bit in the company of some energy left within this body, I finally made it. This brothel, where we called it The Bidding Blossom, was the ‘so-called utopia’ of where my mother gave birth to me. The building looked average, small exterior compared to any housings

but the insides were wider that it could carry enough capacity for the guests. Right in front of the entrance, a sealed newspaper was still untouched by nothing other than the crystalline snows. While I tried to reach it, suddenly I felt a knock upon my head.

“Back from the dead, eh, Baeg Jo?”

I rubbed my head while I tried to look up from where it came, only to reveal a native Manchurian man dressed in his long grey mantle while holding a broom gave me his most nonchalant gaze. He shoved the broom toward before crossing his arms.

“G-Good m-morn-”

“It’s afternoon already, kid.”

I blinked, and failed to realize the pace of the day was that fast- did I take the knock that hard? “My- apology, sir. I was late.”

“Having a good tight sleep on the streets, ain’t you kiddo?” I stood silent, only replying with a nod.

“You were almost bred by those drunk soldiers, did you?” I bit my lips hard, “No, not at all, sir- owner.”

“I see,” he huffed before he took the sealed newspaper on the ground, “Now go clean yourself, you smelled like shit. You will only receive a little portion of today’s breakfast. And make sure you cleaned the east wing since people will come again to visit at 10 p.m.”

I bowed my head, “Yes, sir.”

But when I was about to leave the main hall, I stopped my walk just to turn my back and faced the boss of this brothel once again.

“S-Sir, I dared to ask, but has eomma returned to our bedroom yet? Has she ended her shift?”

But the owner kept silent, he seemed to notice my curiosity but he preferred not to answer. He was very reluctant to give me even the simplest explanation that he started to rip the seals off from the newspaper. As he spread the newspaper, he continued his ignorance yet spoke for the last time.

“Just get your ass to work, kid.”

[ Evenings, the brothel. ]

I was lucky enough to bathe in warm water since it was able to soothe those swelling bruises upon my abdomen. The boss even gave me some of his ointment, which I would later use to rub the marked area. Of course, it pricked my skin, but it would manage... No, I mean, I'll manage the pain as if it was like a bite of a mosquito.

That day, I brought the broom to sweep around the floor. The place where I was assigned to clean, which was the east wing, the area where most women who were categorized as ‘comforters’ kept inside in each of their rooms just to wait for the guests. They would wait while

they cleaned and adorned themselves back to their sweetest appearance just to indulge in the upcoming moments. Although the word ‘indulging’ seemed to be very harsh and foolish of me since none of them would ever enjoy this kind of... life.

Back to reality! As I finally collected all the dust into the dustpan, now I need to advance the level of this cleaning service— to collect those horrendous, disgusting things. It was a very usual thing to happen in this brothel where guests won’t bother to throw ‘garbages’ into their most suited place. I crouched just to reach one of the vases that decorated every side of the doors. I pulled something out from the inside of that furniture, which revealed a kind of rubber thing that was filled with leaking white liquids. Guess what? Even though this was a normal thing for me, it never failed to cause my stomach to feel sour for its scent.

“Ugh..., no wonder it gave my boss a straight headache for two days,” I sighed while putting the used condom into the dustpan. But it wasn’t over yet, because I would later find another... and another of those things. I would never have imagined that indecent guests would ever exist...

Ah yes, like what my mother said, they bore the sun within their blood. I finally understood, somehow.

Fifteen minutes later, I went to the brothel’s public bathing place with a bucket. I would later pour warm water into it before putting a mop inside of it just to be dragged back to the east wing. Ah, I almost forgot the

soap— which I would later collect from one of the shelves that was put near to the exit door. And off I went to where I would have to continue my cleaning duties.

Speaking of the east wind, sometimes I would hear voices in every room. For children, they might have thought that it was the ghosts who were trying to frighten off those who entered this area. Some said this brothel was haunted by the fact many of the residents of this brothel were comfort women— perhaps they mistook those moanings and wailings to resemble a vengeance spirit. Those assumptions that they delivered would give me a slight chuckle, yet at the same time, it was too hurtful to laugh it off as a joke. It was the saddest and cruelest reality, I thought.

It was horrible to hear and to imagine what the guests would do to them. I would always see how the residence of this brothel would receive atrocious wounds all over their bodies. Just imagine how not only the exterior but the insides of their body would have been damaged from the moment they were commanded to do such humiliating things. Moreover, they would be provided with the medical procedures of what the Japanese established to maintain their health— ‘deadly pills’ that you could use in many ways in how you wanted.

But in my experience, as a kid who grew up in this place, there were probably three things that could happen when you consumed those pills;

One, you ate it a lot until you could neither move nor blink - which I thought once because of ‘obesity’ (but how could a medicine make you fat that instantly? Silly me, Baeg Jo-).

Two, you could return to where you came from and reestablish a new life following the... Sammy? Sama? Uhm- Oh, samsara. I have no idea what that was, to be honest.

Three, you would try to... shoo away another life within your tummy, was what my mother told me.

Mother never tried all of those ‘methods’, she said. She even hated the idea of the third one, because she always said that she would feel regret. I asked what kind of regret, but she would only cuddle me and stroke my hair with her frail and thin fingers.

Imagining those thoughts halt me from continuing my cleaning duties, which I snapped back to reality and began moping around the floor. But again, I hesitated as my ears suddenly heard such a faint voice that sent shivers down to my spine. I tried to focus back, yet that voice kept attracting me as if they were begging for help. I tried to ignore it, yet this time it grew stronger to lure me toward one of the bedrooms.

“.....ba.....eg.....jo.....yah.....”

I stood silent; my movement stiffened while holding the mop tensely. But again, I would try not to bother, as I could hear not only one but a couple of steps

inside of that room. I would be damned if they found out and assumed for me eavesdropping their ‘moments’. So, I hastened my movement by wiping the floor so that I could advance to another spot where I would not be able to hear those voices once again.

But I was certain, that voice, weak as if she was drowning slowly to her unconsciousness, belonged to my poor mother.

[ Midnight, Baeg Jo’s room in the brothel. ]

As the day went dark at such a fast pace, at 6 pm, the boss finally opened the door of our brothel and it was like an announcement for hungry lions that were ready to launch at their prey. It was like an artificial utopia, where those soldiers could spend their moment pampering themselves after suffering the odds of war outside of this town. Sometimes, my boss said, a brothel was where men could release their longing desire for embrace and freedom. Sometimes a brothel provided women who were chosen ‘the best to comfort’ as their ‘temporary medicines’.

But why would I believe in that? Although, he did have a point... But no, I could not agree with him, especially knowing how mother and the other girls were treated horribly by those Japanese soldiers.

I spent the night serving the boss who commanded me to do every order the soldiers wanted from us. Some

of them ordered bottles of Sake and a plate of green soybeans which they called Edamame.

Those were usually the snacks the soldiers ordered, and sometimes I had to send ‘the forbidden box’ which they would use for their ‘delight games’ to each room—you know, those ‘dirty’ games.

I, at least, spent probably four hours serving my boss before his shift ended. I finally had been discharged from my long-hour duties, and it was the time I returned to my old bedroom which I shared with my mother.

“Better get going before someone sees me.”

I began to march upstairs, as my room was placed at the farthest spot of the upper floor. I would try to avoid any soldiers who came past beside me while they were grabbing onto one of the brothel’s women very hard. Sometimes I could see how painful it was from their reaction. I tried not to look into their eyes, as it would make me feel sadder and sorrier about our current situation.

I had finally reached our bedroom, which was so dark and dusty as I was unable to clean it up yet since I ended up beaten by those ‘drunkards’. When I entered my room, I made sure to lock the door just in case those drunken soldiers force themselves to break into this room. Once it happened before and I was suffocated by one soldier, feeling I could not breathe any air anymore- until the boss intervened and even knocked him back to

unconsciousness. The next day, the boss stopped the soldier from entering this brothel, and as a consequence later he returned to the brothel with his back covered with crimson wounds. The officers, unhappy with his actions, decided to discipline him by presenting him fifty whips upon his back.

It was likely the result of him never speaking to me once again, but I understood his reasons. Even a kid like me, confused by a mother's decision to keep her son from an assault, would ponder alone by such thoughts.

It was midnight already, and it was the time to sleep. But as I climbed up to my bed, I stopped and thought of something ridiculous. Maybe it was because of the uneasiness of that last time I almost lost my life; I began to fear sleeping on the top of our bed where I and my mother usually slept. Since I had not heard mother's news until now, I decided to grab the pillow and the blanket before I knelt to the floor. Slowly I crawled under the bed, placing my pillow into its comfy state. I finally set my head upon it and felt comfortable by sniffing its scent.

"It felt right," I muttered before I pulled my blankets to cover my body, "I wonder when eomma will finish her shift. Maybe tonight? Ah- No, perhaps in two- a week? God, I want to see her so bad..."

I genuinely thought of her whereabouts. For a moment, this place would guard me the best when I felt most lethargic, and no one could ever harm me into a pulp while resting and waiting for mother to return yet I

hoped nothing bad happened to her...Yet the probability was pretty low.

“... This world is such a cruel place where people can act savagely more than animals in how they treat the weak horribly. I want to escape from this hellish place and go somewhere, anywhere— as long as I have eomma beside me, I think we could return to our Utopia... Your homeland, eomma.”

Those words were a spurt that came out from my lips. Maybe it was effective from the drowsiness due to my tiresome conditions that I slowly drifted into the ocean of dreams. That place was a manifestation of my frail hope and thoughts... A place where I could sense the warmth of mother once again... A place...

... Ah, so sleepy.

[ ... ]

“Eomma, you always told me that this place called Korea was your homeland?” I tilted my head

while looking at my mother’s eyes as she straightened my tousled hair with her fingers, “What was it like? Does it have better weather than here? Was the food there more delicious than the ones we could only eat here? Were the people....”

I stopped while thinking for a better word to continue my curiosities, “Uhm, nicer?”

I would say my mother was the most patient woman that I ever met compared to any other women who were stationed in this ‘almost’ stranded town. Her gentle eyes, dark as charcoal that her hair shares the same shade of color compared to mine, were unordinary against common people. A tiny smile glued upon her small lips, she sighed while cuddling me closer.

“Yes, Baeg Jo-yah. I came from Seoul, the heart of Korea. It was too memorable that I would miss its summer since it was better than the ones in Xinjing...,” She chuckled, before sniffing the tip of her nose upon my hair, “The food was ten times even better, especially the spicy ones!”

For instance, I felt happy to hear her voice suddenly changed as she spoke about her origins. I hugged my mother just to feel the warmth once again, “Then if we could, we need to go back to your hometown someday! I wished to see it, eomma!”

