

April's Heart

April is trying to drink away the memory of her ex- boyfriend, Kenny, leaving her when she meets Jae outside her building. A chance encounter that seems destined to happen. Will April finally find the happiness she thought she had lost forever when Kenny walked out of her life. Can love really heal all wounds, even those that have left painful scars? Who will immerge the victor in the battle for April's Heart?

April's Heart

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By

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Air, Space, and Perspective

April Thomas poured the last of the wine from the bottle into her glass and stared down into it as if it held the answers to all life's mysteries. She was celebrating one year of being single. Celebrating because drinking alone would have been more of a cry for help. Drinking with friends is fun, at least that's what she had told herself when she invited everyone. Her friends, however, had left hours ago but she was still drinking. Celebrating the day Kenny left her. Kenny with his perfect teeth and strong hands. Articulate, funny, successful Kenny. Who needs him?

"Not me!" April shouted, her desperate voice echoing through her empty apartment. She was trying to convince no one but herself and she didn't even believe her.

For ten months they lived together and she was convinced she had found her happily ever after. He rushed home to be with her every night. He called and texted from work every day. She didn't know how she had gotten so lucky. Then one day the texts stopped. He had left for work before she awoke, as always, but that night he didn't come home. In a panic, April called all of his friends sure he was in the hospital unable to use his thumbs to let her know. Unfortunately, April discovered in the morning that Kenny hadn't suffered a traumatic thumb injury at all. When she was able to reach John, his one sympathetic friend, he informed her that Kenny had been in contact with one of his many ex-girlfriends. The kind of girls who appear when they smell money. John didn't tell her which one it was but it didn't matter because they were all the same. They knew that daddy was rich so they too would someday be rich. Kenny had always taken pride in walking away from those sorts of women and finding someone with what he liked to call "substance". But in the end glitz, glamour, and copious amounts of plastic surgery beat out her substance so when given an ultimatum, he without hesitation (a detail John could have left out) chose the ex.

Substance: 0

Satan: 1

John came over a week later to collect Kenny's suits and the other things he left behind. April had considered burning them like so many jilted lovers in the movies she loved or giving them to the Salvation Army. But instead she folded everything lovingly and placed it in a box she labeled "cheating asshole".

John laughed when he saw it and promised he would let her know how Kenny reacted. He seemed sincere and she genuinely expected him to call, but once she closed the door behind him and watched him carry the box to his car she never saw or heard from him again.

Everything they shared, all the friends she thought she had made, disappeared when Kenny did. He took with him not only his presence and a love the likes of which she'd never known, he took her social life. She worked and ate and she only worked so she could eat and vice versa. She went from nights on the town to tubs of ice cream in her pajamas on a Tuesday afternoon. It was a sad state of affairs. Not that she cared about going out. She would have happily shared her ice cream with him on the floor if that was what he wanted. But he wanted to go out, so they went out. All that mattered to her was that they were together.

That was a year ago. As time went on, she got better. She could keep ice cream in the freezer for a whole two days before scarfing it down in a moment of weakness. She couldn't help but wonder though, as her sadness waned, how Kenny could go from loving her one minute to not loving her the next. Had it all been a lie? He had walked out of her life so easily that she was sure there was something about her that made her impossible to really love. She spent endless nights going over their last few months in her mind, wondering what it was that had pushed him away from her and into the arms of Crystal or Candy or Becky or Bunny. It seemed he was desperate to find the exact opposite of her. Where she had substance he wanted none. Where she was intelligent he wanted vapid. Where she was

warm and loving he wanted cold and demanding. If that's what he wants, she thought, then good riddance.

So finally she felt she had found peace until she realized the anniversary of Kenny's deception was sneaking up on her. As the leaves began to change, she remembered how they crunched under John's feet as he left with the box of Kenny's things. That's when the idea for the "celebration" was born because as much as she wanted to believe she was over him, that kind of pain finds a way to sneak back into one's heart.

Now though that the few friends who remained in her life left, the drinking felt less celebratory and more pathetic. April pushed the glass away and stood up from the table, wobbling a bit before steadying herself. Kenny didn't deserve this. He didn't deserve one more tear, one more moment of her time. She stumbled through her living room and out into the hall. She needed to fill her lungs with the crisp autumn air. She needed to be out under the stars. She needed to feel unencumbered and free.

Once outside she leaned against the door of her building. Feeling suddenly sober she stared up at the stars. The sky was clear and the longer she watched the heavens the closer she felt to them. Almost as if she had been lifted from the ground and was soaring upwards.

"Are you alright?"

The man's voice brought April spiraling from space back to earth. When her eyes finally focused on him, she saw an impeccably dressed, very confused looking gentleman standing before her. He lived in the building and this was one of the first times she'd ever seen him not yelling at someone in Korean over the phone. If he wasn't yelling he was shyly passing her, head down with only seconds of eye contact.

"Sorry," April said, moving to the side so the man could gain entrance. But he didn't open the door. Instead, he took her place leaning against it looking up at the sky. Now she was confused.

"It's a beautiful night, isn't it?" he asked.

April smiled and nodded in agreement. The man's dark eyes twinkled, reflecting the light of the stars. He took a deep breath then turned to her extending his hand.

"I'm Jae. I think we live on the same floor."

"We do. I'm April."

She gingerly placed her hand in his, the warmth of it reminding her how cold she was. She had drunkenly stumbled out of her apartment in a t-shirt and jeans. No jacket, no shoes even.

"So, April, what brings you out at this time of night?"

April considered lying so as not to sound as pathetic as she was quickly starting to realize she was being, but when she opened her mouth the truth came spilling out.

"I was dumped by someone I really loved this time last year. So, I was drinking to...I don't even know, I guess dull the pain. Anyway, I started to hate myself so I came out here for some air and space and perspective."

"Did it work?"

"Yeah, I think it did. I feel much better."

Jae nodded and closed his eyes, resting his head back on the door. He was obviously going through something himself and though she was getting colder by the second, April hated to leave him alone. Suddenly, though, as if reading her mind, he stepped away from the door.

"You must be freezing. Here."

Quickly he punched the security code into the keypad and opened the door for her.

"Thank you," she said, stepping inside. He leaned on the door, watching her. She stopped before going in, catching him staring but he didn't look away as most men would if caught staring at a woman. He just continued to stare.

"Will you be ok?" she asked.

He grinned as if touched by her concern for him.

"I will. I just need some air, space, and perspective. Goodnight, April."

"Goodnight, Jae."

April turned and headed for the elevator that she did not remember riding down. After a few moments she heard the lobby door close and she looked back to see Jae's silhouette through the frosted glass, leaning and looking up at the stars.

Once in her apartment, April busied herself cleaning up the mess she and her friends had made while celebrating. She tried not to think of Jae but every time she thought she heard a sound come from the hall she ran to her door and peered out the peephole. There was something about him that kept him on her mind. His sudden openness was surprising but welcome. Though a few hours earlier her apartment had been full of people, she had very few real friends so the small amount of contact she had with Jae had been more meaningful than any other that night. She hoped to bump into him again soon and found herself blushing at the thought.

This went on for an hour, her diving for the door every twenty seconds until she couldn't clean or stay awake any longer. After one last peek into the hallway, April went to bed and for the first time in a year, her last thought before falling asleep wasn't about Kenny.

A Year and a Day

In the shower the next morning, April was surprised yet thankful that she wasn't hung over. With a wedding to photograph that evening the last thing she needed was a headache and sensitivity to light and sound. Her own equipment would be her worst enemy. She had slept in quite a bit, though, not rolling out of bed until after eleven a.m. She brushed her teeth both before and after her shower, unable to get the taste of old, cheap wine out of her mouth. She dried her hair and pulled it up into a poof, her favorite hairstyle. She put on a black turtleneck sweater and blue jeans and black boots. Looking in the mirror she was impressed by her fashion and figure, and headed for the door with the intention of getting some groceries before she had to get to the hotel and set up. Just as she was about to leave, a light knock on the door stopped her. Through the peephole she saw someone quickly turn from her door and walk away.

"Hey," she said as she stepped out into the hall.

Slowly, Jae turned and faced her so guilty and cute April had to smile. He looked like she should have felt. His usually perfectly coiffed hair was messy and his clothes, the same he had been wearing the night before, were wrinkled and obviously slept in. Or, if the dark circles under his eyes were any indication, stayed up all night in.

April's eyes widened as she tried not to seem as taken aback as she was. She knew she failed though because Jae tried in vain to straighten his shirt and calm his wayward hair.

"I just wanted to make sure you were alright," he said, staring at his shoes.

"Yeah, I'm good. How are you?"

Jae looked up into April's eyes. They were begging her to see through the lie he was about to tell.

"I'm ok."

"Do you want to come in? I can make you some coffee."

"I hate to intrude. Anyway, you look like you were about to go out."

"Not yet. I have a few hours before I have to leave. Come in, please."

With a final tug on his suit jacket Jae nodded and followed April into her apartment.

"Do you want me to take that?" she asked, motioning to the jacket.

"Sure," he said, pulling it off and handing it to her. Without it he looked a little more put together, more like the Jae she was used to seeing. She hadn't realized last night or any time she had seen him before, how fit he was. And tall. Though his hair was a mess it was still shiny. He looked like he had just stepped off the movie screen and into her living room. Forcing herself to stop staring, she hung his coat in the closet.

"Have a seat, I'll start the coffee."

Jae nodded and sat obediently on the sofa, looking so ill at ease that April was beginning to regret inviting him in. But he had been on her mind since she woke up. She wondered mostly what had caused the obvious pain he had been in the night before and seemed to still be in as he sat, fiddling uncomfortably with the corner of a pillow.

She measured out enough coffee for four cups and started the machine. As she moved around the kitchen she fought the urge to look up at Jae. He was obviously upset, the last thing he needed was to be ogled by a lonely stranger. Still, she had a strange feeling that he was watching her.

Casually, she glanced up and as she thought, his eyes were on her making her feel suddenly very self-conscious. She cleared her throat.

"How do you take it?" she asked as she poured.

"Black."

He said it slowly with a cocked eyebrow so unintentionally sexy she nearly spilled coffee all over the counter. Keep it together, she told herself. He was talking about coffee, not women. Anyway, it hasn't been so long since you've had a man. Actually, it had. A year and a day. Her mother would call it a drought. She called it necessary, though not intended. She needed the time alone after the upheaval that Kenny caused in her life, but she didn't want to be alone forever. And here was Jae, showing up almost a year to the day after her heart was broken. His sleepy eyes, full lips and smooth skin were so welcoming. All the times passing him in the hall, or seeing him in the laundry room. How had she never noticed him before now? Even the night before she had been blind to his charm.

It was probably because now that she felt able to let go of Kenny the loneliness was setting in. She hadn't had time to be lonely in the past year because she was too busy being angry and more bitter than Jae's black coffee. But simply being close to him reminded her of what she was missing. She was done wallowing in her misery. It was time to start living again.

When April finished almost completely diluting her coffee with cream, she took both cups into the living room. She handed Jae his and he sipped it immediately because he either needed it that badly or he was trying to busy his mouth to keep from having to talk. She sat a comfortable distance from him on the sofa.

"It seems, by the looks of things," she said, "that the air didn't do as well for you as it did me."

Jae seemed to relax a bit. His shoulders lowered and he tried to smile.

"No, I suppose it didn't. My wounds, though, are fresher. The day after your breakup I bet you looked a lot like me."

"Oh, Jae. No. I looked much worse."

Jae laughed and had to put his hand to his mouth to keep from spitting coffee all over himself.

"I was a mess. And as time went on, it just got worse. I wore pajamas for three straight weeks. My hair, oh my goodness, I had just one big dreadlock. It was horrible."

"Oh wow. Hopefully, I'll recover before I get dreadlocks."

Jae laughed and it was such a welcome sight April just watched him, smiling.

"You're going to be alright," she said.

"How do you know?"

"I just know. Call it instinct. You'll be yelling on the phone again in no time."

Suddenly, Jae's smile faded and he lowered his head. April couldn't believe she had ruined the good mood he had been falling into. She scooted closer to him and placed a hand on his. What a stupid thing to say. How could she be so careless?

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

He didn't respond but when she started to pull her hand away from his he grabbed it back and held it tight. He breathed in sharply and looked up directly into April's eyes. He was crying. She moved closer, overcome with guilt.

"Jae..."

"It's ok. I know people in the building probably just see me as 'that angry Asian guy'. I don't want people to think of me that way. I don't want you to think of me that way."

April's heart fluttered. Why did he care what she thought? Why was he crying? Why was he still holding her hand?

"I don't think of you that way at all, Jae."

His bottom lip quivered as he tried to suppress his emotion.

"My mother is in Korea. She's sick. I pay for her nurses and caretakers to stay with her so she doesn't have to leave her home. I can't be there so they have to make her comfortable, happy. When she tells me that they mistreat her..."

His voice cracked and April, without hesitation, pulled him to her. He wrapped his arms around her waist and squeezed tight. She couldn't imagine the frustration of not being able to be with someone who needed her. His mother was halfway around the world and he had to trust others to do what he felt he should be doing. If April's mother was being harmed by anyone, being yelled at over the phone would be the least of their problems.

"I'm sorry," Jae whispered, his breath hot on April's ear. She tried to ignore how good it felt to be embraced by a man after so long. Jae's strong arms were still holding her against him and though every fiber of her being was screaming at her not to, she pulled herself away from him, but he didn't let go. Instead, they sat face to face, his eyes resting on her lips.

She tried to say something like, it's ok, you have nothing to be sorry for, but when her lips parted only a small puff of air escaped. She had no idea how long they sat there, her trying to control her body's every involuntary

reaction to Jae's touch. Him, staring at her like he intended to devour her whole.

Then, as if they were in every romantic comedy ever made, just as he leaned in April's phone rang. She hopped up both frustrated and relieved and rushed to the kitchen to answer it. Jae sat back, sipping his coffee, watching her intently.

"Yes, hello, this is April."

"April, I'm so glad I caught you. I'm going to need you here an hour early. Janice has some last-minute ideas about the pictures she wants. If they're awful I need you to ignore them. I'll tell you if they're awful."

Oh my God, April screamed in her head. She had almost completely forgotten about her job that evening. This call from the wedding planner had saved her from getting a terrible review from a rather difficult bride. It also saved her from getting her first kiss in a year and a day. But if April was going to be honest with herself, and she hated to do it, she didn't feel right about kissing Jae. He was handsome and obviously very willing, but he had also just broken up with a girlfriend apparently the night before. Being his rebound was not going to help her in her quest to find...whatever she was looking for.

"Sure," April assured the planner. "I'll leave right now."

She hung up and smiled at Jae who couldn't have looked more disappointed. This man, she thought, is fantastic for my ego.

"I have to go. I'm the photographer for a wedding ceremony this evening and they have some last-minute changes to discuss with me. I'm sorry."

"It's ok," Jae said, still pouting.

After getting his jacket, she walked through the living room and he followed so close behind that she was sure he'd run into her when she

stopped. She opened the door and he stepped around her and out into the hall.

"Thank you," he said. "For the coffee and everything. I hope I didn't..."

"You didn't."

April hated to admit how much she was starting to like Jae. It was too fast. Would she have pushed him away if the phone hadn't rung? Hell, no. She would still be on her sofa kissing this man she had just met. Therein lies the problem. She knew nothing about him or his intentions but at the moment his dark eyes made it hard for her to care.

"Maybe I'll see you later tonight," Jae was saying as he walked away. April had been so caught up in her thoughts she didn't even notice he had left.

"I won't be home until late."

"I'll be up," Jae called to her over his shoulder before turning the corner.

April backed into her apartment and closed the door. What exactly she was feeling she wasn't sure, but it beat the anger that had been festering in her heart for the past year and a day.

The Photographer

April arrived at the hotel exactly when she said she would, still the wedding planner was waiting outside impatiently tapping her \$800 pump on the sidewalk. Then she remembered the planner's rules: Early is on time, on time is late, late is fired.

"Hi, Carolyn," April said, her best fake smile lighting up her face.

Carolyn fake smiled back, though hers was far less convincing, and dragged her into the hotel by the arm.

"Your dress is in room 816, your keycard is at the front desk. Tell them you're the photographer."

April was sure "the photographer" was the name the clerks at the desk were given because neither the bride nor the planner, their new names for the day, could remember her real name.

"Janice and I will meet you up there."

April nodded and headed to the desk to get her key.

"I'm the photographer," she replied when asked if she could be helped. She hoped they would ask her actual name but "the photographer" did the trick and she was handed a key card by a plastic-smiled young man whose nametag read Trystan.

"Enjoy your stay," he sang as she walked away.

She was mid eye roll when she ran directly into a man, her face bouncing off his impressive pectoral muscles. He held on to her shoulders until she was steady on her feet. She started to apologize when the man spoke.

"April," he said, seemingly to himself. His voice was familiar but one she hadn't heard in quite a while, like perhaps a year and a day.

Please don't be him. Please don't be him. Please. Please. Please.

Finally, April looked up from the man's cummerbund and into his eyes which softened to the point of tearing at the sight of her.

Kenneth Mitchell. April's heart immediately deflated and sunk to her stomach.

"I have to go," she said, slipping from the grip Kenny still had on her shoulders and running for the elevator. She hopped on an open one that a large group of Australian tourists had just exited and tried desperately to find the door close button. Though she was relatively sure Kenny hadn't followed her she pressed it for good measure and exhaled deeply still trying to process what had just happened.

The doors came together slowly and as April pressed the 8th-floor button a hand stopped them from closing with only seconds to spare. They reopened revealing a panting Kenny who obviously had to fight his way through the Australians to get to her. He stepped onto the elevator and April tried to sink into the wall of the corner furthest from him.

"Why are you running from me?" He asked.

"Because I don't want to see you, I don't want to talk to you and I damn sure don't want to be in an elevator with you, Kenny."

"Please, just let me explain."

He sounded so desperate and pathetic. Not at all like a man who was cocky enough to cheat on and leave a loving girlfriend without an explanation. April wanted to ask where she was. Where was the woman he had chosen over her after ten months of supposed happiness? Probably at

the bar flirting with every man in sight who might have a trust fund. Or perhaps he was alone, dressed to the nines hoping to attract another pretty blonde with nothing to offer but her opinion on what jewelry he should buy her. Either way, April didn't care. He had humiliated her and disappeared without a word. Anything he had to say was a year too late.

She pulled herself from the wall and stood toe to toe with the man who had broken her heart. He still looked close to tears and April wanted to tell him what she had been planning to say if she ever saw him again. She wanted to tell him that she deserved better than to be dumped so unceremoniously by someone who claimed to love her. She wanted to tell him that she was better off knowing the kind of man he really was before giving up any more of her life for him. Mostly, though, she wanted to tell him that though he had broken her heart he did not break her and if he couldn't handle being with a real woman it was better that he did leave.

She wanted to say those things but all the emotions she'd been keeping inside couldn't find a voice. It was too late. It didn't even matter anymore. None of it mattered. This man before her who once held her heart in her hand and crushed it without a second thought no longer had any power to hurt her.

"I'm not interested," she said, smiling. Finally, the elevator reached her floor and April blew past Kenny and into the hall. She turned back to see him staring at her, slack jawed. Again she smiled as she turned from the elevator and walked towards her hotel room.

He must be here for the wedding, April thought as she wandered the halls of the hotel. She could imagine Kenny being friends with the bride. She was demanding and rude and mean. Everything he was apparently looking for in a woman. Maybe he's the groom, she mused as she found her room. She pressed the keycard to the lock and stepped into the most magnificent suite she had ever seen, in person or otherwise. This was the room they booked for the photographer? These people obviously had more money than they knew what to do with. April wondered a few times since she had booked the gig why the couple had chosen her. There were hundreds of

photographers in the city they had to choose from and by the looks of it they weren't worried about the cost. Oh, well, she thought. I'm here. It doesn't really matter how I got here.

April's dress was hanging on a hook on the back of the bathroom door. It was a gorgeous peach gown that went perfectly with her caramel skin tone. The bride, in one of their last meetings, asked if she had a dress for the affair. April shrugged, not really worried about what she was going to wear. It's not like she was going to be in any of the pictures. The bride huffed and asked what size she was.

"Oh that's perfect," she gushed. "14 is my before size. I have plenty of dresses for you to choose from. And whichever one you want you can keep, I'll never be that big again."

The planner looked at April like she was ready to stop her from jumping across the table at the bride, but April just smiled and thanked her for her kindness while in her mind cursing her and her stupid perfect body. I hope she gets up to a 16, she thought.

April had to admit, it was a beautiful dress. She had planned on ripping it up for cleaning rags the second she took it off but as she stepped into it, the fabric felt so nice on her skin she thought it would be a shame to waste it. The bride had probably only worn it once anyway. She pulled her hair up into a high bun, allowing a few curls to cascade down her long neck. Standing at the mirror she hardly recognized the reflection in front of her. For the past year, her wardrobe had consisted mainly of sweat suits and pajamas. Seeing herself like this reminded her she was a woman. That and the way Jae had looked at her that morning. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't keep him out of her head.

Three quick knocks on the door snapped her out of her fond morning memories and back to her somewhat less than glamorous but getting more glamorous by the minute reality. She rushed over and opened it, not wanting to keep the bride and the planner waiting but, to her surprise, Kenny stood on the other side of the door. He gasped when he saw her,

covering his mouth with his free hand. In his other hand, he held a bouquet of flowers.

"You look amazing. These are for you."

April took the flowers and sniffed them, knowing it was killing Kenny to just stand in the hall while waiting for her to react to his presence. Really, she had no reaction. It was strange. Her heart didn't ache, her mind wasn't racing with scathing words to spit at him. All she felt was relief. If she thought the elevator was a fluke she now had proof that she was over Kenny Mitchell.

"Can I come in?"

April stood aside and a shocked Kenny walked past her and into the room. He turned to her after she closed the door, a pained expression distorting his handsome features.

"What did you want to say?" she asked coolly.

Kenny tried to smile, but the corners of his lips instead turned downward as he began to cry.

"I made a mistake," he managed to say.

April wanted to remain stoic and dismiss his emotion as a ploy to get her to listen to him but his tears weakened the ice around her heart. She had never known Kenny to cry. Perhaps in the past year he had learned to weep on command but April could tell that his emotion was genuine.

"Sit down," she said, gently guiding him to a sofa next to a large window. Outside the sun was beginning to set. April knew she didn't have much time before the bride and the planner came to get her. He sat down and she sat beside him for the first time in a year. It felt nice in a way but again she remembered Jae and how he nervously sipped his coffee that morning. She

smiled, despite herself. Luckily, Kenny was too busy wiping his nose to notice.

"I know you don't have a lot of time and I have so much to tell you. I guess what I need you to know the most is...I didn't cheat on you."

"What?"

April leaned back, completely taken off guard. What did he mean he didn't cheat on her? Of course he did, that's why she had spent so much time hating him. He cheated and left her.

"If you didn't cheat on me then why did John say you did and why did you leave?"

Kenny opened his mouth to answer when the door burst open and the planner and bride rushed in.

"Kenny," the bride shouted, "John is looking all over for you. You were supposed to be in the courtyard 15 minutes ago. Don't ruin this for me!"

"Ok," Kenny said, standing. "I'm sorry. I'll go right out. It'll be ok, Janice."

April watched him as he ran out the door, looking back to see her one last time before he was out of sight. April's mind was swimming and the bride and planner weren't helping by shouting hurried instructions at her. Luckily she was a professional and was able to absorb the information while simultaneously being completely confused by what Kenny said. How could he have not cheated on her? Was her year of hating him wasted, was her anger misplaced? She had to talk to him, but first she had a wedding to photograph.

Not the Coffee

The wedding was beautiful and not at all as over the top as April expected it to be given the bride's taste. The planner had really pulled it off, somehow strategically hijacking the ceremony and turning it from a gaudy spectacle to a classy affair. April even teared up a bit when the string quartet began to play "Canon in D" as the bride made her way down the aisle to her smiling fiancée, who turned out to be John, Kenny's best friend. It was strange seeing him again and more strange that he was getting married. Everything was just strange. Her life had been stalled for the last year but theirs had gone on without so much as a hiccup, even seemingly improving. John was always somewhat of a player, going from woman to woman to woman, never alone but never tied down. April always assumed it was his influence that pushed Kenny away and why he was the one to tell her he had cheated and was leaving her. He was proud of what Kenny had done. Breaking free from the bonds of a relationship to play the vast and varied field. And now here he was committing to one woman for the rest of his life. Watching him walk back down the aisle smiling, hand in hand with his new bride, April couldn't help but wonder what else she had been wrong about.

At the end of the night, she was in the hotel room packing up her equipment when she noticed Kenny's flowers on the bed. She smiled, recalling the shock on his face when she had opened the door earlier in the day. Though he kept tabs on her all night, he never approached her or tried to explain anything more. In fact, she had seen him leave in a limousine with the rest of the wedding party just before she went inside.

Though April was curious, the fact that Kenny had nothing more to say to her came as quite a relief. It had been a long day and she just wanted to get home and get to sleep as soon as possible. She knew she'd be thinking about the small amount of information he had already given her. Any more confessions from Kenny could wait until she had had some rest.

As she was packing her things away in the hotel room, the planner came in to tell her what a good job she had done (seeming more shocked than April would have liked, but she took the compliment) and that she'd keep her in mind for future weddings.

"No more bridezillas and you have a deal," April laughed, only half joking.

