

Fleeting v2

1 - Outcast

I live in a house where morning begins even before the sun rises.

My brother would always come back from jogging around 5:00 am, his footsteps would make our tiny home shake. It has been my alarm clock for a few years now.

My father would be sitting in his chair, sipping a cup of coffee as he types stuff in his flip phone. I don't understand why he refuses to get something more modern.

My mom would be responsible for the sizzling noises and the deep savory smell of bacon that forced me to stand.

With my eyes still closed, I stumbled through the kitchen.

“Sasha, don't forget to buy groceries later.” My mother spoke.

With heavy lids, my eyes wandered to the note stuck on the fridge by a small strawberry magnet. It was a list of typical stuff, eggs, some snacks, etc.

I made a small sound in agreement, dragging myself to the sink.

“How's school? You never talk about it these days.”

“Same as always.” I responded coldly.

The cold water gushed down my face, waking me up completely. Refreshed, I grabbed a towel and wiped my face.

“You're graduating soon, make sure to make lots of friends.”

“I don't think a year and half can be considered soon, Mom.”

“Time passes quicker than you think.”

I watched as my mother's back moved swiftly and meticulously. In a matter of minutes, she cooked an entire breakfast for a family of four.

“Help me prepare the table?” My mother asked as she faced me.

“Y-yeah.” I avoided her gaze.

No matter how many years pass, I can never get used to seeing that.

It looked as if someone had smudged her face. Her features blurred like something erased them. Her lips, nowhere to be found.

This is my mother.

“Mom! I'm leaving!” My brother said as he peeked into the kitchen.

My heart almost stopped as I saw his faceless head peeking by a wall. His brown hair swayed as normal, unaware of his missing features.

This is my older brother.

“What about breakfast?!” My mother yelled.

“I'll get something at school.” My brother answered before dashing out into the cold morning.

“Let him be, he's a growing boy.”

A huge figure stepped out of the bathroom. He zipped up his pants as came close to check what my mother had prepared. Despite having the body of an average man, he lacked the features of his face much like the other two.

This is my father.

I think it started some years ago. Right after that. It was since then that I had trouble recognizing people's faces. It wasn't just my parents—my classmates, my teachers, the neighborhood mailman—all of them. They lost their faces.

I honestly don't know if it was due to trauma of some higher power in play. Clueless and hopeless, I found myself accepting that this is my life now.

I sighed as I pinched my earlobes. Even in a world full of faceless monsters, I'll still be an outcast.

Maybe I wished this upon myself.

That afternoon, I stopped by a store to get those things mom asked me to buy.

Let's see... half dozen eggs... pancake mix... a small pack of rice... what else, what else...

It took me about 10 minutes getting everything on the list. I can't help but smile as I reach for a pack of curry mix.

Curry for today...

The simple thought pumped my brain with dopamine.

At the counter, I glanced at the cashier a few times. In the back of my mind, I was hoping she'd look normal to me.

"Thanks for coming!" The cashier said cheerfully.

"..." I nodded in response, trying not to be rude.

I picked up the bag from the counter, checking if I had everything I needed once again. With a slight nod of affirmation, I was headed for the door.

"Wha-!"

A high-pitched voice screeched from the counter.

It was a girl, wearing the same uniform as me. She frantically spread her wallet, searching for what I assume was some change. On the counter, there were two cans of soda, one original-taste and another of that newly released flavor. I think it was called Gorilla Flavor or something...?

How's Gorilla a flavor, honestly...?

I sighed. I can't just stand still now can I?

"I forgot I'm broke... what do I do now?" It was the first time I met someone with body language so over the top I could almost imagine what expression they were making.

"Here..." I reached out my arm, handing her a bill.

She tilted her blank head before accepting the money.

"Thanks..." She said softly, contrasting her screech just a minute ago.

"..."

Without another word I turned back and walked out of the store.

"W-wait!!" Gasping for air, the girl ran for me across the street.

"Please have this as thanks..." still gasping, she held out the Gorilla-flavored soda from earlier.

With slight disgust, I took a step back. "No, thanks..."

Seriously... that Gorilla soda? It's not like I wanted a reward, but, couldn't she at least give me the normal one...?

I thought to myself as my sight landed on the original-taste on her other hand.

Noticing how I glanced at the normal soda, She said, “Sorry, I can't give you this one, it's for my friend.”

With cheeks turning hot, I averted my gaze. “No, it's fine, really...”

She pulled her arm back, “If you say so, then okay!”

“I'm Sabrina, by the way, you are...?”

“Sasha...” I said with my eyes still glued to the ground.

“I'll repay you someday, Sasha!” Without a warning Sabrina fled across the road.

The groceries weighed heavy on my hand, yet, I stood there eyes widened.

Sabrina... she's a weird girl...

A car passed by. For a brief moment, I caught a glimpse of my reflection.

Staring at Sabrina's back, a thought came to mind.

“If I could see it, if everything went great, would I be able to live as carelessly?”

“I'm home!” I said with a quick motion of flicking the switch on.

The once dark living room lightened up in an instance. The light revealed a comfy and warm home, one that I grew up on.

They're not here yet...

I found myself admiring the photos hanging on the wall. There were multiple—photos of my parents at their wedding, my brother at his high school graduation, and one of me back when I was a baby.

Out of all of them, the ones that I enjoy looking at the most were the ones my mother took herself.

It was a hobby she once had before fully turning into a house wife. Her piece mostly consists of sceneries like the setting sun, the mountain top, and the park where I used to go and play.

It calms me down. Her work showed me a world where there are no blurry faces in sight. Just me and an empty sandbox.

“You're home early, Sasha.”

I turned back to see mom in a white dress, one she frequently wore at home.

“Yeah...” My eyes darted across the room, looking for anything to look at.

Slowly, I took a step after another, wanting to just get to my room and lock myself up in the dark.

“Wait.” My mom held out her hand. “I bought you something.”

In her hand, she held a small hair clip. It was purple with some flowery imprints on it.

My eyes widened, I gritted my teeth and swatted her hand away.

For a moment, I was reminded of how a smile looked. The arched lips of those who ridiculed a naive girl.

I watched as the clip flew across the room. I felt my hand sting from the impact, yet I didn't mind.

Neither of us made a move. Like a photograph, we were frozen in time.

My expression softened slightly as I saw mom pull her hand close to her chest. Something deep in me felt disgust.

I'm such a terrible daughter...

Without a word, I locked myself in my room. Again.

The next day...

As always, I arrived early at school. Maybe even earlier than used to and apparently, earlier than anyone in school.

I sat by my seat, watching closely at the rising sun from the east window. The warmth of the morning sun reached my skin, bringing a strange comfort to me.

I sighed, looking at the hair clip in my hand. I woke up early to look for it, but there it was sitting on the kitchen table. It's almost as if it was waiting for me.

Mom probably left it there... it's scary how much she knows me...

I pulled my overgrown bangs to the side and wore the clip.

Did I do it right? Do I look weird?

Using my phone as a mirror, I stared at my smudged face as I wore the clip. I've long forgotten how I looked liked, I wonder how people see me now.

For that day, I decided to wear my hair up.

2 - Silver

“It's you!”

A girl stood by me. She held a tray with both hands as she exclaimed, loud enough to echo across the school cafeteria.

Even before I could react the girl sat right by my side, radiating a sense of familiarity.

“Sorry... who...?”

I don't recognize her voice, it doesn't help how blurry her face looks. Do I know this girl?

