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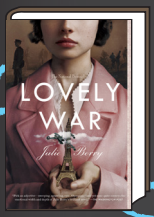

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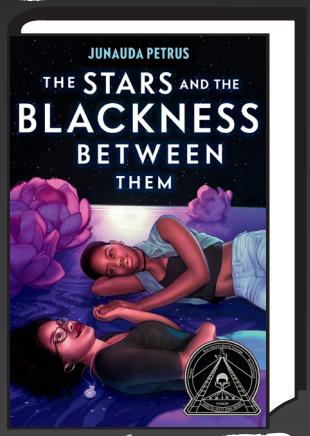


THE STARS AND THE BLACKNESS BETWEEN THEM

LGBTQIA Romance | ISBN: 978-0-525-55549-0

Sixteen-year-old Mabel is lying on her bed, staring at the ceiling and trying to figure out why she feels the way she feels—about her ex Terrell, about her girl Jada and that moment they had in the woods, and about the vague feeling of illness that's plagued her all summer. Mabel's reverie is cut short when her father announces that his best friend and his just-arrived-from-Trinidad daughter are coming for dinner. Mabel quickly falls hard for Audre and is determined to take care of her as she tries to navigate an American high school. But their romance takes a turn when test results reveal exactly why Mabel has been feeling low-key sick all summer, and suddenly it's Audre who is caring for Mabel as she faces a deeply uncertain future.

MABEL

I'M TRYING TO SLEEP AND I CAN'T SLEEP. My belly hurts and my hips too. All I can do is lie in bed and think of young Whitney Houston from the eighties. I have her album *Whitney* next to my bed. I found it at the thrift store last week when I was there with my mama, and I been sleeping next to Whitney every night ever since. My mom thinks it's cute since Whitney was her idol growing up, and she was inspired by her singing and style and stuff. But I feel like Whitney and I are connected in a special way for some reason. I have loved her since I was a kid, when my mom and I would play her greatest hits and dance to "I Wanna Dance with Somebody." At the part when Whitney says, "Don't you wanna dance? Say you wanna dance! Don't you wanna dance?!" Mama would pull my dad in. He would do his reliable and raggedy two-step, thinking he is killing the game and she would be in her intricate Afro-modern-hip-hop choreography—which is a lot of shoulder-shimmying, lyric dancing, and old-lady twerking.

My mom can dance though, for real, and she could always get my dad to just let go and be goofy.

Anyway, I'm up staring at my ceiling, in my memories and my feels as usual, listening to my "quiet storm" mix (as my dad calls it). It's all emo and soft music. Soon, I'm thinking of Whitney and her fine self from back in the day again. She just had a lot of layers to her, which is a thing I think I like in people, like Ursa and Jazzy. Even Terrell has layers. I like that sometimes Whitney was graceful and poised like a church lady, but she was really kind of wild and cray, and straight hood, too.

I'm like that, I got a lot of layers too, but I think other kids think I'm just this whatever tomboy Black girl, who always reading and playing ball or working out or something. I basically fit in, which is okay, but sometimes, I wish I felt comfortable to put my layers out there more.

If I'm honest, part of my renewed curiosity is because recently I found out Whitney Houston fell in love with this other girl, Robyn, when they was teens and working a summer job in New Jersey. I was just looking stuff up online and found some things about her "rumored romance" with her basketball-player best friend, Robyn. I don't know, but it just seems cool to know that she had this connection with this other girl. And that the other girl was a beautiful *basketball* star, and Whitney fell for her butt, called her the "sister she never had." *Mmm-hmmm*. I feel that. I think I've felt that way before. With Ursa, my bestie, I felt that somewhat and in another kind of weird way with Jada, this girl from math.

I read that when Whitney hit it big, Robyn was her for-real, ride or die. That she became Whitney's assistant and her confidante *and* always had her back. For real, for real. They shared a huge apartment together that was bad and beautiful and was living that good life together.

When I listen to "I Wanna Dance with Somebody" after reading more about their connection, I imagine Whitney and Robyn slow-dancing in an icy and lit penthouse in the eighties and it's all back-in-the-day fresh. A world of windows, looking over the city lights and skyscrapers, black and white everything, with leather couches, a big sound system with mad tapes and CDs, glass tables and a neon chandelier. Old-school and tasteful. They are two Black girls, slow-dancing, teen twin flames who loved each other. Inseparable.

I feel it.

Anyway, some people deny it, but when I look at pictures of young Robyn and Whitney and how they are smiling and close, a part of me thinks it's true. I just do. I can totally see why Whitney loved her. She is cool and smooth, more swag than any of those cheesy, Jheri-curled dudes probably trying to push up on her. I also read that one time, Robyn also maybe whooped Bobby Brown's butt. I wanna be like that—smooth like Robyn. Just a tender thug who Whitney would love.

Maybe Robyn was her true love. I wish she coulda stayed with her if that's what she wanted, and they'd be in love forever. Maybe

the world would've loved her if she was queer. I would've, no doubt. Whitney was an angel and what if Robyn could've been her bodyguard? Why did that basic-white-boy Kevin Costner, with no swag, have to save her? It should've been Robyn's cool self. Ain't Black women always saving everything anyway? Why can't we save Whitney?

When I listen to Whitney sing, I'm feeling every feel there is to feel. Lighthearted. Melancholy. Joyous. Romantic. Her voice can do anything, and I get chills hearing her riff and vocalize. I put my head under my blankets, bring my knees to my chest and cocoon myself with Whitney and the darkness and softness surrounds me.

The next song on my list is by my favorite band, BLK LVRS. All of the musicians in the band are weird Black kids. Like me, I guess. I really like the lead singer, QWN Asantewaa. I like them 'cause they is just beautiful and different. They wear simple clothes and a fade haircut and sneakers. Their voice is really soft and deep and emotional, and they write most of the songs and play guitar.

I think if I'm honest, I'm pretty sure I like girls. But I'm not really sure either because a part of me also likes guys, like Terrell. The first time I thought about this in a real way was when I went to see BLK LVRS—my first real, grown concert—and I had this serendipitous, moment-long micro-situationship with this girl.

My mom and dad had surprised me with seeing BLK LVRS for my fifteenth birthday. It was an eighteen-plus show, but apparently the venue allows kids to come with their parents. It made my whole Black life that year, because this was, like, one of the few times they had gotten me something that really felt like me. Not some dumb light-purple frilly blouse or skinny jeans with floral embroidery on the butt or dangly earrings with pink shells or a bougie manicure and pedicure (side note: I did low-key like that ish, though. It actually felt good. Soaking my hands and feet in water and all of this concentrated attention to my fingers and toes made me tingle. I found a dope iridescent-emerald color called Octopussy, which was a weird name, but it made my nails look like the back of a beetle).

So, I'm at the show, I have on my BLK LVRS shirt, black skinny jeans, and a silver chain with Saturn on it that my mom got me for my birthday. My hair was in a braid and I had a big X on my hand to show I wasn't drinking, which I thought was cool anyway. My parents was back in the cut, where some of their friends was chillin' and they got appetizers and drinks and was just being bougie adults in the way my mom loves and my dad is awkward about. My mom says it's good for him to talk to beings besides his plants and his seeds (seeds—as in his children, Sahir and me, but also his actual seeds for Black Eden, the seeds he collects and germinates, and the seeds he raps to once they're in the dirt. The Fugees, mainly). Mom says if she ever dies, he

going to need some friends, maybe even a new wifey. He hates when she be talking so reckless about things like her dying. I think maybe 'cause his parents died when he was young, and the idea makes him feel scared, like a world without my mom would feel.

The energy of the show was very intense for me. All I could do was take in all of the fly people, their different looks and colors. They were beautiful. I had never experienced that ever before. My parents let me wander into the ocean of audience and be free of them, as long as I stayed close to the stage or their bougie district and kept my phone handy. I walked around and tried to be low-key and blend in, but in that space, part of me wished I had let myself let loose and pick an edgier outfit.

I said "excuse me" about ninety-nine-eleven times, and twisted my body through the crowd until I was standing real close to the front, right on the edge of the stage. I wanted to see QWN as close as I could. The wait seemed forever to come out, but there was a DJ playing some bops to keep the crowd ready. When the band got to the stage I was only a couple feet away from QWN.

They was smaller than I thought they would be, but they was also more everything else. More beautiful and dope, and I couldn't stop looking at them. The whole audience seemed to love and want QWN. I mean, my whole body was vibrating. They was all in the zone. QWN didn't seem to notice us at all, except for between songs when they would talk and tell little stories in

they deep speaking voice, otherwise, they would let their guitar talk and harmonize their singing alongside it. Their voice made me feel like they cared about me. I know that's weird, but that is the only way I can explain the way it feels when I listen to them.

I memorize your skin
and you tattoo your love
and your poetry on me

You love like rain
You beautiful sweet
You saturate me
my ancestral wifey

give me touches that
sweeten up
complexities

with all of the tenderness
with all of the permission
You are temptation
and goddess perfection.

Moaning their lyrics, behind the bass line, the whole band was going hard and hitting that beat. I felt every note in my gut,

really underground in me. And the whole crowd was feeling it too, and I was swept into our collective energy.

I'm not gonna lie, I was also feeling super awkward, because I ain't even know if I knew how to dance at first. But then this girl next to me out of nowhere starts to groove with me. I still remember what she got on, she was so magically pretty. She was looking all witchy, with a lavender-colored Afro and white boots and a necklace of mandarin-colored flowers. I started dancing back before I could think about it. She was real smooth with her movements, twirling around me and dropping it low, like bow! I was like, damn . . . I did a helpless version of my dad's two-step, and to my surprise, she seemed impressed. She soul clapped at me even—like I was killing it. She smiled and I just kept doing my thang, grinning back at her. And I don't know why I still remember this, but she smelled good too, like cocoa butter, jasmine flowers, and a little alcohol on her breath, even though there was an X on her hand like mine. All of a sudden, a crew of her friends came back with drinks, and she smiled at me and then floated away among them and I got pushed farther back. It made me feel a little disappointed, but I get it: Those were homies. But for some silly reason, I had wished we coulda danced all night together to BLK LVRS and I coulda maybe even known something about her. Next thing I know I hear a familiar voice.

"Mabel, they is so fresh! I had to get on this dance floor and do my thang, baby!" and there was my mama behind me, shimmying and old-lady twerking her heart out to the music.

We played BLK LVRS on the ride home and I was still buzzing from their weirdness and freeness and Blackness. I tried to relive all I saw on the stage that night: the bass player, BLK Rose, who is tall and dark with a pretty smile and a pink fade, and his jumping up and dancing all over the stage. And BLK Dahlia, their drummer from Senegal, who was raised in New Orleans. She moved between every style of rhythm from congas, wind chimes, to her drum kit to a djembe drum that she played on some of the slower songs. The keys player, BLK Iris and her glittery periwinkle dreadlocks past her fat, fine butt, wearing a mint-green wedding dress, her eyes closed as she did rhythms on her beat machine. And of course, my favorite, QWN Asantewaa, and their emotional voice.

"She's a butch, right?" my dad said from the front seat, promptly killing my vibe. "She could sang her ass off. That falsetto was a young Prince in his hey. Ooooh and she play real good, like Jimi all day on that guitar. I'm glad we went, ladies."

The way he said "she" and "her" really annoyed me. Like he knew them or understood something about them because of how they rocked they hair or clothes. "Why can't you just enjoy the music, Dad? Why the first thing you wonder about them is if they butch? And *they* don't go by *she*," I blurted out, feeling heat in my face. Then both me and my dad got quiet.

"Sequan, the singer—QWN Asantewaa—goes by 'they,' baby," my mama said. But she didn't stop there. "And *oooh,* that little cutie, QWN is a fine, little tender-roni. I can see why all y'all

kids be acting wild behind them," she said, revealing cougar feelings about QWN Asantewaa that nobody was wondering about.

"Right, *they*, not *she*. My bad." He looked at me in the rearview mirror, but I don't think he noticed me rolling my eyes. "They used to call 'em butch or stud back in the day. I wasn't trying to be mean, I ain't know. I did enjoy the show, though, I said that. I liked it." I just kept rolling my eyes at his fumbling. Whatever.

"There are still butches or studs, but there are they and thems and more too." Mom put her hand on Dad's. "This indigo generation is next level. It took me a while to pick up on it, but I get it better now. I know you wasn't trying to be insensitive, 'Quan, but just be mindful okay, honey? They go by 'them' and 'they.'" After my mom broke it down in her own way, my dad and I both stayed quiet the rest of the drive. I felt like I wanted to cry for some reason and a couple tears came down and I wiped them slow, so no one would notice and I felt even more dumb, since I was grateful I got to go. My mom turned up the volume, and as QWN's voice filled up the car, I looked at our city glitter by.

Even though we still close, my dad gets weird around me in certain ways that makes me awkward. I don't know how he would feel if he knew I liked girls, because he was kinda too geeked when I got a "little boyfriend," as my mom put it when I first started chilling with Terrell. I'm pretty sure my mom wouldn't care, since she's always had lesbian and gay friends. I think my dad

would feel some type of way about it, like a little disappointed or confused, to be honest. I don't feel in a rush to talk to them all about my feelings, because . . . nah.

Listening to QWN tonight on the mix reminds me of that night a little. Low-key, a little bit 'cause I always wondered what happened to that lavender-'fro girl, to be real. I just wonder if she thought about me again, which was a long shot, but what if? What if there was a Whitney-and-Robyn connection? Either way, that BLK LVRS show was the dopest night of my life—even with my dad being basic. It's weird that even listening to QWN, with myself alone now in the middle of the night, two years later, I feel like I'm still in that room and a part of them in a way that gives me a good feeling.

AUDRE

WHY I HAVE TO LOVE SOMEONE I CAN'T LOVE? My mother beat me and shame me for being "nasty" and I start to wish myself dead. But if it nasty, I find that nastiness in the church I try and avoid my whole life.

My mama and I was always different but the older I get, the harder it is to live with she. She never seem quite at peace with life. She certainly never seem to feel peace with me. When I was young, she would be in she bedroom for hours, sleeping or watching detective shows. Queenie would come by and cook and lime by us and sometimes comb my hair. When my mama was happy, though, that was my favorite world to live in. We going to the beach, she buying new clothes for sheself and me, she would get new lipstick, perfume, and things that make she feel pretty. We cooking and liming together. But if she in she shadow place, nothing is okay, and I staying out of her way and in my own world. When I was eleven, in addition to going to Queenie's

on Saturdays, I started going down the road by Auntie Pearl and Episode's house, watching TV and exploring the hills with our other cousins and neighborhood kids. Episode is Auntie Pearl's youngest son and my favorite cousin.

My mother's dad died from drugs and madness when I was twelve; that is when she started getting really into church. I remember my grandfather Ivan was funny and kind to a point, but it was only on the surface. I ain't know if it was because drugs or he had a hard life, but he would promise my mama something and then he wouldn't do it, or he'd do something else stchupid she ain't ask for, like bring me a bike with two flat tires when I asked for them shoes with the wheels in the heels of them. Then he get mad when I was disappointed, like he brought me what I ask for. He was always doing things like that. He blame it on when Queenie left him in the eighties—just like his mother did his father when he was a boy, which he seem to blame Queenie for too. Either way, after he dead from overdose, my mama decided to start going to church on Sundays, and then church was all of the time. The next thing I know a corny, clear-skin man always hanging around and that seem to be the official thing that separate me and my mother: a husband named Rupert.

After a while, it was either I go to church or we always arguing about it, because she feel I is "acting like I is a woman" since all I do now is hang out with my cousin and his Rasta friends, plus I stopped eating meat and ain't straightening my hair. She

sentence me to weekly services to "put me in my place." I beg Queenie to ask Mama to let me choose. But Mama got her husband now—a husband that she find in God's house—and she and Rupert insist, since I is in they house, I must go to they church.

And that is where I find Neri.

I saw her right away on my first visit to church. I liked how she opened the doors for all the grandmas. After some weeks, I saw she was always wearing something yellow—whether it was a yellow suit or a yellow scarf or yellow blouse. I noticed that and brought her some yellow flowers from Queenie's yard one Sunday, and she hugged me and I was fluttering inside my body. Every Sunday, she sang real pure and close her eyes. Her voice sweet and perfect and angelic from Goddess. And she noticed me too. After we saw each other a couple of Sundays, she would find me and sit next to me.

Neri was my mother's pastor's granddaughter, and I loved her on sight.

One day during service, Neri held my hand where no one could see. I was feeling something when she did that, like it a special moment. I thought maybe it a church thing people do, I ain't know about, and I loved it. The energy in our hands was singing a gospel the whole time, and I felt the sermon through her palm. My mother's God's grace in Neri's hands. I get real religious after that. I ain't never kissed nobody before. I ain't even feel I wanted to kiss anyone before. But Neri made me wonder: What would it

feel like to kiss her right on her mouth? I ain't know what to do with the feeling so I pushed the thought back out of my head.

Church became actual *church* to me. In my head, I renamed it C.H.U.R.C.H., which stood for "Come Here U Rebel, Come Here." I knew I was a conjurer and feeling weird for being there and finding Spirit. But Queenie had always told me Spirit is everywhere, and that since I was going to church, be open and see what is there to learn about the Spirit of Jesus and the way the Christians try to understand the divine. So when my heart start tingling, I ain't surprised that I found Spirit in church with Neri.

One day I decided to take Neri to the ocean, by where Queenie live. It is a private spot that emerges from a walk through a thick grove and a narrow path. We convinced all the adults—and ourselves—we was studying the Bible. I was in a Sunday dress, pink and ugly and making me look like a tall five-year-old. My glasses are old-school frames that used to be Queenie's, but I like them better than the new styles. My mama hates them, but she never get my style anyhow. I thought I looked funky and original. Neri looked more sophisticated in a navy skirt, with a cream blouse and a yellow scarf, and in her braids she'd tucked yellow flowers that we found on our walk to the water. I laid a scarf for us in the sand. I kicked off my shoes and took off Neri's shoes too. *Pretty feet*, I thought. I held she foot and sang a song. She giggled and swung herself closer to me. Hip to hip, she leaned her head on my shoulder but then caught herself and sat back up.

The ocean witnessed us, and as I sat there with Neri, I felt shy. The water blue was loud and welcoming, like a long-lost tantie. She came close to touch us, then receded back into herself, almost as if to get a good look at us, and then she lunged for us again. I laid my head in Neri's lap and I was surprised when she glided her hand up my back and played in my little Afro. Inside of me started dancing and I felt alive and I faded into her a little.

The water came for our toes, and I told Neri, "This is my real church." I wondered what she thought. She was quiet but nodded.

Being by Neri felt sweet, and I started to shake a little, as if I scared. I didn't want to leave her for any reason. "Audre, you lookin' sad. Just watch at the ocean. Listen to these seawater hymns, nuh?" said Neri, smiling at me and then looking at the water all the while she was making an instrument of me. Stroking my earlobes with she fingertips, twisting little twists in my 'fro and loosening it, sweeping she hand on my face and neck.

When the moment opened up, we both fell into each other. She grabbed my hand and I felt the ocean talking to us real deep inside. Church. My spirit found rhythm with the water and Neri's breath. I overwhelmed my good sense and kissed Neri's hand, then tucked myself back into her lap. She lifted my head up and looked into my eyes. Then she leaned down and kissed my mouth. This the first time anybody kiss me. I was trembling. (I am trembling remembering it.) I stopped breathing for a little moment. The ocean kissed our toes. Her lips on mine were a

warmth, and my body started to bloom within her arms and melt in her skin. And from then on, love was all we knew how to do.

We "study the Bible" by the ocean for three months. My mama was happy thinking I finally accepted Jesus and finally have a church friend—any friend at all since I ain't really close to anyone in school either. (I is cool with people at school, but I always feel like I is a different type of person and no one there really get me. I have Epi, who is my cousin, but more like my big brother, and Queenie, who is my grandma but also feel like she is my sister-best-friend and even a mom to me.) Neri was different though, she was a girl my age and I felt a closeness with her that was new and special.

And every Sunday, we went to the ocean, explaining to everyone that we wanted to study the sermons deeper. "Apply the gospel to our hearts." And we did, in our own way—talking about life and our families and our secrets. We worshipped in each other's arms with our own devotion, sand in her braids and my Afro, our Sunday dresses wrinkled. We peeled down to our underwear and swam in the water and floated on eternity, together. We lay out under the sun and dried, together. She held me in her arms and smiled at me and her eyes made me feel like she really, really saw me. We packed up everything, smoothed our dresses, and headed back to our different worlds. Until that next Sunday.

Between Sundays, I was my usual self but different. I enjoyed everything about life because I was thinking of Neri. As usual, I

got good grades in school and was helping around the house, but now I avoided talking back to Rupert even though he ass still a idiot. Now I smile at he and do what I asked to do.

Between Sundays, I hung out at Epi and he girlfriend Sarya's place only occasionally and not every chance I got. Mainly I went to see what Epi was cooking up new and to hear gossip from he and Sarya.

And even though I was going to church on Sundays, every Saturday don't change. Since I was nine, after chores at my house, I was doing my lessons by Queenie and learning about herbs and baths and rubs and songs, of the spirituality my grandma created for she self and share with me. One Saturday, my grandma felt a feeling and begin to investigate me.

"So you find Jesus or you fall in love?" Queenie asked me, while we in the backyard bottling her homemade bush-plum wine, doing we usual thing of making and studying and just being together. She caught me off guard, as I was thinking of Neri and singing a song from church.

I was changing the album on her portable record player. Her question was a thing I ain't know what to do with. It stayed in the air for a second and I acted like I focusing on the Ma Rainey LP in my hand. Queenie felt like hearing some blues that morning, and she was in a Ma Rainey mood. She said, "Dis wine we is making is for drinking slowly, for contemplation and healing emotional weight that is and ain't yours, like the blues women."

I decided to play it cool with the question and slowly looked up at her. When I see she face smiling her big gap, I couldn't help but smile a little, 'cause in my heart I was thinking of Neri and I is so happy.

"I find Jesus," I said, and look back down in the crate of records.

"Eh-heh, I bet you find he all right." Queenie stop short and bus' out a wild laugh while holding she belly at the thought of me being a church girl. She let out a big, loud sigh when she recover from my comedy. She was wearing a maroon-and-turquoise African-print dress with skinny straps and buttons down the front. Her lipstick was glittery purple, and her gray hair was clipped low. Her body was perspiring and strong, and she dabbed her chest and neck with a handkerchief the color of a piece of sky. She topped off the last bottle, corked it, put it in the carton on the ground with eleven others and took it into the house. I put on an Anita Baker record and put the Ma Rainey one back in its sleeve.

"Anita is a good pick for new love," she said when she come back out. She snuggled me while she giggled.

"Ugh, Queenie, wha' new love? I tellin' you I is save. Jesus and me real cool now." And I started smiling, even though I was trying hard to stay serious. We was looking out at her Queenieland, with its zaboca, mango, guava, plum, plantain, and cherry trees, dasheen bush, bhaji, cassava, sweet potato, and several chickens who she let me name. And out beyond Queenieland was Yemeya, the ocean, the goddess of me and Neri's C.H.U.R.C.H.

"Mmm-hmm, you used to tell me more ting, but lips tight today. But that is what it feel like to be in love for the first time I guess. You wan' feel like you did discover a ting, no one else know," she said pretending she was trying to figure me out, but I knew she already at her conclusion. I could tell.

"Hmmm, I wonder if is someone I know . . . ," she asked, bumping she bum bum into mine.

"It no one you know," I bust out, and leaned on to her shoulder, wanting to tell her every little thing about Neri, but not feeling like I could either.

"Oh, so there *is* a someone. Hmm. Someone from church it seem, then. Well, your mother will like that, maybe . . . I never know with she," she said, holding back she mouth. Then she find a next thought to share with me. "Good for you, my dahlin'." She smiled. "You is smart and strong. I ain't worry about you, but always be safe, yuh understand? You must protect yourself."

"Queenie, it ain't even like that, if you think I is going to get pregnant," I started to say.

"I ain't just talking pregnancy. Protect your heart and spirit. You is open and that is powerful but also vulnerable. I had to say something 'cause anything can happen in the world of love," she said. I remember I nodded, but I ain't really know what she was talking about. I looked around not wanting to look in her eyes and tell her too much. I felt a furry slither around my ankles and looked down to see Bastet, her cat, wound around my ankles. I

picked her up and cuddled her, and then as usual, she escaped after a couple moments to hunt lizards in the garden. Queenie came close to me, more soft and less preachy.