"Please," the planner replied, "aren't they all?"

"I suppose. Out of curiosity, where did you hear about me?"

"The best man, Kenny, he insisted we use you."

Somehow April wasn't at all surprised. It was just like Kenny to orchestrate their reunion, to trap her in a place where she couldn't escape. She'd have nowhere to run so she'd have to hear him out, but he didn't take the opportunity he created. He left without knowing if he'd ever get another chance to explain himself. Apparently, she thought as she lugged her bags outside, it wasn't that important to him after all.

"I need an assistant," April said aloud to herself as she piled her bags into the trunk of her car.

Once her equipment was away, April gently placed the long plastic sleeve containing her new dress on top of it as if she was tucking them in for the night under an expensive designer blanket. When she had slipped out of the dress and back into her street clothes she felt a wave of sadness wash over her. When would she ever have an occasion to wear it again? Kenny had taken her to a number of parties where such a dress would have been deemed appropriate. Work functions. Though she never understood exactly what he did for a living, the world of personal finance being very much out of her realm of understanding, she knew he worked with men who spent quite a lot of money on their wives' wardrobes.

On those occasions she would have loved having a dress like the one in her trunk. Now, though, it would hang in her closet serving only as a reminder that she had nowhere to go as she pushed it aside to reach for a t-shirt and jeans.

Once home, April parked in her assigned spot on the street and because she still didn't have an assistant, she decided to leave her bags and dress in the car overnight.

Until she saw him standing outside the door, April had forgotten all about Jae's promise to see her later that night. He was, again, very well dressed in a suit that was obviously made for him because it fit him so well SHE wanted to tip his tailor.

He was leaning on the door, his hands in his pockets, looking off to the side, revealing a chiseled jawline. April hesitated a moment as she approached him, intimidated by his effortless charm. Why did I take off that dress, she reprimanded herself while wondering foolishly if there was a way to get past him without being spotted. She knew she looked worn out after hours of walking, kneeling, crouching, and a dance with John's handsy uncle.

Just as she was about to duck behind the nearest bush, Jae turned towards her and waved, the most amazing smile she had ever seen spreading across his face, like the sun coming out from behind a cloud. She was so happy to see his spirits were lifted.

"April," Jae said as she approached him, "you look beautiful."

April looked down at herself then back at Jae in disbelief.

"This is what I was wearing when I left."

"You looked beautiful then, too."

If she had been a cartoon character a heart shaped projectile would have jutted from her chest, beating loudly, before slamming back into her body.

Men who looked like him didn't say things like that to her. She was lucky if they said excuse me after shoving past her on the subway. She had gotten used to being ignored by men.

Flushed, she desperately attempted to change the subject.

"So, do you always stand outside the building at 1 a.m.?"

Jae chuckled, taking a step closer to her.

"Only when I'm waiting for you."

April could feel the heat in her face and she knew she was turning all shades of pink. One more flirty word from him and she was sure she'd spontaneously combust.

"You...you were waiting for me?" she stammered.

Jae nodded, biting his bottom lip. Had she really been worrying about being a rebound girl to him? At the moment she couldn't remember, nor did she care.

"Why?" she asked innocently.

"Well," Jae said, taking one of her hands in his, "I started something earlier and I'd really like to finish it, if that's ok with you."

April's breath caught in her throat as he slipped his arm around her waist and smoothly pulled her to him.

"The coffee?" she asked, closing her eyes in anticipation.

"Not the coffee," Jae whispered.

Though April's heart was pounding in her ears, just as their lips touched she heard a car screech to a halt in front of the building. Jae looked up and she

turned to see the driver's side door swing open and a drunken Kenny spill out onto the street.

Her first thought was to rush Jae into the building and deny knowing the man who was now crawling towards them, but he began crying out her name.

"April, I need to talk to you," Kenny shouted as he stumbled towards them.

"Who is that?" Jae asked, wincing at the spectacle before him.

"Kenny."

Unable to look Jae in the eye, she reluctantly pulled herself away from him and ran to Kenny to attempt to shut him up.

"There you are," he said, falling onto his side and smiling up at her. She couldn't hate him more. For the past year she was alone because of him and now she was finally about to move on and he showed up just in time to ruin it. She didn't know what Jae's intentions with her were, all she knew was he made her feel good and at the moment that was all she wanted. She didn't want to be sitting on the ground with her drunk ex-boyfriend.

I better go explain, she thought, but when she looked to where she had been standing with Jae he was gone. Beside her Kenny lay passed out. How was this her life? She wanted to cry and scream and cry some more instead she sat in the grass, defeated.

"Everything ok?" a neighbor whose name she couldn't remember shouted from his window.

"Yeah, everything's fine," she called back. "Just dandy."

Dandy indeed. How had a day that started with such promise ended in such despair?

"I should just leave you here," she growled at unconscious Kenny. Instead, she slapped him until he woke up (then a few more times for good measure), helped him to his feet and walked him to her apartment. He collapsed onto the sofa and April covered him with a blanket. She considered going to find Jae to explain the situation but it was too late and she was too tired. Not to mention she had no idea how to explain it since she didn't know what was going on herself. She finally fell asleep to the sound of Kenny's soft snoring coming from the living room. If anyone had any explaining to do, it was him.

The Worst Twilight Zone Episode Ever

The early morning sun shone across April's face and she awoke with a start. She looked around her room confused, as if she expected to be somewhere else. Visions of the wedding flooded her memory, then Jae holding her outside. And just as they were about to kiss...Kenny! He was in her living room. She grabbed her black and red Kimono robe and rushed out into the main room of her apartment. Kenny was nowhere to be found. There was no trace of him anywhere. No clothes, no lingering scent of expensive cologne. The blanket she remembered covering him with was folded neatly on the back of the chair from which she had taken it.

Had it all been a dream? Was she so exhausted after the wedding that she fell asleep as soon as she got home, dreaming everything she thought happened afterwards? That must be it, she thought. She couldn't imagine Kenny actually acting in such a way. But did dreaming it so vividly mean she wanted it to happen, like she wanted Jae to hold her close and call her beautiful? That part of the dream she liked, the rest was a nightmare. Thankfully, it was over.

April sighed in relief and laughed at herself for thinking her dream was real. Even though it felt so real. Jae's hand in hers, his arm around her, the look in his eyes. How could she have imagined all that? But she had. It was the only explanation.

She shrugged and began making herself a cup of coffee. The goal was to get her pictures edited and all the proofs sent to her clients as soon as possible. After pouring a cup she turned to the refrigerator for the cream. She made her coffee more like dessert than anything, with cream, sugar and even cinnamon if she was feeling extra fancy. Today, though, all she wanted was sugar and cream and enough caffeine to keep her awake for the next six hours. She finally found it, hiding behind a huge jar of pickles she had gotten because it was on clearance.

She turned, carton of cream in hand, only to drop it when she found herself face to face with Kenny.

"Good morning," he said, smiling

He had a towel wrapped around his waist and was drying his hair with another. April picked up the cream without a word because the only words she wanted to say weren't befitting of a lady. He looked so at home and at ease it was as if he never left. But he had left and his comfort was making her blood boil. She poured the cream into the coffee and stirred it so violently she nearly chipped the cup.

"You're angry," Kenny said, dropping his arms to his sides

"What an astute observation."

"April, I'm sorry."

"Yeah, I know, Kenny. That's all you ever are."

"I just wanted to talk to you. Explain things. There was no good time during the wedding. I may have had too much to drink but I was nervous. I want things to be good between us again. I've missed you."

April sighed loudly. She was so tired. Not physically, but emotionally. Between Jae and Kenny, the past 24 hours had taken so much out of her she almost missed being alone. Her life had been simple just two days before. Work, eat, sleep, repeat. Throwing apologizing exes and sexy neighbors into the mix was a recipe for heartbreak, something she had had enough of for ten lifetimes.

"Kenny," April said, her voice softer, "you don't have to explain anything, really."

"I do," he said, coming around the kitchen island that separated them. The closer he got the more aware she became that he was basically naked. He stood so close to her that she could feel the heat emanating from him. She remembered that heat. It was the heat she longed for at night for months, as she lay cold and alone in the bed they once shared.

"My leaving had nothing to do with you."

"But John said..."

"I know what he said. He told you what I told him to tell you."

"Why?"

Kenny closed his eyes, obviously pained by having to recount the cause of his actions. He insisted on starting, however, so April was going to let him finish. She watched him as he tried to figure out a way to say what he had to say without hurting her all over again.

Finally, he looked deep into her eyes as if the next thing he said would change her life, and it did.

"My father."

Kenny's father, Lawrence Mitchell, was a wealthy investment banker and partner in the firm where Kenny worked. Lawrence hated April and he had no qualms with letting her know that fact. She wasn't rich enough, cultured enough, or white enough for his liking. He was convinced and had almost convinced April that Kenny's dating her was simply an act of rebellion and that when the right "woman of quality" came along he would come to his senses. But he didn't. No matter how many single darlings of society Lawrence hurled at Kenny when April wasn't around, or even when she was, he turned them all down, choosing April over everyone and everything. Until he didn't.

"So, what? He threatened you. Your job?"

Kenny nodded, unable to look April in the eye.

"It wasn't just that. He technically owned everything I had at the time. If I didn't do what he asked, I wouldn't have anything."

"You would have had me," April said before she could think. "Wasn't I enough?"

"Oh my God, April," Kenny said, grabbing her hands, "you were more than I deserved. I couldn't expect you to take care of me that way. What kind of man would I be, living off my girlfriend?"

"I wouldn't have cared, Kenny."

"But I would have. I wanted to take care of you. All the places I took you to, the things I bought you. I didn't do it to show off or just because I could. You deserved it all and you didn't even know it. I just wanted you to have the best. I wasn't the best."

"So, then why did you tell John to tell me you cheated? That's so much worse."

Kenny looked at her in so much obvious pain she almost stopped caring about the truth.

"Because, April, I needed you to hate me as much as I hated myself. I didn't deserve your forgiveness or understanding."

"Until now. What changed?"

"John's wedding. I quit the firm six months after, well, everything happened. John and I opened a gym."

"That explains it. I barely recognized him."

Kenny nodded, laughing. April missed his laugh but pushed those feelings aside as soon as they arose. Not today April, she reprimanded herself. Never again.

"Yeah, he's gained around 65 pounds of muscle. Anyway, when he started planning his wedding I started thinking about you. I never told you but I always imagined we'd get married someday."

April fought to keep from swooning as all her girl parts screamed. She didn't trust herself not to squeal so she pursed her lips and let Kenny continue.

"I was hoping a year had been enough time that you could somehow forgive me but I understand if you don't. I wouldn't forgive me, either."

If someone had said to her 24 hours before that in 24 hours Kenny would be wrapped in a towel in her kitchen asking for forgiveness she would have laughed in their faces, then punched them for mentioning his name in her presence. But here he was. Beads of water dripping down his defined chest, his dark eyes smoldering, eyebrows lifted in expectation. He was waiting for an answer but April had none. Now that she knew what really happened, why he really left, were they supposed to pick up where they left off? Did he expect her to step seamlessly back into that role?

"Let me take you to dinner," Kenny offered excitedly before April could decide what to make of the situation.

"I don't know, Kenny..."

"Come on. No obligation, no pressure. Just two people, eating food...near each other."

"Wow, how can I say no to that?"

"You can't. I'll pick you up at eight."

Before she could protest, Kenny turned and rushed back into the bathroom. Watching him walk through her apartment again was so strange. She felt like she was stuck in the worst *Twilight Zone* episode ever.

Imagine if you will, a crazy woman accepting a date with her ex. Will either of them make it out alive?

When Kenny was finally dressed and after an awkward hug, he left. April stood in the hallway for a moment considering trying to find Jae's apartment. When she realized that the night before hadn't been a dream she also realized that Kenny may have done irreparable damage to their budding relationship. She wanted to talk to him. She wanted to see him. She wanted to almost kiss him again.

Just as she was about to go back inside to make herself presentable, a door down the hall opened and she heard Jae. He was speaking Korean but he wasn't yelling. She was about to go towards his voice when a female voice answered him. April's heart sunk to the basement. Jae had found comfort in another woman. They spoke in the hushed tones of lovers and April had to get out of earshot before she made a complete fool of herself. But before she could get to her door, as she had inched halfway down the hall to hear them better, the girl came around the corner. April turned and tried to pretend she was tying her shoe before realizing she was wearing slippers.

"Good morning," the girl said in a thick Korean accent.

April looked up briefly and smiled at the gorgeous woman walking past her. She had a look of perpetual pity like she felt sorry for everyone for not being as pretty as she was. She was wearing a man's dress shirt, Jae's shirt no doubt, and a skirt.

April watched out of the corner of her eye until the girl was gone, still kneeling in her robe and slippers.

"April?"

She looked up enough to see a pair of men's slippers in front of her.

"You HAVE to be kidding," she said aloud.

Salanghae

April looked up at Jae who loomed over her, arms crossed like a disappointed father watching his daughter climb back into her bedroom window after breaking curfew. She was caught in the act; there was no way to escape with her dignity intact. She stood slowly, waiting for a change in his demeanor. She wished she knew him well enough to even venture a guess as to what he was thinking. His dark eyes offered not even a clue. She looked for a slightly upturned corner of his mouth or a wrinkle in the corner of his eye. Nothing.

"What are you doing?" His tone was even yet full of curiosity.

"I can explain," April said while simultaneously trying to come up with an explanation that didn't make her seem like the total goober she was being. But even if she could think of a somewhat believable lie, she couldn't lie to him. Just like the night they met when he asked why she was outside at that time of night. A slew of lies came to mind. Waiting for Postmates. Just joined the neighborhood watch. Testing out new thermal underwear. In any other case, very acceptable lies, but all she could actually say to him was what was true.

"I heard your voice and I was headed over to explain about last night but I panicked when your girlfriend came around the corner. I didn't want her to think..."

"Wait," Jae said, waving his hand in front of his face. "My girlfriend?"

"Well, the girl who spent the night with you."

"April, I didn't spend the night with anyone. After...what happened I came inside and went to sleep. Alone."

"But, she's wearing your shirt, isn't she?" April squeaked, knowing she should just drop it.

"HaJoon is a coworker. She spilled coffee on her blouse on her way to work so she stopped by and I lent her a shirt. That's all."

April could feel her cheeks start to burn. She hadn't been so embarrassed since she tripped on her way to the stage to get her high school diploma. Somehow, the hundreds of snickering students and faculty members hardly compared to Jae's icy glare. It was hard for her to believe they had just met and she had done so much wrong already. First, her thoughtless comments had made him cry and not once but twice his attempts to kiss her had been interrupted. Now this. She wanted to apologize and beg for forgiveness or at least a chance to start over and let him see who she really was.

"April," Jae said, looking deep into her eyes.

Here it comes, she thought, preparing for him to politely excuse himself from her life forever.

"Yes?"

She still couldn't tell what he was thinking. His expression hadn't changed the whole time they had been together in the hall. He looked a little tired, a little annoyed and a little amused. His stare was so piercing, however, that April started to feel naked and she looked down to make sure her robe was still closed.

With his index finger, he lifted her chin until their eyes met again.

"Do you have your phone?" he asked.

Confused, April shook her head.

"Are you expecting any more ex-boyfriends?"

April smiled. "No."

"Good," Jae said, wrapping an arm around her waist. He pulled her close to him and finally his expression changed. The desire in his eyes made him somehow more appealing and April found herself running her hands up his muscular arms, resting them on his shoulders.

God he smells good, she thought. Why didn't I shower? Oh yeah, Kenny. Ugh, don't think about him right now.

April's internal dialogue distracted her enough that when Jae pushed her against the wall behind her she was taken so off guard she yelped in fear.

"Sorry," he laughed.

"Don't be," she said, hardly able to breathe with Jae's body pressed against hers. He glared at her hungrily, torturing her with his slow, deliberate movements. With his free hand he cupped her cheek, running his thumb across her full bottom lip.

"*Salanghae*," he whispered just before their lips touched. April had no clue what it meant but it was her new favorite word.

She thought that since this was their first kiss she would do her best to suppress the desire that had been building up inside her for the past 24 hours. Jae, though, had no such resolve. His hands wandered her body fearlessly, as though he knew she wouldn't stop him, or he didn't care if she did. Of course, stopping him was furthest from her mind. If anything, she wanted more. More of his mouth, his body, his touch. She wanted to know him. She wanted to talk to him for hours and see the world through his eyes. She wanted to give herself to him completely.

Suddenly though, he pulled away and stepped back into the middle of the hallway, leaving her plastered against the wall. He looked like April felt, as though he was about to explode. His hands were balled into tight fists, his lips pursed, his eyebrows furrowed. April knew he was trying to stop them

from going too far too soon (and too in the hallway), something no man she had ever met had ever done. If she wasn't so disappointed she'd be impressed.

Finally after a long exhale, Jae relaxed and smiled.

"Let me make you breakfast," he offered.

April giggled, so suddenly shy that she didn't know how to respond to his simple yet sweet request.

"Can I make you breakfast?" he asked, leaning forward but keeping his feet firmly planted out of arm's reach.

April nodded emphatically, her curls flinging wildly around her face. Who is this man, she wondered. When she had looked up and saw him standing before her just moments prior, she was sure he'd put an end to their flirtation immediately. The last thing she expected was an impromptu make out session followed by a homemade breakfast.

"Ok," Jae said, taking a giant step towards her and kissing her cheek, "give me half an hour."

April waited until he had turned the corner before she burst into her apartment, stripping as she ran, and jumped into the shower. She knew that what she wore wouldn't matter to Jae. He wasn't shallow like other guys she had dated. Like Kenny. Though she knew he had loved her at the time, he was very critical of her wardrobe. He even went so far as to lay clothes out for her some mornings. She would wake up to find a thoughtfully chosen ensemble and a note, replete with hearts and smiley faces, meant to soften the insult.

"I'd love to see you in this when we meet for lunch."

As much as he hated to admit it, he was definitely his father's son.

Though she knew he didn't care, she still wanted to look good for Jae so she reached into the back of her closet where she kept the Kenny approved clothes. She chose a yellow sundress and a pair of white sandals with straps that wound around her shapely calves. Though she knew now that she didn't have to, she felt the need to compete with HaJoon's effortless beauty and femininity. She left her hair down and as she was drying it she realized she had forgotten to tell Jae that she was vegan. She had been for five years. Her heart broke when she thought of him happily preparing omelets and bacon that she wouldn't eat. Maybe she could, just this once. She would tell him on their second date.

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it," she said to her reflection in the mirror.

Exactly a half hour after she dashed into her apartment she stepped back into the hallway, blushing as she remembered how Jae had pushed her against the wall. She could still feel his hands on her, his weight against her. She never would have guessed that the man she sometimes shared an elevator with and pleasantly greeted at the mailbox would one day throw her against that wall in a moment of passion. He hardly knew her. Is this what he does? Just kissing random women in hallways? Was he making out with other neighbors? The pretty sisters on the second floor or the single mother two doors down?

Ok, hold on, April thought. Are you really getting jealous of imaginary competition for a man you don't have? Get a grip.

"April?"

Jae was walking towards her and she realized she was standing outside her door when she should have been with him. He had changed from the striped pajama pants and T-shirt he had been wearing into a pair of slim blue ankle dress pants and a gray button down shirt. The sight of him took her breath away.

"I...I'm sorry," she stammered, "I just realized I don't know which apartment is yours"

She wasn't lying. She didn't. Had she not been stopped by inane thoughts she would have had no idea on which door to knock.

"Well, come on," Jae said, taking her hand, "I'll show you."

Miss Bailey

Walking into Jae's apartment was like walking into another world. Bookshelves lined the walls and any space not designated to books was covered with beautiful art. The prints looked expensive and original. His furniture however, seemed cozy and worn, like it had been lovingly used in a family home. For some reason, perhaps because he always looked so polished, April expected Jae's taste to be ultra-modern, beautiful yet somehow unpleasant in its starkness. It wasn't like that at all. As soon as she stepped inside, she was filled with a kind of warmth, the warmth you feel when you're coming home.

Jae let go of April's hand and he watched as she wandered through his living room. She didn't know why she felt comfortable doing so. It was as if she was in a museum, but she also felt, as she looked around, that she had walked into Jae's heart. His love of art was evident as well as his love for his mother. All throughout the room were pictures of a beautiful woman. Some grainy photos of a schoolgirl with her parents, and others of a young mother with a smiling boy at her side. Though the years went on and stole her youth, they did nothing to diminish the sparkle in her eyes. A sparkle that April could see was hiding significant pain.

As she made her way around the walls, April found herself drawn to a piece of art. Dramatic splashes of black and red paint speckled with white covered the canvas. It was so moving it nearly brought April to tears.

"You like that one?" Jae asked, wrapping his arms around her from behind. She leaned back, thankful for his embrace.

"I love it," she replied, unable to hide the emotion in her voice.

"I painted it."

April couldn't have been less surprised. The sorrow that she saw in Jae was so perfectly encapsulated in the painting it was as if he had literally poured his soul onto the canvas.

She turned to face him, gazing into his eyes for probably too long, but she didn't care. There was so much to see however it was all hidden in darkness. A sadness the likes of which she had never known. It was painted on the canvas and etched in his heart. The longer she stared the more she felt she knew and he just held her there, allowing her to study his features. She felt as if she was learning more about him just by looking at him. Like she was reading his story in the contours of his face and the story broke her heart.

"Jae," she whispered before pulling him to her.

He nuzzled her neck and her heart filled her chest. She was glad he could find solace in her nearness. She longed to be where he came for repose.

"I knew you would see it," he said about, but not particularly to her.

She felt his lips graze her neck then part as he trailed soft kisses from her clavicle to her jaw. He pulled away and smiled, obviously amused by her expression. She was feeling so many things there was no telling what was showing up on her face.

"Let's eat," he said, leading her to his dining table. April smiled and sat when Jae pulled out her chair. He disappeared into the kitchen and she tried to mentally prepare herself to consume animal flesh. Could she do it? What if she got sick all over his furniture?

"Jae," she called out to him.

"Yes?"

"Where did you get your furniture?" In case I have to replace it.

"Most of the pieces are from my childhood home in Korea. My mother insisted I bring them when I came to America so I'd never feel far from home. It wasn't easy, but I managed to get them here."

He couldn't have said Ikea?

"I have to tell you something," she said. "I should have said it in the hall but, well, you know."

Jae emerged from the kitchen with two plates, placing one in front of April and one at his place at the table.

"Hold on," April said, staring at the plate as Jae stood next to her, smiling, waiting for her to realize what was in front of her. "Is that...?"

"Tofu? Yes. With mushrooms, spinach and soy sausage."

"Are...how did you...?"

"April, you don't have to know someone to know them. Please, enjoy your breakfast."

Jae sat down, smirking, pretending he didn't notice April staring at him. She crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair, waiting for an explanation.

Finally, he looked up.

"Are you afraid I've been stalking you?"

"It crossed my mind."

"I promise, it's nothing so nefarious. I have to admit, though, I never thought I'd tell you this but I suppose now it's unavoidable."

"Tell me what, Jae?"

"It's about Miss Bailey."

Just the mention of her name brought tears to April's eyes. Miss Bailey had been April's downstairs neighbor. They had grown very close over the years. April told Miss Bailey everything. She spent more nights than she could remember sitting with the old woman, drinking tea and commiserating. Her stories were amazing and April couldn't get enough of them. Just after Kenny left, Miss Bailey broke the news to April that she would be moving to a nursing home. She was too old to care for herself alone in her apartment. April offered to help or to hire a nurse, anything to keep her near. She didn't know how she could lose Kenny and Miss Bailey within weeks of each other. But she refused. Her son had picked out a place where she would be tended to properly. April promised to visit as often as she could but only a week after she left, April received the call that she dreaded. Miss Bailey had passed away. She never had the chance to see her again after she left. April was so grief stricken, so filled with remorse that Kenny's leaving hardly compared.

"I know she was your friend," Jae said. "She was my friend, too. She reminded me of my mother. She had me over for dinner at least once a week. She talked about you a lot and worried after your boyfriend left."

"She told you about that?"

"Yes. She was concerned that you wouldn't recover. That you'd wallow in your misery forever."

It was so like Miss Bailey to worry so much about April, especially since she never cared for Kenny. Many of her stories had suspiciously Kenny-like characters who had broken her heart and left her abandoned and alone. She called them cautionary tales. April knew most of the stories weren't true and had been based on well-known movies of Miss Bailey's time, but still she listened. If only April had heeded the advice rather than humor her friend and ignore her warnings, she could have saved herself a lot of heartache.

"What else did she say about me?"

April feared that Jae knew some of the horribly embarrassing details of her life she had shared during their many long evenings of conversation. Miss Bailey knew about her prom dress debacle, the many perm nightmares, the night she lost her virginity! Surely she wouldn't divulge those kinds of secrets to a man April didn't even know.

"Just that you were the most kind, honest, loving person she knew and that you deserved to be happy."

"Oh, well she had a tendency to exaggerate," April said, blushing.

"That she did, but not about you."

"Jae, I'm nothing special."

"No? Tell me, April. When you looked at my painting, what did you see?"

Just thinking of the painting made April's heart race. She had seen painters paint; the passion it takes to create that kind of art is exhausting. She knew Jae's soul was on that canvass, that what she saw, the agonizing despair, was only a fraction of the sorrow within him.