“You forgot?!” She leaned closer to me, her face hovering inches from mine. “From the other day?! At the store?!”

I tried creating some distance between us, yet she keeps closing in like an oblivious cat.

“Oh...” Memories of that day flooded my mind. “Soda-girl.”

She nodded furiously, holding my hand. “That's me! Soda-girl!”

“Eh...” I tried escaping her tight grasp yet it turned to be futile.

“Bri, are you bothering people again?”

A melancholic voice called it. It belonged to a slender figure with silver wavy hair that falls down to her waist.

Her face was particularly notable.

Much like everyone else, it was hazy yet also recognizable at the same time. Like a wax candle slowly melting.

“No! Lettuce! I would never!” Sabrina said, practically jumping from her seat.

Lettuce? Weird name...

The silver-haired sat at the other side of the table, bringing her own tray close to her.

“What's with the Soda-girl, anyway?” She took a bite off her melon bread as asked.

“Remember last time? When I bought us drinks? That's her!” Sabrina explained as she clung to my arm.

At this point, I silently surrendered and just let her do as she pleases. It's much easier that way.

“I never knew you go to this school too! Must be destiny!”

She hugged my arm tighter, not giving me any chance to move.

“Haha...” I let out a dry laugh as I felt cold sweat forming on my forehead.

My eyes darted away. Hoping to find anything to distract me from the sudden physical intimacy.

“Sasha, this is Lettuce. She does not bite.” Sabrina introduced her as she snuggled against my arm.

“Sorry about her, she gets excited quickly. I'm Letha.”

Letha apologized with a tilted head. I think she's smiling.

“I-it's fine... I'm Sasha...” I tried smiling too... turned out horribly...

“You're in 2nd year too, Sasha?” her voice carried a sense of elegance.

She must be a pretty girl... I can feel it the way she carries herself.

“Mn... Class B...” I answered.

“We're in Class A.”

Class A? Both of them? They must be smart then?

An awkward silence followed the conversation, one constantly broken by the sound of metal utensils.

I didn't say anything. I had nothing to say.

This interaction, it's just for today. Tomorrow I'll have this table all to myself again.

So maybe... just for today... I'll let them join me...

“Ah!”

Without a warning, Sabrina stood up. Her face was glued to her phone, reading a message.

“Bri?”

Letha glanced at Sabrina, though seemed pretty unbothered by her sudden action.

“Sorry, Lettuce, Sasha, I forgot I had band practice today. I better get going before Thea turns red.”

Sabrina grabbed her bag and disappeared into the crowd.

I waited for the sound of a chair scraping back. I expected the blur of silver hair to stand up and follow Sabrina. That's how it usually goes. People realize I'm not much of a talker and they find an excuse to be somewhere else.

But the chair stayed put.

"She's a lot to handle, isn't she?" Letha's voice broke the quiet. It wasn't loud, but in the sudden vacuum Sabrina left behind, it sounded like a secret.

"Mn..." counting my own heartbeat, that was all I could say. Perhaps it would have been better if my heart had a mouth, it seems eager to know this girl, after all.

"You like purple, Sasha? That clip looks good on you."

Blood rushed to my cheeks from her compliment.

"Thanks..."

"I think I have a similar one at home... maybe I should wear it next time. What you think?"

"I'm not really an expert at that sort of thing. Even this clip, my mom bought it for me."

Letha's body stiffened lightly the moment I mentioned my mother. For a second, I thought I caught a glimpse of her eyes and how deep they were.

"Your mom...? Must be nice..."

I wonder what kind of expression you're making right now. I wonder what kind of sadness is hidden behind this smeared canvas. I hope I can see it one day. People, I mean.

Letha seemed to have noticed the way I looked at her, she must have realized that an essence of herself seeped out of the facade for a moment.

"Sasha, are you free this weekend? Wanna hang out?"

Back to her usual elegance, Letha straightened up her posture.

"Hang out? What for?"

"I don't know, stroll around the town?"

"We just met though?"

"It's fine, you seem fun to be with."

"I don't get how you can be so friendly with strangers."

"Is that a no?"

I hesitated.

“I’ll think about it.”

Once again, I found myself admiring my mother's photographs, more specifically, a photo of a certain park. She's amazing, being able to capture such breathtaking sceneries.

I felt my lips making an upward arch.

“You really like that one.”

Mom’s voice caught my attention.

Leaning by the wall, she crossed her arms.

It was her. Just from the way she stood, I knew it was her. No face needed.

“We used to go there when I was pregnant with you.”

“How's this the first time I'm hearing that?”

I faced her with soft features.

Intuitively, I felt her glance at the clip I was wearing.

My cheeks turned red, taking the shade of an apple.

“Looks good on you...”

How long has it been since I felt this warm? Kinda makes me want to see her smile...

Maybe one day...

“I-I’ll do my homework!” I said in a stiff voice.

“What about dinner?”

“I’ll eat later!”

I threw myself on the bed. Typically, I prefer my room dark. It helps make my sleep better. However, I turned all the lights on that night.

I scrolled through my phone, searching for a particular number.

My phone only had certain people in it. Just family members and classmates whom I got partnered with in some subjects.

‘Letha’ the profile read.

With hands filled with hesitancy, I type a message and hit send.

“What time do we meet?”

3 - Nuance

Along the crowded street, a single figure stood out like a sore thumb. Every step she took left a trace of anxiety, as if one wrong move could harm her.

She began growing conscious of the crease on her shirt, adjusting her posture ever so slightly.

Her hands found themselves on the hair clip she wore, the one she spent almost an hour fixing in front of the mirror.

Mnnn...

She groaned in her head as she was reminded of how her brother saw her feeding her vanity in front of the bathroom mirror. Just how long will he be teasing her of having a boyfriend after that?

Maybe I should put a mirror in my room...

The girl had always hated mirrors, after all, whenever she looked into one, all that she saw was a blurry image.

She sat on a bench with a sigh. She watched patiently as the fog of unfinished faces moved. Fast and neverending.

A donut shop from across the street caught her eyes. Her brother once bought her a gift from that shop, the taste of sweets never left her tongue. She thought to herself:

I'd like to try those again...

Sweeping through the fog, a waving hand had drawn her attention. It was a girl with jet black hair, standing at what she estimated to be 160cm. She wore an olive crop top with black undershirt, completing the look with a pair of headphones around her neck.

Is she waving at me? Sabrina perhaps? No, let's just pretend we never noticed her.

There were multiple thoughts running through her head.

Is she really waving at me?

Am I sure that's Sabrina?

What if it's someone else?

Unable to bring focus to her face, the girl decided to turn her head down.

“Hey, were you ignoring me?”

The girl with black hair spoke.

“Ah... Sorry, didn't notice you.”

She took a breath of relief. After hearing her voice she was certain, it's Sabrina.

“We locked eyes though.”

With a pout, Sabrina took a seat beside Sasha.

“Did we?”

Sasha replied, her tone cold and detached.

“Anyway, Sasha, do you like bands?”

Sabrina sat closely to Sasha as always. It was as if it was her second nature.

Sasha shook her head.

Bands...? My dad sometimes listens to rock band songs, not that I'm too interested in them.

“There's a band I like, I'll lend you some albums later so give them a listen, okay?”

Sabrina, aside from being an energetic kid, was also into music. Sasha thought that it was fitting, maybe to the point that it was a bit tropey.

Waiting for a certain blur of silver, the two found themselves chatting. Music that Sabrina likes. Shows that they watched recently. Their test scores. Trivial stuff.