"And listen, Audre. I want you to give attention to every second of this moment, this feeling. Enjoy love." She stroked my head as she said this. "You will lose yourself in it and then find yourself in a new way. That is just how it work and maybe supposed to work. So be strong in who you are, eh? Don't be a bobolee for nobody, you understand?" she said. She turned to me and looked me in the eye. "Remember you is the granddaughter of Queenie. You is my royalty, okay? You can always talk to me, eh? I was young once, and I know things. All kind a things." She smiled, looking mischievous and a little sly. From that smile I knew I ain't telling she nuttin'. She wise and is good with secrets. But what if she decided to talk to she sisters and then everyone from Laventille to Chaguaramas would know by the evening, including my mother, and that would put shame in she eye. But even though I feel I wanted to keep it for me, I appreciated that she even noticed I'm different. Because I feel I was too.

That last Sunday, I woke up early and was ready for church before everyone. I opened my eyes, looking forward to seeing Neri and getting to be with her all by myself. But first, I was sitting with her in the pew all morning amongst her granddaddy's sermons on the deeds and stories of the Bible and the Lord and Jesus and

Mary and the disciples and the wife of this one and the son of this one. I listened and applied his stories to my life in whichever way I could, which is what Queenie said I should do. But I also mostly daydreamed about Neri, who was next to me in a chapel of perspiring aunties with baby powder on they chests, their perfume warm and lingering; a chapel of pious uncles of the church who are hard-backed and in white and pastel colored button-up shirts with their eyes wet and their souls weary for the Lord. Children was there too, memorizing the instructions for their holiness and to become obedient to the Bible and the Lord. No matter how I felt about some of the beliefs of Christianity I ain't agree with, how I didn't—and don't—understand all of the things about church, I loved (and still love) the village feeling when I was there and the music always touched me until I would cry. I was feeling love and current in the space between me and Neri's shoulders as we prayed and stood and sang and praised in her grandfather's house of God.

Afterwards, Neri and me went to our private church, where the sky was thick with clouds moving towards us, levitating above our bodies like Goddess herself. The water crawled up and saturated the sand as though she was paying attention to me and Neri's worship. The sky wasn't too much expanse for the water and the water wasn't too much deep for the sky. They were reflections. I slid through the sand closer to Neri. I sat behind her and just held her, smelling her neck before I kissed it right on the place where her thick hair was lifted from her neck.

I waited all week for Sunday, for this sweetness. For when I could be by Neri and feel like myself. Neri was wearing a beige blouse with tiny yellow daisies and a yellow skirt. And I was feeling proud, 'cause she smell like Ocean Love, the perfume I got her last week, when I went by Episode and Sarya's apartment for a scent for she. They was all in my business trying to understand, why all of a sudden this ragamuffin want to smell sweet.

"For what stchupid, dirty-pantie-boy you wan' impress? He know I is ya cousin?"

"Epi, no one studying you. And ya tink anyone scare of a skinny-ass Rasta? Yuh wan' meh business or no?" I asked, able to block his nosiness better than Queenie's. I was sitting on the couch in the living room connected to their kitchen.

Episode laughed and said he is happy that the church ain't cure my mouth and continued to cut up chadon beni for the pigeon peas he was making. Sarya floated out of the room, long dreads swinging near she ankles. She got skin that is dark like melongene and just as smooth and shiny; she look like she could be a model from Nigeria or Senegal, but she is Trini 2 the bone, like we is. She returned and laid out oils before me. I read the names as I picked them up and smelled individually, trying to find something just right. Cool Water smell like a man who want to be cool; Kush smell sweet but not the same sweet of Neri; Frankincense remind me of Catholic church, which isn't quite what I was going for. I sniff Opium, J-Lo, Beyoncé, and they all smell beautiful but still not right for Neri.

I picked up one of the oils, turned it around, and read, "Hot Pum-Pum." Sarya smiled with pride at me. "That is a good selection! I see ya cousin got taste, Epi! That is a Sarya original, special and limited-edition fine oil! You ain't gone find that one nowhere, but watch out," she said, then leaned in to whisper, "it drives all these stchupid men out here crazy." I put it down quick. I saw one that said Ocean Love. I smelled it and felt something in my heart.

When I gave it to Neri the next Sunday, she gave me a real nice, long kiss.

And that last Sunday on the beach, I should have realized that the clouds was talking. Neri and I feeling sweet and full of love, yet I was feeling something in my spirit. Neri was laughing loud at the sky.

"And, gyal, I get up in de tree and I ain't realize how high I reach." Her head was thrown back as if she were looking at herself up in a tree. I couldn't take my eyes off her beautiful neck. "Yuh see, I scaaared! I looking down and imagine me foot slip, me head bus', and me granddaddy have to give a sermon for he granddaughter, who dead over mangoes, trying to get this one real up high for you." Neri leaned in close to me and our eyes almost crossed we focused on each other so tight. "But I ain't care. I know it was sweet and of course you deserve the sweetest." She had brought it in one of her yellow scarves. Once Neri and I was out of church, she was herself too—funny and weird and more free and willing to say anything she want.

"Before I kiss anyone," she told me once, "I used to practice on mangoes. Especially the sweet juicy ones. I would sneak them

in my room and pretend it was someone I was liking. If you see the mess I did make," she told me, and we giggled about it. I asked her if she ever love a girl before, and she looked at me and smiled and nodded and we ain't say nothing more.

I thought of her kissing practice as I peeled the mango skin with my teeth and lips leaning over the sand to not spill on me self—it was juice, soon as you bite. I took another taste, she took a bite, and then we drinking from the fruit, from our own fingers, and then from each other's lips. Everything slow with tenderness. If I close my eyes now, I can see it.

Our garments open up. Arms slide out of sleeves and around each other. Neri lays me down, and I look up at her and see the sky beyond her head. She takes off my glasses and places them to the side of us, carefully in my bag, like she always does. She kisses my eyelids and I touch her face. She starts humming a song from church and I start humming with her. Neri get me to feel the beauty in them gospels. My breath catches in anticipation of her movements, how she will touch me and where. I love how her body feels, rocking into mine, blooming into mine.

She starts to kiss me, her lips and mouth warm and tasting of mango, and I exhale out like I was drowning in air until then. She lets her kisses travel to my cheek, linger at my chin and neck. My body is trembling and moaning, by the time I feel her lips on my collarbone, my underarms, licking my nipples, she delighting all places of me soft and cover up to everyone else. I roll into her

sweetness, her touch relaxes me into the sound below us and she becomes ocean, kissing my skin, like she always know how to love me. I roll on top of she and I return love to her by gliding my lips along every part of she skin. She feels so soft and I longing to taste she. I move my lips down she neck, shoulders, she chest, waist, and belly button. She places her hand on top of my head, and my lips move slowly across her navel and her hip bones, which make she giggle.

Suddenly, my hair is being pulled and I is being dragged backwards.

"JESUS! GET THE DEVIL OUT! YUH DISGUSTING! YUH IS so SICK, Audre! Why you bring this shame to God? God, why you give me this SICK GIRL?!!!"

With each lash of she hand, I tried to cover myself, my mama like a hurricane around me, pushing me down into the sand. She ain't care. My face, back, shoulders, breasts, ass. She lashed all the places that Neri just kissed. I was crying and shaking, I ain't know how I even got moving. In remembering it, I still feel this shame, this torrid feeling.

Neri was crying and screaming, grabbing for my mama, begging her to stop cuffing me down, please, that it was she. My mama screamed for her to put on she clothes and go into the car and stop lying. She yelled she knew I influence this. Neri protected me from my mom's lashes by standing in front me and me mother hit her chest once, before she grabbed me from behind.

We were all scuffling in the sand. I was thinking if we should run to Queenie's, but my spirit, my body, everything was paralyzed. My mother screamed and took us both by our arms and command us back down the path, back to she car, commanding Neri to get in. I got in the back seat, crying and feeling her licks on my body and the one on my heart. Neri and I in the back seat, and I couldn't even look at her.

When we got to the pastor's house, Neri quick squeezed my hand, like we were in church, but now the gospel is screams and sharp and afraid. My mother seemed to be in the pastor's house for all of time and no time at all.

When we get home, the yelling and lashes start back, and when she get fed up with me, I was sent to my room. I hear her and Rupert talking in the other room when he get home late from work. He barely seem like he around but you feel his influence nonetheless in this house. I felt alone in my house. I felt like I was her enemy and not she only child.

The next week, after she and Rupert return from church, she told me her decision: That I is to live by my father.

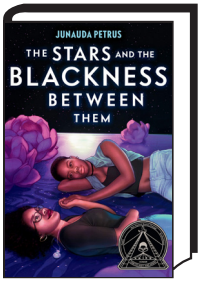
Queenie was already waiting outside the house in her vintage white-and-chrome Mercedes-Benz convertible. With the top down. I don't know if my mama called her or if she just know. I slid myself in the front seat and we roll off. I was numb and felt like myself was all poured out. We drove in silence for a while.

Finally, she asked the verdict. I whispered. "She sending me to the States by my Yankee father who I barely know," I say and my throat thickens with each word. "My mother don't want me anywhere on the island to shame she with my nasty ways," I say, sinking further into the red leather of she car.

We pulled up to the wood's entrance that leads to the beach. Queenie put the car in park and before I knew, she swung to the passenger side, pulled me out of the car into her body. "Stop calling it nasty, dahlin'," Queenie said. I was in she arms, and I instantly collapsed into tears. I felt like I did as a little girl, when I would be hurt and she would swoop me up and hold and rock me.

She said she always knew who I was and it makes me special. She apologized for my mother. I cried harder when she said that. She started crying too, which made me scared. Fight come out of Queenie, before tears, but she was crying for me. I asked she if I can stay with her forever instead of going to the States. She was quiet, considering. "Dahlin', I wish, I wish I could, me dahlin', but I can't cross me daughter. I love she, but I know me daughter. She will never forgive me and she will make your life hard. I ain't know, gyal. Maybe it would be easier for you wit' ya fadda.

"But," she said, "before I take you to me home, let's go to the water and see what Spirit say." And then she asked me if I had my pouch. I closed my eyes to collect myself and prepare for ceremony.



THE STARS AND THE BLACKNESS BETWEEN THEM

by Junauda Petrus

What did you think after reading a few pages?

What did you think of the cover?

Would you recommend this book?

Why or why not?

PATRON SAINTS OF NOTHING

Mystery Centered on Immigrant Identity

ISBN: 978-0-525-55492-9

Jay Reguero plans to spend the last semester of his senior year playing video games before heading to the University of Michigan in the fall. But when he discovers that his Filipino cousin Jun was murdered as part of President Duterte's war on drugs, and no one in the family wants to talk about what happened, Jay travels to the Philippines to find out the real story.

Hoping to uncover more about Jun and the events that led to his death, Jay is forced to reckon with the many sides of his cousin before he can face the whole horrible truth—and the part he played in it.

AN IMPROVEMENT TO SOCIETY

I wake to the sound of the garage grinding open. My room is pitch black, and when I check the time on my phone I find that it's almost five in the morning. There are a few texts from Seth from last night that I ignore. Downstairs, a door opens and shuts, then footsteps shuffle across the floor. I almost drift back to sleep when I remember Jun is dead. For a moment, I wonder if I dreamed that conversation with Dad, but then dread settles into my heart and I know I didn't.

I need to speak with Mom. She's always able to extract information from Dad that nobody else in our family can, so if anyone knows more about what happened to Jun, it's her.

I throw the covers back, and head downstairs through the dark house.

She's in the kitchen, back to me as she puts a kettle of water on the stove for her post-shift cup of chamomile tea. Her blond hair—which I definitely didn't inherit—is tied back in a ponytail, and she's still in her scrubs like Dad was. They work at the same hospital, where she's an oncologist and he's a NICU nurse. When Chris, Em, and I were younger, they used to work opposite shifts so that at least one of them could always be on family duty. We rarely saw them together beyond one day a week and family vacations. But after I finished elementary school, they aligned their schedules, and as we grew up, they grew closer.

"Hey, Mom," I say, looking a mess in my wrinkled clothes.

She stops what she's doing and turns around. Her weary face transforms into a picture of sympathy in a heartbeat. She crosses the space between us and wraps her arms around me. "I'm so sorry about Jun," she says. "I know you two were close. If I could have, I would have been here sooner."

Earlier I thought that I wanted someone to hold me. But now that someone is, it doesn't make anything better.

Mom kisses my forehead. "How are you holding up?"

"Fine," I say, but that's not what I want to talk about. I shed her arms and back away. "Why aren't they giving him a funeral?"

She hesitates, like she has an answer ready but is having second thoughts about going with it. Eventually, she says, "You know how your uncle is." Then she turns around and busies herself with prepping her tea.

"Yeah, but—"

"His family doesn't want to talk about it. We should respect that." She closes the cabinet door hard, like a full stop at the end of her sentence.

But I need to know more. I need to know what happened to my cousin. Maybe only for the sake of knowing—but maybe because I need to hear that it wasn't my fault. That, whatever happened, a few more letters from me wouldn't have made a difference.

"You know the reason—don't you? You can tell me. I'm not a kid anymore."

She rests her hands on the counter but doesn't answer.

I think about the words in Jun's final letter, the part about how everyone pretends like they don't see the suffering around them.

"So we're just going to act like this didn't happen? Like Jun didn't even exist?"

After a beat, she turns around to face me and crosses her arms. "If that's what's best for his family, then yes."

"Do you lie to your patients?" I ask.

She raises her eyebrows. "Not to my patients, but sometimes to their families, yes."

"You serious?"

She nods. "Sometimes my patients want me to lie for them. Nothing out of line. Mostly they want me to say something in a way that will give their loved ones relief. Or at least, something that won't leave them with too much despair."

I shake my head. Unbelievable.

"If I have a patient who is dying slowly and painfully, and he asks me to tell his family that he won't suffer in his final moments, what am I supposed to do?"

"If they ask, tell the truth."

"Even if the truth does nothing but cause the family anguish?"

"They deserve to know."

"Or do they deserve peace?"

I say nothing.

She sighs. "You aren't going to let this go, are you?"

"No."

"Just like your father . . ." she says quietly.

Except her comment confuses me because he lets everything go.

"It's not going to do anything for you," she says. "Except cause you more pain."

"I know."

The teakettle starts whistling. Neither of us moves.

Finally, Mom breaks eye contact and removes the kettle from the stovetop. She pours the water into the waiting mug, drops in the tea bag, then pushes the mug toward me. "Careful. It's hot."

"Thanks."

She glances toward the entrance to the kitchen. Then she takes a deep breath and asks, "Do you know what *shabu* is?"

"*Shabu*?" I repeat, testing the shape of the unfamiliar word in my mouth. It sounds like it could be Tagalog, but I've never heard it before. I shake my head.

"It's what they call meth in the Philippines," she says. "A cheap high. Easy to find. Devastating."

My stomach flips. "Oh."

"I don't know everything," Mom continues, "only what your dad tells me, and I can tell he doesn't know the full story either. You know how his family is. But, in this case, I don't think he wants to know any more."

"What do you mean?"

"After Jun ran away from home, he started living on the streets. At some point he started using."

I stare hard at my untouched cup of tea. A lump forms in my throat. "Overdose?"

Mom shakes her head.

I look up. "Then what?"

"He . . ." She trails off and looks around again as if to make sure Dad isn't within earshot. Then her eyes land on mine and soften. "He was shot." She pauses. "By the police."

"The police?"

She nods.

"Why would the police shoot him for using drugs?"

She takes another deep breath. "Duterte."

I wait for her to say more.

Mom blinks. "Rodrigo Duterte? President of the Philippines?"

I know she's waiting for understanding to dawn on my face, so I look down, feeling like a fool.

"You don't know about him? About the drug war?"

"I've read a little," I say, so I don't look completely stupid. But the truth is, I never made it past the headlines.

"Really, Jay, you should pay more attention to what's going on in the world outside of your video games."

"Sorry," I mumble. But it's not like our family is the model for current events analysis. There was another major school shooting a few weeks ago, and "It's so sad" and "It really is" and "I'll never understand those people" was the extent of my parents' conversation about it over dinner. They didn't even ask how I felt.

"Duterte was elected back in 2016," Mom explains. "One of those 'law and order' types. Said that if he were elected, he could eliminate the country's crime in three to six months."

"For real?" I ask.

She nods. "Blamed drugs. Said he had a plan to get rid of them, and once he did, there wouldn't be any more crime."

"And people believed that?"

"He won by a landslide." She lets that sink in, and then goes on. "Once he was president, he ordered anyone addicted or selling to turn themselves in. If they didn't, he encouraged the police—and the people—to arrest them . . . and to kill them if they resisted."

"Execution without a warrant or a trial or anything?"

Mom nods.

"Isn't that illegal?"

"The government determines what's legal."

I shake my head as I think of Jun dying because of some bat-shit-crazy government policy. "And they've *actually* been doing this?"

"You really haven't read any articles about this online or learned about it in school at all?"

"How many people have died?" I ask instead of answering.

She shakes her head. "Some think over ten, maybe twenty, thousand. But the government says only a few thousand."

Only.

"And Filipinos are still okay with this guy?"

She takes a deep breath. "Jay, it's easy for us to pass judgment. But we don't live there anymore, so we can't grasp the extent to which drugs have affected the country. According to what I've read, most Filipinos believe it's for the greater good. Harsh but necessary. To them, Duterte is someone finally willing to do what it takes to set things right."

"So I'm not allowed to have an opinion? To say it's wrong or inhumane?"

She puts her hands on her hip and flashes me a look that signals I should check my tone. Then, in a low voice, says, "That's not what I'm saying, Jay."

"What are you saying?"

"That you need to make sure that opinion is an informed one."

There's obviously no way to argue that point without sounding like an idiot, but knowing that doesn't dissolve my newfound anger. "So what's *your* informed opinion?"

"That it's not my place to say what's right or wrong in a country that's not mine."

"But you lived there. You're married to a Filipino. You have Filipino children."

"Filipino *American* children," she corrects. "And it's not the same."

"Then what about Dad—what's he think about Duterte?" I ask, not sure I pronounced the name correctly.

"He's just glad you and Em and Chris grew up here."

I don't know what to say, so I take a sip of the tea, which is bitter and lukewarm. I remember how during sophomore year, my English class read *Night* by Elie Wiesel while we learned about the Holocaust in World History. After we finished the book, we read the author's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech. I don't remember the exact words, but I remember how he said something about how if people don't speak out when something wrong is happening—wherever in the world—they're helping whoever is committing that wrong by allowing it to happen. Our class discussed the idea, and almost everyone agreed with it, even me. At least, we said we did. Never mind the fact we all knew most of us didn't even say shit when we saw someone slap the books out of a kid's hands in the hallway. In fact, the most outspoken supporter of the idea during the discussion was a kid who did that kind of dumb stuff all the time and thought it was hilarious.

It strikes me now that I've never truly confronted that question before, that I never had to. But I'm left to wonder, did my parents' silence—and mine—allow Jun's death in some way? Was there anything we could have done from the US?

The answer doesn't matter anymore, though. It's too late.

Jun is gone. And apparently to most people he was nothing more than a drug addict. A rat transmitting a plague that needed to be eradicated. It all still feels so absurd, so unreal.

As tears well in my eyes and a new wave of nausea roils in my stomach, I put down the mug and turn away from Mom. I rest my elbows on the counter and cover my face with my hands.

"Are you okay, honey?" comes Mom's voice from somewhere far away.

I shake my head.

She starts rubbing small circles into the center of my back, but I shrug her off and head up to my room. I sit on the floor, and then press my back against the closed door, hands shaking. My eyes gravitate toward the shoebox under my bed.

Shot.

By the police.

For doing drugs.

Not for robbing or attacking or killing.

For doing drugs.

Now he's dead.

Dead.

Maybe he was reaching out to me through those words, and I let him slip away. I stayed silent. If I had written to him more often, been more honest, would it have helped him work through some of his problems so he wouldn't have run away from home? Maybe if I tried to find him, I would have. Maybe he wouldn't have become an addict if someone were there for him.

Maybe he wouldn't have been killed in the street by the police, his death tallied as an improvement to society.

A NARROWER COUNTRY THAN EXPECTED

I didn't think the Internet would ever fail me, but here we are.

It's Sunday night. I'm at my desk hunched over my laptop, ready to chuck the effing thing out the window.

My parents think I've holed up in my room all day to do homework, but let's get real. It's spring of my senior year, and I've already been accepted into college. Besides, Jun's death has me looking at things differently. Like, if I complete the assignments or not, what does it really matter?

No, what I've been doing is trying to find out more. I expected the info my mom gave me to get rid of that nagging feeling I had inside, but it only aggravated it. When, where, how did it happen exactly?

I need to know this level of detail.

Why? I don't know.

Truth is a hungry thing.

Maybe it's because everyone else is so willing to pretend that it didn't even happen that I'm starving for certainty. Or maybe it's my penance.

Unfortunately, after hours of devouring information about the drug war, I haven't come across anything about the recent death of a "Manuel Reguero Jr."—Jun's legal name. Since Jun was the son of a high-ranking police officer, I expected an obituary at least.

I click, scroll, skim, repeat. I keep trying different phrases and combinations with no luck. I even try using Bing, which apparently still exists.

Of course, I've found tons of articles, videos, and social media posts about the drug war in general that I check out to get up to speed on what's been happening the last few years. No matter the source, most follow the same flow: They describe the drug and corruption problems, Duterte's solution, and the mounting body count. Few include the victims' full names. Most suggest that these killings are crimes against humanity, including a note about the international community's condemnation—but inaction.

It's the photos that hit me the hardest, though. A woman cradling her husband's limp body. A crowd looking on, emotionless, as police shine a flashlight on a woman's bloodied corpse. A couple, half on the ground and half tangled in their moped, their blank faces turned toward the camera and sprays of blood on the pavement behind their heads. Sisters gathered around their baby brother's body lying in its small casket. A body with its head covered in a dirty cloth left in a pile of garbage on the side of the street. Grayish-green corpses stacked like firewood in an improvised morgue. There's even a short video of grainy security cam footage in which a masked motorcyclist pulls up next to a man in an alleyway, shoots him point-blank in the side of the head, then drives away.

In high definition, I see the victims' wounds, their oddly twisted limbs, their blood and brain matter sprayed across familiar-looking streets.

In every dead body, I see Jun. I want to look away.

But I don't. I need to know. I need to see it. These photographers didn't want to water it down. They wanted the audience

to confront the reality, to feel the pain that's been numbed by a headline culture.

Most of the Filipino sites I can find in English accuse the foreign media of overestimating and sensationalizing. They praise the president for decreasing crime and drug use and improving the country in countless other ways as well. Criticisms are few and far between, which makes sense after I learn about a senator named Leila de Lima. She was apparently one of the most vocal critics of the drug war and chairing the investigation into the extrajudicial killings—and then was imprisoned on drug-related charges based on Duterte's accusation. So the majority of the opposition I find online comes from anonymous blogs or social media accounts like this one on Instagram called GISING NA PH!, which contains post after post of Filipinos holding photographs of their loved ones who the police murdered.

It's crazy and sad and shameful that all of this has been going on for the past three years, and I basically knew nothing about it.

I'm still lost in the rabbit hole when there's a light knock on my door. I minimize the browser, open a random English essay, and swivel around. "Yeah?"

Mom enters, dragging Dad in by the wrist.

"Hey, honey," she says. "We wanted to check in on you. See how you're doing."

I can tell Dad would rather be somewhere else. His eyes dart around my room, landing anywhere but on me. Mom catches his eye and gives him a look meant to urge him to speak, but he only offers a small shrug.

When I was younger, I spent a day following Dad around the hospital for a bring-your-kid-to-work kind of thing, and I

remember being shocked at how friendly and comforting he was with the anxious families of the babies under his care. He was a different person from the quiet, distant man I lived with, saying all the right things in the perfect tone. It was like he used all his compassion on strangers and ran out by the time he came home.

I turn back to my laptop and type nonsense sentences into the doc like I'm actually working on this essay. "I'm fine."

"Would you like to talk about how you're feeling?" Mom asks.

How I'm feeling?

I don't know. Why does it matter? I want to go back to reading more about the drug war, to finding information about Jun. I need to *do* something, not sit around talking about feelings.

I shrug.

"It's important to process your emotions about these kinds of things," she says.

I say nothing. It doesn't escape my notice that she can't even name it.

An awkward amount of time passes, the clacking of my keyboard the only noise in the room. They're probably having a nonverbal debate behind my back about whether to push me to talk or let me be.

Eventually, Mom sighs and then walks over and kisses me on top of the head. "Don't stay up too late."

"I have to finish this essay."

"There are more important things in life," Dad says from the doorway, speaking for the first time.

I want to laugh aloud since this is the exact opposite of all they've told me my entire life—that school, my education, should be my number one priority. After all, it's why they brought our family to the US. But I hold it in and say good night.