"I saw sadness. Despair. Misery."

Jae smiled as if her answer validated a belief he had about her.

"Miss Bailey knew you would. That's why she asked me to care for you after she was gone. She knew that-"

"She did what?" April asked incredulously. Quickly anger and embarrassment boiled in her veins. "Jae, I don't need a babysitter. So if that's all this is..."

She lowered her head, tears threatening to spill down her cheeks. Why did he have this effect on her? Why were her emotions so raw and exposed

where he was concerned? She should be angry at both Jae and Miss Bailey but somehow, though he had caused the pain, she yearned for him to comfort her.

Jae left his seat and kneeled in front of her, his hands on her lap. She couldn't bring herself to look at him. Their relationship wasn't at all what she thought it was. Their chance encounters now seemed more contrived, their natural chemistry forced by the hand of a dead woman. However, none of those facts changed how she felt about him. She still longed to be with him, to make him smile. To help him forget the pain that plagued him.

"I'm sorry that I misrepresented myself when we first met," Jae said. "Honestly, I didn't intend to go through with Miss Bailey's request. I did, however, want to meet you. I wanted to see for myself if the connection she imagined we would have could be real, the connection I had begun to feel as well for someone I'd never met but somehow I knew. So, when I saw you standing outside last night, it felt like fate. I had to know."

"And?"

"And I've never felt this way. I'm not the type of man to aggressively pursue a woman, and I'm sorry if I came on too strong, but there's something different about you. It's like I can't stay away. I feel foolish but I can't help it. When Miss Bailey first told me about you I had no idea who you were. Now, April, it's like you're all I see."

Thank You

Later, when April would think back on what happened in the next hour it was all a blur, which was a shame because there were some parts she really wanted to remember. Some though, she'd rather forget. She remembered that Jae had kissed her, passionately again. The kind of kiss that melted her knees. As they kissed he easily slipped her dress over her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. She, without looking, was able to undo his belt and pants and they, too, fell to the floor with a clunk. Then somehow as if by magic,

she was lying beside him in his bed. Their clothes were in the living room where they had fallen. Her head was resting on his shoulder, his arms tight around her as if he was afraid she would run away if he let her go.

He kissed her forehead then giggled to himself.

"What?" she asked.

"I'm going to be really late for work."

Shocked, April tried to pull away from him but he held her tight.

"You have to work today?"

"I work every day, April."

"Why didn't you tell me? We could have done this later."

"Honestly, I couldn't wait anymore."

"Jae, you've only waited, like, a day and a half."

"A day and a half," he said, positioning himself over her, "too long."

He lay there staring at her, something she noticed he liked to do, for an impossible amount of time. He studied her every feature. She watched his eyes make their way around her face several times before she blushed and turned away.

"Why are you so shy?"

"I don't know. You're looking at me."

"Because you're beautiful."

"I'm not beautiful, Jae."

Jae mock gasped, clutching his heart dramatically. April laughed and he rolled over next to her, pulling her to him again.

"I wish you could see what I see when I look at you. You'd never make a statement like that again."

April had to wonder what Jae saw when he looked at her. Was it some composite of characters that Miss Bailey had concocted to make him fall for her, sight unseen? Had she painted the picture of a superwoman that April could never live up to? When he saw her in her mundane life, would he lose interest? He had obviously developed real feelings for the woman he believed her to be but how much of that belief was based on who she really was?

"Jae, I'm not..."

"Anything special. I know. You said so earlier."

"I'm really not. I'm afraid you are expecting something from me that I can't be. I'm just a woman. A photographer. A homebody. I wear pajamas all weekend if I don't have to go out. I cry at least once a day because of Instagram stories. I love superhero movies. I dance in the grocery store when a good song comes on. I don't know who you expected but I'm just me."

April half expected Jae to kick her out of his bed, apartment, and life after her confession. She could have gone on for hours listing her quirks but Jae seemed stunned enough with the few she had named. April sat up, taking Jae's silence as a cue to leave. She swung her legs over her side of the bed, regret setting in immediately and hard. Why had she slept with him so soon? She should have known he was too good to be true.

"April," Jae said, shaking his head.

"I know. I'm leaving."

"Lay down," he said sternly.

Hesitantly, April resumed her place next to him, staring up at the ceiling. Again, he positioned himself over her, gently caressing her cheek.

"I don't know what came over me out there," he said, nodding towards the living room. "I'm not like that. I swear. I don't...I don't do this. I'm acting so out of character that I'm scaring myself. I don't regret it though and I hope you don't either because I want this. I want us. I want you. I'll take you to every superhero movie and I'll dance with you at the grocery store. As long as we're together."

"I don't know what to say," April whispered, a wave of emotion stealing her voice.

"Say yes."

April nodded and Jae beamed, pulling her up into his arms. He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her gently.

"*Salanghae*," he said before kissing her again.

"What does that mean?" April asked. "You said it earlier, too."

"Um, I, um..." Jae stammered, suddenly flustered. "It means thank you. It's a way to say that."

"Oh, ok. My first Korean lesson."

"I should really get ready for work," Jae said, abruptly changing the subject.

"Oh, of course," April said, removing herself from his lap. He stood up, unashamed of his naked body, and walked into the bathroom. April, on the other hand, wrapped every available piece of bed clothing around herself before going to the living room to retrieve her dress.

"April?" Jae called from the shower.

"Yes?"

"Have dinner with me tonight?"

April gasped. A real date! Maybe they weren't doing things in the order her mother would approve of, but still, it was a date. Somewhere to begin. So far they hadn't had a proper beginning. They had jumped right into the middle by jumping right into bed. She wasn't proud of that fact but something about Jae was so magnetic she could hardly help herself. She wanted more, though. She wanted to hear his life story. To know what made him laugh. Mostly she wanted to know what had caused the darkness in his eyes. Where did the pain originate? She may not find out in one night but this beginning gave her hope that in time he might divulge his secrets to her.

"How's eight o'clock?" Jae asked.

"Fine," April responded, though something was nagging at her, like an itch she couldn't scratch. What was she forgetting?

Kenny! Of course. His ever impeccable timing was casting a shadow on her otherwise beautifully sunny day. She would just have to cancel. But how? After he left, she had angrily deleted every text and e-mail he ever sent her and set out to purposely forget all his information in order to avoid sending angry messages to him in the middle of the night. She could call his father's office but she was sure he wouldn't be eager to offer her any information. She would just have to go through with her plans with Kenny, which would mean turning down Jae's offer.

"I hate to ask but can I get a raincheck?"

April cringed waiting for a reply. Jae turned off the shower and emerged from the bathroom. His hair was slicked back, water dripped down his neck

and onto his chest. He was holding a towel and began drying himself, waiting to hear her explanation. She was struck both by his beauty and by the eerie sense of déjà vu she was feeling. How many wet men was she going to talk to today?

Jae looked understandably disappointed. She was blowing him off for their first date. A chance to be seen in public together, to make it official. She would have to have a good explanation, too bad she didn't.

"You see, Kenny and I..."

The words had barely made it out of her mouth and she knew it was a mistake. Jae's demeanor changed so quickly that April was almost frightened. His icy glare stopped her mid-sentence.

"Kenny, your ex-boyfriend?" Jae growled.

April nodded.

"Kenny, the man who walked out on you a year ago?"

"Yes, but..."

"Kenny, the drunk guy from last night? That Kenny?"

"Jae," April said, taking a step towards him, "I know it sounds crazy but it's just dinner. He just wants to talk to me. We have a history."

"No, he has a history of breaking your heart. I don't understand why you need to see him or why you would want to for that matter."

"Look, it's..."

"Do you still having feelings for him?"

"Of course not," April replied immediately, recognizing that any hesitation after a question like that would be disastrous. What a ridiculous notion. Any feelings she had for Kenny were long gone. Just because she had gotten over her anger didn't mean she wanted him back. Just her ability to say as much to Jae solidified that fact in her mind. She couldn't lie to him. Kenny was her past and she'd make sure that both he and Jae knew she was leaving him there. For the sake of her future.

Her answer seemed to relax Jae a bit. The anger was gone from his eyes but he still seemed different. More closed off than he had been before. Stung by the sudden chill around them, April approached him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"How about," she said, kissing him softly, "I meet you after dinner. We can go out for drinks. I won't be late."

"Alright."

He pulled her to him, holding her against his naked body. She stared at him and couldn't help but again see the pain in his eyes. She hoped she wasn't causing him more, adding to the sorrow already ingrained in him. His slight grin took away most of her concern. The rest melted with a kiss.

As April walked back to her apartment she couldn't help but smile. Jae was exactly what she needed. He was sweet, romantic, and crazy about her. After a year of thinking she was never going to find love it seemed to have landed on her doorstep.

I Love You

April tried to work, she really did. She sat at her computer with every intention of editing the hundreds of pictures she had taken at the wedding. But she couldn't keep her mind from wandering back to Jae. She remembered him holding her on the sofa. It had only been a day ago. His hair was a mess, clothes disheveled, but he was still perfect. She knew he must have been able to feel her heart pounding, its pace quickening purely because of his touch. She didn't know then about Miss Bailey's plan or about Jae's intense sadness, but she remembered looking back at him the first night before she got on the elevator. He was standing alone in the moonlight, his heart broken. Then she realized that perhaps Miss Bailey hadn't been thinking only of April when she asked Jae to look after her. Maybe she realized that April would be good for him as well. That they each had what the other needed and without a push from her they would go through life on parallel paths, never to cross without influence from an outside force.

Just as that realization hit her, the alarm on her phone went off. It was time to start getting ready for dinner already! She refocused her attention on the computer screen. Her mouse pointer still hovered over the first picture.

"I didn't even click on it!"

She would have tried to hurry and do something so that she didn't feel the entire day was totally wasted but she didn't want to compromise the quality of her work. Anyway, she knew exactly how long it took to get ready to go out with Kenny. About an hour longer than it took to get ready to go anywhere else. And he would be exactly on time yet somehow already impatient. He was a consummate professional, even in his personal life.

Also, she wanted to get ready in enough time to be outside waiting when he arrived. Best not to let him get comfortable being in her apartment again. If

she had her way, this would be the last time she ever saw Kenny Mitchell.

At 7:45 April stepped out of her building, the cold wind swirling around her. Summer had given way to fall so abruptly she was still shocked by the nip in the air. She wrapped her arms around herself and tapped her toes on the cement to warm up her leg muscles. She was wearing the one outfit she had that Kenny had never seen her in. It had been a birthday gift from Miss Bailey. She wanted April to wear it on her next date. Little did Miss Bailey know her next date would be with Jae nearly a year later.

Oh, Jae. Thinking of him took some of the bite out of the air as memories of their steamy morning replayed in her mind. His touch, the way he looked, everything about him seemed to speak to her and it told her that she was who he had been looking for. It was a strange sensation, feeling so very wanted. Knowing that she wasn't going to be lonely anymore was such a welcome relief. The burden of loneliness had been weighing on her so heavily the past few months she feared she'd get so used to it that, even if someone did come along, she would prefer to be alone and not take a chance on love. Thankfully, her bitterness hadn't fully set in and she was open to Jae's rather aggressive advances.

April was smiling to herself, lost in thought when she heard the rumble of a sports car engine from down the street. A black Lamborghini rolled to a stop in front of the building and the door swung open. She knew that no one in her building owned such a car, so she assumed, correctly, that Kenny had arrived. He stepped out of the car and turned to her, smiling a radiant smile that made her blush. He still had it. He was so charming and sure of himself it was hard not to be attracted to him. He closed the door and as if in slow motion, he walked towards her. His dark blue suit seemed to stretch around his muscular frame, making every flex visible. Owning a gym had been good for him in many ways and April had to force herself to stop staring and act cool as he approached. All she needed was for him to think she was interested in him in any way. If that happened he would never stop trying to get her back.

"April," he said, his smile fading into a sultry grin.

"Hey, what's up?" April replied, trying to seem uninterested without appearing as if she was trying to do so.

"You look...amazing."

"Thank you."

If anyone else had paid her that compliment she would have returned it, especially if they looked as good as Kenny. But he didn't need her approval. He knew he looked good and he knew she thought he looked good, even without her saying so. That was Kenny. He was so confident but somehow also humble. He was arrogant yet down to earth. He was a paradox and for a time April tried to understand him but nothing she learned in high school psychiatry class covered the likes of him. So, she lived in a constant state of surprise, never quite knowing what to expect from him.

"Shall we?"

Kenny offered her his arm and she hesitantly took it, still nervous to be so close to him. He was treating their outing like a date and that was the last thing she wanted from him. She had finally found peace with him and the situation but she wasn't trying to rekindle the past. It was over. Strangely, had Kenny showed up in her life just three days earlier, she's not sure how she would have reacted. No matter how over him she may have been, the way he handled the situation still stung. Somehow, knowing the truth about why he left didn't help as much as he may have thought it would. Even as she walked beside him there was still a kernel of pain in her heart. No matter the reason, he had left her broken hearted and alone and she didn't know if she could ever fully forgive him for that. She could get past it but she knew it was best if, after this night, they were out of each other's lives for good.

Kenny opened the car door for April and unabashedly watched her legs as she pulled them in, crossing them at the ankles. She watched him watch her

and when he realized he was caught cleared his throat and closed the door, rushing around to the driver's side.

"So," April said when they were buckled up, "where are you taking me?"

Sounding like kidnap victim was not her intention but was somehow apropos.

"There's this Korean place in Annandale that I really like, if you're up for it. I checked and they have a lot of vegan options."

Stop being so considerate, April thought. It will get you nowhere. Going to a Korean restaurant was a great idea, though. It gave her a reason to bring up Jae and to let Kenny know she was taken. She had to admit though, having Kenny look at her the way he was made her happy and gave her back some of the self esteem she had lost when he left. She couldn't help but wonder would he have walked away so easily if she was like one of the women his father had repeatedly tried to saddle him with? Could he have abandoned blue eyes and porcelain skin? Would he have fought for someone like that?

"Sounds great," she replied, pushing those thoughts out of her mind. She had no reason to believe any of that was true. Kenny often mentioned how much he loved her curls and caramel skin but it had been engrained in her from youth that she was only pretty "for a black girl." So because he professed to love her full lips and shapely hips, when she was told he left her for an ex-girlfriend, all of whom looked like calendar models, the confidence he had instilled in her came tumbling down and she had only just begun to rebuild it. This time though, it didn't hinge on acceptance from a man. She was finding it within herself.

"Ok," Kenny said, putting the car in gear.

April could feel Kenny's apprehension as they rode in silence, the air between them heavy with unspoken words. She knew he didn't ask her to dinner not to talk to her. The question was when. She looked over at him

quickly while tucking a wayward curl behind her ear. His lips were pressed together as if opening them would unleash an eruption of words he couldn't control.

"So," April said, not quite sure what to say next, "how are John and his wife?"

"Great. Still honeymooning."

"Oh, where did they go?"

"Paris."

Of course they did.

"Sounds lovely."

"Yep."

How far was Annandale, exactly? Trying to get Kenny to talk was like squeezing water from a rock. He was usually so verbose, talking at length to anyone about anything. He had opinions on almost every topic. She remembered mentioning plastic surgery to him just once in passing and sitting through a 45-minute diatribe on inner beauty and the plastic surgery industry feeding on the insecurities of women. She had the feeling now, though, if she brought up a subject he had felt passionately about in the past, she'd get maybe an "uh-huh" out of him, at most.

Finally, they pulled into a parking lot.

"We're here," Kenny said, suddenly charming again. "Don't move."

He got out of the car and walked to her side to open the door. He gave her his hand and she stepped out. Kenny closed the door but didn't let go of her hand. He entwined his fingers into hers and started to walk to the restaurant. She was so stunned she almost forgot to follow him until he pulled her

along. They walked hand in hand through the door and were greeted by the maître d.

"Good evening. Name, please."

"Mitchell," Kenny said.

"Table for two, this way."

Still hand in hand, they followed the man to their table. Finally, she was able to free herself as he pulled out her chair.

"Here are your menus. Your server will be right with you."

The man placed a menu in front of each of them and April saw an opportunity to use the small amount of Korean she had learned from Jae.

"*Salanghae*," she said, smiling.

The maître d furrowed his eyebrows and bowed before hurrying off.

Kenny watched as the man ran to a waiter whispering, obviously impressed, then turned to April, a confused look on his face.

"Why did you just say that?"

"Oh, that's Korean. I learned it from my new friend, Jae. It means thank you."

"Well, your friend taught you wrong, that doesn't mean thank you."

"How do you know?"

"Because Janice is always in the office of the gym watching those Korean dramas. *Salanghae* doesn't mean thank you, it means I love you."

If April had been drinking she would have spit it all over the table. How could it mean I love you? Jae had said it to her twice. If that was true not only did he love her but he lied about it. She didn't know which was more upsetting.

"You're going to love this food. It's amazing," Kenny was saying, but April was barely paying attention.

Am I going to love it or am I going to be thankful for it, she angrily asked herself.

Maybe Kenny was mistaken. He doesn't know everything, she thought. April quickly pulled out her phone and googled "I love you in Korean." She gasped when the word popped up before her. "*Salanghae*."

"Are you ok?" Kenny asked.

"Yes," she said slamming her phone onto the table. "Let's order."

Soju

"So," Kenny began as they buckled their seatbelts, "what's bothering you?"

Dinner had gone relatively well, all things considered. The talk remained small and comfortable. They discussed work, weather, and politics, something on which they had always agreed. Kenny knew which topics to avoid to keep things civil and when he felt the conversation approaching one he deftly changed the subject.

"What do you mean?" April asked. "Nothing."

"Three empty bottles of Soju say different. I know you. You only drink when you're upset."

April rolled her eyes, not because he was wrong but because she was annoyed that he was right again and that he really did still know her so well. She would rather think that he remembered what he used to know. She was far from the same person he left a year before. Of course some things would have remained the same, such as her bad habit of turning to alcohol as a numbing agent. And as irritating as it was, she had to face facts. She had done a lot more drinking than usual. The situation with Jae had gone from dreamy to creepy in no time flat. How could he say he loved her? They didn't even know each other. I don't even know his last name, she thought. Do I know my last name? Huh, Soju is amazing.

"Was it something I did? Maybe this wasn't..."

"No, Kenny, it wasn't you. I actually had a good time tonight."

Kenny sighed, obviously relieved he hadn't driven her to drink again.

"I'm glad," Kenny said, starting the car.

April closed her eyes and relaxed into the cozy heated seat. The alcohol was making her feel weightless, as if she could float around the inside of the car if the seatbelt wasn't holding her down.

"So, who is he?"

Slowly, April opened her eyes, afraid she had been talking in her sleep, though she was fairly certain she hadn't been sleeping.

"Who's who?"

"The man you've been thinking about all night."

"What? Man? Thinking?"

"Yes, April. It's the Korean guy from your building, isn't it? The one you were with last night."

"You remember that?"

"Vaguely. It's hard to forget seeing a man almost kiss the woman you...let go."

"Kenny..."

"What did he do?"

"Nothing. It was nothing."

"It better be."

Even drunk, April was shocked by Kenny's tone. Who was this man beside her suddenly so willing to stand up for her when a year ago he left her because his father told him to? Where was this Kenny back then? She wanted to ask him but she felt like there was something else she was

supposed to be doing. She knew she was definitely supposed to say something to him. Something important. But thinking was too hard, so she stopped and relaxed again, closing her eyes, allowing the alcohol to numb her body and mind. She felt herself begin to drift. Not to sleep but to what felt like another consciousness. As if she was looking in at her life from the outside. The confusion she felt at dinner was like a distant memory. Everything seemed so clear. Why not let Jae love her? Why not love him in return? Who's to say what it takes to love someone or how long. His feelings were obviously deep and she wasn't about to turn him away. She was ready to accept what he had to offer. She'd have to tell him as soon as she got home.

"April," Kenny was saying as he gently shook her shoulder, "we're here."

"That was fast."

She smiled up at him, now feeling the full effects of the Soju. She giggled when he unbuckled her seatbelt for no reason other than she expected to float away. Instead, she slumped against the door.

"Stupid gravity," she mumbled.

"Oopsie daisy," Kenny said, pulling her back to a seated position. Quickly, he rushed around to her door and opened it getting a shocked reaction from her, thinking he was in two places at once.

"Yep, I'm over here now."

"Yes you are," she laughed, falling into his arms.

April felt so light it was hard for her to understand why Kenny was having such a hard time getting her into her building. With all his muscles he should have been able to lift her easily but he struggled to get her into the elevator then out again when it reached her floor.

He propped her against the wall and dug in his pocket for his keyring.

"You still have a key?" she asked, not nearly half as angrily as she should have.

Kenny nodded and turned to her, the same pain she saw in him at the hotel again evident on his face.

"Why are you sad?" she asked, absent-mindedly touching his cheek. "We're happy now. Right?"

"Sure."

"Oh, Kenny. It's ok."

April stood close to him, her wobbly legs barely able to hold her up. When she began to fall, he grabbed her by the waist and pulled her to him.

"See, you are strong. I knew it!"

"April, I miss you," Kenny blurted out, squeezing her tighter as he spoke. "I was wrong to let you go."

April didn't know what to say. She had known going into this date that Kenny wanted her back. But she had Jae now; she wasn't single anymore. Oh, that's what I wanted to say before, she thought. She had been so stupidly sidetracked by Jae's confession and so much Soju.

"Kenny, no. I have a boyfriend."

"You didn't yesterday. I was in your life for a year, April. I love you. I have always loved you."

There was so much April wanted to say and had she been sober she really would have let Kenny have it. She would have told him that if he loved her he never would have let her go. She would have told him that they could have worked it out then but now it was too late. Jae loved her and she

wanted him to. But she was tired and weak and being held by him was the only thing keeping her upright.

"Kenny..."

"Just give me a chance," he whispered. "Please."

She wasn't going to say yes. She would want the record to show that her answer would have been no. Even if they had been alone in the hall the entire time.

"April?"

She turned to see Jae standing at the end of the hall and she, in her inebriated state, took a while to figure out why he looked so hurt. Finally, she pushed herself out of Kenny's arms and lurched towards him.

"Jae!"

He turned to walk away and she stumbled after him. He stopped at his door and turned to her.

"It's not what it looks like," she said, hating herself for using that line.

"Oh? You weren't standing in the hall in your ex-boyfriend's arms? He wasn't confessing his love to you?"

"I had nothing to do with that."

"But you had to see him tonight. You had to know or have some idea about how he felt."

Yes, she knew but her intent was to shut it down. This wasn't supposed to go this far and it wouldn't have if it hadn't been for...

"At least he confesses in English."

"What?"

"*Salanghae*, Jae? You've been saying to me undercover."

Jae's face turned red. April didn't want to be doing this in the hallway. Everything was spiraling out of control. She wanted to stop, take him inside, and talk but he looked so hurt by her words, again. He simply shook his head and went inside, closing the door tight on her and their relationship.

April didn't pass out right then, she went inside, followed by Kenny who was a witness to the whole embarrassing ordeal. She ignored his presence until he spoke, asking her if she was ok. She wasn't by any means but she nodded and went into her room. She wanted to go full-on reality star and bang on Jae's door, creating a scene until he answered or the police were called but she had a feeling she'd be arrested long before he let her in.

Was this really over so quickly? Was she so bad at relationships that she managed to kill one before it had a chance to start? Maybe she didn't deserve someone like Jae. Sweet and kind and artistic. Maybe she should accept Kenny's offer. Take him back and be exactly where she was a year ago. That prospect made her head hurt worse than the hangover she already felt coming on.

Perfect/Regret

Despite, or possibly because of everything, April slept like a log. A snoring, drooling log. She had somehow gotten turned around during the night and her feet were resting comfortably on the pillow, her head hanging off the end of the bed. Her hair was an absolute mess, wound around her head like cotton candy around a stick. Her head was pounding to the beat of some kind of internal death metal music.

"Here."

She tried to look around to see where the voice was coming from but all she could see was hair and blanket.

"Who's there?" she asked, trying to clear her vision and reaching out into the abyss of her bedroom.

"It's me," Kenny said, grabbing her hand and pulling her up.

"You're still here?"

"No, I'm a figment of your Soju soaked imagination. Drink this."

"You're one to talk, Mr. Passing Out on My Lawn."

He handed her a glass of water ignoring her snide comment and she gulped it down like she'd been stranded in the desert for a month. He stood with his hands on his hips, watching her, not even trying to hide his disgust.

"Ok, I know," she said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "I'm pathetic."

"I wouldn't say pathetic. Booze fueled, maybe. Insane, definitely."

"Thanks."

"Look," Kenny said, sitting beside her, "I don't know what that was all about last night and it's none of my business, either, but if you care about this guy, don't let him go. Believe me, you'll regret it."

"I might not have a choice."

It was beginning to set in that she may never be able to fix what she had so carelessly broken. She let her fears and insecurities turn something beautiful into a mess. And now that she had decided to let Jae love her, she was afraid he no longer wanted to.

"I," April said, standing, trying to pretend her head and heart weren't killing her, "have pictures to edit."

She left Kenny sitting on her bed and went to her computer. She found the photos of the wedding and began working. Kenny stayed and offered her food and drink at regular intervals, which she refused. Hours passed and her eyes never left the screen, her mind never wandered from the task at hand. She reasoned that if she could just sit there forever she'd never have to face her reality. Unfortunately, she fell short of forever and the last edit of the last picture was complete. She exported the pictures and e-mailed them to the planner who would, in turn, send them to the bride.