However, my words suddenly caused her smile to falter like dying petals, and it was at that moment I was stiffened and afraid if I offended her feelings. “A-Ah, eomma, I didn't mean to...”

“No, Baeg Jo-yah,” Mother suddenly sighed, only to cup my cheeks with her tender hands, “You must not feel sorry for expressing your wishes. I always hoped that I would remain hopeful like you, but these days, it felt wrong if I wished for words as you had just said before.”

“...”

I remained silent before I leaned to my mother, “Eomma, I would also wonder why would you let me live despite I am not...”

She suddenly frowned, “Baeg Jo-yah.”

Her chilling voice caused me to stop instantly, then I looked down that I did not dare to face her now. “I-I’m sorry, eomma...”

Mother sighed once again, yet cackles before she lifted me into the air. I was confused by her actions, yet I could see her smile once again blooming beautifully upon her sad eyes.

“Nevertheless, you are still my son. You must not think of yourself as a burden, even though I knew you felt it was wrong to raise you as my son that I conceived from a man I had never known and loved before, every child was pure like snow. You were never to blame, it was just... I was always this feeble, I could not bear the guilt if I never let you have a chance to live a life like any other kids.”

Before I could answer, she pulled me closer just to press her lips upon my forehead.

“One day, Baeg Jo-yah, we will leave this place and return to my homeland. I promise that, and I will always love you from the very deep of my heart.”

[ The cold sunrise, under the bed. ]

The morning was cold that I sneezed, causing myself to be awoken by my actions. My forehead accidentally collided with the bed, which left me to snarl in pain because of my clumsiness. Another morning, another day to be spent.

Today's weather was so cold compared to yesterday, that now I could see my breath. I huffed my freezing hands before I crawled out from under my bed. The atmosphere was chilly and I had to stretch and wiggled my body with many energies just to temper my body heat. I went to my old and dusty wardrobe before I pulled an old heater which now, I need matches just to lighten the thing up.

I immediately walked off from my room to the lower floor's kitchen just to find any box of matches left. As I grabbed the heater, I went to unlock the door before I was taken by surprise with an unusual scenery upon my very own amethyst eyes. A plate consisted of the littlest portion of food with fish and potato, and it was still warm. The plate was placed right in front of this room.

I crouched down just to take the plate and sniffed the food lightly. I worried that this food was not intended for me, yet decided to take it with me, retreating to my room once again, closing the door. My earliest goal to search a box of matches was replaced with such a 'mysterious gift'.

Now to think of it, yesterday's reason I left the brothel was to buy a portion of food just for me and my mother. I would never know when mother would return to this bedroom, as I would only hope that the food would not turn cold. I would never figure exactly about my mother's return. Would she return with a fine condition, or would it be even worse than I ever imagined?

I dared not to eat this food. I would feel better if I could see my mother eat this. Even if the scent of the fried fish allured my nose, I hold back just to remind myself that my mother would not have the chance to eat this at all for a moment, so I would treasure this secretly.

Now it reminded me that yesterday I envied children who could be with their parents, walking around the town of Xinjing freely compared to my situation... Ah, it made sense if I saw my mother as the only thing that kept me strong despite the fact that I was born with such a frail body. Yes, I would wait for her to return despite the increasing coldness of this room.

Maybe I would wait for another day, again, until this hope withers coldly.

End?



Fantasy

## LEVANIN

Clarissa Dominica

“It’s 12.10 already, where is she?” said Umi

“I know, right? It’s very unusual for her to be this late.” Coral said with a slight grunt.

“Aw come on guys, she’s just late for 10 minutes. Just wait for a little while.” Said Isla, calming both of her friends. It is quite unusual for this other friend that they are waiting for to be late. Then, just around the corner, a quick step was heard, along with a sight of a silhouette.

“There you are, Lily! What took you so long?” Umi said with a worried face.

“I’m so sorry, guys... I’ve had something to do earlier.” Said Lily, while trying to catch a breath.

“Yeah, right. I bet you’re helping some random grandma on the streets again...” snickered Coral, knowing very well that Lily did what she said. Yes, Lily is really that kind of girl. This 17-year-old high school student, although very shy, is a very kind girl. Well, at first, she was shy. But she became braver or, at least, more confident than before.

“Oh, how our dear Lily has changed.” Said Umi, while her hands started to wipe the imaginary tears that came from her eyes.

“Yeah. I guess you’re right, Umi. Lily did change, but we still love her nonetheless. Right, Coral?” Isla said to her friends.

“Of course, we are. Ah, why don’t we go to that café and let Lily tell us what happened that made us wait for 10 minutes.” Coral said while pointing at a café not far from where they’re standing. The girls then walked together to the café. After ordering their drinks, Lily started to tell her story. Lily and her friends then reminisced about the times when Lily was very shy. Back then, Lily was a very timid girl. She’s extremely kind, but timid. She always clings to her family and friends, not because she chose to but because she didn’t have the confidence to interact with other people outside her ‘comfort circle’. Although, even inside this circle, Lily still tends to be reserved and keep things to herself. One bright night, however, a magical event will change Lily’s shyness.

That night, the moon was shining so bright. It glowed a soft yellow color, accompanied by some twinkling star. Lily stared at the sight from her window, then she let out a sigh.

“Haa, why can’t I be braver?” Said Lily with a sad face. She then remembered when she was in elementary school. Lily had a very great and creative mind, even until now. However, her friends didn’t understand her thoughts. One classmate, who was the class bully, then kept teasing her, calling her as Silly Lily. Soon, the bully’s words spread to all students in the school and they all called her

by that name. She remembered how traumatic she was because of the event; thus, she became very reserved and tend to not speak of her opinion at all.

“What’s wrong, Lily?” asked Lily’s mom.

“Nothing, mom.” Replied Lily. But then she asked her,

“Mom?”

“Yes, dear?” her mom replied

“Am I... weird?” said Lily with a sad tone.

“What? Of course, not at all, dear. You’re a bright child” As her mom said those words, Lily’s dad came.

“You’re our lovely child, Lily. Be proud of yourself.” Her dad said.

“Okay, dad. Thanks, mom, dad.” Said Lily with a slight smile. She felt relieved hearing her parents support but her worries still remained. She then went upstairs to went to bed. After changing her clothes, she plopped her body to her bed and started to question what dream will she had tonight. It may sound weird, but Lily can dream about many things. Her dreams became one of some ways she can calm herself, and it can be so realistic that she felt that she got into another world. As Lily questioned her dreams, her eyes started to get heavy. Unconsciously, she muttered,

“I wish to not be shy anymore.” Then she drifted away to sleep.

As Lily opened her eyes, she saw a wooden door. She then saw her surroundings.

“It seems like I’m in a cottage.” She muttered. Then, without hesitation, she opened the door. Much to her surprise, she saw a bustling old town. The town was full of street vendors and buyers, and the items that they sell were various. She was wowed by the scenery that she saw, but just as she stepped outside, a young man that seems to be just at her age approached her. The man was wearing a white uniform and a blue cape which really complemented his deep golden hair.

“Fancy to meet someone new in town. Are you the new restaurant tenant, Miss?” asked the man to Lily.

“What? No, I’m not. I don’t even know what place this is. Where am-” as Lily was about to finish her sentence, her stomach let out a grumbling sound. I can feel hungry in a dream? She thought.

“Pfft... My apologies for being rude, but why don’t we continue our conversation in a place nearby? You can eat there while I answer your questions.” Offered the man while gesturing his hand to show a restaurant not far from where they’re standing.

“Hmm..., okay then. Can I know your name first?” asked Lily shyly.

“Oh, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Leon, and I am this town’s official. And what’s your name, Miss?” He said as he bowed slightly.

“Hello Leon. I am Lily. Nice to meet you.” She replied with a slight bow also. They then walked towards the restaurant. After they arrived, Leon quickly ordered food and drinks for the two of them. Leon asked Lily about her origin, and Lily told her story truthfully. Leon was very intrigued but also confused. But then he started to tell about the city. The trading city, Levanin, is one of the most populous town in the country, which was called Flaneia. The country is ruled by a king which resided in the royal residence in the middle of the country. Levanin occupied the eastern part of the country, and also had a coastal area. Due to this factor, Levanin had a bountiful amount of produce and trade goods. Just after Leon finished his explanation, their order arrived. Two beef steaks are placed in front of them. It looked scrumptious. Lily took a bite of the steak, but then her face let out a scorn. The steak was overcooked, and it had no seasoning! Seeing her weird face, Leon asked her,

“Is something wrong with the food?” hearing his question, Lily quickly swallowed the steak and forced out a smile

“N-nothing. It was... fine... I guess.” Said Lily.

“Hmm, I’m not sure you’re telling me the truth.” Leon said with a suspicious tone.

“Ehm..., can I be honest with you?” asked Lily shyly.

“Sure, Miss Lily.” said Leon with a bright smile adorning his face. Lily then raised her hand and place it near her mouth and whispered,

“Actually..., the food tastes bad”

“Well, I’m not going to lie to you, Miss Lily. The food here always tastes like this.”

“Well, from where I’m from, there are many dishes made from many types of ingredients. And they’re all very delicious.” Said Lily while she remembered her favorite dishes.

“Hmm..., your words interest me, Miss Lily. Would you care to show me one of these delicious dishes that you spoke of?”

“Well..., I guess I can. But I don’t have the tools to cook.”

“No worries, Miss Lily. Let me show you the way.” Leon paid for the meal, then led Lily outside of the restaurant and back to the cottage. Now that Lily saw it from the outside, the cottage was actually connected to a large space. They went inside, and to Lily’s surprise, the cottage had a full set of kitchen utensils, tools, and supplies. It even had a similar look to her kitchen in her home.

“This cottage where you came from was actually one of our most advanced cooking place, and the space

next to it was going to be made into a restaurant by the town officials. We just haven't found a tenant to run the restaurant. The town was actually going to provide some money to start up a restaurant business here, but alas no one wanted to run this restaurant. Miss Lily may try to cook your dish here in the meantime." Explained Leon.

"Oh, okay then. Thank you for lending me this beautiful kitchen." Said Lily, then flashed a slight smile to Leon. Lily thought about which dish should she make to impress Leon. In the real world, Lily is very interested in cooking, and she got a great talent in it. People always complimented her for her delicious cooking. While thinking about what to serve, she saw a basket full of potatoes. She then grabbed some and said,

"Alright! I'm going to make French fries." Lily then saw an apron hanged not far from where she's standing. She grabbed the apron and put it on, then tied her long dark brown hair. She started preparing the potatoes, then cut it into shoestring shape, fried it and lastly seasoned it. She then put the fried potatoes into a basket that was already had a paper laid on top of it. She brought it to Leon.

