

2023-05-01

I Lie Awake

Pauline Juliet Ku
University of Texas at El Paso

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open_etd



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ku, Pauline Juliet, "I Lie Awake" (2023). *Open Access Theses & Dissertations*. 3809.
https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open_etd/3809

This is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UTEP. For more information, please contact lweber@utep.edu.

I LIE AWAKE

PAULINE JULIET KU

Master's Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

Lex Williford, MFA, Chair

Sasha Pimentel, MFA

Katherine Serafine, Ph.D.

Stephen L. Crites, Jr., Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

Copyright ©

by

Pauline Juliet Ku

2023

I LIE AWAKE

by

PAULINE JULIET KU, B.S.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank my pugs Lucy and Cata, my devil of a girl and my catastrophe, who amuse me every day. I want to thank my thesis director Professor Lex Williford for his patience and encouragement. I also want to thank my committee members Professor Sasha Pimentel and Dr. Katherine Serafine for their invaluable input as a member of the AAPI writing community and knowledge of psychology, respectively. My husband, Dr. Jorge Alberto Muñoz, Jr., has supported me the entire time I've completed this MFA. Thank you to everyone who has read and commented on excerpts of this thesis in workshop or in Creative Writing Society and especially to Professors Kadiri Vaquer Fernandez, Sylvia Aguilar Zéleny, and José de Piérola who let me workshop parts of my novel in their classes.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
CRITICAL PREFACE.....	vii
PART ONE.....	1
SMILE.....	1
NO RAGTIME	4
2 WEEKS' NOTICE.....	6
VANITY.....	10
BETTER THAN PAMPRIN	16
WHY CALTECH?.....	27
PARAMOUR.....	33
PART TWO.....	42
BATTLE OF WILLS	42
UP IN THE AIR.....	51
A LEG TO STAND ON.....	53
WHAT A DRAG	58
DEAN MEAN	61
SARAH LEE	67
OUR RUNNING JOKE	74
TELL ME MORE	80
MEET YOUR MATCH	82
BLACK EYE.....	86
PART THREE.....	91
DUMB SHERLOCK HOLMES.....	91

ROSES ARE DEAD	96
BEREFT	103
INCONCEIVABLE	112
MONOPOLY	116
DR. KATE.....	121
TAKING BACK THE NIGHTS.....	132
I LIE AWAKE.....	139
I FALL ASLEEP.....	144
VITA	146

CRITICAL PREFACE

Maggie Kim, the protagonist in my first novel, *I Lie Awake*, is at heart an unreliable narrator. An autofictional novel which lies between memory, mental illness, trauma, and recovery/discovery through sexual liberation and humor. Maggie's weapons of choice are humor and wit. Slightly cinematic with standalone titled chapters that represent episodes experienced by the protagonist, the structure will be in roughly chronological order. The novel arose from questioning my remembrance of things past. Was my childhood just uneventful or did I have retrograde amnesia for a childhood full of rape and incest perpetrated by my oldest brother and/or a male cult member? Were these memories hallucinations fueled by delusions of sexual violence, flashbacks to actual events, or a mixture of both? I don't know the answer, but I know I've experienced it one way or another.

A beloved movie of mine, *Happiness*, written and directed by Todd Solondz, deals with these complex themes and serves as a model for how to talk frankly and humorously about sexually dark themes like pedophilia. It also allows the viewer to see the perpetrator in a somewhat empathic light, something I found almost impossible to disentangle from my own story. Because the novel is autofictional, one would assume that it should have been easier to write as I drew upon my personal experiences but my autobiography often got in the way and I fictionalized parts to protect myself from traumas I partially remember and to protect the people in my life whom I'd otherwise accuse of heinous crimes which I can't substantiate through evidence other than the hallucinations and delusions I've experienced since becoming a paranoid schizophrenic at the age of 21, my senior year at The California Institute of Technology or Caltech.

More recently, my psychiatrist, troubled by the frequency and strength of the tactile, auditory, visual, gustatory, and olfactory hallucinations I've experienced like the smell and taste of poop or the feeling like I'm being sexually assaulted when I try to nap, has suggested therapy to combat the complex PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), which, according to him, is more the organic cause than an imbalance of neurochemicals solved by taking psychotropic medication including antipsychotics, benzodiazepines, and sleeping medication. Thanks to the exploratory work I've already done writing *I Lie Awake*, I can talk through talk therapy and voice the fears, doubts, uncertainties, guilt, and shame I feel when thinking about my past or present.

I Lie Awake is a coming-of-age story about a young Korean American girl named Margaret Kim (Maggie) who grew up in a cult/abusive Korean Christian church and starts hearing voices at Caltech largely centered on rape and sexual violence. Shortly after hearing voices saying, "I'm gonna rape you," she attends a party where she copes by drinking and smoking too much marijuana, then pukes and blacks out (Ku 53). The next morning, she wakes believing she was raped by her male friend Neil who followed her into her dorm room and stayed with her until she regained consciousness. Subsequently, she develops PTSD. However, she soon discovers that the voices and hallucinations continue as she develops flashbacks of sexual encounters with her oldest brother which plague and confuse her because in high school, she seemed to be healthy, believing that she was celibate and a virgin. Could her mind have blocked out the pedophilic incestuous encounters she experienced from 5-12 or is her mind creating false memories that impute him in sexual crimes he never committed?

This writing, informed by scientific literature on schizophrenia including the *Schizophrenia Bulletin* journal article, "Do Specific Early-Life Adversities Lead to Specific

Symptoms of Psychosis? A Study from the 2007 The Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey,” stating that rape before the age of sixteen is associated with an approximately six-fold increase in likelihood of experiencing auditory and visual hallucinations. Importantly, schizophrenics have suffered great skepticism in beliefs around rape since some call it a delusion and not a memory, but the paper goes on to say that patients’ reports tend to be accurate and valid when judged against the reports of siblings, remain stable over long periods, and are unaffected by current symptoms.

I grew up in the University Bible Fellowship (UBF) in Chicago, IL, and don’t have fond memories of childhood. *The Spirit Moves West: Korean Missionaries in America* by Rebecca Y. Kim describes UBF, which many former members see more as a cult than a church. The gender segregation and arranged marriages in UBF and the inclusion of a young white American single male cult member in my basement may have created the perfect storm for child molestation/rape that I remember/reexperience today complete with all five senses including olfactory and tactile, not just auditory, or visual hallucinations. Even though UBF discourages sex, they never explain it so a child could interpret it as play, which makes for a dangerous Pandora’s box.

On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous by Ocean Vuong was the first novel that made me cry and laugh at different times, and my aim was to hit the same mark. A second-generation child of the diaspora myself, I use culturally relevant themes to enlighten my work. The novel also deals with an Asian American protagonist who has always identified more strongly with being American than Asian but who experiences differential discrimination through her sexual encounters and compliments for looking exotic. Maggie, who does not speak Korean, and speaks more Spanish than Korean, feels no attraction to Asians because they remind her of her brothers. Could this aversion to Asian men have a more concrete basis than she has ever given credence to

before? This is something I'm just now exploring. Nevertheless, she must deal with culturally conservative family members like her parents who wish her to marry into a UBF house church, which Rebecca Y. Kim describes are families "born out of weakness and marginality...from the 'underside of history'—made up of the poor, the migrants, the strangers and pilgrims worshipping" (8).

Some amazing authors have acted as my guides, including Esmé Weijun Wang, schizoaffective herself, who wrote *The Collected Schizophrenias* as well as the engaging isolated and incestuous novel, *The Border of Paradise*. Incidentally, Wang studied at Yale University but never allowed to return to her studies despite having recommendations from doctors and therapists, consequently transferred to Stanford University and eventually she got an MFA from University of Michigan. Her and Elyn Saks' writing on hallucinations and delusions in the groundbreaking memoir, *The Center Cannot Hold*, have informed my writing as much as the theoretical framework provided in UTEP Professor José de Piérola's class *Minding Fiction*.

Schizophrenia often begins in college or grad school. Unfortunately, many people cannot continue their studies and schools remain uncooperative with their medical leaves. I had to apply to be let back in from medical leave 3 times, was sometimes rejected, forced to take community college classes, see a therapist after my health insurance was no longer active, and meet with the Associate Dean Barbara Green and the Director of Health and Counseling Services Kevin Austin who'd also speak to my psychiatrist at the time. I was forced into therapy at Caltech and forced to only take 2 or 3 classes (underload) when I returned to my studies. Caltech was so afraid of suicide by its students since they had many high profile students do so under their supervision. I, myself, was never suicidal, but they probably concluded I was a danger to other students because of my psychosis.

Having a compassionate doctor makes all the difference. Although I am considered high-functioning I've come to resent the connotations in this terminology. Do people really expect me to not function from day to day? Elyn Saks on page 86-87 of *The Center Cannot Hold* says her Dr. Storr said:

“Your mind is very sick,” he said calmly, “and just as I’d advise with a sick body, it needs a specific kind of exercise to help it heal. That means resuming the work you love. It makes you happy, it gives you purpose, it challenges you. And so you need to stay at Oxford, in your program.”

She'd spent the past four months in a psychiatric hospital. Now, she sits on the board for The Center for Reintegration, which provides scholarships for students with bipolar, schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder to get back to work, back to life. I applied to this Baer Reintegration Scholarship three years in a row from 2019 to 2021 for the following Academic Year but was never chosen. She's also Associate Dean and Orrin B. Evans Professor of Law, Psychology, and Psychiatry and the Behavioral Sciences at the University of Southern California Gould Law School. She's received the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship commonly known as the Genius Grant and given an influential, funny, and eye-opening TED talk, all things I would die to be able to do. Unlike me, she wasn't always open about her schizophrenia, but her 2007 autobiography and her many successes help dispel myths and stigma surrounding the disease and she's probably the most articulate highly visible person with paranoid schizophrenia alive today.

The Neural Correlates of Consciousness, a class with the accompanying book *The Quest for Consciousness* by Christof Koch at Caltech introduced me to the subjectivity and neurobiology of consciousness furthered by the theory from Daniel Dennett in *Consciousness Explained* of multiple drafts in his model of consciousness, which strongly impacted my view of

how I see the world as I feel like my experience is tampered by multiple authors in my head and my viewpoint now of the past or present can change instantaneously. Dennett says that there is no observer inside the brain and that “all varieties of thought or mental activity—are accomplished in the brain by parallel, multitrack processes of interpretation and elaboration of sensory inputs. Information entering the nervous system is under continuous ‘editorial revision.’” (111). He goes on to say, “at any point in time there are multiple ‘drafts’ of narrative fragments at various stages of editing in various places in the brain” and thus we shouldn’t ask when something becomes conscious (Dennett 113). The mind then is constantly revising fragments here and there and my consciousness began that long ago, but this work and the dilemma I’m faced with in terms of whether I can trust my memory, hallucinations, and delusions has been brought to the foreground by the narrative techniques I’ve learned in the MFA.

Sanity is precious, and while I have it now, I know it can be lost at any moment. Depression and anxiety are the least of my concerns. I’m much more concerned about psychosis and thinking that I am, was, or will be raped in the present, past, or future. The description of insanity has been hard to portray since we often lose memory in the extreme states in a psychotic break. I could only truly rely upon others’ descriptions of what I said and heard or hospital records and as I describe in “Dumb Sherlock Holmes,” a chapter of *I Lie Awake*, I feel like a dumb detective because “None of this sleuthing is getting me anywhere closer to the truth” (Ku 93).

The storytelling mind...allergic to uncertainty, randomness, and coincidence...is addicted to meaning. If the storytelling mind cannot find meaningful patterns in the world, it will try to impose them. In short, the storytelling mind is a factory that churns

out true stories when it can, but will manufacture lies when it can't. (Gottschall 103)

Jonathan Gottschall, an American literary scholar specializing in literature and evolution, wrote the book *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. For sure, the need to tell my story and own it was a driving impetus for writing this novel, and were it not for the MFA, this story would not have been completed or in its present form. I've written iterations of it before, but always struggled for coherency. For example, in Spring 2020, I wrote the screenplay *Yoga Po*, a culmination of tidbits written over a span of five years leading up to the MFA. The logline, a one-sentence synopsis of the movie's plot, I started with was "A resilient young woman with schizophrenia fights ISIS and her delusions of being the acting president of the United States and superhero to finally find sanity, love, and peace with humor in a world rife with trauma and pain," but the logline I adopted after writing the entire screenplay in three weeks was "A young schizophrenic woman fights her hallucinations and delusions to find sanity and the love of her life."

What I can accomplish now in novel form is more complex and realistic than a screenplay because I can get into the thoughts of the character, here, Maggie Kim, not Yoga Po. "A movie is a story told in pictures and sound..." write Robin U. Russin and William Missouri Downs in their book *Screenplay: Writing the Picture* on page 447, "At its simplest, it is a basic description of what the audience will see and hear." I expect the reader to pause while reading *I Lie Awake*, especially my intended readers, people who may doubt whether they were victims of childhood sexual assault or newly diagnosed paranoid schizophrenics wondering why they hallucinate about sexual violence.

The quote from Gottschall suggests that my storytelling mind is uniquely my own and that only some of what I have created is fiction. I wholly acknowledge this struggle and try to

work out whether readers can trust Maggie Kim or whether the purported author of this metafiction even can trust herself. Other tangible evidence corroborates the memories which trouble Maggie, like by her siblings Sheehe and Woojin. They each distinctly remember her brother Unghe asking Maggie for blow jobs, sometimes right in front of them as in the case of Woojin. My siblings remember me describing my oldest brother's pubic hair as a dense forest and remember him asking me for a blow job while they were in the room. In his New York Times' obituary on September 24, 1939, Sigmund Freud wrote, "The mind is an iceberg—it floats with one-seventh of its bulk above water" ("DR. SIGMUND FREUD DIES IN EXILE AT 83" 1). Perhaps it did not progress from there, but because they remember and are more reliable narrators than I am, these memories should be a cause for concern. My mind wasn't even conscious of this memory until I had my first auditory hallucination at Caltech. I describe this memory to doctors with its bothersome weight in my first psychiatric hospitalization in February 2008, likely decades after its occurrence. For years, this iceberg threatened to sink my life like *The Titanic*, but I won't let it.

I can't confront my brother in real life, but I imagine how a confrontation between Maggie and her brother would play out in the chapter "Taking Back the Nights." Maggie tells her brother on page 134:

You took my childhood away from me. Now, all I remember is crawling through that cobwebby back boiler room through a hole you created in the dry wall to your closet in the basement. Why was that hole never patched? Woojin wants to know why your door was always locked? Why was I the only one who fit through that rabbit hole? I still remember that winter day that you supposedly got locked out of your room. I wore my pink snowsuit and Sheehe and Woojin were there, too. Why'd you do it, Unghe? Why'd

you rape me for years?

Maggie and I both know there cannot be a good explanation for all of this chaos, and in many ways, she's braver than I am. I remember at the first inkling of fear expressed towards my brother as a schizophrenic adult, I would be on another trip to the mental hospital. Unghe is a police officer, a fact taken from real life.

Maggie and I could never prosecute anyone as the evidence is heavily "He said. She said." or rather "He said. She hallucinated." Even when I allude to a videotape of the abuse in the novel, I'm unsure because this detail is based on an unreliably hazy memory. My thesis director Professor Lex Williford upon reading the chapter "Monopoly" suggested that I conclude the videotape as real and have the mother Uma give her daughter Maggie the videotape in her last will and testament, but this account runs counter to the whole premise of the novel. For a fact, Maggie doesn't know whether the abuse occurred, and the scene pointed to a highly improbable resolution. I had to change and rewrite the confrontation chapter, at first more dramatic in person complete with a surprise kick in the balls, to a confrontation on the phone, which I find much more realistic.

Writing a novel according to Professor José de Piérola's syllabus for Writing the Novel, a class I took this past fall, is "the art of the burning patience" and my novel was hard-wrought. I shed many tears while writing, but I also experienced joy and mirth. I didn't write this novel to sell. I wrote it because according to Professor Lex Williford, it's the fire that burned brightest in my belly. Once it got a hold of me, it wouldn't let go. That iceberg is slowly melting, and my mind is freer now because I have unburdened many of its demons. The hell I went through is more distant and remote, and I can reflect upon how I managed to survive the hell of thinking, reliving, and experiencing pain and rape on a daily, monthly, and yearly basis. This narrative

therapy improved my long-term mental health even if it was detrimental at first and in the near term. I'm working in therapy to go from sexual assault victim to sexual assault survivor. The stigma of rape is just as bad as the stigma of paranoid schizophrenia, and most schizophrenics suffer from both in their lifetime, not only real but imagined, recreated over and over again in a while loop of misery and pain that can make any normal woman, child, or man want to commit suicide.

Rape, the ultimate robbery of freedom, annexes bodily autonomy, usurping a function normally reserved for pleasure and reproduction. It takes away an innocence one can never fully regain. What normal preteen girl can be raped repeatedly and expected to grow up into a contributing member of society when a family member and a cult member robbed her of her childhood? There's a reason why armies rape. It's as much a psychological type of warfare as physical, a memory forever seared into the minds of victims and victim family members. I have two siblings who also have severe mental illness, albeit their onset was in their thirties, but often these siblings with Bipolar I with Psychosis hallucinated about the physical welfare of my sister and me. One believed someone held his female neighbor captive, in danger and being raped constantly. How does the insidious iceberg Freud describes rear its head again after decades of dormancy?

Learned helplessness makes victims complicit in future bodily crimes. According to Heather Brick in her Master of Arts thesis in Clinical Psychology, women sexually abused as children, "Instead of stopping a potentially dangerous situation, . . . may be more likely to passively submit to assault, in keeping with learned responses from their past abuse" (7). They "may feel powerless in a threatening situation and may not assert themselves at a point where

they could change the outcome of the situation” (Brick 7). Unfortunately, rapists can often easily identify old targets of child sexual abuse and revictimize them even into their adulthood.

According to the website laurenskids.org, one in three girls are sexually abused before the age of eighteen and approximately twenty percent of victims of sexual abuse are under the age of eight. According to the 1995 statistics Brick uses, about 15% to 33% of the female population are abused as children, but the percentage in clinical settings is higher ranging from 35% to 75% (1). For this reason, child sexual abuse can lead to:

depression, anxiety, self-destructive behaviors (such as suicidal behavior and self-mutilation), social isolation, poor sexual adjustment and dysfunction, substance abuse, dissociation and memory impairment, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, personality disorders (such as Borderline Personality Disorder), somatization problems, and high risk sexual behaviors. (Brick 1-2)

In deciding to write Maggie’s adventures exploring her sexuality, I can rewrite a victim story even as it deviates from mine. Is Maggie traumatized from the disturbing memories she’s had? Obviously, but that doesn’t stop her from having pleasurable sexual experiences as she comes of age. She identifies as a lesbian but soon discovers at Caltech, where her father forces her to go after he finds out about the underage lesbian affair with her best friend Abby in California where Maggie’s family moved to when she was in high school, that she’s decidedly bisexual and eventually she marries her college sweetheart, a male Caltech PhD student and El Paso native Jose Sanchez. I began writing this seductive fictional story in the chapter “Better Than Pamprin” in my Queer Writing course I took with Visiting Professor Kadiri Vaquer Fernandez.

Understandably turned off by men, having serviced her brother’s youngest sister fellatio fetish,

Maggie's first sexual experience and her sexual orientation gravitate towards women. However, as the novel progresses, it's clear that she does experience attraction towards men as well.

Lastly, I want to say what an unbelievable privilege working on this project has been. I'd imagined writing a memoir for years, but the level of immediate PTSD I felt when putting pen to paper made me approach it differently. I struggled to write about it in a novel, but doing so offered me an enormous freedom, because the form isn't necessarily autobiographical, but the inspiration for something greater. If Maggie becomes a hero for the reader, she does so by overcoming incredible obstacles to get past her trauma, not just conquering the stigma only of possible childhood rape but also of schizophrenia, and finding love through terrible pain and doing so with a sense of humor.

A sense of humor has been a driving force in my life, saving me from real suicidal ideation when I had to withstand 20,000 invisible stabs at the lowest point in my life, when medication was not sufficient to keep the tactile or other pestilent hallucinations away. While experiencing excruciating psychosomatic pain, I begged for my then boyfriend, now current husband to kill me. Religiosity didn't keep me alive, but things to smile and laugh about even while experiencing excruciating psychosomatic pain. Psychosomatic pain is still pain and experienced the same way by the body. Medical personnel, nurses, and doctors, often overlook pain, but in the partial hospitalization at St. Vincent's Providence Hospital in Beaverton, OR, in 2015 I had to circle a number for pain and mood every single morning. Both are intricately related. "The transition from acute to chronic pain problems is known to be catalyzed by psychological processes" (Linton 701). In acute, chronic pain from 2015 to 2016, I still experience hallucinatory nights where the pain returns, but it no longer disables me. My mental

and physical state have improved enough for me to reflect upon that time. While the medication has gotten me to a steady state, I have real and frequent flashbacks several times a week. For this reason, my doctor suggested talk therapy and trauma-informed cognitive behavioral therapy to see if I can improve my psychological and physical state when medication isn't enough.

I found the yoga the most helpful class I've taken during the partial hospitalization because simply changing poses and light stretching helped to dissipate my pain. I learned that switching my body position could take me away from the painful stimulus, and sometimes I appeared to fight back against invisible foes. Of course, this partial hospitalization led to real hospitalization and a medication readjustment in the hospital, where fighting invisible or real people led me to some rapid tranquilizations (involuntary injection with antipsychotics and/or sedatives). Upon my seventh and final hospitalization in 2015, I'd learned more coping mechanisms for hallucinations than I could ever learn in the hospital. Working is an effective coping mechanism that I do not do enough of. Fulltime work was a point of stress, anxiety, and depression for me in 2014 and the beginning of 2015, and I'd often cry upon returning home after a 9-hour shift, but I find that parttime work restores and distracts me. At the height of Medicare Open Enrollment, I worked a total of 11 days in a row, up to 13 hours a day.

The practice of writing or journaling can prove very therapeutic, a self-discovery with the use of words. Also, watching film and TV can not only initially distract, but movies like *Happiness* can help dispel myths of sexual predators as the protagonist Bill Maplewood not only rapes children but is also a psychiatrist. When his son Billy finds out he raped his classmates Johnny Grasso and Ronald Farber, he asks his father "Would you ever fuck me?" to which Bill replies, "No...I jerk off instead" (Solondz 94-95). I still do not know if my brother raped me, but I do know he masturbated or thought sexual thoughts about me, not normal brotherly behavior,

just as it's not normal fatherly behavior for Bill Maplewood. I know that my brother is at least a gang rapist because he told my other brothers that he had sex with a girl who had drunk too much along with four other guys and that they realized they'd gang raped her when she cried at the end. Now, when I hear that story I experience much paranoia as I can imagine myself in that scenario in college. Often, I hallucinate about the time I blacked out and believe I was not only raped, but gang raped. However, my brother's gang rape story probably happened when I was in high school, and I didn't drink at the time, so obviously it couldn't have been me, but that doesn't stop the paranoia of "Could it have been me?" from playing in my head again and again.

The definition of autofiction by Siddharth Srikanth is:

a work in which the author is the protagonist, in which the author's biographical background and life experiences inform the nonfictionality of the work and in which the author combines fictionality and nonfictionality at length for his or her purpose. (353)

Often, writers of autofiction deploy extensive fictionality in order to better illuminate actual life experiences, and writers are not compelled to tell it like it was exactly. Autobiography is much more rigid and stringent, novels the stuff of fiction. Autofiction can be inspired by real life events, written non verbatim and embellished to create a more dramatic narrative structure that reads like a fictional novel. I find myself hard pressed to write about things I have not personally experienced. I write from dreams or my real life, my hallucinations and delusions, but the fictional parts are actually the more rewarding parts because I'm freer and more liberated and not held down by the question "Did I get that right?"

Some of the sexual experiences Maggie has in the novel were fictionalized or the protagonists different than in my real life, but I had the liberty to play around with it because it is a novel. In the first consensual same sex experience, written in *Queer Writing* inspired by the

book *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong, I wanted to describe a joyous deflowering and include realistic dialogue and thoughts going through Maggie's mind while being seduced by her best friend and high school crush Abby. I tried to tie into the story, various timestamps of popular culture, movies, TV shows and music, all the better to immerse the readers into Maggie's point of view and reference. This task proved to be more difficult than I imagined because Maggie is significantly younger than I am, born in 1992 instead of 1986. I put references to politics like the vote to approve Proposition 8 in California in November 2008, legislation banning same sex marriage. The use of a Novel Map, learned in *Minding Fiction*, helped to give the novel a cohesion and flexibility in terms of which chapters came first, second, third, etc. I decided to include headers with place and time since the novel spans a couple decades and multiple cities in the United States. There's much to admire in Maggie. She does things I've only dreamed about like confronting her brother, but that is the nature of autofiction and altogether she may be a more reliable narrator than myself in memoir.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bentall, Richard P et al. “Do Specific Early-Life Adversities Lead to Specific Symptoms of Psychosis? A Study from the 2007 The Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey.” *Schizophrenia bulletin*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2012, pp. 734-40. doi:10.1093/schbul/sbs049. Accessed 22 Jul. 2022.
- Brick, Heather. *Mechanisms involved in sexual assault revictimization*. Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers. The University of Montana. *ScholarWorks*, 1999. <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=9931&context=etd>
- “Child Sexual Abuse Facts.” <https://laurenkids.org/awareness/about-faqs/facts-and-stats/> Accessed 20 Mar. 2023.
- Dennett, Daniel C. *Consciousness Explained*. Little, Brown and Co, Boston, MA, 1991.
- “DR. SIGMUND FREUD DIES IN EXILE AT 83; Founder of Psychoanalysis Theory Succumbs at His Home Near London.” *The New York Times*, 24 September 1939, pp. 1. Accessed 20 Mar. 2023.
- Gottschall, Jonathan. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.
- Kim, Rebecca Y. *The Spirit Moves West: Korean Missionaries in America*. University Press, New York, NY, 2015.
- Koch, Christof. *The Quest for Consciousness: A Neurobiological Approach*. Roberts and Co, Denver, CO, 2004.
- Linton, Steven J. and William S. Shaw. “Impact of Psychological Factors in the Experience of Pain.” *Physical Therapy*, vol. 91, no. 5, 2011, pp. 700-711.
- Russin, Robin and William Downs. *Screenplay: Writing the Picture*. 2nd ed., Silman-James

- Press, 2012.
- Saks, Elyn R. *The Center Cannot Hold: My Journey Through Madness*. Hyperion, New York, NY, 2007.
- Solondz, Todd. *Happiness*. 1998. <https://thescriptsavant.com/pdf/Happiness.pdf>. Accessed 27 June 2022.
- Srikanth, Siddharth. "Fictionality and Autofiction." *Style*, vol. 53, no. 3, pp. 344-363, 2019.
- Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel*. Random House, New York, NY, 2019.
- Wang, Esmé Weijun. *The Border of Paradise: A Novel*. The Unnamed Press, Los Angeles, CA, 2016.
- Wang, Esmé Weijun. *The Collected Schizophrenias: Essays*. Graywolf Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2019.