A thought emerged from the back of Sasha's mind.

Why am I doing this now?

It's not like Sasha never had any friends, in fact, she had two back in middle school. However, it was the first time in high school that she tried connecting with her classmates.

Why now?

She spent her first year in solitude, not talking to anyone unless it's for a subject. She never once tried reaching out to her classmates, and even if they asked her to hang out, she'd always find herself with a list of excuses.

And so she wondered.

Why now?

“Sorry for dragging you all the way here, Sasha.”

The fluff of silver next to me whispered.

“It's fine, I had nothing better to do anyways.”

I said with a faint smile.

“What are we looking for exactly, Lettuce?”

Next to Letha was Sabrina, pacing herself to match our speed.

“Sorry, I honestly have no idea.” Letha’s shoulders slumped with a soft sigh. “I wonder what kind of gift he'll like...”

The three of us had been strolling around the mall, playing a game of treasure hunt without a map.

“His birthday is coming up soon, huh? Maybe I should get him something too?”

Sabrina tilted her head as if thinking.

I wonder who's him...

“...”

“Lettuce? What's up?”

Letha stood still, her head facing a certain store.

With a joyful voice, she said, “I think I know what I should get him.”

Letha walked out of the store with strides a bit bigger than before. She held a small shopping bag close to her chest as her face shone.

“Letha... that gift, it's for a boy right?”

With a small voice, I asked for confirmation.

“Yep!”

She beamed.

“Oh... okay...”

I turned my head down.

“It's quite something isn't it?”

“No, I... uh...”

She leaned closer to me, bumping her shoulder to mine.

“He has his own quirks.”

Letha's voice sounded dreamy at that moment, like she could float at any moment.

“He likes stuff other boys try to avoid. I like that about him.”

Looking up to her, I thought I saw a glimpse of her arching lips. Like the fog around her face turned red.

“Sorry, for making you wait!”

Sabrina's voice called out to us. She wore star-shaped sunglasses and carried four bags from the store.

“Bri... You should really stop spending all your money on random things.”

Letha's face met her palm.

“What?”

Sabrina asked with a sense of naivety.

“Nothing.” Letha sighed. “Anyway, Sasha, is there somewhere you'd like to go to?”

“Me? Why?”

“I don't know... I just feel kinda bad, making you tag along buying gifts for someone you never met.”

Letha answered with an awkward laugh.

“Yeah! Don't hold back, Sasha.” Sabrina's words sounded unconvincing with how she wore those glasses.

“Then...”

Knock... Knock...

Sasha knocked on her brother's room. She just got home after a long afternoon of being out with her friends.

She bit her lips gently and played with her earlobe, a habit she picked up when she felt anxious.

A few seconds later and the door creaked open, greeting Sasha with her brother's smeared face.

“Hmm??”

Without a word, she presented a box of donuts to her older brother.

“What's with those, Sasha?”

“I can't finish these on my own...”

At that moment, her brother's lips formed a smile. One smile she wasn't aware of.

His hand reached her head, stroking it and quite messing it up.

Annoyed, Sasha swatted his hand away.

“Stop!”

“Give me a second, I'll be there.”

It's been a while since Sasha felt a deep warmth in her chest. It was like she finally took a bath after a long day of work. Like a soft bed meeting her strained body. Like a moment of intimacy.

The two of them sat on the living room sofa, mulching on glazed donuts.

“Is this some kind of bribe?”

Sasha looked to her brother, confused.

“Bribe? What are you talking about?”

“I don't know... so I won't tell Mom about your boyfriend or something?”

Sasha felt her cheeks turning red as she punched her brother's shoulder.

“I told you, I was out with friends! Friends, not boyfriend!”

“I get it! I get it!”

The siblings had a two-year age gap, such a short gap that they often played with each other like friends in childhood. However, they started drifting apart when her brother started middle school.

As time passed they talked to each other less and less, it was inevitable. A story we've all heard before.

“Honestly, I'm surprised.” Taking another piece, he said, “It's been a while since you've gone out with friends. I was starting to think you were getting bullied.”

“ ... ”

Sasha curled up her legs, pulling them closer to her body.

She thought to herself,

This is nice... I could get used to this...

The evening the siblings shared was something Sasha had always taken for granted. She knows her brother will be there no matter what and so, she took her time.

Yet, something about that day made her want to spend more time with him.

It goes the same way for him. He found the time to put all of his college project away for a few moments with his sister. As if he knew how much she longed for the old bond they once had.

And so, the two of them thought,

This is nice...

4 - Birthday

The day of a certain silver-haired girl starts with a small jog. She puts on a tracksuit and does laps around the neighborhood. At times she would put on her headphones and play some music Sabrina recommended to her, much like today.

Despite the recent thoughts bugging her mind, she found herself adding small hops to her strides today.

It's today! His birthday!

She wiped the sweat off her forehead with a smile, imagining his reaction from her gift.

Will he be thankful?

Perhaps, be a little shy?

Will he like it?

Getting out of the shower, her eyes locked into a small box with her gift in it. She decided to keep the wrap simple, she thought he'd like it this way.

She stood in front of the mirror, fixing her uniform and grooming herself. Today, she wanted to look extra neat for some reason.

I want him to call me pretty...

Her cheeks burned up with the implications of her thoughts. She shook her head, looking directly into the mirror.

Pull yourself together, Letha!

Letha walked along the silent and empty hallway of what she refers to as 'home'.

Much like any other day, there were nothing but her breaths that broke the silence. She got used to it. Now, hiding the sounds of her footsteps became second nature to her.

By the front door, several huge photographs hung on the wall. One with her parents' wedding day, one when her parents visited Hawaii, and a single portrait of a boy around 8 to 10 years old.

Letha stared at the final portrait with deep eyes. Seeing all of them made her think of Sasha.

It's been almost a week since they last hung out. Ever since then, they've been messaging each other, chatting about random stuff.

She pulled her phone out and typed a message.

“Good morning, Sasha! At school yet?”

She hit send, smiling.

“Yep, just got here.”

Within a minute, her phone beeped again. Letha was surprised with how fast she replied. That's another thing to keep her mood up for the day.

“Early as ever. See you at school.”

“Hey, do you have a minute?”

At school, Letha approached a classmate. More particularly a boy, almost the same height as her.

The vacant room fell silent as the morning sun seeped through the windows. She knew how he'd always be the first one at school and so took advantage of it. To make an opportunity for them to be alone.

“What's up?”

Looking up from his seat, the boy locked eyes with her, sending a jolt under Letha's skin.

She held a small bag in front of him, the same bag she had earlier that morning.

“Happy Birthday, Lucas.”

Eyes widened, Lucas stared at the gift handed to him.

With his mouth gaped, he said, “You remembered my birthday.”

“Of course! Go on, open it.”

Lucas handled the gift gently, opening it as if the wrapper was the gift itself. Little by little, bit by bit.

In his hands he found a small plush.

“Stella? You got me a Stella plushie?!”

‘Stella of the Stars’, a magical girl anime aimed towards small girls. It was something you wouldn't expect a high school boy to be a fan of, however, Lucas admired Stella with all his heart.

It likely stemmed from having to babysit his younger sisters. Watching Stella with them made the anime grow into him.

He admired the main character for having a courageous soul. He liked the animation style. He loved how the anime tackled sensitive issues with delicate care.

It was a hidden gem!

Seeing his reaction, Letha unconsciously wore a smile.