The usual feeling of accomplishment she felt when finishing a large assignment was tempered by the hollow feeling in her chest. She sighed heavily and tried to think of something else to do. She had to get out, being in her apartment only reminded her of Jae. If things went on like this she would have to move.

"Let's go out," Kenny said cheerfully, emerging from April's bedroom where he had made her bed and at some point vacuumed.

He had always had this annoying habit of reading her mind. When they were together she liked to think it was a sign that they were linked by some telepathic love bond. Now, she was sure he was the devil.

"I don't want to," she lied.

"Come on," he said, pulling her up by her wrists. He pushed her into the bathroom and closed the door behind her. "Don't come out until your hair is curly again."

That could take months, she said to herself as she stared at her reflection in the mirror. What had become of her? Kenny was her savior? Jae hated her, presumably. Her hair was becoming a metaphor for her life, twisted and out of control and there wasn't enough conditioner in the world to fix it.

Kenny's idea of going out was going to his gym. April had thrown on some clothes she wasn't entirely sure were clean, threw her hair up into a bun and reluctantly followed Kenny to his car. She stared out the window as he drove, trying to force all thoughts from her head. They didn't speak but she could feel him looking at her at stop signs and red lights. Sometimes for so long that people in cars behind him were forced to blow their horns to get him to move when the light turned green. He waved apologetically and turned his attention back to the road.

"We're here," he said. "We don't have to stay long, I just need to take care of some things."

"Why did you bring me here?" April whined.

"Would you rather be at home alone?"

April didn't answer because she knew Kenny knew he was right and confirmation would only feed his ego. She shrugged and he smiled, leading her inside.

She didn't know why she was surprised by the sleek interior of the gym. Elite Fitness was a very fitting name. Everything in it screamed Kenny. Everywhere she looked there was a eucalyptus tree or some expensive looking piece of Asian sculpture. He walked through, high fiving and shaking hands with his employees and customers. Everyone seemed to love him. April always knew Kenny wasn't cut out for the corporate world. This was more his element. Being creative and working with people, not above them.

"Stay right here," he directed her before disappearing into a room she assumed was his office. She expected him to return with a laptop and maybe some folders full of whatever papers a gym owner would have. Instead, he came out wearing shorts and a tank top. He smiled at her and motioned with his head to follow him. Curiosity and genuine intrigue quickened her steps as she strode beside him.

They entered another room and were met by a dozen or so pregnant women.

"Hello, ladies. Sorry I'm late. This is my friend, April."

"Hi April," they all said simultaneously.

April waved shyly and looked up at Kenny, waiting for instruction.

"You can sit over there or you can join us," he offered.

"Yeah, join us, you'll love it. Kenny's the best!"

Fearing a pregnant mob, April found a space amongst the women who clapped and hooted for her. Kenny led the class in some simple stretches and low impact aerobics and though he looked like they shouldn't be, his movements were fluid and graceful. He made his way around the room, checking their posture, making sure to make contact with each of them so no one felt left out. A few of them blushed when he placed his hand on their back or shoulder and April couldn't help but smile. When he got to her she expected him to pass her by since she wasn't paying for the class and didn't

really care if she was doing it correctly. Instead, he leaned down and whispered, "perfect" into her ear.

At the end of class, a group of women surrounded Kenny and before she could escape a few stopped April as she tried to rush to the door.

"So," a redhead with a cute face full of freckles said. "I always wondered if Kenny had a girlfriend."

"You're so pretty," said another woman. "Isn't she pretty?"

"Thank you, but I'm not Kenny's girlfriend."

"Are you sure?" the redhead asked, incredulously.

"Fairly certain, yes."

"Well," said a woman who had what April could only assume was a Transylvanian accent, "maybe you should be. He was staring at you the whole class."

The women finally began to disperse and April was again alone with Kenny.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

April nodded, smiling.

"What?"

"Nothing. You're just full of surprises, that's all."

When he dropped her off, Kenny started to unbuckle but April stopped him, placing her hand over his.

"You don't have to walk me in," she said. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure? I can come in for a little bit, make you some soup."

April shook her head, genuinely touched by Kenny's kindness. She didn't know his motives, if he had any, but she was grateful to him for being there when she needed him and as much as she hated to admit it, she did need him. Before she got out of the car he handed her his business card.

"Call if you need me," he instructed.

She didn't look back but she knew Kenny had stayed and watched her until she got into the building. Not two minutes after she closed her apartment door behind her, there was a soft knock. She almost broke her ankle tripping over her shoe trying to run to answer it. She ripped it open and there stood Jae. He was wringing his hands, looking distraught and eager.

"Jae," April said, his name already feeling strange on her lips.

There was a distance between them that couldn't be measured in inches, feet or even miles. He seemed guarded and when she moved towards him, he moved away.

She knew he didn't want to come in, didn't want coffee or anything she had to offer. This was his goodbye.

"Look, April, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I was saying...that..."

"That you love me?"

"Yes. It was a mistake. You don't even know me. I was just feeling lonely, that's all. I'm sorry."

He may as well have punched her. In fact, she would have preferred it. Then her stomach would have a physical cause for the knot growing inside it threatening to make her sick. Even if she could think of something to say,

there was no way she could form the words. She just stood in her doorway trying to come to terms with her new place in Jae's life, as a regret.

Before she could respond he mumbled something about having to work and took off for the elevator. April fought her desire to run after him and tell him that loving her was ok. That she had decided it was what she wanted. That she needed another chance. He had already given her more chances than she deserved. She calmly closed the door and picked up her phone from the back of the sofa. She dialed slowly, giving herself a chance to reconsider after every number.

It rang only once before being answered.

"April? What's up?"

"Kenny, can you come over?"

"I'll be right there."

Forgiveness

It's amazing what time can do. How it can heal or harden a heart. There's no formula, rule, or logic that can rationalize how much time it takes to move on from loss or heartbreak. It's not determined by the depth or manner of the wound as kind words can be just as lethal as cruel ones depending on the context in which they are spoken. And the smallest scratch can, with time, widen into a soul-swallowing chasm.

If one is lucky, time will help them forget. The sorrows suffered at the hands of a lover seem inconsequential when compared against the scope of an otherwise happy life. And when we forget we find that forgiveness, fight against it as we may, becomes easier and almost necessary.

"Do you still like extra butter?"

"April, of course." Kenny laughed as though her question was ridiculous.

"I don't know, with all this going on I thought you might not," she replied, motioning to his pecs, abs and arms. "What was I talking about?"

Kenny laughed. "Just go get the popcorn, I'll save the seats," he said, handing her a fifty dollar bill.

April smiled and turned to the concession counter. The line was as long as she expected it to be during the opening of a summer blockbuster. The superhero movie of the century. She had been planning to see it on opening night for over a year. She tried to play cool when Kenny suggested they go together. He knew she loved the genre and though he cared so little about any man in tights, he was there with her. Supporting her sick obsession. He had been there a lot lately. Supporting her. Eight months had passed since her painful breakup with Jae. If she could call it a breakup. They hadn't even been on one date. Still, not seeing where it could have gone, what they

could have meant to each other was painful nonetheless. After which they had again become strangers.

First, they avoided each other. She once went a week without getting her mail because he was in the hall or waiting for the elevator every time she tried. Instead, she just quietly closed the door hoping he didn't notice her to avoid any kind of confrontation. After a while, though, she stopped caring. She was able to walk past him and not yearn for him to call out to her. She could ride in an elevator with him, staring at her phone until they got off and she went to her door, never once looking at him. She was aware of him though. Aware of his eyes on her. But she pretended not to notice, laughing at nothing until she was out of his sight.

Kenny was such a comfort. In the days just after the fight, he helped keep her mind off Jae. He invited her to his exercise classes, stoking rumors among all the pregnant women. He took her to dinner, to the theater, shopping. Pretty much anything to keep her from turning into a shut-in. Which is exactly what she would have become had it not been for him. He was very present and very welcome. She had nearly forgotten all the anguish he himself had caused her. It could have seemed as if he was doing a good deed to absolve himself of guilt. But he wasn't. He was doing it because he cared about her. He knew her, even after having been away from her for so long. He still understood her. She didn't know what she would have done had he not been there.

April still stood in line, even after letting her thoughts wander. She had moved slightly but she wasn't worried about missing anything. She had forced Kenny to get them there an hour early. She still had plenty of time to get popcorn, get to her seat and not miss one minute of action-packed adventure. She watched excitedly as the menu screens above the snack bar flashed pictures of the stars of the movie advertising a special. Two large popcorns and two large drinks for only \$30. That was quite a savings. She would get that when she finally reached the cashier and force Kenny to let her have his commemorative cup when he was done with it.

April was starting to get a bit sleepy when suddenly a laugh pierced the relative tranquility of the lobby. The laugh of a woman trying too hard. April rolled her eyes so glad she wasn't on a date. She looked in the direction of the laugh and saw a familiar-looking woman in the line next to hers. One she had seen before but couldn't remember where. She was wearing a very tight dress and very high heels, taking her 5'3" all the way up to around 5'9". April sighed and turned her attention back to her line which was beginning to move. When she finally reached the counter and made her order the woman in the heels was at the counter next to her. She was hanging all over a man who April couldn't see but he must have been a stand-up comedian because his date never stopped giggling. He took his popcorns and turned towards April causing her to nearly drop hers. The standup comedian was Jae.

Trying to make a quick getaway while holding two giant popcorns and sodas wasn't easy. She ran away, eyes down and barreled headfirst into a door, dropping a popcorn. She was going to just let it go and keep running when a voice from behind her stopped her in her tracks.

"Here, let me."

She turned around and found Jae picking up her popcorn. He obviously didn't know it was her until he stood up because he dropped it again when he saw her.

"Thanks, but I got it."

"April," Jae said as she picked up the bucket, shuffling her other purchases in her arms.

"Come on, babe."

The woman in the heels walked over and grabbed Jae by the arm. Now April recognized her.

"HaJoon," she said, shocked.

"Ne?"

Jae whispered to her in Korean and she walked away, sulking.

"It's not what you think."

"I don't think it's anything, Jae. Even if I did, I'd have no right to. Enjoy your date."

April tried to walk away with as much dignity as she could muster with popcorn and cherry Pepsi spilling from her arms with every step. Be dignified, be dignified she repeated in her head though that ship had sailed and sunk.

When she finally got inside the theater Kenny was waving wildly to her from a seat in the middle of a row.

"Really?"

She pardon and excuse me'd her way to her seat and plopped down in a huff.

"I could have gotten the snacks, April," Kenny said, noticing her bad mood.

"It's not that. Jae's here on a date."

"Where?" Kenny asked, looking all around as if he was going to jump up and defend April's honor.

"Calm down. He's in the lobby. Anyway, he has every right to date, Kenny."

"Yeah, well, he had to know you'd be here tonight."

As the lights went down April tried to think if she ever mentioned to Jae that she liked these types of movies. She didn't know, but if Jae had shown

up with a date knowing she would see them there he was a jerk anyway. Who cares? she thought. I'm just going to forget about him and enjoy the movie. At least she tried, but HaJoon's voice kept ringing in her ears. Come on, babe. How irritating.

"Don't let it ruin your night. You've been waiting forever to see this movie," Kenny whispered.

"Nothing is ruining my night. I'm fine."

"You're fine, huh? Where's your straw?"

April looked around for the straw. She didn't remember ever having it as her soda sat in the cup holder untouched. Kenny took her arm and raised it, revealing to her the straw balled up her clenched fist.

"I like them this way," she said, unwrapping the mangled straw and jamming it into her soda.

Kenny rolled his eyes and turned his attention to the screen.

April didn't know why she was so angry. She had gotten over Jae. She was in a good place. She was seeing the last installment of her favorite movie franchise. She was supposed to be happy and she had been until she saw her. Why did Jae's questionable taste in women have any effect on her now? It doesn't, she decided as the lights went down and the previews began. She got cozy in her seat next to Kenny and got ready to enjoy three hours of action.

11:25

Kenny dropped April off and left, going who knows where. He never really talked about what he did when they weren't together. She assumed he worked out and did Kenny like things such as ironing his sheets or giving himself a manicure. She realized as she walked to her building that when she thought of what Kenny did when he wasn't with her, she never thought about him dating. Not that she would care. It just never came to mind. She tried to imagine Kenny on a date and laughed out loud. It had taken her so long to get used to his eccentricities and his somewhat controlling nature. Though he seemed to have calmed down quite a bit, he was still Kenny.

April shook her head clear of thoughts of Kenny and rushed into her building and out of the mid-summer humidity. She couldn't wait to relax in the cool air conditioning of her apartment, sipping ice water out of her super hero cup and listening to her favorite smooth jazz station on the radio. However, as soon as she opened the door to the building she wished she hadn't. Jae stood at the elevator, alone, shockingly. No high-heeled hussy at his side.

Somehow their meeting at the movie theater had hit the reset button on her discomfort around him and she looked for a way to escape but there was none. With nowhere to flee, she stomped defiantly towards him and stood three feet behind him on the other side of the hallway, looking everywhere but in his direction. She wished she could end their stalemate. She wished she could talk to him but every time she thought she might be able to, her nerves took over. Even when they were at the movie theater she had been afraid to engage in any conversation, tripping over herself to get away from him. She just wanted to get away.

"Did you enjoy the movie?" Jae asked suddenly without turning around.

April didn't answer, as she wasn't sure he was talking to her until he turned his head to the side, still not making eye contact.

"April, did you enjoy the movie?"

It was the best thing EVER!

"It was ok," she replied coolly.

Finally, the elevator doors opened and Jae stepped inside. He turned to her and held the door open with his hand. She would have been happy to wait for him to ride up alone but she knew he would have stood there all night waiting for her to board with him. I'm really going to have to start taking the stairs, she thought to herself as she entered the elevator.

April stared at her shoes as the elevator slowly crawled to the third floor. She couldn't remember it ever going so slow. Finally, the doors opened and April nonchalantly rushed out ahead of Jae and around the corner to her apartment. She hoped to be inside before he made his way to her but she fumbled with her keys so long that by the time she turned the knob he was behind her.

"It was nice seeing you," he said.

April spun around a wave of sudden emotion burning inside her.

"It was nice seeing me? Jae, you've seen me hundreds of times in the past eight months. You've spoken not a word to me, so why tonight? Why not walk past me the way you always do? Is it because you were on a date with HaJoon?"

"April, we weren't on a date, ok? I didn't want to go to the movies by myself so HaJoon offered to go with me. When she saw you, I don't know, I guess she thought it would help me if she acted that way. I'm not at all romantically interested in her."

"Help you how, by trying to make me jealous?"

"Were you jealous?" Jae asked, somewhat hopefully.

Why did he have to ask her that? Of course she was jealous. HaJoon was gorgeous and thin and confident. Seeing her by Jae's side made her feel more inadequate than she usually felt. She was spending time with him when April couldn't, going out with him when April never had. Jealous was an understatement. He thought Jae had replaced her and it broke her heart.

"Yes, I was jealous. Ok? I hated seeing you with her. I know I have no right to be jealous or angry or anything towards you, but I was. Why did you even say anything? Why not just let me think it was a date?"

Jae looked around as if the answer to her question was written somewhere on the walls. Finally his gaze settled back on her.

"I don't want you to think that I was with a woman."

"Why does it matter if I think that?"

"I just don't want you to."

With that, Jae walked away. His shoulders slumped, head down. April was slightly stunned by his admission and by his willingness to tell her how he was feeling. After eight long months of silence, a silence that he initiated, he must have been tired of holding in words that so desperately needed to be said. Had he been waiting for her to make the first move? She couldn't imagine Jae, the man who had pushed her up against the wall, being afraid to tell her how he was feeling. She had assumed that the anger of finding her in Kenny's arms was what kept him from coming back to her, but perhaps he had been more hurt than angry. He hadn't told her that confessing his love was a mistake because he didn't love her, but because he did and he didn't want to be hurt by her more than he already had been. He had no idea that she would never intentionally hurt him.

April sat on the edge of her bed for what felt like an hour that night, just thinking. She thought back to a year ago and how different her life had been then. At the time she was still working on getting over Kenny. Jae was just the guy yelling into his phone in the hall who shyly smiled at her in passing. She had forgotten how he smiled at her before they met. It was so slight that it was nearly undetectable, but it was there. He had been instructed by their friend to fall in love with her and he didn't even know who she was. Not until the night they met. The night that made her believe in love again.

She had never dared admit it to herself because it was so crazy, but she had fallen in love with Jae. In the few short hours they spent together she knew. His magnetism, charm, sadness. All of who he was fit so perfectly into the emptiness in her heart. It was there that she wanted him to live, safe from the pain of his life, the trauma of his past. Luckily, the connection between them was deep but it was also brief and though the pain April felt when it ended was significant, she hadn't loved him long enough to mourn as she had for Kenny. She also couldn't feel the same way about Jae leaving her though, because it was more than partially her fault that he was out of her life.

April glanced at the clock on her nightstand. It was already 11:25. The slow summer sun seemed to have just dipped below the horizon but it had actually been hours since its last ray streaked across the sky. Finally laying down, she covered herself to her chin and stared out the window. Below her, the city was still alive and bustling. She lived a few blocks from any main road but the ambient sound soared through the musty summer air and into her window. She smiled, happy for everyone who had someone to be out with, someone to hold their hand as they crossed the street, someone to pull a chair out for them at a restaurant. She wondered how many first dates were being had as she lay staring at the stars. How many relationships were being forged or how many were ending. How many people were meeting the loves of their lives or loves that wouldn't even last the night? She thought about Jae, laying alone in his bed, surrounded by vestiges of his childhood. She wondered if he was lonely or if his life even allowed for

loneliness. She remembered how tightly he held her after they had made love, how he seemed so determined not to lose her. Many nights since she longed to feel his arms around her again, this night was no exception. Was he awake? Was he also watching the sky, thinking of her? Just stop, she said to herself. Please stop. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, falling asleep before her tears reached the pillow.

One

"Do you still have that dress?"

April stopped mid-bite, black bean noodles hanging from her mouth. Kenny had brought her lunch from the Korean restaurant they had gone to together and he was dexterously using his chopsticks while she struggled with her fork.

"What dress?" she asked, her mouth full.

"The one you wore to the wedding. Do you still have it?"

"Yeah, somewhere."

She actually knew exactly where it was because she put it on at least once a week and stared at herself in it for an hour before taking it off and crying eating an entire cheesecake.

"Well, I was wondering if you would like to wear it out," Kenny said slowly, trying to measure her reaction.

April gave him the sideways glance she always gave him when he was talking nonsense, which was quite often. She wiped the black bean sauce from her chin with a napkin and shook her head.

"What, you don't want to wear it out?" he asked.

"I guess it depends where. And why. And with whom."

"My dad's company banquet. Because I want you to go. Me."

April laughed out loud, nearly choking on her food. She took a sip of water and looked Kenny in the eyes, trying to tell if he was kidding. He stared back expectantly.

"Oh, you're serious."

"Of course I am."

"Why would you want to take me to that, Kenny?"

"I don't know. We had fun there in the past. It would be nice to see everyone again."

"And showing up with me would really get your dad's goat."

"What? That's crazy."

Kenny tried to hide his smile by turning and looking at the nothing on the wall behind him. April laughed and grabbed his arm, pulling him back around. He gave her the puppy dog eyes that he used to use to get her to do things she didn't want to do. Those eyes had her golfing with the wives of his coworkers. They were very powerful.

"I'm not falling prey to sad eyes, Kenny. You lost that power over me."

He sighed, sticking out his bottom lip. He had reached new lows. April looked away, suddenly intrigued by the nothing on the wall beside her.

"Please, April. I know you don't owe me anything but it will be so much fun. Imagine his face when he sees you there, with me, wearing that."

Kenny shivered, obviously imagining the old man having a non-life threatening cardiac event at the sight of her. It was a pretty amazing thought, she had to admit. She just hoped the dress still fit after all the cheesecakes. She pushed her noodles away and nodded.

"Ok, I'll go."

"Oh my God, thank you," Kenny exclaimed. He leaned across the table and kissed her cheek, then sat down, looking confused as if stunned by his own actions.

"I'm sorry," he said, staring at the floor.

"Kenny, it's fine. We're good."

April smiled, charmed by his shyness. So much about him had changed since they were together. She was enjoying getting to know him all over again.

"Ok, great. I have to get to the gym. I'll text you all the details. I promise you won't regret it."

"I already am a little bit but it's ok."

Kenny laughed and left, smiling at April before closing the door.

In all honesty, she was looking forward to showing up at that party and knocking the orthopedic socks off Kenny's father. She would have to be more witty and engaging than usual, using her well-rehearsed "rich people party laugh." Kenny had told her more than once that her normal laugh was a bit bombastic for intimate affairs such as those. So instead of throwing her head back and snorting like she usually did, she learned to simply giggle, her hand delicately placed on her chest. Not that she laughed often at these parties, but when she did, she did it like a princess.

A moment after Kenny left, as April was cleaning up her lunch, a soft knock at her door startled her. Normally a knock wouldn't send shivers down her spine the way this one did, but she knew that knock. The soft, slow knock that she had tried to forget, along with everything else. Bowl of noodles in hand, she crept slowly to the door and nearly dropped them when, again, three soft taps sent her pulse through the roof.

Gathering all the strength and bravery inside her, she opened the door. On the other side stood Jae, looking somehow small and miserable.

"April," he said as though he was surprised she opened the door.

"Jae."

"Can we talk?"

April nodded, moving aside so Jae could come in. He walked over to the sofa and sat in the same place he had the first time he had been there. April put her bowl of noodles back on the kitchen island and sat next to him. She didn't know what to expect so she tried to brace herself for the worst.

"I miss you," he said bluntly. April knew Jae wasn't one to mince words. He got straight to the point. Still, she was shocked by his sudden confession.

"You do?"

He looked at her as if her question hurt his heart to hear.

"Of course I do. I never wanted this."

"Neither did I, Jae. And it's all my fault."

"We're both to blame. I should have come to you long ago, but I was afraid to talk to you."

"You were? Why?"

"You have the power to hurt me more than anyone, April. I was trying to put off that pain for as long as I could."

"How did you know what I said was going to hurt you?"

"I didn't know, but I didn't want to take that chance."

"Jae, the last thing in the world I want to do is hurt you."

April sensed Jae's demeanor soften, and saw his eyes start to glisten with tears.

"I'm sorry, April," he said, his voice cracking.

"So am I," she replied, already in tears.

He reached for her and pulled her to him, holding her close. She rested her head on his shoulder feeling his heart pound against her chest. They stayed there in each other's arms for what felt like an eternity, but it wasn't long enough for either of them. They wanted to stay together for as long as they were apart. They wanted to make up for the time they spent away from each other. Reluctantly, Jae pulled away from her and lifted her chin. He tried to smile, gently wiping a tear from her cheek.

"I'm so glad I got to see you before I left," Jae said, the pain returning to his eyes.

"Left? What do you mean? Where are you going?"

April sat up, pulling away from Jae. His eyes dropped to the floor and she lifted his chin as he had done to her just moments before.

"Tell me," she whispered.

"I'm going back to Korea. My mother has been moved to a hospital. She doesn't have much time left."

April felt like the floor had given way and she was falling, Jae getting further from her by the second.

"When?" she heard herself say.

"Next week. I got the call last night. I have some things to see to before I leave and I had to make things right with you first. I couldn't have lived with myself if I hadn't."

"When are you coming back?"

"I don't know that I am."

April stood up and walked into her kitchen for no reason other than she couldn't sit still any longer. She felt like she had to do something, make something, clean something. Anything but listen to Jae talk about leaving her...again. She knew Jae must be going through such a hard time, knowing his mother was sick and now having to tell her that he was leaving. She felt such heaviness in her heart. All she wanted was for Jae to be happy but somehow it always seemed like an impossibility. She would do whatever she could, though, to making him as happy as he could be.

Jae followed her into the kitchen, apologizing the whole way.

"Jae," she said, turning to him, "you have nothing to be sorry for. I chased you away. I did this. I can't fault you for wanting to be with your mother or for keeping a distance between us all these months."

Jae took April's hands, holding them tightly.

"I wish I could stay with you, April. I..."

"Don't, Jae. Please don't say it. I already know."

Again, he pulled her to him and she held on to him as tight as she could. If she had to let him go eventually, she would, but not this night. This night she would hold on to him. She would live for as long as she could as his. Finally. Her heart would be safe in his embrace until the time came when he took what was left of the light from her life. Until then, they were one.

Abeoji

"Do you have to work?"

April lay next to Jae, his arms tight around her waist. He kissed her shoulder and sleepily responded, "Mmmm."

"What does that mean?" April laughed.

"It means yes, but I don't care."

"But Jae," she said, turning to face him, "you should give them notice so that when you come back..."

The look on his face stopped her dead.

"You're not coming back."

"I don't know yet. Things are moving so fast and now there's you. I thought I had made the decision but now I'm not sure."

"This decision has nothing to do with me, Jae. This is about you and your mother. You can't come back for me if she still needs you there."

He caressed her cheek, looking at her as though he was trying to memorize her face.

"I don't know when I'll see you again," he whispered.

"Someday," April replied. "I know it. We are meant for forever. This isn't the end, it can't be."

April was hoping her words would convince Jae that he wasn't about to lose her forever. That when he was alone he could call on memories of her to warm his heart. That though the road he was about to travel was destined to lead to heartbreak she would always be there waiting to comfort him.