"Here you go, French fries."

"French fries? What an interesting name." after he said that, Leon took one piece of the fry into his mouth. Soon after it entered his mouth, the crispy outer part and the soft inside of the fry pleased his palate. The slight warmth from the just fried potato and the nice hint of salt

made him want to stuff his mouth with the so-called French fries.

“This... is very unexpected. What do you call this dish? French fries? This is very delicious Miss Lily!” shouted Leon with a gleeful tone.

“I’m delighted that you enjoy this simple dish.” Lily smiled sincerely. She just realized that this town’s food resembled its appearance. Thus, the people here didn’t know ‘modern’ foods which were as simple as plain French fries. Not long after Lily’s reply, Leon became very quiet. It seemed that he is thinking very hard about something.

“Mr. Leon, is there something wrong?” asked Lily worriedly.

“Miss Lily.”

“Yes?”

“How would you like to run this restaurant?”

“Pardon me?”

“It would be beneficial, for you and for us. I would like people to know how delicious the dishes that you cook are. People will love it. You will not be disappointed if you-” Leon had not finished talking when Lily suddenly talked.

“Wait, Mr. Leon. This is too sudden for me. I... I can’t handle customers well. I’m shy. I cannot do it.”

“Miss Lily, I’m sure you can do just fine. What about I add something to our deal? I will personally help you running this place, and I will also train you to not become shy anymore. What do you say, Miss Lily?” hearing his offers, Lily started to think about her wish before going to bed earlier. Doubt filled her mind, but then her mouth unconsciously said

“Hmm..., I guess I’ll-” just as she was going to answer the question, she woke up from her dream.

The next day, Lily went to school as usual, but her mind seemed to not be able to focus. She thought about Levanin again and again. She could not even focus on her lessons. Her friends had to constantly snap her out of her daydream. She quickly brushed off her thoughts on Levanin. She’s sure that she would not dream of Levanin again, or so as she thought.

Over the course of the week, she forgot entirely about her dream. She lived her life as usual. But then at night, the moon was unusually bright, just like the night when Lily had that dream. Lily, however, didn’t realize this. She went to bed as usual and just closed her eyes. Then, not long after she saw someone familiar. Leon was in front of her! She then heard the same words being uttered,

“... What do you say, Miss Lily?”

“Huh? Oh yeah...” replied Lily as she was still in shock.

“Yeah? Do you agree with my suggestion?” Leon asked confusedly.

“Wait! I need time to think. Give me a minute.”

“Okay, Miss Lily. I’ll wait for your reply outside. Just call for me when you’re ready.” Said Leon. He then went to the cottage door and walked out to the street. Lily thought about his offer, can she do it? Is it possible to run a store in her dream? But then she thought that this is a dream, she can do anything in it. It’s not permanent anyways. After thinking about her decision, she called Leon to go inside. Leon happily obliged. Lily then said her answer to him.

“Sir Leon. I’ll accept your offer. I want to run this place.” Hearing Lily’s words, Leon could not bear to hold his wide smile. He took Lily’s hand, shake it excitedly, then said,

“Thank you very much, Miss Lily! I’m sure we’ll, no I mean you’ll, do great in managing this place!”

“Thank you for the encouragement, Mister Leon. I am happy that I get to work with you. Oh, please do call me Lily.” Said Lily.

“Okay, Miss Li- I mean Lily, please do call me Leon also.”

“Okay, Leon.” And so, Lily and Leon started to prepare for the restaurant. They decided to name the place Lily’s Café. They would both take turn in cooking

and managing the customers, although Lily was against this decision. Leon, however, encouraged her so that she can become more confident, so she accepted it. Finally, after few days in the dream world, they are ready to open the restaurant. And just after Lily and Leon prepared themselves, their first customer came in. It was an old but bright looking lady. Lily thought that the lady would be as old as her grandma, but she refrained from saying that fact to Leon, fearing that the lady would be insulted. Leon then greeted her first.

“Good morning, Granny Anne. I see you’re as curious as you usually are.” He said with a kind smile. It seems that Leon already knew her, Lily thought.

“Being curious is what make me have a young spirit, my dear.” Said the lady with a chuckle. She is very cheerful, Lily thought again.

“It’s very unusual for our Leon to be this close with a girl. Of course, it’s better to know the girl herself directly.” Her chuckles and words made Lily embarrassed. She was about to open her mouth when Leon intervened.

“This is Lily, Granny Anne. I will be running this café with as her assistant. Lily, this is Granny Anne. She lives near this place. All people in this town know her.” Leon introduced Lily to Granny Anne and vice versa.

“N-nice to meet y-you, Granny Anne. I’m Lily.” Said Lily awkwardly.

“Nice to meet you, Lily. Why, what a very shy girl you are.” Said Granny Anne with her bright and kind smile.

“Yes, Granny. But she is going to try to be more confident.” Leon said. He then thought for a few seconds that uttered his idea.

“I have an idea. Since our store just opened, and we will probably not have that many customers anyway, why don’t Granny Anne help Lily in practicing her greetings? You can also increase your confidence whilst training, Lily!” shouted Leon gleefully. In reply to the offer, Granny Anne also shouted gleefully.

“Wonderful idea, Leon! I would be happy to help. What do you think, my child?” Granny Anne then turned to ask Lily.

“If you don’t mind, I would be very grateful.” Lily replied. She still felt nervous, but she was positive that this would help her greatly in gaining her confidence.

“It is settled then! But before that, dear Lily, can I please have something to quench my thirst. It seems that my excitement dried my throat.” Asked Granny Anne with a smile.

“Okay, right away Granny Anne.”

“Please, just call me Granny.”

“Okay, Granny. Please wait for a while.” Lily then left Leon and Granny Anne and went to the kitchen. She

thought hard about what to serve to Granny Anne. That's when she saw a fridge just in the corner. She quickly opened the two-door refrigerator and saw ice trays in the top part and lemons and strawberries in the bottom. She took out a tray of ice, two lemons, and a handful of strawberries. She sliced the fruits and put them in a jug, then put in the ice also. She then poured some water into the jug, and stirred the mix. She then prepared three glasses and brought them along with the jug to where Leon and Granny Anne were sitting. She served the glasses to the two people sitting and poured the mix into the glasses.

"Infused water, to relieve our thirst." Said Lily, while sitting down to another chair of that table.

"Infused? How interesting." Said Granny Anne. The three of them then drank the infused water. Granny Anne's and Leon's face lit up instantly due to the refreshing taste of the water. Their thirst was completely gone and was replaced with a sense of delight.

"Such a delicious water! I didn't know that adding some fruit to some water and ice would feel this good!" squealed Granny Anne. She then poured some more infused water to her glass. It seems that Granny is addicted, though Lily as she let out a small chuckle.

"I'm definitely sure that you can run this place, my dear. Even water can taste this good in your hands!" Granny told Lily gleefully. Leon nodded agreeing what Granny Anne said and said,

“Alright then! It is settled. Granny and I will train Lily in serving customers and gaining confidence.” And so Lily’s café had its first customer. As it was time to close, Lily and Leon tidied up everything then went into the kitchen. Leon showed her the stairs. Upstairs, there was a fully furnished bedroom. Surprisingly, it was the exact depiction of her room in the real world. Leon then went home. After locking the door, Lily plopped herself into the bed and slept. She then turned back to the real world. Few minutes after she regained her consciousness, she began to wonder why her dream became so realistic. She never had a dream this real and this long, but as she saw the alarm clock just next to her bed, she realized that she woke up late! She hurriedly prepped herself for school.

Another surprise came to her, as she had the same dream about Levanin over and over for a month. The dreams were like a continuation of the previous ones. Thus, she felt like she lived in another world. During that month, she had dreamed about working in the café numerous times. A dream may feel like one or two days in Levanin. Each time she dreamed about Levanin, she became better in managing the café, and she became less shy and more confident in interacting with the customers, of course with the help and company of Leon and sometimes Granny Anne. Her family and friends in the real world also noticed these subtle changes. Take this one morning as an example.

“Dad! Mom! I’m going to school!” shouted Lily as she checked for her stuffs for today’s classes.

“Okay, Lily! Be careful on your way to school!” her mom shouted back.

“Wait for me, Sis! Don’t leave me!” cried Tulip, Lily’s first younger sister. They always went to school together, while Lily’s other younger sister Primrose and Poppy were driven to school by her dad. Usually, her dad drive all of them to school, but during the month Lily started to dream about Levanin, she wanted to go the school by herself. Tulip then followed her.

“Our Lily seems to change, dear.” Whispered Lily’s dad to her mom. He sips his coffee as he also prepared himself to drive his other two daughters to school. Driving was faster than going on foot, so he can have some leisure time while waiting for his two daughters getting ready.

“She is, dear. Just as she wanted, she became more confident. But I do wonder where did she find this boost of confidence.” Said Lily’s mom while smiling.

“I’m sure she gets it for somewhere. What’s important is that we always support our daughters, whatever their personalities are.” Said Lily’s dad

“Yes. You’re right, dear.” Her mom replied. Lily and Tulip then went to their school. Their age is not that far, so they attend the same level of school. Lily was a twelfth-grader, while Tulip was a tenth-grader. Lily then walked to her classroom and greeted everyone that have come in the classroom with a shout.

“Good morning, everyone!”

“Morning, Lily!” everyone replied back to her. Lily then went to her seat and talked with her best friends.

“What a cheerful Lily that we have this morning! What’s your secret for today’s cheerfulness, Miss Sunshine?” said Isla.

“Oh, stop teasing me, Isla. I won’t tell you what’s my secret. You all should have a secret source of happiness.” Lily replied with a big smile.

“Ow! Your smile is too bright, I will melt away right this instant!” said Coral jokingly, while putting her hands in front of her eyes to ‘block’ away the brightness.

“Cut it out Coral! I need to bask in this bright light!” said Umi replying Coral’s joke with her own. The four of them laughed uncontrollably. It may have seemed typically usual at first, but Lily’s friends could feel that Lily became less shy. But neither of her family and friends, not even Lily herself would predict that this happiness will soon turn gloomy.

After a month, Lily did have a significant change. She did become less shy and more confident, but as her confidence grew, she began to experience less and lesser dreams about Levanin. She still dreamed, but it was always other places or ‘world’, not the Levanin that she wanted. And then, Levanin stopped appearing in her dreams. Because of that, she became more and more frustrated and depressed. She kept focusing on having a

dream in Levanin that she neglected her school works. Her grades were getting lower and lower that her close ones are starting to get worried for her. But she ignored their words, and kept getting paranoid for not having a dream in that place again. However, she started to shift her focus to her failing studies. Few weeks have gone by and she forgot about Levanin, but not entirely. She still remembered the wooden cottage where she first started this series of dreams, and she still remembered Leon though it's just his silhouette.