She was glad that no one else was there. If she had given this to him in public, he likely wouldn't be as thrilled. Lucas wanted to keep his admiration for Stella a secret. He wasn't sure how people would react once they knew he liked an anime for little girls.

Letha felt a deep satisfaction within her.

I'm glad...

“Thanks, Lettuce!”

In the afternoon of the same day, Letha found Sasha sitting on a bench just outside of the gym.

A sigh of relief escaped from her as she saw her seemingly fine.

Earlier, she received a text message from Sasha.

“Help, please.”

She immediately packed her bag and went to see her as soon as she saw that, worried for her friend.

She stood up straight, gasped for air then approached her.

“Sasha?”

Sasha's head quickly turned to her direction.

“Letha... hi...”

Meekly, Sasha greeted her.

“What happened?”

The silver fluff made herself comfortable by sitting next to her.

“It's...”

Sasha turned her head down.

Letha noticed it before, but Sasha seemed to be having trouble with making eye contact. Whenever they talk, she'd catch her eyes darting all over the place. It was as if she didn't know where she should look.

“Something strange happened...” Sasha continued.

“Strange...?”

“A boy in my class... asked out on a date...”

Sasha felt her cheeks burning up with one hand playing with her earlobe, gently pinching and pulling on them.

“Is... that it?”

She looked at Letha with round eyes, nodding.

“Sorry, but... how is that strange?”

Letha never meant any harm with that. At least to her eyes, Sasha was a cute and meek girl, it won't be long before guys would start showing interest.

“I mean... I'm just not used to it...”

Sasha responded, still playing with her earlobes.

“Hey, look at me.” Letha cupped her cheeks, forcing the girl to look at her. “You're cute, you should try looking in the mirror more.”

Sasha stayed silent, possibly trying to process what she just said.

“What did you say, anyway.” Asked Letha.

“I kind of panicked and agreed on the spot.”

“So, you want to turn him down?”

Almost immediately, Sasha bounced.

“No! I... I want to... to go...” embarrassed, Sasha replied. “I just don't know what I should do... I don't want him to be disappointed once he sees me like this...”

Sasha's shy but cute confession made Letha's heart flutter. And so she decided.

“I'll help you!”

Letha held Sasha's hands as she smiled.

5 - Date!

It was the first time I had been in a room so spacious. The walls were so far apart it could pass as an apartment, the bed was big it could probably fit a whole family in it, and the ceiling was so high up it rivals the sky.

Still... does one girl really need all these guitars?

By the left of the bed lined up four guitars of various shapes. An acoustic, a normal-looking one, another that was V-shaped, and one that has four thick strings.

“Sasha, you okay?”

Sabrina's voice pulled me back to reality.

“Y-yeah...” I replied as I wore an awkward smile.

“You don't look okay, though. If you need to use the bathroom, it's that way.”

She said pointing at a door opposite to the bed.

Wow, her room even has its own bath...

“No, really... I'm fine...”

I replied, hesitantly sitting on the edge of Sabrina's bed.

Pulling a chair for herself, Letha faced me and said, “Sorry, Sasha. I said I'll help you but I don't actually know anything about this.”

Her shoulder slumped with her fingers fidgeting on her skirt.

“No, I-”

“No need to worry!” Her loud voice echoing, Sabrina puffed out her chest. “Just trust me and you'll be fine.”

I felt my lips moving into a wry smile. Letha shook her head slightly as we both stared Sabrina down.

“I'm starting to doubt if this was the best idea.” Letha whispered under her breath.

Sabrina suddenly threw herself on the bed, landing on the mattress with a soft *flop*.

“So... what is this boy like anyway?” She asked, resting her chin on a pillow.

“I don't know... we barely spoke before...” I adjusted myself slightly, playing with my earlobes.

The three of us fell into silence for a good second, listening to the soft humming of the AC unit.

“Where should we start then?” Sabrina walked up to a door, revealing a closet the size of my kitchen.

Multiple dresses lined up, almost as if Sabrina has one for all occasions and even for any day of the week.

“What kind of clothes do you like, Sasha?” Sabrina asked while going through each dress one by one.

“I...” I pinched my earlobes harder this time. “I don't know... I just wear whatever...”

My face turned red, head turned down, embarrassed by my lack of knowledge towards fashion.

My sight slowly turned blurry. My heart rate increased, remembering how my classmates used to look at me.

It's been so long. I thought I had forgotten. I thought I could finally move forward, that I could finally be vulnerable again. Despite that, it wasn't always that simple. Me of all people should know that.

“Leave it to me! I'll find something for you.” Sabrina yelled, gesturing a thumbs up and a hand on her waist.

“You'll be fine as long as Bri suppresses her weird tastes.” Letha added with a giggle.

“Mmmn...” looking up to both of them, I simply nodded. “Thank you.”

“Welcome back.”

That evening went by as usual. I found mom sitting and scrolling through an art magazine, something she's a real fan of.

I walked by the kitchen silently, grabbing a glass of water for myself.

The flowing water reminded me of how mundane things are. It reminded me of how I saw the sun set at the same time yesterday. It reminded me of the same sound of cicada each night. It reminded me of my father's favorite television program.

Yet, one thing today was different.

“You got your hair cut?” Mom asked from across the room, her face, still hazy as ever.

Taking a sip off the glass, I felt a familiar sensation on my face.

What was this feeling called again?

“My friend did it for me.” I muttered, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

Ah... I think I remember now...

“It looks good on you.” She whispered before turning her attention back to the magazine she was reading.

This feeling...

I think it's called 'Pride'.

Sunday. The sky showed a clear canvas of blue with several white streaks of cloud. The perfect afternoon.

The local museum, in an attempt to boost tourism, was currently conducting an art exhibit. Though, it proved to have insignificant change in human traffic.

Despite that, some people looked forward to this day, like this girl standing by the entrance of the museum.

She took a step to the side, using the wide glass window of the museum as a mirror. She angled her fedora slightly just as her friends told her to.

‘Is this fine?’ she asked herself.

She gently played with her loose braid, letting it rest on her shoulder.

A sudden gust of wind made her floral dress flow, taking the shape of her natural curve. Holding her fedora in place, she stared at her blurry reflection for a few more minutes.

Arching her lips, she nodded slightly before doing a little twirl.

“Sasha,” a masculine yet caring voice called out. “Sorry, I was late.”

Theo, Sasha’s classmate since last year, greeted her.

Sasha shook her head. “I just got here myself.”

Her rounded eyes met his subconsciously. For the first time in a while, she was face to face with another person.

It was the first time for her to examine a blank face without looking away. The first time she ever tried to look beyond the fog.

'Why is staring at me so intently?' Theo's inner voice panicked. *'Is there dirt on my face?'*

"Uhhh... Sasha?" With an awkward smile, Theo spoke.

Quickly, Sasha averted her gaze. She got too consumed in admiring the thing she feared all her life that she couldn't help but stare.

"Sorry," instinctively, Sasha pulled her earlobe. "Shall we?"

Without her knowledge, Sasha successfully made his heart skip a beat. A signal to the start of their date.

Meanwhile...

A pair of eyes had been monitoring the whole interaction. A familiar star-shaped sunglasses watched from afar, ready to interfere with the slightest of Sasha's discomfort.

'Meeting with a boy you barely know. Sasha, you're so naive.' Sabrina thought to herself, chewing on her thumb gently.

Maintaining distance, Sabrina began moving through a small crowd. With absolute mastery, she weaved through each person quite easily!