"Just don't forget me," April said, trying to smile.

"That would be like forgetting my own heart," he replied before kissing her deeply. Everything about him, his kiss, his touch, his voice had an air of finality as if he was doing it all and saying it all for the last time. It seemed as though he expected a call at any moment informing him of some terrible turn of events that would force him to have to leave immediately. So April matched his intensity. She threw her inhibitions out the window. If these were going to be their last moments together for the foreseeable future she wanted him to remember them. As they kissed, April pushed the blanket to the floor, revealing her naked body to him for the first time. Every pooch and pudge on full display. She straddled his hips, sitting tall as he took in every curve. He reached out and slowly, with intent focus, ran his fingertips over her warm caramel skin. She shivered and watched his eyes light up at the sight and feel of her.

"April, I lo-"

"Hey, are you in here?" a voice called from outside her door.

Before April had a chance to reply, Kenny burst into her room.

"Oh my God, Kenny!" April shouted, trying to quickly pick the blanket up off the floor and cover herself.

"I'm sorry," Kenny mumbled before finally leaving the room.

April grabbed her robe and after a look back at a humiliated Jae, went out into the living room.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I...I'm sorry," he stammered, trying to avert his eyes from her. "I was worried. You weren't answering your phone or the door."

"I'm not naked anymore, Kenny. You can look at me. And I'm fine. Jae and I made up last night."

"I see that," Kenny said, unsuccessfully trying to hide a grin.

April scowled at Kenny but she could hardly be angry. His heart was in the right place. Unfortunately, his body was in the very wrong place. While he was there, she wondered if she should tell him about Jae leaving. She would eventually, but this wasn't the time. She had hardly made peace with it herself.

"I'll leave you guys to it," Kenny said, winking and dodging a slap on the arm from April. "Oh, I texted you the information about the banquet."

"Ok," April said before turning to go back to her room. She took a deep breath and opened the door, sure Jae was going to be upset about Kenny walking right into her house and her room.

Jae sat on the edge of the bed and April approached him cautiously.

"I've had a lot of time to think about everything between us," he said, looking at the floor. "I'm ashamed of the way I handled your friendship with your ex-boyfriend. It's just hard for me to see you with someone who not only loved you but also hurt you so deeply."

"Jae..."

"Let me finish. I also realized that my problem with you and Kenny is my problem. It's not caused by you or him. When I care about someone, I fear losing them. So, I either hold on too tight or I let go completely. This has caused me to lead a very lonely life. When I was ten, my father left my mother and me. He didn't leave a note. There was no explanation. I woke up

one morning and he was gone and we went on as if nothing happened, as if it had always been only the two of us. I cried alone in my bed at night. I didn't want my mother to know that I was sad because she was being so strong."

April sniffled as tears ran freely down her face. Jae reached out for her hand and she took it, offering him her strength.

"When Miss Bailey told me about you and how much you were hurting, I thought of my mother and though I didn't know him, I hated Kenny because he was just like my father. The thought of losing you to him was more than I could take."

"So you let me go."

"I felt I had to. I saw no reason to delay the inevitable."

"Why did you think I would choose him over you?"

Jae's gaze dropped again to the floor.

"My own father didn't love me enough to stay, why would you?"

He may as well have reached into her chest and ripped out her heart.

"Jae," she said, overcome with such sadness she felt she could cry forever. She stood between his legs and he rested his head on her chest, wrapping his arms around her. She held him as tight as she could in a naive attempt to make up for all the hugs his father never gave him. She decided then that all the love he was never shown, she would show him. All the doubt he ever had about his ability to be loved would melt away and he'd be left with one constant and true love. Hers.

"What day next week are you leaving?" April whispered. She almost hoped he hadn't heard her because she didn't really want to know but she had to.

"My plane leaves Wednesday night at midnight."

That gave them seven days. Seven days to make up for a lifetime of being apart and at the same time to prepare to be apart again. It was so unfair, so cruel. Being brought together only to be separated again. Not knowing if fate would find a way to bring him back over so much time and distance. All April could do was wait.

"I'm going to make you something to eat," she said, kissing the top of Jae's head. He nodded and let her go, laying down and closing his eyes. She knew he was exhausted and wanted to give him time to rest. She went into the kitchen, picking up her phone on the way. She looked at it and had to laugh a bit when she saw ten missed calls from Kenny. He was nothing if not persistent. He had also texted several times. The most recent begging her to answer the phone or door, but the first he sent just after he left her apartment after lunch the day before.

"Wednesday, June 10th. I'll pick you up at 7:45. Thanks again. You're the best."

"Who the hell has a party on a Wednesday?" April shouted.

"What's wrong?" Jae asked, emerging from the bedroom.

"It's nothing. Kenny asked me to go to a party with him but it's the same night you're leaving. I have to tell him I can't go."

April began to text Kenny back but Jae snatched the phone from her hand.

"No," he said. "I want you to go to the party."

"What? No. Jae, I'm not going to let you go to the airport alone. I want to see you off."

"April, if you're there, I won't be able to leave. You have to go with Kenny. Please."

April wanted to object but she knew there was no point. Jae wouldn't change his mind and the last thing she wanted to do with the small amount of time they had left together was argue. So she nodded and he gave her the phone, retreating to her room without another word.

She stared at Kenny's text, wanting so desperately to tell him she couldn't make it. As good as Kenny was at distracting her from the pain she had been suffering through, she felt this night his efforts would be in vain. All the guests would be staring, wondering why Kenny had brought the woman who was crying into the caviar. And like a sad Cinderella, when the clock struck midnight, her world would change forever.

Through the open door to her bedroom, she saw Jae sleeping soundly. He had pulled the covers up to his chin and was scrunched into a ball. She imagined him as a child, laying in his bed, the covers his only comfort, crying himself to sleep.

Reluctantly she opened Kenny's text and replied, with tears streaming down her face, "I'll see you then."

Home

April sat uncomfortably on Jae's sofa as he brought boxes out of his bedroom. She told him he could keep his things in her unused storage locker in the basement of the building. Keep them, that is, until he sent for them to be transported to Korea. They had spent the past three days together, barely leaving each other's side. She helped him pack, though she was mostly useless, having to stop so frequently to wipe away her tears. He would notice and try to comfort her with a hug and in response, she would try to smile. But for all their trying they knew they were failing. Simply pushing feelings aside that would soon have nowhere to go. They were four days away from their goodbye.

Jae was getting daily updates on his mother. She was stable, but that could change at any time. April could tell how much his mother's condition was weighing on his heart, though he tried to hide it from her. Often as they lay or sat together, he seemed to be lost in thought. Washed away on a sea of memories of the woman who sacrificed so much to raise him alone. The woman who, though she worked three jobs, was somehow always there to tuck him in at night. The woman who believed that he could come to America and make a good life for himself, something she longed for him to have, though she could never quite provide it for him herself.

"Are you hungry?" Jae asked, joining April on the sofa.

She wasn't. Eating was the last thing on her mind, but she felt that maintaining normalcy was important. She didn't want to add to Jae's list of mounting stresses.

"Sure," she said.

"Let's go out and get something to eat. We've been cooped up in here too long."

April nodded. Jae was right. Their self-isolation wasn't healthy and she knew that it would only make it harder to separate when that time inevitably came. Hiding from the outside world wasn't going to keep them together. They may as well try to enjoy themselves while they still had the chance to do so.

"How about that &pizza on U Street. I know it's your favorite."

"Ok, let me take a shower and I'll meet you outside in 20 minutes."

Jae smiled and kissed her cheek. Not his normal smile, but his new smile. A smile filled with longing and regret. April found it amazing and heartbreaking that a simple curve of his lips could convey such emotion. Was he so laden with sadness that every gesture indicated as much? Or perhaps it was her projecting her emotion onto him. His smile was the same, but her inner turmoil turned it into something else. She couldn't think about it anymore. He was right, they needed to get out.

The walk to the pizza place was a short one and Jae held her hand the whole way. Besides the movie theater, she had never been with him away from their apartment building. They were finally on their long-overdue first date.

Inside, Jae ordered for her and in the middle of ordering, the boy behind the counter began speaking to him in Korean. He replied, smiling, and she watched his mouth, mesmerized as his lips formed the beautifully foreign words. It sounded to her like music. Melodic with a rhythm that was somehow missing from English.

Jae paid for the pizzas, said goodbye to the boy who made them and they left, finding seats at a small table outside the restaurant. For a moment they ate in silence, enjoying the warmth of the sun on their skin and the sounds of the city around them. April was glad she had agreed to come out to eat. She loved her neighborhood and just being out among the people instantly improved her mood. Her home wasn't just the place where she slept every night; it was where she chose to live. It was her neighbors, the little stores

run by husbands and wives who knew her by name, her favorite restaurants. It was the lights of the city she watched as she fell asleep every night. As long as she was there, she was home.

"What did you say to that kid?" April asked, breaking the silence.

"Oh, he asked if I was Korean and where I was from. He said his family moved here from Daegu when he was only a few months old. He wants to visit Korea someday. He's saving money for the trip by working here."

"Daegu, is that close to where you're from?"

"About 150 miles from Ansan. I told him that I would soon be going home. He said I was lucky."

April didn't say what she was thinking because the sudden realization of it was far too distressing to face on such a beautiful summer day. She simply smiled and sipped her drink, hoping it would force down the feeling of dread rising in her stomach. But it didn't. She knew nothing would so she dove in headfirst.

"I want to learn Korean," she blurted out.

Jae beamed.

"Really?"

"Yes. I think it's a beautiful language and someday I'd like to visit Korea. Visit you."

And with that Jae knew that she knew his secret. The secret she hadn't realized he'd been keeping until a moment ago when his eyes shone so brightly at the thought of going home.

He seemed like he wanted to say something but she took his hand before he could speak.

"You never intended to stay, did you?"

Jae shook his head.

"When the time came, and I knew it would, I planned to go back and stay. I only came to America to please my mother."

"And you've been miserable here."

"For the most part. I work so hard but I never advance. I don't have time to live, to enjoy my life. It feels like nothing but struggle. I'm tired, April. These past few days with you have been the best since I've been here though they've also been the worst. I don't want to leave you, but I want to go home."

April wished his confession was a surprise but it wasn't. Part of her knew ever since she saw his painting. The blue, black, red, and white represented his home. The pain she saw in the painting and felt in his presence were his desire to go back there. A feeling of loss and abandonment. The same he had been feeling his whole life.

"Does your mother know how unhappy you are here?"

Jae shook his head emphatically.

"No. April, this was her plan for my life. Knowing how I feel would break her heart."

Suddenly an image of Jae as a child flashed through April's mind. He was still that boy, crying alone in his room, trying to spare his mother the pain of the knowledge of his despair. The moment his father left he stopped living for himself; his happiness became secondary. Had they never met he would go back and after the pain of losing his mother subsided he would finally be able to be free to live a life of his design. Now though, he would be burdened by thoughts of her. Wondering if he should try again to make

America his home. Just as his mother's had, her expectations would be guiding his decisions.

"April, I don't know what to do."

Every impulse in her brain was telling her to beg him to come back to her to see where their relationship would lead. She wanted to try to convince him that she was all he needed. But she knew that it wouldn't be fair to either of them. Jae deserved to finally be free. As much as she wanted him she knew that even more he needed to see where his true destiny would lead. She couldn't interfere or interject her will into his life. She knew his freedom depended on her willingness to let him go.

"Well," she said, smiling through her pain, "what you do is go home."

"But..."

"No, there are no 'buts'," she said, squeezing his hand, trying to draw any strength she could from him. "You're going to go through with your plan."

Jae sat back in his chair, obviously astonished by her demand. But she knew it was the right decision and she knew he knew, too, because he didn't argue. There was no fight, simply acceptance.

They stared at each other for what felt like hours. Finally, Jae got up and took her hand. Without a word, they began to walk. They walked through her neighborhood. At every corner, as they waited for the light to change, he wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. She led him through the town. They stopped at small storefronts and looked at the treasures inside. She told him stories of the times when she was younger, running through the streets, going to the clubs. He listened and laughed when she told him about falling after a night out in very high heels and having to hold onto a lamppost while her friend retrieved her car to pick her up. When night began to fall, they sat at Meridian Hill Park surrounded by fireflies and the magic of the night.

Everything she wanted to say seemed wrong. She would miss him but telling him so would only make him feel guilty. She was sorry for so many things, but bringing them up would only remind him of bad times. So they sat in silence until, just as the sun dipped below the horizon, he gently kissed the top of her head and whispered, "I love you."

Just the Beginning

Morning. Every day begins with a glimmer of hope. April knew this though she was having trouble remembering it. She knew that Jae's leaving wouldn't be the end of her world. She would recover and move on but she didn't believe she would ever love again. That would be the takeaway, the scar with which she was left for the rest of her life.

Beside her Jae lay, looking more peaceful than she was used to seeing him. Usually as he slept she could see that he was fighting demons from the past in his dreams. He would be curled up tight, his brow furrowed, holding on to the blanket with white knuckled desperation. Just the sight of him made her ache. All she wanted was for his nightmares to end.

And it seemed that they had, at least for the moment. She wasn't surprised, though. He was finally going home. He would be with his mother, something she knew he longed for. He could tell her stories of America and make sure that her final moments were filled with pride for her son had achieved what she hoped he would. She would be at peace having never known his lifelong suffering.

"What are you thinking?"

April hadn't noticed Jae waking up and turning to face her. He smiled sweetly and pulled her close to him.

"So many things," April replied.

"Can you tell me some, or are they secrets?"

"Mostly secrets but I suppose I can tell you one. I was thinking how wonderful you are."

Jae laughed and squeezed her tight. She snuggled beside him and closed her eyes, a sudden wave of fatigue overtaking her. She had been unable to sleep much that night, her brain going full tilt until she saw the sun start to rise. Her thoughts, worries, and fears had taken on a life of their own, filling her head and denying her rest. She had just been able to silence them when Jae woke up. She tried to keep her eyes open but it was impossible. As sleep beckoned, she was powerless to resist. She heard Jae say her name but was asleep before she had a chance to respond.

April awoke to the scent of coffee and the sound of two men talking. Jae never watched television so she had no idea what could be going on but as she listened she realized, she knew those voices. She put on her robe and slippers and cautiously opened her bedroom door. There, sitting in her kitchen drinking coffee and chatting like two old friends, were Jae and Kenny. April stared at them, convinced she was still sleeping. This was the last thing she expected to awake to.

"There she is," Kenny said, waving April over. She slowly made her way to them, still in disbelief.

"What's going on?" she asked sleepily.

"Kenny and I were talking," Jae answered as if it was something that happened every day. He may as well have said, "Oh, I'm just juggling knives."

"I see that. Why?"

"Why not?" Kenny asked.

They both laughed and April felt like Alice in the middle of some sick trick played by the Queen of Hearts.

"Do you want some coffee?" Jae asked. "I know you're exhausted."

"Will it make me shrink?"

“Um, I don’t think so,” Jae answered, pouring her a cup and fixing it for her just the way she liked it.

She sat down next to Kenny at the island and stared at Jae. What was he up to? And Kenny, she cut her eyes at him suspiciously. It felt like a trap but she couldn’t figure out which of them was trapping her or why.

“I came over to talk to you about tomorrow,” Kenny offered.

“What about it?” April answered abruptly.

Kenny flinched, her paranoia taking him off guard.

“Just making sure everything was good and that you still wanted to go.”

April nodded, sipping her coffee and glaring at Kenny over the rim of her cup.

“Are you alright?” Jae asked. “You seem...upset.”

“I’m fine,” April said. “This is just a little surreal. The two of you. Together.”

“I should go,” Kenny said, standing. “I have to teach a class in half an hour.”

Jae and Kenny shook hands before Kenny practically ran for the door. April watched him then turned to Jae expectantly.

"What was that about?" she asked when he offered no information.

"He really just came to see you. You were asleep so we started talking. I don't want there to be any animosity between us. I know he's going to be here after I leave."

April nodded though she wasn't exactly sure Jae was telling the whole truth. If not, she was sure she could get the whole story from Kenny when they went out.

“I was thinking,” Jae said coming around the counter, “that we could just spend the day in bed. Everything’s done. I’m all packed. I just want to relax with you. Is that ok?”

April nodded, looking over at Jae’s luggage stacked neatly by the door and she immediately forgot all about everything but the fact that he was leaving. She hated that luggage. It signified the end of something that meant the world to her. In less than twenty-four hours Jae would take up his bags and walk out of her life. She’d be left in an apartment that was as empty yet somehow emptier than before.

“I’m going to take a quick shower. I’ll be there in a minute,” April told Jae.

He kissed her cheek and she went into the bathroom. Staring into the mirror, she willed herself not to cry. This sadness was something she would have to get used to. Soon she’d have plenty of time to weep and expel all her sorrow, but she didn’t want Jae to see her that way. She knew his guilt would cause him to make decisions he wouldn’t otherwise make and she didn’t want to be the cause of any mistakes or any more regret.

Wrapped in a towel, she went to her room to find Jae standing at her bedroom window, staring at the city below.

“You love it here,” he said without turning around.

“I do,” she replied.

“I wish I could. Everything would be so much easier if I could.”

“Jae,” April said, rushing to his side, “even if you did, it’s not where you need to be. Loving this city wouldn’t keep you from missing your home. I love this city because it’s where I grew up. Everything has meaning to me;

it evokes memories that make me feel secure. I know you feel the same way about Ansan."

"April, I'm sorry."

Jae turned to her, tears streaming down his face. She hadn't expected an emotional outpouring from him; she was supposed to be the sad one. He had seemed so at peace with his decision just a short time ago.

"Why?" she asked, wiping away his tears.

"I shouldn't have let this happen. I should have kept my distance. I knew I wasn't going to be able to stay but I pursued you anyway. I never should have started this."

April sighed, taking Jae into her arms.

"I'm not sorry," she whispered.

Jae pulled away and looked at her, perplexed.

"You're not? Why? This is a disaster."

"That's not how I see it at all. Jae, when I met you, I was so low that I was drinking alone trying to drown my sorrow. You came into my life like a bolt of lightning and you changed me. Nothing lasts forever but I will carry you in my heart for the rest of my life because that's where you belong. I honestly believe I'm better for having been with you, even if it was only for short while. So, please don't be sorry."

"Do you mean that?" Jae asked. She knew he was afraid she was simply trying to appease his suffering by saying what he might want to hear, but she meant every word. Where would she be if he had kept his distance? She didn't even want to think about it. She assumed she'd be drinking nightly or at least eating herself out of house and home. She never would have reconnected with Kenny who had become so much more to her than he had

even been before. And though she may never let herself fall in love again, she did believe in the power of love. She had Jae to thank for that.

April nodded, overcome by emotion.

“Come on,” Jae said, taking her hand and leading her to the bed. He lay down and opened his arms, inviting her to join him.

They spent much of the day in silence, kissing, caressing, making love. Somehow, though, it didn't feel like the end. As the day wore on, April became more and more sure that her story with Jae wasn't over. And as night fell, she knew for certain that this wasn't their last night together. Somehow, this was just the beginning.

Eventually

April stood in front of the closet, a towel wrapped around her, fresh from the shower, staring at her dress. In a short while she'd step out of her building with Kenny and into the unknown.

She felt surprisingly numb. The night before she had been so certain that no matter how the day ended, when all was said and done, she and Jae would be together. However, with the rising of the sun, her certainty faded into doubt, then to sadness, then to nothing. She felt the way she did the night she had gotten drunk on too much Soju, as if she was looking at herself from the outside. It was comfortable and painless, but she knew it couldn't last forever.

Behind her, Jae was gathering the little things he needed to take with him; his wallet, passport, plane ticket and boarding pass. He placed them neatly into the travel bag April had bought him, zipped it up and dropped it on the bed.

"That's everything," he said. "I'm all packed."

"Mmmhmm."

"Are you going to put it on? I haven't seen you in it yet," he said, running his hands up and down her hips as though he was molding her out of clay.

"I will, " she replied, leaning back into him.

She would miss his touch so desperately. Something in the way he caressed her made her feel delicate, as if at any moment he feared his touch may break her but he couldn't help but touch her anyway. She was his treasure, something precious to behold. Never had she experienced such care. Normally she felt large and ungainly. The only time she dare sit on Kenny's

lap he tapped her thigh after a few minutes silently begging her to release him. He pretended he had to get up to freshen his drink but April knew he was just trying to spare her feelings. She was shocked he didn't drag his wounded leg to the bar begging for ice.

"Kenny's coming at eight o'clock, right?" Jae asked, looking at his watch.

April nodded.

"That's in half an hour."

She nodded again, the knot that for the past week had been growing in her stomach, tightening. Even in the months they had been apart she was somehow able to find comfort in the fact that he was so close. When the pain of missing him became unbearable she need only remember that every night, only feet away from her, he lay asleep. And in the morning the same sun that shone through his window casting light on his beautiful skin was shining through hers as well. So, though they had been living separate lives, they were in some ways, together.

Where had the day gone? She had only a small amount of time left with Jae. She woke up hours earlier than usual to find him lying beside her staring at the ceiling, so lost in thought that she was able to watch him for nearly ten minutes before he noticed. He turned and took her in his arms. With their naked bodies pressed together she felt as though he was somehow touching her everywhere all at once, inside and out. They made love for hours until it felt as though they had melted into one being. When finally Jae climaxed, he called out her name before collapsing onto the bed. She could have cried. Knowing this could be their last encounter turned her intense pleasure into equally intense sorrow.

"*Uljima*," he whispered, caressing her cheek.

She didn't have to ask what it meant. He had said it to her probably close to a hundred times the past week while trying to comfort her.

At his request she held back her tears, even attempting to smile. He returned her smile and kissed her forehead, pulling her close to him. She listened to his heart which was unsurprisingly beating in time with hers. The heart that would soon be thousands of miles away.

They stayed in each other's arms all afternoon. Not a word spoken. Not a desire voiced. Wrapped up in each other trying to forget everything but what they were feeling. Nothing else existed but the two of them. There was no distance, no time, only love.

Sighing deeply, April reached for the dress. No sense putting it off any longer. Nothing could stop the inevitable so she may as well be wearing a pretty dress when her heart broke.

Jae sat on the bed and watched as she pulled the dress over her curves, rising when she looked at him over her shoulder and zipping the back for her. She turned to him and shrugged, unable to keep from crying any longer.

"I'm sorry," she said, trying unsuccessfully to wipe away her quickly forming tears before they fell.

She had been so sure she could get through the night without breaking down. It had been her goal. She didn't want Jae to see her that way just before leaving, his last vision of her one of sadness. Despite it all, she hoped he could somehow find even a small amount of joy in his leaving. She wanted to foster that feeling, reminding him of the good and leave the sadness for when she came home to her empty apartment that night.

He watched stone-faced as she composed herself. Finally, with a deep breath and a long exhale she was ready to continue preparing to leave.

"Right," she said, sniffing and forcing a smile, "makeup."

She turned to leave the room but was stopped by Jae who grabbed her wrist and somehow gently yet with great force pulled her into his embrace. She couldn't help but be reminded of their first kiss in the hall outside her

apartment. She remembered the passion she could feel just being close to him in the way he was gentle yet dominant. His kiss soft yet powerful. For a year he had thought and wondered about her knowing but not knowing. When what he had been told and imagined manifested in his reality he couldn't hold back. She knew he had loved her before he even met her, something she realized while they were apart all those months. To her, he seemed to have been moving quickly in their relationship but he had been in it longer than she had.

"I love you, April," he said louder than a whisper for the first time.

She looked up into his eyes and smiled.

"*Salanghae*," she replied.

Outside, Jae and April stood side by side like two soldiers heading off to a war they knew they couldn't win yet had to fight anyway. Kenny was uncharacteristically late and she knew he was trying to afford them as much time together as possible, sending her text after text full of excuses that barely made sense. Jae's bags were still in her apartment ready for him to take at midnight when he called his ride and left for the airport.

When Kenny's car pulled up, April felt her heart drop. Jae's hand tightened around hers before he released it. Kenny slowly approached them and without a word hugged April as tight as he could without hurting her. She was so grateful to him for everything he had done for her the past nine months and she knew he would be the rock on which she would be leaning for the foreseeable future.

When he let April go he stood in front of Jae who reached out a hand to him.

"Thank you, Ken," Jae said, using the name April had only ever heard his father call him.

Kenny nodded, firmly shaking Jae's hand. It was almost ceremonial. The passing of the woman from her lover to her protector. Kenny would be there when Jae couldn't be, giving her companionship and love in his stead.

Standing in the spot where they'd first met, April and Jae embraced for what could very well be the last time ever. They made no promises because no matter how much in love they were, distance made promises too easy to break.

Kenny averted his eyes as they kissed, said their last goodbyes, and once again professed their love for one another.

"Please be careful," she whispered into his ear as he held her. "Let me know when you get there."

"April," Kenny whispered, placing a hand on her shoulder, "we should go."

"Ok," April said, reluctantly pulling herself away from Jae and taking Kenny's hand. "I'm ready."

They walked to the car and April turned before getting in to wave her final farewell. Jae looked so small standing there alone but she knew why he had to do it that way. She had Kenny to pull her along and force her to leave him. Had she gone with him to the airport the idea of missing his flight wouldn't compare to the pain of walking away from her. Without her there, his mother and his home were all the pull he needed.