They pull the door shut as they leave. A few moments later, I can make out the soft sound of muffled whispering from the other side. Quietly, I get up and press my ear against the door just in time to catch Dad say, "I just don't understand him."

When I walk in late to AP Calc on Monday morning, my teacher, Ms. Mendoza, blinks with surprise from where she's standing at the board reviewing the problem sets. Everyone's staring at me weird as I make my way to my seat, I guess because I'm the kid who usually gets the perfect attendance award almost every year.

"Sorry," I say, slinking into my seat. "Overslept."

Which is true, but I could have made it on time if I had rushed. After reading about what's going on in the Philippines yesterday, though, I didn't feel the usual sense of urgency this morning.

"Oh," Ms. Mendoza says. "Just put the homework on your desk, and I'll come around and check it in a moment."

"Didn't do it," I say.

I'm not sure if there's an audible gasp from my peers, or if I just imagine it. Everyone in this class does every assignment.

Ms. Mendoza gives me a curious look, as if gauging whether I'm being sarcastic or not. I don't look away.

"You can listen, then, I suppose." She returns to the board and picks up where she left off.

A few moments later, I feel a pencil jabbing me in the back of my shoulder. I shrug it off without turning around, already knowing that it's Seth.

"Dude," he whispers. "Why didn't you answer any of my texts all weekend?"

I don't respond.

"You okay? You look like shit."

"Screw you," I whisper.

He puts his hands up in mock surrender and leaves me be for the rest of class.

But as soon as the bell rings, Seth's giant, hairy self is looming over my shoulder. He follows me into the hallway. "Dude?" he says.

"Dude," I reply sarcastically.

"Seriously, what's going on? You didn't log in to the game Saturday night. You didn't answer any of my DMs all weekend. You were late to school today and didn't even do the homework. And now you're acting like a zombie dick."

I stop in the middle of an intersection. Kids stream all around us, clearly annoyed. Seth looks uncomfortable since he's doing most of the blocking and tries to shepherd me toward the wall. But I stay where I am. "A zombie dick?"

"Yeah," he says. "Not, like, a zombie's phallus. I mean you seem spaced out like a zombie, but you're also being kind of a dick. This isn't like you."

"Oh. I get it." I start walking again, making a left turn down the next hallway toward the school's main entrance.

"Jay—where you going?" Seth calls after me.

"Not feeling so well."

Seth jogs over. "You going to throw up or something?"

I don't answer. We walk past the front office and out the front doors. Nobody stops us. Who knew cutting was this easy?

"Need a ride home?" he asks, glancing nervously back at the school like someone's about to sprint outside, grab us by our collars, and drag us back to class.

"Nah."

It's a clear spring day. Sunny, but not so hot. Too nice to match how I'm feeling.

I keep walking. Much as I want to be alone, Seth stays with me. Soon we're beyond the parking lot and the practice fields, then in the neighborhood surrounding the school. As we pass the two- and three-story homes with their manicured lawns and two-car garages, I can't help but remember those photographs of the drug war. It seems impossible that a place like this and a place like the Philippines exist at the same time on the same planet.

"You're not actually sick, are you?" he asks eventually.

"There's so many terrible things that happen in this world," I say, measuring how much I want to reveal, how much he'd care. "But, like, nobody's even paying attention."

He shrugs. "Everyone's got their own shit to deal with, man."

"Like what? What do *we* have to deal with, Seth?"

"Finals, I guess. College."

I scoff. "But what does that stuff even matter?"

"So we can get a good job, man."

It's the same answer nearly anyone would give. The same answer hardly anyone ever questions. The same answer I would have given just a few days ago. But now it feels like bullshit because I think of my family. My parents, my aunts and uncles—all of them have good jobs but none of them took care of Jun.

"Look, dude," Seth says, "you're clearly in some kind of funk. Maybe you're feeling late-onset senioritis. I don't know. But look at it this way: you've only got to survive a few more days and then it's spring break. We'll play so many video games that not only will this stress fade away, but your eyeballs are going to fall out of

your skull. And then after spring break, we're basically done with high school."

We reach an intersection. No cars are coming, but we wait at the light because the glowing red hand tells us to. Seth punches the walk button several times.

"You're starting to scare me, dude. I know we don't usually talk about stuff like 'feelings'"—he puts air quotes around the word—"but if you want to talk, I'm here."

I start to speak but hesitate. The light changes, but we stay on the corner as it counts down to zero and changes back to the red hand.

"My cousin died," I finally admit. A rush of fresh pain fills my heart, but I hold it in.

"Shit, dude. Sorry." He's quiet for a few moments. "No wonder you're getting existential all of a sudden. If you don't mind my asking, how?"

I tell him what my mom told me.

"Whoa." He runs a hand through his hair. "That's wild. Were you guys close?"

Yes. No. Yes and no. I don't know how to answer, so I don't, only shrug and then cross against the light.

Seth follows. "I've read about that guy Duterte. He's crazy as hell. Back before he was president, when he was mayor of some city, he had these death squads that went around killing people they thought were criminals. He even shot a few people himself and, like, jokes about it now."

I keep walking, annoyed that Seth knows more about what's been going on in the Philippines than I did before yesterday's research session.

"Man," he says, shaking his head, "I forgot you're Filipino."

"Huh?"

"You're basically white."

I stop, stung. "What do you mean by that?"

"Sorry, dude," he says, backtracking. "Never mind."

"Tell me."

He hesitates.

"Seth," I urge.

"I don't see color, man," he says. "We're all one race: the human race. That's all I meant."

"No, it's not," I say. And even if it is, that's kind of fucked up. First, to assume white is default. Second, to imply that difference equals bad instead of simply different.

"Promise you won't get offended?"

"No. But tell me anyway."

He lets out an exasperated sigh. "I just meant you act like everyone else at school."

"You mean like all the white kids?"

"Dude, our school's all white kids, so, yeah."

Except it's not. The majority are, for sure, but his generalization—spoken with such confidence, such ease—makes me feel like he's erasing the rest of us.

Seth goes on. "You talk like everyone else. You dress like everyone else. And you, like, do the same stuff as everyone else. That's all I mean. Chill."

"What would you expect me to do?" I ask. "Walk around draped in the Philippine flag?"

Seth rolls his eyes. "You promised not to get offended."

"No, I didn't." I walk away, regretting that I opened up even as little as I did.

"Where you going, Jay?"

"Home," I say without looking back.

"You want me to come with you?" he asks, like he doesn't understand why I'm upset. And that's a big part of the problem. He doesn't. He can't.

It's a sad thing when you map the borders of a friendship and find it's a narrower country than expected.

LET ME GO

I sleep the rest of the day away. And then on Tuesday Mom lets me stay home because I tell her I'm not feeling well. I'm certain she knows I'm lying since she's a doctor, but since she's a mother, I'm certain she knows that I'm telling the truth.

I've tried asking Dad about Jun a few more times, but he claims to know nothing beyond what he already told me. And I keep doing more research online and coming up empty.

But in the afternoon, I'm binge-watching old episodes of *Steven Universe* and cycling through my social media when I get a DM on Instagram from an account I don't recognize. The message only contains a link, but I'm not about to click on it because it's probably virus city.

The profile pic is a low-res shot of some Filipino guy, and the handle's a nonsense string of letters and numbers without a bio. Dude only follows me, has zero followers, and has posted exactly zero times. Definitely not clicking on this link.

A minute later, I'm thinking about setting my account back to private when I get a second message from the same number with another link.

My finger's hovering over the Block button when he sends a third message—this time it's a photo.

My breath catches. I sit up.

It's a picture of Jun.

He's sitting on a curb and leaning back on his hands in front of a wall plastered in faded advertisements. He's got a stubbly

goatee and a few tattoos snaking around his left arm—telling me he's way older here than in any photo I've ever seen of him.

What. The. Fuck.

When was it taken? Who took it?

Where did you get this??? I message, heart racing.

This is your cousin, no? Manuel Reguero?

Who are you?? I ask.

No response.

WHERE DID YOU GET THIS?

Manuel did not deserve to die, he replies. **He did nothing wrong.**

How do you know??? Who are you???

Several moments pass. And then: **I was his friend.**

I wait for him to say more, to answer my other questions. But he never does.

I ask again.

As I wait for a response, I swipe back to his profile pic and zoom in on the face. He said he was Jun's friend, and he somehow found me online. I must have met him while hanging out with Jun on that trip to the Philippines, but I can't place his face at all. I take a screenshot and run a reverse image search, but no matches turn up. I Google the profile name, but that's a dead end, too.

I go back to the conversation, but he hasn't replied. I message him a few more times, but several minutes of radio silence later, I accept the fact that the guy's gone. Hopefully just for the moment.

While I wait for him to respond, I save the photo of Jun to my phone and then open the link from the first message. It takes me to an article from three years ago about Duterte's drug war, one

that I've already read. It's partially a primer on what's been going on and partially a journalist sharing his observations and photos after spending a month in Manila, during which time almost sixty people were murdered by the police or by vigilantes.

Jun's friend still hasn't sent another message, so I open the second link. This one also pulls up an article, but one I haven't come across yet.

It opens with a story about a seventeen-year-old boy named Kian delos Santos that police confronted because he was on a list of suspected drug runners provided by his neighborhood. They tried to arrest the boy, but he fought back and pulled a gun. In self-defense, they shot and killed him.

Only that's not what happened.

A CCTV camera happened to record everything. The video showed a group of police officers dragging him into the middle of a vacant lot, hands tied behind his back and a sack over his head. Then, they removed the sack, untied him, and slapped a gun into his hands. They stepped back and raised their own, pointing the barrels directly at his face. The boy immediately dropped the gun and raised his hands to shield his face. His last words according to an anonymous witness: "Please no—Please no—I have a test tomorrow."

There are other stories. Two brothers on their way to buy snacks. A boy going to meet up with a teammate for their basketball game. Five friends playing pool. A mother out late buying medicine for one of her kids. A teacher eating at a canteen. And more.

All the stories follow a similar pattern: Someone is accused without evidence, they are killed without mercy, then the police

cover it up without regret. Of course, the official report reads that the suspect resisted arrest. But this is contradicted by videos, anonymous eyewitness accounts, or forensic evidence.

The government never apologizes. They deny mistakes, asserting that they had reliable information or evidence, and that nobody, not even family members, should assume they know a person completely. "People hide their sin," one police chief explained.

Of course, the victims are almost always poor and don't have the means to bring legal action against the government.

The article goes on to talk about the mass incarceration; the imprisonment of Duterte's political opponents on drug-related charges that lack credibility, such as with Senator de Lima; the system in which police officers earn certain amounts of money for killing specific types of suspects, creating an economy of murder—especially since there are no bonuses for arrests.

So the drug war continues. The body count rises.

"They are exterminating us like we are rats in the street," ends the article, a quote from a mother who lost all five of her sons to the antidrug campaign, known as Operation Tokhang locally.

I clench my jaw and fight back tears.

I return to the conversation with Jun's friend. There's still no response, but my eyes land on his second-to-last message: **He did nothing wrong.**

The possibility that Jun died like one of the people from this article transforms my sorrow into white-hot anger.

If that's true, why isn't anyone talking about it?

The article included the fact that four low-level officers were eventually charged for killing that seventeen-year-old, but their

punishments were minimal and only happened after massive protests. But what about the other victims who never got a hashtag? What about Jun?

Would there be justice?

Definitely not if nobody even knows what truly happened.

So maybe that's it—maybe I can find out. If his friend is right, maybe there are witnesses; maybe there's video; maybe there's a flawed report.

I stand up from the couch and start pacing the living room. For the first time in a few days, I feel like I have the opportunity to do something that matters. Something real. Something for Jun.

Except I know I can't do it from here, from behind my laptop.

I need to go to the Philippines.

I laugh. That's impossible. I can't just up and fly halfway across the world.

Or can I?

Spring break starts in a couple days, and I don't have plans besides playing video games with Seth. I wouldn't have to miss that much school, and at this point in senior year most of the classes are filler anyway. I have a passport, so that's not an issue. And even though a last-minute ticket to Manila will be pretty damn expensive, we've got the money.

No, the real problem won't be getting my parents to pay for it.

It will be convincing them to let me go.

GROUNDED

Later that night, Mom and Dad are standing at the island in the kitchen, reviewing the details of the flights I've pulled up on my laptop. I could leave the day after tomorrow, on Thursday, and then return a couple days after spring break. All they have to do is enter the payment information.

"No," Mom says. "No way."

Dad says nothing.

"Why not?" I ask.

"It's too expensive," she says.

"We just bought a Land Rover," I counter.

"Yes, *we* have the money." She gestures between Dad and herself. "But *you* don't."

Dad laughs.

"It can be my graduation present," I say.

Mom says, "What about the new computer?"

"I don't need one. And this even costs less."

Mom raises an eyebrow. "Weren't you just complaining about how this one keeps crashing unexpectedly?"

We all look at the computer, as if waiting for it to crash at that exact moment. Thankfully, it doesn't.

"It's fine," I say. "That's a quirk. It's quirky and lovable."

"That's not what you're going to say in the fall when you lose a term paper you've been working on for days."

"Everything saves to the cloud now, Mom."

She looks to Dad. He gazes at the screen.

"You guys always talk about how you learned so much from traveling. The best classroom is the world and all of that. How it opened up your eyes and changed your life. How you wouldn't be the people you are today if you hadn't taken some of those trips. You wouldn't even have met if Mom never went to the Philippines. Don't you want me to experience some of that?"

They hold their silence.

"Would you rather I sit around the house all week and play video games?"

Mom sighs, crosses her arms over her chest.

"And remember how much Em matured after she studied abroad in France?" I add, omitting the stories Em told me about hitting the clubs every weekend.

"You want to travel instead of getting a new computer?" Mom says. "Fine."

Dad looks at her. I smile.

She nods, then adds, "But not to the Philippines."

My face falls. "Why not?"

"I mean . . . with what happened . . ."

A tense silence settles over the kitchen.

It drives me crazy that nobody will say Jun's name. But I keep myself in check because getting angry isn't going to get me what I want right now.

Thankfully, Mom senses the discomfort and redirects before anyone has a chance to answer her question. "You should go somewhere you haven't been before. You really enjoyed our trip to England last summer, didn't you? Why not somewhere else in Europe, like Spain? I have some friends in Valencia who live right

on the Mediterranean coast. I bet they'd love to host us, and it would be a great chance to practice your Spanish."

"Wait—'us'?" I ask.

"Is there a problem with that?"

A problem? No. *Many* problems? Yes. But I need to tackle one at a time. "Um, can you guys take off work like that?"

"I'm sure we could make it happen."

Dad clears his throat. "Actually, I don't have any vacation days left."

"We can afford for you to take unpaid time off."

"I'd rather not, Dana."

Mom turns to me. "Fine. A mother-son trip."

Suppressing my urge to cringe hurts. But I manage. "As wonderful as that sounds . . . I was thinking I could travel alone."

"Oh?" she says. "Too cool to hang out with your mom?"

Yes. Definitely yes.

"No," I say. "I just think it would be a good way to celebrate graduating high school, you know? Like becoming a man, and all that." It's corny, but whatever it takes. I would never be able to find out the truth about Jun with Mom hovering over my shoulder.

I gauge their reactions and can tell they're still not convinced. I take a moment to go over the Hail Mary speech I've prepared in my head. Of course, I can't just tell them straight up that I want to investigate Jun's death since they've already made it clear Tito Maning's family would rather forget about him completely. But I know a bit of the truth might help me make my case.

"What happened with Jun," I start, "made me realize how little I know about Dad's side of the family, about that side of myself.

I mean, we see your relatives in Ohio almost every summer, Mom, but I haven't seen Dad's family or been to the Philippines in almost a decade. I don't speak Tagalog. I can't even name more than a handful of cities in the country. But all of that's part of me, isn't it? Or, I mean, it should be. It's like I only know half of myself."

My parents exchange a look. I can't tell if it's good or bad. I'm afraid what I've said came out more like an accusation than an explanation.

"I understand all of that, and I do think it would be good for you to go back." She uncrosses her arms and takes Dad's hand, lacing their fingers together. "But maybe the timing's not right."

Except I'm ready for this.

"The truth is, Grace asked me to go," I lie.

Dad cocks his head. "Really?"

I nod.

"You've spoken to your cousin since . . . ?"

I look him straight in the eye. "She's been having a really hard time and wants me to hang out with her for a bit. You know, to help her through it. But please don't tell Tito Maning—she doesn't want him to know it was her idea."

"I didn't know you two were close."

"We text sometimes," I say.

"But Maning doesn't allow her to have a phone."

"Oh. I meant message. Online."

He looks at Mom for a moment then back at me.

"She's having a *really* hard time," I repeat, hoping he cares enough about his niece's emotional well-being that it will sway him.

Dad lets go of Mom's hand and angles the laptop toward himself. He gazes at the screen and drags a finger across the trackpad to scroll the page. Mom leans back against the counter and watches.

"Jay's almost eighteen," he says.

"Almost," Mom says.

Dad scrolls up and down the page, making it clear he's killing time while he thinks instead of seeking information about the flight. Eventually he stops, runs a hand over his mouth, and then makes eye contact with Mom for several seconds.

Something passes between them, and a moment later, Dad pulls his phone from his pocket then turns his attention back to me. "I need to make sure it's okay with Maning."

"You serious?" I say.

He nods, then disappears to make the call.

I look at Mom expecting her to protest. But she sighs, mutters something about her baby boy growing up, and then wraps me in a hug.

Though Dad speaks to Tita Chato and Tito Danilo every few weeks, it's not unusual for him to go months without speaking to Tito Maning. And when he does, his conversations with his older brother typically last only a few minutes, more an exchange of news than a conversation. I'm counting on their lack of communication to work in my favor now, on him believing my lie that Grace doesn't want him to know it was "her" idea and honoring that, and on Tito Maning's desire to keep up appearances, to pretend that Jun's death really doesn't matter. If he were to refuse to host me, then that would be admitting that it does.

While Dad's gone, Mom eventually releases me from the hug and then asks about half a dozen more times if I'm sure I wouldn't

rather go with her to Spain or Iceland or the Czech Republic. Dad rejoins us like ten or fifteen minutes later.

"Is it cool?" I ask.

He nods.

I want to wrap my arms around him, but that's not something we do. So instead, I tilt my head in a gesture of appreciation and say, "Salamat po. Thanks."

"You will stay with family the entire time," Dad says. "You won't go anywhere by yourself."

"Of course," I say.

Dad turns the laptop to face him and starts typing in the payment information. "Go get your passport," he says.

I do and then hover over his shoulder as he enters the last of the information. When he clicks to confirm the purchase, I can't believe this is really happening. A strange, fluttery feeling stirs in my chest. My heart wants to soar, but it's like a bird with clipped wings, the real reason I'm going keeping it grounded.

THINGS INSIDE

4 March 2012

Dear Kuya Jay,
I decided I want to be an astronaut when I grow up. We learned about the planets today in science class, and I wish I could see them for myself. Even though most everyone wants to visit Saturn because of its rings, I would fly to Jupiter. Did you know it has a storm that is thousands of kilometers in diameter that has been going on for hundreds of years? If I could go into the middle without being killed, I think that would be so beautiful to see. And if I got bored, I could go to one of its many moons. Teacher said one of them has water, and where there is water, there will be Filipinos.

I told Tatay at dinner, and he said it was stupid, that everyone knows the Philippines has no space program. Maybe it will one day, I said. Then I pointed out how we were some of the first people to cross the oceans, so why couldn't we be among the first to cross space? He shook his head and said I have been watching too many American movies. The Philippines will never have a space program, he said. When I told him that I will move to a country that has one, he said no, that I was born here and I would die here.

After dinner, Grace told me she did not think my idea was stupid. She said she would like to visit Neptune. But when I told her how cold Neptune is, she switched her answer to Venus.

It is fun to dream about, but I think Tatay is right. So maybe you could become the astronaut instead. And if you're a very good astronaut, maybe they will let you take someone along and you could choose me. We could go to Jupiter, or we could go wherever you want. Anywhere but this planet.

Sincerely,
Jun

I am on the floor next to my bed rereading one of Jun's letters after dinner—still in disbelief that my parents have agreed to let me go on the trip—when there's a knock on my door.

"Can I come in?" Dad says from the other side.

I put the letter away and slide the box back under my bed, wondering if he's here because they've changed their mind. "Sure."

Dad enters, pushes aside some clothes draped over my desk chair, and takes a seat. He leans back and looks around. I wait for him to say something. Finally, he points with his lips at the poster of Allen Iverson on the wall above my bed—one of the very few recognizable Filipino habits he's retained. "That's new, yes?"

I shake my head. Iverson's still wearing a Sixers jersey in the picture. He used to be Jun's and my favorite player.

"Oh," he says. He looks around. Taps the statuette of the Forsaken Queen from *World of Warcraft* that's on my desk. "But this is, right?"

"Sure," I say, even though it was a Christmas gift from him and Mom three years ago. Another thing shaded with Jun's ghost because when we were in middle school, he snuck out to an Internet café so we could play online together a few times. He was terrible, of course, but I didn't care.

"I knew it." Dad goes back to letting his gaze wander, and I go back to waiting for him to say why he's here.

Eventually, I can't take it anymore. "So what's up, Dad?"

"'What's up?'" he repeats. "That's a very American phrase, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"You're very American. Like your mother. No accent like me."

I shrug.

"That's why I moved us here. I wanted you, your brother, and your sister to be American."

"Mission: accomplished." I draw my knees to my chest, seeing this for what it is.

"You may not speak Tagalog or know as much as you would like about the Philippines, but if we'd stayed, you wouldn't have had all the opportunities that you've had here."

I don't say anything, but I wonder if Jun would still be alive if our family had remained or if his family had joined us in the US.

"It's easy to romanticize a place when it's far away," he goes on, making this officially the most I've heard him speak at once in a long time. "Filipino Americans have a tendency to do that. Even me. Sometimes I miss it so much. The beaches. The water. The

rice paddies. The carabao. The food. Most of all, my family." He closes his eyes, and I wonder if he's imagining himself there right now. After a few moments, he opens them again, but he stares at his hands. "But as many good things as there are, there are many bad things, things not so easy to see from far away. When you are close, though, they are sometimes all you see."

I want to tell him that I understand, but I don't because I don't. Instead, I ask, "Like what?"

"Just be careful and keep that in mind," is all he says, rising to leave. "I forwarded the flight info to your email. You'll be there for ten days. You'll spend three with Tito Maning, three with Tita Chato, three with your lolo and lola, and then one more with Tito Maning since he'll take you back to the airport."

"What about Tito Danilo?" I ask.

"He was assigned to a parish in Bicol a few years ago, so you'll see him when you are with your lolo and lola."

"Thank you, Dad," I say. "I really do appreciate it."

He stops in the doorway. "But, Jason, you must promise one thing."

"I know," I say, "stay with family at all times."

"Well, yes, but that's not what I was going to say. You must promise not to bring up your cousin while you're there. It will be too painful for them. Too shameful. They want to forget. To move on. Honor that."

"Of course, Dad," I say. "No problem."

He searches my face for the truth. Satisfied, he nods and leaves.

I may not have learned to speak my native language from him, but I learned to keep the most important things inside.

PATRON SAINTS OF NOTHING

by Randy Ribay

What did you think after reading a few pages?

What did you think of the cover?

Would you recommend this book?

Why or why not?

LOVELY WAR

Historical Fiction with Greek Gods

ISBN: 978-0-147-51297-0

A sweeping, multilayered romance set in the perilous days of World Wars I and II, where gods hold the fates—and the hearts—of four mortals in their hands. They are Hazel, James, Aubrey, and Colette. A classical pianist from London, a British would-be architect turned soldier, a Harlem-born ragtime genius in the U.S. Army, and a Belgian orphan with a gorgeous voice and a devastating past. Their story, as told by the goddess Aphrodite, who must spin the tale or face judgment on Mount Olympus, is filled with hope and heartbreak, prejudice and passion, and reveals that, though War is a formidable force, it's no match for the transcendent power of Love.

DECEMBER 1942

I Hear a Rhapsody

IT IS EARLY evening in the lobby of an elegant Manhattan hotel. Crystal prisms dangling from the chandeliers glow with soft electric light. On velvet couches near the fire, couples sit close, the men in officers' uniform, the women in evening wear, resting their heads on their gentlemen's shoulders. Restaurant garçons seat couples at dim tables secluded by faux-Greek marble busts and showy ferns, where urgent kisses may remain unseen.

The orchestra warms up, then begins the strains of "I Hear a Rhapsody." A lady singer fills the glittering stage with her amber-colored voice:

MY DARLING, HOLD ME TIGHT
AND WHISPER TO ME
THEN SOFT THROUGH A STARRY NIGHT
I'LL HEAR A RHAPSODY

She's not Dinah Shore, but she's really something.