...

Or so she thought.

Her small figure collided with a tall frame. She reached for her bottom as it hit the ground, groaning a small 'oww' while trying to get up.

"Sorry, Miss! Are you..." offering his hand, he apologized as he slowly recognized Sabrina. "Okay...?"

"Ah!!" Sabrina pointed at him, face painted with surprise. "Keith!"

She took his hand, bouncing back to an upright position.

"Bri? What are you doing here?"

"I should be the one asking you that!" Looking at the posters on his hand and the 'Chick-a-flix' visor on his head, Sabrina took a guess.

Hands on her waist, Sabrina leaned slightly, her voice filled with a firm tone.

“You took another job? Does Vivi know about this?”

“I'm just covering for a friend. Just a shift!” He said as he took off his visor.

Pouting, Sabrina glared at him.

“Please don't tell my mom,” turning his eyes away, Keith said meekly. “Just this once.”

For a moment, Sabrina's expression softened.

She sighed. “Seriously... stop making Vivi worry.”

“I-”

Keith's words were cut off by Sabrina's fingers on his lips.

“No excuses.”

“Yeah...” Keith replied with a resigned tone.

With a firm grip on this wrist, Sabrina pulled him through the crowd.

“Wait... where're we going?”

“Just shut up and follow me, we're losing them.”

“But-”

“Vivi is just a call away~” Sabrina said smugly.

A vein popped out of Keith's temple, muttering to himself,

‘This girl... I'll get you someday...’

Adding another member to the party, Sabrina began her journey of keeping Sasha safe.

6 - Someday

“Uhhh... What exactly are we looking at here?”

Two pairs of stars watched a girl and her date carefully.

“Shhh... they might hear us.”

Keith wore a wry smile as Sabrina shushed him up. He sighed, following her from behind.

A few meters away were two familiar faces. Theo, whom he once had as a lab partner, and a girl in his class whom he forgot the name of.

Keith wasn't particularly close with either of them, but he also never saw them together before. What puzzled him even more was the fact that Sabrina was eagerly keeping an eye on them.

‘So Sabrina is into those typa guys, huh?’

He thought to himself.

He glanced back at Sabrina, still eyeing the couple with a troubled expression.

For all the years he had known Sabrina, he had never seen her show interest in romantic stuff. It was almost like she was physically incapable of such thing. But now, this look on her face, there's no doubt about it. She likes this guy!

Keith removed the whimsical glasses Sabrina lent him. He lightly chuckled to himself, drawing her attention to him.

“What's with you?” Asked Sabrina, lightly tapping his abdomen with her elbow.

Keith responded not with words but with a teasing smirk. He crossed his arms, still not saying anything.

Annoyance filled her body. “What? Say something!”

Keith grinned wider, obviously finding the situation amusing.

Nerves started appearing on Sabrina's temple as she gave Keith's shoulders a few punches.

“Really, I hate it when you do that.” Said Sabrina after finally calming down.

“Focus. We'll lose them.”

“R-right!”

The two of them followed the couple closely. They moved from paintings to portraits to sculptures, each one of them seemingly bringing their subjects closer.

Keith didn't have any strong impression towards the girl they were following. They were in the same class, yes, yet they've never really had a proper conversation.

Aside from that...

She seemed different today.

A certain painting caught the girl's eyes, stopping a few minutes to admire the work. Theo, noticing his date's fascination, stood still by her side.

Her lips parted, eyes still glued on the work.

From where they were standing, Keith could barely hear anything she said. It was a mystery he wasn't particularly interested in. Instead, his gaze fell on Sabrina.

The brownish-yellow ambient lighting of the room touched her skin gently. Her deep eyes stared at something farther than anyone can imagine. She watched them with a blank face. An expression that made her look like a statue herself.

"Let's go." With a smile, Sabrina tugged on Keith's sleeves. "They'll be fine now."

"Hey, Keith. Can I come over?"

On the way home, Sabrina asked a curious question.

"Right now?" Keith glanced at his watch. "I'm fine with it but you shouldn't stay out too late."

"You worry too much!"

Sabrina tugged her lips into a smile, different from how she was back at the museum.

Not wanting to argue further, Keith nodded.

It's been a while since Sabrina last came over. The last time he remembers was probably two months ago when they watched that movie then. His mom will be happy to see her again.

"Mom..." He muttered under his breath

There was a time when Keith's mom used to wear long-sleeved shirts year round. It was then that he felt the need to grow up.

"Keith..."

Sabrina's footsteps slowly petered out.

“Haven’t you done enough already?”

Keith froze. He turned her way, yet his eyes desperately avoided hers.

“Let's go, sun is setting soon.”

“If you really need a job then...”

Keith bit his lips subconsciously. His fingertips trembled with the slightest touch of air.

“I'll ask father if-”

“Don't say it... please...”

Keith's face fell into a resigned smile.

Sabrina's parents run a successful local company. If anyone can help him, it'd be Sabrina. That's why it's such a hard and bitter pill to swallow.

Sabrina's gaze fell on the ground. The silence was left sitting for too long, leaving only the occasional sound of wind passing.

He took a step towards her. With a swift motion, his hand landed on Sabrina's head.

“Bri, I'll be okay.” He said, stroking her hair.

Easing up, Sabrina nodded.

...

A painting caught my eye.

It was a single portrait of a woman. Her back was turned towards the viewer with her face slightly angled to show half her face.

Her bare back was pale, contrasting the saturated background of the piece, with brush strokes that almost feels the same way human skin would.

Despite that, my eyes were drawn to one exact point. Her face. Intentionally smudged and ruined by the artist.

I've seen this portrait before, about a year ago when our class had a trip to this exact museum. I thought it was me who filtered out the face for myself. I thought it was me, acting up again.

My lips tugged into a smile as I realized; I'm seeing the same thing everyone does.

I took a quick glance at the boy beside me. Much like the painting, his face was unfocused, unfinished.

“Why the museum?”

My lips parted as I asked him that question.

My words took him by surprise.

“I liked it, I was just wondering.”

Theo took a sigh of relief, his eyes wandered back to the piece.

“Remember last year? That one class trip?”

With rounded eyes, I nodded slightly.

“You were staring at this piece back then too.” He chuckled softly. “You looked like you were having fun.”

My cheeks felt hot, trying to hide it by covering half my face with my fedora.

So someone was watching me back then...

Kind of embarrassing when I think of it now...

“Do you like me?”

I kept wondering where that beat was coming from. Loud. Rhythmic.

I placed my hand over my chest, trying to calm down.

“I like you.”

I never knew those three words would affect me as much as it did.

My hand landed on my earlobe, pinching and pulling on it rougher than usual.

“Why?”

“Why, you say?”

“...” I nodded.

He tilted his head slightly, as if reminiscing. Turning to me, he spoke in a sweet voice.

“You know how we just moved in last year?”

He continued. “I didn't know anyone at all. Honestly? I was freaking out on my first day.”

Theo let out a soft laugh between his words. His hands started fidgeting, moving from his pocket to the hem of his shirt.

“Then there was you. You told me I looked okay.” He scratched the back of his neck. “Not as romantic as you hoped for? Sorry for that.”

I shook my head. “No... I...”

I looked down as my tongue got tangled up on itself.

“You, Sasha. Do you like me?”

“...”

I've been wondering for a while now.

Why did I go to this date in the first place?

Do I like him? Do I want to be with him?