One dark and rainy night, Lily went to sleep in her usual time. As she opened her eyes in the dream world, she saw a familiar place and a familiar figure. Her face turned bright as she recognized the place and the person. She was at the café and in front of her is Leon! She leaped towards him, happy that she could see him again. However, as she was going to do just that, she noticed that the room had a gloomy sense to it. She didn't feel quite right, so she calmed herself down and greeted him with her usual smile.

"Hello again, Leon. It's been a while. Let's open the café quickly. I'm sure we're running out of time." Lily said as she rolled up her sleeves getting ready to prep the café.

"You don't need to open the café for today, Lily."

"Why not?" Lily's voice trembled while saying. She knew that something was going to happen, but she still tried to put on a smile.

“It seems like we are going to be separated.” Said Leon with a bitter smile.

“What? Why?”

“I don’t know, but I feel our encounter in this world is going to end soon.”

“No! I don’t want to forget about Levanin again. It’s my home!” shouted Lily. Tears started streaming from her eyes.

“It’s not Lily. This is your dream. You can’t live forever in your dreams. You’ll die in the real world”

“I don’t care! I can’t live without knowing Levanin anyway. Please, don’t leave me!”

“I have to. Besides, I have done my job. You have become less shy and more confident, and the restaurant ran successfully in your hands. I guess you have to open a restaurant some time in the real world that you have talked about.” Said Leon. He tried to force a smile, but all that he let her to see was the same bitter smile that he gave before.

“I suppose it is time now. Good bye, Lily. I wish you well in the real world.” Said Leon as he gave her his biggest smile that he can make. Just before Lily could process everything and reply to Leon’s words, the grounds beneath her feet disappeared, and she fell into a big dark deep hole. Shocked, she woke up from her dream. It was

still dark outside so she tried to go back to sleep. To no avail, she failed and she cried and cried till morning came.

As the sun rise, her eyes were swollen, she tried to hide her face from her family. But just as she were going to grab an ice cube from the freezer, her mom came and see her face. She was surprised, but seeing her precious daughter's sunken eyes she decided to not ask her. She suggested to Lily that she should have a day off from school, at least until she's better. Lily just nodded and went back to her room. For days she kept getting mood changes. She sobbed then she stopped crying and focused on other things but then she sobbed again. She cried until she forgot again about Levanin, but she felt a void existed in her heart.

Lily's friends became worried of her, so they came to Lily's house and brought desserts to cheer her up. Lily's parents led them upstairs and let them went inside Lily's room.

"Lily, we came with desserts. How are you? Are you getting better?" asked Isla. Umi and Coral showed Lily two boxes containing the desserts. They opened the box and put them in Lily's lap. As soon as Lily saw the desserts that her friends brought, all of a sudden, her memories of her dreams started to appear. She remembered all of them. Her heart was then full of sadness that she cried loudly in front of her friends. Her friends, panicked because of the situation, tried all ways they can think of to stop her from crying. Umi, not

knowing what to do, hugged her to ease Lily's sadness. Her other friends quickly joined Umi and they all hugged Lily until she stopped crying. After she stopped, Lily told her dreams to her friends. All the memories, about Levanin, about her café, about Granny Anne, and about Leon. She said to them that she missed dreaming about Levanin again. Her friends consoled Lily. They all said she indeed have become more confident since she started dreaming about Levanin. Levanin did changed her. They are also glad that she stopped dreaming about Levanin. They thought that she would become addicted to dreaming, that she would then ignore the real life that she had and not strived to change herself in the real life than to dwell in the world that she created in her mind. Her friends' words made her realized that she had indeed changed. She realized that she was not the shy Lily anymore. She also realized that she became too obsessive in his dream world and she had to forget about it sooner or later. She let out a sigh of relief and enjoyed the rest of the day with her friends and of course her family.

Few years later, 24-years-old Lily stood in front of a two-stories building. She then put up a sign board near the entrance of the building, the board was written with these words, Levanin Café. Yes, this is Lily's café. After her talk with her friends several years ago, she was determined to run her own café and named it Levanin. Lily opened the entrance and went inside. The first floor was a workshop and a kitchen. She planned to teach people how to cook and bake in here, in times of need

she also planned to run a community kitchen in this workshop. The second floor is the café. She designed it to look as similar as possible with her café in the dream world, or at least the way she remembered it to look like. She changed some things but the appearance was basically the same. Speaking of change, Lily had overcome her shyness and became very confident in what she did. She was very thankful being able to experience her dreams and was ready to fulfill her dreams in her real life.

Just as she was about to drift to nostalgia, a man appeared in front of the café. Lily examined him quietly from inside of the building. She thought that he was very familiar and she felt very close to the man although she didn't know him. Lily brushed off her thoughts and started to walk towards the entrance.

"Welcome to Levanin Café. Would you like to go inside?" said Lily with a business smile.

"Yes, please. The name Levanin is somewhat familiar to me." The man answered.

"Is that so, Sir? Please follow me to the café." And so, Lily led the man upstairs to the café. The man then sat on one of the tables.

"How can I help you, Sir?" Lily asked the man.

"I would like to order something to eat, but I don't know what to order. Can I please have you make me whatever dish you like?" said the man.

“Of course, Sir. Please wait for a while.” Lily then smiled towards her customer, walked to the kitchen, and directly prepared his order. After she finished cooking the man’s order, she brought it to him.

“Please, enjoy.” Said Lily as she smiled.

“Thank you.” The man said to her. Now that she thought about it, his voice sounded exactly like Leon, the man in her dreams. She then realized that his appearance was very similar with Leon also. She hesitated at first, but then she decided to ask him,

“Pardon me, Sir. But, may I know your name? It seems that you are somewhat very similar to someone I knew.” Said Lily politely.

“It’s okay. My name is Leon. It’s a pleasure to meet you and this place.” Answered the man with a smile on his face. Just after hearing the man’s answer, Lily was certain that he was indeed Leon that helped her in her dreams! Lily was so shocked that the man was worried for her.

“Is something wrong, Miss?”

“Oh. It’s nothing, Sir.”

“Pardon me, but your face shows that you are surprised with something.” Said the man.

“Well, to be honest, I think I have seen you in my dreams...” Lily said shyly. It seemed that her shyness had not completely gone.

“Dreams? How interesting. Would you mind telling me your dreams?” said the man curiously, but still maintaining his smile. And so, Lily told Leon about her dreams. They talk for hours. Lily thought about how magical her dreams were, how her dreams were literally coming through. As for the continuation of their story, it’s up to you to decide what would they experience. For now, the story ends here.

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FIN

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# THE LAST BREATH

Emmanuella Sekar

“You may or may not believe my story. One thing you must know, there are things in this world that are hard to comprehend, and I... I...”

I sigh. Suddenly I feel tired. The psychiatrist looks at me, smiling knowingly.

“Iris, just tell me what you have to tell me.” She pats my thigh and nodded, encouraging me.

“I had been trying to believe my reason until that day, when I entered that house and saw what happened. It was... It was...unreal...”

A gust of wind suddenly enters the room. It’s cold, and otherworldly. The psychiatrist doesn’t look, she feels the shivering chill like I do. So be it. I steel myself. I need to part my story with whoever wants to listen, whether that person will believe me or not.

“The moment I finish my story, I don’t know what will happen to me. Just be all ears, alright?”

She nods again, now with her hand holding mine. I don’t know what has happened to me, or my sanity, but I think I see something out of the window. A shadow is lurking in the dark alley of this sanatorium.

“It began when I was born.”

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I lost my mom when she gave birth to me. I had never known the comfort of motherly love, but my dad had tried his best, all the time, to be both a father and mother to me. I had never really talked much with my dad. He was a rather quiet and reserved person. Maybe it was his job that made him so.

My dad ran a construction company. It was not a tie-and-suit corporation but projects kept coming, mostly housing projects and subsidiaries. My dad could not watch over me, so he put me under care of my grandparents in Jogja. My grandpa and grandma lived in a traditional Javanese house in Gunung Kidul, which had been altered slightly into a more modern architecture because of the impact of the 2006 earthquake. The larger portion of the house, though, retained its heritage vibe. The house had been occupied by more than five generations, so my grandma told me.

“Our ancestors always watch over their descendants in this house.” My grandma stroked my head when she showed me the old photographs depicting past family members. She pointed at my great-great grandfathers and grandmothers, but my sight was fixed on a curious figure. It was a woman who showed her back to the camera, while the other family members faced the lens with their stiff poses, typical of old family photos.

“Why is this woman showing her back?” I asked my grandma, who looked confused. She looked at the photograph, and back to me. “What woman?” she asked me.

When grandma flipped the page of the photo album, I was sure the woman showing her back turned her head slightly, and I could see a vague expression on her face.

It was an expression that would haunt me in my nightmares.

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I stayed with my grandparents until I turned 16. Dad decided to have me transferred to a favorite senior high school in Jakarta, so I could study under his guidance. I entered science class, and my father thought that it would be best if he mentored me in science subject. The reason was because I wanted to enroll in an architecture study program in university. I wanted to be like my dad.

I was doing pretty well in my new school in Jakarta, though I missed my school in Gunung Kidul and my friends there. I missed my grandparents more, but I knew I had to concentrate on my studies now. I would grow and help Dad with his job. I needed to level with him. I wanted to stay with him, and take care of him. After all, I’m his only family member left.

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“Dad, I know it’s hard for you, but it won’t be easier if you just let yourself down. You will only hurt yourself more.”

Four years after my return to Jakarta, and I had entered university, two blows hit our family hard. First blow was a lawsuit that cost Dad his company. He was sued by his former business partners for project liabilities. Dad knew they were crooks. They were the perpetrators, but they tried to put the blame on my dad. Dad’s company and their companies once worked on a huge project, building a mall. They were subsidiaries to the project’s principal contractor. However, one month after the grand opening of the mall, three escalators failed and one visitor was badly injured. The visitor’s left foot was stuck in the elevator and had to be amputated. The mall was sued, and in turn the mall management asked the subsidiary contractors working on escalator installation to take responsibility. Dad’s company was one of them, and his company didn’t work on the failing escalator but in court, the judge gave a guilty sentence. Dad was forced to sell his company’s assets and closed his business to pay the victim’s family.

The second blow was the death of Dad’s twin brother in Jogja. Their car hit a bridge and it plunged into a river, with the twin brothers inside. When they were fished out of the river, they had already died. Dad got more devastated, because the twins were really close with him.