PART ONE

SMILE

RIVER GROVE, IL

2004

I didn't like to smile for school pictures. Looking in the mirror now, I can pose my head just right, but in front of the camera, I never felt natural. To smile with closed mouth or with teeth? That's what everyone asked. They said only one of our Rhodes School friend group, Eva, looked good smiling with a closed mouth. I just looked at my crooked front tooth sticking out its turtle head. One time the photographer made me laugh when taking my picture and that's the only picture I liked as a portrait of me, a young artist who likes to draw other people and not myself. He said, "I made a flyer but soon cried because my flyer flew away" just as he flashed the camera light. What's peculiar about my sketchbooks is that they didn't look at all done by an Asian, which I really don't identify with culturally or linguistically.

I'm Maggie Kim, a Korean American, born and raised in Chicago, IL, but all I could see is a sea of white in my portraits. I drew actresses and models and made-up characters, but they never came out as Asian in style or ethnicity. They were all blonde and blue eyed, all unconscious because I just didn't see Asian faces except those of my own family.

I liked to stand in front of the mirror after showering but just looking at my face I blushed. How strange, that I'm more comfortable seeing myself naked than bare faced since I never ever put on makeup. I didn't like makeup on my eyes or face because I wore contacts. With makeup, I was constantly rubbing my eyes. Besides, I had nothing to hide. I didn't have acne or blemishes, skin porcelain and a pale-yellow white, kind of like my crooked teeth, stained from the coffee I drank when writing out my weekly testimonies for bible study in UBF or

University Bible Fellowship, the fundamentalist evangelical Korean Christian church I grew up in.

I once heard that smiling means chimpanzees are afraid. It's a show of teeth, not like wolves baring teeth, which shows fear and deference to the dominant member of the troop. Smiling ages you. Laugh lines, even deep cheek wrinkles, can form, and I guess that's why my mom Uma always yelled at my older brother Woojin and me when we made faces in the huge living room mirror.

Us Kim kids didn't really watch TV in the living room. According to my mother Uma *The Simpsons* weren't for children, and she yelled that my sister Sheehe and I laughed like coked-up hyenas watching *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*. She was not amused when interrupted getting some shut-eye before leaving for work at 6AM. A cardiac ICU nurse at Westlake Hospital in our neighboring city of Melrose Park, she often brought home Burger King original chicken sandwiches instead of cooking at home because she was so exhausted after working 12-hour shifts. We were latchkey kids, somehow a privilege in the 21st century, perhaps something Uma was proud of. She made more than my dad Apa, but we never heard about that and only found out their salaries after Sheehe filled out the FAFSA financial aid form for college.

We amused ourselves with that mirror taking up the whole wall above the living room couch and books we borrowed on a shelf from the River Grove Public Library. My mom used to leave us there for hours treating it like a day care until one day the workers put up a sign saying you could not leave your children unaccompanied. The frowns we made would remain forever imprinted on our skin, she said, but she also yelled at Woojin and me when we kids mooned

ourselves on the coffee table. Anyone looking through the living room window could see our pale asses and legs.

When I was 8, we prayed at this same coffee table when Jesus's Second Coming was supposed to occur in 2000. Funny enough, she called in sick for all us kids from Rhodes School and East Leyden High School and so bored and out of touch, I never remembered how long we stayed praying on our knees waiting to be invited to the heavens before death overtook the unbelievers. Maybe Jesus forgot to mark his calendar or missed his heavenly train. He left us to toil together miserably for a while longer. Heavens forbid that Jesus smiled down at our half-assed prayers. Uma's eyes closed, after peeking through with one eye at first, we kids finally looked around in bewilderment at this scene from The Last Supper. I didn't remember if Apa was there. Certainly, I couldn't remember him looking sternly at us or beating us after he caught us staring at each other wide-eyed. Maybe asleep, he did work the night shift at the post office, and occasionally if we rough housed too loud he beat our hands or legs in the kitchen with chopsticks or spatulas. Or made us do military exercises of standing with arms up or out until they ached more than a slap from the wooden spatula.

NO RAGTIME
RIVER GROVE, IL

2004

“Uma, I got my period!” I yelled closing the front door on Lyndale Street after coming home from Rhodes School.

“What? Maggie, let me see,” my mother said, following me to my bedroom, pulling at my clothes, while I jerked away from her.

“No, why do you want to see?” I asked, blushing over showing my mom.

“Oh, come on, I gave birth to you 12 years ago. You’re my daughter.”

Though I never watched Star Trek, I knew the saying: “Resistance is futile.” When my older sister Sheehe came home one time after getting a haircut, bangs and all, she asked my mom in a loud voice, “Uma, do you notice anything different about me?”

My mom replied a flat “no.”

“I got a tattoo!” Sheehe shouted.

“You did not!” my mother screamed. “Where?”

“You can’t see it because it’s on my butt!” Sheehe said, pointing at her rear end.

My mother chased Sheehe around the house trying to pull her shorts down so she could see this god-awful tattoo. My mother, a South Korean missionary, came to America to preach the gospel and unlike our two brothers, kept a tight watch on Sheehe and me. They got to come and go as they pleased, returning smelling of alcohol and cigarettes. Sheehe mooned my mom to her relief and my sister’s glee.

“Okay, Uma,” I said, taking off my pants, unstained by blood. Then, taking off my underwear, I handed over my soaking wet panties. My heart raced. I knew what a period is from

those video presentations about puberty at school. I was finally a woman. I may not have had the boobs to show the world yet, but I was no longer a girl I thought as my mom took away my panties.

I put my hands over my now bare lower body, no hair like I glimpsed on my mom's naked body, trying to get a look at the thick, white pad my mother pulled out, but I froze.

"There's no blood," she said, "This isn't your period. You don't need that yet."

"Then what is that?" I asked pointing to my panties.

"Nothing. No period. You see, it's white not red! You can just use pantliners for now if you want." Her flat voice, I didn't ask anything else, but grabbed the thin pantliner, and removed its paper backing sticking it to my panties, not bothering to put on a fresh pair since these did not have the fresh, red blood my mother had been hunting for.

How come no one told me you can discharge white before red? I wondered and looked at my Rhodes School cheerleading uniform on the dresser. How strange, white, and red, just like me and my mysterious discharge. The girls at school all developed before me. I begged my mother for a training bra even though I had nothing to hide. I just didn't want to be naked in the locker room, while my other more endowed peers hid their much bigger boobies. And now, blushing again, I didn't even have this coming-of-age story. I couldn't tell of painful cramps and blood like my classmates. I couldn't tell of having to excuse myself to the nurse's office, bleeding through my khakis or jeans.

I felt more humiliated because I had absolutely nothing to share. My mom said, "Maggie, be happy you're not bleeding yet."

"But how can I be happy?" I asked, "I'm not a woman yet."

2 WEEKS' NOTICE

SAN JOSE, CA

2007

At the beginning of sophomore year of Cupertino High School known to us students as “Tino”, I had my regular bible study with Shepherdess Lily Reyes, a 19-year-old impressionable young Filipina woman. She was excited to tell me about the Good News of Jesus. Shepherds and Shepherdesses are the titles given to American Bible Teachers in University Bible Fellowship, while Sheep referred to those more recently recruited. I was a second-generation Missionary kid, and my parents were Missionaries from South Korea, which ironically had a smaller percentage of Christians than the country they immigrated to the US from, about thirty percent to at least seventy percent. My mother studied nursing, which is the only way they could immigrate to the United States in the 80s to the main center of UBF in Chicago, IL.

“Maggie, I’m about to get married. Shepherd Teddy—our pastor—is going to marry me and three other couples this coming Sunday! Isn’t that great?”

“Wait, Lily, what are you talking about? Who are you marrying?”

“Oh, it’s Ahmed Akbar, but he wants us to change our names when we get married.”

“What? Really? To what? But did you guys even date at all?” I asked, not believing my ears.

“Yes,” she said, “for 2 weeks! We’re going to be Abraham and Sarah like in the Old Testament.”

“I’m familiar with Abraham and Sarah. Were Isaac and Rebecca’s names taken by another couple?” I asked, but my sarcasm was lost on her.

“Actually, yes, another couple at the main center took those names.”

Like the Moonies led by Reverend Moon, Korean cults were crazy about arranged marriages. Many young women, 18- or 19-years-old, had never dated or even held a man's hand married some thirty- to forty-five-year-old man they barely spoke to before in University Bible Fellowship. Public displays of affection were frowned upon, and the sexes heavily segregated at church. After marriage they moved in together and formed a house church, churning out babies like commercials of I Can't Believe It's Not Butter.

A misnomer, UBF largely recruited on college campuses, but over the history of our church we got kicked out of some college campuses. I believed Lily from San Jose City College, the local community college, had only been a sheep in the church for a little over a year. I'd started to see UBF like kids did growing up in Scientology, more a cult than a church, but I had to bide my time to figure out some strategy to get out. Already, my busy gymnastics schedule had allowed me to opt out of the Daily Bread prayers, but I still had to see Lily soon-to-be-Sarah-Akbar once a week for bible study.

"How old's Ahmed?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know. I think he's turning 38 in November," she replied way too casually.

"That means he's twice your age!" I'm appalled at the idea that I could be next on the marriage chopping block at any time with just two weeks' notice. "Have you even kissed anyone before?"

"No, Maggie. Why'd you ask me that?"

"Because your first kiss is going to be at your own wedding. I think that's disgusting."

Marriage was worse than losing a job, something that happened to Sheeche after college causing her to move back home. She'd been working at Sharpie for a couple years in Boston, MA, and given me Prismacolor colored pencils and a Grumbacher transparent watercolor pan set

for free, but never got along with her female boss and resigned because Sheeche didn't fit in that cutthroat culture and thus was unable to climb the corporate ladder. She didn't like talking about it, but at least she gave her two weeks' notice and they let her go with a month of severance pay.

Can you get to know your fiancé enough in 2 weeks? I wondered, especially in church which separated the sexes while in Sunday Service or any other church gathering. When I was 8 or 9 that hot summer, playing basketball outside the church, one of the Shepherdesses had asked me to walk home and change into pants from my Bermuda jean shorts.

"I've got to change?" I asked. "Everyone else is wearing shorts."

"Yes, but everyone else is a boy," she said. I was a tomboy and didn't understand until years later, that someone had said I could invite lust into the boys or men present at the tender age of 8 or 9! From that day on, I suffered through hot Chicago summers wearing long skirts or pants like the other women in the church often recruited to reinforce this almost Sharia-like law. Makeup forbidden, if a young woman even came to church with a chic expensive haircut, one of the Shepherdesses recut her hair to look more plain or downright ugly. I started feeling jaded in junior high, but in high school when we moved to San Jose, I'd used my involvement in the girl's gymnastics team, something my dad could condone, to create even more distance from myself to the church. Disagreeing with the Main Center, my dad had moved us to San Jose because the church leader Samuel Lee made people walk barefoot from Skokie to the Main Center for hours in the snow and ice.

Stubborn, I continued in artistic gymnastics into my teenage years, in long-sleeved but revealing lower-body leotards. I could buck the family fundamentalist tradition while at school and still cringed at my feeble preaching while in the second grade. When I was a younger child,

I'd been so enthusiastic about proselytizing that after hearing about the Sermon on the Mount, I'd gotten up on my chair in the middle of class and tried to give my own Sermon on the Mount.

Every week for years, I'd asked my best friend Nancy to come to my house for bible study only to succeed in the fifth grade. I'd been so crazy about asking that I'd not prepared for the eventuality of her saying yes and when she got there and I had the Bible in front of me and her attention, I balked. I asked my brother, one year older, Woojin if he could teach her since he had taught bible to a couple of his friends, and while he did I just kind of hung around for the half hour it took. She never came back, and I don't believe I ever got another friend to come over to our house again. Word must have gotten around. Over-zealous but not that knowledgeable. maybe I'd not eaten enough apples at that point to be a bible teacher.

VANITY

SAN JOSE, CA

2008

Memory is faulty. I know that now, but it doesn't make my memories any the less painful in their current form. I remember my parents leaving me in downtown Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry's last exhibit: incubating chicken eggs in one display and baby chicks in a separate display next to it in the middle of a room. I remember staring and staring, then looking around for a sign of my family. They were gone. Vanished.

I proceeded to the next room, a huge back atrium with no family in sight. Growing up with three older siblings, not used to being alone at 4 or 5, I went back to the room with the baby chicks and cried in a corner until two female good Samaritans paused and asked if I was okay. Luckily, by that point in my life, I knew enough English to sob *no*. They took my hand and led me to the security desk where the security guards tried to cheer me up with Snickers bars as I heard over the intercom that the museum would be closing in 5 minutes and that everyone should head for the exits.

I'm not sure if that message came before or after the two kind ladies dropped me off. I just know that it made me cry harder. After what seemed like hours, my family finally returned in our dedicated 2000 Dodge Grand Caravan, and the security guards released me. My family had gotten ice cream in between leaving the museum and coming back. They looked at me like I was crazy for freaking out. Of course, they were coming back, they said, and, "How were the baby chicks?"

When I told my dad about this memory, he denied any knowledge. He said it must have been when a couple Korean missionaries had taken us to the museum. “How could he forget one of his own children in a museum?” he asked as my jaw dropped at this revelation.

Another memory not my own but can that be faulty too? My sister was eleven or twelve at the time, making me about five or six. She remembers waking up one night to use the bathroom only to find it occupied already by me and a twenty-something year old single male cult member. White American Shepherd Rob Abbott was washing me in the bathroom sink.

My sister did a double take and asked, “What’s going on?”

“Oh, Maggie wet her bed,” he said, “and I’m just cleaning her up.”

“Why didn’t you wake up my parents?”

Now, any response here, remembered, misremembered, or forgotten would be woefully inadequate because there’s no good response to that completely innocent but also legitimate question. I didn’t have a bedroom at the time, having slept on the floor behind the TV in the living room, while Rob Abbott slept in the basement. He should not have been upstairs at night.

I never remember wetting the bed, but I do have memories that make me doubt this story because I’d wake up every night, confused, holding my privates, and cry in the hallway until someone led me to our water closet to pee. You see, I spent a year and a half in South Korea, from age one and a half to three years old, and I wasn’t used to the new house layout upon our return to suburban Chicagoland. I didn’t even remember my own mother. I thought the aunt—known informally as Emo (Korean for aunt)—who took my older brother Woojin and me to Korea was my mom.

Now, I don’t remember anyone washing me in the sink directly, but I do remember climbing onto that same sink, naked, repeatedly to admire myself in the mirror. I also remember

someone standing behind me and pointing at the mirror, but it wasn't Shepherd Rob. It was my oldest brother Unghe. As I got older, I'd put one foot on the bathtub and the other on the bathroom sink after showering but still I learned vanity at that sink.

Google translate says, "Yeppuda,aju yeppuda," is "Pretty, very pretty," but I remember, "Eppo, neomu eppoda." Either way, there was someone who spoke Korean, likely related to me putting me in the sink every night and pointing out how beautiful I looked naked and stroking my clitoris with the bar soap we used to wash our hands with. No pump and dump fancy liquid hand soap for us conservative Christians. How small I must have been, but I was always the smallest in my class besides a preemie girl in a wheelchair who'd been one pound when born compared to my five pounds eight ounces.

Why did my parents send me to Korea where I hold no memories, good or bad? I peer at the pictures of myself with Woojin and we look happy if a little confused. There's one of me in a small red polka-dotted two-piece swimsuit and I wonder how progressive that must look in UBF's eyes. A two-piece on a two-year-old! What blasphemy! Such indulgence! Another picture shows me in a tank top and shorts with a colorful crab on it and I looked quite crabby as my Korean relatives gave me an unbecoming perm that looked like an untamed afro.

Woojin went to Kindergarten in South Korea and then in River Grove, IL, dressed in a black and white penguin costume in Korea and red graduation cap and gown in America. He must have struggled to learn English more than I did, but Unghe says I kept calling objects and colors out in Korean when I returned, and he was like "What the heck?" about his two youngest Korean American siblings.

Sheehe and Unghe used to tease me and Woojin saying without stop, "Haha, you don't know English! You don't know how to read!"

I was maybe only three, but I declared, “No, I do know how to read!” and I grabbed my bible and circled all the words I knew by heart at the time, which were “a,” “an,” and “the,” the articles in the first chapter of Genesis.

A happy memory I have of childhood, otherwise few and far between, was going to the River Grove Library, which still smells of musky books and paper, because Uma and Apa couldn't afford daycare and she'd just drop us off for hours at a time. At first, I played with the toys, sliding colored blocks in wire rollercoasters or hanging monkeys onto each other. Eventually I became an avid reader, but while still in first or second grade I read out loud. We'd bring books about dogs, Judy Blume, or picture books back to the house and when I read out loud, my siblings couldn't read in their heads so all four of us would read various books out loud.

Today, I miss Emo, but having lost my mother tongue I can't talk to my surrogate mother except in broken English. Her English is quite rudimentary, and she moved to Philadelphia when I was three or four, leaving me without a caring mother. Maybe she would have protected me had she been able to stay longer. Maybe I wouldn't have cried so much, and maybe, just maybe, Javi would have an older brother, a polar bear stuffed animal that rivaled my size when I held him and which I hugged for comfort until one day my mother threw or gave him away without telling me. Unghe, her firstborn and thus favorite, got to keep his nasty polar bear, Teddy, which he used as a pillow, retrieving him so many times from the garbage bin. Or maybe Unghe threw my polar bear away, so I'd come play with him and Teddy.

The tears that fell, fell on deaf ears and no one could comfort me, perhaps because they didn't know why I cried and, years later, I'm not sure why I cried either. I wanted a loving family and to be hugged and comforted, but they all seemed to ignore me. Perhaps I cried because I was hungry, and no one cooked for me.

Woojin and I would make bologna tacos, just a piece of bologna wrapped around white sticky rice from the ever ready to eat rice cooker. Or we'd put sesame oil and soy sauce in rice and divide it up into fractions in a circular pie shape on our plates. I guess that's how I got so good at math!

One day Sheeche made a steaming bowl of ramen, and said, "Maggie, if you worship me, I'll give you this ramen." Dutifully, I bowed down to Sheeche, but instead of rewarding me, she gave it to Woojin who tended towards the chubby side.

Another time she'd frozen a bottle of Sprite and said she'd sell it to me for a dollar. I paid but afterwards discovered it was just tap water frozen after the Sprite had been drunk. She gloated and refused to give my dollar back.

One day in middle school, Sheeche said, "Maggie, I want to make a bet. If by the time you graduate high school, you're not five feet I win five dollars. If, by some miracle, you're over five feet I'll pay you five dollars."

I agreed and we made out the contract on a pink post it note I stuck on the bedroom wall. At the time four foot eight or nine, I thought there's no way she'd win, but lo and behold, after six years I only grew to four foot eleven. She always claimed gymnastics stunted my growth, but I blamed the siblings who ate all my food and the parents who neglected to feed me three solid meals a day. When my mom or dad returned home from the grocery store, we all yelled, "First pick, first extra," then continued to fight for "second pick, second extra," etc. The first pick among four children gave you the choice of flavor of whatever grocery item like popsicles and the first extra piece should there be more than four of anything.

My paternal grandparents crossed the DMZ and the East Sea, a marginal sea of the Pacific Ocean surrounded by Japan, China and Russia, in a boat to start life all over again in

South Korea after World War II, but before the Korean War, and my dad was born in South Korea since they'd crossed with his older brother, just a baby at the time.

"Apa, tell me the story again," I'd pleaded.

"There's not much to say," he replied. "My father crossed the border repeatedly but one day got separated from Uma."

"For how long?"

"For the five years between World War II and the end of the Korean War. He remarried and had another son, my half-brother, who I never met and who died by drowning at eighteen. My mom always wanted me by her side. She feared losing more family members, so maybe that's why she breastfed me until I was five. She'd make me count past one thousand as she cooked or worked to support the family and I was always an obedient son."

"And they found each other again?"

"Yes, eventually, and he left his second wife to be with his first."

"I wish I could go back with my first mom."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean maybe Unghe would've behaved if Emo were still around."

"You were always Emo's favorite."

"And Unghe was always Uma's favorite."

BETTER THAN PAMPRIN

SAN JOSE, CA

2009

“Tell me the first time you saw a dick, Peggy,” said my best friend, Abby.

“I was five or six. I came downstairs to the basement, and I must have not made a sound because I interrupted my oldest brother Dae-Hyun, whose nickname Unghe means to shit in Korean, on his way to the shower who just stood there, completely nude and placed his hands in front of crotch. ‘Oh!’ he said, then closed the door again.”

“What did you do?”

“I ran back upstairs telling my sister that his pubic hair looked like a forest. I don’t remember this now, but she does because she’s six years older and my brother is eight years older.”

“Did it traumatize you?” A look of concern crossed Abby’s white, unblemished and make-up free face.

“I think it did, but I really don’t remember that much from my early childhood, mostly the shocking moments.”

“Like what?” Her hand touched mine as I thought about what had led to my continual mental health crisis.

“I don’t know if it was a dream or if it actually happened, but the dreams still haunt me twelve years later. I stood in Unghe’s room, the matted floor beneath my bare feet and watched him lying on his plywood twin bed stroking himself. What he’d hidden in a forest of pubic hair, he presented to me like some sort of treat. ‘Why don’t you suck it?’ He said. ‘Just like a tootsie pop, but don’t bite it at the end, okay?’”

My secret found its way onto Abby's face, which darkened, mouth open, nostrils flaring and eyes glaring.

"OMG. And what did you do?"

"I remember shouting 'No!' and that's where the memory ends. That's why I wonder if it was a dream, but the detail seems unusual unless it was my first nightmare."

"Man, it does sound like a nightmare. I saw my baby brother's dick for the first time when I was seven. My mom was changing his diaper, and I thought it looked like a little shriveled up tortellini. Isn't that funny?"

I forced a smile. "I think it's better to have a younger brother than one eight years older," I said. "That way their dicks don't haunt you for the rest of your life."

"So, have you seen a dick since?"

"Not if I can avoid it," I said. "When did you know you like girls? I felt like I didn't want to suck dicks, so I didn't like boys."

"I didn't get turned off men or boys like you at such an early age. I'd say I like both. They're two distinct flavors, but girls definitely taste better unless they're on their period."

We both laughed. I was on my period now, the cramps killing me. Abby came over to make me feel better with a hot water bottle, Pamprin, tissues, chocolate, and the best thing yet: her undivided attention.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to ask you to eat me out with a bloody tampon string hanging out of my vagina." She squeezed my hand.

"Wouldn't be the first time! Feel any better, love?"

"What? What made you ask me that?"

"Because you made a face when you saw Jason Segel's dick in the movie."

“Oh, it was just so big!” I said, wincing through another cramp. We’ve just watched the movie *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, a witty comedy about a couple breaking up. “Besides, I’d much rather have seen Kristen Bell naked than Jason.”

“I know, right? Kristen Bell is a prude, never gets nude. Remind you of someone?” She nudged my ribs with her pink elbow, rewarded by my eager smile. Two years older than I, she just completed her freshman year at University of Illinois Urbana Champaign or UIUC, no prude anymore either. I’ve been waiting all year for her to return to her hometown of San Jose. Abby saw my mind wander and gently pressed her lips against mine. “Aw, come on, I’m only joking. I know you want to take things slowly, but I can’t wait to see what you’re hiding behind those pink, cotton pajamas your sister gave you. You’re practically swimming in them. Doesn’t she know you’re an extra, extra small?”

“It’s just Korean like me. And, hey! I’ve gained five pounds of water on my period alone.”

“Oooo, so that makes you what, 98 pounds? Can you see the freshman fifteen on me?” She turned herself to the side and puffed out her stomach, making her look ridiculous trying to gain my high school sympathy for the fifteen pounds each student gains freshman year.

“You look like one of David Attenborough’s birds of paradise,” I said without thinking.

“But that would make me male, and you, uninterested,” she snorted. I thought she looked like a cute, dirty blonde pig, but I didn’t say anything, eager not to offend. “I can dance around all I like, and you’d still not mate with me,” she said and got up to dance to nonexistent music.

“Come on, Peggy, do the twist with me.”

“You know I hate that nickname, Abby. My name’s Margaret, and what I’d really like is a margarita.”

“Ah, ah, ah, I’m not letting you drink on the rag. You’ll get a killer headache, and it wouldn’t help your cramps one bit. Here, drink more water. Why don’t you go on the pill like me? I don’t even get periods anymore.” Abby danced in and out of view, the TV still on with music from the repeating menu for *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*.

“I went on it for a few months when I was fourteen to clear up acne, but I gained too much weight, got moody all the time. And it didn’t do a lick for my acne. It actually made it worse. I got bacne: back acne for the first time. Besides, I’m not having sex with any boys so why bother? Tell me you don’t let boys come inside you.”

“No, silly, I still use condoms with boys. Their dicks are too dirty. You got to wrap them up and the mess is intolerable unless they wear one. Cum everywhere.” She threw up her hands as if fireworks are shooting out of them.

“What’s it like to lose your virginity?”

“With girls it’s awesome. With boys, painful at first but then your body gets used to it. Hey, let me look at those eyebrows!” Abby frowned as she grabbed her always-handy set of tweezers. “You got to pluck every two weeks, Peggy. This is ridiculous.”

“Ah, I’m just too lazy and you do them better than I can.”

“Here’s a trick you should know. Grab an eyebrow pencil and pencil in what you want to keep. Here, go!” She handed me the pencil and I went to the bathroom mirror.

“Remember the first time our friend Vicky plucked her eyebrows?”

“How can I forget? That poor girl had an almost Frida-style unibrow plus overgrown patches. What was she, Italian?”

“I think so. Her last name was Gandolfini. I just don’t think mine are all that bad.”

“They aren’t, but it takes me ten minutes to do your eyebrows, and you look so much better with them done, honey. I’m not telling you to wear makeup or anything. You’re a natural beauty like me. You’ll see when you go to college. People won’t be able to keep their hands off you.”

I hesitated. “I don’t know if I want to go to the same college as you.” We haven’t talked that much during the year, and I felt hurt that she was sleeping with so many people, especially boys, but I didn’t want to start an exclusive relationship either. Here was my chance to escape from Abby’s shadow. I was applying to colleges in the fall and while University of Illinois Urbana Champaign was my safety school, I had to let her know that’s not really where I wanted to go. “I want to go to Sarah Lawrence in New York or Scripps College in Claremont if I can get in.”

“You’ll get in. What did you get on your SATs, a 1500?”

“No, 1420. I got really nervous that morning, but I’m taking it again in October. All my practice tests were 1510 or better.” I didn’t want to talk about the SATs. I would much rather keep gossiping and flirting with Abby, but my head started to pound, and I made a motion towards the Pamprin bottle. Quicker than me, Abby, always attentive, grabbed the bottle and twisted it open, depositing two caplets into my palm.

“You know you could make a killing taking the SAT for other Asian girls,” Abby teased.

“They don’t need my help. Most of them have been taking the SAT since seventh grade just to go to annual summer math camps. My parents never sent me there because they know I want to study liberal arts,” I said, then realized, “I’m actually very lucky to have such tolerant parents. Every Korean I know is being pushed into math or science, doctor or lawyer, never music or arts, despite excelling in those. It’s just part of growing up Asian to be forced into all

these extracurriculars. I'm glad summer's finally here. Now I can catch up on all the books I've wanted to read but had no time to like *Outliers* or *The Hunger Games*."

"You can always study me," Abby said. "I've always wanted you to draw me naked. Can you do me *Titanic* style?" Abby asked unclipping her blue jean overalls before I could even answer. *Oh God, I've never seen her naked before.* Sure, I've had wet dreams about this moment, but all of a sudden, a knot formed in my throat and my palms sweated. She stepped out of her overalls, and I could see that she was wearing underneath a black silk thong and Christmas stockings that reached to her pale, veined knees. *Kinky*, I thought. *Had she been planning this all along?*

I struggled to find my voice, "Abs, you better check to see if my bedroom door's unlocked. I'd hate for someone to interrupt us mid *séance de dessin*." I got up to find that my cramps and headache have retreated as new impulses quickened my heartbeat.