I've heard of love before. I've heard from friends, I've heard of it from my family, I've heard of it from TV.

Still... How do I know when I love someone?

Perhaps I only came to this date to prove something to myself.

Perhaps... What I came to love was the idea of someone loving me.

“Sorry. You don't have to answer that.”

I looked up to him. His face, still blank.

I felt something deep in me. One that I haven't felt for so long.

It's unfair... I want to see his face...

“Maybe someday...”

I replied.

7 - Empath

A phone's beep echoed within the room. It vibrated twice in a span of a few minutes.

The owner of the phone, a girl with long silver-colored hair, lay flat on her bed. She ran her hand through her hair, her eyes closed and her breath shallow.

She turns over, burying her face in the lavender-scented pillow. Her body felt weak, her mind listless. Something in her chest made it hard to breathe.

“ ... ”

Her slightly opened eyes caught a glimpse of the phone. It had lightened up with several notification bars on the screen.

Dragging her body, she reached for the phone, still refusing to stand up.

‘2 text messages.’ It read.

A contact of name ‘Allen’ lit up.

“Sorry, Letha, we found someone for the part. We'll call you if there's any vacancies!”

Letha, scanning the message, felt a pang of disappointment. She had been courting this role for several days now. Given it wasn't a major role, it at most had a few lines, yet, she wanted to be part of the play. Just because.

Her fingers hovered over the screen, unsure of how to respond. She typed a few words, read it, then deleted it. She typed again, then deleted it without reading. Then she typed some half-hearted words and called it a day.

“Sure! I'll be waiting!”

She hit sent before rolling over one more time. She heard that line several times before. Yet, they never call.

“It's fine... we'll get the next one.”

Letha whispered to herself.

Still, her chest felt heavy. She thought that maybe this time she'd hear her clap. But it's okay... she'll get the next one.

“Was I that bad?” Letha wondered, her hands raised towards the ceiling.

“Halt, peasant! You shall not enter the castle!”

Letha threw a line from the script. Her voice, lacking any real agency the script was asking for. Bluntly, it was bland, almost robotic.

Letha bursts into a soft laughter. She imagined just how much of a mess it would have been if she got the role. Maybe it was for the best.

With her lips arched upwards, Letha opened another message.

“It went well.”

“Thanks.”

Letha couldn't help but giggle at the two separate messages. Even through texts, she keeps her distinct voice.

She scanned through the stickers on her phone, taking minutes before she found the perfect one. It was a Stella of the Stars sticker, one where Stella held a big red heart.

She closes her eyes once more. This time it felt lighter. Her chest, her limbs, her thoughts. Those simple updates swayed her mind off of how terrible she was at acting, how she probably won't be casted, and how she never liked plays anyways.

For today, sleep well, little silver fluff.

...

A week has bled into the next since the museum. To be honest, the world hasn't shifted on its axis like I thought it might. Theo and I exist in a strange, quiet orbit—a few hurried greetings in the hallway and the steady, rhythmic glow of phone notifications at night. At the museum, we left things in that weird spot. We're not in a rush, it's better this way. For now, the distance between us is comfortable, like a painting you're meant to view from afar.

“You want me to teach you photography?”

My mom's voice jumped a pitch from my request. Her posture straightened up, as if she couldn't believe the favor I asked.

“Y-yeah...” I wore a wry smile, hoping she'd agree. “I think it'd be f-fun...”

She rinsed the last piece of plate before wiping her hand with a towel.

“Stay there.”

She rushed to her room. The muffled sound of drawers opening and boxes moving suggested she was looking for something long buried.

A few minutes passed and she came out with a grey compact camera.

“Here.”

She extended her arm, offering me the camera.

I know this one...

I noticed the photographs on the wall.

“Isn't this...”

A strange sense of unease overwhelmed me as my fingers hovered over its cold metal. I held it tightly, worried I'd drop the camera.

“That's the one I used back then.”

My mouth gaped. I hesitantly tried to give it back to her.

“Keep it.” She insisted. “You want to learn, no?”

My downturned lips slowly tugged a smile. I nodded eagerly.

“Then... how do I exactly...”

I held the foreign object in an awkward manner.

“Here... like this...”

She taught me the basics. How to hold the camera, how to operate one, and the basic functions. She then taught me how to properly take pictures. Stuffs like line of sight and rule of thirds.

It was honestly fun, watching mom talk about what she loved. It was times like this that I was reminded how she used to be a different person before us. Before me.

I could get used to this...

I wish I've done this sooner...

I was late for school for the first time the next morning. We stayed up for far too long talking about lenses.

“I'd do it again.” I muttered to myself, smiling before letting out a yawn.

The day went by in a flash. Without giving me a chance to breathe, the day was coming to a close.

“You look tired, Sasha.”

A hand offered me a can of soda. I reached for it, holding it dearly. My mind drifted off to a shared past with this girl, one that happened not long ago.

“You had a long day? Fufu... I could tell, I could tell.”

Sabrina's arms crossed, nodding as if she just solved a huge puzzle.

Sure... let's go with that...

Her steps came to a stop as if she remembered something. She reached for her bag, searching through tons of other random stuff.

“Hmm?”

I curiously peeked over her shoulder.

“Here!”

In her hand were several CDs with covers neat and unscratched. In a glance, you could tell it was cared for. Despite how she looks, Sabrina could be very organized.

“I picked out the best ones for you!”

“CDs still exist today?”

My thoughts leaked as she handed me the pile.

“Of course they do! Mostly as collectibles though.”

One album caught my eyes. It had a song I recognized. One that I liked, actually. It was a song my Dad used to listen to. Nostalgic.

Sabrina, in a quick action, wrapped her arms around mine. “Still, having someone to go home with feels nice.”

“Letha doesn't tag along often?”

“Lettuce? She has duties and stuff. That girl always takes the work nobody wants to do.”

I opened my soda with a fuzz. The carbonated drink gushed down my throat with a refreshing gleam.

I caught a glimpse of Sabrina's profile at the corner of my eye. I noticed how fair her complexion was. Yet, that was all I could infer.

Unconsciously, my hand reached for her face. Landing on her cheeks, just below her eye. The contour of her face took shape as I ran my fingers along her facade.

Sabrina twitched in surprise. Instinctively, she swatted my hand away.

“What was that?” She asked in an almost playful tone.

“Nothing.”

Turning my face back to the road ahead, my mind still wandered to that brief touch.

“Sabrina, can I take a picture of you?”

The sudden question made Sabrina slow down her pace.

“Do you... have a crush on me?” Sabrina asked in all seriousness.

“It's for practice.”

I took out the camera in my bag, holding it and gesturing a click.

Sabrina took a sigh of relief. Her shoulders slumped in an exaggerated manner.

“Phew... That scared me... I didn't want to reject you.”

For some reason, the idea made me itch with annoyance.

“Okay! Where do I stand? What do I do?”

“Just smile or something...”

I held up the camera. As the setting sun illuminated half her face, and as the blowing wind made her hair flow, I took the shot.

A few minutes of walking later, I found myself alone in an alley. Her voice was gone, yet I could still hear it. Her arms weren't there, yet the touch still lingered. Her presence was gone, yet she still made my lips smile.

What was left in my hands was a photograph of a faceless girl.

8 - Unbreakable

For the past few days, Keith has had trouble sleeping.

He would often find himself wide awake for no reason. His body was worn out yet his mind refused to rest. And so, he stared blankly into the ceiling.