A man and woman enter the lobby and approach the front desk. All eyes follow their progress across the Persian rugs.

The man, colossal in build and stern of jaw, wears a fedora tipped low over his brow. When he reaches for a billfold from the inside pocket of his double-breasted pin-striped suit, the panicky thought occurs to the desk clerk that perhaps the man is reaching for a pistol. His black-and-white wing-tip shoes don't look jaunty. They look dangerous. He makes half the men nervous, and the other half angry. He's the kind of man who could crush you beneath his feet, and he knows it.

But oh, is he beautiful.

His lady friend, even more so.

She wears a tailored, belted suit of deep blue that fits her better than skin. Her figure is the sort that makes other women give up altogether. From the waves of dark hair, coiffed and coiled under her cocktail hat, to her wide, long-lashed eyes peering out through its coy little veil of black netting, down to the seams of her silk stockings disappearing into her Italian leather pumps, she is arrestingly beautiful. Impossibly perfect. The scent of her perfume spreads its soft fingers across the lobby. Everyone there, man and woman, surrenders to their awareness of her.

The tall man knows this, and he's none too pleased about it.

He riffles a pile of bills under the nose of the stammering clerk and snatches a key out of his unprotesting hand. They make their way through the lobby, with the man urging the woman forward as though time won't keep, while she takes every slow step as though she'd invented the art of walking.

They carry no luggage.

Even so, a stooped and bearded bellhop follows them up the stairs and down the corridor. The violent glares from the tall man would have sent others fleeing, but this bellhop

chatters as he lopes along on crooked steps. They ignore him, and he doesn't seem to mind.

They reach their room. Its lock gives way beneath the swift thrust and twist of the man's key. They disappear into their room, but the persistent bellhop follows them in.

He clicks the light switch back and forth rapidly. "Bulb must be out," he says apologetically. "I'll be right back with maintenance."

"Never mind," says the man.

"Bottle of champagne?" the bellhop suggests.

"Scram," the man tells him. He and his lovely companion disappear down the narrow hallway, past the closet and bath, and into the tastefully decorated suite.

"As you like," the bellhop replies.

They hear the door open and shut. In an instant they are in each other's arms. Shoes are kicked off, hats tossed aside. Jacket buttons are shown no mercy.

One might not trust this man, and one might even envy or condemn this sort of woman, but no one can deny that when they kiss, when these two paragons, these specimens of sculpted perfection collide, well—

Kisses by the billions happen every day, even in a lonely world like ours.

But this is a kiss for the ages. Like a clash of battle and a delicious melding of flesh, rolled together and set on fire.

They're lost in it for a while.

Until a cold metal net falls over them, and the electric lights snap on.

"Evening, Aphrodite," says the stoop-shouldered bellhop.

DECEMBER 1942

The Golden Net

THE PRISONERS, stunned and blinking, have the squashed and deformed look of criminals who pull pantyhose over their heads to rob a bank. The golden mesh of the net, supple and translucent, presses down upon them with the weight of a ship's iron chains. It's a work of exquisite beauty and extraordinary cunning, but neither god appreciates its craftsmanship just then.

Aphrodite's lover tears at the net with savage fingers, but its glittering strands hold firm.

"I'll skewer you, brother," he snarls. "I'll smash your skull like an eggshell."

Most people would flee at the malice in that deep voice. But not Hephaestus. He's not afraid of the massive god.

"Don't waste your breath on him, Ares," says beautiful Aphrodite. She turns a withering gaze on her uniformed husband. "For a hotel this expensive, the service here stinks."

Hephaestus, god of fires, blacksmiths, and volcanoes, ignores the jab. He eases himself into a soft chair and stretches his misshapen feet before him on the carpet, then addresses

the battle god, who is indeed his brother. Both are Hera's sons. "Service everywhere has gone down the toilet since your latest war began. All the good men are overseas."

"Where they should be." Ares thrashes again at the golden net. He tries to conjure a weapon from thin air. Normally this would be effortless for him.

"No point," advises Hephaestus. "Might as well be mortal, for all the good your power'll do you. My net blocks you. Can't have you escaping."

Aphrodite, goddess of passion, turns her back upon her husband. He catches her gaze in a long gilt-edged mirror.

"You disgust me," she tells his reflection. "Jealous, cringing dog."

"Jealous?" Hephaestus feigns surprise. "Who, me? With a wife so loyal and devoted?"

If his words sting Aphrodite, she doesn't let it show. She pulls her blue jacket back on over her blouse and knots a fetching little scarf around her neck. "Well, you've caught us," she tells Hephaestus. "Netted like two fish in a stream. What do you plan to do with us?"

"I've done it" is his reply. "Step one, anyway. Put you under arrest."

Ares and Aphrodite look at him like he's mad, which is possible.

"Step two: offer you a plea bargain."

Aphrodite's eyebrows rise. "Offer me a *what*?"

"A deal," he says. "Renounce this chump, and come home with me. Be my faithful wife, and all is forgiven."

The clock on the mantelpiece gets two or three clicks in before Aphrodite begins to snicker. Ares, who has watched for

her response, now guffaws with laughter. Too big, too loud, but he's relieved, and he's never been a good actor.

"You think she'll leave *this* for *you*?" He flexes his many (very, *very* many) muscles. They swim like dolphins under his glowing skin. The removal of his shirt has done glorious things.

Hephaestus is drowning inside, but he's come this far and he sticks to his plan. "You reject my offer?" he says. "Then I'm taking you to trial on Olympus."

The net, which had lain over them like a heavy blanket, now encircles and encloses Ares and Aphrodite like a laundry bag, while a chain hoists them upward. Their divine limbs, so impressive in marble statues, jumble every which way uncomfortably. The netting bag rotates slowly through the air, like a ham curing over hot coals.

"What are you *doing*?" Aphrodite cries. "You put us down *at once*."

"Your court date has been moved up," answers the bellhop. "Father Zeus will officiate at the bench, and the other gods will form a jury."

The goddess of beauty has turned a delicate shade of pale green. The spectacle of the entire pantheon of immortals howling and cackling at her mortification! Nobody knows the sting of gods' mockery better than a god. And nobody knows your weak spots better than sisters. Those prissy little virgins, Artemis and Athena, always looking down their smug, goody-goody noses at her.

Bagged like a chicken she might be, but Aphrodite still has her pride. Far better to bargain with her husband in a swanky Manhattan hotel than to quail before her entire family.

"Hephaestus," she says smoothly—and Aphrodite can have a brown velvet voice when she wants to—"is there, perhaps, a third option?" She sees her husband is listening, so she presses her advantage. "Couldn't we just talk this out here? The three of us?" She elbows Ares. "We'll stay in the net and listen. Ares will behave. Surely we don't need to drag others into such a private matter."

Hephaestus hesitates. Privacy is Aphrodite's domain. A hotel room practically gives her a home-court advantage. He smells a trick.

But she does have a point. He, too, has pride to sacrifice upon the altar in hashing this matter out publicly.

"Let me get this straight," he says slowly. "You decline your right to a trial by jury?"

"Oh, come off it," says Ares. "You're a blacksmith, for Pete's sake, not an attorney."

Hephaestus turns to his wife. "All right," he tells her. "We can do it here. A more private trial. I'll be the judge."

"Judge, jury, and executioner?" protests Ares. "This kangaroo court is a sham."

Hephaestus wishes he had a bailiff who could club this unruly spectator on the head. But that's probably not what bailiffs are supposed to do.

"Never mind him," Aphrodite tells her husband. "You're already sitting in judgment upon us, so, yes, be the judge if it suits you."

Ares laughs out loud. "Tell you what, old man," he says. "Fight me for her. May the best god win."

Just how many times Hephaestus has imagined that satisfying prospect, not even his divine mind can count. The devious

and cunning weapons he's devised, lying awake and alone at night, plotting a thousand ways to teach his cocky brother a lesson! If only.

But you don't accept a challenge to duel with the god of war. Hephaestus is no fool.

Except, perhaps, where his wife is concerned.

He produces for himself a bench and a gavel. "This court will come to order," he says. "Let the trial begin."

DECEMBER 1942

The Judgment of Manhattan

HEPHAESTUS LOWERS THE net back to the couch and lets it expand so his prisoners can at least sit comfortably. They can stand up, but they can't go far.

"Goddess," he says, "in the matter of *Hephaestus v. Aphrodite*, you are charged with being an unfaithful wife. How do you plead?"

Aphrodite considers. "Amused."

Ares snorts.

"You're in contempt of court," Hephaestus says. "How do you plead?"

"On which charge?" asks the goddess. "Infidelity, or contempt?"

Hephaestus's nostrils flare. This is already off to a terrible start. "Both."

"Ah," she says. "Guilty on both counts. But I don't mean to be contemptible."

Hephaestus pauses. "You plead *guilty*?"

She nods. "Um-hm."

"Oh." He hadn't expected this. The clever lines he'd prepared, the scalding words, they desert him like traitors.

"I've disappointed you." Aphrodite's voice oozes with sympathy anyone would swear is sincere. "Would it make you feel better to present your evidence anyway?"

Who's manipulating whom here?

She's not afraid. No amount of evidence will matter.

But Hephaestus spent months gathering it, so he submits it for the court.

The lights dim. A succession of images appears in the air before them like a Technicolor film in their own hotel room. The goddess of love and the god of war, kissing under a shady bower. On the snowcapped rim of Mount Popocatépetl at sunset. Cuddling on the shoulder of an Easter Island statue. On the white sand beaches beneath the sheer cliffs of Smugglers' Cove, on Greece's own Zakynthos Island.

"Hermes," mutters Aphrodite darkly. "Zeus never should've given him a camera."

If Hephaestus had expected his wife to writhe in embarrassment at this damning proof, he has only disappointment for his efforts. She's shameless. His brother is shameless. He was a fool to think he could shame either of them.

The images fade. Silence falls.

Aphrodite watches her husband.

Hephaestus's thoughts swirl. What had he expected? A tearful apology? A pledge to be true? He should've known this would never work.

But he'd been desperate. Even Olympians, when desperate, can't think straight. Of all the beings in the cosmos, Hephaestus is the only one who can't pray to the goddess of love for help with his marriage troubles. The poor sap hasn't a clue.

"Hephaestus," Aphrodite says gently, "this trial was never to get me to admit something you know I don't mind admitting, was it?"

"You *should* mind."

"Your real question," she says, "if I'm not mistaken, is why don't I love you?"

"It's simple," Ares says. "She loves me."

Something is apparently hilarious to Aphrodite. Ares's huge arms fold across his chest.

She wipes her eyes and speaks. "I don't love either of you."

Ares sits up tall and thrusts out his lower lip.

"Hephaestus," Aphrodite continues. He feels like he's now in the witness stand. "Do *you* love me?"

He's not sure what to say. What's she doing? He wishes his dumb brother weren't here.

"I'll answer for you," she tells him. "Of course you don't."

"I . . . That is . . ." Hephaestus stammers. "I'm here because I want—"

"No *one* can love me," she says. "No one."

"What do you mean?"

"That is the price," she tells him, "of being the goddess of love."

Ares's deep voice breaks the silence. "Don't be ridiculous," he says. "The only reason Father Zeus made you marry him was because all the other gods were fighting tooth and nail for your hand. He stuck you with him to avert a civil war. We *all* wanted you."

She shrugs. "I *know* you all wanted me."

Modesty was never her forte, but then, a humble god is hard to find.

"I'm the source of love," she says, "but no one will ever truly love me. The fountain of passion, but I will never know a true passion of my own."

Ares throws up his hands. "You're nuts! Have you read Homer? Hesiod?"

"Goddess," Hephaestus says quietly, "what can you mean?"

She gazes into his eyes until he squirms. "You male gods are all rapacious pigs," she says dismissively. "I grant you, Husband, you're less horrible than some. You all brag of your exploits. You're no more loving than an anvil is. Fickle and capricious and completely self-centered. You're incapable of love. Just as you're incapable of dying."

"You're calling *us* self-centered?" replies Ares. "You're no Florence Nightingale."

"You have no idea what I am," she tells him, "nor what good I do. I know what you think of my 'silly romances.'"

She turns to Hephaestus. "I might find a mortal to love me," she continues, "but that's worship, not love. I'm perfect. Mortals aren't meant to love perfection. It disillusions and destroys them in the end."

Hephaestus is baffled. Aphrodite has no one to love her? He, the god of fire and forges, has no shortage of ore and fuel. Ares, the god of war, has been enjoying a blood-soaked century like no other in history. Artemis has no shortage of stags to hunt. Poseidon's not low on salt water.

And his wife, the gorgeous goddess of romance, is lonely?

"Do you know what it's like," she says, "to spend eternity embedded in *every single love story*—the fleeting and the true, the trivial and the everlasting? I am elbow deep in love,

working in passion the way artists work in watercolors. I feel it *all*." She wraps her arms tightly across her chest, as though the room is cold. "I envy the mortals. It's because they're weak and damaged that they can love." She shakes her head. "We need nothing. They're lucky to need each other."

"Yeah, well, they die," Ares points out.

"Why have you never said this before?" Hephaestus asks her.

"Why should I?" she says. "Why would you care? You think my work is stupid. You never come out of your forge."

She's right. Not stupid, not exactly. But, perhaps, inconsequential. Iron—there's something that lasts. Steel and stone. But human affection? Hephaestus, as any Greek scholar can tell you, wasn't born yesterday.

Aphrodite still looks cold. She couldn't be. But Hephaestus breathes at the fireplace, and the logs laid out there burst into sizzling flame.

Firelight plays across Aphrodite's features. She tilts her head to one side. "Do you want to see what real love looks like?"

Hephaestus looks up. Her eyes are shining.

"Do you want to hear about my favorites? Some of my finest work?"

"Yes." Hephaestus's reply surprises him. "I do."

A groan rises from the couch, but the goddess ignores War.

"I'll tell you the story of an ordinary girl and an ordinary boy. A true story. No, I'll do one better. I'll tell you two."

Ares lifts his head. "Do we know these stories?"

"Barely, if at all," she says. "You never pay attention to girls."

He snickers. "I beg to differ."

"I'm not talking about their bodies." Aphrodite's eyes roll. "You never pay attention to their *lives*."

"Ugh." His head drops back. "I knew this would be boring."

Aphrodite's eyes blaze. "I'll make it easy on you," she says. "My two stories involve soldiers. From the Great War. The First World War. You'll know their names and their rank, at any rate. You may find that you remember bits of their stories."

Aphrodite's dark-lidded eyes gaze out into the skyline of a Manhattan autumn evening. The Big Apple's lights have dimmed, in case of German U-boats in the harbor, or Zeus forbid, Luftwaffe bomber planes from who knows where, but not even a global war can completely snuff out the lights of the City That Never Sleeps.

Ares watches Aphrodite's lovely face, and Hephaestus's grotesque one. For the millionth time, the war god wonders what Zeus intended, forcing these two to marry. What a curse, to be yoked to that monstrosity! All the more tragic for someone so perfectly perfect as she.

Why, then, does Ares find the hairs on his arms prickling with jealousy? Even now, though the golden net divides the blacksmith from the goddess, there's something between them. Something he can neither conquer nor destroy. Impossible though it is, a silver thread binds Hephaestus and Aphrodite together, if only slightly, barring Ares from making Aphrodite completely his own.

But what does he expect? They're married, after all.

"Goddess."

Aphrodite meets her husband's gaze. He points his gavel at her.

"Present your evidence."

When she tilts her head slightly, he smiles beneath his whiskers. "Tell your story."

Ares rolls his eyes. "Gods, no," he moans. "Bring out the hot pincers, the smoking brands! Anything but a *love story*!"

Aphrodite glares at him.

"She's always yammering on," Ares says, "trying to tell me about some dumb love letter, some random kiss or other, and how long it lasted, and, by Medusa's hair, *what they were wearing* at the time."

"Goddess?" says Hephaestus.

"Mmm?"

"Leave nothing out," says the god of fire. "Make your tale a long one."

APHRODITE

Hazel—November 23, 1917

I FIRST SAW Hazel at a parish dance at her London borough church, St. Matthias, in Poplar. It was November 1917.

It was a benefit, with a drive organized for socks and tins of Bovril broth powder to send to the boys in France. But really, it was a fall dance like the one they held every autumn.

While others chatted and flirted, Hazel glued herself to the piano bench and played dance tunes. The chaperones gushed about her generosity, putting others' enjoyment before her own. Hazel was neither fooled nor flattered. She hated performing. But she'd rather stick pins in her eyeballs than make awkward conversation with boys. Anything was better. Even the spotlight.

She thought she was safe. But music draws me like a bee to honey. And not only me.

A young man sat some distance away and watched her play. He could see her hands, and the intent expression on her face. He tried not to stare, with limited success. He closed his eyes and listened to the music. But even as he listened, he saw in his mind's eye the tall, straight form of the piano girl, dressed in pale mauve lace, with her dark-haired head lowered

just enough to watch the keys, and her lips parted, ever so slightly, as she breathed in time with the song.

Oh, the minute I saw those two in the same room, I knew it. I knew this could be one of my masterpieces. You don't find two hearts like this every day.

So I sat next to James, while he watched Hazel play, and kissed his cheek. Honestly, in his case, I don't even think I needed to do it. But he had a very nice cheek, and I didn't want to miss my chance. He'd shaved for the party, the little darling.

I was jealous of how he watched Hazel, drinking in her music like water and tasting how she dissolved herself in it like a sugar cube. None of the girls whirling by held anything for him. He was a neat sort of young man, very careful about his clothes, as though he dreaded the thought that his appearance might offend anyone. He shouldn't have worried. He wasn't exactly handsome, not at first glance, but there was something in those dark brown eyes that might cause Hazel to forget Chopin for a moment or two. If she would ever look up.

I slid onto the piano bench beside Hazel. She was so absorbed in her music that she didn't notice my arrival. Of course, almost no one notices me, yet all but the hard-hearted do sense a new mood. Perhaps it's my perfume. Perhaps it's something more. When I pass by, Love is in the air.

Of the young men present, some hadn't yet left for battlefields. Others were home on leave (medical or R & R). To their credit, the girls were wonderful about those with ghastly injuries, and made the wounded feel like princes. A few lads worked war production jobs in weapons factories. Some saw them as cowards shirking the battlefield, but this crowd of

girls welcomed them in good humor. They were practical, these Poplar girls, and they preferred local beaux over absent loves. Some enterprising girls hedged their bets and held on to one of each.

The young ladies worked in munitions factories and in private homes as domestic servants. Not long ago they'd all been in school.

And then there was Hazel. She played like the daughter of a duchess, raised under the eye of the finest musical tutors. But she was the daughter of a music hall pianist and a factory seamstress. Hazel's father pounded the keys at night to keep the wolf from the door, but he taught his daughter to love the masters. Beethoven and Schubert and Schumann and Brahms. She played like an angel.

James felt her angel music whoosh through his hair.

Poor James. He was in a predicament. The one girl to whom he'd like to speak carried the party's entertainment in her hands. To interrupt her would be unthinkable; to wait until the party ended would mean she'd disappear into the crowd.

She reached a refrain, and I lifted her chin toward James's watchful face.

She caught his expression in full. Both of them were too startled, at first, to break away.

Hazel kept on playing, but she had seen straight through those brown eyes and into the depths behind them, and felt something of the thrill of being seen, truly seen.

But music won't keep. So Hazel played on. She wouldn't look up at James again. Not until the song was over did she sneak a peek. But he wasn't there. He'd gone.

It's the quiet things I notice. Hazel exhaled her disappointment. She would've liked one more glimpse, to see if she'd imagined something passing between them.

Hazel, my dear, you're an idiot, she told herself.

"Excuse me," said a voice beside her.

APHRODITE

First Dance—November 23, 1917

HAZEL TURNED TO see a forest-green necktie tucked carefully into a gray tweed jacket, and above it all, the face of the young man with the dark brown eyes.

"Oh," said Hazel. She stood up quickly.

"Hello," he said very seriously. Almost as if it were an apology.

His face was grave, his figure slim, his shoes shined, and his dress shirt crisp. Hazel watched his shoes and waited for the heat in her face to subside. Did those shoes contain feet like her father's, she wondered, with hair on top? *Stupid, stupid thought!*

"I'm sorry," the young man said. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"That's all right," Hazel replied. "I mean, you didn't." A fib.

The scent of bay rum aftershave and clean, ironed cloth reached Hazel's face and made it tingle. His cheeks were lean and smooth, and they looked so soft that Hazel's fingers twitched to stroke them. The dread possibility that she might

act upon the impulse was so mortifying to Hazel that she very nearly bolted for the door.

"I wanted to tell you," the young man said, "how much I enjoyed your playing tonight."

Now, at least, Hazel had a script. Her parents had coached her over a lifetime of piano recitals in how to respond to compliments.

"Thank you very much," she said. "It's kind of you to say so."

It was a speech, from rote, and the young man knew it. A shadow passed across his face. Of course it did, the poor darling—he only had one chance to interact with her, only one thing he could decently say: that he loved her music, that it took him away from this place, from this night, one week before shipping overseas to the Western Front, where young men like him died in droves, and that she, *she*, had given him this indescribable gift of escape, all the while being so sincere and fascinating in her absorption in the music. Propriety allowed him only to tell her that he enjoyed her playing, when he wanted to say so much more, and the one thing he dared hope was that she would feel how desperately he meant it.

And her eyes, he now discovered, were wide and deep, rimmed with long black lashes.

Poor James.

Hazel knew she'd gotten it wrong. She swallowed her fear and looked into his eyes.

"Truly," she said, "thank you."

The shadow passed. "My name is James." He offered her his hand.

She took it, warm and dry, in hers and wished she didn't have a pianist's wiry, muscular thumb and fingers. Incidentally, that is not at all how James perceived her hands.

"And you?" He smiled. Never mind Hazel; I nearly swooned myself.

She blushed. If she did any more blushing, her cheeks might spontaneously combust. "I'm Hazel," she said. "Hazel Windicott."

"I'm glad to meet you, Miss Windicott." James etched her name into permanent memory. *Hazel Windicott. Hazel Windicott.*

"And you, Mr. James," replied the piano girl.

He smiled again, and this time dimples appeared in his cheeks. "Just James," he said. "My last name is Alderidge."

The stout woman running the entertainment, one Lois Prentiss, came bustling over to see why the music had stopped. An older woman, a favorite of mine named Mabel Kibbey, popped up like a gopher in a hole.

"Miss Windicott has worked hard all evening," she said. "I'm sure she'd like a moment's rest. I'll play for a spell. I think I know some tunes the young folks will like."

Before Hazel could protest, Mabel Kibbey had pried her out from the piano and pushed her toward James. "Go dance," she said. In a blink, James led Hazel to the edge of the dance floor and offered her his arm. Dazzled by the pink spots on James's cheeks, just above the dimples, she placed her left hand upon James's tweed shoulder and rested her right hand in his.

Mabel Kibbey struck up a slow waltz. James pulled Hazel as close as he dared.

"I'm afraid I don't really know how to dance," confessed Hazel. "There's a reason I stay behind the piano."

James stopped immediately. "Would you rather not dance?"

Hazel fixed her gaze on his necktie. "No, I'd like to. But you mustn't laugh at me."

"I wouldn't," he said seriously. He slid back into the music.

"When I trip and fall, then?" She hoped this would come across as a bit of a joke.

He pressed his hand a shade more firmly into her back. "I won't let you fall."

Nor did he.

James, in fact, was a fine dancer, not showy, but graceful. Hazel wasn't, but she was musical enough to find the beat. James supplied the dancing. She only needed to follow along.

I sat next to Mabel Kibbey on the bench and watched. This dance could be a beginning, or an end, depending on a thousand things. Could they speak? Would one speak too much? Or say something stupid? Should I do something?

"They'll be all right," Mabel said, casting a glance my way.

"Why, Mabel Kibbey," I whispered, "can you see me?"

She flipped the page of her music. "I've always seen you," she said. "You're looking especially well tonight."

I gave her a squeeze about the waist. "You're a darling."

She twinkled. "It's nice to know you're still here for the young people," she said. "This dreadful war. How they need you now."

"Not only the young." I nodded in the direction of a spry older gentleman, seated across the room. "Would you like me to make you an introduction tonight?"

Mabel laughed. “No, thank you.” She sighed. “I’ve had my day.”

We both saw, then, a faded wedding photograph, an empty chair, and a gravestone.

“Who’s to say you can’t have another day?” I asked her.

She reached a repeat and flipped her page back. “You go see about Miss Hazel.” So I did.

They had covered the basics: She was eighteen. He was nineteen. Hazel, only child, from Poplar, daughter of a music hall pianist and a seamstress. Done with school, practicing full-time and preparing to audition for music conservatories. James, from Chelmsford, older brother to Maggie and Bobby. Son of a mathematics instructor at a secondary school. He, himself, worked for a building firm. Or had, until now. He was in London, staying with an uncle. Here to see about his uniform and kit, before reporting for duty in a week, to be stationed in France.