“Just focus on your studies, Iris. Leave me be.”

“No, Dad. No. I have been doing well in my studies but my greatest achievement is to be able to improve, and help you through all of these.”

I leaned on my dad’s side. I put my head on his shoulder. He put his head on mine, and embraced me. He cried.

I cried too.

But I was relieved. I felt a positive emotion coming from Dad. Cry, cry as much as you like. I let Dad in tears for a while. He had been as if in a lifeless state recently, for the past two months, until today.

That was when I thought everything would be alright.

But I was wrong.

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The night train that carried me and my dad to Jogja bolted from Gambir, and we arrived at Yogyakarta Station after eight hours. Dad looked really uneasy. Ever since he was informed that Grandma fell seriously ill, his anxiety seemed to have grown to the point I couldn’t have a lengthy conversation with Dad.

“Misfortune. Blood. Blood...”

I heard Dad speak in his sleep when we were still on the railway.

“No...not her...not my daughter...”

I felt a creeping chill on my spine. What did it have to do with me?

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“She lost consciousness a few minutes ago. Hurry, we must take her to the hospital!”

Grandpa didn't pay much attention to me or Dad when we arrived at the house. Grandpa did kiss my cheeks, and Dad kissed his hand, but no exchange of warm conversations happened. A neighbor came in a car. Grandpa and Dad carried Grandma out of her room and they rushed to the hospital. I was left alone in the house.

“Dik Iris, tonight you stay in my place, okay? Okay?”

Mbak Siti, grandparent's trusty servant, gave her the reason why I had to stay in her house.

“The weather is not friendly, currently. Hard rain and strong wind can happen anytime. Your grandparents' house is a perfect place, but time has turned the house to be much more vulnerable to natural forces.”

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At Mbok Siti's house, Iris tried to find information to fulfill her suspicions. "Mbok, Mbok has been working at grandfather's house for a long time, do you know grandfather's colleagues?" then Mbok Siti answered while busy tidying up the items in the kitchen that were already neat "Yes, mostly Dik ...", Iris still kept asking "Then, does Mbok know about strange or mystical things about friends or something at Grandpa's house maybe? ". Mbok Siti was silent for a long time and was confused about what to answer, "Umm, I don't know, Dik, Mbok never intrudes and doesn't want to know about matters like that, Mbok only focus on taking care of the house, Sis."

Iris tried to understand the answer even though her curiosity had not yet paid off.

When the night falls, Iris sneaked into her grandfather's house because no one is there. She opened every old door and entered every room. She tried to roll back her memory. At first there was nothing strange in the lonely house. However, by the time Iris arrived at her grandfather's room, there was a feeling of suspicion rising within her. She was moved to open an old wooden cabinet in the corner of the room, then he found a shabby photo album.

When she opened the photo album, she was very surprised to see the photo of the strange woman she had seen before. Grandpa seemed very friendly with the woman, and her appearance was always captured in every photo in the album. The people in the photo album are

like members of a group. Instantly Iris was shocked and gasped. In her mind saying "what does all this mean?".

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Iris went back to Mbok Siti house yet she drowned into her mixed feelings. She felt that things were getting wrong, there must be something that her family was hiding. The next day, the morning was foggy. Iris woke up feeling very disturbed. She tried to distract her frantic mind by walking out, to nowhere. Iris stopped near the village cemetery. He saw a black dog, and they stared at each other.

The dog didn't bark at all. Iris ventured closer to him and then stroked him. The dogs looked very happy and they got along at once. The dog always followed Iris wherever she went, until Iris had to return home. Iris named him Boris. "What? You want to come with me? Alright, my name is Iris. And you... I think I'll call you Boris."

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The night fell, Iris was at Mbok Siti's house with Boris, but Iris did not find Mbok Siti there. Iris and Boris went to their grandfather's house. He felt something was odd, "Why hasn't anyone come to the house until now? And Mbok Siti where did she go without telling me? " she asked himself. Iris tries to contact her father, but dad's cell phone isn't active.

"Boris, accompany me, will you?"

Iris invited Boris to enter Grandpa's house, but it turns out that Boris also feels something strange in the house, especially in Grandpa's room. Boris continued to bark toward the cupboard in Grandpa's room. Iris was surprised and felt there was something behind the cupboard. He peeked through the cupboards and found a door. With all her strength Iris pushed the old wardrobe. Then she saw the old door and he felt a bad air. Boris was still barking and getting angry as if he was seeing and fighting someone. Iris ventured to open the door with all her courage. When she opened the door, she saw a stairway down. The room was very dark and stale. She ventured downstairs and invited Boris to protect him. Boris couldn't enter. Something pushed Boris from behind the door. "It's time for me to reveal all these secrets, I have to do this. Boris take care of me from here, I'll go inside." Boris felt sad and came out from Grandpa's room. Iris descended the steps with fear and curiosity. Arriving downstairs, she heard the voices of many people muttering. She was shocked, scared, but she still had to do it. She opened another old and eerie door and she couldn't believe what she saw.

Instantly she went limp and screamed in fear. She saw everyone she was looking for there, grandfather, grandmother, father, uncles, mother, and another woman with a strange face that she had seen in the photo. She was dressed like Mbok Siti and she was very big like a giant human, her face was crumpled and very scary. Her hair was gray, matted and loose. Her voice was very shrill and

heavy. She looked at Iris. Iris realized, "She is Mbok Siti!, she's the devil all this time!". They make a circle. The strange woman was in the middle of the circle. Father, mother, and uncle seemed unconscious as they continued to mumble. Grandma is next to Grandpa, crying. Grandpa said to the strange woman, "It is the time, she is our last breath, please accept it!".

THE END.

# THE RED RIBBON

Marchelline Berliandika

They called those days “The Red Ribbon Day”, when every children must stay inside their houses, not even allowed to look outside. They were so kept at home that parents would nail wooden plank across their windows and doors. For that day only, no sunlight was allowed into these little cottages, however, it never was a dark day. “It’s just another Christmas in spring day” the people said.

Jewel didn’t knew, nor did she ever ask of why, and she probably better not. But she knew that it was one of her favorite days. When her house was filled with the smell of pecan and honey as her mother was baking, and she got to sing and dance with her father just to end the day with a roasted lamb that made her mouth water.

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“Sweetie! get up and get the shopping cart.” Jewel ran down the stairs in hurry, grabbed a big basket, and followed her mom to the market. The day before the Red Ribbon had always been one of the busiest. The town market was filled with people spending their coins on the best foods for the next day.

In the midst of the bustling market, Jewel overheard a piece of her mother’s conversation with an

acquaintance. “How old is she now? fifteen? It’s the scariest age..” the lady looked at Jewel with her worried eyes. “You gotta keep her inside.” Then she leaned towards Jewel’s mother and whispered “Lucian is gone.” Jewel’s mom looked surprised and she shrieked, “Lucian?! Mr. Carpenter’s son?”. “It was last year,” said the lady, “i saw them holding their son’s hand, begging him not to go. But he’s gone.” The lady’s eyes got watery. “I went to their house and cried with them all that night.”

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In the evening, the sound of hammer knocking was heard throughout the town. Jewel helped her parents nailed wooden planks accross their windows. It was just like any Red Ribbon Days before, but that conversation she heard in the market kept playing in her head. She thought to herself, “What’s really out there? What is this all about? Why?”.

It was a long discussion with herself, but Jewel finally made up her mind. One day, she quietly took out a small hammer from her father’s tool room. She crawled underneath her bed, and hidden by the noise of the daytime, she started hammering a small hole in her bedroom’s wall, she did it nearly every day until the hole get bigger and she could now poke her head outside.

Time went by, the day she had been waiting came. On the midnight of the Red Ribbon Day of the following year, Jewel jumped off of her bed, but when she was about to crawl underneath it, at once guilt and fear

filled her mind. What would happen? What if there was real danger? Would she be cursed? her fear raged. She hesitated for a while, but her curiosity took over her. So, she took a deep breath, stuck her head through the hole in the wall, and poked her head outside.

She was stunned, processing what's in front of her eyes.

Far in the forest that she saw every day, stood a gigantic sparkling tower surrounded by a glittering city. There were fireworks and flashes of every color that she couldn't describe. For a whole hour, she couldn't draw her eyes from it. In her head, she can hear the bustling sound of that city and the voice of a crowd of young people calling out for her. Hypnotized, she pulled her body and crept up to the front door.

How shocked she was to see her father was awake sitting on the floor in front of the door. When he saw the Jewel come, his face was suddenly filled with sorrow as if his heart was broken.

"Dad," said Jewel. "There is a big town in the forest." Jewel saw his father's eyes got watery. "And I wanna go there." Jewel said.

With tears falling down his face, Jewel's father took out a red ribbon from his pocket. Without saying anything, he knelt down and tied one end of the ribbon to Jewel's right ankle and he held the other end tightly in his hand. From the kitchen, Jewel's mother came with a belt, she

hung a bag of butter cookies and a big bottle of water on her waist. They then kissed her cheeks and opened the front door for her.

“You may go.” Said Jewel’s father. “But one thing you have to remember, you must never cut the ribbon.” Jewel followed the call in her heart and set off into the forest. Along her long journey, every once in a while, she felt her ankle was being pulled from the other end, and each time, it reminded her of her home.

Far in the forest, she came across many middle-aged people who looked very tired and dazed. They searched through the ground, bushes, and trees, they clearly were looking for something, thought Jewel. But they looked too scary for Jewel to greet them and talk to them. So she passed them by and continued her journey.

\*

The town wasn’t any less beautiful when viewed up close. It was so crowded and lively, there were shops on either side of the street selling various items she had never seen before. All the people dressed very attractively, and their fragrances were the smells she never knew existed. Jewel ran here and there and went into every shop that caught her eyes. When she got into a clothing store, she was mesmerized by a pair of beautiful leather shoes. She believed that her father would love it, so she asked the shopkeeper, “How can I get it?” and the shopkeeper kindly answered, “With the witch coins.” Jewel asked

again. "How can I get it?". The shopkeeper smiled and said, "Go to the tower and join the queue."

So, Jewel went to the tower. There were young people lining up in front of its base, all with red ribbons tying their ankles—she joined them. The officers there are all silent, they were taking the people one by one up to somewhere. When finally came her turn, the officer took her to a jewelry shop, where she was greeted by the owner lady as a laborer. By the end of the day, after hard work, she was handed some coins with two witches engraved on it with it she bought herself some food for her rumbling stomach.