"Are you going to be alright?" Kenny asked as he started the car.

After one last glance at Jae through the window she nodded.

"I'll be fine. Eventually," she replied, wiping away a pesky tear. "Let's go."

Passport

As Kenny drove through the city, beside him April watched the sky, the red and orange hues deepening to purple as the sun fell from view. She had watched thousands of sunsets through the skyline of the city but none felt as final as the one she was watching this night. It signified the end of so much more than just a summer day. When the sun rose again it would shed its light through the window of an empty apartment where once lived the man she loved.

April shook her head free from thoughts of the morning and tried to focus on the night ahead.

"So," she said so suddenly that Kenny flinched, "about this party."

"Uh huh," he replied with trepidation.

"Does your dad know I'm coming?"

"No. I just told him I had a date."

April nodded. Had it been any other night she knew her performance would have been outstanding; clinging to Kenny, baby talk, pet names. Just making an absolute spectacle of herself and having a great time doing it. She was sure Kenny was regretting his decision to ask her to come with him so she didn't want to let him down. Despite feeling like her soul had been ripped out and stomped on, she was determined to be who he needed at the party. It was the least she could do for him.

"Don't worry," she said turning to him and smiling. "I got this."

When they got to the country club Kenny left his car with the valet and they walked inside hand in hand. Immediately, as if a spotlight had been shone

on them, everyone turned and watched as they walked through the ballroom, Kenny smiling and waving at his former co-workers whose jaws hit the floor at the sight of them.

They approached a couple who tried to escape when Kenny started walking in their direction, as if his father would be mad at them by association.

"Hey, Bob. Margie. How are you? You remember April?"

"Uh, yes, of course. Lovely to see you again," Bob croaked after a swig of wine.

"Indeed," April replied as Kenny wrapped his arm around her waist.

"Hey, have you seen my dad?"

April thought they were going to have a stroke right there in front of them. The couple looked around, pretending to try to spot Lawrence in the crowd of stunned accountants, or whatever they were.

"Oh, never mind, I found him. It was nice seeing you again."

April couldn't help but giggle as they left Bob and Margie looking after them, waiting to see how Lawrence was going to blow up, their morbid curiosity getting the best of them.

"That was more than worth this whole trip," Kenny laughed.

Despite herself, April felt good for helping Kenny. She knew his plan wasn't just about showing up with her to anger his father, it was more than that. For years he had done what his father expected, lived under his thumb and the one time he rebelled, by being in a relationship with April, Lawrence did the only thing he could do to break them up. Bringing her, the woman he couldn't stand his son to be with, to his party was Kenny's way of saying that his life was his own. Finally, he was his own man.

As they approached Lawrence, April began to prepare. She pulled Kenny's arm around her and looked up at him lovingly. She saw the old man see them and he rushed over to stop them from going any further.

"Great party, Dad," Kenny said.

"What do you think you're doing? What is SHE doing here?"

"I'm flattered you remember me, Mr. Mitchell. This is a lovely affair."

"Ken, can I speak to you alone for a moment?" Lawrence said through clenched teeth, grabbing Kenny by the arm.

"Actually, no," Kenny said, pulling his arm out of his father's grasp. "I already know what you're going to say. April's not good enough for me, right? She's not befitting a Mitchell. All the things you said when you forced me to break up with her. What were your exact words? Oh yeah, if you keep dating that trash you'll never work in this town again."

April gasped, shocked that even Lawrence Mitchell had gone so far as to call her trash. There were some choice words she had for him but this was Kenny's fight. Around them, guests began to gather, watching as a family drama played out in front of them.

"You are such a disappointment. You could have a wife, a good wife, if you had just let her go and taken my advice."

"You know what?" Kenny spat. "I'm glad I'm a disappointment to you. I can't imagine the kind of son you'd be proud of. I just know that I never want to be that man. This woman is worth more than all the girls you tried to set me up with combined. Just the fact that she's standing here with me right now means I'm not a failure. So take your job and your money and this family and go to hell."

With that Kenny took April's hand and they walked casually back through the party, leaving his stunned father speechless. Once outside and away

from all the eyes that had watched him calmly tell his father off, he nearly collapsed. April held him up, positioning herself under his armpit.

"Are you ok?" she asked.

"Are you kidding? I feel fantastic!"

She smiled as he stood beside her, catching his breath.

"I couldn't have done it without you. I know it was hard for you to be here tonight."

"Yeah, well, anything for you, Kenny," April replied, hugging him.

She knew it had been therapeutic for Kenny to do what he had just done but it had also been meaningful to her. Hearing him say such wonderful things about her, having him stand up for her even if it was almost two years late meant a lot to her. She knew that Kenny cared deeply for her but to effectively walk out of his family to defend her was more than she had ever expected from him. Or from anyone for that matter. He had given up any comfort that his name may have been able to afford him in the future because of his love for her and his need to be his own man.

"Oh my God," April said, realizing suddenly what she had to do.

"What?" Kenny asked.

"What time is it?"

Kenny looked at his watch.

"Nine fifteen. Why?"

"Can you get me home before ten?" she asked, looking around for the valet.

"Yeah, but I'm supposed to keep you out. I promised."

"I know you did, but I have to get home before he leaves. Please."

"Ok," Kenny said, taking his valet ticket from his pocket. "Hey," he called to the man who was leaning against the building smoking a cigarette. "I need my car, now!"

As they sped through the city April couldn't help but think of the things Kenny had said about her to his father.

"Did you mean all that? What you said back there."

"Every word," he said, his eyes never leaving the road.

She smiled to herself, lucky that she had a friend in him. He was strong and caring and always there when she needed him. She didn't know how he would react to what she planned to do but she was about to find out.

"So," Kenny said, "why did you need to see him before he left?"

April took a deep breath before divulging her idea to him. His speech, everything he had done for her made her realize that sometimes the people you love are more important than everything else. He had taught her that night that her love for Jae was all she needed. His heart was her home.

"Are you sure about this?" Kenny asked as they sat outside her building. The sadness in his eyes almost gave her pause, but she knew she was doing the right thing. She pulled him into her arms as tears streamed down both their faces.

"I am. I love you so much, Kenny. Thank you. For everything."

Kenny cleared his throat, pulling himself away from her.

"You better hurry up, he's going to leave soon."

April nodded and got out of the car. Kenny waved before slowly pulling away, leaving April crying on the curb. She watched as his taillights faded, not knowing when she'd see him again.

Gathering her courage and resolve, she ran into her building and to the stairs taking them two at a time until she got to her floor. She made it to her door just as Jae opened it to leave.

"April, what are you doing here?" he asked, so shocked that he dropped his carry-on bag.

"I couldn't let you leave. Jae, this isn't right. We're supposed to be together. I love you."

"I love you, too, but you know I have to leave. I need to be with my mother."

"Yes, I know," April said, pushing past him into her apartment and rummaging around in her desk drawer.

"Then what do you mean?"

Finally, she pulled a blue pouch from the drawer and ran back to him.

"I mean that I realized tonight that the most important thing is being with who you love. Jae, you're all the home I need."

"What are you saying?" Jae asked, his eyes wide.

"I'm saying," she said, shoving her passport into her purse, "I'm coming to Korea with you."

New Chapter

“If that’s ok,” April said, realizing that she hadn’t been invited and may be an unwelcome guest on Jae’s return trip home.

Jae seemed too shocked to speak and simply stood with his mouth open as April nervously twirled a curl around her finger. Outside, a car horn snapped him out of his delirium.

“I don’t know how to say this.”

April’s heart dropped. How could she be so selfish? Not even asking permission to travel with him, just assuming he’d jump at the chance to have her there. He loved her but this trip was going to be emotionally draining and she hadn’t regarded his feelings at all.

“It’s ok,” April said. “I should have asked you first. I’m sorry.”

“No,” Jae said, taking her hand. “I want you to go.”

“Really?”

“Of course. I was going to ask you to come with me but I didn’t want to interrupt your life. I didn’t think it fair to ask you to leave your home just so I could bring you to mine.”

April smiled, full of relief and happiness. She had been right all along. It wasn’t the end.

“Come on,” Jae said, pulling her towards the elevator. “We have to hurry.”

She grabbed one of his suitcases and they ran down the hall together. April couldn’t help but almost laugh as they exited the building, put Jae’s bags in

the trunk, and got into the Uber.

“Oh my God,” Jae said as they settled in for the forty-five minute drive to the airport.

“What is it? Did you forget something?”

“No,” Jae said, “you did. You don’t have any luggage or a ticket.”

“Well, I may not have any luggage, but Kenny bought me a ticket online before he dropped me off.”

“He did?”

April nodded, remembering sitting in the car after the party that night. She knew she was hurting him by leaving and if she thought there was any other way she would have stayed but she couldn’t let Jae leave without her.

“Are you going to be alright?” April had asked.

“Of course. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

“Kenny, you know how much you mean to me, don’t you?”

Without a word he nodded, unable to look her in the eye.

“Do you remember our first date?” April asked, feeling suddenly and understandably nostalgic.

Finally, Kenny looked at her, surprised.

“Of course I do. I took you to that seafood restaurant,” he said, smiling and shaking his head.

“Yep, and I couldn’t eat a thing. Even the drinks had some kind of fish in them.”

“I should have asked you where you wanted to go. I was such a pompous jerk.”

“No, you weren’t. You were sweet. You had them make me regular fries and a regular salad, no shrimp in sight. I really appreciated that.”

“Well, I liked you and I didn’t want you to be hungry.”

April laughed and Kenny watched her. She knew he still loved her. He always would. Part of her wished that things had gone differently between them, that he had let his father do what he wanted and stayed with her. She knew, though, how much he had grown while they were apart. The kind of growing that is spurred by heartache and regret. When he left her that chilly October day, he had been a boy. The Kenny that sat beside her was a man. A good man. She had no doubt that when he finally got over his feelings for her, he would find someone who loved him as much as, if not more than, she had. He deserved at least that much. So, she knew that her leaving was the best thing for him.

“April this is probably out of line for me to ask but...”

“What?”

“Do you think I could have one last kiss? I know I don’t deserve it, but I guess since this time I get to say goodbye, I thought I’d ask.”

April didn’t even have to consider it. She smiled and nodded, leaning closer to him. He fidgeted in his seat for a moment before finally turning to her, obviously close to tears as was she. Gently, he pressed his lips to hers for what felt like the first time and she became acutely aware that this was going to be the last time they were together for a long while. Somehow, she already missed him.

Sitting beside Jae on the way to the airport, April began to think about what lay ahead. She was about to walk into a world that was so different than the

one she was used to. She didn't know the language or the culture. Jae would be her only conduit into something completely foreign to her. She was scared but also excited. She had so rarely left the comfort of Washington that even a trip to another American city was exciting for her. She didn't want to be a burden to Jae, he had so much to deal with already, so she prepared mentally to learn as much as she could as quickly as she could so that she could fend for herself if she needed to.

"I'll have to teach you some Korean," Jae said suddenly, reading her mind again.

"I can't wait to learn," April replied.

Jae squeezed her hand tighter and she lay her head on his shoulder. She knew that when they landed, he would want to go right to his mother and she would go along. She wondered if he had told his mother anything about her. Did he tell her he had fallen in love with an American woman? A black woman? Would she accept April or would she try to chase her away the same way Kenny's father had? She wanted to ask Jae what he thought but she knew he had enough to think about. She tried to push any worry out of her mind but it seemed worry was all she could do. She wondered if it would be better for both of them if she didn't go along to meet his mother. Perhaps she should stay at a hotel and, well, hide in order to give Jae a chance to be alone in the hospital without having to deal with any conflict. No, she thought. She would stand by Jae's side because whether she was accepted or not was not her problem. She wasn't going so she could sit on the sidelines and watch as the world as he knew it ended. She would support the man she loved no matter what.

The closer they got to the airport, the more nervous April became. She had never traveled so far from home before. And the farthest she had flown was to Florida to visit her mother who was there taking an extended vacation and had begged for weeks for April to join her. Finally, she gave in and was glad she did. The trip was wonderful but the flights were not. Every bump, every jitter sent her stomach into a tailspin. She was sure several times that the plane was going down and she was surprised to see no one

else panicking as much as she was. They must not have anything to live for, she foolishly surmised, as she waited for the oxygen masks to fall and the emergency instructions to play over the intercom.

Despite their seats being in separate sections, the flight was so empty that they were able to sit together with the permission of a particularly sweet flight attendant. They also got extra blankets, extra peanuts and extra drinks, for which April was extremely grateful. She allowed Jae to have the window seat and she clung to him from the moment they took off.

April tried to get as comfortable as her fear would allow. She knew as the plane sped through the sky that there was no turning back. She was on her way to another country with nothing but the clothes on her back and the money in her wallet. It's crazy what love will make someone do. It will make you give up everything in your life that is sure and secure and throw you up into the heavens with nothing to hold on to but the arm of the one you love. It will make you leave your home, the only place you've ever known to make the one you love proud. It will allow you to watch the one you love, love someone else as you stand idly by unable to express how you feel. Love is confusing and scary and can be humiliating, but it's also wonderful and fulfilling. April had no idea what she was in store for in Korea but she knew she was safe. She was ready for this new chapter in her life even if it took her miles away from home because she knew she was always home as long as she was with Jae.

Mistake

When finally the plane touched down at Incheon Airport April could sense Jae's anticipation. It felt like he was about to jump up and run for the door the second the wheels hit the ground. After they retrieved their luggage, Jae rushed them outside to get a taxi to Ansan. He had barely spoken to her since they arrived, rushing from place to place, leaving her to catch up to him or be lost in a sea of people with whom she couldn't communicate. She knew he didn't mean to leave her behind but he was running on pure emotion. Every once in a while, he looked back to make sure she was still there and when he saw her fighting through the crowd trying to keep him in her sight, he waved and plowed on until they were finally in the taxi and able to slightly relax.

Jae exhaled deeply as they began the ride to his hometown. The taxi driver tried to make pleasant conversation with him but he answered his questions curtly as he gazed out the window, his mind laden with worry and anticipation. Finally, the taxi driver took the hint and drove in silence. As they got closer to Ansan, Jae's grip on April's hand tightened until she felt that if they didn't arrive soon, he'd break it. Finally, they stopped in front of a small apartment building surrounded by shops and restaurants. It seemed like a nice neighborhood. Around them people sped by on bicycles, a group of young women dressed in business attire walked by laughing, two young children ran in front of their mother and father, playing a made-up game. April smiled at them and they waved to her then shyly ran back to their parents.

"Come on."

April had been so enthralled with her new surroundings that Jae had been able to retrieve the bags from the trunk and pay the driver before she had even noticed. She followed him into the building and onto a cramped elevator. When they reached the fourth floor the doors opened revealing two

young men who were waiting to board. Jae greeted them politely and April smiled as she pulled Jae's suitcase behind her into the hall. One of the boys pushed it as he entered the elevator and it fell out of her grip. Sure it was an accident, April smiled at the boy who mumbled something to his friend and laughed. April had no clue what he said but whatever it was sent Jae into a rage. He shouted at them and lunged at the elevator. Luckily for the boys the doors closed before Jae could reach them.

April stood beside Jae, stunned by his sudden outburst. She had never seen him so angry before. His demeanor was usually so calm she had doubted he could even be provoked to such a violent reaction.

"Jae," April said, cautiously touching his arm. "What did they say?"

"It doesn't matter," he said, taking her hand. "*Gaja*."

April nodded and followed behind him as he led her to his mother's door. He had explained on the plane that one of the reasons he had been working so hard was to pay the rent on the small one bedroom apartment she had moved into after he left. No matter how much she had resisted the help, he couldn't imagine letting her continue to work three jobs just to barely survive.

Standing outside the door, Jae hesitated. He lifted the cover of the security keypad but punched no buttons. Instead, his shoulders slumped and he began to cry. All of the rushing was over. He was here. There was nothing left to do but deal with what was real and what was real was that he was about to enter the apartment his mother had been living in alone for ten years. The apartment she'd probably never step foot in again.

April pulled him into her arms and held him as he wept. All the years of sadness had led to this moment. Soon, he'd have no more secrets, he'd no longer have to lie. He was going to be relieved of a burden but in its place would be an even heavier one. Living motherless for the first time in his life.

Finally, he pulled away from her, his face streaked with tears. She wiped them away and he kissed her gently.

"I'm glad you're here," he said.

"Me too."

Again, he lifted the cover of the security pad and punched in his mother's code. The door beeped and unlocked. Jae turned the knob and with a deep breath stepped into his mother's home. April hadn't been sure what to expect. Other than the dust that had settled on most of the surfaces in the week that she had been in the hospital, the apartment was clean and cozy. April followed Jae in and watched as he took in his surroundings. The only pictures on the walls were of the two of them or of only Jae. He traced the frame of one of them with his finger, the image obviously stirring memories. There was a small table made neatly with one place setting, a love seat and chair and a television that Jae had bought her a few Christmases before. He told April that she had scolded him for buying her such an expensive gift but also made sure to tell him all the programs she was watching whenever they spoke on the phone.

April stood in the living room as Jae entered the bedroom so that he wouldn't feel crowded. She could see that in the room there was nothing more than a mat on the floor and a closet full of clothes, more gifts from Jae.

"Are you tired?" he asked as he emerged from his mother's room.

"A little," she answered.

"Let's take a nap. The love seat opens into a bed."

Surprised that Jae didn't want to rush to the hospital to see his mother, April nodded, knowing better than to say anything about it.

Jae took the suitcases and wheeled them into his mother's room, closing the door behind him. April unfolded the bed as he took blankets from a closet in the hall. She watched him move around the apartment and tried to tell what he was thinking. He simply looked resolute, focused on the task at hand. She saw no sadness, no relief, nothing. It was as if it was any other evening and he was preparing to turn in early. Once he had the blankets spread over the sofa bed he took off his pants and sat down waiting without speaking for her to do the same.

"Do you want me to set an alarm?" April asked, slipping out of her dress.

"No," he replied taking her hand. "Let's just sleep."

April hadn't realized how tired she was until she lay down in Jae's arms. She hadn't slept during the whole flight, though all she wanted to do was sleep. She was too anxious to even close her eyes. Every time she did, she imagined something horrible like the plane crashing, or being lost in the streets of Ansan without Jae to translate for her. So, though she wanted to know when they were going to see his mother, she was too tired to ask. Or too afraid.

"I love you," Jae mumbled as he began to fall asleep, his arms tighter around her than they had ever been.

"I love you, too," she replied.

When April opened her eyes again what seemed like seconds later, the room was dark. She reached over to the other side of the bed to wake Jae, upset that they had overslept but felt nothing but cold sheets. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness she realized that she was alone, Jae was nowhere to be seen. Outside, the signs of the shops that lined the street shone enough light through the window for her to just make out the table where her phone was laying. Carefully, she made her way across the room where, under her phone, she found a note.

Back in an hour. Getting dinner.

An hour from when? Why didn't he wake me? She would have loved to have taken a walk with him and get dinner together. She wondered how long he'd been gone. The darkness in the sky deepened as the moments passed and April sat alone on the bed. She tried not to be frightened when she heard strange hushed voices that seemed to stop outside the door. She held her breath until the footsteps finally withdrew as the men continued down the hall.

Finally, just as she was reaching her wit's end, the security pad beeped and Jae walked into the room.

"You're up," he said without even a bit of warmth or eye contact.

"Yeah," April replied, afraid to say more.

Jae took the bag he had into the dining area and began to take containers out and put them on the table.

"I got dinner."

April stood by his side watching him intently, trying to find the Jae she knew in this cold man. His movements were quick and heavy as he slammed the food down and angrily balled up the bag it had been in as if it had offended him in some way.

"I would have come with you if you had woken me up, Jae. You didn't have to go alone."

"I wanted to be alone."

"Oh..."

"I went to see my mother," Jae said, finally looking up at April as if he was confessing something for which he had no remorse.

"How is she?" April asked.

Jae looked at her with such disgust she wished she could sink into the floor. She knew it was a stupid question but she didn't know what else to say, she had no idea what he wanted from her. If he wanted anything at all.

"She's dying," he growled, throwing the chopsticks he was holding onto the floor.

April froze where she stood, fear keeping her from moving or speaking. Jae stomped to his mother's room and slammed the door behind him, shaking the pictures on the walls and making her jump. She couldn't do anything but cry, standing next to the food he had gotten for them to share. She had never felt so alone. She knew that Jae was going through a very hard time but taking it out on her wasn't going to solve anything. She had made the trip to comfort him and it seemed her presence was doing nothing but annoying him. Somehow, her being there was making him feel worse. Her nature, her heart, was pulling her towards the door but she dare not open it. The man on the other side was not the Jae she knew. This Jae frightened her and as much as she hated to admit it, she was beginning to realize that her impetuous decision to accompany him home had been a mistake.

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Forgotten

April stayed up as long as she could, nibbling on the food Jae had brought her, staring out the window at the people below happily living their lives while she sat alone contemplating her unsure future, but as the night wore on it became obvious that he wasn't coming back out. She wrapped herself in a blanket and got into bed willing herself not to cry, refusing to give in to her current situation. She had been through a lot in her life and she would get through this as well. Eventually morning would come and she would be able to talk to Jae, but for the time being she needed to sleep.

"April?"

The whisper invaded April's dream not long after she'd finally drifted off. She opened her eyes and saw Jae sitting beside her. His expression was lost in the darkness of the room but she could feel tension emanating from him.

"Is everything ok?" she asked, sitting up.

Another stupid question. She braced for his reaction but all he did was shake his head.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

She nodded, unsure how to reply.

"Do you want me to leave?" she asked after a moment of silence.

He looked at her and she noticed the street lights reflecting in his eyes the way the stars had the night they first met. It felt like forever since he had been just that guy in her building. They had gone from strangers to lovers and back to strangers within the space of a few days and in that time it had become apparent to her that they were supposed to be together. That no

matter how much he fought it or how many mistakes she made, in the end they would walk through life together. However, since arriving in Korea her faith in their destiny had been shaken.

"Of course not. Is that what you think?"

"I don't know what to think, Jae. I came here to be with you and to help you though this but I don't think I'm helping. The last thing I want is to make this more difficult for you."

Jae sighed loudly and pulled April into his chest. It didn't take long for her to miss his touch and she reveled in his closeness and warmth while at the same time fearing she would lose it again and not just for a few hours. She feared losing him forever.

"I don't know how to tell you how I feel. It's easy to express love but pain for me is more difficult."

April knew this about Jae. He left her for nearly a year because he couldn't talk to her about his fears and the scars left over from his past but he told her he loved her before they ever even went on a date.

"I understand," April said, pulling away from him, "but you have to try. You can't shut yourself behind a door every time you're hurt."

"You're right. I'm going to try to change. I can't lose you again."

"Jae," April said, again resting her head on his chest, "you never did."

April awoke just as the sun rose above the horizon. She sat at the window and watched as the city came to life, amazed by how little she missed home. She missed Kenny, and she had desperately wanted to call him the night before but she knew he would try to convince her to come back and she probably would have gone while Jae was holed up in his mother's room. But she knew she couldn't give up and she was glad she hadn't. Ansan was beautiful. She wanted to stay.

"We'll have to get you some clothes today," Jae said suddenly, startling April. She remembered a time when she would avoid letting him see her undressed at all costs. Now, though, she loved the way he looked at her curves, his obvious admiration giving her back some of the self-esteem she'd lost in her childhood.

"I thought you were asleep," she laughed.

"I was until I reached for you and you were gone. I was afraid..."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Thank you, April. For everything. I'm so lucky to have you by my side."

Jae joined her in front of the window and as the sun rose they held each other, so resolute in their happiness that they almost forgot everything else.

"I'm going to go take a shower then I'll go buy you something to wear, ok?"

"Ok."

The moment April heard the shower turn on she rushed to her phone and called Kenny. She knew he was worried about her but trying to give her space by not constantly checking to see if she was alright. She opened WhatsApp and saw that he was online, most likely staring at his screen waiting for her call.

"April," he shouted excitedly as soon as the call connected.

"Hey, Kenny. How are you?"

"I'm fine. How are you? Was the flight ok? Where are you staying? How's Jae's mom?"

"Wow, um. I'm ok. The flight was terrifying. We are staying at Jae's mom's apartment and she's not doing well, Kenny."

"Oh, my God. I'm so sorry. How's Jae?"

April didn't know how to answer that question. The last thing she wanted was to worry Kenny and any knowledge he would have of the night's events would do that. However, she also didn't want to lie. Kenny was her best friend and lying to him felt wrong but not more wrong than letting him worry about her from a world away, knowing he was powerless to help her.

"He's having a hard time but he's getting through it."

"I guess that's all he can do."

"Yeah."

"April."

"Yeah?"

"I miss you."

"I miss you too, Kenny."

April forced back the tears that threatened to fall and tried to compose herself so that no sign of sadness was evident to Kenny or Jae. The only thing that got in the way of her imagining a happy life in Korea was living without Kenny. She didn't know if she could do it. She found it so strange that the thing that was giving her pause wasn't her home but her ex-boyfriend. She was quickly realizing, however, that home was more than just a place, it was who you shared it with.

"I better go," April said when she heard the shower turn off.

"Ok," Kenny replied. "Don't forget about me."

"I couldn't ever forget you."

Just as she hung up, Jae stepped out of the bathroom, a towel around his waist, glistening and wet. The sight of him took her breath away. He went into the bedroom and through the open door she watched as he dug through his bags and when he found what he was looking for, pulled off the towel and dressed, bathed in the light of the morning sun.