Laying on a hard mattress made him uncomfortable, yet he can't shift around. His Mom, Vivian, has her back turned to him, deep in slumber.

“...”

Keith was left alone with his thoughts and they kept whispering to him.

The glaring moon caught his attention. From the open window, it looked so far away. This made Keith pause. He could have sworn the moon was never this far before.

“...”

He closed his eyes. For tonight, he wished for a dream. A bright dream he has for himself.

Drifting away into sleep, he smiled.

“Excuse me,”

The next day, someone unexpected approached him.

“Are you Keith?”

Her eyes stared directly at him, yet feels like she's looking past him. It was as if she didn't know where her eyes should focus.

“...?”

“Uhhh... the...”

The constant chitchats of other students kept Keith from hearing what the girl had just said. Still, his mind wondered.

Where have I met this girl?

Her face, although easily dismissible, radiated a weird sense of familiarity.

“Sorry, could you repeat that?”

The girl's eyes shifted to the floor as her hand pulled on her earlobe.

"The peer critique..."

By the time she answered, Keith had pieced together the puzzle of where and when she met the girl.

It was a couple of weeks ago, Sabrina dragged him around to spy on Theo and his date. This girl.

"We were assigned partners."

"Ah," Keith's mouth gaped as he remembered. "So what's the plan?"

It was a project assigned to them the other day. They were to create a short passage and have their assigned partners critique them. Coincidentally, he got assigned with her.

"Have you done your paper?"

A wry smile appeared on Keith's face. He had no idea what he should write.

"Sorry, what was the topic again?"

The girl looked up with rounded eyes. She looked at him curiously, almost as if expecting his question.

"Your hobbies." She answered briefly.

"I see! I'll get it done by tomorrow!" He said before the word has even sunk into him.

"..."

With a nod, the girl turned back, settling down to her seat near the back of the room.

Hobbies?

His mind finally decided to process her words.

"I'll get it done, somehow." He whispered to himself.

Hobbies. The things you do in your free time. Things that are fun. Things you look forward to.

In its essence, hobbies are those things that make living feel like living, thus, it should naturally come to mind. Your hobbies.

A heavy breath escaped Keith when suddenly a light tap brought him back to reality.

"Smile." Said the figure beside him. "Customers hate frowning cashiers."

Amanda, Keith's coworker, gestured a smile with her fingers. She leaned over the counter and tugged her lips into an arch.

Following his senior's example, he forced an uneven smile, holding it stiffly.

"Pfft..." Amanda squealed, holding back her laughter. "Are you constipated?"

Moving away from the counter, Amanda gave him one last glance.

"Old man probably took you in hoping you'd attract female customers. Do your job well, 'kay?"

Being a donut shop, the store is already plenty popular to different demographics. That does not mean a pretty face won't be helpful with business, though.

"So be an eye candy? Got it."

The playful banter between the two was interrupted by the sound of the bells hanging by the door. A customer.

"Welcome, what will it be today?"

Deja Vu.

She wore a uniform that Keith was so familiar with. Her hair was tied to a loose braid as her head slightly bowed down. Approaching the counter, she tugged on her bangs.

"Box 1, please." She said in a weak voice, pointing to the menu posted by the counter.

Curiously, Keith watched as the girl fiddled with her hair.

No doubt. She's his project partner. Even then, does she not recognize him or does she not care at all. Maybe both?

"Uhm... Box 1... please?" She repeated herself, in a much louder voice this time.

"Ah, right! Sorry!" Startled, he began preparing her order.

"Here!"

Keith handed her a box filled with six donuts. She placed the exact amount on the counter as she picked up the box.

"Thanks." She gave a small nod.

"Hey, can I ask a question?"

Surprised, she looked around to confirm he was talking to her.

“How long should my essay be?”

“What essay?” She asked, completely puzzled.

“You really don't recognize me? Keith?”

Her expression lightened at the mention of his name. Her eyelids relaxed and her lips tugged into a soft smile.

“Sorry, I'm not great with faces.”

With a brighter look, she began observing him directly as she did that morning.

“Here, you can use mine as reference.” She pulled a neatly kept paper from her bag.

“Oh, okay.”

“I have to go now. I'll see you tomorrow.”

Her departure left a void of silence in the shop. For some reason, Keith became more aware of the sweet glazed aroma in the air.

“Maybe I shouldn't overthink this.” He muttered to himself.

In his hand was a piece of paper, neat and cared for. Words were written in smooth stylized strokes, as if each curve was made in minutes.

“Through my Lens.” The title read.

“I never knew how cameras worked. Do they burn the image through the paper? Do they freeze a moment of time and keep it in their files? I don't know, and honestly, I think it's better that way.”

Keith skimmed through the paper, his eyes stopping at few specific prose.

“It was my Mom's camera. A reminder of how she was, not as my mother but as a person.”

His gaze lingered for far too long on that one note. It made him feel the empty seats around the store. It made him feel the quiet breeze seeping through the window. It made him long for something.

With the image of his mother popping into his mind, he began asking himself a certain question.

If he was never born, what kind of life would his mother have?

The next day came and Keith never did his essay. Nor did he come to school.

Side 8.1 - Theo's Lie

Somewhere, Sasha is facing a dilemma.

“Hmmm...”

She tilted her head to the left, her brows furrowed. She began inspecting a framed photo on her desk.

“Tch.”

She tilted her head to the right, crossing her arms. Annoyed, she adjusted the angle of the frame multiple times.

“Forget it.”

The desk made a sharp sound as Sasha turned the frame face down.

She let herself bounce on the bed, resting her chin on a pillow.

“It's not weird, is it?” She asked herself. “I'm just proud of how great it turned out.”

She glanced at the picture frame. She reached for it and turned it upright.

Her face wrinkled with cringe the moment the picture faced her. She tried looking at it for a few seconds.

Nope!

She slammed it against the desk again.

It was a picture of her friend, Sabrina, one she took herself. Honestly, it's probably the best one she ever took since she started with photography.

The light was shining directly into the subject, giving the shadows high contrast. The angle made Sabrina's features look soft, one could almost imagine wings behind her back. The pose she made was childish yet charming, giving her an innocent aura.

Whether Sasha was aware of it or not, this will be a high she'd have trouble topping off.

There was only one problem.

The way the photograph faced her bed made her extremely conscious. It was as if Sabrina was watching her sleep, watching her wake up, even watching her change!

Sasha sighed. She got up. Her bag weighed her down yet she put it on anyway. And so, it was time for school once again.

She yawned and left the room. But not before she turned the frame up.

That day, Sasha's eyes kept wandering to the same spot, Keith's empty seat.

Despite only knowing him not too long ago, she can't help but wonder if something is wrong. He seemed fine the day before. Could it be that he got sick?

Sasha shook the thoughts away from her head. Whatever it is, it's not her place to meddle with his personal life.

Eventually, Sasha glanced away from Keith's seat.

The walk back home was peacefully silent. It's her lone footsteps that she kept counting that day. Earlier, she received a message from Sabrina. She's got business to attend to, leaving Sasha on her own.

Sasha had gotten used to Sabrina's presence after hanging out all this time. She now leaves space by the pavement instinctively. Despite that, Sasha had also missed this silence. She's now in a limbo of longing for both noise and silence.

She smiled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Hey, Sasha!”

Sasha knows this voice very well.

It's someone who constantly greets her every morning and occasionally sends her voicemails by evening.

“Theo. Going home?”

He jogged until he got by her side. The plastic bag he held swayed with every step.

“Yeah, bought some snacks first.”