"You know, Pegs, this will be a lot more fun if you strip with me. Why does the artist remain clothed while looking at her Venus de Milo?" Already she's pulled off her tight white T-shirt to reveal a nude bra darker than the paleness of her upper chest, the size of which I'd always been curious of, but never bold enough to ask. *34B or 34C?* Definitely more well-endowed than my boyish upper half. I've always been embarrassed to shower after swim P.E. class thinking someone might mistake me for a boy from behind. Abby and I've sadly never been in swim class together.

"Aw, come on, I'm not taking off my bra until you join me." She knew I was curious about her nipples. The first time I saw pink nipples in *White Oleander*, I was fascinated, thinking they only came in a caramel brown like mine.

“Okay, but we’ll have to do it at the same time. I’m not wearing a bra under my pajamas,” I said raising my hands to the bottom of my cotton bunny pajama top.

“No problem. Ready?” Her hands went to the back of her overburdened bra. “One, two, three!” I pulled off my top just as she removed her bra, so at first, I didn’t see her breasts on full display. *How’d we get here?* I wondered as I saw her quarter-sized pink nipples turn stiff in the air-conditioned privacy of my bedroom and saw that despite their formidable size, her breasts didn’t droop more than an inch, perky and inviting. Suddenly, I became aware of my mother’s quiet footsteps and a knock on the door. I reached for the remote and turned up the volume on the TV.

“You girls good? Have you finished the movie yet? I made some kalbi and mandu with rice for dinner. Is Abby staying for dinner?” The doorknob turned but the door wouldn’t open without being unlocked on top. “Hey, Maggie, why’s the door locked?”

“Um, thanks, Uma. We’re just finishing the movie,” I said as I muted the volume on the TV set. “We still have about 30 minutes left.” Abby suppressed her laughter, making her boobs comically jiggle. *I’m not amused. I knew something like this was bound to happen. Nothing in this house goes unnoticed. Now I’m going to get a lecture after dinner about not locking the door.*

“Thanks, Mrs. Kim. We’ll be down in half an hour. And, yes, I’d like to stay for dinner. We’re just trying on some clothes. Sorry, Mrs. Kim. We’re both half naked,” she said to my mortification.

“Ah, okay, let me know if you need anything in your size!” my mom shouted in her undisguisable country South Korean accent. “I’ve probably got a few hand-me-downs that may

fit you better than any of Maggie's clothes. I keep trying to get her to eat more. She's bone thin, but I guess I was like that at her age, too."

"Thanks, Mrs. Kim. Some of the hand-me-downs from Maggie's sister fit just fine. Just half an hour more and we'll be down."

"Okay, girls. Have fun." The footsteps retreated down the carpeted staircase.

"You'd better turn up the volume on that TV set, so your mom doesn't hear us," Abby said. I dutifully turned the movie back on with 30 minutes left. Her eyes wandered my exposed torso now at her leisure. I imagined her finding my 32A breasts woefully lacking, but her eyes keep going to my impossibly thin waist and the six-pack I've been hiding. "My God, Peggy. All those years in gymnastics didn't go to waste. I've never seen a six-pack on a girl. I got to say. It's turning me on. And I've never seen such perky breasts. Do all Korean girls have such assets?"

I blushed. "You'd think all K pop stars look like taller versions of me, but I've only seen old Korean women with hairy black bushes, bulging stomachs, and grey hair at the Korean spas I go to here."

"And do you have a black hairy bush or are you shaved like me?" she asked, sliding her silky black thong down to her ankles, so I could see the blonde stubble and a perfectly visible camel toe that excited me more than her generous breasts.

"No, don't answer me," she said as I opened and shut my stupid mouth. "Show me." Shyly, I pulled down my pajamas and period underwear to reveal a full but neat bush of mostly straight black hair.

"Huh, your pubes don't curl? I guess that's the only straight part of you," Abby joked to settle my nerves. "I was mostly kidding about you drawing me. We'll have more time for that

later. Why don't you lie down on the bed, and I'll show you what college taught me?" My legs were weak even before I climbed into bed with a girl for the first time. *This isn't how I imagined it.* I never expected to lose my virginity on my period and with Abby, my high school crush.

While I climbed up into my four-poster bed, Abby gave my right butt cheek a playful grab.

"I've never been with a gymnast before. I bet you're super tight even without Kegels."

"I've never been with anyone before," I squeaked.

"No time like the present! I bet we've already lost three minutes." She lay next to me, pressing her breasts against my side and opening her lips exploring my tongue with hers. We've made out on numerous other occasions, but this time felt different, as desperate as I was to be deflowered by Abby of all people! *Haven't I just been rejecting her onslaught of advances? What am I doing with my parents downstairs waiting for dinner?* She grabbed my right hand and guided it to her supple breast. *So, this is what it feels like to have boobs,* I thought. The weight of them surprised me as her mouth worked its way down the side of my neck and unpierced earlobe, titillating me, making me inhale rapidly. Her hand expertly found my clit among the untended pubes. Her fingers paused as she looked at me expectantly.

"Let's find out how wet you are," she teased as her slim fingers entered me for the first time, partially impeded by the tampon string. "You want me to find your G spot? Every girl has one. Some are easier to find than others." The pressure from her two or three fingers made me moan.

"Yes, please Abby," I whispered into her ear. Her smile extended from ear to ear. She moved to straddle me, giving her a better angle to enter me.

"Wow, you're wetter than a comfort girl on her first day." I ignored this racist comment as I felt her fingers slide in and out rhythmically as her hips moved. I was aware of the wetness I

provided and the wetness on my thigh as she humped me to the motion of her hand. She pushed her fingers in to their hilt and explored the top side of my vagina until I nearly screamed, as she has indeed found the hidden erogenous G spot.

“Not as hard as I thought,” she smiled with triumph. She massaged my G spot as waves of orgasms rushed headlong over me, making me breath erratically and moan excessively. Her mouth found my waiting nipple and sucked it, extracting a new sensation and less powerful orgasm accompanying that rocking my inner lower body. My legs trembled periodically. My hands dropped to the blanket, which I grasped in desperation to not scream louder than the TV. *How much time has passed?* She wasn’t lying when she said losing your virginity to a girl, especially one so expert as herself, was awesome. Bored with my nipple, she kissed me down my abdomen until her tongue licked my clit, eliciting another new sensation, sharper than that in my vagina. Her tongue continued to work on my clit until I felt even more bliss wash over me. Unlike a boy, she knew the female body well with its many erogenous zones and capability for multiple orgasms. She didn’t relent. A rush of vaginal secretions flowed out of me, sliding down to reach my asshole, which she thankfully ignored. Her head tilted back, so she could see my contorted face and she went right back to eating me out. *Appetizer before dinner*, I thought unconsciously, suddenly guilty.

“Abby, stop!” I pleaded.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“It’s just I feel guilty. I’m not doing anything for you.”

“Don’t worry, Pegs. I’ll teach you how to pleasure me next time. We only have five more minutes. Just lie back and enjoy. I really don’t mind. I have a vibrator at home. I’ll use it on you when your period’s over. It’s so sublime.” I believed her and relaxed as her fingers gently

massaged me and her tongue roughly caressed me. As the movie ended, she moved over me to kiss me full on the mouth so I could taste my own secretions. I didn't hesitate to kiss her back, surprised by how sweet her tongue tasted with not a hint of iron or irony.

“Thank you, Abby.”

“Feeling better?” she asked. “I always get super horny on my period. Orgasms help a lot with the cramps. Better than Pamprin?”

“Way the fuck better than Pamprin.” Grudgingly, she removed her fingers, found the tissues she brought and cleaned me up.

“We better get dressed for the date with your mom and dad.” I blushed but followed her direction while on the flat screen TV attached to the opposite wall the credits rolled.

WHY CALTECH?

SAN JOSE, CA

2009

“Unghe,” my parents called my oldest brother who sported a farmer’s tan around his muscle tee. “We want to talk to you in the kitchen.”

“Okay, Uma and Apa. What’s on your mind?”

“We found a pregnancy test in the bathroom trash,” my dad Apa said sitting in his padded indoor wicker chair in a white short-sleeve button-down shirt. The years have not been kind to his receding hair line which he gave a quick brush while saying, “Do you know anything about this? I must say it was positive which I see as a negative.”

“I don’t know. Maybe it was Sheeche,” Unghe said, referring to my sister who was not in the room. “You know she pees a lot.” Sheeche means to pee in Korean and is my sister Eun-Yeong’s nickname.

“This isn’t a joke, Unghe,” said Uma, still youthful but already a size ten with dyed short, permed hair. “Did you get your girlfriend pregnant? We only allow her to stay nights with you because you’re twenty-five, but we highly disapprove of illegitimate children, so we want to know how soon the two of you will get married.”

Unghe looked around to see if I was around, but he didn’t see me eavesdropping and spying from the living room next door. Unghe said, “Why don’t you ask Maggie when she’s getting married?”

“Huh?” Apa replied.

“You know I overheard Maggie and Abby the other night when she slept over,” Unghe said. “I heard moaning and screaming and a whirring noise. Maggie has a girlfriend.”

“Don’t try to deflect this onto Maggie. What vile lies you tell about your youngest sister! We need a wedding date so we can plan financially,” Uma said.

“No, I’m not making it up. Either they were having sex or watching a lesbian porno,” Unghe said.

By this time, I’ve turned ashen white in the living room, frozen at my laptop typing an essay on the New Deal mid-sentence since my high school had already started. I imagined my parents drained of color too as they came to realize that their underage daughter’s best friend has seduced her, a relationship not only an abomination to their fundamentalist Christian beliefs but also to California law. The age of consent was eighteen in California, and I was only seventeen.

“Maggie! Come into the kitchen. Unghe just told us something very disturbing and we want to know if it’s true.” Here Apa hesitated as I slinked into the kitchen almost dropping my laptop off the armchair that served as my office, where I usually found comfort cuddling with my black pug puppy Cata, short for Catastrophe. “Are you and Abby having sex during your sleepovers? Unghe says he overheard you last night.”

“Apa...” I stared at the floor refusing to make eye contact.

“Maggie, look at me when I ask you. Is this true? Are you a lesbian? Do you know what you’re doing is illegal under California law? We can press charges against Abby for statutory rape.”

“No, Apa, please don’t! We...we love each other!”

“Love between a twenty-year-old woman and a seventeen-year-old girl, my girl, is not possible especially not under my roof.”

“Apa. It’s 2009. Why can’t you get with the times?”

“First off, Proposition 8 passed last year with the generous help of our and other churches so marriage between a man and a man and a woman and a woman are illegal. Can you have children with Abby? Can you raise a family in a house church like the other members of U.B.F.?” U.B.F. had other names to the missionary kids like You Be Fat because almost all church activities centered on making and sharing food or fellowship together multiple times a week including Friday night meetings, Saturday Children’s Bible Fellowship and Sunday Worship Service. Because of my demanding all-around gymnastics schedule, I had at least been excused from the dawn daily worship services called Daily Bread.

House churches formed after an arranged marriage between a man and a woman, expected to start a family right away usually between an older, mid-forties or fifties shepherd, and an eighteen- to twenty-one-year-old girl.

When twenty-one Unghe’s first love Maribel turned Mary got married to a Middle Eastern man Munjed turned Joseph and he fought hard for his right to date, causing nearly physical altercations between Apa and him. They’d changed names to sound more biblical, but Unghe had refused to take a biblical name despite being offered many. He also punched Sheeche in the arm over something as small as Sheeche’s eating his Hungryman TV dinner when they were in high school or when Sheeche said, “Unghe, come look at my poo.” Sheeche, two years younger than Unghe, begged our parents to kick him out or call the police, but, afraid of how their family would look to the church members, they never did. Now, at twenty-five, he had just graduated from the twenty-six weeklong San Jose Police Academy and would soon start a prestigious career as the overgrown bully he’d always been. But getting his white American girlfriend pregnant under our parents’ noses was too much. Finally, they had an excuse to throw their firstborn out of his privileged place in the home and family. Their hopes now lay with

Sheehee because I, once the star student and athlete, had also disgraced them by having an unholy relationship with my best friend. *God, what is Unghe's problem? Hasn't he heard of "Don't ask, don't tell?"*

"Apa," I said. "I don't want any part in U.B.F. I've been telling you for years, but you won't believe me. I'm atheist."

"I've lost faith in you, but I know how to correct it. You cannot see Abby anymore, who's not allowed in this house. You will apply to Caltech instead of Sarah Lawrence. Don't think that you can defy me. You know I'm paying for your college tuition but only if you apply to a college where you'll meet a decent husband, and Caltech has twice as many guys as girls, so your chances increase."

"But, Apa! Caltech's a math and science school. It's the freaking California Institute of Technology. What will I study?"

"I don't know. Biology? This summer, you've certainly become versed in the female human anatomy."

Here Unghe chimed in. "I hear you have to write a 'Why Caltech?' essay and I'm sure you can write one about how your father found out you're a lesbian so he sent you to the most male-dominated co-ed school he could find. Who knows? Maybe you'll win a pity prize."

"Shut up, Unghe," I said and began to cry. "I'd been wanting to go to Sarah Lawrence ever since seeing the movie *Ten Things I Hate About You*. I don't want kids anyway. Why do I have to marry a man?"

"Listen, Maggie," Apa said. "You're young. You're just going through a phase."

"A lesbian phase," Unghe said.

“You don’t know what you want now, but Caltech has future plans for you, so you better come up with something for that ‘Why Caltech?’ essay and make it convincing because you’re not applying to either Sarah Lawrence or University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where Abby is. And Unghe, you should pack up your bags by next week since you and your girlfriend aren’t welcome under my roof anymore. Is that it for surprises?” asked Apa. “Sheeche! You got anything to add? Maybe you’ll join the Air Force like your old man?”

Sheeche popped her head into the kitchen smiling at the trouble her siblings have created for their conservative father. “No, Apa. I think I’d prefer to just stay home until I get married like the good Korean daughter Maggie isn’t, and I want to be maid of honor at Unghe’s shotgun wedding!”

“Dangshin, you got anything to add?” Apa looked over at my mom who has been shifting her feet the entire time.

“Yeobo,” Uma said. “I think you’re being a bit harsh, but I agree with you. I just think Maggie should have a chance to say goodbye to Abby under my supervision, of course, and biology’s better than studying fine art. Maggie, we don’t want no starving artist.”

“Great. I’ll just be a starving biologist then, but thanks Uma.” I wiped my tears away. “Can I be excused? I got to call Abby.”

“Yes, you’re excused, Abby...I mean Maggie!” Uma said correcting her Freudian slip, wringing her hands on her apron to keep from crying herself.

“Maggie, you can’t talk to Abby unless Uma is there,” Apa says, extinguishing any last bit of hope left in me. I wondered why Uma hadn’t said anything. No doubt the shock of two fuck ups in two out of four children had hit her pretty hard or perhaps she knew all along and couldn’t bear to stand up to the men in the house. Maybe I could ask her why she didn’t stand up

for me when I met up with Abby for the last time. She may never answer some questions, but it didn't hurt to ask. Uma always thought of me first even if she cared more that I didn't have cellulite than that I did two perfect cartwheels on balance beam my freshman year. She'd said, "Your legs looked beautiful in that leotard. No cellulite. Not like some of the other girls," when I'd asked excitedly at the first gymnastics meet, she could attend, "Did you see the cartwheels I did on beam, Uma?"

On the other hand, my dad witnessed my first sports injury warming up for my first ever, first away meet at Mission San Jose High School. I'd just dismounted off the balance beam and, frustrated over my performance, I didn't watch my steps and stepped off the shallow mat spraining my ankle, not doing any trick at all but storming off in a foul mood over a stupid round-off, half afraid he'd demand I come home right away. But after the physical trainer iced and taped my ankle, he cheered me on the balance beam. My coach took me off vault so I wouldn't look like Olympic Gold Medalist Kerri Strug in her infamous last, gold clinching vault in Summer 1996, which I've watched over and over again on YouTube. Although I wouldn't mind being carried in Coach Brown's iron cross strengthened arms. *Huh? Where did that idea come from? That's the straightest idea I've had all day, Abby would say. God, I'm going to miss her.*

PARAMOUR

SAN JOSE, CA

2009

I had talked with Abby about saying goodbye for perhaps the last time and we agreed on a day in early September to meet under the supervision of my mom. Abby had changed from her usual bubbly self at this solemn meeting.

“Mrs. Kim, could Maggie and I take Cata for a walk to talk a little more privately?” Abby asked. The sun was beginning to set after another hot, sunny day. *I hope Abby doesn't get sunburnt*, I thought, but it was already after 5PM. Cata perked up when she heard her name and was at the door in seconds.

“I guess that's okay, Abby. I'll stay behind but I won't eavesdrop. Mainly I'm here to keep you girls from fooling around in the bedroom like Mr. Kim is afraid of.” *Ouch. Uma really got to the heart of the matter in one sentence.*

Abby and I walked out the front door and I couldn't help but feel like this might be the last time I saw her in the flesh. Uma followed us, giving us maybe twenty-five feet of space in between. Cata immediately started sniffing around but didn't pee right away.

“Abby, why'd it take you so long to respond to my messages?” I asked. “My dad wouldn't let me call you.”

“Maggie, I don't know what to say,” she said. “I didn't want to get you in more trouble with your parents. It's a mess as it is.” I couldn't help thinking she had another reason, maybe a secret paramour that she had been seeing the whole time, but I didn't want to know if that was the case.

“I have to apply to Caltech now according to my draconian dad,” I said. “He wants me to find a good husband there.” I scoffed as if this was the last possible imaginable thing for my college future.

“Why don’t you transfer to Caltech or at least UC Santa Barbara so we could still see each other next year?” I asked. In our halting walk, Cata alternated between pulling on the leash and pausing to sniff. Here, she found the scent of another dog’s urine and squatted with one leg barely raised and peed daintily. Abby and I both said, “Good girl, Cata!”

She paused for effect and looked at me. “Maggie, I’m perfectly happy at UIUC. It would mess with my graduation plans and besides it’s not like you’re my exclusive. We just had a summer fling and fun as it was, I’m not going to risk going to jail over our relationship.”

“I guess my dad put the nail in the coffin of our relationship with that threat. We could take a trip to Chicago where the age of consent is seventeen.”

“Maggie, the deed is done, and they can bring the hammer down at any time. Don’t antagonize your dad. He means well. Society hasn’t changed enough for us to be together romantically or maritally. Look at what happened with Proposition 8.”

“Prop 8 might have passed, but maybe there’s a future for us after all of this.” We continued walking glancing back at Uma who was keeping her promise. “I don’t want to lose you.”

“I think you already have. I knew I was taking a risk in seducing you especially in your parents’ house, but you proved just too cute to resist.”

“I got to work really hard to get back into my parents’ good graces and you’re right that I shouldn’t give them more shocks. I just wish we could go to college together and tell everyone to fuck off.”

“Listen, Maggie. I’m not new to controversy. There’s someone I’ve been seeing throughout the year and with this scandal, I’ve been thinking of cutting it off.”

“Why, Abby?”

“Let’s just say it’s too easy to get caught and he’s married with a couple of young kids.”

“Oh, so you do have a paramour.”

“No, Maggie, I’m the paramour. He’s the adulterer.” Saddened to hear that Abby would always be carefree, I was imprisoned in the cult of cisgender heteronormativity.

“You know you’re breaking my heart, right?” I choked on the words, then sobbed. My first love affair had already soured, I thought. *Was I just a conquest to her, a tick off on her multicultural checklist?*

“Maggie, I’m so sorry. I don’t mean to hurt you.” She squeezed my hand which made Uma clear her throat behind us. “Sorry, Mrs. Kim.”

“I have to work on phone privileges,” I said, “but will you pick up if I call you?”

“Of course, Maggie. Despite everything we’re still best friends. Just not best friends with benefits.” *Little consolation that is*, I thought.

“At least Unghe moved out of the house,” I tried to change the subject.

“What happened?”

“He got his girlfriend pregnant, and I guess my dad was sick of everybody having sex under his roof. I don’t know why they were so stupid to leave the positive pregnancy test, but the truth would’ve come out eventually.” The sun had finally dipped below the horizon and pink and purple cirrus clouds bathed the sky scattered in diagonal wispy rows. Cata still hadn’t pooped, but I got a bag ready anyway using my saliva to separate the end of the sealed teal green eco-friendly bag.

“Oof. I never understood why Asian parents liked to keep their grown-up kids in the house after college. Me, I was practically abandoned after turning eighteen.”

“It’s tradition for Korean parents to let their kids move away when they get married and then they expect us to have a bunch of babies, throwing stones at a cloth the married couple holds in traditional dress, but I don’t think Unghe and Alicia are going to have a traditional Korean wedding, since she isn’t Korean and they’re getting a shotgun wedding where Sheehe wants to be the maid of honor.”

“Your parents are only progressive to a point. How come Unghe gets to have a white girlfriend, but you don’t?” Cata picked the perfect time to circle back around a neighbor’s lush green front yard and take a shit.

“I don’t know,” I said, bending down to pick up the three pieces of hot shit. “I’m too tired to fight them. Time might change me, but time won’t change them.”

“Your mom’s cool though. She let us say goodbye at least.” I looked away at the suburban scenery complete with flower beds, little windmills made of plastic, and towering trees planted before we were born.

“Yeah, but I think she wanted to chase you away with the fly swatter when you grabbed my hand,” I laughed, my eyes still a little misty.

“Why Caltech, though? I read in the *Princeton Review* that in terms of dating pool for girls, ‘The odds are good, but the goods are odd.’ You should apply to Reed College, too.”

“Where’s that?”

“In Portland. It’s also known as ‘Weed College’ and you can study both biology and studio art stoned.”

“If I get into Caltech, that’s where my dad will make me go. UIUC’s no longer a safety school for me, with you there and all.”

“Wherever you go, Maggie, don’t change for anyone. Have a little dance, make a little love, get down next year.” Abby tried to lighten the mood, but I didn’t even crack a smile. *This senior year is the most depressing*, I thought. “Look, your parents aren’t going to follow you to Caltech, and they can’t force you to marry someone against your will. I’m sure they’ll disapprove of all the bachelorettes, but there may be one or two people who meet your standards, no?”

“Yeah, Caltech’s not really big on LGBTQ, I think,” I said. “Unless other reformed lesbians are there.”

“Maggie, you need to expand your horizons. Men aren’t all bad. Your brother, he’s bad, but they aren’t all like him. And men, let me tell you, are easier to seduce than women.”

“Abby, I don’t want to hear this,” I said shaking my head.

“Okay, okay. I’ll let you grieve, but I want you to get back up on some sexy horse again one day. I didn’t take your virginity just so you could become a born-again virgin at Caltech.”

“I still haven’t lost my heterosexual virginity.”

“I hope you don’t save it until marriage. There’s one good thing having sex is good for, and that’s determining if you’ll have a long happy marriage,” Abby whispered to make sure Uma didn’t hear. “Besides, Unghe really didn’t wait until marriage to have sex and get his girlfriend pregnant, so why should you?”

“I don’t want to get pregnant ever. The whole idea is repugnant, isn’t it Cata?” I paused to pet Cata, who looked at me adoringly.

“Then make sure guys wrap it up,” Abby says. “Don’t be like my friend Kim. Her boyfriend refused to wear a condom because he couldn’t stay hard and then he’d prematurely ejaculate enough to make her take the morning-after pill five times a month.”

“My God, that’s horrendous. The morning-after pill’s not even 100% effective. I read that if you’ve already ovulated you can still get pregnant. My mom wants me to get an IUD.”

“What’s that?”

“An intrauterine device that prevents pregnancy for up to five years, but when I asked my gynecologist, he said it’s really painful for women who’ve never had a baby. He said I could wait on having a pap smear since I’m technically still a virgin.” We both let out strained laughs.

“They should have to give men pap smears too,” Abby joked.

“Actually, they should because the same virus that causes cervical cancer can cause anogenital cancers in men,” I said. We’ve reached the point where we usually turn back, past the small children’s park we sometimes let Cata off the leash, but she was not the most socialized dog and just kind of rushes any pup that moves.

“Look at my little scientist!” Abby said. “She knows so much.”

“You did get Gardasil when it came out in 2006, right?” I said, aghast.

“You betcha. I’ve known so many women with abnormal paps who had to get their cervixes burned off, and those were the lucky ones. The unlucky ones died an untimely death.”

“Hopefully, those days are over, but the vaccines aren’t foolproof either.”

“Sex is never without risk, and somebody’s always got to pay.”

“I wish my dad didn’t have to pay for my college. That way I could decide where to go.”

“You don’t think you can get a full ride to UIUC?”

“My SATs aren’t good enough for a full ride anywhere. I’m not even sure they’re good enough for Caltech. The top 25% have perfect scores.”

“Sheesh. Talk about a reach school.”

“Yeah. I hear there’s English and History majors, but Apa wants me to apply for Biology. He said I’ve certainly been studying the female anatomy a lot this summer.”

“Oh my! I really don’t know what his problem is. Does he know about you and Unghe?”

“Not that I know of. I just try to forget that part of my childhood. The past is past.”

“I wish you had a brother that cared about you when you were young.”

“I do. Woojin. He’s always protected me.”

“What do you mean?”

“One time he had a friend over that asked to kiss me after seeing my sketchbook of crying women, dogs, and trees.”

“And?”

“Uncomfortable and taken aback, I said no. Then I found out later that his friend had a girlfriend.”

“Yeah, guys are scum sometimes. So, you’ve never even kissed a guy?”

“I came close. Once on the bus ride to or from school the popular kids were playing truth or dare. I must have been a freshman or sophomore, but they dared Platonic Bob to kiss me, and I was petrified thinking it’d be my first kiss. He leaned over and kissed me on the forehead much to my relief.”

“Now, that’s a good guy. I wonder why they dared him to.”

“It’s not much of a surprise. I managed the guys’ gymnastics team, and no one seemed to be into me. They kept going on and on about how ‘Vicky’s so hot.’ and ‘Karla, she’s really cute.’

until someone said, ‘Well, what about Maggie?’ and someone replied, ‘She’s Asian.’ as if to say I’m exotic except not in so many complimentary or racist words.”

“Ugh. Yeah, forget about high school. You’ll soon be in college where hopefully people don’t take your race at face value.”

“Thanks, Abby. I never wanted to date anyone in high school besides you anyway, and thanks for everything you’ve done for me. It’ll be tough to beat.”

“Aw, Maggie. My pleasure too. Things’ll get better, but I must say it’s better to be bisexual than lesbian or gay from what I’ve seen in my friends. Too much discrimination and not enough rights.”

We’d made it back to the now porch-lit house, and Uma was itching to move things along as we’d been out for close to half an hour.

“Maggie. I wish you the best,” Abby said. “Mrs. Kim, can I give Maggie a goodbye hug?”

“Yes, I guess that’s fine, Abby. We still love you despite you taking Maggie’s innocence.”

“She was never that innocent. Goodbye, Maggie. Take care.”

“Goodbye, Abby.” *I love you*, I thought, but didn’t say it. We hugged a little too long and Uma cleared her throat again.