"I won't be long," he said as he approached her.

They kissed and again he was gone and she was alone. She thought about calling Kenny back but decided against it. She couldn't be splitting her time between the two of them. Anyway, Kenny needed her to be gone in order to get over her and to move on, something she never imagined she'd have to worry about. It was amazing to her that all the time she thought that she was easy to forget and discard, in reality she had never been forgotten.

"Does it fit?" Jae called from outside the bedroom door.

She wasn't sure how he had done it but he had gotten her size exactly. The pants, blouse, even the bras and underwear fit her perfectly. She stepped out of the room and he smiled, proud of his fashion sense.

"How did you get it so right?"

He smiled.

"I know your body."

April blushed and took the socks and slippers out of his hand. He had gotten her enough clothes to last a few days as well as some toiletries and hair pulls. He had thought of everything. Even she would have forgotten deodorant or a toothbrush but he hadn't. He had taken care to remember every detail, to anticipate her every need. Something so small as remembering her preference in toothpaste flavor reminded her that he cared

and that though at times it may seem like he wanted to push her away, he needed her close.

"It's still early," Jae said, looking at his watch. "Do you want to take a walk?"

"Sure," April replied, excited to finally get out and explore her new surroundings.

As she put on her sneakers, which also fit just right, Jae's phone rang, piercing their happy day with a dagger of dread. Since she had known him, there had never been good news on the other side of any of his phone calls. She tried to stay hopeful but she knew that this could be the worst call of them all. She stood beside him, a hand on his shoulder as he answered.

"*Yeoboseyo?*"

The male voice speaking to him was stern and serious and Jae listened intently as he spoke.

"*Ne.*"

"What did he say?" April asked, when Jae hung up.

"We have to go," he said, looking off into the distance as if he was somehow trying to see what was in store for him in the near future. Or as if he was trying to understand what was happening, confusion clouding his eyes. Already he seemed lost, searching for an answer that wasn't his to understand.

Without another word they rushed out the door together, hand in hand. Whatever they were headed for, whatever Jae was about to face, they would face it together. Never again would he have to hide or internalize his pain. In the taxi, she held him while his world crumbled and as he silently cried, she cried with him.

Eomeoni

Once at the hospital Jae and April were lead to Jae's mother's room, all the while a tall doctor who seemed to be about Jae's age explained what was happening. Jae pulled April along by her hand as he rushed through the halls to her bedside. It had been another close call, Jae explained before disappearing behind the door. They were able to save her but they didn't know for how long. Their goal had been to keep her alive until he had a chance to say goodbye.

April stood in the hall outside the room, unsure what to do. She couldn't help but be struck by the eerie stillness of the corridor. It was so deceptively quiet. A silent warzone. Behind the doors that lined the halls people were fighting for their lives but the only commotion occurred when the end was near. When the final battle was being waged against an often invisible enemy. April knew that surrender was an option for Jae's mother but still she fought and April understood why. Though she had never herself been a mother, she knew the undying love a mother has for her child. Though she sent Jae away all those years ago she had done it out of love, out of a selfless desire to see his dreams come true. She was fighting for him. She didn't want him to have to deal with the pain of losing her, of being alone in the world without the person who knew him best.

"Excuse me."

April turned, the quiet voice shocking her out of her introspection. Beside her stood a young woman and a little girl. The girl was holding a doll and was looking up at April with the brightest most hopeful eyes she'd ever seen. April couldn't help but notice the hospital bracelet on the girl's arm and her heart broke.

"Hi," April said, smiling.

"This is SooAe," the young woman said, motioning to the little girl. "She wanted me to tell you that she loves your hair."

April self-consciously touched her curls. When she was younger, she would have killed for SooAe's long straight locks, her curls having caused her more embarrassment than one person should have to live through.

"Thank you," April said to the little girl and the young woman translated. "You have pretty hair, too."

The girl smiled shyly then said something to the young woman.

"She wants to know if you'd like to see her room. It's just down the hall."

After a glance at the closed door in front of her, April nodded and followed the girls to SooAe's room, hoping that everything would stay calm while she was gone and that Jae wouldn't notice she was missing.

April sat on the bed as SooAe rushed around the room gathering her prized possessions. Several dolls and drawings that she had done she shoved onto April's lap. As she did, her cousin, JiMin, explained her situation. She told April that she had been in the hospital for three weeks and that her spirit had been waning lately. She was beginning to realize that her sickness was serious though the adults around her had been trying to keep the grim details a secret. Only a week after she had been admitted she was diagnosed with leukemia. This small happy child was yet another soldier fighting for her life. April tried to hold back her tears for SooAe's sake as she happily handed her stuffed animal after stuffed animal. Each with a name and origin story. After a while her excitement seemed to have taken a toll and she climbed onto her cousin's lap, smiling up at April.

"I think it's time for her nap," JiMin said, stroking SooAe's hair. She whispered to her in Korean and the little girl nodded, yawning.

"Thank you for visiting with her. I can tell this helped."

"I'm happy to. I hope to see you again soon," April said as the girl waved weakly.

Once back in the hallway April rushed back to Jae's mother's room all the while trying to gather herself and got there just as Jae came out.

"Where were you?" he asked. "I checked a while ago and you were gone."

"I'll tell you later. How's your mom?"

"She's sleeping. Stable for now."

April nodded, struck by a sudden sadness so deep it made her nauseous. JiMin had described to April how SooAe's mother had reacted to her diagnosis, crying and begging God to save her baby. Her father had stood stoically by her side in a state of disbelief. And Jae's mother, so desperate to stay with her son, she was using all her strength to keep from losing her grip on the frail bond that was keeping her tied to this earth. One mother afraid to leave, the other afraid of loss.

"April, are you ok?" Jae asked.

She tried to answer but the hall started to spin and suddenly the floor rushed up to meet her and with it came darkness and more silence.

April opened her eyes moments later as Jae was kneeling over her calling for someone to help him.

"Jae," she whispered, trying to sit up.

"Don't move," he said.

Suddenly she was being lifted by three white coated men and placed into a wheelchair.

"I'm fine," she tried to tell them. "Please, Jae, tell them I'm fine."

"You fainted. You're not fine."

"I'm just hungry. I've barely eaten since we got here. You know me. I usually eat a lot."

April tried to lighten the mood by laughing and Jae nodded, telling the men to leave her in the wheelchair.

"I'll take you to the cafeteria but if you still feel faint after you're done eating, you're getting checked out."

April nodded obediently and sat back as Jae pushed her to the elevator. She had a feeling she knew why she fainted but she didn't want to say anything about it. No use making Jae worry more about her. She was sure that a good meal would pep her up enough that she wouldn't lose consciousness anymore at least. Jae pushed her to a table and went and got her a tray so full of food she wasn't sure even she could finish it. Hurriedly, she began stuffing her mouth. Half because she was that hungry and half because she wanted Jae to get back to his mother as soon as possible.

As she ate, he watched her as if looking for some visible indication that she was feeling better. After a while he took her hand in his and stared deep into her eyes.

"I can't lose you, April."

"Jae," she replied, pushing the tray away, "you won't."

"Before she fell asleep, *eomma* told me she didn't want to leave me. I told her you were here with me. It seemed to ease her mind a bit."

April smiled, squeezing Jae's hand. She couldn't imagine the way he was feeling, watching his mother slip away, waiting for such a painful moment to happen. Not wanting to say goodbye while at the same time wishing for an end to her suffering. She almost counted herself lucky that her father's

death had been sudden and that she had been so young at the time. She wasn't able to fully understand anything except that Daddy wasn't coming home anymore. She still had her mother to lean on, to talk to, to share memories with. All the things that Jae was too young to recall or understand would soon be lost forever, answers to questions he had yet to ask, locked in his mother's mind.

"Let's go back upstairs," April suggested.

"I think you should go back to the apartment."

Whatever sign of recovery he was looking for he must not have found because his eyes clouded with concern.

"I'm not leaving you here alone, Jae. Take me to the pharmacy, let me pick up a few things. When we get back upstairs I'll stay in the wheelchair. Standing is what's making me dizzy."

After a moment of thought, Jae conceded and pulled her away from the table and pushed her towards the pharmacy.

"I have to get some private things, can you wait out here?"

"Of course," he said, handing her a bill. "This should be enough."

She stood and walked into the pharmacy, looking around for what she needed. She didn't recognize any of the brands but luckily most tampon boxes look the same no matter the country. She got some ibuprofen, wet wipes and a few other items and made her way to the checkout counter. The clerk said hello in English and smiled. April smiled back and looked over at Jae who was standing at the door, watching her intently in case she needed help.

"I did it all by myself," she said as she sat back in the wheelchair with her bag.

"I'm proud of you," Jae said, sounding more like himself than he had since they arrived in Korea.

It made her miss him. Since they met he had always been slightly intense but he was also playful and sweet. She missed that Jae and for a while she wasn't sure she would ever see him that way again. After everything that had happened the past two days, she feared the darkness in him had taken over and he would remain brooding and distant forever. So though this moment of levity was brief, it gave her hope that the Jae she knew was still there somewhere.

After a few hours in the hall, Jae told April that they were going back to the apartment.

"Are you sure?" she asked groggily.

"Yes. They've given her painkillers and sleeping aids. She won't be awake for hours and you need rest."

April wanted to argue but she couldn't. She was tired and hungry but she didn't want to be the reason Jae wasn't there when his mother passed. She would never be able to forgive herself.

"Just drop me off and come back, then," she managed to say.

"I need rest, too."

"Of course."

Once back at the apartment, April fixed them each a plate of leftovers. They sat in the bed and Jae turned on a variety show that they watched as they ate. Had the situation been different it would have been the perfect evening and she knew that Jae felt it too by the way he wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close to him. When he noticed her nodding off he turned off the television and wrapped both his arms around her. She sighed, resting her

head on his arm. He kissed her lips gently and caressed her cheek and just as she fell asleep she heard him whisper, "Thank you".

War is Over

April got up early and showered, allowing Jae as much rest as possible. The night before she had fallen asleep only to be awakened a few hours later by his restless movements pulling the blankets from her and nearly pushing her off the bed. When he finally calmed down enough for her to get comfortable beside him the sun was peeking through the curtains and dancing across the floor at her feet.

She stood and looked outside for a while, desperately wishing she had had the foresight to bring her camera. It seemed every morning brought something new to the landscape she wished she could capture. The expansive sky and clouds, the way the rising sun shone off the buildings reflecting its golden hues in their windows. The same sky, the same sun she used to watch in DC but it was as if she was seeing them for the first time. The sensation was strange yet comforting. Like seeing Jae in the hospital, talking to the doctors in a language she didn't understand. Like holding his hand when she knew his mind was miles away.

In the shower April turned the water as hot as she could stand it and let it pound on her muscles, massaging away the stiffness of a 14-hour flight, two nights on a sofa bed and half a day in a wheelchair. She knew there wasn't enough hot water in the building to ease her aches but she was thankful for what she had. Just as she started lathering her body, Jae knocked on the door.

"Can I come in?" he asked.

"Sure," April said, surprised by his request.

She could see only his silhouette through the frosted glass of the shower door and she opened it slightly so he could see her. To her further surprise, he was naked.

"I thought I'd join you."

"I guess that'll be a timesaver."

He nodded and stepped into the small shower with her. She watched with unabashed adoration as he backed into the hot water, wetting his hair, then lowered his head, allowing the water to flow over his neck and shoulders.

"Here," she said, taking a rag and turning him around.

She lathered the rag and ran it across his muscular back while gently kneading his skin. The tension in him was unreal. Every muscle she touched was taught and he moaned softly as she tried to work out the kinks.

"Does that feel better?" she asked when she was done.

"Much," he replied, turning to her.

Through the steam he reached for her and pulled her into a tight embrace. She wrapped her arms around his neck and though they stood under a scalding shower somehow her tears felt hot as they rolled down her cheeks. She didn't even know why she was crying. Just being close to Jae, being necessary to him, it brought up emotions in her that she had never faced. Feeling his heart beating against her chest, his breath on her neck, his hair between her fingers she felt so complete and she realized how incomplete she had been for so much of her life. Not because she wasn't whole without a man but because she had so much love to give and Jae needed so much love. She knew he hadn't gotten into the shower with her for sex. He wanted to be close to her, to feel her skin on his, to see her exposed and vulnerable, to prove that she was safe with him. He wanted her to know that though his words in the past few days may have been harsh, though he may have turned away, he would always come back to her because she was his home.

"Are you sure you want to go with me today?" Jae asked as they were getting dressed.

"Of course."

"I just hate leaving you out in the hall. At least go sit in the waiting area. I'll text you if I need you. I don't want you to faint again."

"Jae, I won't, ok? I always get a little light headed around that time of the month. I'm slightly anemic but it's nothing to worry about. I've been dealing with it since I was thirteen."

"I don't know. Somehow, when you say I shouldn't worry it makes me worry more."

April waited until Jae was done tying his shoes and kissed him quickly on the cheek.

"*Gaja*," she said, taking his hand and leading him out of the apartment.

April sat alone in the corner of the waiting room playing with the learn Korean app she had downloaded on her phone. She was still working on Hangul when she got a text from Jae.

'When she wakes up I want you to come meet her. They said they can let you in for a few minutes.'

April replied that she would come up as soon as he let her know and went back to the app. Only she didn't go back to her Hangul lesson. Instead, she switched to the translator function and quickly began typing the things she wanted to say to Jae's mother. She had been thinking the night before about what she would tell her if she got the chance. There was so much but she knew her time would be limited. She wanted to assure her that Jae wouldn't be alone when she was gone and that she would love him for as long as he would let her.

She sat, quietly practicing the pronunciation of the phrases that the translator had come up with when she heard someone call her name. She

looked up to see SooAe running across the waiting room towards her. April stood up and the girl ran into her legs, hugging them together as tight as she could. Behind her was JiMin and who April assumed were SooAe's parents. They looked so concerned watching their little girl run up to and hug a stranger but JiMin was explaining as they rushed after her. April caressed the girl's head and smiled at the family as they approached her.

"These are SooAe's parents. I told them all about your visit yesterday. They are very grateful to you for making SooAe so happy. You are all she can talk about."

"It was my pleasure," April had hardly finished saying when she was hugged by SooAe's mother. She looked up at April with tears in her eyes and whispered something she didn't understand. She looked at JiMin confused and she translated.

"She said you're now a part of our family."

April closed her eyes in a vain attempt to keep her tears from falling. She had hardly done anything to deserve such a declaration of love from this woman. She had spent an hour in the company of her daughter. She listened to her make-believe stories. She hugged about a hundred teddy bears. It was nothing to April but a pleasant visit, but to SooAe it had been exciting and new. It was something she would remember if she was given the chance to grow old.

April sat down and patted the little girl's head.

"Where are you all going?" she asked.

"Her treatment is done for now. She gets to go home."

"Wow," April exclaimed. "That's great. I'm so happy for you."

April wanted to continue the conversation and maybe find out where she could see them again but her phone buzzed.

'She's awake.'

"I have to go," she said. After hugging SooAe and her mother one last time she headed for the elevator. Then realizing that JiMin could help her, she ran back.

"Can you tell me how to say this?" she said, handing the girl her phone.

JiMin smiled and syllable by syllable sounded out the phrases.

"Thank you," April said as she ran back across the room. "Goodbye!"

Jae was waiting for her when she got off the elevator and she could tell he had been crying.

"Jae?"

Without a word he pulled her into a hug his body racked with sobs.

"It won't be much longer. There's nothing else they can do," he whispered.
"I didn't want her to see me like this before..."

"I know, baby. I know. "

"She wants to see you. They said it's ok for you to come in now."

April nodded, waited for Jae to compose himself, and hand in hand they walked into the room. The curtains were open and the deceitfully sunny day so severely juxtaposed the mood in the room it was jarring. Laying in the bed, Jae's mother looked so small, her frail frame barely making a lump under the covers. She looked at April when they walked into the room and Jae introduced them.

"April, this is my mother, Kim Jang Mi. *Eomeoni*, Aeyo."

She spoke to Jae and reached out her hand to April.

"She wants you to sit beside her."

April nodded and sat on the chair closest to the bed.

"Geunyeoneun yeppeuda."

"She says you're pretty," Jae said.

April smiled, suddenly struck dumb with grief. The look in her eyes was so hopeful, so similar to the look in SooAe's eyes and the eyes of her mother. How could she live up to their expectations, she wondered? But, what did they expect from her? Nothing but who she was. They wanted nothing but for April to be April. All they wanted was the love that she was more than happy to give. She leaned forward, her mouth close to JangMi's ear. Even now April couldn't help but notice that she was a beautiful woman. Though illness had ravaged her body, her spirit still shone in her eyes. However, like Jae, they also revealed a deep sadness. April hoped that she could, in these last moments, relieve some of her sorrow.

After a deep breath, she began to whisper to her the words that she had learned in the waiting room with the confidence that comes with truth. She told her everything she thought that a mother would want to know from the woman who'd be caring for son once she was gone. When she had said all she wanted to say April backed away and watched JangMi's reaction to see if she understood.

"Ne?" she asked, tears glistening in her eyes.

April nodded.

"JaeYeong," she said, reaching now for Jae's hand.

"Eomma."

Jae sat on the bed and instinctively took April's hand as well as his mother's. She seemed to smile as she placed her other hand over theirs, squeezing as tight as she could, as if giving them her blessing, and saying goodbye. She stared into Jae's eyes, tears running into her hair and April could tell she had let go. For Kim JangMi, the war was over.

"Eomma?"

April covered her mouth to keep from crying out loud. She could feel Jae shaking, his tears now freely flowing with no more reason to hold them back.

"Jae?" April said, her voice hoarse with emotion.

Jae lowered his head and brought his mother's hand to his cheek then kissed it before placing it on her chest.

"Come on," she said, standing.

He took a deep shaky breath and followed her to the other side of the room as the nurses worked to unhook his mother from all the machines that had been monitoring her. Jae watched but April couldn't. It was so hard to see her that way, her gaze still trained on where Jae had been sitting beside her, when just moments ago she had been whispering in her ear exactly the things she needed to hear to be able to peacefully slip away without worry.

The rest of the day was a blur. April stayed beside Jae as he filled out paperwork and made arrangements.

"I just want to get it all done today," he had explained to her.

When they finally arrived back at the apartment, they ate without speaking and went directly to bed. April had no idea what time it was but she was exhausted and she could only imagine how Jae was feeling. She tried to push away fears that he would pull away from her again and she'd wake to find him closed in his mother's bedroom, out of her reach physically and

emotionally. Her fears faded though as he tenderly placed a hand on her waist before moving closer to her, making sure that every part of his body that could be was touching hers. They lay face to face in the darkness and April suddenly became very aware that she was now the only woman left who loved Jae. If not for her he would be alone in the world. Had she not come with him he would be laying in his mother's home with no one to hold him.

Suddenly, Jae cleared his throat.

"What did you say to her?" he asked.

April knew there would be a time when Jae would want to know her first and last words to his mother. She hadn't been prepared yet to tell him everything she had told her but prepared or not, the time had come. It was probably better that she couldn't see his eyes or the expression on his face. She had no idea how he'd react to what she was about to say.

"I, um," April began, her voice shaking. "I told her that I loved you and that she didn't have to worry. I told her that I would care for you. And I told her that you would always be loved by me and...."

"And who?" Jae asked, rubbing April's arm.

His voice was soft and understanding as if he knew what she was about to say but he wanted to hear it from her. She felt his arm tighten around her in anticipation and somehow, even in the darkness, she could feel him watching her.

With a flutter in her heart, she gently touched his cheek and found that, like hers, it was already wet with tears.

"Our baby."

A Case of the Ex

"How long have you known?" Jae asked.

"Just today," April replied, thinking back to the day before.

While she had been almost certain that her lightheadedness was the fault of her impending period, she had a nagging suspicion that there was another cause. So, when she went to the pharmacy to buy her tampons, sure she would need them, she also picked up a pregnancy test, hiding it among the other purchases until she could get back to the apartment and take it. She hardly expected a positive result so she took the test before bed and didn't check it until she was about to get into the shower the next morning.

Still cloaked in darkness, she was unable to see Jae's reaction. She hoped he was happy and not angry that she hadn't told him sooner. But how happy could he be mere hours after saying his final goodbye to his mother? She had no idea how he felt about fatherhood or about the prospect of being bound to her forever through another human being. In her mind, she prepared herself to tell him that she would raise the baby alone if she had to. She would go back to DC and he'd never hear from her again if that was what he wanted. She had to know. She felt like she had been lying there for hours waiting for his response.

"Well?"

"I don't know what to say," he whispered.

April's heart dropped. She felt so foolish, allowing herself to get pregnant. She knew better. She had always been so careful with Kenny but that was mostly because their sex was usually scheduled days in advance. Date, time, position. All planned out ahead of time. With Jae, it had been

spontaneous. Always filled with passion. The last thing on her mind was what should have been first.

"I'm so sorry I let this happen, Jae. I'm so sorry."

"April," Jae said as he pulled away from her and rolled over, turning on the lamp.

With light suddenly filling the room, April could see that he was confused, that an apology was neither what he expected nor desired.

"Why are you sorry?" he asked as she sat up beside him.

"I guess because I don't know what you want. I don't know if you want this."

With great care, he took her hand as if the moment she became pregnant she turned into a piece of fine china. Beautiful to hold but easily broken. He stared down at their hands, his thumb caressing hers, tracing small circles on her skin.

"I've never wanted anything more," he whispered.

She knew he had so much more to say to her, but for the moment he had said enough. She pulled him into her arms and for the rest of the night they held each other, mostly in silence. Their little family in its infancy, created out of love, huddled together in a small room of a small apartment in a big city. April could have so easily felt lost and alone, unmarried and pregnant, but she reprimanded herself for ever believing that Jae would abandon her and their child. He kissed her as she fell asleep, his arms still around her. Protecting her. And as quickly as they had formed, all her fears melted away and she slept soundly.

April wasn't sure what time Jae had fallen asleep but she woke up with the rising sun as usual. She left him in bed as she showered, humming all the while, songs her mother sang to her when she was a child. Jae had yet to

meet her mother and he told her he wanted to video chat with her as soon as possible and share the news. It wasn't the ideal way to introduce them, but she didn't feel right waiting too long to tell her.

There was so much to do, so many considerations, so many plans that had to be made. They had so much to look forward to but so much work as well and April was both nervous and excited.

When she turned off the shower, she heard a knock coming from the living room. She quickly wrapped a towel around herself and opened the bathroom door. Jae was still sleeping and she still didn't speak enough Korean to engage whoever might be there.

She left the bathroom and the person knocked again. Gently, she shook Jae's shoulder and he slowly opened his eyes, then shot up out of bed.

"Are you ok?" he asked, looking her up and down.

"Baby, I'm fine. There's someone at the door."

"Oh?"

April stood on the other side of the room as Jae approached the door. He opened it a crack and whoever was on the other side pushed it open the rest of the way and charged into the room. April gasped, and rushed to Jae's side ready to defend him any way she could when a woman came around the door.

"JaeYoung," she shouted, throwing her arms around his neck.

She continued shouting in Korean and Jae did his best to peel her off of him but she wouldn't let go. Finally, he said something that stopped her and she backed away, a sullen look on her face. She replied, her eyes on the floor as if she was being reprimanded, which April realized she was. Jae stared at her, the ice in his eyes unmistakable.

"Jae?" April said, drawing the attention of the woman as well.

Suddenly, she started screaming, angrily motioning to April who could do little more than wish she wasn't mostly naked. Whoever this person was, the sight of April there with Jae sent her into a rage. April was sure at least half of what she was hearing were swear words, from both of them. The woman waved her arms around wildly as Jae stood in front of April, trying to protect her from being hurt.

Finally, Jae had enough and he pushed the woman out into the hall, closing the door behind them. April heard them talking, the woman's pleading met with Jae's harsh responses. He came back inside and immediately took April's hands.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"I'm fine. Who was that?"

"Her name is Han JiWoo," Jae said.

April felt the air around them change, becoming thick with discomfort and she held her breath fearing what he was about to tell her. Looking back at the door he frowned, the anger emanating from him so toxic that she could feel it herself. When Jae looked back at her, April raised her eyebrows expectantly, hoping he was overdramatizing the moment.

"She's my ex-wife."

April knew she was smiling but she couldn't stop. She was frozen. She stared at Jae but she wasn't seeing him. She was looking into the eyes of a stranger, a man with whom she had created a life but who had kept his marriage a secret from her. A marriage, she ventured to guess, that hadn't ended well based on the screaming match she had just witnessed and the hard to mistake hatred she could see in him since the woman had been there. She knew that hatred; she had experienced that hatred. It could be all-consuming if left unchecked. April thought back on her relatively short

relationship with Jae and tried to remember recognizing that kind of anger in him, the kind she could see burning in his eyes as he stood beside her. She couldn't. All she had ever seen in him was sadness. Had JiWoo been part of what made Jae so sad? April wasn't sure she wanted to know.

"Ok," she said and started towards the bathroom to finish getting ready for the day trying to shake the feeling of dread that was creeping into her heart.

"That's it?"

She turned back to him and shrugged.

"Yeah, I guess. What else do you want me to say?"

"April," Jae called after her and grabbed her arm just before she closed the door on him. "I know you're angry that I didn't tell you before. I'm sorry."