That night she slept on a bench in front of a shop, munching the two cookies left from her mother, imagining it was her warm bedroom. She missed her home very much, but she had promised herself to bring home some good gifts for her parents. "I could stay here for some time, and when I get my money, I will bring home some gifts."

But time went by, and now Jewel had stayed in the city for months. She made a lot of good friends and was gathering more coins as the best worker. She rent herself out a cozy bedroom and bought herself perfumes that made her smell like everyone in the town. But every now and then she missed the smell of her mother's pies while she joked with her father waiting for lunch. Even though the thought of returning to her hometown always lingered in her head, she kept on putting the plan on hold. She thought that the more she gained in the city, the bigger

presents she could bring for her parents later, and the more they would be proud of her. So she worked really hard and was busy climbing a better job.

As time went on, she realized that one by one, her friends were cutting their ribbons that now hers was the only one still intact. But the longer she stayed in the town, the more her memory of her parents faded. Years followed by another year. Now she too began to forget what the ribbon she had on her ankle was about. She occasionally felt as if someone was pulling on the ribbon but she couldn't remember a thing. After a long time, Jewel started to get annoyed by the ribbon and she began to think about cutting it.

When she was sitting in the garden about to cut her ribbon, she saw a witch dressed all black fly up above on a broomstick, carrying a giant pouch filled with red ribbons to the top of the tower. A few moments later she saw smoke billowing from its roof and reddish flakes filled the sky.

“Why would the witch burn the ribbons?” Jewel whispered.

Then all of a sudden, she heard a soft voice in her head, saying,

“For if there is anything the black witch hates the most, it is family bond.”

She couldn't recall whose voice it was, but she felt her heart melted and she missed that sound so deeply that

her eyes became watery. Only a moment later, she remembered that it was the voice of her father, reading her the last line of her favorite bedtime story of the white and the black witches from back in her childhood.

Like a bolt of lightning, all the memories returned. With her tears streaming down, Jewel dashed out of the city following her ribbon. When she got to the forest, again she saw the middle-aged people walking around restlessly, some weeping, they were walking through the bush, still desperately looking for the thing, that she now knew, “Its their ribbons.”.

\*

From the tower, the witch saw Jewel running away from the town with her ribbon still tying her ankle.

“Futile.” She laughed. Then she cast a spell and suddenly a ravine formed in front of her. Didn’t have time to stop her steps, she fell into the ravine.

As Jewel was falling into the dark bottom, with her eyes closed, she saw her parents’ faces clearer than she had ever been for a long time. She was crying out of helplessness when she was startled by something that held her leg tightly—the red ribbon.

She was hanging on the cliff wall for some time, hoping that her parents would tug the ribbon and save her life. In the midst of her despair, all of a sudden she felt that the ribbon was being pulled and she was slowly lifted up to the ground.

Overwhelmed with gratitude as well as guilt and regret, Jewel ran as fast as she could to her house. She wanted to hug her parents so bad, imagining how tall she had now become compared to her mother. When she approached her hometown and smelled the smell of pecan pie, right then, she forgot everything she had left in the big town and all she wanted now was to live her life as she used to in her childhood.

But when she reached her old neighborhood, the ribbon was headed in a different direction from her house. She was confused, but she decided to follow it. It leads her to a green peaceful field, shaded by the shady late afternoon sun. And the ribbon ended inside the ground, where there were two graves on which engraved the names of the father and mother.

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Years later, in the joyfulness of the day her son was born, Jewel heard a knock on her door.

Flying away on a broomstick, was a witch dressed all in white.

And there was a letter:

“Congratulations” tied with a red ribbon.

# ΗΣΡΗΛΣΤΥΣ



Science-Fiction

## LAST DAWN

Ervina Aimee Liann

My legs jittered as I waited for my doctor to sit at his desk. I had been hearing whispers of demanding voices at the back of my head. A shadow regularly appeared on the corner of the room and an occasional tingling sensation of what seemed to be invisible spiders beneath my arms.

Not that, not that, not that, I tried to manifest my destiny. But the word I had hoped not to appear rolls smoothly out my doctor's mouth.

I sank in my chair, trying to register my diagnosis. The doctor's voice became distant, a murmur of what seemed to be the prescription. My worst fear has come true.

"Hon, you okay? Do you hate your food?" my mother noticed that I looked off lately.

"Huh," I seemed to doze off. The noodles on my plate had been minced brutally.

"I heard you went to a psychiatrist." I looked at her in shock. The doctor's visit was a few weeks ago. I had secretly come to reveal my curiosity.

"Oh, yeah, I was feeling..." my head spun. I couldn't decide if I should come clean.

“You don’t have any of those double personalities, do you. It’s gonna be hard for your future, you know. You won’t be able to find a job.”

“No, no, no, it was just some anxiety... you know, moving, moving can be a little stressful,” I chuckled.

“Thank goodness, I thought you were going crazy or something,” my mother sighed in relief.

“Ohh, you’ll be fine honey,” she looked at me again with her warm smile and patted my shoulder.

That’s it, I couldn’t tell her. There’s no way. Even if she supported me, I couldn’t add more problems to her list. Not when she’s busy moving stuff across the country.

My mother and I had prepared to move out to Poland for her work. A country where I knew nothing off, with language I can’t speak, sure did make me a little bit anxious. So on that note, I didn’t entirely lie to her.

But that wasn’t my real concern. Ever since the doctor’s visit, things have gone more vivid.

The voices have grown louder and louder, slowly taking control of my decisions. I’ve seen fishes swimming on my bedside, the clock getting distorted, and the shadow still following me everywhere I go.

Despite the trouble I was going through, I knew I had to look okay. So here I was, sitting in the hotel, in an unfamiliar country, all alone.

Well, my mother did invite me to go out with her and her friends, but I refused.

“I’ll go out when we move to the new house... I promise” I tried to convince my mom.

“Alright then, suit yourself. You can walk around the block if you want. Get yourself some fresh air, stop looking... just don’t lock yourself in the room all day,” she looked worried.

“Okay, mom, I will,” I pushed her gently out the room and sighed.

“Good, lock her out.” The voices had crackled in my brain like finding a channel on the radio.

“Don’t let that evil witch know. She’ll put you in the nuthouse. Worse yet, she’ll disown you,” I could picture their sinister grin.

“SHUT UP,” I had enough of these voices. They can’t control me.

I wouldn’t trouble my mother with the look of confusion and awkward smiles in front of her friends. That’s why I didn’t come with her. I was the one who made this decision, not them.

Looking out through the window, the sun had slowly shifted down the horizon. The flowers in the window sill outside danced with the wind, inviting me to enjoy the calming dusk. I sighed. You know what, let’s go for a walk.

The soft beam of remaining sunlight greeted me once I stepped out. “Dawn Hotel,” I turned to see the golden plague of my temporary home beamed with glory before walking down the road. The wind pushed me gently as I strolled through the block. The leaves sizzled along with it.

The serenity of this evening sent delightful shivers down the layers of jackets that wrapped around me. I might enjoy this town, I thought.

I walked a little farther down the road. The street lamps have begun to spark, roadside shops turned their light almost in unison. It must be minutes till the sky turns back.

I looked ahead and saw flickers of little light framing a movie poster. “Midnight in Paris,” the poster read. Looks fun, I thought, as I approached the ticket booth. The movie ended at around 9 p.m.

The sky was definitely pitch black when I got outside. “You stupid... what were you thinking?” mocked the little voice in my head.

I stood utterly still beside the road. There’s no way I could walk back to the hotel on my own.

A handful of taxis parked on the side of the road, not far from where I was standing. But with my insufficient Polish, I’m afraid I’ll get myself lost.

The street lamp on the street across suddenly flickered, catching my attention. I hadn't noticed before, but the cinema was right across a tall, gloomy building, stretching as far as I could squint my eyes. I assume it was the concentration camp.

Oh God, to think of all the cruelty taking place on that ground. Sudden chills crawled on my skin.

In the low light of the evening, I could see a form of a shadow standing pin-straight near the camp gateway. A pit grew in my stomach; I had to get going.

There was no other way. I walked fast towards the group of taxis. They were not far ahead, but it seemed that the road had stretched before me. My back started to sense the shadow following me. I didn't dare to look back.

I picked up my pace, focusing on the taxis that strayed further and further from me. A couple of headlights grew closer and wheezed not far from me.

Stepping out from the car was a couple of girls giggling. One of them handed some money and rushed towards her friend who went ahead of her. I took a look at the sun-bleached taxi that hasn't moved just yet. It was rather old-fashioned.

"Not that one," the voice reminded me of the movie I saw earlier. The man traveled back in time when he rode an old taxi.

I was not about to take the chances, but I could feel the shadow growing closer and closer. There's no time. With the help of my phone and my hand gesture, I secured a seat back to the hotel.

As the car drove closer to the "Dawn Hotel" plague, the voices began to turn their volume up. "Here's the grand reveal, drum roll please... what period do you think we'll end up in," the drum pounded rapidly in my head.

Stepping out of the taxi, I can feel my heart race. I walked through the door to see the brick red floral wallpaper, coffered-style ceilings finished with brown marble tiles. The hotel still looked as tacky as it was when I first walked it.

The clerk, although he was not the same guy who gave my room key, I could tell by the equally tacky red and gold uniform that I was not thrown into some period. I got back safe and sound.

I expected my mother to greet me behind the door but only met a total silence. My mom hadn't gotten back yet, but I was too tired already to wait for her. So without much thinking, I jumped to the bed and snuggled on the pillow.

I woke up to the sound of BOOM. Immediately, I sat straight on my bed, disoriented. I turned aside to see the bed still vacant. But the sheet was wrinkled, the pillow left with a dented mark, and the blanket was tossed to the

side as if someone left in a hurry. My mother must've gotten up before me.

BOOM. The sound startled me once more. I pushed myself out of bed to check on the window. The sun barely rose up from the horizon yet, but there seemed to be a handful of people in sand-colored uniforms walking around the street.

I quickly put on my black trench coat and tumbled my way down the staircase. There were more people outside of the hotel, all dressed in the brown uniform, red bandages attached to their left arms.

Already, I felt a sense of unease throughout my body. The scene from last night has made its way back to my mind.

"A daytime costume party, maybe," I tried to rationalize the situation. But Halloween was weeks ago, my little mind started to toy with the possibility of jumping back to the 40s. Still, I shrugged it off.

The further I walked down the road, my suspicion became more vivid. More men in brown uniforms were seen wandering around the road. Enormous blood-red flags with four black elbows on a white disc were hung on the second-floor windows.

By that time, I still dismissed the possibility until I heard a sharp pop echoing in the street. A woman in shabby black garb slammed into the pavement. Blood started to pool around her head.