“Bye, Mrs. Kim. I’m expecting an invitation to Unghe and Alicia’s wedding.” *The passive aggressive atmosphere is thick as fuck*, I thought. I knew that comment took Uma by surprise, but she recovered.

“Bye, Abby. You may not be a Kim, but you’re all right by me,” she said, and I watched as Abby walked to her parents’ Honda SUV, turned on the engine, turned the lights on, waved, and drove away.

“Uma, you didn’t have to clear your throat so many times on the walk,” I said watching my best friend and first lover exit my life.

“You two stay far away from each other. God doesn’t like lesbians.”

“My God, Uma. We’re going to be half a country away in less than a week.”

“Thank God.”

“No, thanks to you and Apa.”

“Maggie, we’re doing this because we love you.”

“Whatever. Mom. Cata, let’s go inside.” I walked into the house with Cata, avoiding brushing into Uma.

PART TWO

BATTLE OF WILLS

PASADENA, CA

2010

From the moment I get into Caltech, Apa backs down. Having studied Chemistry in Kyungbuk University, a national university in Taegu, he seems more elated than I when he drops me off at campus ready to catch the bus for Frosh camp. At Ventura Beach, I feel a little ridiculous because unlike the other girls, I don't have a bikini to my name. Growing up in the more conservative continental United States, I'd always worn a one piece and never outside of family vacations. I don't count the two piece in South Korea because I don't recollect wearing it except looking at myself in one photograph. I keep the thin, tight orange and blue one piece in my luggage choosing instead to wear a tank top and shorts to Ventura Beach along with plenty of sunscreen, a wide brimmed hat, my prized Burberry sunglasses, and a slim Japanese translated novel called *The Housekeeper and the Professor*. My dad figures that having to take five terms of mathematics, I should learn a thing or two before starting and he'd found Yoko Ogawa's book at the Caltech bookstore alongside the textbooks I'd need for the semester. He is determined to pay my way through college only if I date men. This is rule number one. He makes more rules as college life begins around me and tells me, "You'll abide by my rules as if you're living in my house because you'll be living off my dime."

UBF left me brainwashed and stupid, ill prepared for the academic environment of Caltech, where I've gotten in by the skin of my teeth. I know because of the *Princeton Review* that I am in the bottom quartile for SAT scores at Caltech, and I suffer from imposter syndrome and thinking I'd gotten in because of affirmative action above all else. May 5th they had called

me to tell me I'd gotten in on the waitlist and I'd been completely prepared to go to Reed College in Portland, OR. I'd even sent a \$300 nonrefundable deposit there.

I mostly keep to myself these days, missing Abby's companionship and despairing that college would be so different with both of us halfway across the country from each other. As soon as we arrive at campus, Rotation begins, the process of picking a House and the House picking you. I don't particularly care where I end up, but many freshmen want to be in the South Houses, Ricketts, Dabney, Blacker, or Fleming, because they want to have a single. The North Houses, Page, Lloyd, and Ruddock have doubles only. Avery is in between with a good mix of dormitories, but I am immediately put off by how many Asians are present at dinner. I don't want to be pigeonholed due to my ethnicity and I feel more American than Asian on any given day. At midnight on Sunday, I receive this baffling email:

From: "An Upperclassman" an.upperclassman@gmail.com
Date: Sun, September 26, 2010 11:56pm
To: mkim@caltech.edu

As you know, prefrosh, you are embarking on one of the most important journeys of the next four years of your life--and possibly the rest of your life. The house you rotate into will affect who you befriend, what you do, and how much you enjoy your time at Caltech. At this juncture, I feel I should impart a few words that I wish I had known about rotation as a prefrosh. These are words I only learned as an upperclassman, via my involvement with my house's meetings and picks.

Depending on what house you visit, I have some conversation starters for you. Upperclassmen love when you can start and hold a conversation with them. These ought to get their attention.

- * How many non-Asians rotated into Avery last year?
- * How many students have the symptoms of alcoholism in Page?
- * What does Lloyd do besides longboard?
- * What sort of internal strife does Ruddock have for room picks after frosh year?
- * How many Fleming girls date outside of the house?
- * How many satanic rituals will you have to do in Ricketts?
- * How many drugs have people tried at Dabney's Drop Day?
- * What's Blacker's code of silence like?

Have fun. I'll have more in store for you later this week.

-- An Upperclassman

P.S. If there is a house that you really like, more than any other, you should go talk to that House President.

P.P.S. I'm emailing different pieces of advice to different pre-frosh, not to canary trap any one of you, but merely to motivate you to discuss this important topic with your friends.

P.P.P.S. Email me with questions.

I know this is a rotation violation, and the upperclassmen say every year there are offenders, and that we should just ignore the email. Rotation violations are violations of the edict "They're all fine houses." According to rumor, Ricketts House nearly broke Rotation for the class of 2010 because of a vile rumor saying, "If you rank Ricketts, you get into Ricketts." They'd secured just enough votes to have the smallest incoming crop of freshmen in recent history. But, according to Ricketts House members, they got the most awesome frosh that year. I wonder which house this particular upperclassman writer belongs to, but there aren't too many contenders outside Ricketts, Dabney, and Blacker since they seem the least disparaged by stereotype in the email.

Fleming is my first real house dinner. In the colorful full-paged propaganda handbook I got mailed after doing well on the PSAT, they characterized themselves as the athletic house, but I soon find them to be a house full of knuckleheaded jocks on this particular Rotation night.

"What's your name?" A somewhat short but grotesquely muscled Eastern European upperclassman asks me.

“Maggie Kim,” I reply, not relishing being asked this question repeatedly despite wearing name tag after name tag perfectly visible to this blind fitness freak.

“Well, my name is Chekov, and this here is my roommate Billy. I’m gay and he’s bisexual. We were wondering if you’d like to be our roommate. We live in a triple,” he says gesturing to an unattractive, tall but fit man.

“Why’d you want to live with me?” I ask.

“Because we want to have sex with you. Billy here wants to take your virginity.”

“How do you know I’m a virgin?”

“We can make many assumptions about the frosh. One of which is that 99% of them are virgins before Caltech, and another is that 33% of them will still be virgins when they graduate four to six years later.”

“Well, if you’re gay and he’s bisexual, then what prevents you two guys from just having sex with each other?”

I’d obviously hit a nerve as Chekov reddens going into a steroidal rage and barely held back by Billy while he mouths the words, “What did you say, you bitch?”

I don’t have a gay old time at Fleming, nor Page where beer drinking is prevalent, nor Ruddock, which reminds me of the cultists in U.B.F., wondering when they’ll ask me to bible study, but I find a home in Ricketts and Dabney, and Lloyd and Blacker seem harmless enough if a little boring. The five-minute dinner in Ricketts doesn’t bother me because you can easily finish eating your plate of chicken tenders and fries while watching *The Simpsons* in the lounge right after at 6pm. Ricketts House feeds more than me, but my sense of dark humor too.

“What do you get when you put a baby in a blender?” asks one Skurve as Ricketts members are affectionately named.

I think about it for a second and say, “Baby food,” which I think is a clever answer.

“No, the answer is an erection!” he replies.

“I don’t get it.”

“Neither do I. I prefer your answer honestly.” He seems bored with the whole Rotation thing.

“What’s your name?” I ask since his name tag is in Chinese, unusual since he looked white, at least six feet tall, dark and handsome.

“Oh, you can’t read Mandarin?” he jokes pointing out the characters.

“No, I don’t even know my mother tongue Korean.”

“The name’s Will. Will Ling Li. My adoptive parents apparently had a sense of humor.”

“Which you share. Why do you think I should rank Ricketts?”

“I think you’d fit in here. I mean you’d fit in almost anywhere given your size and resemblance to a social chameleon, but I think you’d get along with Skurves and Darbs or Dabney members. I’m both but choose to live in Dabney because it’s a little quieter.” I am happy to see that he doesn’t have an Asian accent, off-putting as the least sexy accent outside of Indian.

“Where are you from, Maggie Kim?” he asks.

“Chicago, originally,” I say.

“Oh, the Windy City. I’ve gone there a few times. Has anyone ever told you, you have a Chicago accent?”

“Only when I say the word ‘Chi-CA-go,’” I say for emphasis, then add, “Da Bears,” for fun. “Are you from the Midwest too?”

“Born and raised near Columbus, Ohio. Might as well been a farmer’s boy.”

“What do you do for fun outside of asking dead baby jokes and the kind of sexist ‘Would you fuck a goat for a million dollars?’ joke. I mean, us girls, also want to be millionaires, you know?”

“I like to play video games on my Xbox One and DJ. I’m having some friends over to play Geometry Wars in a little bit. Want to play?”

“Never heard of it.”

“Oh, the best mode is pacifism mode. You try to avoid the spawning shapes by flying through special bars that explode them in your path.”

“Sure, I’d like a crack at it.” He gathers up a few people as the dinner’s winding down and we head down the breezeway through Blacker’s lounge, along an alley (what hallways are called) and enter into a single room on Dabney’s first floor. Sure enough, there stand a couple of Disc Jockey turntables, a well-worn futon, minifridge, and small TV with Xbox.

“Ladies first,” he gestures towards a free controller. The game is surprisingly fun, and addictive and I can’t help but laugh for the first couple of minutes. I notice on the sink a bong, which no doubt will pass around if there isn’t a frosh present. Will is starting to grow on me after the awkward introduction to his erection, I think. *Maggie, why are you thinking of Will’s erection?* Abby would have asked, but I ignore this thought because it makes me die in the game and I reluctantly have to give up the controller for someone waiting for their chance to be a passive-aggressive Geometry Wars participant. Will offers me a Coke from the fridge and we go out of his room into the courtyard to sit on a giant swinging couch built of two by fours for privacy.

“What year are you?” I ask.

“I’m a sophomore,” he replies.

“Are you happy where you ended up?”

“Yes, and most people are at least not at the end of Rotation but by the end of their first semester. Rotation is the ultimate battle of wills. The frosh vs upperclassmen, but the upperclassmen have the advantage of knowing what’s best for the frosh.”

“Do Skurves really believe in Satan?”

“Not really. We don’t really believe in God or Satan so it’s wrong for people to call us Satanists just because we like to have a pentagram in the dining room. I’ll tell you a funny story. When I had rotation dinner at Ricketts last year, some Skurves set fire to a giant penis effigy, and the administration got so mad that they instituted Eco-Rotation, where some Houses lose privileges if they don’t get enough freshmen to rank them high enough.”

“Well, penises are meant to be burned, aren’t they?” I reply.

“Not if you’re doing it right,” he says with a nudge. *Am I flirting?* I wonder to Abby in the sky, *with a guy?*

Don’t think about it, Maggie, she replies in my head, *just go along with it.*

“I grew up in an evangelical church that I see more like a cult now,” I say changing the subject to avoid flushing red.

“Really? Where did it start?”

“It started in South Korea, infamous for its cults. Do you remember the Moonies?”

“How can I forget?”

“Well, we also had arranged marriages, but more like four couples getting married at a time not hundreds or thousands. Our leader, Missionary Samuel Lee probably picked a lot of couples. They didn’t even kiss when they married. It was more like attending church complete with boring hymnals and sermon.”

“Well, I’d rather kiss you than go to church,” he blurts out then apologizes quickly.

“I’ve never kissed a guy before,” I say blushing.

“Have you kissed anyone before?”

“My best friend Abby. My dad won’t let me see her anymore after he found out we were fooling around.” I have no idea how Will is getting these confessions from me.

“So, you’re lesbian?” he asks apparently disappointed.

“I didn’t say that!” I say to appease him. “I’m just shy and, well, never found a guy I liked.”

“Do you like me?”

“You’re unrelenting, but I guess.”

“So, can you kiss me good night, Maggie Kim?”

“If you really insist!” I give up protesting and we explore each other’s lips and tongue, and I find out that guys can be good kissers too. I whisper, “You’ll have to let me hit that bong when Rotation is over. I’ve never tried one of those either. You’re a good kisser, too.”

“As good as Abby? You’re not half bad yourself.”

“I never kiss and tell,” I smile back.

The night ends with bong rips I can’t be a part of, but I have a date for next week, and I am looking forward to seeing more of Will Ling Li as the semester gets underway.

Rotation ends and I rank Ricketts, Dabney, Lloyd and Blacker all number one, and the rest of the houses all fives except Fleming a dismal nine, leaving my fate up to the upperclassmen as Will advised. I end up moving into Ricketts, which suits me just fine, but I find myself leaving for Will’s room more and more as the weeks go by. I even tell him about the

sexual harassment I faced in Fleming, and he promptly figures out the room in question then urinates on it one night when no one is looking.

What a stand-up guy, this Will is, I think.

UP IN THE AIR

LOS ANGELES, CA

2011

Will and I didn't join the mile-high club, but we did come up on acid—start hallucinating—in the air on the flight to Las Vegas on the way to our first ever Burning Man together before the start of my sophomore year.

Acid, the best dance teacher, is something I'd learned from a cool chap named Bo at Caltech. The rhythm of the electronic music of Drop Day, a Dabney House annual party/tradition like no other falling on the second trimester's academic drop day, where more Darbs (Dabney members) drop acid than not, inhabiting my limbs, legs and trunk so that I can't be off beat even if I try. And everything I try feels so fluid, so natural, yet so daring and free. Years of gymnastics taught me grace, but acid taught me spontaneity.

Clouds outside the jet window form cauliflower florets of white broken occasionally by rainbows of light and hookah smoke rings allowing the patchwork of farmland to peek through.

"It's so fucking beautiful," I tell Will, not taking my gaze off the too small airplane window. It's just the two of us on the right-hand aisle.

"Ask for a blanket," he tells me.

"Why? I'm not cold," I reply.

"I got a surprise for you," he whispers into my ear. I can feel the blood pounding in my ears as they finally start to pop. We're listening to Infected Mushroom with one air pod each, but we can still hear each other, as we grin so much our cheeks hurt. The stewardess passes by, and I say, "Excuse me, can I have a blanket?"

She returns with a blue American Airlines blanket wrapped in plastic. Greedily, I rip the plastic blanket cover open and tunnel under, burrowing my tiny T-rex arms underneath. I'd say from the beginning that I was a T-rex, tiny arms and big mouth, usually a self-deprecating crowd-pleaser of a joke. Will clandestinely burrows his right hand underneath feeling for my clitoris.

"Look out the window and enjoy the view," he says. I gasp as his fingers stroke my engorged clitoris. Acid always makes me the horniest girl. He reaches lower to wet his fingers in my lubricated cavity before he continues eliciting quiet moans from my now red face and dry mouth.

"Oh!" I exclaim as I come and see the contrail of another airplane a thousand or so feet below. "I've never seen that!" I say, acting my best to appear normal as Will goes through the motions. Even though I've never come vaginally with him, he always made sure I come some way, either oral or manual, even until his forearm aches. The plane below flies like a cartoon plane intercepting our flight path at a 75-degree acute angle or 105-degree obtuse angle either way you look at it.

"That's so cool!" I say loudly masking another powerful orgasm.

"Shh!" Some passengers trying to sleep murmur. Will and I turn to each other, lock eyes, and giggle.

The desert Sun is starting to set coloring the fluffy clouds like delicious pink and dark blue cotton candy. Will whispers, "I want to eat you and the clouds at the same time."

"But won't that be very sticky?" I reply. "And will you do it willingly?"

A LEG TO STAND ON

PASADENA, CA

2012

“I’m gonna rape you.”

I sit bolt upright in my single dorm room bed, alone, scared and confused. *What am I hearing? Is someone on the other side of the wall?* I’m too scared to investigate outside. *What if it’s true?*

Then I hear again, “I’m gonna rape you at the party, Maggie.”

Fuck, I can’t go to Apache! I can’t move. I curl up in a fetal ball on my twin bed and I recognize the voice. Neil, a good male friend, is telling me he’s going to rape me at the Ricketts House Party in three days. I cry. Why me? Why then? Why now? What did I do to deserve such personal violence?

And then, other friends’ voices chime in: Jackie, Liam, and Rachel.

“Watch out, Maggie. We’re gonna rape you.”

I believe them. I can’t escape them. I don’t make any noise but quiet sobs, as I hug myself trembling. *I must have smoked too much weed. This can’t be real. Why would anyone announce such a thing?* But still, I stare at the wall, a wall of real voices talking about real violence.

I can’t go. There’s no way I’m going. I can’t make it stop. *Please, why can’t someone make them stop?* I don’t pick up the phone. I don’t dial a friend or 911. All my friends are in the stairwell on the other side of my dorm room wall, intent upon raping me.

Why? I don’t know.

When will they stop whispering to me? I'm sure no one else can hear them as I hear distinct, indiscernible conversation float past them in the dining hall. This threat is for me and only me. I am their only target. *Why am I frozen like a doe in the headlights?*

Why can't I move? What's preventing me from taking action? I've never been so scared in my life. No, flight or fight are not an option for me. I freeze. If I leave, will that action precipitate their action? I'll just stay in my protective little ball and hope they go away.

The next day, I wonder if they know I owe money. I went to Europe without enough savings and now owe over \$600 for the 4-week summer trip through Spain, France, Belgium, Netherlands (easily the best part), and Italy. I've maxed out my credit card and now the voices know and they're trying to exact punishment. I shouldn't be smoking weed, I think. How much was that quarter ounce in the glass mason jar on my built-in wooden dresser? I stare at it and realize I haven't yet touched it. I can return it! I will return it. That's \$50 right there. I should have been making payments instead of spending \$50 a month on weed.

At Apache, my Caltech undergraduate dorm Ricketts' party, two days later, I'm scared again. Jackie shows up at my dorm room door excited beyond measure.

"Maggie! Are you going to make my tramp stamp?" she pleads knocking on my door holding a black Sharpie referring to the making of a makeshift tattoo on her lower back. "Holy shit. I wish my costume was as hot as yours! Where'd you get the idea?" she says taking in the two tiny Ace bandages wrapped crisscross about my nipples and barely hiding a plucked pubic mound, ass out for show. She's wearing a thong and pasties.

"Of course, Jackie. Just give me a moment. I, uh, didn't have any money for a costume this year so I thought I'd DIY it. Do it yourself. You really like it?"

“Maggie, I fucking love it! You’re so goddamn crafty. Here, I got us two white wines to start off the night and Rachel made Green Dragon upstairs when you’re ready. It tastes like shit, but that’s just the weed distilled into the Everclear. I’ve been mixing it with Capri Sun.”

“Okay, turn around, so I can see my magnificent canvas,” I say readying the Sharpie. I can’t help but compare her to Abby. Jackie is my best friend at Caltech, but we’ve never kissed. She’s heterosexual and unlike Abby, I see her as a platonic friend. Besides, I’m too scared to mess up the girl-girl relationship I have with her by adding sexual drama to the mix. Will and I have agreed to break up shortly before Apache. We’d been dating for a year and a half, and he wanted to explore more of Ricketts’ underbelly.

Jackie and I smoke and hang out all the time. She’s also a year younger than I and her enthusiasm for all things Ricketts is infectious. I knew I wanted her in my house from Rotation, where I first met her. Her whole class, while small, packs quite the punch. Her incoming year, there was a dreadful rumor that “If you rank Ricketts, you get into Ricketts” and that rumor basically broke Rotation, but it also ensured that we got the most badass frosh class ever, many of whom had already tried drugs like marijuana before arriving at Caltech. I heard two even ate some pot brownies at the end of Rotation party in the Ricketts’ off-campus house Hazzard.

I draw an asymmetrical dragon, not my best work but I’m a little distracted, “Here, Jackie, I finished. You can look in the mirror above the sink.” All the Caltech dorm rooms come with a built-in sink and mirror, perfect for spitting out cum and brushing your teeth right afterwards, things I’ve gotten accustomed to hearing about by now, the middle of my sophomore year. Caltech may exude a clean-cut image to the outside world through its colorful brochures and list of Nobel Prize winning professors, but entering this world has been a shock on the first night on campus in Page House where a male-dominated kegger was going on as I passed the

Beer Room to get to my empty double with broken furniture during Rotation. Without a roommate that first week, I was terribly lonely and not really down to party with a bunch of hormone-filled frat boys or so they seemed to my naïve eyes. I had to acquire the taste of beer over many sessions of beer pong in Ricketts Dining Room and only then because of my ferocious competitive nature to get good at any sport including drinking games.

“OMG, Mags! Thanks so much. Now, let’s party!” She hugs me tightly and leads me out to the courtyard where the music booms and half naked or fully naked men and women are drinking, smoking, and gyrating. We go upstairs to a dark dorm room and choke down the Green Dragon with Capri Sun, leaving a horrible aftertaste we chase with Two Buck Chuck wine, Charles Shaw wine bottles of different varietals introduced into California Trader Joe’s stores in 2002 for the low, low price of \$1.99. Between 2002 and 2013, 800 million bottles had been sold and hundreds if not thousands have been a hit at Apache year after year. Apache, themed like the French Underground, featured food and drink of French baguettes and cheap wine. It’s not long before I get a single red rose from someone I like and am sitting in his lap, making out with him.

Before things progress any further, my friend Neil asks if I want a hit off a hash cigarette and I accept, hopping off Jared’s lap and joining a group of stoners in the breezeway, a covered outside walkway located between the dining room, courtyard, and my dorm room. After taking one hit, I immediately felt sick. I rush to my dorm room on the first floor right off the courtyard, up the half flight of stairs, and stairwell, where my whispering ghost friends haunted me, and puke in my trash can.

Neil follows me in, tucks me in, and I black out. Several hours later, I regain consciousness and we chat for a couple minutes. He takes out the trash and returns asking if I’ll be okay. I say yes and thanks. When he leaves, I feel funny. Still high and a little horny, I touch

myself until I come, looking at the red rose on the dresser, and then sniff my fingers in a manner uncharacteristic and foreign to me. *Condom. I smell condom*, I think and freeze. And then the voices begin again.

“Did you hear she was raped?”

“I think she liked it.”

“How many people raped her?”

“She was coming in her sleep!”

Panicking, I thought *Did I fall off the cliff of sanity after smoking weed way too often for the past year and a half or was this the famed loss of innocence everyone especially young women experience in those formative years in college?*

I’m not sure what happened. Before hearing voices, I never feared rape despite being sexually harassed for years and narrowly escaping an attempted rape once from a creepy Indian postdoc who must have been 10 years older than I.

Therapists often ask patients who black out if the guy present was the type to rape, and I shake my head, not convinced either way. I’ve got to admit Neil wasn’t the type to rape. One look and any girl could run away. Once, we had a competition of who could stand longer on one leg while in line waiting for a Stephen Hawking lecture at Caltech. I chose my right leg arbitrarily, but Neil had his foot amputated due to a congenital abnormality as a baby, and had a prosthetic leg held together by duct tape because he couldn’t get a new leg after age eighteen without spending an exorbitant amount of money. Half a year later my genetic vulnerability or murky past would surface to rival all the contradictory evidence that Neil was in fact a good guy. After between 5-10 minutes of even-keeled balancing, we decided to call it a draw.

WHAT A DRAG

PASADENA, CA

2012

The next few days are a blur, like the ones leading up to it. I tell Jackie, but she dismisses it. She gives me Xanax and tells me I'll feel better after sleeping. Meanwhile, I shower, I go about my business, ignoring the huge elephant in the room. I don't want to accuse Neil of rape, but I do want answers and the voices have become unbearable to the point of paranoia. I don't want to go to the hospital or police. I ask a guy I've been casually seeing, Tom, if he can drive me to the hospital, saying, "I think half of the people who went to Apache got raped. I think you got raped. You got to take me to the hospital."

Tom has long blond hair and is the best drummer I've seen live not in a professional band. He drums shirtless and when we were both freshmen, he won the Dabney drag show, by shaving his slim, toned legs and wearing pink fishnet stockings complete with borrowed heels. I'd also entered that year dressed as a goth guy paired with a goth drag queen nicknamed Weird Woman who dragged me around stage by the surprisingly comfortable leash my posse had put around my neck, complementing the bondage shirt, camo pants, combat boots and the crème de la crème hand towel rolled up in a condom and stuffed in my pants that gave me my stage name, Tripod. But I never looked very masculine so the top prize went to a more androgynous female and I and my partner only placed third.

Instead, Tom drives me to his mom's house where I sleep for several hours only to find that he's taking my clothes off and forcing himself on an unwilling me. *Is he covering up for Neil so no one will believe me? Was I gang raped?* This is really fucked up, but I don't resist much. I see his dead father and alive mother watching, my first-ever visual hallucination in the

wall, and they're happy, so why shouldn't I be? *Okay, Maggie, you're in way over your head. Just survive the next half hour to hour*, I think. After he pulls out and cums on my stomach, I feel sick. His mother wants us to stay for dinner, but we catch dinner in Dabney House Dining Hall.

While eating generic red pasta, I can't help but hear the voices of everyone there. Instead of Ricketts where the tone of the voices was joking or celebratory, these voices are all about the trauma and stigma.

"Did you hear she was raped?"

"OMG. Can you believe it?"

I break down at the end of dinner and cry. Tom gets up to go to the kitchen between all four South House Dining Rooms and gets me a cookie, but I can't help thinking Tom has added insult to injury. The resident advisor comes over to see what's the matter and he takes over, asking if I would like to go back to my room, and soon I'm with the resident advisor of Ricketts, Ashley, an attractive blonde graduate student in Chemistry and her grad student boyfriend.

"Maggie, how long have you been hearing voices?" she asks with a soft voice.

"I...I think almost a week now. I think I was raped," I say, still sobbing.

"Maggie, we're going to get you the help you need. Do you trust us? I called Security and they're going to take you to Huntington Hospital. Are you willing to go with them?"

"Yes, but can you come with me, and can I take Javi?" I ask. "He's my cute little baby polar bear cub." I carry him around with me most places, hugging and kissing him when I need comfort. I used to have a big polar bear that I loved but my mother gave or threw him away and I can't even remember if that polar bear had a name. I just remember crying a lot as a child and never knowing why or experiencing comfort from the one person who should have comforted me, Uma. I'd cry and cry and cry until I'd get so thirsty, I couldn't cry anymore.

What's special about Javi I'd tell Ashley later is he talks. My cousin told me to pick out a stuffed animal at Sea World before my first semester at Caltech, saying her mom would pay for it. I picked the cutest polar bear with a playful kink in his neck perfect for hugging and kissing. My first serious boyfriend at Caltech made him talk and we named him together. Before Will, Javi only made noises, but Will and I held conversations and Javi was like our go-between son. *God, I miss you, Will. When am I going to stop saying God and Jesus Christ?*

Will and I'd broken up a few months before Apache after dating for a year and a half, exclusively at that. You could say I was on the rebound, but it was more than that. I was heartbroken, but Will and I also used to fight, and Javi would try to communicate what one partner didn't know about the other.

"I'll drive to the ER and meet you there, Maggie. And yes, I think you can take Javi," Ashley says. "You sure you don't want to go to Las Encinas?" Las Encinas, colloquially known as Dabney East, is the local mental hospital East of campus where students who'd done a bit too much acid are locked away for a week or more at a time. I'd visited a friend there once. Bipolar I, she didn't even remember my visit. She just sat on the floor and cried. Like the fear of rape, I'd never feared having my freedom taken away and now I'm looking at the possibility of being locked up. No one seems to believe me when it comes to the rape, but they do seem to be more concerned about the voices I'm hearing.

"I don't want to go there! I'm not crazy!" I scream. "I want to get a rape kit done."

"Okay, okay, Maggie, then we'll take you to the Huntington Hospital," Ashley says quickly.