The war.

You had to walk into the room then, Ares. A final ending, a permanent goodbye.

Yet you were the reason everyone was there. The war was in every sermon, every street sign, every news report, every prayer over every bland and rationed meal.

And so James went from stranger to patriot, hero, bravely shouldering his duty to God, King, and Country.

Hazel went from stranger and pianist to reason why the war mattered at all, symbol of all that was pure and beautiful and worth dying for in a broken world.

When I found them, their heads were nestled together like a pair of mourning doves.

James, the soul of politeness, wouldn't dream of drawing Hazel too close on a first dance. Which was not to say he wouldn't like to. But Hazel, baffled by finding herself so safe and warm in the arms of this beautiful young man, realized, when the song ended, that she'd been resting her forehead against his cheek. That cheek, she had wanted to caress, and now, in a way, she'd done it. She began to be embarrassed, but as the other dancers applauded, James cradled her in his arms, and she knew she didn't need to apologize.

Lois Prentiss began to boom out her thanks for all who'd made the evening a success, but Mabel Kibbey, with a wink at me, cut her off by starting a new song, even more tender than the first. While other couples jockeyed to find partners, Hazel and James found each other wordlessly, having never broken apart, and danced the entire dance, their eyes closed.

If I couldn't knit these two together by the end of a second dance, Zeus might as well make Poseidon the god of love, and I'd go look after the fishes.

I could have watched them forever. By this point many eyes besides my own were watching Hazel Windicott, a well-known commodity in the parish, as famous for shyness as for music, dancing with the tall young stranger. When the song ended, and she opened her eyes, she saw James's face watching her closely, but over his shoulder there were other faces, whispering, wondering.

"I need to go," she said, pulling away. "People will say . . ."

She flooded with shame. How could she betray this moment to fear of others?

He waited openly, calmly, without suspicion.

What did she owe to other people anyway?

"Thank you," she said. "I had a lovely time."

She looked up nervously into his dark brown eyes. *You're wonderful,* they said.

So are you, her long-lashed eyes replied.

"Miss Windicott—" he began.

"Call me Hazel," she said, then wondered if she ought.

The dimples returned. She might melt. Other people didn't matter. Let them gossip.

"Miss *Hazel* Windicott," he said, "I report for training in a week."

She nodded. "I know." He'd already told her. It was so unspeakably awful. Already lads she'd known had died in the trenches.

James took a step closer. "May I see you again before I go?"

She chewed on this shocking proposal. This was not the way of things. Introductions, chaperones, supervision. Parental permission at each step. Large ladies like naval battleships prowling the seas of church socials, scouting for improper hand-holding and clandestine kisses. The war had relaxed propriety's stranglehold, but only somewhat.

James stewed. He'd said too much. Moved too fast. The thought made him sick. But what choice did he have? He had only one chance to get to know Hazel Windicott, the piano girl.

"May I?" he said again.

Hazel's father appeared in the doorway.

"How soon?" she asked James.

He smiled. "As soon as possible."

"How much?" asked Hazel.

The smile faded, leaving only that intent gaze in its place. "As much as I may."

It was time for Hazel to demur politely, make her excuses, thank him for serving the Crown, and break away from this doomed solider boy. It was definitely time to say no.

"I'd like that."

She smiled, the first time she'd smiled for this stranger. James's poor heart might've stopped beating then and there if he weren't young and healthy.

Hazel give James Alderidge her address. When she felt fairly certain the eyes in the room had moved on from gawking at her, and her father had fallen into chitchat with other arriving parents, she reached up onto her toes and gave James a kiss on the cheek.

James Alderidge didn't know it was the second such kiss he'd received that night. He only knew he was in grave danger of heading off to the Front as a soldier in love.

The thought scared him more than all the German missiles combined. Should he pull back? Should he cut this fantasy short, and not seek out another encounter with the piano girl?

Music. Lashes. Lilac-scented hair. The light grip of her lips in a brief kiss upon his cheek.

And, once more, the music.

What he should do, James decided, and what he *would* do, had no bearing upon each other.

APHRODITE

The Kiss (Part I)—November 23, 1917

IF THAT KISS caused James a night of agonizing wonder, of delicious bafflement, he was not alone. For Hazel's part, the bafflement was wondering what on earth had come over her, and the agony was dreading what James must think of her. She, Hazel Windicott, who never looked at boys! The respectable, serious-minded young lady who spent hours each day practicing piano, who kept her head while other girls did . . . whatever it was that other girls did. Would this James think she was the sort of girl who went about kissing young men upon first acquaintance?

She walked home with her father, buttoning her coat collar close around her neck. The night was unusually cold. Her left arm still remembered resting itself upon James's arm, and her right hand remembered holding James's hand. Her body remembered moving in time with his, and being pulled closer as the last song ended.

"Did some dancing, did we?" observed her father. Hazel was mortified to discover that she was acting it out, holding out her arms toward an imaginary James. So much for secrets.

"Mrs. Kibbey thought I ought to," she said. *Blame it on Mrs. Kibbey, will you? Weak!*

Her father, a tall man with long arms and legs and fingers, and deep grooves carved into his cheeks, put an arm around Hazel's shoulders.

"Mrs. Kibbey's right," he said. "You need to live a bit more, my girl, and have fun. Not just stay cooped up with old folks like your mother and me."

She leaned her head against her father's shoulder. "Don't be silly," she told him. "You aren't 'old folks.' "

"Tell that to Arthur," her father said. "Arthur" was the arthritis that plagued his wrist and knuckle joints. "I mean it, Hazy. You should spend more time with people your age. Just promise me you won't fall in love with a soldier boy. You don't need your heart broken in two."

She nodded. She couldn't exactly look her dad in the eye just then. And she certainly wasn't about to make any promises.

For pity's sake, she scolded herself once more. *You are* not *in love with that boy. You've only just met him tonight, and danced two dances. People who talk of falling in love after just one meeting have their heads full of pillow down.*

Why, then, had she kissed him on the cheek?

APHRODITE

The Kiss (Part II)—November 23, 1917

WHY *HAD* HAZEL kissed James on the cheek?

This was the question tormenting James as he circled St. Matthias's block. Up Woodstock Terrace, along East India Dock Road, down Hale Street, along High Street, and back. Breezes off the Thames brought the cry of seagulls and the clang of the dockyards. Up ahead, the lights of Poplar twinkled.

Was it a sisterly sort of thing? Surely that was all the kiss meant: *Do not hope for more, you strange stranger. Here is where my view of you begins and ends: platonic goodwill. Patriotic gratitude. Here's a quick little peck to prove it. Now goodbye.*

He groaned. He'd heard of things like that. Girls who went about bestowing kisses on soldiers in their khakis on train platforms, and on new conscripts at recruiting stations.

There was the spot. Right there, upon his cheek. He ran a finger over it.

He passed by a couple that had taken advantage of a deep, dark doorway for some kissing of the type Lois Prentiss would certainly veto. It reminded him of that one smile, lighting up Hazel's lips, making him wonder how kissing them would feel.

What was the *matter* with him?

The war, he decided. The war had addled his senses. The war had driven the whole world to the brink of insanity. Hasty war weddings and fatherless war babies and last-minute love. The whole cheap, flimsy spectacle of it.

But he closed his eyes and remembered, once more, the feeling of holding the piano girl in his arms.

He could still see her father holding her coat for her, and steering her out through the throng. Wild horses couldn't persuade James to shadow their footsteps home. It would be indecent.

Her address. Would she have shared it if she thought of him in a strictly friendly way?

When he'd passed the kissing couple three times, he headed home. He crossed East India Dock Road and came to Kerbey Street, which led to his uncle's flat. He glanced at theatrical playbills and navy recruitment banners. When signposts revealed that Kerbey Street had met Grundy, he stopped.

The corner of Grundy and Bygrove, Hazel had said. Second floor, above the barbershop.

Surely she'd be home by now. Asleep in bed, no doubt. What harm was a little detour? He'd merely note the location. He ought to get a haircut anyway. Perhaps tomorrow he could return for a trim, and while he was there, he might . . . what? Knock on her door?

The utter impossibility of it all hit him.

He could take a look. His motives were pure. He wasn't spying. He only wanted to see the kind of curtains behind which

the piano girl lived her luminous life. He would innocently imagine her asleep on a soft pillow, her lashes delicately tangled together, her long hair spread about her, her slim hands playing Chopin in her dreams.

APHRODITE

Sleepless—November 23, 1917

HAZEL WAS FAR from asleep. She'd changed into her nightgown and unpinned her hair. She sat on a low divan beneath her bedroom window, wrapped her arms about her knees, and looked out upon the street. In the upstairs flat, the two spinster Misses Ford played their gramophone recording of "My Heart at Thy Sweet Voice." It was much too late for opera. Hazel didn't mind.

James Alderidge. A nice name. One could certainly do worse.

Had she danced two dances with a stranger, and *kissed him on the cheek*?

She pressed her own burning cheek against the cool, damp windowpane.

Who would've thought, on this utterly normal day, that before bedtime her brain would be scrambled like an egg? She'd only gone to play as a reluctant favor to Mrs. Prentiss, just as she'd gone that afternoon to the Poplar Hospital for Accidents to play for the recuperating soldiers.

James Alderidge. He was heading off to the war. Training, then trenches. That would be an end, not only of their acquaintance, but, very possibly, of his life.

Or, the end of his life as he knew it. Already there were honorably discharged men to be seen, coming and going, in wheelchairs, missing legs. With sleeves tucked into jackets to hide missing hands. With hideous, disfiguring scars where shrapnel had torn their faces.

She knew this, of course. All of Britain knew what a terrible price young men paid each day to stop the wretched Kaiser. That evil, stupid, horrid man who'd unleashed his army like a dark flood across Europe.

The thought of that fearful price carved into the face of the boy with the dark brown eyes filled her own eyes with tears. So she failed to notice the figure on the street corner, gazing up at her bedroom window.

LOVELY WAR

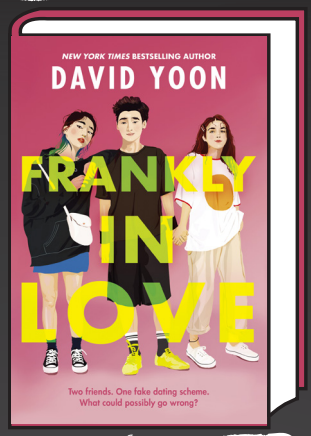
by Julie Berry

What did you think after reading a few pages?

What did you think of the cover?

Would you recommend this book?

Why or why not?



FRANKLY IN LOVE

Rom-Com Centered on Immigrant Identity

ISBN: 978-1-984-81222-3

Korean-American teen Frank Li and his parents don't see eye to eye when it comes to dating. He just wants to have a girlfriend; they just want him to have a Korean girlfriend. When fellow Korean-American Joy Song agrees to a fake relationship, he gets to hide his real girlfriend and she gets to hide her real boyfriend. They think they've found the perfect solution, but soon enough, Frank's complicated love life leaves him wondering if he ever really understood love—or himself—at all.

before we begin

Well, I have two names.

That's what I say when people ask me what my middle name is. I say:

Well, I have two names.

My first name is Frank Li. Mom-n-Dad gave me that name mostly with the character count in mind.

No, really: F+R+A+N+K+L+I contains seven characters, and seven is a lucky number in America.

Frank is my American name, meaning it's my name-name.

My second name is Sung-Min Li, and it's my Korean name, and it follows similar numerological cosmology:

S+U+N+G+M+I+N+L+I contains nine characters, and nine is a lucky number in Korea. Nobody calls me Sung-Min, not even Mom-n-Dad. They just call me Frank.

So I don't have a middle name. Instead, I have two names.

Anyway: I guess having both lucky numbers seven and nine is supposed to make me some kind of bridge between cultures or some shit.

America, this is Korea, Korea, this is America.

Everyone good? Can I go do my thing now?

Good.

the fall season

of the senior year

of the high school period

of early human life

chapter 1

lake girlfriend

Senior year is begun.

Is begun sounds cooler than the more normal *has begun*, because if you say it right, you sound like a lone surviving knight delivering dire news to a weary king on the brink of defeat, his limp hand raking his face with dread. *The final breach is begun, your grace. The downfall of House Li is begun.*

I'm the king in that scenario, by the way, raking my face with dread.

For senior year is begun.

Sometimes I look way back to six months ago, during the halcyon days of junior year. How we pranced in the meadows after taking the PSAT: a practice run of the SAT, which in Playa Mesa, in California, in the United States of America, is widely used to gauge whether an early human is fit for entrance into an institution of higher learning.

But the PSAT?

A mere trial, we juniors sang. *What counts not for shit, your grace!*

How we lazed in the sunlight, sharing jokes about that one reading comprehension passage about the experiment testing whether dogs found it easier to tip a bin (easier) for food or pull a rope (trickier). Based on the passage and results in Figure 4, were the dogs

A) more likely to solve the rope task than the bin task?
B) more frustrated by the rope task than the bin task?
C) more likely to resent their human caregivers for being presented with such absurd tasks to begin with, I mean, just give us the food in a damn dog bowl like normal people?
Or
D) more likely to rake a paw over their face with dread?

The answer was D.

For come Score Day, I discovered I got a total of 1400 points out of a possible 1520, the 96th percentile. This earned me plenty of robust, spontaneous high fives from my friends, but to me they sounded like palms—*ptt ptt ptt*—slapping the sealed door of a crypt.

The target was 1500.

When I told Mom-n-Dad, they stared at me with pity and disbelief, like I was a little dead sparrow in the park. And Mom actually said this, for real:

Don't worry, we still love you.

Mom has said the words *I love you* exactly two times in my life. Once for the 1400, and another time when she called after her mother's funeral in Korea when I was ten. Hanna and I didn't go. Dad was at The Store; he didn't go either.

In retrospect, it's weird we didn't all go.

Secretly, in retrospect: I'm glad I didn't go. I met my grandma only once, when I was six. She spoke no English, me no Korean.

So in retro-retrospect, maybe it's not so weird that we didn't all go.

Dad has said the words *I love you* exactly zero times in my life.

Let's go back to that PSAT score.

As a leading indicator, a bellwether, augury, harbinger, and many other words from the now-useless PSAT vocabulary study guide, a score of 1500 would mean I would probably kick the real SAT's ass high enough to gain the attention of The Harvard, which is the Number One Top School in Whole of United States, according to Mom-n-Dad.

A 1400 means I'll probably only ess-ay-tee just high enough to get into the University of California at Berkeley, which in Mom-n-Dad's mind is a sad consolation prize compared with The Harvard. And sometimes, just for a nanosecond, their brainlock actually has me thinking:

Berkeley sucks.

My big sister, Hanna, coined the term *brainlock*, which is like a headlock but for your mind. Hanna lives in Boston near the other Berkeley, the Berklee College of Music.

Berklee is my real dream school. But Mom-n-Dad have already nixed that notion. *Music? How you making money? How you eating?*

Hanna's two names are Hanna Li (character count: seven) and Ji-Young Li (nine). Dad named Hanna Li after Honali, from a popular 1960s marijuana anthem disguised as a children's song, "Puff (The Magic Dragon)." The song had found its way into high-school English classes in Seoul in the 1970s. Dad has never smoked pot in his life. He had no idea what he was singing.

Hanna is the oldest; Hanna did everything right. Mom-n-Dad told her to study hard, so she got straight As. They told her to go to The Harvard, so she did, and graduated with honors. She moved on to Harvard Law School, and graduated with a leap big enough to catapult her above assistants her same age at Eastern Edge Consulting downtown, which specializes in negotiating ridiculous patents for billion-dollar tech companies. She's even dabbling in venture capital now from her home office high atop Beacon Hill. Weekdays, she wears very expensive pantsuits; weekends, sensible (but still very expensive) dresses. Someone should put her on the cover of a business travel magazine or something.

But then Hanna did the one wrong thing. She fell in love.

Falling in love isn't bad by itself. But when it's with a black boy, it's big enough to cancel out everything she did right her whole life. This boy gave Hanna a ring, which Mom-n-Dad have not seen and might never.

In another family perhaps on another planet, this brown boy would be brought home for summer vacation to meet the family, and we would all try out his name in the open air: *Miles Lane.*

But we're on this planet, and Mom-n-Dad are Mom-n-Dad, so there will be no Hanna this summer. I miss her. But I understand why she won't come home. Even though it does mean I'll be left high and dry without someone to make fun of the world with.

The last time she came home was a Thanksgiving holiday two years ago. She was at a Gathering. It was the Changs' turn to host. I'm not sure why she did what she did that night. *So I have this boy now,* she said. *And he is The One.*

And she held out her phone with a photo of Miles to Mom-n-Dad and everyone. It was like she cast a Silence spell on the room. No one said shit.

After a long minute, the phone turned itself off.

Mom-n-Dad went to the front door, put on their shoes, and waited with eyes averted for us to join them. We left without a word of explanation—none was needed—and the next morning Hanna vanished onto a flight back to Boston, four days early. A year later, after six or seven Hanna-free Gatherings, Ella Chang dared utter the word *disowned*.

And life went on. Mom-n-Dad no longer talked about Hanna. They acted like she moved to a foreign country with no modern forms of communication. Whenever I brought her up, they would literally—literally—avert their eyes and fall silent until I gave up. After a while, I did.

So did Hanna. Her text message responses fell from every day to every other day, then every week, and so on. This

is how disownment happens. It's not like some final sentence declared during some family tribunal. Disownment is a gradual kind of neglect. Since Mom-n-Dad gave up on Hanna, Hanna decided to give up as well. I get that.

But I never gave up on her. I still haven't.

It's a scary thing to watch someone you love vanish from sight.

I talk a lot about Hanna with Q. Q is what I call my top chap, and I am his.

I'm forever grateful for Q's patience with me, because I can't imagine it makes Q feel all that good to hear how Mom-n-Dad rejected a boy with the same skin color as his.

Q's full name is Q Lee. He Lee and me Li. Like two brothers from Korean and African-American mothers. His parents, Mr. and Ms. Lee, are normal people who seem forever astonished that they gave birth to such a meganerd of a son. Q has a twin sister named Evon who is so smoking hot I can barely look at her. You say Evon Lee like *heavenly*.

Q's *Q* doesn't stand for anything; it's just Q. Q decided to rename himself a couple months ago on his eighteenth birthday. He was originally born as Will. Will Lee.

Show us your willy, Will Lee, they would say.

Good choice on the name change, Q.

Like most nerds, Q and I spend our time watching obscure movies, playing video games, deconstructing the various absurdities of reality, and so on. We hardly ever talk about girls, for lack of material. Neither of us has dated anyone. The farthest I have ventured out into girl waters is when I accidentally kissed Gina Iforget during a game of

spin-the-ballpoint-pen in junior high. It was supposed to be on the cheek, and both Gina and I missed and touched each other's lips instead. Ooo-ooo-ooo.

The only time and place we even obliquely approach the subject of girl is when we happen to find ourselves sitting on the shore of Lake Girlfriend.

Lake Girlfriend is at Westchester Mall. Westchester Mall is the biggest mall in Orange County. For some reason, they leave all their doors open well past midnight, long after the stores have all shut. The mall becomes a beautifully empty, serenely apocalyptic space that no one in all of Southern California seems to know about.

Only two security guards patrol all seventy gleaming acres of the deserted mall. Their names are Camille and Oscar. They know me and Q and understand that no, we are not dating; we are just two guys with strange ideas of how to pass the time.

Lake Girlfriend is a fountain in Westchester Mall's Crystal Atrium by the Nordstrom anchor store. It is a low polished structure formed from simple modernist angles. It bears a fancy brass plaque that says DO NOT DRINK—RECLAIMED WATER. Above, nameless jazz infuses the cavernous faceted space with echoey arpeggios.

I call it Lake Girlfriend because maybe if I give it enough confessions and offerings, a girl will rise from its shimmering surface and offer me her hand.

Q and I sit tailor-style on a stone ledge the color of chocolate by this fountain. We watch the water bubble up from an octagonal top pool, push through a stone comb, and descend

staggered steps to a pool floor sequined throughout with glimmering coins.

I reach into my army-surplus rucksack and take out my Tascam, a sweet little device no bigger than a TV remote, and record the sound: low, rich syrup layered with pink noise and the occasional pwip of large bubbles. Practically a complete riff unto itself. I click the recorder off and stash it away so that Q and I can begin.

"Ideal traits in a woman," I say. "You go first."

Q rests his chin atop his fists. "Speaks at least two other languages."

"And?" I say.

"Can play the oboe at a professional level," says Q.

"Q," I say.

"Ivy League professor by day, ballet renegade by night."

"I'm assuming this list isn't based in reality," I say.

"A guy can dream, right?" says Q.

It's a little hard to hear him over the white noise of Lake Girlfriend, and I think that's the thing about this place that makes it easy to talk about things like ideal girls. It's like talking out loud to ourselves, but in front of each other.

"Your turn," says Q.

I think. A hundred faces scroll through my mind, all pretty in their own way. A thousand combinations of possibilities. Everyone has loveliness inside if you look carefully. Lots of the world is like this. One time I halved an onion and discovered its rings had squashed one by one to form a perfect heart shape at the core. One time—

"Frank?" says Q. "You gotta move your mouth to speak."

"Wull," I say. "I mean."

Q looks at me, waiting.

"Basically I guess she has to be kind, is most important."

Q raises his eyebrows. "So no meanies. Got it."

"And she should make me laugh," I say.

"Any other vital criteria?" says Q.

I think. Anything else—hobbies, musical tastes, fashion sense—doesn't seem to matter that much. So I just shake my head no.

Q gives the fountain a shrug. "That's super romantic, like in the most basic sense."

"Basically," I say.

We both stare at the fountain for a moment. Then I mark the end of our visit to Lake Girlfriend with the ritual digging into my front jeans pocket for sacred coins, one for me, one for Q. Q tosses his in with a fart sound. I give mine a squeeze and flip it into the water, ploop. The coins are added to the submerged pile of random wishes: good grades, job promotions, lottery dreams, and, above all, love.

No one comes rising out of the shimmering water.

Q doesn't know it, but I've secretly left out one criterion for my ideal woman. It's one I'd rather not say aloud, even though it's the one I worry about the most.

My ideal woman should probably be Korean-American.

It's not strictly necessary. I could care less. But it would make things easier.

I've toed the dating waters only twice before, and each time something has held me back from diving in. A paralysis. I think it comes from not knowing which would be

worse: dating a girl my parents hated or dating a girl my parents loved. Being ostracized or being micromanaged.

Then I consider how Korean-Americans make up only 1 percent of everyone in the Republic of California, out of which 12 percent are girls my age, which would result in a dating pool with only one girl every three square miles. Filter out the ones who are taken, the ones I wouldn't get along with, and—worse—add in the Ideal Woman criteria, and the pool gets even smaller. Lake Girlfriend shrinks down to a thimble.

So I shelve the notion of an ideal girl for now. I realize I've been shelving the idea for years.

"A guy can dream," says Q.

"A guy can dream," I say.

chapter 2

metaphor incoming

Mom-n-Dad's store also has two names, like me and Hanna.

Its official name is Fiesta Hoy Market, which I won't even bother to translate because goddamn, what a stupid name. Its second name is simply The Store. The Store is its name-name.

Mom-n-Dad work at The Store every day, from morning to evening, on weekends, holidays, New Year's Day, 365 days out of every year without a single vacation for as long as me and Hanna have been alive.

Mom-n-Dad inherited The Store from an older Korean couple of that first wave who came over in the sixties. No written contracts or anything. Just an introduction from a good friend, then tea, then dinners, and finally many deep bows, culminating in warm, two-handed handshakes. They wanted to make sure The Store was kept in good hands. Good, Korean hands.

The Store is an hour-long drive from the dystopian perfection of my suburban home of Playa Mesa. It's in a poor, sun-crumbled part of Southern California largely populated by Mexican- and African-Americans. A world away.

The poor customers give Mom-n-Dad food stamps, which become money, which becomes college tuition for me.

It's the latest version of the American dream.

I hope the next version of the American dream doesn't involve gouging people for food stamps.

I'm at The Store now. I'm leaning against the counter. Its varnish is worn in the middle like a tree ring, showing the history of every transaction that's ever been slid across its surface: candy and beer and diapers and milk and beer and ice cream and beer and beer.

"At the airport," I once explained to Q, "they hand out title deeds by ethnicity. So the Greeks get diners, the Chinese get laundromats, and the Koreans get liquor stores."

"So *that's* how America works," said Q, taking a deeply ironic bite of his burrito.