My throat let out a generous shriek. I froze, my eyes began to quiver. A few heads turned to my booming call. “Ohh, you’re dead,” the voice in my head commented. I quickly turned and began to sprint.

“It’s the car; I told you to not ride on that one; look at what you’ve done,” the whispers blamed.

“Someone’s following,” my skin crawled. I took a swift glance, and through my peripheral vision, a lump of brown figure was approaching me.

“Someone’s definitely following. You’re dead meat,” the voice did not sympathize.

In fact, it increased in volume and ferocity, demanding me to walk faster and faster. I walked faster. My eyes began to twitch, forming vignettes that zoomed in and out as I tried to catch my breath.

Scanning hazily into the street, a crowd of people in disheveled black clothes marched toward my direction.

I secured a hiding spot, tall fences right behind the luscious bushes. My legs sprinted faster than they could’ve ever been. Throwing myself through the crowd, my black trench coat merged perfectly, and with one swift turn, I shuffled behind the fences.

My breath was uncontrollable. I glanced at the street, and the man walked past me. I sighed in relief.

BUZZ. BUZZ. Something was vibrating in my back pocket. My brain had turned into a mush; I had entirely forgotten about my phone.

I reached down to grab it. There were a bunch of spam notifications popping up on the screen. I supposed my phone caught a wifi network nearby.

Scrolling through the screen, I noticed that my mother texted me at 5:37 a.m. "I'm off to the morning market nearby, be back at 10. I wouldn't want to bother you. I know you hate waking up early," the text read.

I quickly jumped at the top of the screen to press the call button but stopped my finger mid-air. "She'll know," the voice warned.

I glanced back at the empty street. "If I called my mother and she found out that it was all in my imagination– she's gonna say I'm crazy. But if this is all real and I'm trapped in–," I rubbed my head real hard.

BUZZ BUZZ. My phone demanded attention. I gazed at my phone sunkenly. On the top of the screen, the lowest wifi bar was flickering. I tapped to find out what network my phone was connected to.

"Gotowe@Cafe," the network read. "Go to we–," I frowned at the obvious mistake. Regardless, whoever was on the network was trying to send me a message.

I looked back at the street. There were some soldiers in brown uniforms marching on the road.

I shuddered. My whole body began to tense. But I couldn't wait any longer. "I can do this," Taking a deep breath, I rose up from the ground and walked as fast as I could. My eyes were locked to my phone, keeping in track of the tiny rainbow that became my compass.

At the back of my head, I could feel the shadow following me. My hands began to tremble.

The bar was flickering at its max. My eyes darted back and forth, trying to find the cafe.

I noticed an oak board stand right across the street. That must be it, I thought. I hurried to the board.

When I finally got a clear look at the cafe, I realized. I had misinterpreted the wifi network. Not only was it just a cafe name, but it was also written in Polish.

There was no turning back. The man in a brown uniform had approached me. I ran towards the cafe to hide, but the door wouldn't open. I shook the knob back and forth, wailing in frustration.

I know it wasn't true. There's no way I jumped back in time. Worse yet, the 1940s. But it was all too vivid to only be my imagination. I faced back from the door, slumping to the ground. I could only succumb to the grim voices that grew in intensity by the minutes.

I could see a blank chunk expanding through the flooded vision, increasing in numbers. It was the shadow finally getting at me. My throat was too tense to let out any

noise. Its hands reach towards me. I counted my last seconds.

Then, a warm hug. A familiar head rested on my shoulder, melting my tension. My trembling hands wiped the streaming tears off my face. The head lifted off my shoulder, facing me while grabbing my sticky cheeks.

“Honey, you’re okay?” It was my mom. “God, you must be so scared. I’m sorry,” she hugged tighter.

I closed my eyes, tears streaming down my cheeks once more. It was tears of happiness. My mom had come for me. She jumped back in time, and... she jumped back in time... how, I thought. The German soldiers, the poor Jewish people, was it all just in my mind?

I looked up to see a handful of men in brown uniforms and poor people in shabby garments standing there staring at me. Concern painted in their face. But I was even more confused, how did they... then my eyes panned to a man with black headphones, an enormous lens strapped to his chest.

“Oh,” I realized.

## SECOND LIFE

Maria Esa Aurora

Have you ever thought that other beings are always watching our lives? There is another world that has life just like ours. They are not aliens who have a plane called UFO and fly here and there in the Earth's sky. They have their world, their planet, and their universe. They live normally like what we do now. They have houses, plants, animals, clear skies, and the sun and moon in the day and night. Their life is trendier than ours with such futuristic technology.

Haikal is an 18 years old boy. He is in the second grade of high school. A boy with short curly brown hair, his eyes are beautiful with glows of joy and anxiety that he had kept for a long time. If you look closely, Haikal has carmine eyes with a blue lightning hue. What a beautiful eye color, but it looks weird if we stare at it intensely. He is neither very tall nor short. Maybe he can help you get the books that are on the seventh shelf. Oh.. do you think Haikal is a human from Earth? He is not. He is from another universe called Neo.

Haikal's life was practically nothing special before he came to Earth. He is intelligent and creative, but he does not think that his intelligence will bring him luck in the future. He just wants to have a teenage life like a teenager on Earth does. He has lots of friends. But they

think that even though they are good friends, they believe Haikal has a mysterious personality.

December 2009. Uncle Ty visited Haikal's house while he's in his room with friends, playing their favorite VR survival game.

"Kal! Uncle wants to talk to you! Can you come to the living room for a moment?", for some reason, Uncle Ty's face was solemn. He had something important to say.

"Yes, Uncle! Guys, I'll be back later. Enjoy the game!" He walked down the stairs to the living room. He saw Uncle Ty gathered with his parents, waiting for him to come.

"Come here, boy." Said his father. Haikal sat next to his dad. He was confused with the situation and why his parents and Uncle Ty looked so severe.

"So, Haikal, Uncle would like to ask for your help to carry out a secret mission," said Uncle Ty, greeted with a surprised face Haikal.

"Secret mission? What is it, Uncle?" Haikal asked with a confused face and asked why he should accept it.

"Haikal, Uncle wants you to go to Earth to see and gather our people who were successfully sent to Earth and bring them back to our planet." Uncle Ty seemed to beg Haikal.

"Why, Uncle? Weren't they sent because they have to help humans on Earth to live like us? With modern and

advanced technology.", Haikal seemed confused by this secret mission. Haikal thought that this mission is very unreasonable.

"It's not like that, Kal. Indeed, some of them are given the task of helping humans on Earth. But some of them have violated the agreed rules." Uncle Ty was disappointed. The secret mission is about some people from Neo going to Earth to help them develop some technology that will make their daily activities easier. However, some of them abused the technology for things like terrorism and cyber corruption. As the person who is responsible for this incident, Uncle Ty doesn't want the humans on Earth to be slowly destroyed and followed the greed of the Neo people.

"I can't, Uncle. I'm not ready for this. I'm only nine years old. I can't bear this problem alone.", Haikal refused Uncle Ty's offer. He thought that there was someone other than him who could carry out this secret mission. He also felt that he has no preparation from within him if there would be a danger one day.

"Kal, we have analyzed the data of people we can trust for this. But some of them refused because they want to have a normal life without having to be given the responsibility of secret missions," Uncle Ty replied.

"That's right, Haikal. We have gone to great lengths to persuade them. You're our last hope. If no one brings them back, then our people will destroy Earth because of their greed.", said his mother wearily.

"Give me some time to think first. Maybe two days. I think this mission will be difficult later, and I can't leave my friends in here.", he replied with a gloomy face.

Two days after, Haikal was reoffered the secret mission. He had a lot of considerations to think about, especially when he had to leave his friends. Their friendship is like brothers. Haikal was not ready to leave them. He was afraid that his life would change and got worse without his friends.

"So, Haikal? Will you accept it?" asked Uncle Ty, who was now in the living room with Haikal and his parents.

"Honestly, Uncle. I don't think I will complete this mission and bring people back to this planet. My martial art abilities are below average compared to the people sent to Earth.", said Haikal sadly and in despair. Uncle Ty knows that this was difficult for a teenager like Haikal. But Uncle Ty believed that Haikal will succeed with his martial arts skills and intelligence in technology.

"Don't worry, Haikal. Your parents will go with you, and your friends and I are here ready to help you too. You have us here." Uncle Ty replied confidently.

"Okay, Uncle. I'll try it. But there is one thing I want to say." Haikal asked Uncle Ty.

"What's that?",

"I want you to promise me not to interfere with my life on Earth, whether it's about my friendship or even anything other than this mission," Haikal asked with great emphasis.

"Alright, we won't bother you other than for the sake of this mission. But we also have one condition, Haikal, and this is what you must do." Uncle Ty replied with a nod of Haikal.

"I want you to take full responsibility for this mission, no matter what. You also have to report to me about what plans you will make to complete this mission. Even though it's just to bring them back, but I'm sure something will happen and can endanger you." Uncle Ty asked firmly. Although this mission looked very easy, Uncle Ty gave Haikal the freedom to make his plans without Uncle Ty's coercion. Uncle Ty understood that Haikal must also have happy memories to make friends and spend time playing with them on Earth.

"Of course, Uncle. I will immediately give the report.", Haikal said with full of confidence.

"But, Uncle, what's the function of this chip? I still don't know the function of having a chip like this in our bodies. It's strange.", Haikal asked with a surprised face.

January 2010. Haikal and his parents arrived at Earth. Of course, they didn't use transportation like cars or planes to get to Earth. They used a time machine,

where they can calculate the time distance between Neo and Earth.

Before their departure, Uncle Ty had prepared everything Haikal and his parents needed, such as a house, money, work for Haikal's parents, even a new school. Their identity? Of course, they've made official residence letters like the Earthlings have. They must kept their identities and lived like humans on Earth.

Haikal's house looked minimalist but elegant. Ah...you think that Haikal's life would be like rich people, right? No. What's the point of living a luxurious life like the rich if they only live on Earth for a short time? But behind the minimalist house, Haikal had a secret room to relax and do his job.

"Wow... this house is so beautiful! I feel like I've lived here. Mom! Dad! Where's the basement?" shouted Haikal. He was already on the 2nd floor after choosing the room to be his private room.

"It's the right of the kitchen room, honey! Hurry up! Pack your things and make a report if we arrive! And don't forget, tomorrow is your first day of school!" shouted his mom on the 1st floor. She's tidying up things. They didn't forget to bring family photos, some beautiful paintings, and aesthetic items. Haikal's father was decorating the living room to make it look more comfortable to use.