DEAN MEAN

PASADENA, CA

2012

I chose Huntington Hospital because I wanted to go through the ER to get a rape kit done—too late. Nothing prepares a woman or girl for the possibility that she was raped. No one took my accusation seriously, I'd showered and had somewhat consensual sex even though I could have been sexually assaulted the night before. *If other people didn't care, I thought why should I?* But that's just the insidious nature of the crime. The more talk around rape, the further psychological trauma occurs around the event and the less agency the victim receives. It seemed though that most people were more concerned about what I was hearing in my head—which I still believed to be true—than what may have happened to my body when I blacked out for a couple hours.

Could I have been raped? Yes. Was I? I don't know. Did I talk to the police? Yes. The officer asked me for the names and numbers of the two men who'd left me traumatized, writing on a notepad. I had to search my phone for them, but I described one as my friend and the other as a sort of boyfriend. I never knew if the officer called them, but I'm sure the rumor I started had found its insidious way through Ricketts House and years later people would say someone was raped at that Apache.

I told him, "I'm telepathic."

"What am I thinking?" he asked me, but all I could hear in my head was, "Yellow Belly Custard," and I didn't believe that that was his actual absurd thought, so I reneged and said, "I don't know what you're thinking."

Did the doctors and police believe me? No. Did they find anything amiss in the blood work? No. They just found weed.

Did I get a rape kit? No, the vexed female doctor took one look at my uncovered genitalia under the gown and said, “You weren’t raped. Now, I want to do a spinal tap.”

I yelled at her, “No, you can’t!” and called the officer I’d just spoken to on the phone using the card he left me.

I got his voicemail. “Please Officer Bryant,” I said. “The doctor wants to do a spinal tap and they’re trying to hurt me. Please call me back.” I didn’t know then that spinal taps are often ordered to rule out meningitis or encephalitis (swelling of the brain) in hallucinating patients. My mother would eventually fight against this violation of my body for me in a future hospitalization in San Jose, but I just thought they wanted to cause me pain for falsely accusing my friends of rape.

The female doctor confiscated my phone and asked me, “How do you know a spinal tap is painful?”

I said, “I’ve seen *House* on TV.” She wouldn’t even let me pee in the bathroom, making the nurse bring a bedpan. I’d already yelled at the nurse, who couldn’t find my vein on the first prick and had gotten another nurse to draw my blood right the first time, making eye contact with my Caltech resident advisor who shook her head and tried to smile.

I felt like a criminal instead of a victim because nobody believed what had happened to me constituted rape.

I probably wouldn’t have pressed charges, but the medical personnel just put me in the locked psyche ward and slammed the door, end of story. I could no longer shower without being watched. I’d be checked on every thirty minutes, day or night, and I was given medication

(Abilify) that would make the voices and paranoia go away, but also make me so drowsy I'd try to nap but also drool all the time.

I've made my peace with that and many other nights. By no means was this the worst night of my life, but it was my first full-blown psychotic crisis. The highlight of my hospitalization was visits from my friends, including Jackie, who brought me not only the most expensive cigarettes, menthol Nathaniel Shermans, but my art supplies which I needed to keep in a locked closet for fear of theft from the other patients. In every hospitalization since, I drew and inevitably people wanted my drawings and doted upon my talent. Sometimes I'd make gifts of portraits to them, and, once commissioned to do a portrait of one patient's wedding and her two sons, I mailed off the drawings, but she never paid me the \$80 we had agreed upon.

My roommate whose name I forget that first hospitalization was homeless and liked to shower five times a day likely because she was an exhibitionist and schizophrenic or bipolar. She told me she could speak to Jesus Christ. The first terrifying night I spent there she got out of bed and slept on the floor, but I hallucinated Tom running from police sirens, breaking into the Huntington and having sex with him in my bed with frequent hallucinogenic orgasms. To this day, I don't know what happened that night. The next day I found a long blond hair in my bed, proof of sex done the night before. I thought perhaps I slept with my roommate, but I don't have clear memories of doing so. She just said last night the moon was full. She asked me if she could have my pink long-sleeved shirt when I wore it. I said no, it was a gift from my mother, but my roommate could wear it for a day. I always wore bras, but perhaps because she didn't have this luxury, she just put it on bare chested and everyone else and I could see her nipples underneath the pale pink. No one said anything, probably because it was kind of hot.

We were definitely evenly matched in that room. Once, after showering the nurses said it was medication time and I almost exited the room in just a white bath towel, but the male nurse said, “Maggie, you can’t go out like that. Put some clothes on first.”

I hadn’t even given it a second thought. I learned to stretch in the privacy of my room. I did cartwheels down the hallway and was preparing to do a tumbling pass and ran a little, only to be accosted by security guards, restrained, and forcibly injected with antipsychotics and sedatives, two needles in my exposed thigh. Apparently, they thought I was agitated and decided to knock me out for 12-16 hours straight. You don’t appreciate freedom or consciousness until it’s forcibly taken away from you and given a euphemistic name like rapid tranquilization. Schizophrenics and bipolar individuals experience this treatment in every hospitalization and that gave me lingering PTSD of hospitalization.

Apa flew to Los Angeles during my first hospital stay, finding a room at the Ronald McDonald house close to the Huntington, one of the hardest acts a father must do for the well-being of his child. Unlike my dad, Uma did not fly out when I was first hospitalized. She called and asked if I’d been raped, and I said no because that’s what everyone at the hospital told me to say and something I’d been beginning to suspect. I talked to her on the payphone. She seemed distracted and unconcerned, a little distant and a little fake but perhaps that was just her out in the country South Korean accent.

When the Associate Dean of Undergraduate Students, Dean Green, who I call Dean Mean, came to see me five days into my first hospitalization and first (and last day) on the open ward, she told me I could not continue my studies right away and would have to move out of the dorm. I cried uncontrollably for an hour after this decision. Dean Green probably cared more about the reputation of Caltech than my fate, telling me telepathically that she was sending me to

a rape camp in Texas where I'd really be raped daily if I ever accused one of her students of that horrendous crime again. I had two conversations with her that hospital stay. In one, she looked me in the eye, talked evenly and normally, but in my head, she was hostile and seeking revenge. She left after only about 10 minutes, unable to console my grief.

At a time I most needed my friends, the administration actively segregated me from them, letting only two at a time visit and for an hour total daily. Once, my friend Daniel was mistaken for a mental patient and when he tried to leave, they asked, "Oh no, where do you think you're going?"

The social worker came in after I'd been sitting there crying for an hour. She asked me, "What do you want to do when this is all over?" Through my tears I sobbed, "I want to be a stripper!" and to her credit she didn't laugh, but said, "You can do anything you want." The tears stopped. Now, I laugh when I remember this story. Hope and future to the social worker were still possible and she made me realize that I could still do everything I wanted to even if it was as silly an occupation considerably more prone to trauma and stigma than any other but appealing because it granted freedom over body. The over-sexual impression I gave on that first hospitalization led to the misdiagnosis of Bipolar I with Psychosis, which would eventually morph into Psychotic Disorder Not Otherwise Specified and Paranoid Schizophrenia on subsequent hospitalizations, but diagnoses are just labels or disorders all on the same general symptom spectrum. What matters most is getting on a regimen of meds that help and sticking to it.

I never became a stripper. Some would say I never became anything, and the tears would come and go over the years, but my and other's sense of humor would help dam them back up.

I have a rule: blow my nose into more than three tissues at a time and I'll know if I'm depressed. It's been years since I blew my nose into more including the whole time I've been in El Paso since 2019. I feel fortunate to be in a city where I've never been hauled away in a cop car or ambulance and where I've never been civically committed or rapid tranquilized in a hotel, ambulance, or hospital. But the rape delusion remains and likely will never go away.

SARAH LEE
PASADENA, CA

2013

“Maggie,” my female Caltech psychiatrist, Dr. Freeman says. “I think you suffer from PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) from your time in U.B.F. and I’d like you to see a someone at the Counseling Center. Is that something you’re comfortable with?” Between 40 something and 50 something, Dr. Freeman always keeps the same professional short bob, and I never glimpse photos of her family or catch any wind of her personal life besides that she’s got to take her three I imagine small pooches out every four-five hours, making the job of psychiatry just a tad bit harder.

“I don’t know, Dr. Freeman. I saw someone my sophomore year at the Caltech Counseling Center, but he wasn’t very helpful,” I say, looking at the floor avoiding eye contact.

“Why do you say that and who was it?”

“His name was Reese and he asked if I had any suicidal thoughts or thoughts of hurting myself and I replied, ‘No, but I’ve had homicidal thoughts’ as a joke, and he didn’t get it. He kind of tensed, leaned in and said, ‘Really!?’ That’s when I knew I couldn’t see him anymore. Honestly, I only went to the Counseling Center for depression after my first break up and after failing classes but didn’t feel like I was really understood. The Dean kind of forced it on me as a condition of the Undergraduate Academic Standards and Honors Committee (UASH),” I explain what needs to happen to approve students placed on probation due to GPA below 1.9. You get one free pass with the Dean, but otherwise petitions go to the full committee—quite a bureaucratic nightmare and red tape involved with all parties.

“Ha, Maggie! I can see your sense of humor needs humoring. How about we set you up with an appointment with Sarah Lee? She’s Korean American like you.”

“With a name like Sarah Lee, I’m sure she’s had a harder life than I did.”

“Yes, Maggie. Keep joking with me, but I want you to take counseling seriously. This is your opportunity to explore past traumas and really get to the root of your problems.”

“Which are what exactly?” I ask not expecting a cogent response. Dr. Freeman, known to have her kooks, so I never knew when she’d bring up something occult or semi-scientific based on the last psychiatric article she’d read that week.

“I got some homework for you to do, Maggie,” she says. “I just read an article.” *Oh no, I think, here we go again. I hope she doesn’t change my medication based on this.* The Zyprexa and Haldol combination seems finally to have reduced the voices to a manageable level, only at my pillow and very occasionally in crowded restaurants and bars, places that have always made me paranoid. “I just read an article in *Schizophrenia Bulletin*. Now where did I put it?” She rifles through her overloaded desk shifting through patient files until she happens upon a seven-page printout in black and white. “Ah, here it is! Here, you can have my copy to borrow. It’s called ‘Do Specific Early-Life Adversities Lead to Specific Symptoms of Psychosis? A Study from the 2007 The Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey.’”

“Wow must be a fascinating read,” I say, not enthusiastic about reading another scientific paper on top of all the coursework I still have left to do as a junior.

“Now, now, Maggie. It’s actually not that dense and if my theory is right, we’ve only touched upon the tip of your schizophrenic iceberg, but I don’t have the time to deal with it, so my colleague Sarah Lee and you’ll work this all out, hopefully before you graduate!” And with that Dr. Freeman concludes our all too short 15-minute consultation. “See you in a month. I’ll

write refills for you right now. No change in medication. Sarah Lee can see you on Friday at 3pm.”

“Thank you, Dr. Freeman.” I pick up the paper and the prescriptions, noting like always that my Klonopin and Lunesta are written on a special blue controlled substances tab separate from the prescription for my antipsychotics.

I say without thinking, “What would I do without you?”

“Likely go insane and back in the hospital, but that’s not going to happen, is it Maggie?”

“No, Dr. Freeman. I still have a degree to finish.”

“That a girl!” She waves cheerfully as I swing open the second door of her office leading into the Bank of the West’s office building hallway, the fifth floor on Colorado Ave. I never see anyone in her waiting room or hallway, and I need a key with a long metal baton like Unghe’s nightstick to use the women’s restroom. *Ugh, I don’t want to think about Unghe*, I think as I exit. Maybe Sarah Lee can help me with my uncontrollable thoughts, I hope, but fat chance therapy will help me. I’m a scientist and while I know I have a mental illness, that knowledge hasn’t always helped me. The medications on these scripts, these are the real answers, but I’ll humor Dr. Freeman into thinking I’m taking therapy seriously because I really need *HER* help, not Sarah Lee’s. What if she’s like another Reese? Don’t joke, that’s what Dr. Freeman said. Then what? Cry? Ugh, I walk around two corners and push the elevator button, ride it down and head back out into the oppressive heat of another full blast end of summer day in Pasadena, CA ready for the long walk back to Caltech’s olive tree-lined inner campus.

I read the scientific article the next day and weep, careful not to let my tears drop on the hard copy Dr. Freeman gave me. *Could this be why I was schizophrenic? I wonder*. It says that

those who reported being raped before the age of sixteen were six times more likely to experience auditory visual hallucinations in the twelve months preceding assessment. This was, of course, just based on a questionnaire, but the origins of bipolar and schizophrenia weren't entirely clear to me until that point, and early hits based on childhood trauma could be a working hypothesis. I'd read that influenza during pregnancy for example made for a 7-fold increase in babies developing schizophrenia, clearly based on the science in *The Origins of Schizophrenia* written by Columbia Professor Alan S. Brown, MD and my Caltech Professor Dr. Paul H. Patterson. During influenza epidemics, the cases of schizophrenia would rise 20-30 years later. Also, why are my hallucinations so sexually violent? Based on Jung's archetypes, one would imagine that all schizophrenics can experience the same types of hallucinations programmed into the human mind before birth, but why am I so afraid I'd been or would be raped and why did this fear only emerge seemingly out of the blue one weed-filled day?

I go to the first meeting with Dr. Sarah Lee optimistic and with paper in hand, but she dismisses all my claims with one sentence.

"Listen, Maggie. I know Dr. Freeman wanted us to discuss possible PTSD, but I don't want to derail you from your studies. Let's not talk about it further, okay?"

"What do you want to discuss?" I ask.

"How are you doing in school? How's your sleep? Are you dating anyone? Things of that nature," she replies good naturedly. *This is a fucking waste of time*, I think. If I wanted a Korean American girlfriend to discuss these things, I would have joined the Caltech Korean Student Association or the Asian Pacific Student Union. She's lost my confidence in the first meeting just as that first meeting with a therapist a couple years before had.

I didn't realize how much counselors shared at the Caltech Counseling Center until I tried to come back from the medical leave that followed from Winter 2014 to Fall 2015. I'd told Sarah Lee that I thought I might have been raped and predictably she dismissed this and told me not to think about it because it would only cause me pain. But, when I tried to be readmitted from my latest medically forced hiatus, the Director of the Counseling Center Kevin Austin brought up this fact.

"Maggie, you falsely accused one of our students of rape," he said to my surprise.

"How do you know it's false?" I asked pushing the air out my gritted teeth.

"Sarah Lee told me that."

"How can Sarah Lee tell you that if it is supposed to be confidential between doctor-patient?"

"The Counseling Center therapists can discuss anything discussed in therapy with each other. You signed a release to that effect the first day we treated you."

"So, you're saying that you guys gossip about my possible rape among yourselves on your fucking lunch breaks?"

"Now, now, Maggie, there's no need to use that language."

"But that's duplicitous. To make students believe they're being heard in a safe space and then pull the freaking rug out from under them!" I yelled as I dissolved into tears. "And you don't know anything that has ever happened to me especially that night."

"The police found no evidence of a crime."

"The police didn't even bother to look. The female doctor refused to do a rape kit on me. She took one look at my vagina and said, 'Oh, you were never raped.' She also wanted to do an extremely painful procedure called a spinal tap on me, but I refused calling the police officer

who took my information. How can you trust anything the police or doctor tell you? If I didn't know better, I'd say Caltech was protecting my rapist and covering up the crime."

"Now, Maggie, that sounds awfully paranoid to me."

"All I've told you are facts you can base on my therapy and medical records, of which you seem to have access to. Where's the form so I can redact the permission for you to discuss my private conversations with Sarah? Maybe this is why so many Caltech students commit suicide after receiving counseling. Have you ever thought of that, Dr. Kevin Austin?"

He didn't seem all that warm to me after this frank discussion, but when he said he couldn't get a hold my psychiatrist in San Jose, my mom intervened and got Dr. Laura Hoyt on the phone. He left the room to give himself the privacy he didn't warrant Caltech students and came back 5 minutes later smiling.

"Maggie, Dr. Hoyt says wonderful things about you and has utter confidence in your ability to succeed here if readmitted. You didn't tell me you got straight A's in community college."

"Dean Green didn't tell me I had to attend another college while on medical leave from college until last fall, but luckily, I live near San Jose City College. Also, I'd lost health insurance coverage while gone from Caltech for over a year, so I had to pay for therapy out of pocket after the fact."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Now, I just want to let you know that Dean Green wants to keep your stress levels here to a minimum so she'll sign an underload petition for you the rest of your semesters here and you can only take two to three classes instead of the usual four to five. Congratulations and good luck." I ignored the hand he stuck out to shake. Undeterred he shook the hands of my mom and dad, such kiss asses who were paying this fool's way. I'd been

irritated that my mom gave Dean Green a Starbucks gift card as if she'd done everything to help me instead of hindering me, but that was Uma for you, always giving away gifts instead of to her own four children.

“Thank you, Dr. Austin,” my dad said. “Maggie won't disappoint. She's been itching to get back to her studies after a year and a half.”

OUR RUNNING JOKE

PASADENA, CA

2016

It is senior year for the second time and I can't figure out how to do a problem on the Introduction to Mechanics physics class homework, even though I've gone to the TA session and wrote down the solution. Every time I try, I can't find the right steps to do it, and on top of that, my tutor Daniel has gone missing in action the week before finals and the Dean's office provided me with a list of seven tutors. Four replied that they were too busy, and the rest didn't even bother emailing back. *If I fail this physics class again that will be the reason I never get a Caltech degree*, I think. I failed freshman year, practical track. Then I tried taking the analytical track affectionately named "anal" in colloquial terms and failed even more spectacularly. Now, I am just one problem set away from the final. In a panic, I call Jackie.

"Jackie? Hi, do you know anyone who can help me with Introduction to Mechanics? I'm never going to graduate if I don't pass that class."

"Yeah, I do. His name is Jose Sanchez, a PhD student in Materials Science."

"Oh, he's a graduate student? Perfect. Then he won't fall in love with me."

"Every Caltech male in their twenties falls in love with you, Maggie."

"No, I'm just kidding. I don't date graduate students even though I'm a super senior and I probably should. And what are you talking about? Coming back from medical leave, I find myself a cougar. Anyway, thanks, I'll give him a call." I hang up and dial another number, area code 915.

"Hi, Jose?"

"Hello?" A distinct Mexican American accent answers.

“Yes, my name’s Maggie Kim. I’m an undergraduate here and I need help with the last homework set for Introduction to Mechanics. My tutor Daniel went MIA. Do you think you could meet me at Starbucks and tutor me? The Dean’s Office will pay you and I’d forever be in your debt.”

“Yes, I think I can do that. What time?”

“Thursday at noon works for me.”

“The Starbucks on Lake Ave?”

“Yup, that’s the one. Thanks so much.”

I walk into the Starbucks and look around. I see a slim figure in tight black workout pants and white t shirt getting up from a corner table waiting. *He can’t be that much older than me*, I think.

“Maggie? Maggie Kim? Is that you?”

“Yes,” I reply shaking his hand firmly. “It is. Have you been waiting long?”

“Only 15 minutes. I stupidly got up every 5 minutes every time an Asian girl came in, but you don’t look like the typical Asian at school.”

“Is that a compliment? And how funny. I’m sorry you got so confused. We did say noon, right?” I’m sure I will start blushing and look away.

“Yeah. I just wanted to make a good impression. Jackie talks about you a lot.”

“What? Really! I’m so glad to meet you. You don’t understand how much I need your help. I’ve already failed this class twice. Jose Sanchez, you’re my only hope.”

Jose laughs. “A princess in distress? How can I refuse? Now before we get started, can I buy you a coffee?”

“Oh, I don’t think that’d be appropriate. I’ve never let a guy buy me coffee,” I reply taking out my credit card. Jose’s face immediately becomes crestfallen before recovering quickly. *Had I offended him?* I wonder as I order and return to the table taking out my books and notes.

“Okay,” I say. “So, I went to recitation section, and I have the final answer. I just don’t know how to get there. Can we go through it step by step?”

Jose works diligently for several minutes while I watch the concentration on his face. “Huh, that’s weird. I know that my physics is right, but I’m getting a different answer. Can you take a look at my work?” I follow his work, a page full of formulas and equations solved, and see that the answers don’t match, but why? We keep hovering over the same page, both puzzled until...

“Aha! I got it. Here, you said velocity equals time over distance, but isn’t it distance over time? Does that solve the puzzle?”

“Oh, how embarrassing. I’m supposed to be the expert, but you show me up on the first day.”

“And last day. This is the last physics problem set I have to turn in.”

“Oh no! Does that mean we won’t see each other again?”

I coolly drink my coffee and reply, “I guess not. Not unless there’s a reason I should see you. Do you have one?”

“I did just get a puppy.”

“Now I know you’re lying, mentiroso!” I say liar in Spanish.

“Woah! You speak Spanish? No, I’m not lying. I just got Lucy, short for Lucifer, and she’s the devil of a girl. Would you like to see her? I can give you a ride. Did you walk here?”

“Yeah, I didn’t know you had a car,” I reply. Most undergraduates don’t have cars at Caltech, but they’re more common among graduate students. “Um, let me just text Jackie.”

I text Jackie: Jose just asked me to his apartment to show me his new puppy. Do you think it’s safe to go with him?

Jackie responds: Yeah, he’s a great guy. Glad you two are getting along. Is love in the air?

I turn back to Jose, blushing again, “Sorry. A girl can never be too careful.”

“Don’t worry. I’m the perfect gentleman. Let’s go.” We pack up and head out into the baking heat. His red 2010 Ford Focus is parked at a meter. We’d been there maybe an hour and a half and there were still five minutes left. Jose even opens the passenger door. He lives in the Villa Apartments north of campus where an iron gate opens to the parking lot. We go up some stairs to the courtyard. Jose says, “Rumor has it, it once held a swimming pool but now all that’s left is astroturf and a children’s playground.”

Jose and I tip toe into a second-floor apartment in the corner. Lucy, just a tiny 2-month-old tan pug puppy, sleeps in the kitchen with her surrogate mother, a stuffed tiger, blocked off by tall boxes. Jose whistles.

“Lucy! I want you to meet my new friend, Maggie.”

“Oh my gosh. I didn’t know she was a pug! I have a black pug back home named Cata short for Catastrophe. She’s adorable! Can I hold her?” I ask, but Lucy comes over and sits in her own shit. “Hi, there, Lucy. Oh wait, she sits in her own poop? Never mind, you can hold poopy paws.”

“Lucy! Why’d you sit in your poop? Can’t you see I’m trying to make a good impression? Not much of a wing woman yet, is she? I love the name Cata and the fact that it’s short for something much more devilish like my Lucifer.”

“I’m sorry. I just can’t stand poop. I hallucinate it too much. Oh, no! I’ve said too much.”

“You haven’t said enough,” Jose sings the next verse even though I didn’t sing it. “What do you mean hallucinate? You do acid? I’ve never tried it but am kind of curious.”

“No, not like that. I, um, have schizophrenia. I’ve been hospitalized three times already and twice been put on medical leave. I didn’t mean to tell you right away but, yeah, I’m certifiably crazy.”

“It’s okay. Lucy’s crazy, too. She’s actually my emotional support animal. That’s why I got her. I have Bipolar Type II.”

“You’re not scared of me now, are you?”

“Oh, please. I might be scared if I showered and sang RAPE ME, RAPE ME AGAIN!”

“Oh, so you think I want to rape you?”

Jose looks smug, looks at Lucy, adorably pouts and whimpers, “Well, don’t you?”

“Maybe after I get to know you, but we just met! I don’t even know where your area code is from and what would Jackie think?”

“Oh, 915’s El Paso, one of the safest cities in Texas or the United States. I don’t care what Jackie, or anyone thinks. Don’t we get along?” He jabs my arm playfully. “When can I run into you again?”

“What about if we go to the Caltech gym together? These antipsychotics are wreaking havoc on my waistline. I need to run. You want to run together? It can be a running joke between us!”

He laughs. “Jackie did warn me about your puns, but I think I’d love to run with you. What do you do, one mile?”

“No way, Jose. I run 5Ks. That’s 3.11 miles. You think you can keep up with me?”

“Oh please. I’d run circles around you. Us Mexicans were born to run.”

“I guess that means we’ll have to get treadmills next to each other.”

“Consider it our first date. What about Saturday 1PM?”

“The race is on. Oh Lucy, I’m sorry I ignored you! Can you forgive me?”

Jose raises Lucy to eye level and says for her in his falsetto heavily accented speech, “Of course I can!” I can’t help but laugh.

“What’s that stuffed tiger’s name? Is that her mom?”

“Oh, that’s Chelsea. Yeah, I feel bad for leaving her alone all day. She used to be my younger brother’s stuffed animal, but he grew up.”

I bend down and pet Lucy, “Well, you Lucy will grow up too, won’t you? Oh my God! She’s the size of your shoe! Let me take a picture! I’ll text you.”

I text the photo of Jose’s bright red running shoe and Lucy lying next to it with this caption: our running joke.

TELL ME MORE

PASADENA, CA

2016

At the Caltech gym on Saturday, I hop on the treadmill next to Jose.

Jose sings, “Are you all ready for this? Bum. Bum. Bum. Bum. Bum. Bum. You all ready for this?”

“You betcha! I’ll start at a six. You?”

“I think I’ll start at least at an eight. Don’t cut yourself short.”

“Oh, please. I always cut myself short, besides, aren’t you a head taller than me?”

“I’ll pull ahead then, but you’re a ten easily.”

“You just want to get in my size-two pants. I used to be a double-zero ankle, the smallest possible adult pant size, but, alas, time and medication.”

“Woo. You got to show me pictures. You’re not a bad shape now, but you’re in horrible shape.”

“I know!” I pant. “I haven’t had time to run in a while. Too busy finishing the semester. When do you graduate?”

“Oh, I’ll have my PhD in Materials Science in two weeks. Then I’m off to Portland in the Fall. I got a good paying position at Intel. No more broke grad student for me. What about you? You’re Biology, right?”

“Yeah. I kind of got stuck in that major at first as a joke. I’m just going to tutor at a Korean Academy or hagwon after graduation. I applied for a bunch of jobs but that’s the only one I could interview for. Portland, huh? Wow, that’s far.”

“I know, but I can’t wait. We still have the summer.” Jose sings again in his distinctive Juárez accent, “Summer days drifting away but, oh, those summer nights!”

“You’re a horrible singer and flirt!”

“You’re not half bad either,” he says. “Come on!”

“Tell me more. Tell me more. Will we have our first fight?”

“Tell me more. Tell me more. Can you run, all right?”

I laugh despite dying while running. “So, when can we go on a real date? I forgot how much running sucks.”

“What about dinner?”

“I love dinner! When?”

“I’m busy with graduation, but what about in three weeks?”

“Sure thing, but that long? I’ll buy you lunch before then.”

“Okay. I can’t say there’s no such thing as a free lunch then! Next week, same time, after a run?”

“Yup,” I say. “I hope this Mexican likes Chipotle and Jamba Juice.”

“This Mexican loves diarrhea, so yeah, you’re on!”

MEET YOUR MATCH

SAN JOSE, CA

2016

During the summer of 2016, Jose and I got to know each other better. Sadly, the months, weeks, and days were numbered.

“Why don’t we drive up to Portland together, and we can stop in San Jose at my parents’ house?” I ask. “I’ve been dying for you to meet Cata.”

“Sure thing. I hope they get along. How old is Cata now?”

“She’s seven and a half now. She only weighs fourteen pounds. Looks more like a black cat than a pug and I call her ‘Cat’ too confusing Facebook and other social media algorithms to show me cat videos instead of dog.”