It's hot in The Store. I'm wearing a Hardfloor tee shirt perforated with moth holes in cool black, to match my cool-black utility shorts. Not all blacks are the same. There is warm black and brown black and purple black. My wristbands are a rainbow of blacks. All garments above the ankles must be black. Shoes can be anything, however. Like my caution-yellow sneakers.

Dad refuses to turn on the air-conditioning, because the only things affected by the heat are the chocolate-based candies, and he's already stashed those in the walk-in cooler.

Meanwhile, I'm sweating. I watch a trio of flies trace an endless series of right angles in midair with a nonstop zimzim sound. I snap a photo and post it with the caption: *Flies are the only creature named after their main mode of mobility.*

It makes no sense that I'm helping Mom-n-Dad at The Store. My whole life they've never let me have a job.

"Study hard, become doctor maybe," Dad would say.

"Or a famous newscaster," Mom would say.

I still don't get that last one.

Anyway: I'm at The Store only one day a week, on Sundays, and only to work the register—no lifting, sorting, cleaning, tagging, or dealing with vendors. Mom's home resting from her morning shift, leaving me and Dad alone for his turn. I suspect all this is Mom's ploy to get me to bond with Dad in my last year before I head off to college. Spend father-n-son time. Engage in deep conversation.

Dad straps on a weight belt and muscles a hand truck loaded with boxes of malt liquor. He looks a bit like a Hobbit, stocky and strong and thick legged, with a box cutter on his belt instead of a velvet sachet of precious coins. He has all his hair still, even in his late forties. To think, he earned a bachelor's degree in Seoul and wound up here. I wonder how many immigrants there are like him, working a blue-collar job while secretly owning a white-collar degree.

He slams his way out of the dark howling maw of the walk-in cooler.

"You eat," he says.

"Okay, Dad," I say.

"You go taco. Next door. Money, here."

He hands me a twenty.

"Okay, Dad."

I say *Okay, Dad* a lot to Dad. It doesn't get much deeper than that for the most part. For the most part, it can't. Dad's English isn't great, and my Korean is almost nonexistent. I grew up on video games and indie films, and Dad grew up on I-don't-know-what.

I used to ask him about his childhood. Or about basic things, like how he was able to afford a luxury like college. He grew up poor, after all, poorer than poor. Both my parents did, before Korea's economic supernova in the late eighties. Dad said he would go fishing for river crabs when food ran low. Lots of people in the sticks did.

"Tiny crabby, they all crawling inside my net," he told me. "All crawling crawling crawling over each other, they stepping on each other face, try to get on top."

"Okay," I said.

"That's Korea," he said.

When I asked him what that meant, he just closed the conversation with:

"Anyway America better. Better you going college here, learn English. More opportunity."

That's his checkmate move for most conversations, even ones that start out innocently enough like, *How come we never kept up with speaking Korean in the house?* or *Why do old Korean dudes worship Chivas Regal?*

So for the most part, he and I have made a habit of leaving things at *Okay, Dad.*

"Okay, Dad," I say.

I grab my phone and step into the even hotter heat outside. Corrido music is bombarding the empty parking lot from the carnicería next door. The music is meant to convey festivity, to entice customers inside. It's not working.

¡Party Today!

Buzz-buzz. It's Q.

Pip pip, old chap, let's go up to LA. It's free museum night. Bunch of us are going.

Deepest regrets, old bean, I say. *Got a Gathering.*

I shall miss your companionship, fine sir, says Q.

And I yours, my good man.

Q knows what I mean when I say *Gathering*.

I'm talking about a gathering of five families, which sounds like a mafia thing but really is just Mom-n-Dad's friends getting together for a rotating house dinner.

It's an event that's simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary: ordinary in that hey, it's just dinner, but extraordinary in that all five couples met at university in Seoul, became friends, moved to Southern California together to start new lives, and have managed to see each other and their families every month literally for decades.

The day ends. Dad changes shirts, trading his shop owner persona for a more Gathering-appropriate one: a new heathergray polo that exudes success and prosperity. We lock up, turn out the lights. Then we drive forty minutes to the Kims'.

It's the Kim family's turn to host the Gathering this time, and they've gone all out: a Brazilian barbecue carving station

manned by real Brazilians drilling everyone on the word of the night (*chu•rra•sca•ri•a*), plus a wine-tasting station, plus a seventy-inch television in the great room with brand-new VR headsets for the little kids to play ocean explorer with.

It all screams: *We're doing great in America. How about you?*

Included among these totems of success are the children themselves, especially us older kids. We were all born pretty much at the same time. We're all in the same year in school. We are talked and talked about, like minor celebrities. *So-and-so made academic pentathlon team captain. So-and-so got valedictorian.*

Being a totem is a tiresome role, and so we hide away in the game room or wherever while outside, the littler kids run amok and the adults get drunk and sing twenty-year-old Korean pop songs that none of us understand. In this way we have gradually formed the strangest of friendships:

- We only sit together like this for four hours once a month.
- We never leave the room during this time, except for food.
- We never hang out outside the Gatherings.

The Gatherings are a world unto themselves. Each one is a version of Korea forever trapped in a bubble of amber—the

early-nineties Korea that Mom-n-Dad and the rest of their friends brought over to the States years ago after the bubble burst. Meanwhile, the Koreans in Korea have moved on, become more affluent, more savvy. Meanwhile, just outside the Kims' front door, American kids are dance-gaming to K-pop on their big-screens.

But inside the Gathering, time freezes for a few hours. We children are here only because of our parents, after all. Would we normally hang out otherwise? Probably not. But we can't exactly sit around ignoring each other, because that would be boring. So we jibber-jabber and philosophize until it's time to leave. Then we are released back into the reality awaiting us outside the Gathering, where time unfreezes and resumes.

I call us the Limbos.

Every month I dread going to these awkward reunions with the Limbos, to wait out time in between worlds. But every month I'm also reminded that most of the Limbos are actually pretty cool.

Like John Lim (character count: seven), who made his own game that's selling pretty well on the app store.

Or Ella Chang (nine), who shreds at the cello.

Or Andrew Kim (nine), who cowrote a pretty popular book with his YouTube partner.

I used to think the character count in our names was a weird Korean thing.

But it wasn't a weird Korean thing. It was just weird.

I think the type of person who is willing to live in a totally different country is also willing to make up their own weird traditions. Weird makes weird.

Weird also makes for incredibly lucky lives for us kids, and for that I'm always grateful. For real.

At tonight's Gathering the Limbos are holed up in Andrew's room, playing a multiplayer brawler game.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey," they say.

There's John Lim steering his controller in the air, as if that will help anything. There's Andrew Kim, hissing with effort. There's Ella Chang, calmly kicking everyone's ass from behind her horn rims.

"Wanna play?" drawls Ella.

"In a sec."

One of the Limbos is missing. I wander around the house until I find her: Joy Song, sitting alone among big Lego bricks in the pastel room of Andrew Kim's little sister.

Joy Song (character count: seven), second name Yu-Jin Song (nine).

When we were five, six, seven, Joy and I used to sneak the crispy bits off the barbecue table before it was time to eat. We used to stand on our chairs, hold noodles as high as we could, and lower them into each other's open mouths below. We used to put blades of grass down each other's pants, until one day I caught a glimpse of her front and understood that it was now time to be afraid of girls. I've been afraid ever since.

Now Joy Song sits in the corner smelling her upper lip. She glances up at me—*oh, it's just Frank*—and keeps her upper lip curled. It adds an edge of defiance to a face otherwise made up of simple ovalettes. She returns to what she was doing: arranging the Lego bricks in a line.

She's also listening to music through her tiny phone speakers. It sounds like bugs shouting.

"Isn't that just the best way to listen to music?" I say. "Really respects the artistic intent of the musicians."

"Hi, Frank," says Joy, joylessly.

"How you been?"

"Oh, not much," she says, answering some other question in her head.

I sit at the pile of Lego and feel like I'm ten. "You wanna build something?"

"It's just that the solid ones are ABS plastic, and the clear pieces are polycarbonate."

"Oh-kay." I notice that Joy has changed her hair. On the outside it's the usual ink-brown shell, but the inside layer has been dyed a lime green that's visible only in flashes.

She runs her hand through her hair—green flash—and stops, holding her head sideways. Lost in thought. "You can't 3D-print ABS or polycarbonate. At least I can't. I don't have the requisite tech."

She releases her hair, and the green layer becomes hidden again.

Me and Joy both go to Palomino High. Our classes never intersect. No one outside the Limbos knows we're Gathering friends. When we pass in the hallways, we just kind of look at each other and move along.

Now that I think about it, why *don't* we Limbos hang out outside Gatherings?

"Let's make a tower," she says.

We fall into an old habit: building a four-by-four tower with the colors ascending in spectral ROYGBIV order. Chk, chk, brick by brick. We do this for a long time, in silence.

The noise of the party phase-shifts, and I look up to see my mom peering in from the doorway. She doesn't have to say anything. All she has to do is look at me, then at Joy, and smile this corny tilted smile.

After Mom vanishes, Joy rolls her eyes hard and groans to the heavens.

"Joy, will you marry me so that House Li and House Song may finally be joined as one?" I say.

"Shut the fuck up," she says, and throws a Lego at me.

She's got a bizarre laugh, kind of like a herd of squirrels.

"God, I'm so screwed," she says finally.

"What's going on?"

"Wu—you know Wu."

Of course I know Wu. Wu is Chinese-American, third gen. Wu is six two, 190 pounds of fighting muscle; a hawk-eyed warrior prince somehow lost in the American high school wilderness. A single glance from him frequently makes girls walk face-first into their lockers.

Wu is 99 percent likely to go to the University of Southern California, which is in Los Angeles. His dad went to USC. His mom went to USC. They have USC license-plate frames on their cars. They still go to the football games.

I once saw Wu and Joy making out between a pair of columns, and the sight of her ovalette jaw moving with his angular one produced that paralyzing mixture of revulsion and fascination you get when you're seeing something you

know must surely exist but never thought you'd see with your own eyes.

Q thinks Joy is gorgeous. As a non-Gathering friend, Q is allowed to think that.

Wu's full name is Wu Tang.

Yep.

Joy continues. "Wu's all, *I want to meet your parents.* I'm all, *no,* but he keeps insisting. We had this big fight."

To understand why this is an issue, it's helpful to know that basically every country in Asia has historically hated on every other country in Asia. Koreans hated Chinese, and Chinese hated Koreans, and have forever. Also Chinese hated Japanese hated Koreans hated Thais hated Vietnamese and so on. They all have histories of invading and being invaded by one another. You know how European countries talk shit all the time about each other? Same thing.

"That's stressful," I say with a frown.

Joy and I are up to green bricks now. I hold one up and notice it's the same color as the green hiding in her hair.

"I don't just have boy problems," says Joy. "I have Chinese boy problems."

Koreans hating Chinese hating Koreans hating blablabla.

"Racists," I say.

Joy just nods. She knows I'm talking about her mom-n-dad.

I know this is the point where one of us should say some-damn-thing about Hanna. But what is there to say?

There's plenty to say. But I've said it over and over and over, so many times that I don't have to even actually say it anymore. Now I'm just super tired of saying it.

Our parents are racist. I wish things were different. I miss Hanna. I wish things were different. Our parents are racist. I miss Hanna.

Chk, chk. We build until we reach the violet bricks. There's a bunch of white and black and brown bricks left over.

"What should we do with these?" I say. "They don't fit into the rainbow spectrum."

This is a ridiculous and obvious metaphor, and Joy smacks my forehead to point it out.

"Metaphor incoming, doosh," she says.

Then we just kind of stare at each other.

"Fuckin' parents, man," I say.

chapter 3

more better

Mom's driving me and Dad back home from the party. It's a long way from Diamond Ranch back to Playa Mesa. The neighborhoods start all Korean, then go Mexican, then Chinese, then black, then back to Mexican, then finally white.

Playa Mesa is in white.

We're only at the first Mexican when Dad quietly throws up into an empty to-go cup.

"Eigh," says Mom. "You drink too much, Daddy."

"I'm okay," says Dad.

"Eigh," says Mom, and rolls down all the windows.

Dad seals the lid on the soda cup and leans back with his eyes closed. The straw is still sticking out of the top. It's like Satan created a drink daring all to take a sip.

The fresh air helps with the smell.

"You don't drink like Daddy, okay?" Mom says to me through the rearview mirror.

"Okay, Mom," I say.

"One time, one man, he drink all night, drink too too much? He sleep, he throw up, he choking in his sleep? He die."

I've heard this story before. "That sucks."

"Really don't drink, okay?"

"You got nothing to worry about, Mom."

And she really doesn't. I've had about two drinks my entire life, and I didn't bother finishing them. Same thing with top chap Q, Q's sister, Evon, or any of my other friends. We're all sober kids, all in the same Advanced Placement (AP) classes, and therefore do not get invited to parties and their concomitant opportunities to imbibe. We wouldn't drink even if we did.

We are APs, or Apeys for short. We do not go to *keggers* or *ragers*. Instead of parties, we find empty parking structures and hold midnight table reads of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. We pile into my car, a teenaged front-wheel-drive Consta with manual windows, and drive halfway to Las Vegas just to see a meteor shower and get a good look at Orion's scabbard in the flawless black desert sky. To be clear, we never actually continue on to Vegas. Whatever happens in Vegas, whatevers in Vegas, who cares. We turn the car around and head home and wonder about life outside Earth, and whether we'll ever encounter aliens or they're just ignoring us because we're still so embarrassingly primitive, or if the Fermi paradox is true and we really are the only intelligent beings in the entire universe.

Traffic is super light—just a stream of lights rocketing along at eighty-five miles per hour—and already we're up to Chinese. Dad points it out.

"This all Chinese now," he says. "Used to be Mexican, now totally Chinese. They take over whole this area. Look, signs say HONG FU XIAN blablabla, ha ha ha."

"Chang-chong-ching-chong?" says Mom, laughing too.

"You guys," I say.

"They eating everything," says Dad. "Piggy ear, piggy tail, chicken feet, everything they eating."

I facepalm, but with my knee. Koreans eat quote-weird-end-quote stuff too: sea cucumbers, live octopus, acorn jelly, all of it delicious. White people, black people, Indian, Jamaican, Mexican, *people*-people eat weird, delicious stuff.

I want to say all of this, but I find I can't. It'll just get me nowhere. My parents are just stuck on thinking Koreans are special.

"Ching-chong-chang-chang?" says Mom again.

Dad laughs, steadying his to-go drink from hell, and for a second I can imagine them before they had me and Hanna. It's a paradoxically sweet vignette. Mom-n-Dad warmly muttering to each other in Korean, most of which I can't understand, except for the startling appearance of the word *jjangkkae*, which means *chink*.

If I were like any other normal teenager, I would lose myself in my fartphone (that's what Q says instead of *smartphone*, because all we're doing is farting around on social media anyway), giving out crappy likes on the crappy feeds, maybe crafting beats if I felt like being creative. But then I

would only get carsick. So all I can do is be present and in the racist moment.

"You guys are so racist," I say instead.

I'm so used to them being racist that I can't even bother arguing with them anymore. It's like commanding the wind to alter direction. *You are aware that non-Koreans populated the United States of America before you came here, right?* I used to say. *You're aware that Korea is this tiny country, and the world is full of people you know little about, right?*

Arguing with Mom-n-Dad is pointless, because the wind will blow wherever it wants according to its own infuriating wind-logic. Only the insane would keep trying to change them. Especially when they end things with their *just-joking* defense. Like now:

"No racist," says Mom, wounded. "We just joking."

"Joy Song has a boyfriend and he's third-gen Chinese," I say.

I of course say no such thing. Saying that would instantly make Joy's life hell once her mom got the call from my mom, and my mom is always making calls. Then Joy would build a drone in her garage and order it to dice me up with lasers in my sleep.

But part of me itches to do it anyway. Because this is America, and because I want to force the issue. *Did you know,* I would say, *that Korean-Americans make up only 0.5 percent of the entire population? Did you think about that before you came here? Did you think you could avoid the other 99.5 percent of the country for very long?*

I don't say any of this. Instead, I talk about Q.

"What if Q was Chinese? Would you be all *ching-chong* in front of him?"

"No," says Mom. She looks almost insulted.

"So just behind his back."

"No, Frank."

"Do you call Q geomdungi behind his back?"

"Frank, aigu!" Mom's glaring at me through the rearview mirror's slash of light.

Geomdungi means the n-word.

"Q is okay," says Dad. His eyes are still closed. It looks like he's talking and sleeping at the same time. He sounds reasonable and soothing, even when he's drunk. "Q like family. I like Q."

Dad says this despite the fact that Q has only ever hung out at my house a handful of times in all the years we've known each other. There is a secret to why this is.

The secret is in the smiles. Mom-n-Dad, all smiles, and Q, too. Everyone smiling, pretending the specter of Hanna is not right there before us. By Mom-n-Dad's internal wind-logic, Q is fine—Q is a friend, Q is a boy. There is no family name at stake here.

But still, I'm afraid Mom-n-Dad would possibly say or do something carelessly hurtful to my most top chap. So the few times Q's been over, I've kept things simple and quick: say hi to Mom-n-Dad, smile-smile-smile right up the staircase, and head straight into my room for shitty old video games on my shitty old system. Eventually I just found myself hanging out at his house all the time. It's easier than all those smiles.

Q first pointed out the smiles a long time ago. He was angry. I was angry too. Who wouldn't be? We sat all night with our anger, discussing it, shaping it, until it became a kind of energy shield defending us. I vowed to protect Q from any harm my parents could potentially dish out. I ranted out a fiery apology, going on and on until Q finally stopped me with an arm hug to say *You didn't pick your parents, and neither did I.*

That's what Q tells me whenever my parents say something ludicrous: *I didn't pick your parents to be my best friend in the whole world.*

The car is quiet but for the whistling wind. For a second I think the issue has been successfully forced, copious science has been dropped, minds have been quietly blown, we are all one human race, this is the United States of America, I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted.

But then Dad keeps going.

Dad keeps dream-talking.

"Q is so-called *honorary white*. You know *honorary white*?"

"No he's not," I say, but Dad just keeps on going.

"Daddy, sleep," says Mom.

But Dad does not sleep. "Black people always no money they having. Always doing crime, gang, whatever. Make too many baby. That's black people."

"Dad, jesus, that's not true," I say. All I can do is shake my head. This sort of drunken rambling is familiar territory for me. I find a painted line on the highway and follow it as it dips and rises and splits into two. We change lanes and the tires do two fast, sharp drumrolls.

But then Mom sits up. "It is," she says. "I wondering, why black people behaving like that? Our customers? So many, they behaving like that. Ninety-eight percent."

Mom likes to make up fake statistics. So does Dad. It's annoying as hell.

I snarl at the window. "So, slavery, decades of systemic racist policy, and the poverty it created don't have anything to do with anything."

"1992," says Mom, "we coming to United States, only we have three hundred dollar. That's it. We stay friends' house almost two year. Dr. and Mrs. Choi. Only we eating ramyun and kimchi rice two year."

That's not the same thing, I think. I don't bother listening to the rest.

Mom-n-Dad are like this big ice wall of ignorance, and I'm just a lone soldier with a sword. I just kind of give up. I find myself missing Hanna big-time. She used to argue all righteous with Mom-n-Dad all the time, like the lawyer she eventually became. She wouldn't back down a single millimeter, not for shit. She would take the argument all the way to the limit, and then just hold it there. Like:

Where does Korean-ness begin and end?

What about kids born from Chinese or Japanese occupiers? What about those comfort women? Should their Korean cards be canceled?

Don't you think you should have to live in Korea to be fully Korean?

Don't you think you should have to be fluent in Korean to be fully Korean?

Why'd you come to this country if you're so Korean?

And what about me and Frank?

She was brave—braver than me—but now I wonder if being brave is worth it. The brave go first into battle. But that makes them the first to go down, too.

I wait for the car to get quiet again before saying:

"What if I dated someone black?" I want to add *like Hanna*, but don't.

"Frank, stop it," says Mom, and gets a grave look, like *That's not funny.* She glances at Dad. Dad is asleep. His to-go cup is tipping. She puts it in the center cup holder, which somehow makes it even more disgusting.

"What about white?" I say.

"No," says Mom.

"So only Korean."

Mom sighs. "Why, you have white girlfriend?"

"No."

"Don't do it, okay?" says Mom. "Anyway. Big eyes is better. Nice eyes."

Mom is obsessed with girls having big eyes. Joy's mom is obsessed with girls having big eyes. Same with the parents of the other Limbos. We tried figuring out why once at a Gathering. Someone said it must have something to do with a bunch of round-eye American soldiers saving them from civil war, which led to a close examination of the size of General MacArthur's eyes, which pivoted to theories about big-eyed characters in Japanese anime, which devolved into a big Lego-throwing debate about which was better, Japanese manga or Korean manhwa.

"You marry Korean girl," says Mom. "Make everything easier."

I dig the heels of my hands into my eyes. "Easier for you." I want to add, *I could care less if she were Korean,* but we've beat this horse before and it's an incredibly durable creature.

"Not just us," says Mom. She's indignant. "Easier for everybody. Korean girl, we gathering with her parents, we speak Korean together. More comfortable, more better. We eating Korean food all together, going to Korean church together, more better."

"So, more better for you."

"No," says Mom, louder. "You will understand when you have baby. Okay: pretend you have mix baby, okay? People say, 'Oh, what nationality this baby?' Too headache for baby. For you too! Where baby belong? You think about baby."

So I think about baby. Not my baby, but specifically the future baby of Hanna and Miles. I've seen *mixed* babies before, and like all babies ever born, they're adorable. Who could be so cruel as to reject a *mixed* baby?

What the hell am I talking about? I hate that word, *mixed*. Just a couple generations ago people called French-Russian babies *mixed*. Now those babies are just called *white*. This word *mixed* is just brainlock messing with my head.

I give up. "Okay, Mom."

"Anyway," says Mom, calm again. "I know lot of nice girls."

I massage my temples. I've reached the end of the discussion, where there's nothing left to do but say *Okay, Mom.*

"Okay, Mom," I say.

chapter 4

just bad enough

I don't really like calculus.

But Calculus class? That's a different story.

Calculus class takes place at the ungodly hour of seven o'clock, before the rest of humanity is even conscious. It's unreasonable. Mr. Soft knows this. That's why he has a box of coffee ready, and a dozen donuts, two for each of us.

Mr. Soft has the lights dimmed. He has quiet jazz playing on a sweet vintage boombox. Mr. Soft is one of the gentlest human beings I know.

Mr. Soft's full name is Berry Soft.

"You want a little something special this morning, Frank?" says Mr. Berry Soft, very softly. "I brought my espresso machine today. More than happy to make you a cappuccino."

Our desks are arranged in a rough circle, with Mr. Soft tailor-sitting atop a stool, his glowing face underlit by an antique overhead projector literally from the year 1969 that

he likes to draw on with wet-erase pens. No laptops, no phones. Just concepts and principles and longhand problem solving.

"Just look for the stuff in common between the nominators and denominators," says Mr. Soft, drawing by hand. "See what cancels out. Chop chop, flip these guys here, chop, and we're left with the answer."

"What is the answer?" says Brit Means, who sits next to me.

"I mean, it's thirteen over five," says Mr. Soft. "But that doesn't really matter. What matters is the process."

Brit Means glows in the light of his wisdom. "The process," she says. Then I realize she is nodding at me through narrowed eyes. I nod back without quite knowing what we're nodding about.

Like most of the other Apey boys, I find Brit Means a little weird and a little intense, and can't help but be fascinated by her. She walks the halls like a time traveler noticing small differences created by minute shifts in quantum chaos. She can sometimes seem like a beautiful foreign exchange student from a country no one's ever seen.

Once, I found myself sharing the shade of a tree with her on a hot day just after school. I was waiting for Q; she was waiting for her ride home.

"Most human structures are made out of wood," she said to the tree. "Wood is trees is plants. Human clothes are cotton: plants again. We live in nature every day without realizing it. We live *inside* plants."

"Huh," I said, secretly marveling at a sudden acute impulse to kiss her.

Back in Calculus, Q passes the box of donuts around. Brit leans over to choose one, drawing close enough for me to smell the shampoo in her wet hair.

Next to her sit Amelie Shim, Naima Gupta, and Paul Olmo, always in that order.

"So I'm supposed to give you turkeys a test for the suits," says Mr. Soft. "What questions do you want on it?"

We all think. It's so early.

"Just email me, okay?" says Mr. Soft. He's so soothing. "You're all getting As anyway. I hate this grading bullshit." Even his swears are soothing.

"Thanks, Mr. Soft," says Q.

"We all know we're doing the work here, right?"