He presented the plastic bag filled with chips and watermelon ice pops.

“Want some?”

“I'll take this then.”

She reached out for the ice pop, nibbling on it as they walked.

Except for that time at the museum, the two have never had the chance to be alone. Naturally, a sense of thick fog surrounded the air around them.

Trying to break the awkwardness, Sasha threw a clumsy question.

“So, how was school?”

“...?”

Theo tilted his head, confused by the random question.

“Sorry, that's what my Mom always says when she wants to strike a conversation...”

Sasha explained with an awkward smile.

Theo chuckled to himself. “School is great, aside from all the projects and requirements.”

Hearing him genuinely answer her silly question made her expression soften.

“Right! I've been stuck on...”

Sasha had been discovering things about herself lately. Today, she learned that she can talk for a whole fifteen minutes, the time it took for her to get back home.

“Sorry, I dragged you all the way here.”

She said in an apologetic tone.

“It's cool. I live around here anyway.”

“You do?” Sasha glanced at his face. Staring back was a blank canvas.

“I'll see you tomorrow.”

With that, Theo waved goodbye as he saw Sasha enter their house safely.

A few days later, Sasha would learn that Theo lives on the opposite side of town.

9 - Jerk

Where would you want to be at the end of the world?

Who would you call first?

What will you say?

In simplest words, in time of your absolute worst, where would you go?

For Keith, it would be her.

“Why?” Sabrina stared down at the curled up Keith. “Why are you here?”

Keith raised his gaze to her chin, unable to bring himself to look at her face. Her knuckles turned white as he curled up even more.

“Can I sleep over?”

A simple melody echoed through Sabrina's room. It came from a boy, sitting quietly on the floor, a guitar in his hands. The boy plucked the strings with no plan in mind, he simply followed the shapes Sabrina once taught him.

“Dad says you can stay.”

Sabrina proclaimed as she entered the room.

“Thanks.”

Sabrina let herself fall on the bed, turning to face Keith who was still plucking over the chord shapes.

“You suck.”

Sabrina commented on Keith's buzzy notes.

His eyes not leaving the fretboard, “I haven't gotten any practice.”

Despite the harsh comment, Sabrina continued to patiently watch him find the right notes.

“How do you play it again? That one song you made.”

“So that was what you were trying to play.”

Sabrina gently stood up, sitting on the floor next to Keith. He handed her the acoustic guitar as she began playing a simple line.

The song was made years back. It was made from Keith wanting to play something for a girl. Sabrina threw everything she had for that one song, made it as dynamic as possible while ensuring a complete beginner can play it.

She hummed the main melody as she plucked the strings, her eyes glued to the vibrating strings.

“My Mom found out.”

Without looking up, Sabrina waited for Keith to continue. For a while, she had the feeling it was about him working. His words only confirmed her suspicion.

“We're both worn out. I ended up saying things I shouldn't have.”

She bit her lips, still trying to play the song steadily.

“She asked me about college. I said I wasn't going.”

Her vision became blurry as tears started forming. Despite that, she kept her head tucked in. She kept playing.

“She started going on about how hard she's working so I can get a degree.”

“I said I never asked her any of that.”

The melody came to a stop as Sabrina carefully positioned the guitar leaning on the wall.

“She shouldn't have given birth to me if it was that hard.”

Sabrina pulled his arm. She wrapped her arms around his tightly and trapped his hand between her thighs, not giving him the chance to move away.

Both their warmth contrasted the cooled air of the room. Their breathing naturally synchronized as both their chest heaved up at the exact same time.

Following her mother's death, Sabrina longed for the nurturing figure of a mother. That's when he met Keith and his mother Vivian.

She was silently envious of how close they were, even to the point of imagining how things would be if their lives got swapped. It's not like she hates her father, it's the opposite. She respects her father too much that he became an idea rather than a person.

At some point, Keith's home became as warm as her own.

“Stay here. Just for tonight.”

Her tone made it seem like she was begging him. Perhaps it wasn't far from how she was truly feeling at the time.

His hand reached for her head, stroking her jet-black hair. "Sometimes, I worry for you. You're way too defenseless."

She looked up to him, her round eyes wet with tears. Despite that she gave him a paralyzing glare. In response, Keith just smirked.

"You're not that scary with all that snot."

"Jerk."

Despite that, Sabrina still refuses to let go.

That night, Keith settled into one of Sabrina's guest rooms. The room was spacious and the bed was soft. Yet curiously enough, Keith did not sleep a wink that night.

Morning came and the room was once again empty. What was left in Sabrina's hand was a beeping phone, and a message.

"I'll fix this somehow."

"Thanks."

"Bri, you look out of it, you okay?"

By lunch, Sabrina found herself stuck on one math problem, her brain refusing to process the given equation.

Lucas, one of her friends, sat on the seat to her front. He leaned to her table and rested his chin on one hand.

"Do I?" Sabrina knitted her brows.

"Yup!"

She held her chin with one hand and gestured as if thinking.

"I was just thinking of why earth revolves around the sun and not the other way around."

Lies.

Lucas, not fully in sync with her, just gave her a blank face. Sabrina then widened her eyes and gave him a sweet smile.

“Where's Lettuce anyway? She was gone before I knew it.”

His eyes wandered around the room, looking for traces of Letha.

“No idea! It's basically impossible to keep track of that girl.”

“Maybe we should install a tracking app on her phone next time.”

Sabrina giggled. “Knowing her, she probably won't mind.”

“Right?” He said with a small smirk.

Amidst their conversation, Sabrina tucked her notes under her desk. She stood up, slinging her bag on her shoulder.

“I need to go check on something.”,

“Yeah, sure.” Lucas replied with a bored tone.

Sabrina knew just how stubborn Keith could be at times. She couldn't think of a single time Keith apologized to her first after a fight. She'd usually be the one bombarding Keith's inbox with messages.

Yes, she trusted that Keith would know to do better, but she just can't shake this cold sensation on her fingertips.

She peeked through the room next door, the class where Keith was in. Surely enough, his seat remained empty, he's not here today either.

“Sabrina? You need something?”

Calling to her from behind was a girl with unwinking eyes. Sasha approached her, looking in the direction Sabrina was looking at.

“Sasha, I was just... uhh...”

“Hmm...?”

“I was looking for someone...”

“Want me to call them for you?”

Sasha pointed to the room as she asked the question, offering to help yet unsure if she can do it.

“No! I don't think they're here anyway.”

Sabrina took another quick glance at the empty seat. Her soft smile almost turned into a downwards arch.

“Anyways, don't wait for me later! Bye!”

Sabrina waved goodbye.

“Oh... okay...”

Dumbfounded, Sasha waved back watching Sabrina slowly move away.

Then she stopped. A few steps away from Sasha.

“Sabrina?”

Sasha could feel the tension surrounding her friend. She'd never seen Sabrina so hesitant before. All this time she acted as if she had everything planned.

But now...

“Can you do something for me?”

Sasha was taken by surprise by the sudden request, yet she nodded instantly.

“Keith, he's a guy in your class. Tall guy, sharp features. If you ever see him, can you ask him to call me?”

Keith. It was a name Sasha wasn't expecting to hear from Sabrina. Just as she expected, something must have happened.

“That's all. Bye.”

The distance between the two grew as Sabrina hurried away. It was a quick encounter, not even lasting five minutes. So why did this leave Sasha with an unfamiliar tremble in her chest?

Once again, she stared at Keith's empty seat.