My dad had stopped nosing around after graduation. I guess the fact that his daughter was schizophrenic had temporarily halted his hunt for a good husband, but when I said I was doing a road trip with Jose, he couldn’t hide his curiosity.

“So, who is this Jose Sanchez?”

“Nothing, Apa. We’ve barely met. I’m just helping him move to Portland.”

“He works at Intel?”

“How’d you know?”

“There’s only two major companies in Portland. Intel and Nike. Coming from Caltech, I’d imagine the former, not the latter.”

“Way to pigeonhole him. Be nice.”

“When am I ever not nice?”

“Like my entire childhood.”

“Aw, you’re still mad about Abby? Are you a crabby Maggie? I just want to know. Will you two be staying in the same room or do we need to prepare two bedrooms?”

“You’re fine with us sharing a bed?”

“So long as he doesn’t knock you up. Not until after the wedding!”

“Apa! You’re incorrigible. Also, he’s got a tan pug named Lucy that’ll be staying with us too.”

“Aw, so Cata’s met her match too? Lucky girl. I think the two of you were meant to be.”

“Don’t mention it to Jose. You’ll scare him away.”

We make our way haltingly up the coast of California with the Pacific Ocean and beach on one side, the Sierra Mountains on the other, smelling cow poop occasionally. Lucy is beyond excited to be on her first road trip. She’s grown significantly in just a few months and I think she may be half Cata’s size already. We were sure to stock up on Rancheritos and Takis before leaving the gas station. I can’t stand Takis but Rancheritos aren’t spicy at all and reminded me of Mexican Doritos. Jose always comments that they had Doritos in Mexico too and he grew up thinking they were Mexican. I keep singing, “Rancheritos, Ranchery” to the tune of Indiana Jones. The six-hour trip seems to fly by. We pull into the driveway at night, my parents already at the door waiting with Cata.

“Hi Mr. and Mrs. Kim. Thank you so much for hosting me and Lucy.”

“No problem, Jose.” Cata can smell Lucy but makes a bee line for her butt, sniffing and biting it.

“Poor Lucy!” I say. “Cata, you have a little white around your snout, now? How very distinguished.” Lucy starts whining trying to escape Cata’s curious snout.

“Oh, she’ll get used to it. Won’t you, Lucy? Do you like your big sister, Cata?” Lucy looks at Jose with her most soulful sad eyes and whines, clearly not happy to share her dad with another bigger, meaner dominant pug.

My mother cooked very rarely: most often when somebody was at my parents’ house as a guest. She was an excellent Korean cook. She would prepare with love duckmandugook, a soup dish of flat rice cakes, pork dumplings, beef, egg, and seaweed. I still believe she made the best duckmandugook I’ve ever tasted because she was very generous with the salt. You had to blow on the soup to make sure you didn’t burn your taste buds or else dinner would be ruined. Even living in LA’s Koreatown after college, I’d try to relive the sensation of this traditional dumpling soup at a restaurant only to be disappointed by its lack of homemade taste.

When Jose visited in August 2016 my family for the first time, driving from LA to San Jose, then on to Portland, OR she made this staple. Always one for flare and humor, she heaped a huge metal bowl of duckmandugook in front of him, saying, “I bet you can’t finish this.” My boyfriend took her little nettling about food in good grace. She’d challenge him every few minutes with another. “This kimchi will be too spicy for you.” Of course, he finished because it was delicious, and he said that the kimchi was mild after all.

Uma made herself and her food endearing to Jose. She was not only an excellent cook but a gracious and playful host. She said she’d kick him out if he had three strikes against him. I can’t remember how many he’d accrued, but I don’t believe it was more than one or two. His mother would repeatedly return this hospitality to me years later in El Paso, cooking dinner for us every week or every other week.

We stayed for only one night, and I wish I could have taken Cata too, but as I would be flying back to LA this would prove problematic. My parents begged us to stay longer, but I knew that would be inviting trouble and I preferred to have a few days alone with Jose in Portland, OR so after breakfast we headed back out on the road never forgetting that Lucy met her match.

BLACK EYE
PORTLAND, OR

2017

I can't remember fights that well, not what is said, or why we even fought, but for me my fights with Jose were more visual than anything else. I can't remember the order of events, the regrettable things I said to make him afraid of me. I just remember reacting instinctively and irrationally. He was an alcoholic. I knew that from the beginning, and we fought about it in Pasadena and for the brief time I'd commute from Koreatown to Pasadena after graduating working as a tutor and riding the Purple Line to Gold Line twice a week. I thought of commuting back, but Jose liked when I stayed even if just to yell at me more. But when I got fired and my rent went up a year and a summer into my tutoring job, he asked me to move to Portland with him where he'd gotten a nice job at Intel Corporation. We'd been long distance for only a year. I remember having so much patience when I lived in LA, commuting for 2 to 2.5 hours by train instead of car, but that patience soon vanished when I got a new psychiatrist in Portland, OR and she refused to prescribe me Klonopin or Lunesta, both controlled substances.

I became manic and not needing to sleep as much, full of restless impatient energy and one day, fed up, I decided to empty Jose's liquor collection. He came home late after having a few too many beers with coworkers and Lucy and I had been waiting for him, hungry and lonely for about three hours. Gone were the days I'd wake up five hours before him, clean Lucy's pee and feces in the Villa apartment, walk and feed her, then read in bed until the Seroquel finally released him from its nocturnal hold. No, Seroquel was gone, and alcoholism was in especially in Hillsboro, OR.

“Jose, you’ve got to quit drinking and start taking Seroquel again,” I said as I ostensibly poured out the half empty bottles of Fireball and Patron, saving the whiskey for last. “I can’t stand you drunk,”

“Maggie, stop that. Do you have any idea how much that costs? I’m keeping the alcohol and kicking you out. Move out of the way,” he said pushing me away and rescuing the rest of his bar collection which were crowding the counter next to the sink in the tiny one-bedroom apartment at the Verandas, which I’d come to secretly hate. “I don’t have any problem but you!” he screamed, flying into a rage that just made me react violently as well. “I want you out of my life, Maggie.” He grabbed the drawers in the bathroom full of odd things like hair ties and cosmetics and threw all the contents into a box.

“Jose, no! You can’t do this to me.” I pleaded as I watched him take out a second box. My life with him flashed before my eyes. I ran to the couch, and he followed, picking up poor Lucy and throwing her from six feet away, trying to scare me into submission, but Maggie Kim may be many things but I’m not a victim. I saw Lucy’s terrified face as she became a living nuclear projectile, and she landed safely shaking onto the sofa beside me. “That’s it, Jose. You can’t just kick me out.” I chased Jose to the bed where I started throwing punches at his face and he restrained my arms. I was fast and while I didn’t know martial arts, I knew how to punch. He pinned my arms to their sides hugging me, but he couldn’t stop the verbal assault. I don’t remember the exact words, but I probably said things like, “I’m gonna fucking stab your neck.” I tend to be colorfully inventive in my violence and threats.

“Maggie, I’m going to put you in the hospital.” Those words halted the attack, made me stop, run and curl into the fetal position on bathroom rug where I bawled, “No! Jose! Please no!”

Tears and snot ran freely now. Jose had promised to never put me in the hospital when we started dating. He knew how much post traumatic stress I had from there and how badly they'd treated me, violated my patient and human rights, and involuntarily held me against my will, forcibly medicating and sedating me and sometimes even restraining me.

“Maggie, you at least need to find a new doctor. I can't keep paying \$375 dollars per session for a doctor who refuses to prescribe you what you need to sleep.”

“Jose, will you go back on Seroquel and drink less?”

“I don't have a problem. I'm fine off the Seroquel.”

“You almost got a DUI the other day,” I said referring to the time he got pulled over for driving under the influence dropping our friend Leo off at his downtown Hillsboro apartment building after some beers. The female cop ahead of us turned right and then followed us to a red light, pulled close to read the expired plates and pulled us over. There was no moving violation, but there's no doubt she could smell the beer on Jose's breath. Leo and I pretended to have had a lot more to drink than Jose and said he was the designated driver. Luckily, she didn't press his luck, but since we were driving locally, she let us go with a warning. He even said she was hot, something I did and didn't like about Jose. He'd tell the truth no matter the situation, something he'd learned from Maggie Kim, too, but over the years, the lack of patience and lost respect sometimes made us fight like animals or just get on each other's nerves. We sure knew all the wrong buttons to press and pet peeves by the end of a few years.

He had a good therapist in Portland, OR and I wish I could have said the same thing, but all my therapists only wanted money and to discuss boring ass things like why I couldn't sleep. In a way, Jose had been my therapist when sober, but my antagonist when drunk. I couldn't help but think I was held to a double standard in this relationship. On the one hand, I felt secure that

he would never hurt me despite some of the things the bipolar rages would make him say and regret, but on the other hand, I wanted not to fight at all. I wanted him to stop breaking things and throwing Lucy in my face. He would kick me out for hours at a time when he just wanted to be in the apartment drinking alone. I'd have to walk to a restaurant and watch two movies back to back all to bend over backwards to appease him because I was after all living there rent free and barely lifting a hand to help better our lives. I was sliding backwards, and I was taking Jose's sanity with me. Not fair, I know but neither is being with an untreated alcoholic bipolar man. But also, it was safer for him to drink at home than it was for him to drink and drive so I tolerated the binge drinking as best I could, hoping the mood would pass.

I left him with the smallest black eye. You could see it if you squinted. He let me sleep on the couch setting up an elaborate spoon and pot alarm which I found out about the next morning in case I decided to try to enter the bedroom. The next day was bleak. I felt like I had no options. I had to look for a new psychiatrist. That was top of the list. We also knew we needed to look for a new place to live as we'd outgrown the hell hole of a one-bedroom carpeted apartment close to work but far from life. I hallucinated the smell of gay orgies in the Verandas because the house was dirty. I also have been known to have jealous delusions and thought Jose had impregnated my LA songwriting teacher who I secretly called Smelly Meli, and that she and not I was making the cavernous dent in the Queen sized mattress. I'd devote most of my life to listening and daydreaming with occasional writings of the goings on in my brain and head, but the deluge of sensations and hallucinations, delusions, dialogues, visual scenes, and whims would often be too much to truly capture and also bewilderingly unintelligible to the not schizophrenic. I could imagine whole symphonies or music videos complete with visual effects and dance moves, but alas I could not learn them nor could anyone else and I was the only one to

enjoy them. I didn't think there was a way for me to share the creativity I had brimming from my brain, until we moved to El Paso.

But first, we settled on a newly constructed home in Beaverton, OR to restart our life in 45 Central where we'd still have access to a clubhouse, pool, outdoor ping pong table but have the privacy of living in our own single-family home. Lucy was probably the happiest and I still miss that damn three-story house we were lucky to find a buyer for before moving finally to El Paso in Fall 2019. We celebrated and entertained many people in that first house, sparsely furnished but beautiful inside and out and filled with much more love because we had the space to be separate and grow perhaps not financially but emotionally and spiritually with the aid of magic medicine like shrooms, molly, and acid. I'd enter the Guitar Center Singer Songwriting competition and place 10th one year and start my own piano teaching business. I'd buy my first car and have more freedom than ever before after getting stable once again. There were three stories to that house: one ground level with my digital piano and songwriting, two kitchen and living room where we'd cook and hold parties including my first birthday party in 2017 when I turned 25, and three the bedrooms and full bathrooms where the dirty living and TV watching happened.

PART THREE

DUMB SHERLOCK HOLMES

PORTLAND, OR

2018

I called Abby as soon as I ended the FaceTime with Will. His face looked a little hairier and fuller than I remembered while we were dating, but we'd both been young at the time, me a freshman, him, a sophomore in college and it'd been a good five years since he'd graduated in 2013. I imagine I didn't look the same to him either and the recent sunburn from visiting Seaside, OR without sunscreen on my naked face probably didn't help. He'd texted me as I called him initially saying to give him two minutes. When he picked up, I saw he was outside in a shady park in downtown Chicago. The connection was spotty, but I was happy he took the call outside his office for the privacy anonymity provided in a public setting.

“What did you ask him, Maggie?” Abby’s question brought me back to the present.

“Not much. I’d already texted him that I wanted to probe some of our memories together because I don’t believe my memory is reliable since I’ve gotten sick. He didn’t even remember me being sick, but then again, we’d kind of drifted apart after the breakup,” I replied.

“So he didn’t know you were schizophrenic at Caltech?” Abby asked.

“Not a clue, and exactly how do you sum up seven years of hallucinations, paranoia, delusions, and perhaps real or false memories in a thirty-minute spotty video call?” I asked rhetorically.

“At least he talked to you. How’d you reach out?”

“I Facebook-Messaged him and didn’t really want to get my hopes up about a response,” I replied, “since I’m sure to him it seemed out of the blue. I’d deleted his phone number after the breakup.”

“You’re kind of keeping me hanging here, Mags. What did you find out?” Abby asked.

“I told him the concrete evidence I have,” I said. “Sheeche remembering me telling her Unghe asked for a blow job when I walked in on him masturbating, and that my brother Woojin remembers us sitting on the floor of Unghe’s bedroom and Unghe asking me, ‘Maggie, suck my gochu,’ which translates to ‘Maggie, suck my dick.’ I could see the surprise and concern in his face. Then, I asked him if I ever spoke of Unghe while we dated and he said no,” I was keeping this phone call a secret from Jose for two reasons. I didn’t want him to know I talked to two exes in one day, not that he was really the jealous type, but you never know, and couples should have a couple of secrets.

“Okay. So, it was a surprise to him then.”

“Big surprise. I asked if it felt like I knew what I was doing when I gave him blow jobs since from what I remember I didn’t feel unsure of myself in that respect. I remember looking up online how to give a blow job, but I remember at the time never looking at an erect man’s penis so closely before. However, now I remember what Unghe’s penis looked like and what seem to be tens if not hundreds of times performing blow jobs on him. Will said I wasn’t bad at it, but he doesn’t remember much more.” I guessed these sexual experiences meant more to me at the time, than it did to him, I thought, but didn’t tell Abby. “I was, to be honest, a little disappointed that he didn’t say I was really good, just not horrible, but I guess that’s guys for you.”

“What else did you find out?” Abby asked.

“I mentioned that when we had sex for the first time, I didn’t bleed and I didn’t feel any pain, which I thought was unusual.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said that at the time I thought I was a virgin and he was under the same impression. He said that I did mention being in a cult but never in the context of being sexually abused.”

God, I was so naïve at Caltech.

“And how do you feel about that answer?” I wondered how Abby could keep talking to me after all these years and with such engaging interest in a past that haunts me, but which I realized now, after talking to Will, didn’t always haunt me.

“Honestly, I feel like a dumb Sherlock Holmes, Abby. None of this sleuthing is getting me anywhere closer to the truth. I feel like I’m just circling a clogged shower drain and I’m not sure I can handle it anymore. The memories feel so concrete, but I don’t know what to believe. It’s like I’ve led two different lives. One, either I was the victim of pedophilic incest and molestation since before I can even remember or two, or I’m just a paranoid schizophrenic who can’t distinguish hallucination from reality. Either way, I’m severely traumatized and it’s not like I can get a straight answer from the one person who would know for sure, Unghe. I’ve discussed it with Woojin.”

“How?”

“I said I’ll never know if Unghe is telling me the truth, and Woojin said, ‘If he did do it then he’s going to say no, and if he didn’t do it, he’s also going to say no.’ It’s a Catch-22. How am I ever going to get a confession from him, if he did do the crime? I said I wasn’t likely to ‘Me-Too’ him because that would just throw me under the bus, and Will agreed it’s good what I’m writing is labelled as fiction. He also asked me to change his name in the novel because one

of his friends wrote a book and used his real name. I told him I'd already done that and not to worry. Then, I told him I'd already accused someone of rape my sophomore year and he asked what happened and who?" I remembered the protective instinct cloud his face as a former boyfriend and protector when he asked the question. "I told him it was Neil, a freshman at the time who had a fake leg. I told him I blacked out after puking and came to and when he left smelling condom, which I wasn't sure was real or a hallucination then or now, but that I'd suffered from PTSD years later, crying inconsolably about it."

"God, Maggie. I think you're the new Asian American Veronica Mars." Abby asked trying to lighten the heavy mood cast over this conversation. "Are you going vigilante next? When is the season premiere of your new Netflix show?"

"If only, Abby. There'll never be justice in my case since I'm probably the girl who cried rape too often with no hard evidence. I even thought Woojin, Sheeche, Apa, and Uma raped me at various times and in various ways. It was like my own fucked-up version of the infamous fucked up joke the Aristocrats! When I told Woojin that he used to ram a square based pyramid up my vagina on FaceTime he was like 'What the fuck?' but now I think I only doubt the memories of Unghe. I'd also thought Woojin put razor blades in my body and was moving them around telepathically when I was psychotic over Christmas break 2012. When I demanded X-rays to prove it, they moved a mobile X-ray machine into my ICU room, but I was afraid they were trying to kill me and screamed until they rolled it away again. But I hope my writing about it and talking about it will help other women and girls in my situation, and Will agrees that I'm in prime position to help others cope with similar feelings and disturbing memories/sensory experiences. I told him it was like being on acid all the time and he said he imagined it was but probably a bad trip."

“Look at my little hippie, Maggie!” Abby screamed so loud I had to pull the smartphone away from my ear.

“Ha, I told him it wasn’t all bad. Pain is often mixed with pleasure and vice versa, but I tried to reassure him that I didn’t feel as much pain as I felt in 2012 or 2014 and that it’s been 4 years since I’ve been hospitalized. I asked if knowing all this made him feel differently about me.”

“And I’m sure he said no, because I’ve known you a long time and my opinion of you only improves. It doesn’t deteriorate,” Abby said. I almost cried from the level of support my first lover is showing me as I tell her about my first heterosexual lover. It’s so weird that I get jealous of the female attention my current partner Jose gets, but never jealous about anything Abby.

“He said I was always good natured and that hasn’t changed at all.”

“Aw, you see. You got nothing to be paranoid of,” Abby said.

ROSES ARE DEAD

PORTLAND, OR

2018

I'm at home in 45 Central in Beaverton, OR taking a Swagbucks survey online when my cell phone rings for the first time. I see that it's Unghe and I ignore it, preferring to finish the few questions I have left before getting a few cents as incentive. But, when a minute later Sheeche calls, I pick up. She's crying heavily and I can barely make out what she says.

"Maggie, Uma had a heart attack." Silence rings in my ears like tinnitus as I take this information in. *I'll have to go to the hospital*, I think wearily. I'm embarrassed by my response, but it had been completely unconscious. The next thing Sheeche tells me shatters my heart.

"She's dead." I can't believe it. Tears roll down my cheeks unabated. Uma and I have not always seen eye to eye. How was that even possible because of the few inches in height difference that we were? She'd tried to give me an exorcism when I was hallucinating, her faith always stronger than anyone else's in the family. But now I feel ashamed of the way I've treated her and seen her through the years of my illness. I had so many delusions about her, and I mistrusted her, but she was my one and only mother and now she was gone, not after a lengthy illness and reconciliation but suddenly and completely.

"What?" I cry out. "How can that be possible?"

"Maggie, she's dead. Uma is dead."

"When did you find out?"

"Woojin just called me. Unghe called him and now I'm calling you." I wonder if somehow the news got contorted in a ridiculously cruel telephone game from sibling to sibling,

but I know this can't be true because Unghe had just called me, and he never calls me. I'm always the bored one playing the game "Which Sibling Should I Call?"

"Unghe called me a minute ago, but I was busy, and I didn't think it was important. I didn't pick up. What happened?" The tears don't stop, not for me and not for her.

"Apa found Uma on the toilet. He opened the door because she'd been in there for like 2 hours. She died taking a shit, didn't even have the time to wipe. The paramedics say the strain of pooping often causes heart attacks, but she was dead by the time they arrived. Unghe wanted to see her, and they warned him not to, but he used his authority as a police officer to get access."

"She just turned 60 in November! Oh my God, I got to call Jose."

"Make your flights to San Jose. I'll see you in a little bit. Bye, Maggie."

"Bye, Sheehe." That had to be one of the shortest conversations I've had with Sheehe, but it was also the most painful. I had joined the 27 Club, I thought, the club where famous people die at the tender age of 27. Members include Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, and Amy Winehouse. Now, Maggie Kim, aged 27, without her mother will go among the living to only think of the dead. I call Jose at Intel, no doubt oblivious to my pain yet. He picks up on the second ring.

"Hey, Maggie. How's it going?" It's a relief to hear his voice, so cheerful at an unexpected dial.

"Um, Jose. I don't know how to say this," I cry into the receiver.

"Just say it."

"Roses are red. Violets are blue. My mother is dead, and I need you." I can't help sobbing now.

“What? Maggie, I’ll be there in 15 minutes. I’m so sorry. Hang on, I’m on my way.” He doesn’t bother saying goodbye because how can it be good when your girlfriend’s mother just passed away? He didn’t ask about any particulars. Those can come later after enveloping me in his arms and crying alongside me. The death of a parent is not something he’s experienced and hopefully won’t experience until he’s middle aged, and I myself have never lost a family member so close. Not knowing what to do, I call Unghe.

“How’s Apa?” I ask finally sympathetic to the pain of another family member.

“He and I are all right,” he says matter-of-factly. “I tried calling you. Why didn’t you pick up?”

“I didn’t think it was important, but Sheeche called me after you called Woojin and Woojin had called her. It’s kind of rare that two siblings call me within a minute apart.” This must be awkward, I think. Sheeche hasn’t talked to Unghe in about 5 years, for laying hands on her when they were in high school together. I wonder when she will stop talking to me should I get the guillotine or cold shoulder for some transgression she can never forgive for she is one to hold grudges. Time to let go.

“When are you coming to San Jose?” I’ve been avoiding going back home for a few years. Too many bad memories of physical pain and hallucinations, delusions about my family trying to kill or rape me, and of course forced hospitalizations and forced rapid tranquilization, when they’d inject me with medication at the house, ambulance, or hospital for agitation. But now, I have to be brave. I’ve been stable for a few years and starting to get restless recovering from a convalescence that at times had necessitated Jose to carry me from the couch to the toilet because inexplicably my limbs became paralyzed in the one bedroom apartment in Hillsboro,

OR. Paranoid schizophrenia was my main diagnosis, but this forayed into catatonic schizophrenia although my positions were less bizarre. I just couldn't walk.

"When's the funeral?" I ask. The tears never stop, and I pause to blow the snot dripping out of my nose.

"I'm not sure. We have to make arrangements. Is Jose with you?" Unghe asks nicely.

"No, he's on the way right now. I haven't told him anything yet besides Uma is dead."

"Good, you shouldn't be alone right now. You're a fighter Maggie. Never forget that."

"Okay, Unghe. I'll let you go and text you when we have the tickets." With that, I ended the call, which had been surprisingly civil, but we were after all grieving the same loss. Jose arrives 10 minutes later and immediately my crying intensifies.

"I'm so sorry Mags."

"Is this what it feels like to lose your mother?" I ask stupidly.

"I only know what my mother tells me. You never stop crying when you lose your mother especially so young. She was thirty when her mother died of bone cancer."

"How I wish I had three more years, but I treated her so badly when she was alive!"

"She's your mother and above all a Christian. I'm sure she forgave you. She just never understood your illness."

"No one in my family did. They just knew how to call 911."

"Why don't you take your medication early?" he asks. "The Klonopin should at least help you."

"We have to book our tickets. I'm not sure they're even flying out of PDX. Isn't the weather bad?"

“Yes, it was snowing pretty heavily, and the roads were a mess, but I got here as fast as I could. I should have left hours ago.”

“Thank you. Portland picked the wrong time to have a blizzard.”

“The sky is crying, just like you. Let’s leave tonight so we’re at the airport for a morning flight.”

We book an 8AM flight from PDX, Portland’s airport to San Jose, but all the time worrying about how we’ll get there with luggage and our beloved pug Lucy to boot. The snow has made the roads undrivable and calling Radio Taxi left us hanging because they weren’t driving in this weather.

By the time we decide to take the Blue Line train, it’s 10PM and the mile trek through the snowy streets takes a while. A good Samaritan passes by in a van, and we get a ride the last half a mile, crammed in with 3 people and paper bags of groceries. When the train finally arrives in the cold and snowy night, the doors close too quickly, and I hear Jose yell something. Not catching what he’s yelling, the train pulls out of the station.

“Stop!” he’s yelling. “Stop the train! Lucy! Oh my God, Lucy!”

The train doesn’t stop for another 100 yards and the doors open. Lucy’s been trapped outside the car and dragged for 100 yards, the leash finally breaking at the end. She’s a shivering mess along the tracks, but thankfully seems undamaged. Jose scoops her in his arms, muttering under his breath both concerned and irate at the reckless conductor.

“Oh, Lucy. Are you okay? Poor animal,” he says. I watch in disbelief. It seems like a scene from a movie. How can so many tragic things happen at once? When we get to downtown Portland, we realize that the train to PDX isn’t running anymore. Panicking, we hop on the only train leaving, one that will take us farther away. It’s 11:30PM and in the train car there seem to

only be homeless people sheltering from the storm, and one young lady on a methamphetamine binge picking at imaginary bugs on her face, muttering.

“Maggie, please tell me you don’t have cash on you,” Jose whispers.

“I’ve got \$200 in my purse,” I whisper back.

“What are we going to do?” he asks as we’re pulling up to the next empty station.

I see past the highway stop the cheerful lights of a Comfort Inn and I say, “Let’s go to the Comfort Inn. Maybe there’s an airport shuttle to the airport. Get out!”

We walk up the snow-covered steps along the Interstate 84 to Interstate 205, and finally it seems our luck has turned for a taxi is crossing the highway at this moment, and we frantically flag it down.

“Where to?”

“The airport please!” we say in unison. I can’t believe our luck. The trip is only 10 minutes, and the fare is \$40. We leave a tip double that amount to show our gratitude. By the time we get past security and to the gate, it’s 1:00AM and we can only sleep for five hours. Meanwhile, Lucy must stay in her carrier bag since her collar became useless the moment it broke off. Jose curses himself for not putting her in the bag at the station, but how were we supposed to know the conductor would be so careless? She barely acknowledged her mistake when apologizing and asking if Lucy was okay.

I had to admit that Lucy and I were similar, both suffering from uncontrollable PTSD. She’d had a rough time at Caltech, being tied to the kitchen sink every night, waking up and peeing and shitting inside then pooping three times in one walk around the block. I used many paper towels and Pine Sol to clean the soiled linoleum floor. Her only joy came from observing the wall where cockroaches emerged from the cracks and scattered at her curious sniffs and licks.

But I got very angry at Jose the one time he called me “Poor animal” thinking it derogatory and condescending. Yes, I can have a temper, too, but right now I’m just grateful not to be alone with my thoughts.

BEREFT

SAN JOSE, CA

2018

At the funeral, Sheehe wanted to give a eulogy, but everyone thought that was a bad idea because she hated and debased my mother while alive and was just chomping at the reins to roast her on her new shallow grave. Unghe and Woojin felt they couldn't do a good job so everyone including Apa turned to me as the family representative. My mom would have a Catholic burial because they had plots for Koreans in the graveyard and I was sure she wouldn't have turned in the grave if she realized the pain we had to go through to make her final arrangements.