We have an assignment to calculate the volume of solids formed by rotating area formulas around axes. Nothing too crazy. But Mr. Soft wants to make things interesting by having us sketch the resulting volumes on paper, in charcoal, by hand.

"To really get a sense of how the volumes feel," he says.

It's a pair assignment. Paul Olmo leans over to Q and whispers something. Q nods.

"Me and Paul are gonna do our volumes in clay," Q announces.

"Nerds," I say.

Q just looks at me like *So?*

It's Paul's turn with Q, since I got to partner with him for the last assignment. We rotate among us three to ensure equal friend time. Before I can wonder who I should pair up with, Brit Means speaks.

"Frank, will you be my partner?"

"Thanks you," I find myself saying.

Thanks you?

The bell rings. I see Q looking perhaps as astonished as me—Brit always partners with Amelie—and he offers me a covert fist bump. I naturally mistake the fist bump for a high five, and the whole thing becomes this strange gear-shift pantomime: the awkward greeting ritual of male nerds everywhere.

• • •

Playa Mesa is a giant pyramid-shaped peninsula set at the edge of the Pacific; Brit Means's house is on the side opposite from mine on that pyramid.

We sit at her hulking dining table and start our assignment. Brit's mom designed the table; Brit's dad built it. Atop the table sit garlic pita chips in a wooden bowl, which Brit's dad carved himself. The table sits in the bulb of a large, curvaceous kitchen, which Brit's mom designed and Brit's dad built. Brit's parents are architects. They habitually design and build stuff—big, ornate, well-constructed stuff—like no big deal.

In walk her mom-n-dad, in matching hoodie sweats, matching lambskin slippers, holding matching mugs of tea. They are of identical small stature and seem to have come from the same lat and long within Europe many stout generations ago, and remind me of kindly druids from a video game I used to play.

"We'll be upstairs," says Brit's mom, and then she smiles this tilted corny smile. It's the same tilted corny smile my mom gave to me and Joy at the last Gathering.

What is happening?

"Nice to meet you, Frank," says Brit's dad.

They vanish upstairs in unison.

Brit and I sit alone.

Brit regards me for a moment, like you would a favorite painting in a museum, and speaks suddenly: "You take the odd ones, I'll take the evens."

She means the assignment. She tucks her hair behind her ear and flicks her Zeichner Profi 5.0 mm mechanical pencil, effortlessly performing Around-the-Worlds, Weaves, See-Saws, regular Sassys, and Ultra Sassys.

More like Ultra Sexys.

I try to eat my lower lip. Then I remember the first Rule of Being a Person: no auto-cannibalism. I eat a garlic pita chip instead. So does Brit. We compulsively reach for more, munching and munching, and of course our hands touch in the bowl. We both draw back as if the chips are electrified.

"Sorry," she says.

"Me too," I say.

"Huh?" says Brit.

"I don't know," I say.

For some reason, this makes Brit smile this smile that says: *But I do.*

"Wanna get through this stuff?" she says.

"Right," I say.

Solving the problems is the easy part. It's the sketching that takes time. Brit plays some music on her phone, but then switches to a proper wireless speaker.

"I hate listening on tiny speakers," she says, seconds before I can, and my heart does a triple jump.

Once I recover, I get started on the work. I sketch small—less surface area to cover—and finish fast. Brit picks up on my tactic and sketches small, too. Our pencil leads scritch and scratch. She elbows me.

"You're such a cheater."

"I'm still doing the assignment," I say. "I'm just being efficient about it."

"Done," she says.

We retract our leads and set our pencils down.

"Yours look good," I say.

"Yours look good too," she says, gazing at me.

Dear lord Flying Spaghetti Monster in Pastafarian heaven. I think Brit Means is flirting with me.

"What do you wanna do now?" I say.

"I don't know, what do you want to do?"

She sits closer. Now is the moment in the teen movie where I sweep the homework to the floor and kiss her. But like I said, my kissing track record is exactly one item long, and was an accident.

I'm pretty sure Brit's kissing track record is as short as mine. But she must be ready. Right? Why else would she be sitting so close? Is that how this works?

I have no idea how anything works. I have no idea what is happening. I stare back into her eternal ancient gray eyes

looking all ancient and gray and eternal into mine and find that they are also inscrutable. I could be totally wrong. It could be that Brit's just the strange type of girl who likes to sit close and stare and say nothing.

"Forgot my glasses," says a voice, and we look up just in time to see Brit's dad's hoodie vanishing around a corner.

"Let's go outside," says Brit, suddenly standing. "There's something I want to show you."

• • •

We step out into a night full of crickets on loop. Like most of Playa Vista, there is only one streetlamp for miles. Outside that single icy cone of light is the pure impenetrable darkness of the new moon sky, with only the stars and the glint of many parked cars visible.

"What's with all the cars?" I say.

"Someone's having a big house party. I'm pretty sure it's Armenian independence day." Brit hops and crouches, inspecting the cars. She moves like a long-haired imp.

"Look," she says, and cracks open one of the cars.

"Brit," I say, laughing.

"They're never locked," she says, opening it farther. "I find it so revealing about people's biases. People just assume certain things about certain neighborhoods. They wouldn't leave their doors unlocked like this over in Delgado Beach."

"Well, Playa Mesa is freakishly safe, after all."

"If we did a study, we would find a correlation between unlocked cars and neighborhood income levels, I bet you a million bucks."

"Ha ha," I say, but stop short. Because to my horror, Brit has ducked her head inside the car and is now emerging with a tin of mints. She pops one in her mouth. She tosses me a mint, too.

"Have one," she says.

"You're insane," I say, and laugh, and look around.

But I eat the mint.

Brit carefully closes the door, then latches it shut with a bump of her hip. "People keep the artifacts of their lives in their cars. Makes me feel like an archaeologist. A carchaeologist."

"We're gonna get busted."

"Frankly, Frank Li, you're being paranoid," says Brit, with mock sass. "Anyway, even if we do get busted all I have to do is be all, *Oh-em-gee, I'm so drunk, anyway you should really lock your car, bye!*"

Brit has switched to California Valley Girl Patois with no effort, and it makes me twitch a little.

In Language class Ms. Chit would called this *code switching.* It's like switching accents, but at a more micro level.

The idea is that you don't speak the same way with your friends (California English Casual) that you do with a teacher (California English Formal), or a girl (California English Singsong), or your immigrant parents (California English Exasperated). You change how you talk to best adapt to whoever you're talking to. But it's not just about adaptation, as Ms. Chit explained. People can code switch to confuse others, express dominance or submission, or disguise themselves.

I've always thought I'm pretty good at code switching. But the way Brit does it is true mastery. It's like watching

her become a different person entirely. It makes me wonder what other codes she can speak.

"This one . . . No, there's a blinking light on the dash," she says. "This one, maybe."

She pops the door open: "Aha."

"I am jacking cars with Brit Means," I say.

"Tell me, though: is it jacking if they're unlocked?" she says.

"How long has this been a hobby of yours?"

"Only a couple months. I've found alcohol, cash, just cash lying out in the open. An old instant camera. It's crazy."

"Wait, are you keeping this stuff?"

Brit unearths something. "Look. High-fidelity compact discs. Who listens to CDs?"

She flings one at me and I fumble to catch it like a Frisbee. It's all in Armenian.

"Dude, put this back," I say. I wipe the disc clean of my fingerprints, just in case the FBI gets called to investigate, and start to fling it back to her when she quickly hits the car's lock button and slams the door shut.

"Too late," she says, giggling. "You're stuck with that."

"I already said you're insane, right?" I say, and slip the disc into my back pocket.

"And to answer your question, no, I don't take the stuff. I just redistribute it to other cars."

"That's hilarious. It's like a metaphor for something."

"For what?"

I think for a moment. Metaphor not incoming.

Is this bad? Sure. It's just a little bad. To be sure, it's nothing compared with what other kids are doing, like failing out

or getting pregnant or arrested or, in the case of Deckland Ayers, drunk-racing his brand-new Q2S sport coupe into a pole and failing out in the most permanent and tragic way.

But for Apeys, it's just bad enough.

And I love it.

"Hey, a minivan," I say. "A trove of treasures."

The minivan is the same as Q's mom's, so I know it has sliding doors on both sides. I guide Brit to the minivan's shadow, quell her sputtering giggles by squashing her cheeks with both hands, and then try the handle with practiced familiarity.

Click, whoosh.

Inside the van are toddler seats and stuffed animals and spilled puffed crackers and so on. I guide her in and can feel every sinew of the small of her back with my open hand. And together, we slowly slide the door shut behind us. The silence is absolute and ringing. I can hear her every breath. I can hear the brush of her fingertips on my shorts.

"It smells kinda good in here," she says.

And it does, because here we are, crushing toasted Os beneath our knees. Releasing their stale aroma. The space we are in is small and new and secret, and no one else in the world knows about it because no one else in the world is here but us two.

Brit is waiting. Brit is *nervous*. As nervous as me.

I find our mutual nervousness strangely comforting. It makes something in my heart loosen its grip and let go.

I pull her in and our mouths fit perfectly.

This is really happening to me. I am kissing Brit Means.

And, I realize, this is really happening to Brit Means, too.

Has she been planning this? How long has she liked me? To think, we've been friends all through high school, and this—this kiss—has been waiting in plain sight the whole time.

"Hi," I say, breathing.

"Hi," she says.

Her gray eyes are dilated wide to see in the night. We kiss deeper this time, and I don't care that she can now taste the garlic pita in my mouth because I can now taste it in hers, too. The silence focuses in. Every shift in our bodies crushing another piece of toasted cereal. The fierce breathing through nostrils flared wide. It takes me forever to realize the dome light has come on.

The light is on inside the van.

Someone has clicked a key fob remote. Someone close by, getting closer by the second.

We spring apart and duck.

"Oh shit," says Brit. Her eyes have tightened.

I'm still gasping for air. "Okay. Uh. I think we should probably go."

In the far distance, voices.

"I think you're probably right," she says, and snorts.

Brit Means snorts!

I pull the door handle and slowly slide it open. We slink out into the street. As quietly as I can, I slide the door shut, but it needs one good shove to latch closed. Usually I can get Q's mom's van to shut with barely a sound. But I guess it must be my heart dropping beats or the fact that my arms

feel like they're in zero-g, because the best I can manage is a crisp, clearly audible *chunk*.

"Ei," says a voice. "Inch dzhokhk yek anum?"

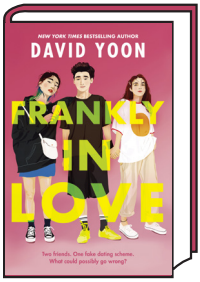
"Go go go," I hiss.

"Sorry, can't understand you," yells Brit.

We sprint into the darkness, leaving a trail of giggles behind us.

Just bad enough.

But so good.



FRANKLY IN LOVE

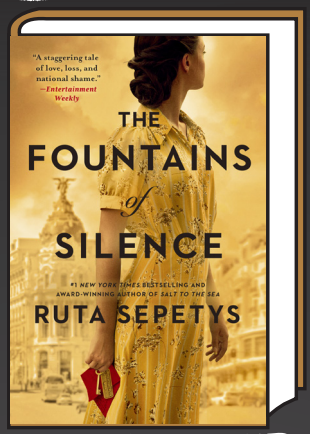
by David Yoon

What did you think after reading a few pages?

What did you think of the cover?

Would you recommend this book?

Why or why not?



THE FOUNTAINS OF SILENCE

Historical Fiction in Franco's Spain | ISBN: 978-0-142-42363-9

Madrid, 1957. Under the fascist dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, Spain is hiding a dark secret. Meanwhile, tourists and foreign businessmen flood into Spain under the welcoming promise of sunshine and wine. Among them is eighteen-year-old Daniel Matheson, the son of an oil tycoon, who arrives in Madrid with his parents hoping to connect with the country of his mother's birth through the lens of his camera. Photography—and fate—introduce him to Ana, whose family's interweaving obstacles reveal the lingering grasp of the Spanish Civil War—as well as chilling definitions of fortune and fear. Daniel's photographs leave him with uncomfortable questions amidst shadows of danger. Lives and hearts collide, revealing an incredibly dark side to the sunny Spanish city.

PART ONE

1957
MADRID, SPAIN

I've never been happy about sending an Ambassador to Spain, and I am not happy about it now, and unless Franco changes in his treatment of citizens who do not agree with him religiously I'll be sorely tempted to break off all communication with him in spite of the defense of Europe.

—Harry S. Truman, 33rd president of the United States
August 2, 1951

Memorandum from Truman to Secretary of State Dean Acheson
Acheson Papers—Secretary of State File
Truman Library Archives

1

They stand in line for blood.

June's early sun blooms across a string of women waiting patiently at *el matadero*. Fans snap open and flutter, replying to Madrid's warmth and the scent of open flesh wafting from the slaughterhouse.

The blood will be used for *morcilla*, blood sausage. It must be measured with care. Too much blood and the sausage is not firm. Too little and the sausage crumbles like dry earth.

Rafael wipes the blade on his apron, his mind miles from *morcilla*. He turns slowly from the line of customers and puts his face to the sky.

In his mind it is Sunday. The hands of the clock touch six.

It is time.

The trumpet sounds and the march of the *pasodoble* rolls through the arena.

Rafael steps onto the sand, into the sun.

He is ready to meet Fear.

In the center box of the bullring sits Spain's dictator, Generalísimo Francisco Franco. They call him *El Caudillo*—leader of armies, hero by the grace of God. Franco looks down to the ring. Their eyes meet.

You don't know me, Generalísimo, but I know you.

I am Rafael Torres Moreno, and today, I am not afraid.

"Rafa!"

The supervisor swats the back of Rafael's damp neck. "Are you blind? There's a line. Stop daydreaming. The blood, Rafa. Give them their blood."

Rafa nods, walking toward the patrons. His visions of the bullring quickly disappear.

Give them their blood.

Memories of war tap at his brain. The small, taunting voice returns, choking daydreams into nightmares. *You do remember, don't you, Rafa?*

He does.

The silhouette is unmistakable.

Patent-leather men with patent-leather souls.

The Guardia Civil. He secretly calls them the Crows. They are servants of Generalísimo Franco and they have appeared on the street.

"Please. Not here," whispers Rafael from his hiding spot beneath the trees.

The wail of a toddler echoes above. He looks up and sees Julia at the open window, holding their youngest sister, Ana.

Their father's voice booms from inside. "Julia, close the window! Lock the door and wait for your mother. Where is Rafa?"

"Here, Papá," whispers Rafael, his small legs folded in hiding. "I'm right here."

His father appears at the door. The Crows appear at the curb.

The shot rings out. A flash explodes. Julia screams from above.

Rafa's body freezes. No breath. No air.

No.

No.

No.

They drag his father's limp corpse by an arm.

"¡Papá!"

It's too late. As the cry leaves his throat, Rafa realizes. He's given himself away.

A pair of eyes dart. "His boy's behind the tree. Grab him."

Rafa blinks, blocking the painful memories, hiding his collapsed heart beneath a smile.

"*Buenos días, señora*. How may I help you?" he asks the customer.

"Blood."

"*Sí, señora*."

Give them their blood.

For more than twenty years, Spain has given blood. And sometimes Rafa wonders—what is left to give?

2

It's a lie.

It has to be.

I know what you've done.

Ana Torres Moreno stands two levels belowground, in the second servants' basement. She rips the small note to pieces, shoves them in her mouth, and swallows.

A voice calls from the hall. "Hurry, Ana. They're waiting."

Dashing through the windowless maze of stone walls, Ana wills herself to move faster. Wills herself to smile.

A weak glow from a bare bulb whispers light onto the supply shelf. Ana spots the tiny sewing kit and throws it into her basket. She runs to the stairs and falls in step with Lorenza, who balances an assortment of cigarettes on a tray.

"You look pale," whispers Lorenza. *"¿Estás bien?"*

"I'm fine," replies Ana.

Always say you're fine, especially when you're not, she reminds herself.

The mouth of the stairway appears. Light from a crystal chandelier twinkles and beckons from the glittering hall.

Their steps slow, synchronize, and in perfect unison they emerge onto the marble floor of the hotel lobby, faces full

of smile. Ana scrolls her mental list. The man from New York will want a newspaper and matches. The woman from Pennsylvania will need more ice.

Americans love ice. Some claim to have trays of cubed ice in their own kitchens. Maybe it's possible. Ana sees advertisements for appliances in glossy magazines that hotel guests leave behind.

Frigidaire! Rustproof aluminum shelving, controlled butter-ready.

Whatever that means. Beyond Spain, all is a mystery.

Ana hears every word, but guests would never know it. She scurries, filling requests quickly so visitors have no time to glance out of their world and into hers.

Julia, the matriarch of their fractured family, issues constant reminders. "You trust too easily, Ana. You reveal too much. Stay silent."

Ana is tired of silence, tired of unanswered questions, and tired of secrets. A girl of patched pieces, she dreams of new beginnings. She dreams of leaving Spain. But her sister is right. Her dreams have proven dangerous.

I know what you've done.

"For once, follow the rules instead of your heart," pleads her sister.

Follow the rules. To be invisible in plain view and paid handsomely for it—five *pesetas* per hour—this is the plan.

Her older brother, Rafael, works at both the slaughterhouse and the cemetery. Between two jobs he makes only twelve *pesetas*, twenty cents according to the hotel's exchange desk, for an entire day's work.

Ana hands the sewing kit to the concierge and heads quickly for the staff elevator. The morning is gone, but her task list is growing. Summer season has officially arrived at the hotel, pouring thousands of new visitors into Spain. The elevator doors open to the seventh floor. Ana shifts the basket to her hip and hurries down the long corridor.

"Towels for 760," whispers a supervisor who shuttles past.

"Towels for 760," she confirms.

Four years old, but to Ana, the American hotel smells new. Tucked into her basket is a stack of hotel brochures featuring a handsome bullfighter, a matador, holding a red cape. In fancy script across the cape is written:

Castellana Hilton Madrid. Your Castle in Spain.

Castles. She saw old postcards as a child. The haunting newsreel rolls behind her eyes:

The tree-lined avenue of Paseo de la Castellana—home to Spanish royalty and grand palaces. And then, the bright images fade. 1936. Civil war erupts in Spain. War drains color from the cheeks of Madrid. The grand palaces become gray ghosts. Gardens and fountains disappear. So do Ana's parents. Hunger and isolation cast a filter of darkness over the country. Spain is curtained off from the world.

And now, after twenty years of nationwide atrophy, Generalísimo Franco is finally allowing tourists into Spain.

Banks and hotels wrap new exteriors over old palace interiors. The tourists don't know the difference. What lies beneath is now hidden, like the note disintegrating in her stomach.

Ana reads the newspapers and magazines that guests discard. She memorizes the brochure to recite on cue.

> *Formerly a palace, Castellana is the first Hilton property in Europe. Over three hundred rooms, each with a three-channel radio, and even a telephone.*

"If you are assigned to a guest in a suite, you will see to their every request," lectures her supervisor. "Remember, Americans are less formal than Spaniards. They're accustomed to conversation. You will be warm, helpful, and conversational."

"*Ay*, I'm always warm and conversational," Lorenza whispers with a wink.

Ana wants to be conversational, but her sister's call for silence contradicts hotel instruction. The constant tug in opposite directions makes her feel like a rag doll, destined to lose an arm.

A man in a crisp white shirt emerges from a door into the hallway.

Ana stops and gives a small bob. *"Buenos días, señor."*

"Hiya, doll."

Doll. Dame. Kitten. Baby. American men have many terms for women. Just when Ana thinks she has learned them all,

a new one appears. In her English class at the hotel, these words are called terms of endearment.

After what happened last year, Ana knows better.

American diplomats, actors, and musicians arrive amidst the swirling dust of Barajas Airport. They socialize and mingle into the pale hours of morning. Ana secretly notes their preferences. Starlets have favorite suites. Politicians have favorite starlets. Many are unaware of what transpired in Spain decades earlier. They sip cava, romanticizing Hemingway and flamenco. On rare occasion someone asks Ana about Spain's war. She politely changes the subject. It's not only hotel policy, but also the promise she made.

She will look to the future. The past must be forgotten.

Her father executed. Her mother imprisoned. Their crime was not an action, but an ambition—teachers who hoped to develop a Montessori school with methods based on child development rather than religion. But Generalísimo Franco commands that all schools in Spain shall be controlled by the Catholic Church. Republican sympathizers must be eradicated.

Her parents' offense has left Ana rowing dark waters of dead secrets. Born into a long shadow of shame, she must never speak publicly of her parents. She must live in silence. But sometimes, from the hidden corners of her heart, calls the haunting question:

What can be built through silence?

They are calling the Hotel Castellana Hilton here "The Forty-ninth State" and with some justification, because only in America does there seem to be more Americanos. . . .

. . . There are diplomats and generals, admirals and hill jumpers, phony counts and real ones, movie actresses trying to look like movie actresses and non-actresses also trying to look like actresses. Some of the steadies have been here so long now that they have to cut them loose from the bar stools. And there is usually a magnificent assortment of weirdies.

. . . I have seen faces around here that haven't emerged since the old contract-letting days of World War II. They crowd the bar and give cocktail parties and search endlessly for "contacts," for Spain is opening up more and more to outside trade, and there is, of course, big dough to be made in the construction of the military bases here.

—Robert C. Ruark

from "Call Hotel Hilton The 49th State"
Defiance Crescent News*, Defiance, Ohio*
March 1, 1955

3

They know he's a tourist.

It's not the camera that draws their stare. It's his clothing. The eyes of the locals pull first to Daniel's mud-dulled boots. Their gaze crawls over his denims, pausing briefly at the belt buckle displaying the silhouette of Texas. A quick survey then continues north over his plaid shirt, but as soon as they see his camera, they quickly turn away.

People look at him, but no one speaks to him.

Two small boys walk by a newspaper stand. The front page of the paper features a picture of Spain's leader. The boys stop and raise their right arms in salute to the photograph.

¡Franco! El Caudillo de España.

Daniel snaps a picture.

The words and Franco's photo, in various configurations, appear everywhere. On the country's coins, postage stamps, trolley cars, and street signs. Daniel looks at the newspaper photograph. General Franco is short with a bland face and retreating hairline. His tiny mustache is perhaps his only distinguishable feature. Small in stature, his grip over the country looms tall, absolute.

"Dan's six foot one now," bragged his father recently. "Isn't that right, big man?"

Wrong. Height doesn't make a man big or powerful. He and his father look through different lenses.

❊ ❊ ❊

As he exits Retiro Park, noise erupts like a clowder of screaming cats. Motor scooters blister down the scalding pavement, darting between wheezing buses and honking cars. A little girl in a ruffled dress sits on the handlebars of a motorcycle as her wild driver whips through traffic.

Daniel pauses on the sidewalk. Madrid roars with an exotic energy of deep colors. Cars and shoes are black, blending with street tapestries of charcoal, Goya brown, and dark currant. The churning scenes are accented by swirling exhaust and snaps of Spanish. His mother, born in Spain, is adamant he speak the language of her country. For the first five years of his life she spoke to him only in Spanish. Although the language is familiar, all else in Madrid is foreign.

On the corner near the entrance to the park, tired donkeys pull lumbering carts. Vendors hawk souvenirs. A pencil of a man stands behind an assortment of Spanish folding fans. He holds several at once, flicking them open to flutter like painted butterflies. The vendor motions to the badge hanging from Daniel's camera strap, asking if he's a journalist.

"¿Periodista? ¿Americano?"

Daniel nods at the half-truth and continues walking. The camera was a high school graduation present from his mother. The badge is from a local paper back home in Dallas.

"I want to be a photojournalist," he announced recently at the dinner table.

"Trust me, you'll grow out of it," said his father.

He won't. Photographs are spontaneous and exciting, something that he creates, not inherits. They're a story of his own making, instead of an ancestral narrative steeped in oil fortune. He thinks of the typewritten letter at home in his desk drawer.

❊ ❊ ❊

Dear Mr. Matheson,

Congratulations, you have been selected as one of five finalists for the 1957 Magnum Photography Prize.

His portfolio is due in September.

His father doesn't understand. Daniel won't tire of photography, but he is tired of frugal listeners who are generous with opinion. And the opinions are many:

He should pursue football instead of boxing.
Photography's a waste of time.
The family oil business will be his happily ever after.

Those who think they know him best don't really know him at all.

Girls were no different. "Daniel Matheson. My, my, where have *you* been hiding?" joked the pretty debutantes crowding the jukebox at Nelson's.

He hadn't been hiding. He'd always been there but the girls had never noticed—until he returned as a senior, four inches taller and several yards stronger. His phone started ringing. They loved his truck, his photos, and hearing him speak Spanish with the waiters at El Fenix. Suddenly, he was "interesting." And suddenly, he was foolish enough to believe them.