"Okay, mom! I finished cleaning my room! I'm going to the basement to set my computers!", Haikal answered excitedly. Haikal was always excited and happy when he deals with computer technology and coding. Although Haikal is sociable and makes friends with anyone, he also needs his own space to play games and practice his martial arts. Haikal is very good at self-defence. Already a black belt, he is very reliable and agile. It was also one of the reasons why Uncle Ty sent Haikal to Earth.

The first day of school began. Haikal rode his bicycle to his new school in the morning with happy steps because he will meet his new friend in the new environment. Haikal's school was not too far from his house, so he liked to go there by cycling or walking. Haikal thought that he can enjoy the beauty of nature while he's headed to school.

Haikal was already in his new class. Because he is a new student, he had to introduce himself in front of the class.

"Hello! My name is Haikal Byun. You can call me Haikal or Kal. Nice to meet you!" Haikal said with a smile on his face. After introducing himself in front of the class, he sat down on an empty bench. It's near the wall on the right, 3rd row from the front.

"Shhh...Kal! Henlo! My name is Seul, and this is Leon! We'll be friends forever, right!", exclaimed Seul accompanied by a nod of Leon. Seul sat behind Haikal and Leon on Seul's left. Haikal was happy because they

wanted to be friends even though it was the first time they met.

"People on Earth are friendly," thought Haikal.

February 2018. It's been ten years since Haikal and his parents lived on Earth. What about the secret mission? Haikal did everything Uncle Ty asked. Once a week, he always sent the mission reports to Uncle Ty. The report contained an analysis of life on planet Earth. Also, he did not forget about Neo people who are the target of their mission. With this analysis, Haikal and Uncle Ty could sort out the people brought back to planet Neo. Whenever he was analyzing, he used his favorite room, the basement, and asked his parents for help to revise the missing ones. When Haikal was still in elementary school, he was very conscientious and intelligent because, at his age on the planet, Neo had been trained and taught knowledge since they were a child.

In the morning, Haikal, Seul, and Leon went to school. Yes! They were now 18 years old and entered the 2nd grade of high school. Their friendship is like siblings, even though they often fight because of misunderstandings. Haikal was also used to life on Earth. But he secretly learned about life on Earth from his best friends, Seul and Leon.

Right now, Haikal, Seul, and Leon were in the school cafeteria. The break time was the most awaited moment for Haikal and his friends to eat and relax.

"How about we go to Amazon and play some games after school?" asked Leon.

"Okay! I also feel bored at home and this piling up of tasks," Haikal joined with a nod of Seul. Haikal was also felt burdened by the secret mission from Uncle Ty for ten years. He knew that this was the beginning of his struggle. He hoped that he and his friends could have free time like this. "I need to start making memories with them so that when I come back, I never regret it," thought Haikal as he looked at Seul and Leon, who were laughing because of the game they played.

Time to come home from school. As they promised, they were going to Amazon. The place had tons of game machines such as basketball, survival game, karaoke, puppet claws, and many more. They spent their free time playing and laughing together, moreover with Leon's naughty pranks that he always did to Seul. Luckily Seul had gotten used to Leon's mischievous nature for the past ten years.

At night, Haikal was in the basement. It's time for Haikal to do his main task. He checked his computer, which shows people's activities from Neo, who are on Earth. He also found out the function from the chip in his left hand, which can make it easier for him to catch the

target. Suddenly, Haikal received a message from Uncle Ty.

Haikal, now it's time for your mission to begin. Bring home the target. She is Winnie, 25 years old. You can see it through your detection computer. I hope you can bring her home but be careful; she is very good at martial arts.

After reading the message, Haikal checked the data and informed his parents. Haikal invited his parents to see the data of their target.

"She has committed corruption by utilizing the technology she created. She instigated people and had killed three officials? Why is she so mean? Okay! At least I can make a plan-B, in case I can't beat her with my martial arts.", thought Haikal. It's hard to struggle alone, especially because Haikal didn't want his parents to get hurt.

It's been a week, and Haikal had assembled his equipment, from a simple chip detector to a device that can be used as a weapon to kill a target. For your information, the people from planet Neo have the power that comes from the chips in their bodies. The chip is connected to their brain. Although they look like ordinary humans, they have advanced technology. So, they have a different survival system. They can upgrade their power through a computer system, but it is excruciating because it can kill their bodies.

On Tuesday morning, Haikal skipped school because he wanted to focus on his mission. After doing activities like bathing and breakfast, Haikal rushed to the basement to find the target location. It's been one week and two days, he was waiting and could not find his target, but this time, Haikal found the target through the chip and computer code he had made.

"I got you! After one week and two days, my efforts were successful! Mom! Dad! I found her!" shouted Haikal from the basement. Then Haikal walked to the living room, and his mother said, "Tomorrow, you can start your mission. Mom and Dad will send messages to Uncle Ty later."

"Aye-aye, Mom! I'll check again whether all my tools are proper and functioning properly. I'll go back to the basement.", said Haikal.

The next day, Haikal didn't go to school again. His house was empty. Seul and Leon come to Haikal's house and hope that they meet Haikal. But in vain, they didn't even meet Haikal's parents. In another place, Haikal and his parents were battling their targets. Their faces and bodies were already black and blue. Surprisingly, their target was powerful. Unfortunately, Haikal forgot to bring the chip-stopping device. As a result, they're in wounds and helpless.

Their target managed to escape, Haikal and his parents had to return home to heal their wounds. Haikal was upset that he didn't bring the tools and missed the

target. Haikal was angry. He blamed himself for causing his parents so much pain. That day, they ended up recovering their energy.

On Friday, two days after they failed to paralyze Winnie, their target, Seul and Leon, returned to visit Haikal's house. Arriving at Haikal's house, Seul and Leon met Haikal's parents who they told them to go to Haikal's room.

"Kal! Where have you been! Why don't you go to school? Why does your face look like this? Did you just get into a fight? Or an accident?" asked Seul, gently touching Haikal's face.

"O-oh.. long time no see. It's okay, guys. Don't worry. Hahaha...this is nothing. I just fell from the stairs. E-em...I also have permission from our teacher if I don't go to school." Haikal answered doubtfully. He didn't want Seul and Leon to worry. "Byun Haikal, what are you hiding? It's not like you. We've been friends for a long time, and I know that you're lying." Asked Leon with a suspicious face. Leon believed that there is something strange.

"Kal, we're best friends. We will help you if you're in trouble. Whatever it is, Kal, tell us, we are ready to help you.", asked Seul.

He was confused. Is it time for him to be honest with them? What if his two best friends left him because they thought he's weird? It took him a few minutes to think

through of the consequences before he talked about his secret.

"Seul, Leon, I'll tell you the truth. But I'm afraid you'll be mad and leave me."

"You can trust us, Kal."

"First of all, I just want you to know that I'm not a bad person. So...", Haikal started telling everything from the very beginning. Starting from Haikal's real identity, the reason why he is on Earth, and most importantly, his mission to bring the main target back to the planet Neo.

Seul and Leon listened carefully. Yes...even though all of that is entirely unexpected, Seul and Leon didn't want to cut Haikal's story. As long as Haikal talked, Seul and Leon showed their surprised faces. How can there be two worlds in one universe? Planet Neo? Does it exist? Chip? Why do they need chips? Aren't they the same humans as on Earth? Why can they upgrade their powers like robots?

It felt like they had been friends with aliens, strange creatures from another planet, for around ten years. However, Seul and Leon accepted Haikal as their friend. They knew that Haikal is a good person, and he was only doing his job.

"I won't hurt anyone here. I just want to finish my job, and maybe...I'll return to my 'house' and never go back to Earth again." said Haikal with a sad face. He didn't want to leave Seul and Leon. He was comfortable with life

on Earth. Though, he remembered that his life is not on Earth. He also has friends in Neo and missed them so much.

"We will help you get that target. It would help if you didn't get hurt alone," said Seul. But Haikal refused it. He didn't want them to get hurt too. Seul and Leon weren't ready for all of this.

"Don't worry. I've prepared everything. I just want you to support me, so I don't get hurt again," replied Haikal.

After Haikal had recovered and trained his martial arts to defeat his target, Haikal headed to the basement three days later. This time he promised to catch his target and bring her home to planet Neo. He immediately checked whether the tools he had created were ready in his room, especially the chip-stopping device that could help him incapacitate targets. "Weapons, done. Vest, done. Tools for kill chips, done. All I need now is my courage," said Haikal as she put the objects in his pocket.

After everything is ready, he sat on the gaming chair, looking at the computer with the screen that displays the target position. He saw that the target is in a crowded place. This time, Haikal's plan is to take Winnie to an empty spot, maybe to an old building.

Haikal then rushed towards the target location. Haikal said something, "Winnie, a Neo girl, was sent to Earth to carry out a noble mission but ended in betrayal.

Your dirty deeds on Earth are unforgivable. Come with me." The target chased after Haikal and followed him to the place that Haikal has prepared.

After they arrived at an old building, Haikal started beating her up. Haikal did this not without reason. Haikal was furious with all of Winnie's actions on Earth to the point of sacrificing many human souls. They fought until they were black and blue. Haikal was nearly exhausted from the intense blows of his target. Haikal struggled to stand up. Haikal was alone, and no one helped him. But Haikal couldn't just give up. His target was now pressing Haikal's legs so he couldn't move anymore. She broke his right leg.

A car suddenly came. Haikal was confused and tried to see who's coming. Haikal was shocked. He couldn't believe what he had seen. Four people came, running towards Haikal and the target. They are the people Haikal longed for. After that incident, it had been a long time since Haikal had seen them. Yes, they are Haikal's best friends from planet Neo. They came to help Haikal.

"Haikal!" shouted one of his friends. Haikal smiled from seeing them. Haikal felt that his energy was increased again with the arrival of a friend he never met ten years ago. Haikal had to get back up.

"Haikal! I heard you made that tool! Hurry up and get it out while we are about to hit this target!". Haikal reached into his pants' pocket while enduring pain all over

his body. He got the tool, but it cracked, and he's afraid it won't work. It was small, and the button itself was broken.

"The button might not work. I have to go near the target's body and stick my chip on top of her chip." thought Haikal. Yes, Haikal had made the chips to look like the tools he created. Haikal prepared everything even though he had to make sacrifices. With a limp step, Haikal got up, he approached his target who was already limply hit by one of Haikal's friends.

"Get out of here! I'm gonna kill her with my chip! Thank you, friends, for coming and helping me. It's time for me to end everything.", said Haikal while looking at his friends. Haikal brought the chip on his left wrist closer to the target chip. After that, a bright blue light appeared, and Haikal's vision darkened.

A year after...

"Welcome back, our hero!! Ready for another adventure?"