Many people came from her hospital where she worked, the church she was an active member in, friends both old and young, as well as immediate family attended the memorial. This was before Covid-19 would overrun funeral parlors and halt the ceremonial burials because of the risk of transmission during this last rite of passage into the underworld so the parlor was brimming with men and women in black. Sheehe had brought a dress for me to wear, but I took one look at the frumpy, ruffled, shapeless black shift and decided to wear a dress she'd given me at another less contentious time worn over a dark navy-blue laced long sleeve shirt. You'd have to look closely to tell I wasn't wearing all black.

I did put on the fashionable headpiece she gave me, and Sheehe kept posing for photos in her sexy little black dress while flitting from group to group with her outrageous highly inappropriate laughter. Years later, Unghe's wife Alicia and Woojin would still be complaining about the behavior of the one stand-up comedian in our family to "make it": Sheehe Kim.

I took one last photo of my mom, wearing an unbecomingly pale pink lipstick, downy grey hair spread on the pillow, and thought this is not what she would have picked to wear one

last time, especially that shade of pink. So, it was final. I thought like always that there was still a slight possibility that she was alive, elsewhere, and that she'd supplicated for a wax statue in her fake death for the cameras. Apa told me when I went to touch her that her skin wouldn't feel real, and the hand I touched was cold and waxen, devoid of color besides the blue veins still visible behind thin skin. Yes, as a paranoid schizophrenic, I'd learned grandiose delusions are the norm, and that one can think that cameras follow one around the world capturing every awkward but genuine moment to broadcast to the hungry masses.

The reason for this particular delusion had its backing in one hospital stay at Las Encinas in Pasadena, CA. I'd had to sign a ream of hospital papers in that hospital chosen by the Hollywood elite for drug rehab, and I thought I was signing the filming rights away. It didn't help that Sheeche was in town having made it to the Top Ten of Last Comic Standing on NBC in 2014. I'd suffered many delusions, but one persistent one was that she was only on TV not by her talent, but by buying the rights to have a reality show about her littlest sister, way more popular and talented than her for sure filmed and edited by the Hollywood elite, a story that had its basis in the sordid reality of an attractive but misunderstood schizophrenic who had a way of winning hearts and minds with her quick humor and sharp wit.

Alas, my mother really was dead, and I was a dead ringer for my mom. Sheeche had stolen the family albums back in 2020 and regularly scanned photos into her social media Instagram and Twitter and Facebook accounts of my parents in their youth. One photo of her giving a prayer or sermon, could have been of me. Our faces, painfully, were so similar in youth that sometimes I can't look in the mirror without seeing my dead mother and weeping for her early demise. I'd told my dad that my sister would eventually lose her looks and her Twitter following

which stands close to 100,000, when that happened and my dad, so sweetly, replied, “Your mother was beautiful until the day she died so don’t be so sure.”

The worst part came when everyone was giving their condolences after the ceremony. Us, immediate family members, lined up in a semicircle near the open casket. I’d drawn cursorily her picture on her wedding day, which lived into infamy because on it, she was the only woman and the most beautiful at that, surrounded by UBF men in brown or grey suits, on the arm of my proud dad. Perhaps because she was to become a Korean Missionary or that she was Christian, I never glimpsed her in the traditional Korean dress for her wedding, the Hanbok, which I’d seen worn by my female cousin in LA Mina, and the woman my male cousin Jay married, Ana. There were bowls of mints around the parlor, and I’d wondered why up until everyone came up to us, maskless, stinking of halitosis, and kissed our tearful cheeks, spewing their germs into our grimaces and saying, “I’m sorry for your loss. Your mother was such a wonderful person. She’ll be missed dearly.” I’d read afterwards that crying can make your breath smell worse, but I wished they’d eaten a mint first because there was only one person with a dry eye in the whole funeral parlor and it was the disgustingly impersonable Korean UBF minister Jakob Lee. He paused to pretend to shed tears, but wooden as he was, he shed none having to shield his eyes from the embarrassment of not genuinely grieving like the rest of us.

My mother’s executor, Mr. Han, was also an embarrassment to his profession and status as my mother’s good friend having made his money from my mom’s Primerica connections. He told us heirs that we’d have to withdraw her annuity in cash and then reinvest it into our own IRAs, but because we chose to follow his advice we had to pay income taxes on our paltry \$9,100 inheritance. The whole meeting, he kept telling Jose and me a story about how my mom was in his minivan one day and asked for him to head to the nearest fast food restaurant. She

didn't make it and shat her pants from diarrhea, a harbinger of the way she died, but who tells this story while executing her last will and testament? He handed me an old envelope addressed to me in my mother's handwriting.

"Maggie, your mother told me that in the event of her death, I should give you this letter and that you should read it privately, then burn it without letting anyone else lay eyes on it. Apparently, it was very important and only to be given to you in the event of her death."

I locked eyes with Jose and thanked Mr. Han for his help, preferring to wait until we got back to Portland to open and read it in the safety of our long distance from San Jose.

The evening we got back, Jose asked, "So, you going to wait to open it?" and I felt the nausea of curiosity and dread as to what my mother could have written me from beyond the grave.

"Will you leave me for a moment? Mr. Han said I shouldn't let anyone else read it."

"Aw, come on, you gonna leave your fiancé out in the cold?"

"My what?"

"Aw, come on Maggie, you're an open book. I could tell from your mother that you'd wanted to get engaged with three princess cut diamonds since you were a little girl. Here," he took out his backpack, decades-old jewelry catalogues leafed through, and pulled the one with a circled ring in blue pen and yellow highlighter. "I haven't bought the ring yet, but, Maggie Kim, will you make me the happiest man in the world, and marry me?" He even held my hand as he got down on one knee.

My jaw fell open and I couldn't believe I'd lose a mother and gain a future husband in the span of a week. "She gave you that?"

“Yes, the last time we went to visit her. I’m sorry I was so late to the game. It’s still taken me years to get past the whole broke graduate student phase and provide for you, but I’ve been at Intel long enough to know that this is the right thing to do. I know it’s not arranged marriage like all those Indian American men get, and UBF members, but what do you say?”

“Yes,” I blurted out. “Fucking yes, Jose. I didn’t want to get married in UBF, but I think I’m finally getting the taste of freedom from the cult, and I love you.”

“I love you, too. Now let’s read the letter,” he blurted out. I stared at him and he gave me a sheepish look. “What? You’re going to wait until we’re married to tell me the family secrets?”

My hand wavered for a moment. “What if you take back your proposal?”

“You think anything from your past will change my loving you? Then you don’t know your future husband.”

“Okay.” I sat on the edge of the unmade queen bed, having to hop a little to get on it due to my short legs. “Come.”

I slid my index finger under the lip of the envelope, careful not to get paper cuts and opened it. I pulled out one sheet of paper tinged brown from age and unfold its trifold. The letter itself was brief, but in my mother’s unmistakable handwriting. I’d learned in middle school how to forge my mother’s signature because we had to get our parent’s signature for spelling tests even if we got 100s, which I nearly always did. I’d sign her name for tens of tests on the way to school, copied from the sparse checks she had around the house. We read in unison, Jose seated close enough that his body heat warmed my cold side. Our ecstasy over our impromptu engagement soon left the room.

Dear Margaret,

I love you dearly. I know your childhood was not the best. I'm writing to you after your last hospitalization here in San Jose. Your illness was as God intended, but as a mother it's been hard to witness. I believed you were possessed by the Devil and my exorcisms haven't been the least bit effective, but I continue to pray you find relief and solace in God, for he who gives can also take away.

I want to tell you the reason your father and I moved to San Jose from River Grove, IL. I wanted you to start high school anew away from your past, which for some reason you don't remember. I walked in on Shepherd Robert Abbott and you having sex when you were 11. I should have listened to Sheehe when she found him washing you in the sink. Unfortunately, I let him stay in our basement and the abuse progressed from there. I couldn't tell you while I was alive, but if you are reading this, then I am reunited with our heavenly Father.

When I heard you got raped at Caltech, I didn't want to believe it. These demons have chased you even into college. I regret being so hardheaded with your first consensual lover Abby, but I cannot reconcile it with my Christian faith. I'm sad you've lost your religion, and pray you'll find God and a good man to marry. Please don't tell anyone of my failure as a mother to protect you. I didn't believe Sheehe, but now I believe you. As a sufferer of child abuse, you're vulnerable to future abuse. I pray you won't be preyed upon again, and that this did not cause your schizophrenia, but alas God has good plans for you, and you will make it through other trials to prove to be a daughter of God and Jesus Christ.

I never told your father, and I hope you can keep this a secret from the family.

Can you ever forgive me?

Love,

Uma

P.S. – Please burn this letter after reading.

My grief turned sour. “How could she keep this from me? How could she not prosecute my rapist? How could she still stay in UBF after her daughter was abused?”

“Maggie, your mother herself was delusional. The fact that she turned to exorcism instead of psychiatry is a sign that she thought your problem was spiritual not medical.”

“I know. She cared more about that God damn church than me! Why don’t I remember this?”

“It’s your brain’s way of protecting you. Many abuse victims, especially young, can’t remember their abuse. The mind shuts it out. It came out after you smoked weed.”

“So now I think everyone raped me, and I can’t know for sure. Was it just Rob Abbott or were there others? What about my brother Unghe?”

“I don’t think Unghe raped you.”

“But you can’t be sure.”

“No, I can’t, but he’s still your brother.”

“My mom may have protected him, too.”

“The letter says nothing about Unghe.”

“That’s because he was always my mom’s favorite.”

“Maggie, there’s some things you’ll never know, but at least from what your mom is saying, there’s a reason you hallucinate, especially sexual violence.”

“Why’d she not want me to tell Apa or anyone in the family?”

“She’s protecting herself and you. You shouldn’t tell anyone.”

“Why? This is huge news.”

“Maggie, this society doesn’t treat rape victims well and with your history, no one will believe you. You’ll never get anything out of it including justice. We better burn this letter.”

“I hope my mother burns in Hell, but I don’t believe she’s there or with her Heavenly Father. She’s just worm food now.”

We moved to the kitchen stove and watched as the flames enveloped this blasphemous letter. I didn’t cry since it confirmed what I had already suspected, and in a way, this letter had brought closure to the curious relationship I had with my mother, who despite her best efforts couldn’t protect my innocence. I was bereft, but now I knew part of the truth. She’d let a rapist live in the basement of our house for years, believing he was a God believing man and not an opportunistic pedophile who’d groomed me from little girl to young woman. Now, Unghe, who also lived in the same basement, came under my suspicion, but having no direct evidence of that besides hearsay, I’d have to let it go for now.

“Did I transfer the guilt of abuse from abuser to brother? Or did they both abuse me?”

“Maggie, you’ll probably never know. Let’s just try to forget this. Why don’t we watch a movie? Want to see *Bohemian Rhapsody*? It’s still playing in theaters.”

“I guess. Distractions for Schizophrenia seem to work pretty well.”

“You mean the app where you discovered the internet at BrainHack 2018?” BrainHack was a neuroscience hacking event we attended in Eugene, OR. I’d designed an app that played cat videos and links to dog videos as well as several personal essays about coping mechanisms for hallucinations and delusions based on my real-world experience.

“That’s the one. It’s my job to take care of you now that your mother’s gone. I promised her to look after you, and like I promised you, I’ll never put you in the hospital, so let’s go to the movies.”

“Thanks, Jose.”

INCONCEIVABLE

EL PASO, TX

2020

I never know what to get people for Christmas. At Caltech, my freshman year, I bought all my presents at the bookstore on campus. I bought mugs and t-shirts, a muscle tee for Unghe because he liked to wear such ridiculous things. I wrapped all my presents in newspaper and not gift wrap writing “Ghetto Wrap” in silver Sharpie in diagonal lines.

I decided not to go home for Christmas this year, but I wanted to get Woojin and Unghe DNA kits from 23 and Me, a genetic testing company. I also wanted to get my father one, but already knew he wouldn’t take one. I wanted to know if Woojin and Unghe were actually my brothers as I’d had numerous delusions about the two of them and since they’d still have the same Y chromosome from my dad, I’d know if they were in fact my full brothers or not.

I, myself, had done the Health and Ancestry kit from 23 and Me years before being suspicious that I had a defective acetaldehyde dehydrogenase 2 (ALDH2) gene causing me to have the Asian glow or flush when I drank alcohol. Those with both copies missing got violently sick from just a sip and would vomit, therefore preventing them from continuing to drink and this missing copy was more common in those of Asian ancestry. Those with 1 copy of the gene could drink but could not process the acetaldehyde that is a metabolite of ethanol, which builds up in their body, expressed through red flushing of the face and the upper body. This extremely toxic substance is a known carcinogen and consequently many people with just one copy will end up getting esophageal or throat cancer from drinking alcohol repeatedly. Acetaldehyde breaks down to harmless acetic acid or vinegar with the ALDH2 genes, defective ones of which are cancer’s culprit.

Unfortunately for me, 23 and Me couldn't sequence all of the genes from my saliva sample, so I still don't know if I have a defective copy or why sometimes I turn red from alcohol, but not always. I should demand them to sequence my brother's DNA kit, but indigent me had opted for just the traits and ancestry for my brothers not aware they wouldn't sequence for the alcohol flush gene. Oh well, live and learn, or so I told myself.

Woojin took months to take the test mainly because he was lazy and didn't want to go to the post office. He genuinely was happy with the present, but Unghe is another story. He said he wouldn't take it, and when asked why he said, "That's how they catch serial killers."

He told me a story of some niece getting her DNA kit and the uncle being arrested for murders. He was just being skeptical as a cop, but I had to wonder, "Who did he murder? What's he got to hide?" I tried to get him to send Apa the test, but he said he'd have a hard time finding the test in his house.

Ugh, why do I even bother still talking to Unghe? I wondered.

After months of waiting, Woojin's test results came in and they were utterly unspectacular. We're 100% siblings, sharing almost 50% of our genes and it's likely that my dad is my biological father.

I know, I know, I know. Why would I even doubt the paternity of my dad? It wasn't from watching *The Maury Povich Show*, a staple of my TV diet in the late 90s and 2000s. I always wanted to take Apa there to see if Maury would yell, "You are the father!"

No, Sheeche told me that Apa had a vasectomy before I was conceived. She thought it apt to tell me one Christmas that the operation had failed and that I was conceived shortly afterwards explaining the fact that Woojin and I are only about one year and 4 months apart. The way the

story goes, my parents went to the doctor after my mom got pregnant for the last time, and he apologized and gave them \$1,000.

My mom eventually gave birth to me, everyone interested in looking at my newborn self to see if I looked like my dad. Bald when born, I was in fact the spitting image of Apa. My mom got her tubes tied right after my birth and my dad had a sperm count done and it appeared as though his vasectomy was botched. My sister has another theory, but it's as paranoid as *quis est meus*. She thinks my dad didn't jerk off enough after the vasectomy so there were still live sperm, but my conception happened some weeks or months after it so it shouldn't have mattered. Don't give credence to false claims.

At any rate, my conception was not immaculate like that of the Virgin Mary, but my chances were pretty inconceivable given that the failure rate of vasectomy is between one to two per 1,000 men. Not many times did I feel proud that Uma was Republican, but boy, am I happy she was pro-life. Her pregnancy with Woojin had been tumultuous as he kicked a lot, and like she says, "I only wanted to have three children, but God gave me four!"

I'll be spending another Christmas in El Paso, away from bustling airports, upright seats, and screaming babies. I love El Paso. It's a quiet but big enough town that you will want for nothing more, and Jose has a lot of family here and holidays are full of fresh tamales, homemade mac and cheese, turkey, Dos Equis, and Red Label Johnny Walker. I do have to learn a lot of Spanish now that we're a 15 minute drive away from his mom who doesn't speak much English. After years of working a sinecure at Intel Corp. he decided to apply to be a Professor of Physics at his alma mater The University of Texas at El Paso. When I announced to his whole family on the last visit that we were going to move to El Paso I started with "Nosotros tenemos buenas

noticias.” Everyone thought that I was pregnant, but they became elated at the news that we wouldn’t be half a country away anymore. I really feel like an adult Korean American adopted into a Mexican family.

My mom now dead and forever gone is the really inconceivable thing. What I wouldn’t give to have her back.

MONOPOLY

EL PASO, TX

2021

Waiting for the air conditioning to go off to offer myself complete silence in the house, I look at a blank Word document on my laptop, cursor blinking, having changed the font to Times New Roman, selected No Spacing and set the font to 12. Finally, after 3 minutes, the A/C shuts off. I press my ear to my pillow using it like an old school rabbit eared TV antenna, trying to pick up my own telepathic signal. After adjusting the position of my ear squashed into the white noise provided by my baby blue, floral printed pillowcase, I hear my oldest brother's voice, Unghe. This class assignment came from Professor Daniel Chacón's Physics and the Occult class and you're supposed to listen to silence until you hear a voice.

"I want to have sex with her, but she's doing a class assignment right now." The voices usually comment on what I happen to be doing at the time.

"I'm not hypnotizing her right now."

A second voice chimes in, "So, you admit that you hypnotize her to go to bed?" He had an accomplice more versed in hypnosis than I liked. This deep-throated chant would make my eyes slits and my mouth yawn throughout the afternoon, too often than I'd like to admit. It'd always say the same thing on loop, "You are getting very sleepy." I'd wish I could fight it, but there was only one cure that I'd learned the hard way, to give in and masturbate while someone or multiple people had their way with me in bed. Sometimes it was boys or men, and sometimes girls or women. Without the masturbation, there'd be no arousal and what would predominate would be the pain of tactile hallucinations. Olfactory and gustatory would sometimes involve

themselves too making a panoply of unconscious erotic sensations I should curtail before going down that road yet again.

“I don’t want the whole world to know I had sex with my baby sister.” Huh, Unghe always admits to the crime in my head, but I’ve never had the balls to ask him in real life why or how he did it because honestly the truth came out after my mother’s death. I just know I can’t shake the paranoia and sometimes I even hear courtroom drama a la Me Too movement and a confession waiting on for a lifetime, a lifetime full of abuse.

One of my female MFA in Bilingual Creative Writing classmates says, “I can hear her older brother talking.” At first wanting to become a schizophrenic consultant, I succeeded in getting into the UTEP Biosciences PhD program to only have panic attacks about 9AM classes and cutting off mouse heads, transitioned to a Psychology PhD by taking undergraduate leveling-up courses, then only applied to the MFA in Bilingual Creative Writing because I couldn’t stand school for five years and I wanted to finish my autobiographical superhero/schizophrenic screenplay Yoga Maggie.

Another voice, male, says, “She’s writing everything she’s hearing right now.” This assignment of listening to silence in order to write is way too easy for a paranoid schizophrenic. Voices tend to appear when there’s no distraction, no outside noise besides the white static in the pillowcase, but just now, the air conditioner turns on again, and the typing of this exchange means I miss crucial information in the conversation of which I’m only an observer.

“I can’t say anything without her hearing it,” Unghe complains.

The analytical first male voice says, “And writing it down?”

“And writing it down,” Unghe says. After a brief pause and squirming, “I’m in love with my sister.” Ew, gross, I think. Exactly what I fear.

The psychoanalyst asks, “How can you be in love with your sister?”

“I’m in love with having sex with her,” Unghe says, as if he’s the one hypnotized. Then, realizing he may have made a mistake in revelation, he backtracks. “No, I’m not in love with my baby sister Maggie. That’s not what I said. Our other sister Sheeche put those words in my mouth.”

Now it’s my turn to respond with conviction, “Uma knew the whole time.”

“She’s bringing my dead mother into this. She thinks I killed Uma because she had the video tape of us having sex,” Unghe says, burying the axe far deeper than he meant to, but this is a safe space, not a deposition and he never pleads the fifth even if he pleads for forgiveness, love, or understanding during these psychoanalytic pillow sessions I’m accustomed to far too often every week.

My classmates say, “He was sick enough to make a video tape?” The infamous tape had reached the status of the holy grail or a nail in the coffin because I knew that if this tape existed it offered definitive proof that the sexual abuse happened, justifying the queasiness I feel every time I encounter someone who vaguely looks like my brother or when I look at photographs of us over the years all catalogued seemingly innocently on Facebook for all our family and acquaintances to see.

“He’s a police officer though and he’ll never be charged,” I say in my head. Fatalistic, though it may be, I can’t think of any police officer ever being accused and especially not convicted of rape even with a preponderance of evidence stacked against these serial rapists. Because that’s what they do. They became police officers not to serve and protect the community but to protect themselves and their own bottom line. I cynically wonder how many felons who were never caught became the tried and true, the corrupt blue. The blue uniform just allowed

them to do what they've always known and always felt like doing, prey on the innocent, the young, the nubile, the naïve, and yet they remain one of the trustiest professions out there.

“How many women get raped in San Jose?” I'd asked Unghe once.

“Nobody.”

“What do you mean nobody?”

“Look Maggie, no one gets raped. That's just something a woman says when her husband catches her cheating on him.”

Silence. *How can he expect me to even believe such a thing?*

But it's like the military. Once, I'd been asking how people ended up in John George Psychiatric Hospital in Alameda County, CA, the mental hospital I transferred to from a local ER with no psychiatric ward. One soldier said he entered the army because then he would have a license to kill. I couldn't help but think that something similar may have crossed my brother's mind, and I was deathly afraid of him, such that even when relatively sane I made sure our paths didn't cross when I visited my dad and my other brother Woojin in San Jose. Marcos, the soldier, said he tried to commit suicide after coming back from Afghanistan by inhaling helium, but he made the mistake of uttering his supposedly last words aloud in the funny high-pitched voice that accompanies helium inhalation, and he couldn't stop laughing. That turned out to be a failed suicide attempt and he sought help, but like me, we weren't laughing at the time being treating like chattel in a dungeon where boredom reigned, and misery brewed.

I could honestly relate. I'd never tried to commit suicide before, but I've definitely felt suicidal ideation and been depressed enough to want to die. Once at Caltech, I'd jumped off the diving board and sank to the bottom of the pool. There I opened my eyes, sitting under nine or

ten feet of water, saw the light twinkling above me on the surface, and started to inhale through one nostril. I could feel the water enter my nose and start to drown me, but I thought, if I continue to do this, I will die. And at that critical moment, I chose life and kicked off the bottom to reemerge into the breathable world renewed by my close brush with death.

My ear lifted off the pillow unconsciously as these last thoughts circulated around my receptive brain. Free writing was easy, but this session had turned evil despite my best efforts to start off on neutral ground. Staring at my computer, I reread all the quotes and the inkling of a chapter began to shape in my mind. *Unghe won at Monopoly again, I think. He got the Get Out of Jail Free card. Now he's never going to pay.* I wanted so badly to make him hurt, for him to have repercussions because of what he'd done to me, the way he psychiatrically maimed me and left me vulnerable to hallucinations and delusions that still plague me to this day.

DR. KATE
EL PASO, TX

2022

I've a penchant for boredom on airplane rides. The lack of internet and the disinterest in watching TV/movies on board leads me to strike up conversations with whatever passengers happen to sit next to me on an airplane, quite literally a captive audience. Sometimes, I'm racist about it. I'll go up to someone who looks Hispanic and speak to them in Spanish, without even asking if they speak Spanish. Jose pointed this out to me once, and now at least I ask, "Se habla Español?" Another time, I kept saying pun after pun, writing them in my phone and likely annoying the shit out of the two gentlemen flanking me. Eventually they pretended to sleep. Another time, I gave a diagnosis of ADHD to a poor teenager who couldn't help fidgeting as he showed me his quite mediocre artwork and told me he couldn't pay attention to any movie all the way through.

Yes, I am probably the last person anyone wants to sit next to. But sometimes fate peeks her pretty face around the corner and sends to me someone who not only gets me, but also needs me. Such was this time, when a slightly older blonde woman whose beauty had just begun to fade into miniscule crow's feet and wrinkles took her window seat beside me causing me to stand up and move into the aisle. I'm not one for small talk, but I wasn't ready for the big talk that would come in between a couple bathroom trips to the pungent toilet on board. Luckily, I was in the aisle seat as I'm prone to pee up to four times a flight.

A nurse with a doctorate in nursing education, she was travelling to give talks around the country whenever she wasn't directing the hospital. Her name was Dr. Kate, and she was about to meet her fate, the destiny that comes when you open up honestly to a complete stranger

aboard, yes, another American Airlines flight. Why is it that American Airlines is always the cheapest option to fly from most cities? At least, this time it was direct, and I got straight into the heart of the matter because I'd been yearning to connect.

At the time, I'd just spent over a week with my dad, his new Polish American wife Joanna, and Woojin buying them all Elton John concert tickets. I'd talked to Apa about Unghe, but he kept changing the subject and dodging my questions. I couldn't get a straight answer out of him, and I left confused and defeated, going back to El Paso without having the heart to heart I'd imagined before the trip. Joanna had practically force fed me meal after meal showing her affection with fresh home cooked meals like smoked salmon or meatballs. Apa didn't like to talk on the phone, and he was getting along in years. I resigned that the subject of Unghe would remain unsolved, forever seething in my inner psyche and causing physical, emotional, and psychological pain from a memory either incomplete, false, or post traumatic. Did I have amnesia for all those years? Were the memories real but suppressed until I went psychotic?

I'm not sure how I was phrasing my inquiries of Dr. Kate, but I had mentioned that I was interested in advocating for mental health and disclosed my main diagnoses at that point: paranoid schizophrenia, complex PTSD, insomnia, and anxiety. I figured as a nurse she would know.

"You're in an excellent position at this time," she said. "Mental health is finally coming to the forefront of medicine and society."

I found out among other things that Dr. Kate had a textbook published, but when I asked if she was happy with it, she replied, "No, I should have gone with a different publisher. They only give four percent out of each book sale."

“That doesn’t bode well for me,” I said aloud. “I’d like to publish too, but every contest I enter I don’t even place and I just keep paying entry fees.”

“You don’t have to enter contests. You can just submit a compelling chapter of your novel to publishers on their website, but they take several months to get back to you. The book doesn’t even need to be finished and submissions are generally free.”

“I’d never change my last name,” I said. “I think as an author you need to keep your maiden name. Margaret Kim, author. I like the sound of that.”

“So, what kind of book are you writing?” she asked.

“It’s a coming-of-age story, but mainly deals with the healing of trauma after the fact and also without knowing if it is in fact a fact.”

“You know, I was molested by my pediatrician growing up. He molested all six kids in my family,” she said, dropping the bombshell I’d both been wishing for and not wishing for. Sizing her up just at first glance, I’d suspected that she had at some point been a rape victim and I’d been fishing for a confession semi-consciously from the beginning. I didn’t want to be wrong, so I had not confessed to her first. I felt guilty and slightly relieved. It wasn’t my first time talking to another rape victim. It wasn’t even the first time talking to a stranger about childhood sexual abuse. When you open yourself up, you’d be surprised by how common these occurrences really are and it’s usually by someone trusted.

“So he molested boys and girls?” I asked.

“Yes, he didn’t discriminate,” she replied.

“I was raped by my oldest brother,” I almost whispered hoping that the passengers nearby didn’t eavesdrop on our conspiratorial conversation.

“Yes, family members are shit,” she said. “I told my mom, and she didn’t do anything about it. She didn’t even change doctors. I needed protection, and she didn’t provide that.”

“What about your dad?”

“He wanted to shoot the bastard,” she said. “You know, I recently found out that he died, and I felt guilty for feeling happy after his death.”

“You should feel happy. He fucking deserved to die.”

“Yes, but I shouldn’t feel happy because he died.”

“But he ruined your life, didn’t he?” I will never understand white people, I think. Some of them feel guilty for no good reason at all. She must be a snowflake.