After three months of dating Laura Beth, "interesting" no longer interested her.

"What about penny loafers instead of boots?" she suggested. "Let's take your father's Cadillac instead of your truck." And, "Oh, him? He's just a good friend of the family."

His school buddies at St. Mark's laughed. "What did you expect? She rides dressage. You ride rodeo. Everyone knows she's fickle. She's not worth the whiskey." Thankfully, it was his Spanish heritage that ended the relationship with Laura Beth. He was "too ethnic." *Gracias*, *Madre*.

Daniel passes a café. The dry, windy air infuses with oil, garlic, and paprika. Heaps of prawns, eel, fried peppers, and spiced sausages fill the large glass window. He snaps a picture. The warm wind funnels through his hair. Madrid is as hot as Dallas. He turns a corner onto a narrow, cobbled street and tucks into a doorway. Daniel looks at his watch and then to the position of the sun. His parents are waiting at the hotel for lunch. His father will be annoyed with him. Again.

Approaching heels echo in the distance. Daniel raises the lens to his eye.

A nun.

Her steps are quick. Purposeful. She carries a small bundle wrapped in cloth. She looks constantly over her shoulder, as if she's being followed. Daniel remains in the doorway, unnoticed, waiting for the perfect shot. A breath of wind swirls the nun's black robes. She reaches down with a hand to tame them. As she does, the breeze lifts the cloth, revealing the contents of her bundle.

A baby's face, gray like smoke, stares at Daniel.

His breath hitches as he presses the shutter.

The child is dead.

The nun's eyes, wide with panic, snap to his lens.

Hammering the shutter produces nothing but an empty clicking. He's out of film.

His hand dives into his pocket for a new roll. He loads as fast as he can, but it's no use. When he looks up the nun has disappeared, replaced by two men in capes and wing-shaped hats. They're carrying rifles.

The Guardia Civil. The military force that serves Franco.

Daniel's favorite poet, Federico García Lorca, described them: *Who could see you and not remember you? Patent-leather men with patent-leather souls.*

"Steer clear of them," warned his father.

But their sinister appearance, like human crows, curls a beckoning finger toward Daniel's lens. He slides farther into the doorway to conceal himself. It's not illegal to photograph the Guardia Civil, is it?

Just one picture. For the contest.

Daniel presses the shutter. Did he get it?

A flap of wings. A silent bomb explodes.

The men are instantly upon him, slamming him against the door, yanking the badge hanging from his camera strap.

"¿Americano?"

"Sí, señor. Americano," replies Daniel, fighting the urge to shove them away. He tries to remain polite. *"Yo hablo español."*

The guard sneers. "*¿Y qué?* Because you speak Spanish you think you have the right to photograph whatever you please? Hand over the film. Now!"

Daniel fumbles nervously to open the back of his camera and remove the roll. Are they going to arrest him?

The guard rips the film from his hand. "Your badge is worth nothing here. Where are you staying?" he demands.

"The Castellana Hilton."

Wait.

No.

As soon as the words leave his mouth, Daniel wants to grab them, take them back, and hide them.

But it's too late.

. . . The system was very rigid. It was Franco's Spain. You did not want to fall under the hands of the Guardia Civil or the police. The jails were pretty bad and people were getting thrown in there all the time.

—Alexander F. Watson, U.S. consular officer, Madrid (1964–1966)

Oral History Interview Excerpt, September 1996
Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection
Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Arlington, VA www.adst.org

4

Puri holds a baby on her lap. She ties strings on the booties that match the pale rose of the child's cheek. This tiny girl loves sounds, so Puri makes popping noises with her mouth. The infant giggles and smiles in delight, alive with joy and wonder.

A brass medallion hangs from the child's neck by a white string. Puri turns the pendant over and runs her thumb across the engraving.

20 116.

20 116 is unaware she's an orphan. She doesn't realize she's been brought to the Inclusa, the orphanage in Madrid. She has no idea she is held by Purificación Torres Pérez, or that Puri wears a black apron bearing the red arrows of the Falange, the Spanish fascist movement.

"Your duty, your mission as a woman is to serve," lectured her school instructors. Puri is grateful to serve through working with children.

"We're going for photos. It will be fun," coos Puri to the infant.

20 116 is dressed in beautiful clothes that don't belong to her. Puri will take her to the small white room on the third floor. A man with a boxy black camera will come and hover in front of the orphan, capturing her portrait. Puri will

soothe her after the spark of scary flashbulbs. She will make the popping noises.

20 116 will be returned to her ruffled bassinet in the nursery. The pretty clothes will be returned to the dark closet of Sister Hortensia.

One outfit for girls. One outfit for boys.

Sister Hortensia oversees each infant with sincere and devoted affection. Photos of the child will be shared with loving couples in Spain. Puri smooths the baby's downy wisps of hair, thankful there are so many families willing to adopt unfortunate children.

A large framed portrait of Franco hangs at the front of the room.

"Our defender, *El Caudillo*, he is watching," Puri whispers to the baby. "He is taking care of us." She lifts the infant's tiny right arm in salute toward the picture. She bounces her in rhythm and sings the anthemic melody:

"He's Franco, Franco, Franco. Our guide and captain."

A nun from a local hospital sweeps frantically into the room, summoning Sister Hortensia. There are nods. Whispers.

"In the street. Yes, just now. And the Guardia Civil . . ."

Puri strains to hear.

20 116 begins to whimper. Puri makes the popping sound.

The two nuns look to Puri.

Puri turns her back.

5

Ana checks the register in her apron pocket for her assigned guest.

Daniel Matheson.

She knocks lightly on the door. No reply.

Using her passkey, she lets herself into the room.

Warmth. Quiet. The air-cooling is turned off and the door to the balcony stands open. The sheer pearl drape rises and falls on the hot breeze.

Most tourists want air-cooled rooms along with their ice. But this guest is different. This visitor welcomes the hot, dry breath of Madrid into the large suite. His clothes are not yet tucked into the drawers or closet. They spill from open suitcases on the floor amidst other litter of arrival. Stacks of newspapers and magazines sit atop the coffee table. A magazine title, *LIFE*, calls out to Ana. Resting next to the newspapers is a yellow box labeled GE PHOTO FLASHBULBS.

Hotel guests bring an array of expensive belongings. A man from Illinois works for a company called Zenith. He has "transistor" radios in a rainbow of colors, small enough to fit in your pocket. A musician down the hall has a portable record player housed in a suitcase. How do they earn the money to buy such things? The petit lobster appetizer on the hotel menu costs more than most Spaniards earn in months.

"They often leave food untouched, just sitting on the tray," she tells her brother, Rafael.

"Sure, it's not expensive for them," he explains. "American men have something called 'minimum wage' for working. One U.S. dollar per hour. And that's their lowest wage. Can you imagine?" Rafa leans in toward Ana. "Those rich Americanos are happy, not hungry. Put some lobster in your pocket for me," he says with a conspiring nod.

Ana laughs at her brother's teasing. Their older sister, Julia, does not laugh. Julia worries. When not holding her baby, her hands hold each other, wringing twists of concern.

"We have five mouths at the table now. No one can lose their job," says Julia.

Ana loves her job, along with the English classes and the relaxed American atmosphere it provides. She could not bear to lose the position. But Rafa is right. Most guests at the hotel have never known hunger—not hunger for food, nor hunger for life.

Her family has known both.

An open magazine sits quietly on a chair. A photo of an American family stares at Ana. She gently sets down the towels and bends to pick up the magazine.

American girls wear cuffed socks with black-and-white shoes. They stare at pictures of singers who perform something called rock-and-roll music—music considered indecent in Spain. What would happen if Spanish girls wore pants on the street? Would they be apprehended? Would an unmarried woman in Spain ever be allowed a passport?

Ana dreams of travel, of one day leaving Spain. What lies outside the country's borders is untouchable for families like hers. For decades, Francisco Franco has believed that outside influence will corrupt Spain's purity and identity. The train tracks in Spain are purposely wider than the rest of Europe's to prevent unwanted entries and exits.

"Spain needs money and foreign investment, that's why Franco allowed the American hotel," claims Rafa. "*Ay*, a castle in Spain for Americanos," he laughs.

It's true. After years of isolation, select industries have been invited from America—tourism, motion pictures, and oil. Americans stay at the Castellana Hilton. But the Hilton has more than just hotel rooms. It has a business office. Ana's English is strong. Once she's worked at the hotel for two years she may apply for a position in a different department. The secretarial team from the business office travels with executives throughout Spain. They leave Madrid.

A key clatters in the lock. A tall young man with dark hair enters the room. They both jump, startled. The magazine flutters to the floor.

"Welcome back, *señor*." Ana greets the guest as instructed.

The young man stands, holding a camera. He stares at her, then looks nervously about the room. His clothes are different from those Ana sees in magazines. Most Americans are polished and tidy. This boy is handsome but rugged. His hair has a mind of its own.

His low voice breaks the silence. *"Lo siento. No era mi intención asustarte."*

"You didn't scare me," smiles Ana.

"Oh, you speak English," he says quietly.

"And you speak Spanish very well, *señor*, but not Spanish from Spain. Perhaps you speak Spanish"—she pauses—"from Mexico?"

The side of his mouth lifts, almost reaching a smile. "Texas. Must be my accent. But my mother is from Spain." He points to the door. "My parents are in the suite down the hall." He attempts to smooth his tousled hair and that's when Ana notices. His sleeve is torn.

He sets down the camera and moves to retrieve the magazine. Ana reaches it first.

She feels his eyes upon her as she swaps the magazine for the towels.

"Ah, yes. Your parents are the Mathesons of Dallas. You arrived yesterday. Welcome to the Castellana Hilton, *señor*. I hope you are enjoying your stay?"

"Yes, ma'am." He nods.

Unlike "sugar" or "doll," Ana has been told, "ma'am" is a term of respect, not endearment. She looks at the young man. At most, she is two years older.

"My parents," he says quietly. "Have they stopped by my room?"

"No, *señor*."

His shoulders retreat with relief.

A knock sounds at the door. His blue eyes flash wide and a finger flies to his lips, requesting silence. Ana stands facing him, clutching the towels.

The knocking continues, followed by a woman's voice behind the door.

"Daniel, are you back?"

He looks to Ana and shakes his head quickly. His lips form the word *no*, followed by a sheepish grin.

Ana stifles a laugh, trying to contain her wide smile. She hates the spot of gold that tops her lower side tooth.

"Maybe he left the radio on and that's what you heard," says a man's voice.

Radio? Daniel mouths the word.

Ana points nearby. He leans across her and snaps it on low. He smells . . . nice.

After a few moments, Daniel cocks his ear toward the door. "I think they're gone," he whispers. He exhales deeply, as if trying to calm himself. "Sorry about that. I'm trying to avoid my parents."

"Yes, I can see that," she says with a laugh. She turns and takes the towels to the bathroom.

The telephone rings.

"Aw geez, now they're calling from their room," says Daniel.

She wants so desperately to be conversational, to discover why he's avoiding his parents, but heeds her sister's warning. "Is there anything you need, *señor*? If not, I'll be going," says Ana.

"No. Thanks a lot for your help." He pauses, looking at her. "Say, your English is better than my Spanish. Are you from Madrid?"

Ana looks him straight in the eye. She smiles and lies.

"*Sí, señor*, from Madrid."

When I first went there, to Spain in '55, you had the feeling of depression when you got into Spain, repression. It was true. Everybody was careful what they said, what they did, how they disported themselves.

—William W. Lehfeldt, U.S. vice consul, Bilbao (1955–1957)

Oral History Interview Excerpt, April 1994
Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection
Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Arlington, VA www.adst.org

6

"'*Rebellious*, *bohemian*, *vulgar*. These are the words used to describe Miguelín, the new bullfighter.'"

Rafael looks up from the newspaper. His friend Fuga sits on a crate in the cemetery shed and nods, urging Rafa to continue.

"'Following his presentation at Las Ventas in Madrid,'" reads Rafa, "'this *torero* assures audiences that he is one to watch.'"

Fuga points to the image of a matador in the newspaper.

"*Sí*, that's him, Miguelín," says Rafa. "Shall I show you how to write his name? I've told you, if you're going to be a famous bullfighter, you have to learn your letters."

The offer is ignored. Fuga teeters back on the arthritic box, stabbing the dirt with a shovel. His mane of black hair, wild and unkempt, cannot conceal his feral eyes. Those who pass him look twice. They not only see him, they feel him. He is a gathering storm.

Fuga's gaze ticktocks between Rafa and a miniature plywood casket, the size of a large shoebox, that sits near his feet.

"*Ay*, another baby?" says Rafa.

Fuga says nothing, just stares at the little coffin.

Some friendships are born of commonality. Others of proximity. And some friendships, often the unlikely ones,

are born of survival. Rafa and his friend are comrades of hardship. They refuse to speak of the boys' home in Barcelona. It was not a "home." It was a hellhole, a slaughterhouse of souls. The "brothers" and "matrons" who ran the institution took pleasure in the humiliation of children. The mere memory is poison.

The torments, like mental cockroaches, still crawl through Rafa's mind: holding a coin against the wall with his nose; kneeling on chickpeas; being held down and burned with cigarettes. He remembers pure fear causing him to wet the bed, then the brothers tying the soiled sheet around his neck, insisting he wear his cowardice like a cape for all to see. He remembers losing weight, losing his hair, losing his courage.

"¡Basta!"

Stop. The word reaches him before his friend's punch. The sting of pain is the customary antidote, a promise fulfilled when memory grabs hold. The memories are poison. Don't take the poison.

"Gracias."

Fuga nods, his fierce eyes softening beneath the wilderness of his hair. His hand suddenly extends from his pocket, offering a small mandarin to Rafa.

Rafa craves the citrus of the orange, but it's too generous. He can't take his friend's only meal. He shakes his head.

Fuga shrugs. "*Entonces*, ask her?"

"Her" means Julia, his older sister. The favor is one only she can fulfill.

"*Sí*, I'll ask her." Rafa tears the newspaper into a stack of neat squares. "Ana says they don't use newspaper in the

American hotel. She says the guests are provided rolls of soft white tissue in the toilets. When you become famous, *amigo*, you're going to buy us all white tissue for the outhouse."

Fuga stares at the baby's casket. "No," he hisses. "When I become famous, I'll unmask the evil homes and rescue the children." He stabs the shovel into the dirt. "Tell me the words from your book again."

He is referring to a thin volume that Rafa cherishes. It's a favorite book of his father's, containing the philosophy of Seneca.

"Gold is tried by fire and brave men by adversity," says Rafa.

"*Sí*," whispers Fuga. "I will emerge from this fire and when I do"—his head snaps to Rafa, wild eyes ablaze—"I'll burn them all down."

7

Daniel reluctantly takes a chair in his parents' suite. How could he be so stupid? Why didn't he tell the guards he was staying at the Ritz? They could have followed him there and no one would have known. The guards must have better things to do than chaperone a kid with a camera. It's not a big deal.

But if it's not a big deal, why is he still sweating? The images flash constantly through his mind.

The gray baby. The nun's face snapping toward the lens. Her look of shock as she scurried away. The sudden appearance of the guards.

Daniel stares at the camera in his lap. Thankfully, they didn't notice the roll in his pocket. Will the image of the infant appear on film as it remains fixed in his mind?

Bringing the camera to his eye, he frames his broad-shouldered father against the small hotel desk. His dad looks up and shakes his head. The disappointment presses Daniel's well-worn guilt button. Why can't he find passion in oil drilling like his father? It would be so much easier.

His mother evaluates her dresses and clears the annoyance from her throat.

"It was an accident, Martin. Daniel didn't know."

"I'm getting tired of these 'accidents,' María. Two days before our trip he got into a fight at the movie theater."

"I didn't pick a fight, Dad. I was defending a friend," says Daniel. He *was* defending a friend—while enjoying the opportunity to slug a longtime neighborhood bully.

"You're mighty lucky the Dallas police let you off with a warning. You're eighteen. You can be tried as an adult. And this?" His father opens his arms in query. "We've been in Madrid barely twenty-four hours, and the lobby manager tells me you were escorted back by the Guardia Civil?"

"I wish the valets wouldn't have seen," says his mother.

"I wish you hadn't bought him that camera," snaps his father.

"I wish you'd stop arguing," says Daniel.

"We're not arguing." His mother sighs and turns to Daniel. "Your father and I, we have weeks of engagements and trips, *cariño*. I thought it would be exciting for you to explore on your own. But maybe it's not safe. I no longer have family in Spain if something happens while we're away. And now you're so far from Laura Beth."

He still hasn't told his parents about the breakup. They'll ask all sorts of questions. Daniel examines his camera, dodging the topic of Laura Beth and wishing he had photographed the pretty girl in his hotel room. "I'm sorry. It was a dumb mistake. I'm completely fine on my own. Really."

He gives his mom an apologetic shrug. Recently, his mother's tone has developed a tired edge. She's the one who begged to return to Spain, but since arriving, she seems nervous. Daniel recognizes his mother's reaction—it's her fear of not fitting in.

María Alonso Moya Matheson was born in the Galicia region of Spain but raised as a Spanish American in Texas. In

public, his mother is the wife of an oil magnate and appears completely American. She baked fund-raiser cakes for the Eisenhower campaign. She supports the Hockaday School and the Junior League, and is accepted by the socialites of Preston Hollow and Dallas at large. At home, his mom speaks to him only in Spanish. He is *cariño*, darling, or *tesoro*, treasure. Many of their servants have Spanish heritage. His mother makes certain that Spanish food and customs are fixtures in his life.

"It's difficult navigating two cultures," she once told him. "I feel like a bookmark wedged between chapters. I live in America, but I am not born of it. I'm Spanish."

His mom is thrilled that oil business has brought them to Spain. She wants to expose them to the country her late parents so adored. Pure Spain. Noble Spain. This is her plan.

His father snaps open his briefcase.

"I'm not here to bail you out of trouble, Dan. This isn't a vacation for me. Franco will only grant drilling rights to a few American companies. I'll tour the sites and close a deal before summer's end. *That's* the plan," says his father. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," replies Daniel.

Daniel is freshly graduated from St. Mark's School of Texas. In the fall he'll enter Texas A&M University and following graduation he'll join the family oil operation—his college tuition is contingent upon it.

Daniel's thoughts return to the image of the dead baby; the photograph could anchor his portfolio submission. The cash award from the Magnum prize could easily pay for a year of journalism school instead of Texas A&M.

"We're invited to a dinner reception at the Van Dorns'," says his father. "They have a son your age and he's back from boarding school in Switzerland."

"The Van Dorns. Diplomats from Oyster Bay, the Long Island set," says his mother. "Several of these prestigious families have posts in the U.S. Embassy. Daniel, *mi amor*, please wear slacks and a tie. I wish you wouldn't wear those denims all the time. You look like a ranch hand." She grimaces. "Is your sleeve torn?"

Daniel quickly examines his shirt. "Oh, must have caught it on something."

The guards took his film *and* tore his sleeve? If that's how they treat tourists, how do they treat locals? He heads toward the door.

His mother gently takes his arm. "I saw they have postcards in the lobby. Make sure to mail a card to Laura Beth each day. Her family will expect that."

He exits the room with his camera, unwilling to cause a scene.

No need to worry his mother with the truth about Laura Beth.

8

Puerta del Sol. The heartbeat of Madrid.

Evening gathers tourists and locals who linger near the fountains and stairs to the Metro. The words GONZÁLEZ BYASS glow green from the TÍO PEPE sign atop a building, throwing an eerie radiance into the paling sky.

Ana walks down the narrow cobblestone street. The swallowed note is gone, but a taste remains.

I know what you've done.

She looks over her shoulder before slipping through the unmarked door. At the bottom of the darkened stairway, a soft light pulses beneath the entry. She pauses to listen, then pushes through the door.

A rainbow of color bursts with greeting. Glistening bolts of silk and satin climb from the floor to the ceiling. Shimmering fabrics in sea blue, deep amethyst, and gleaming gold cascade across worn countertops. Sketches and patterns are pinned across the walls. Three women sit at tables while two others work heavy material through machines.

Ana bends to retrieve a small pearl from the floor. In this snug space, ceremony is created. The beautiful fabrics and jewels are not for party dresses or wedding gowns. They are created and used for one person only.

El torero. The matador.

Traje de luces. Suit of lights. Named because the gemstones and beads sewn onto the fabric reflect and sparkle as if operated by a hidden switch. One suit is composed of countless pieces, taking months to construct, each detail completed by a different person. One woman specializes in pants, another in capes, and yet others in complicated threadwork. Her sister's specialty—beading and gemstones.

Like her brother, Rafa, Ana's cousin Puri loves the bullfighters. But Ana loves the bulls. She detests bullfights. Divided family loyalties are common, yet unspoken.

The workshop, generally full of chatter, is now devoid of voices. This means that Luis, the master tailor and owner of the shop, fits a matador in the next room.

Ana's sister, Julia, sits on a wooden chair in the corner. A lamp rings a halo of quiet light into her lap. She pushes a needle through the rigid seven-layer fabric, sewing one of hundreds of sapphire gemstones onto a cropped jacket.

Julia's fingers are silent narrators, embroidered with scars. Ana pulls an empty chair to her sister's side. She retrieves a small pair of pliers from a nearby table and sets a hand on her shoulder.

"Finish with these," whispers Ana. "Your hands, they'll bleed soon."

Julia nods gratefully, accepting the pliers to grip the needle.

Ana motions with her head toward the fitting room. Which bullfighter stands behind the door?

"Ordóñez," Julia whispers.

Ana looks to her sister. Julia's face, thirsty of color, needs rest and sun. Julia has a new baby girl, just four months old. The baby is not yet strong. Neither is Julia. She clings desperately to the child, and together they cry through the nights.

Fascist doctrine states that a woman's ultimate destiny is marriage, motherhood, and domesticity. For poor families, like theirs, hunger turns a blind eye to mandates. Many women from impoverished families take positions of manual labor.

But Julia is special. Her talent as a seamstress affords her the opportunity to work in a shop. Luis needs Julia's skills to please his matadors. Julia needs the wages to feed her family and pay their debts.

"We must pool our earnings," reminds Julia's husband, Antonio. "All wages and coins shall be deposited into this old cigar box."

To move from impoverished Vallecas to a small flat in Lavapiés—this is the plan. Julia rations and counts everything, pinching every last *peseta*. For now, four adults and a newborn baby share a dark, single room. But they are together. Which is what their mother wanted.

Ana has no memory of the war, but she remembers the tears of separation after her parents disappeared. She remembers crying desperately the day she left Zaragoza to be raised by her aunt and uncle in Madrid. Though her aunt and uncle have a daughter of their own, her cousin Puri is different. Obedient. Puri is free of heartache and shame. Free of secrets. Ana envies her.

"How was your palace today?" Julia asks.

Lies and threats. But don't worry, I swallowed them.

"The same. Ice and more ice," says Ana with a laugh. She tries to redirect the conversation. "I'll be on the seventh floor for the summer. I'm assigned to a very wealthy family, staying through August. They have a son about my age."

Julia nods.

"He's from Texas," says Ana. "He has American magazines."

Julia's expression shifts from fatigue to fear. "That hotel is not real life, Ana. Not for people like us."

"Julia, it seems unbelievable to us, but for them it's real life!" says Ana. "American women drive their own cars and fly around the world on airplanes. It's not considered sinful. They don't need *permiso marital*. They can seek employment, open a bank account, and travel without their husband's permission."

Julia glances over her shoulder before whispering, "Ana, please stop picking through trash in the hotel rooms. Stop reading those books and magazines! You know very well that the content is banned in Spain. This is not America."

Julia is right. In Spain, women must adhere to strict subordinate roles in the domestic arts. Ana remembers the teachings of the *Sección Femenina*: "Do not pretend to be equal to men." They also teach that purity is absolute. Women's bathing suits must reach the knees. If a girl is discovered in a movie theater with a boy but no chaperone, her family is sent a yellow card of prostitution.

Julia's brow buckles as she reaches for Ana's hand. Even her whisper is unsteady. "The world at the hotel is a fairy

tale. I'm sorry, Ana, but that is not our world. Please remember that. Be careful who you speak to."

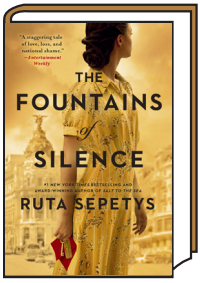
"It's my job to be conversational," says Ana.

"And that's fine, as long as it's a one-way conversation. You may ask questions but try not to answer any."

That might work. Guests enjoy talking about themselves. As long as she reveals little about her own life, there's no need for concern. Her stomach turns, digesting the note.

"Ana, is something wrong?" asks Julia.

"No." She smiles. "Nothing at all."



THE FOUNTAINS OF SILENCE

by Ruta Sepetys

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