“Yes, I’m married now with a couple of kids, but it took me a long time to recover. I couldn’t be touched for a while. I even slapped an early boyfriend for putting his arm around me. And even to this day, I don’t do things I used to do like put on scented lotion.” This comment brought back memories. I remembered showering and shaving my legs with Skintimate, a brand of girl’s shaving lotion, then slathering on cucumber melon Bath and Body Works lotion all over my legs, arms, back and torso. Why had I stopped? I couldn’t remember, but maybe it was like she said, more for the predator than the prey. I remember Unghe giving Sheehe and me a Christmas present of Victoria’s Secret body lotion and thinking, *Isn’t this an odd gift for your sisters?* At least it wasn’t a bra.

“There are so many gaps in my memory,” I replied. “I’m not sure I can trust them. Did you always remember the abuse? Me, I feel unsure.”

“Yes, unfortunately I knew from the beginning.”

“I guess I had about six years gap between the abuse and remembering it. It took the psychotic break. The first voice I heard told me, ‘I’m going to rape you.’ I read an article saying

that those raped before the age of sixteen are six times more likely to hear voices and see things. I have my oldest brother to thank for my psychosis.”

“And the memories aren’t going to stop. I wish I could say they would, but they will always be there.”

“I know that some of the memories may be real and some false or inflated,” I say. “I feel like I remember more each day, but it’s just my brain gone haywire. By the time I die, I’ll have thousands,” Tears streamed down my face at my cursed fate.

“You know we nurses say pain is the fifth vital sign.”

“I’ve felt so much pain in my body, but none of the nurses believed me in the hospital. I’d be getting stabbed repeatedly and they thought it was all in my head.”

“That’s horrible. I would have believed you. There are four vital signs we measure,” she said as she counted on her fingers. “Heart rate, blood pressure, temperature and respiratory rate. If one is off, another will compensate. For example, if your blood pressure is low, your heart rate will speed up. Pain is the fifth vital sign. So, in the healing process, what’s compensating to keep you afloat?”

“I’d say nothing was compensating for my pain. I’d be screaming for hours, and the nurse would just give me sodium naproxen, which seemed only to make the pain worse, not better.”

“We have five rights of safely administering medication,” Dr. Kate said again lifting a finger for each one. “In no particular order: right patient, right time, right medication, right route, and right dosage.”

“I’d say I had no patient rights in my involuntary hospitalization.”

“For the order for medication, we’re given a range. Mild, moderate, and severe,” she

continued. “There’s a different medication for each pain range. Mild 1-3 Advil, 4-6 two Tylenol, 7-10 Morphine or Tordol.”

“God, I wish you’d been my nurse. I was happy only when they’d knock me out for being agitated not the pain. I’d be out for sixteen hours straight, afraid of what they were doing to me at the time. I’ve been afraid of rape ever since my first psychotic break, but what I realize is I’ve been raped for most of my life starting at four or five with molestation and blow jobs, losing my virginity at nine, continuing till thirteen or fourteen, then flashbacks and hallucinations since nineteen.”

“It’s hard to go through trauma unscathed,” Dr. Kate said. “The beauty of going through the trauma are the battle scars.” I’m not quite sure I understood but it sounded pithy, so I replied with a nod.

“They’re not immediately recognizable, are they?” I asked. “Like they say mental illness and trauma, they’re invisible illnesses.”

“But that doesn’t make them less painful or impactful,” she said. “You know, my mother had schizophrenia. I think that’s why she and I couldn’t relate.”

“How come you didn’t mention that before?” I asked.

“I guess I didn’t think it was relevant at the time and I didn’t want to minimize your revelation.”

“Do you want to read part of my novel?” I asked.

“Sure, just a page,” she replied. I pulled out my laptop and opened my Word document to “Better Than Pamprin.” I watched as she read, careful to scroll down when I thought she finished enough to warrant it. “So, what do you think?”

“That was hard, but I think I needed it. The first time I saw a dick was my pediatrician. I think you can do a lot of good, Margaret.”

“Please, call me Maggie.”

The drink cart came by, and I moved to put my laptop away and take out a Korean red bean bun from my bag. My father had given me four buns and I’d already given one away.

“Dr. Kate, you want a red bean bun?”

“No, it’s okay.” I got a Diet Coke, and she asked for sparkling water, was given Ginger Ale by mistake, then asked for the Aha! and finally got her sparkling water.

“You know, I saw growing up that commercial everywhere,” she said referring to the tootsie pop my brother compared his dick to. “Do you remember the song that went along with it? ‘How many licks does it take to get to the center of a tootsie pop?’”

“Yes, I forgot, but I remember now. Three.”

“How come you sucked your brother’s dick?” The question came from left field and took me aback. I took bites out of my red bean bun as I contemplated how to answer.

“I don’t know. I was so small, and he was so big. I’d also seen him beat up my older brother and sister. I was afraid he’d beat me up to if I didn’t.”

“But is fear the only reason you complied? I ask because of familial hierarchy which I think is important in Asian American families.” I’d told her that I was Korean American right from the get-go because I knew in this day and age, whenever I met a white person, the question that most burned in their head was “Where are you from?” and “Chicago” was never a satisfactory answer. They’d ask, “No, where are you really from?” or “Where are your parents from?” or my favorite “What is your nationality?” when they really meant “What is your

ethnicity?” So, I ignored the racist commentary but am bothered that this feels a little like victim blaming. I wondered how she would feel if I turned the situation around on her.

“I didn’t say yes at first, and I think he had started washing me in the sink when I was really little with soap stroking my clitoris. I guess maybe there was a desire to please that may have played into it. You know that brother is now a cop, and I’m sure he’s gone on to rape other women or girls, almost positive about it.”

“That’s disgusting. I saw an online poll once that said firefighters are the most trusted profession. After that, it’s police officers. Next, teachers, and finally nurses. Doctors don’t make the list.”

“I think I’m past the worst part if I think about it. I’m post climax. I’m healing, but there are phrases I’m not sure I want to include like this one,” I pulled out my phone to show her. *He may not have been a good brother, but he was a good lover.* “I had my first vaginal orgasms with him. I remember my small torso sitting up every time he thrust while he stood, and I lay down upon his plywood bottomed bed.”

“I know it’s hard for you to write but think of all the good you will do if other incest victims see that.”

“The subject is so taboo and I’m still not sure it completely happened. I think there’s a part of me that would be destroyed if it were 100% certain, but I think he became a police officer to protect himself, not his country or community. Diplomatic immunity, almost. Have you been to therapy?”

“Yes, and it’s helped me a lot. It’s important to assess whether a treatment is right for you.”

“I’ve never found a therapist who has helped, but again I’m afraid I’ll be dismissed

because I don't have any hard facts. Like, what if I call the sexual abuse hotline?"

"Well, what's the best possible outcome of that call and what's the worst?"

"I guess, validation and support, but maybe they won't believe me and would yell at me for wasting their time."

"That would be bad. What's helped in the past?"

"I find talking and writing about it easier. I can talk to my brother Woojin and my sister Sheehe and it's partly because they remember Unghe asking for blow jobs that I tend to believe it happened, maybe not just the way I hallucinate or remember it happening. My brain is healing and it's still trying to protect itself. My ego's bruised and my sense of self is in jeopardy, but I still think I have it better than other rape victims. At the very least, it wasn't forcible." My voice wavered and fresh tears sprang up.

"Yes, but we both were abused by people we trusted, that our parents trusted, that our communities trusted, and once that trust is shattered it's hard to build back."

"You know, I commend you on your bravery. One of my friends couldn't make it past the first sentence of that chapter I showed you."

"I think your writing is more important than you know yet. It's a journey of healing for you, but it'll be a journey of healing for hopefully millions of other young women, girls, boys, and men. Thank you for sharing your journey with me. Someone once told me, 'When you heal, you get to deal. Then it's a privilege to deal with this giant weight of hurt. You're starting where people want to end.' You should confront your brother. I wish I'd confronted my pediatrician before he died. He should know what you know or at least suspect."

"I have to think about it, but I don't want to have any regrets. I don't know when I'll know I've reached the end and I've only been writing when I feel like it, but I have deadlines to

meet and I'm not sure I can meet them."

"Then force yourself to write more often. Think what are the must have big rocks? Then what are the pebbles and sand that fill in? Be sure to include lighthearted material as well. This is a heavy subject."

"I know," I replied. "That's why I'm not dead. My sense of humor has been the only light in periods of pain and darkness. I used to think my whole life was summed up by rape, pain, and e-cigarettes. I've since quit but it's only been a few months. I'm on the nicotine lozenges. Should put one in my mouth right now as a matter of fact. I always want to vape after I eat."

The flight plan, almost over, we've almost landed on the tarmac, and I felt grateful for having this heavy conversation, something I couldn't have with my friends because they've never been abused or been open about their abuse to me.

"I usually don't have these types of conversations on airplanes," Dr. Kate was saying. "But it was nice."

"Do you want to give me your email address so I can send you more?" I asked.

"Sure, here. I'll type it into your phone." With that said, we waited, and I thought. I wonder if all that she's told me was true, but I have no reason to doubt her validity. Why would she lie? She did seem knowledgeable and sympathetic.

"You know," I said, "if you're alive and even if you're unconscious, you'd have all four vital signs. But if you're unconscious you wouldn't have pain. I was unconscious of my pain for six years. Now that I'm conscious of it, I have to keep an eye on it. That's the lesson I take away. Thank you."

"I thought for sure you hated me for all the nurse talk."

"No way, it was refreshing and gave me a lot of food for thought. Thanks, Dr. Kate."

“Please, call me Kate,” she said. “I know our paths will cross again.”

“If you ever want to talk, I’m game,” I replied as we headed down the jetway together towards the tiny concourse of El Paso, TX, back to the baking heat of a hot August day. I hoped that we do talk, and I hoped she could heal to the point where she could enjoy touch again from her husband, not cringe or lash out in response to genuine physical affection. I’m thankful that I’ve known loving touch in my life, and I know it’s possible to love after rape after all.

TAKING BACK THE NIGHTS

EL PASO, TX

2023

My heart races as my thoughts run their paces. I'll call Unghe now. Wish him a Happy New Year's Baby, I think. God, now I've got that song stuck in my head. Counting Crows' "Holiday in Spain." Courage, Maggie, courage. You're the lioness and he's gonna be fucking dead meat. After this pep talk, I take out my iPhone 13 mini, a little cracked on the screen, and look up his contact. The last time we spoke was over a year ago. I text him so I know he's free to pick up. I really hate calling family, but my New Year's resolution was to put this cold case to rest once and for all.

I text, "Hi Unghe, got some time to talk privately?"

He replies, "Give me a minute. I'm dropping off Alicia and the kids at Mason's baseball game." Mason is his oldest son and the only nephew I've met. I've been purposely spending my holidays in El Paso and rarely visit San Jose especially after my mom's revelation, which I kept a secret since I knew it would never garner sympathy or credence from my family. Scott is just 2 years old. I'm glad Unghe doesn't have a daughter, but I worry about how he was raising his two boys. If they'd grow up to be a predator like their dad.

I reply, "Okay, call me when you're done."

He replies, "Will do." I wait, pacing around my hardwood floors going from living room to kitchen to hallway. Was this a good idea or am I insane for confronting him? I didn't have the balls to do it in person. A phone call is all I can manage. I get physically sick when I see Unghe. This will be the last time I talk to him, I say to myself. Got to close this chapter of my life. The phone rings and I pick up after 2 rings.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Maggie, Happy New Year!”

“Hi. To you too.”

“So, what’s up?”

“How are your boys and Alicia?” I can’t just dive in. I’m stalling with small talk, not really interested in his family, but can’t bring myself to bring the hammer down hard yet.

“They’re doing good. You and Jose good?”

“Yeah, we’re fine. El Paso’s nice in the wintertime.”

“When’s the next time I’ll see you? I missed you last time you were in San Jose. How come no one said you were in town?”

“I don’t want to see you anymore.”

“What? Maggie, what’s wrong?” The fake concern is too much. I can feel myself start to spoil for the fight to come.

“I know you asked me for blow jobs when I was young. Both Sheehe and Woojin remember that so there’s no use denying it.”

“I did ask you for a blow job, but you didn’t give me one.”

“It doesn’t matter if I didn’t. What I remember is giving them repeatedly and frankly, I don’t believe anything you say. You’re a liar.”

Silence on the other end. This conversation is a mistake, I know. It won’t answer any questions for me. At best, I’ll get my voice heard, but it’s tough to formulate my thoughts because he isn’t reacting the way I imagined. His voice sounds soft and defeated.

“Maggie, can we talk about something else?” he says.

“No, Unghe, I need to get this out. It doesn’t matter if you never acted on it; you wanted it enough to ask in the first place and that’s bad enough. It’s the stuff of nightmares and it’s why I hallucinate to this day. Why did you ask me? Did you ask Woojin and Sheehe, too?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what to say. I was young and dumb.”

“You took my childhood away from me. Now, all I remember is crawling through that cobwebby back boiler room through a hole you created in the dry wall to your closet in the basement. Why was that hole never patched? Woojin wants to know why your door was always locked? Why was I the only one who fit through that rabbit hole? I still remember that winter day that you supposedly got locked out of your room. I wore my pink snowsuit and Sheehe and Woojin were there, too. Why’d you do it, Unghe? Why’d you rape me for years?”

“Maggie, I didn’t. I swear to God.”

“You don’t believe in God and if you did, you’d know there’s a special place for you in Hell.” I can feel my eyes start to tear up, but I don’t cry.

“Maggie, you really drank the Kool-Aid in the MFA. Isn’t this what writers do? Make up stories? Each one is more fantastic than the last. Will you stop telling people I raped you?”

“Was your dick the reason I needed crowns on my two front teeth when I was five or six? Did I spit or swallow? All I remember is that you liked the saliva to drip onto your balls all sloppily.”

“Maggie, get a hold of yourself. You’re delusional and these are false memories.”

“What about the candy string bikini you bought me when I didn’t even have tits you could bite them off of? Do you remember that?”

“Are you going to write about this in your book? How can you spread such lies?”

“How can you spread your youngest sister’s prepubescent thighs?”

“Did you stop taking your medication?”

“No and like you even fucking care!” This conversation is infuriating me. I look at the photo of Jose and me on our wedding day hanging on the front wall of our living room. Jose bends a fake bunch of pink and white flowers from a vase towards my face, both of our heads thrown back in a moment of true laughter. “You didn’t even come to my wedding and still haven’t sent a card or present. I don’t exist to you.”

“I told you I had to work that weekend and I have two kids. El Paso is too far for me to travel to.”

“I’m not afraid of you anymore. I’m not afraid of anyone anymore. You didn’t dare step foot in El Paso because you know you’re not welcome here. Jose has a lot of family, real family here, that care about me as much as they do him, and they’ve seen the damage you’ve done and they’re slowly helping repair it. They would never have done this to their first cousin let alone their full sister. You’re dead to me. I can’t wait until I can dance on your grave.” The tears of relief finally come. Is this what power feels like? I’m tripping, I think. I’m always “Just slippin’ on by on LSD” like Aliotta Haynes and Jeremiah in “Lake Shore Drive” made popular by *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*. Drugs unlocked these hidden memories and while at first, I couldn’t control the hallucinations, they’re now a comfort to me. I don’t tell anyone, of course. A stupid comment here or there could land me back in the psych ward, but being schizophrenic comes with superpowers of vision, thought, and audio. I’m my own orchestra, Disney or Marvel studio and I can come up with SNL sketches in real time starring myself in that Fabletics tight hot pink tennis dress I wore to Unghe’s wedding and which I still fit into years later.

“Then why’d you call me?”

“This is the last time. I just want you to know that I know, and you won’t carry that secret to the grave like Uma did.”

“Uma didn’t know.”

“Like Hell she didn’t! Why’d she go bat shit fucking crazy when I got my period, which turned out to not be my period, but fucking ovulation secretions before it? You know you could have gotten me pregnant at fucking twelve?” I imagine him denying this, that he was careful enough to use condoms, which I remember along with a bottle of KY Jelly sitting either on his desk or bookshelf, but of course he will never admit to that. Free Red Lifestyles from the community college he failed out of. One must have failed on his first real girlfriend and now wife Alicia. I’m still unsure of the timeline. I remember most of the abuse going on in the River Grove house, but am unsure if remnants of it remained when we moved to San Jose. Life certainly got better for me, but the cloud of amnesia has never completely lifted to allow me a 360-degree panoramic view of my childhood and teenage years.

“Maggie, I didn’t know any of this until you told me just now.” His tone sounds dishonest and shameful. He’s not a good actor, that’s for sure. In that Jose and he are the same. Their voices betray their fakeness. Jose just acts mad but I’m never really sure if he’s acting because it sounds so fucking fake. I think he gets fed up for sure, but when he yells there’s a hint of irony to it. Unghe lied his way through a lie detector test before getting hired as a police officer, saying he never smoked marijuana which was untrue. He sure isn’t passing this lie detector test.

“Why’d you become a cop? Was it so you’d never see the light of day from a jail cell, where you belong? Was it so you could have a license to kill? I heard that once in a mental hospital from a soldier who tried to commit suicide. Suicide would be too easy for you, though.

You could just shoot yourself in the fucking head and end it. Lucky you.” I feel as though I hit a vein and imagine the blood coming out of Unghe’s arm underwater in a bathtub. *Why, oh God, is my abuser still alive?*

“Again, Maggie, I think you need professional help. I became a cop to be the good guy.”

“So now it’s your penance? You can stop acting like the hero of this story. I know the hero’s journey and it’s mine, not yours. I’m going to expose you to your loving in law family for the scum of the earth you truly are.”

“You think they’d believe you?” I can hear the fear in his voice, a tad bit higher pitched than before and I can tell he’s bluffing. Yes, I have the power now.

“Unghe, there’s a guillotine hanging above your fucking neck right now. Make one small step and it all comes crashing down like the house of cards your life is built upon. I’m taking back the nights. Your reign of terror is over. Like I said, I’m not afraid of you anymore.” I close my eyes and breathe in deeply. Is there anything more I needed to get off my chest? “Oh yeah, and fuck you for giving me herpes.”

“What?”

“You made me make out with you and I’ve had herpes since middle school. I never kissed a boy or girl before high school, so I know it was you.”

“Maggie, you got herpes from Uma kissing you.”

“I’m sure that’s what you want me to believe and what I believed for years, but now I remember, and I can’t fucking forget it. I get cold sores every two months because of you! If Uma gave them to me, why don’t Sheeche and Woojin have them too? Goodbye, Unghe.” I hang up having no more to say or accuse him of. Lucy sits and stares at me. She’s old now, has

problems with her back legs, but we'd recently gotten a Chewy subscription and after a few days the joint supplements were already making her hips stronger.

My delusions over the years have mostly disappeared, but it is telling that my suspicion of Unghe's teenage behavior only increased while my psychosis decreased. I'll never know why I forgot the abuse, but I'm thankful I had some years of respite, but the paranoia and PTSD is tougher to combat. Some days I think most women just get a life sentence of rape, abuse, and harassment from cradle to grave, but then I remember the good men and women in my life who make me feel safe and secure enough to open up to them, cry on their shoulder and help me bear this burden threatening to drag me down when I forget hope and humor, love that doesn't judge. The next steps for me still up in the air, I let out a sigh of relief because it is my hope that the hard parts are over for me.

I LIE AWAKE

EL PASO, TX

2023

Nighttime. A time to lie awake, reflect, deflect, and listen to the voices who Professor Daniel Chacón would say are other thought beings, but which as a scientist I see as a sounding board of my own thoughts and fantasies. It's a rabbit hole I indulge every night taking flight from the quotidian life I lead as a graduate student in UTEP's Bilingual Creative Writing program. My husband asleep next to me, I can't help but think *I don't love the man I'm with when I'm like this. I think about other men I can be with. I'm an unreliable narrator.*

Jose, in my head at first plaintive then recalcitrant, "But you love me, no? You just imagine your life better but don't do anything to make it better." Here begins my imaginary dialogue or monologue, however you'd like to describe it.

"We don't love each other anymore. Everyone wants us to break up, but it's only because other men want to be with me."

"And other women."

"Like Abby?"

"Jose, you want a younger woman and I want an older man. That's just how life works."

And then a digression: Maggie Kim, first time novelist. Lex (my thesis advisor and chief champion of this work of art), handle it with kid gloves. Novels don't have forewords. That's nonfiction.

"Can I be forward with you?"

"If only."

“You hem and haw about your whole life Maggie. Who’s been beside you the whole time you’ve dealt with your memories and your illness? Who comforted you when you cried uncontrollably about getting raped? Who carried you to the toilet when you couldn’t walk that one time? Who, but me, do you have?”

“I don’t have anything besides the capacity to love anyone except the person I’m with. ‘Don’t be with a bipolar man.’ Isn’t that what Uma’s friend Grace Park said?”

“Life doesn’t work the way you want it to Maggie.”

“I want a twenty two-inch waist again. I want to be a size double zero again. I want to be flatulent, not corpulent.”

“You want to be a teenager again. Stop making puns and excuses Maggie. You can’t drink cow’s milk because it’s utterly ridiculous.”

It’s true. I fantasize. I’m unfaithful not to the point of actually committing adultery, but I indulge in fantasy on a weekly sometimes daily basis. I know it’s not fair to Jose and I’m not sure why I do it. I don’t know why I can’t be present with him all the time. I’m not sure if life is just too boring to live in without interacting with other thought beings.

The poor witless subjects of my fantasies don’t even think about me, and that’s the painful part of thinking in the past. Abby? Where is she now? I haven’t talked to her in years. She’s probably carefree while I’m tied down, lying awake in bed wondering if I can stay married to a man that pushes me in life but also pushes me away daily.

Carlos? My first crush in grade school and middle school? He’s married to his sweetheart. They have a baby boy together now. That ship has sailed, but it didn’t prevent me from almost flying back to Chicago and attempting to homewreck their marriage because when I

was floridly psychotic, I thought he was in love with me too. I hate driving so I thought he'd drive me around in *The Transformer's* Bumblebee, a bright yellow Camaro.

Christof? Don't even get me started on him. He saved my life, but Jose would say, just the thoughts of him saved my life. He was a Professor of Neurobiology and Computational Neural Science at Caltech until 2013 and I'd first been attracted to his intellect, German accent, eccentric attire, and friendliness. I didn't talk to him much, but I thought he invited me to his bachelor pad above the 210 freeway in Pasadena during a student faculty lunch where I made a point of sitting next to him but only conversing in my head. I think I probably failed to spook the hell out of everyone by not saying anything which is very uncharacteristic of Maggie, but super characteristic of normal Caltech Asians. Another Professor present was talking to me about how he believed the brightest students did the worst because they were being sabotaged telepathically and naturally, I felt like one of those persecuted geniuses. What cured me of my infatuation at the time was seeing his bald spot one day, but in my head I thought his wife/girlfriend/significant other was threatened and made him clandestinely shave the top/back of his head.

Anyway, I thought I was talking to Professor and Neuroscientist John Allman and him and I thought they thought my ideas brilliant but unanchored in a physical realm, so I was about to approach Professor Allman after class one day to say "I'm the one who you've been talking to telepathically late at night! Can I join your lab?" when two of my male friends intervened and talked to me leading me out of lecture without what may have been a confrontation ending in yet another involuntary hospitalization for me.

John Allman talked about mirror neurons considered the bedrock physiological substrate underlying social cognition. In layman's terms, mirror neurons activate when someone observes another individual performing an action and then activates the observer's cortical motor system.

Impaired in autism and shown to be impaired in unmedicated schizophrenics, it is important to such concepts as theory of mind which forms in childhood around the age of four and the development of empathy. I thought that Christof implanted mirror neurons into my lips and that I'd know whenever I made him smile or laugh. I know this to be a delusion but a huge comfort when I experienced so much physical and psychological pain while psychotic and depressed. I'd be crying hysterically, but if I thought of something astute or funny, I'd smile, and I could see that even in pain I could make someone smile and empathize with me. I'd asked Jose to kill me because I wanted my life to end, but I never could have killed myself despite being in so much pain.

Thanks to medication, I'm no longer depressed or suicidal, symptoms secondary to the deep psychosis I felt at the time, which may be secondary to trauma experienced while young either from sexual abuse or borderline personality disorder, something that may have formed from the strict evangelical fundamentalist cult UBF I was a part of, which repressed my sexuality, and/or which led to direct sexual and verbal abuse from cult members/members of my own family.

I know now that I may never know, but I hope to focus more on the future from now on than the past because there's no point in rehashing it in the present unless I move on, which I already have and which this book has helped me to move on. I hope this book can help others move on too and to recognize abuse when it occurs and perhaps step in and save a life before it becomes too late. Live your life to love and if you're experiencing symptoms or memories like mine, seek help because with medication and therapy (mine was writing and talking to Abby and Jose) life can get a whole lot better.

I want to end with a note that I do believe in platonicity or having relationships not based upon sexual relations and it's possible to be attracted to someone but not be romantically involved with them. I'd define most of my friendships as platonic love and have enjoyed when they progressed past that, but they don't necessarily need to because I'm still insecure and shy and, I've found love in the most expected ways, and I would rather keep that love than bet on another I have yet to or may never experience: mainly unrequited love. I've never ever put myself out there and asked a girl or guy to kiss or to date that I didn't know reciprocated my feelings beforehand. Does that make me a coward? Why yes, but Maggie Kim is a cowardly lioness and she will take her kills and go on to feed her future young.

I FALL ASLEEP

I fall asleep.
I'm not afraid of sirens anymore
nor hospitals at all.
I don't fear that I'll fall.

I fall asleep
with the help of a little pill called Lunesta.
I don't care if I come when I sleep.
I'll come again for all I care.

The hallucinations don't bother me anymore.
I've got enough violence in store.
Whether they drug me with marijuana
I got pharmaceuticals to combat that
even if they always make me fat.

But I'm the good schizophrenic
and you, you're the bad.
This life is not so bad.
I've taken shit from everyone
but do you think I give two fucks about that?

You worry you'll become like me,
but do you know what I think?
I think you should become more like me.
Maybe then you'd have a little empathy.

I fall asleep now
with a little aid
but I hope in the future
this will come more naturally.

When I'm manic,
my mind goes into a panic.
I can't concentrate and
I struggle to speak.

I can take my ear off the pillow,
and then I don't hear you whisper
in my ear.
Is there anything even worth it to hear?

I just needed to go a little crazy
to stop being so lazy.

I can write down my thoughts,
so they're a little less racy.

I fall asleep now.
I no longer lie awake.
I take back the nights.
And will win these final fights.

VITA

Pauline Juliet Ku earned a Bachelor of Science in Biology from the California Institute of Technology or Caltech in Pasadena, CA. She has a poem published in Toda Esta Distancia or All This Distance, an anthology of UTEP MFA candidates' writing during the pandemic. She is the 2022 Dr. Milton and Rosalind Chang Career Exploration Prize Winner for her proposal "Write Your Health" which brought writing workshops to those with or loved ones with mental illness in the El Paso/Juarez border region. In 2021, she won a Mellon HSI Crossing Latinidades Creative Writing Fellowship to learn creative writing pedagogical approaches with emphasis on anti-racist workshops. She resides in El Paso, TX where she'll graduate from the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) with her Master of Fine Arts in Bilingual Creative Writing. Having lost her mother tongue of Korean, she hopes to become fully bilingual in Spanish and English someday soon.

Contact Information: pokumon@gmail.com