She knew his apology was sincere but really she wasn't angry. They had been through so much just dealing with their own situation, Jae had been singularly focused on them and his mother. He knew about Kenny only because he had unfortunately inserted himself into their relationship at the worst time and because Miss Baily had filled him in. Other than that, she never talked about any of her ex-boyfriends. In fact, April didn't even know who he had broken up with the night they met. Because it didn't matter. This woman, though, was different. Not because they were once married but because she seemed upset that they weren't married anymore. With Jae's penchant to want to please, April saw it as a real problem.

"Is she why you left Korea?" April asked.

"What? No, I told you I left because my mother wanted me to make a life there. She thought I'd be happy."

"Well, why did you get divorced?"

"We had been married six months when she cheated on me with her boss. We were unhappy from the beginning. Her father rushed us into marriage too soon. I don't know that I even loved her."

April nodded, hoping that Jae would offer the information she wanted to know without her having to ask because she didn't want to seem jealous or worried, though she was. April's mere presence angered JiWoo to such an extent that Jae had to force her out of the room.

She sighed, realizing that she was going to have to bring it up.

"Why was she so upset?"

For a moment she thought that he wasn't going to answer, he just stared at her as though he didn't hear what she said.

"Um. I think she expected me to be alone."

April's eyes immediately dropped to the floor but Jae took her shoulders and bent down so that their faces were only inches apart, desperate to make her understand.

"April," he said, waiting until she looked up at him before continuing. "You are the only woman I want. She was my past. You are my future."

She nodded and he pulled her into his arms. It seemed every day brought a new realization, something else that made Jae's past behavior make more sense. He had been cheated on by his wife, so seeing April hugging Kenny that night must have brought back memories of that betrayal. She hated herself for being so careless, for exacerbating his feelings of loneliness and inadequacy. She hugged him tight around the neck and kissed his cheek.

"We have a lot to learn about each other," she said as he rested his forehead on hers.

"I want to tell you everything."

April giggled.

"That could take a while."

He smiled and kissed her nose.

"Well," he said, "we have the rest of our lives."

Ready or Not

As the days passed, April and Jae moved nearly as one. Together they buried his mother's ashes, just the two of them, alone in the cemetery, her only mourners. As they walked hand in hand from her grave, the sun dipped behind a cloud as though recognizing their grief and hiding to match it. April cried silently for a woman she hardly knew. She cried because she was the mother of the man she loved and the grandmother of a child she wouldn't get the chance to meet. Jae was silent most of the morning, speaking only to whisper words that April didn't have to speak the language to understand.

Along the path on which they walked, under the dreary branches of a weeping willow tree, sat a bench. Jae stopped in front of it and motioned for April to sit with him. He held her hand on his lap and she carelessly noticed the sharp crease in the leg of his new suit. A suit he bought just for the occasion and that she knew he'd never wear again.

"I've been thinking," he said, startling her.

"About what?"

"We should go home."

"Ok," April said, leaning forward to stand up.

But Jae pulled her back gently.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I meant back to your home. To DC."

"What?"

April couldn't believe what she was hearing. She never thought Jae would want to leave Korea after finally getting back after so many years of unhappiness in America. Ansan was his home; it was where he was born. She had secretly been looking forward to raising their child there. Watching him play where Jae had played, live where he had lived, and enjoy the rich and beautiful culture.

"I know you're surprised and if you want to stay we will but after everything that's happened...I can't explain how I feel. I thought that whatever was wrong with me would be remedied by being here, but I still feel all the same things. If anything, it's worse here because this place is so filled with memories."

April knew that the memories Jae spoke of weren't fond childhood memories like the ones she had of her home. They were of his mother's struggle, a broken home, and his own failed marriage.

"I don't know why I thought it would be different," he said, lowering his head.

"Because you're older now. You thought that the past was in the past but here you come face to face with it."

Jae looked at April and she knew he thought she was talking about JiWoo, and she was, but that was only part of it. Though she still didn't know what they had fought about when she showed up uninvited, she had a feeling it wasn't over, that if they stayed, JiWoo would become a roadblock to their happiness. She also knew that in America his memories could be tempered by walking down the streets of a different city, eating different food. So little reminded him of his home that sometimes he could forget, getting so lost in his surroundings that the past would have nothing to latch onto and for the most part stay in the past.

"We can talk more about it later. Let's take a walk and have lunch."

"Ok," April said.

She was shocked he wanted to stay out. Since his mother passed he only ventured from the apartment when it was absolutely necessary. If the shop where he got his suit delivered, he wouldn't have left even for that.

As they walked he showed her points of interest from his childhood. They passed his elementary school and a park where he used to play after school. He took her to the botanical gardens and watched her as she gazed in awe at the beautiful foliage and flowers. They talked about her photography and her hopes for her future career.

"What do you want to do?" she asked as they walked.

"Honestly, I've never taken the time to think about it. I worked because I had to. I did what I was good at and what would make the most money. What I wanted was never a consideration."

April stopped walking and leaned against one of the trees that lined the path they were on.

"Well, consider it."

Jae looked honestly perplexed. He hadn't been exaggerating when he said he never thought about what he wanted to do with his life. April hated the fact that he felt aimless, like his only purpose was to please other people. He disliked his work but had done it tirelessly to make enough money to take care of his mother. He married JiWoo to please her and her father. He spent so much time catering to other people's needs he had completely neglected himself to the point that he didn't know anymore what he wanted out of life.

Finally, he smiled, taking her hands.

"I know what I want to do," he said.

"What's that?"

"I want to be a good father. I don't ever want my child to look back and wonder if I cared about him. I want to show him love every day of his life. If I can do that, then I will have succeeded."

The light in Jae's eyes was like she had never seen in him before. He had a chance to break a cycle of pain that could have gone on for generations if not for his loving heart and he was taking it with both hands. Not out of guilt, pity, or even obligation. He was doing it because he wanted to. He had learned only days ago that he was going to be a father, that he was having a baby with someone he loved but knew so little about, yet none of those things scared him. Nothing made him worry more than the thought of his child feeling the way he felt in his youth. His mother loved him very much so it wasn't a lack of love that he experienced, it was feeling unwanted and abandoned. Knowing that his father could so easily walk away from him, a man who should have been his role model, his hero, was nothing more than a stranger. They could have passed each other a hundred times on the street and neither of them would have known.

"I think," April said, "that you're going to be a wonderful father and I am grateful that I will be by your side."

Jae stepped towards her, pressing her against the huge tree trunk. She looked around to see if anyone was there, shocked but not that shocked as she recalled their first kiss and how he had pushed her against the wall. Unlike then, though, he kissed her gently because now there was no rush, no pent up passion. As he had said before, they had their whole lives.

As they walked home, Jae's step seemed a bit lighter. Though he still mourned his mother and felt as though he didn't have a home, April hoped that their talk had relieved some of his heartache.

They approached the apartment building as the sun was setting having stopped on the way to get dinner. April had taken the bag as Jae paid and he grabbed it as soon as they walked out of the restaurant.

"I can handle carrying a bag of food," she laughed.

"Not as long as I'm around."

They were about to cross the street to get home when Jae suddenly stopped.

"What is it?" April asked.

"JiWoo," he replied.

April looked across the street and there, leaning on a lamp post, was JiWoo. She spotted them and waved frantically as if Jae would have trouble seeing her.

"Stay here. I'll get rid of her."

Before April could contest Jae crossed the street and as soon as he was within reach, JiWoo hugged him. He didn't push her away this time, though instead, his arms stayed limp at his sides, waiting for her to release him, which wasn't nearly soon enough for April. She watched their expressions as they spoke since any words that made it to her ears over the traffic were meaningless to her. Of course Jae looked angry, staring down at the woman with palpable contempt. She could see he was trying to remain calm but she knew that if the conversation went on long enough he would lose his temper again. She was about to go over to put an end to it when suddenly Jae turned to her.

"April," he called out. "Come here."

Shocked, she made her way across the street and Jae immediately wrapped a protective arm around her waist, pulling her in close to him.

"April, this is Han JiWoo."

Defiantly, the woman stomped her foot, refusing to acknowledge April, who didn't mind in the least.

"Naneun dangsin-ege deo hal mal-i eobs-seubnida," Jae hissed at JiWoo before pulling April past her and into the building.

Once inside, Jae placed the food on the table and took a deep breath, releasing it slowly in an attempt to calm himself.

"Baby," April said, coming to his side. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," he said, attempting to smile.

"We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"No, I think we should."

Proud that Jae was willing to open up to her, April sat down at the table while he took the food from the bags. When finally he sat across from her she prepared herself to be understanding no matter what he was about to say because she knew how hard it was for him to say it. Going from the man who not long ago had locked himself in a bedroom to keep from facing and sharing his emotions to this man who, when given an out, didn't take it, impressed her so much and she didn't want to make him regret his decision to open up to her.

"About JiWoo," he began. "She was hoping I would be willing to give our relationship another chance."

Biting her lip so hard she almost drew blood, April nodded encouraging Jae to continue.

"She heard about my mother's death and assumed I would be here making arrangements and cleaning out her apartment. She came to tell me that...she still loves me and she's sorry for what she did while we were married."

"Wow," April said, not quite sure what to do with any of the information he had just given her. "So, you told her about me the first night and she still came back tonight?"

Jae nodded and April was struck by the woman's brazen overtures towards a man who wasn't available. She hated to admit it but she was worried. She had gotten used to the thought of the two of them living a peaceful life together. Her ex was on board but she had a feeling that Jae's ex was a different story. That April's presence in his life had no effect on her desire to be with him. JiWoo saw her as just a speedbump to happiness with the man whom she had loved and lost.

"Please don't worry. I'm not interested in her."

"What happened between you?"

Jae sighed, looking down at his plate. April knew he had had a long day and pressing him about this, though he said he wanted to talk about it, was not a good idea. What went on with his ex-wife before they met was of no consequence. They were together. He had chosen her when confronted with the choice between his future and past.

"You know what?" April said, reaching for his hand. "Let's just eat, we can talk about this later."

He looked up at her and smiled and she knew he was relieved to have a chance to gather his thoughts before delving into such a painful conversation. She also knew, however, it meant that at some point he was going to sit her down and tell her everything, whether she was ready or not.

Most Serial Killers

April sat on the closed toilet lid, cradling her phone in her hands. It was midnight, ten o'clock in the morning DC time. Jae was sleeping soundly, so exhausted and emotionally drained he hadn't even noticed that she had gotten up. They had agreed to call her mother together at some point but it was difficult to get him to stay up late enough for the time difference to catch her awake and she couldn't keep her pregnancy to herself anymore. She didn't really have any good friends back home, choosing to spend most of her time alone. Her one-year single party was full of people she considered friends but who she wasn't particularly close to. They just showed up for the free booze and because they hated Kenny.

She stared at the phone, knowing who she was going to call. The only person she could call when she had a problem or news to share and her mother wasn't an option. She pulled up WhatsApp and called Kenny's number. It rang exactly half a ring before he picked up.

"Hello?"

Kenny's raspy morning voice made April giggle as she pictured him sprawled across his California King sized bed, not a care in the world, as the day wore on without him. She couldn't imagine the freedom he felt being so rich, successful, and handsome. Waking every morning and never having to do anything he didn't want to do, never feeling discomfort of any kind. She could so easily hate someone like him but he never used his name to get ahead in life. Everything he had he worked for and she was proud of him.

"Hey, Kenny. How are you?"

"I'm ok. Isn't it, like, midnight there?"

"Yeah. It's the only time I could talk to you alone."

"Is everything alright? You're not in trouble are you?"

"No. Nothing like that. I'm fine. Well, as fine as I can be. Jae's mom passed away last week."

"Oh my gosh, April. I'm sorry. How's Jae taking it?"

"Surprisingly well. I was afraid he was going to shut down and close himself off from me but he's getting through it."

"That's good. I've been worried about you both. Is he sleeping right now?"

"Yeah, why?"

"You're whispering and echoing. In the bathroom, huh?"

"Maybe. Look, I called you for a reason but you have to promise that you won't tell my mom what I'm about to tell you because I don't want her to know that I didn't tell her first. Got it?"

"April, I haven't seen your mom in three years. But just for you, I'll stay away from Studio Chic and Lord and Taylor."

"I'm sure it will be difficult. I know how much you love your blowouts."

"Just tell me."

Suddenly, April's stomach lurched and she felt the urge to get sick. Is this morning sickness or nerves, she wondered? Can you have morning sickness this late at night? Anything after midnight is morning technically.

"Hello?"

"Sorry," April said, swallowing hard. "So, I fainted at the hospital."

"What?"

"Yeah, remember how I used to get around my period? The headaches and the dizziness?"

"I remember. You never fainted, though. Did you get checked out?"

April could feel Kenny's concern and she wished more than anything that she could be with him and tell him in person. She needed one of his big bear hugs, his crazy overprotectiveness, and his unconditional love.

"Kenny," she said, swallowing away another wave of nausea. "I'm pregnant."

Silence.

"Did you hear me?"

More silence.

April looked at the screen of her phone to see if the call was still connected. It was, he just wasn't saying anything. She didn't even hear him breathing or moving. She clicked the camera button and waited for Kenny to do the same. When he did, she saw him lying with a hand over his eyes.

"Are you crying? And...are you in my bed?"

"I plead the fifth on both counts," he replied, his eyes still covered.

April laughed, something she felt she hadn't done in so long the sensation was almost strange.

"Kenny."

He uncovered his eyes but wouldn't look at her, instead turning his head to the side and staring out the window. Even as he spoke, his voice even and calm, tears rolled down his cheeks.

"I didn't want your stuff to be here unprotected. I've been staying so no one knows the place is empty. Not every night. Just once in a while."

"Ok. Thank you. Are you ok?" she asked, though she felt the wrong one of them was asking the question.

"Yes," he said, impatiently wiping his eyes. "I'm sorry. God. You. Are you ok?"

April wasn't sure how to react to his reaction. The last thing she expected was for him to cry. What she expected was a lecture on the importance of safe sex and how she had to respect her body if she expected anyone else to respect it. Instead, he lay in her bed, eyes full of tears, trying to smile.

"Kenny, what's wrong?"

"It's just...you're so far away. I always figured if you had a baby and if I wasn't the father at least I'd be there for you. For both of you."

"Oh my goodness, Kenny. You are there for me. I'm sitting on a toilet in another country and you're who I thought to call. So, yes, you are there for me, in my bed, wearing underwear I hope."

Kenny laughed and April sighed, relieved. Not just that her nausea had passed but that her friend was happy and hopefully happy for her.

"April?"

Jae groggily called her from the living room. She tried not to panic but she realized how it must look, her sneaking off to talk to her ex-boyfriend in the bathroom in the middle of the night.

"I have to go," she whispered.

Kenny nodded and she hung up, slowly entering the living room.

"Hey," she said as she climbed back into bed beside Jae.

He turned to her, his eyes closed, and wrapped his arm around her. If he had been awake when he called out to her, he wasn't anymore. His soft, even breathing was so soothing that though her stomach was still a bit uneasy she found herself falling asleep. And though she was in the arms of the man she loved, Kenny's words echoed in her head.

I always figured if you had a baby and if I wasn't the father...

When had he ever thought of having a baby with her? He had also said to her the morning she and Jae broke up that when they were together he imagined they'd be married someday. She never knew he felt that way. He had never expressed any such desires to her. She believed that he hadn't actually felt this way when they were together, but a year of missing her may have caused his mind to wander into what could have been. The marriage and the baby, things he gave up on when he left her, things he never knew he wanted but now somehow missed.

She hoped he could get over whatever residual feelings he had for her. If they were going to be friends, he had to be over her or she would have to say goodbye to him forever.

In the morning, April awoke to the scent of breakfast cooking. She stretched and opened her eyes and saw Jae, showered and fully dressed, standing in the kitchen.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," he said over his shoulder.

"Good morning," she replied. "What time is it?"

"Ten thirty. I went out and got us some tofu and vegetables. You need vitamins and protein for the baby. We shouldn't eat out as much. I'll cook for us from now on."

"Well, I guess I was right."

"About what?" Jae replied, plating their breakfast and putting it on the table.

"I'm the luckiest woman in the world."

Jae laughed and pulled her chair out for her. She climbed out of bed, stretching again, and turned to fold it back into a sofa.

"No, no."

Jae rushed to her and lifted the legs of the sofa bed out of her hands. He pushed it closed and ushered her to her seat.

"Let's eat," he said.

She sat down, stunned by his attentiveness. She was too used to being on her own to not marvel at his sweet helpfulness. She hated to admit it, as she took pride in her strength, but it was nice being treated like a lady. Her car could break down in the middle of a thunderstorm and no one would help her. She knew because it had and no one did. But her petite acquaintances were often getting help they neither needed nor wanted. Once, a stranger had lifted her cousin over a puddle. Just picked her right up. Of course, she beat him with her umbrella afterwards but it was the thought. She was a big girl, she could take care of herself, but it was nice to be taken care of for once.

"So," Jae said. "What did you talk to Kenny about last night?"

April choked for a moment on her tofu then swallowed hard, staring wide-eyed at Jae who calmly sipped his coffee.

"You...uh, you knew?"

"I heard you. April, you don't have to hide to talk to him. He's your friend. I like to think he's mine, too. I know you love me."

"I do."

"I know. So, why do you hide?"

April sighed. She didn't even know the answer to that question. Somehow, she still thought that there was contention between them though before they left, Kenny was nothing but supportive of the relationship, making this time together in Korea possible. He and Jae, in the space of an hour, had formed a kind of bromance based on their feelings for her.

"I honestly don't know. I guess talking to him when I'm with you feels disrespectful. I can't explain it but I'll stop. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry. I understand. Speaking of phone calls, we should call your mother tonight."

Again, April choked.

"What? You don't want to tell her?"

"I do," April said after a gulp of water. "I'm just a little nervous. She hasn't even met you and she wasn't thrilled that I came here with you."

"Wasn't thrilled" was the understatement of the century. She had been furious, texting so quickly that half the words were spelled wrong but April was too afraid to ask her what they meant. She assumed "see you vaxy" meant "are you crazy" but the rest was illegible yet somehow angry gibberish. So, she let her mother rant until she had calmed down enough to try to explain herself. But that didn't help either. Falling in love after only a few days then dropping everything to travel halfway across the world with someone she hadn't even heard about wasn't really something she, as a

mother, ever wanted to hear. April tried to explain that Jae was gentle and sweet but "so are most serial killers...at first" was her only response. That, of course, she spelled correctly. So, not shockingly, April wasn't at all eager to tell her mother that she was pregnant by "the stranger" as she'd dubbed him. Hopefully, Jae could charm her mother because April was out of ideas.

Peephole

Days had passed since the funeral and Jae still hadn't said anything more about moving back to the US. In fact, they seemed to be getting quite comfortable in their everyday life. April was studying Korean, mostly by watching television and Jae kept himself busy doing some accounting for the landlord in exchange for rent. He sat at the table with a calculator and piles of papers scattered all around him. April wasn't sure, but she assumed their landlord had gotten himself into some financial hot water and he had enlisted Jae to get him out of it. Every once in a while she heard him mumble to himself, shaking his head and crumpling up calculator tape. He seemed frustrated but happy. He was working at his own pace, doing a job that had no real deadline. In fact, he often joined April on the sofa with snacks of fruits and vegetables and helped her make sense of what Park SeoJoon was saying on the TV.

When break time was over he'd sigh heavily and say, "*ppo ppo*," his way of asking for a small kiss before getting up and going back to work. It was all so simple and April had never been happier and more afraid. In her life, every time she had become used to a man being there and loving her she lost him. Her father, Kenny. She just hoped that Jae was the exception to that rule, not only for her but for their child.

"I'm going to go out and get some groceries," Jae said after looking in the refrigerator for something to eat and coming up short. "Would you like to join me?"

"I'd love to," April said, taking his already outstretched hand.

He pulled her up off the sofa with ease and they walked out to the street. The day was warm but tolerable and April loved the feeling of the sun on her face, its rays deepening her skin's natural glow. When they got to the grocery store, she decided to sit outside on a bench and let Jae shop. Her

ankles seemed to have doubled in size overnight and the heat wasn't helping. She leaned down to loosen her ever tightening sneaker when she heard her phone ring, a sound she had nearly forgotten and especially didn't expect in the middle of the day, seeing it was the middle of the night for everyone who might call her.

Her heart dropped when she looked at the screen and saw that her mother was video calling her. She tried to do the backwards math and figure out what time it was for her mother and she came up with 1 a.m. It had to be an emergency. There was no other reason for her to be calling so late. April held the phone out so that her mother could see her, and slid her shaking finger across the screen.

"Mom, is everything ok?"

Her mother smiled on the other end of the call, her skin dewy with oils, her hair tucked under a satin wrap.

"Yes, sweetie, everything is fine. You'll never guess who I ran into today at the gym."

Oh my gosh, the gym. Of course. She hadn't thought about the gym.

"Kenny," they said simultaneously.

"How did you know?"

"It's just the way my life's going," April mumbled. "I just guessed. What did he tell you? I mean, what did you talk about?"

"Not much. That boy is strange, honey. I think he was trying to avoid me. I had to follow him into a class for pregnant women. Anyway, he mentioned that you wanted to talk to me but the time difference was making it hard. So, I thought I'd come to you."

"How thoughtful of him," April growled through clenched teeth.

"Where are you sweetheart? You're sweating."

"Oh, I'm sitting outside the grocery store."

"Oh my god," her mother exclaimed. "Does that man have you begging for food? Honey, there's no shame in coming home. We've all made horrible mistakes. You live and you learn."

"Mom. Calm down. Jae's inside shopping. I just wanted to sit outside, that's all. No horrible mistakes made. I'm fine."

April watched her mother's reaction and she wasn't surprised to see a bit of disappointment. Not that she wanted her to fail but she wanted her to come home, to be within arm's reach though she rarely reached her arm, having not visited April for months and being too busy for April to ever get a chance to go see. She knew her mother was more comfortable when they were close, just in case. Her separation anxiety rivaling April's own.

"Hey," Jae said, coming out of the store, carrying three grocery bags. "Who are you talking to?"

"My mom," April replied.

Jae stopped in his tracks and for a moment April thought he was going to drop the bags and run. Instead, he took a deep breath and a seat beside her.

"Hello, Mrs. Thomas. It's nice to finally meet you," he said, his smooth voice making not only April but also her mother swoon.

"Hello, young man. Please, call me Vivian."

If she had been looking, Vivian would have seen April trying to stifle her laughter but she was too enthralled by Jae's charisma to notice.

"Hey, Mom, we have something we need to tell you," April said, taking advantage of her mom's crush on her boyfriend in order to break the news. She preemptively lowered the volume on her phone in expectation of some sort of screaming, though she wasn't sure yet if it would be a happy or devastated scream.

"What's that, honey?"

"I'm pregnant," she said slowly, afraid to get to the end of the word.

All she knew was that she hadn't lowered the volume of her phone enough. Her mother's screeches echoed off the walls of the buildings causing nearby dogs to howl.

"Mom! Mom! Is this good or bad?"

"I'm going to have a grandbaby?"

"Yeah, mom," April laughed and both women began to cry.

"Look, now, you're making me cry off my oils."

"Sorry," April said, wiping her tears and resting her head on Jae's shoulder.

"You get out of the sun, honey. We can talk more later. Jae, it was nice to meet you, baby. Please take care of my little girl."

"I plan to for the rest of my life, ma'am."

"Good night, Mommy," April said before hanging up.

"That wasn't so bad," Jae said, smiling and wiping April's tears.

"It wasn't bad. It was actually good." So, why was she so afraid?

"Let's get home."

April nodded and stood up, stumbling a bit as she began to walk.

"Are you ok?" Jae asked.

He grabbed her tight by the arm, holding her steady. She laughed but when she looked at him she saw that he found it far from amusing.

"Yeah, my feet are just asleep. Jae, I'm fine."

He exhaled and relaxed a bit but wrapped his arm around her tightly as they walked in an attempt to preempt any fall. When they got back to the apartment April kicked her shoes off, sighing loudly, so happy to release her feet from their canvas prison. Jae rushed to the kitchen and fixed April's lunch, vegetables with a delicious sauce, rice, and a liter bottle of water. She took the water and gulped down nearly the entire bottle in one go, her thirst surprising her. Jae watched with glee as she devoured every last bite of the food, licking her fingers, the fork, and the bowl clean.

"So," Jae said when she was done, "have you thought about when you want to go back home?"

Home. The word had nearly lost all meaning. At the moment she was home. She looked around the small apartment at the simple yet wonderful things that surrounded her. She had grown to love it all. Spending quiet days with Jae as he worked happily at the kitchen table in his sweatpants and slippers. In DC things would be different. Of course, she wanted to be close to her mom, especially after seeing her excitement about becoming a grandmother, but at what cost? What would they be giving up?

"No, I haven't," was all the answer she had.

She knew Jae didn't want to stay in Ansan. Even the sweet memories he had were painful now that his mother was gone and his ex-wife's sudden reappearance had erased any doubt he had in his mind that they should go back. But she didn't want him to go right back to where he left off, working

long hours at a job he hated. She wanted him at the kitchen table, smiling at her while he did what came easy to him. She wanted evenings on the couch and morning walks and everything Ansan had been for them.

"We should probably think about it then," Jae said.

"What about a job?" April asked.

"I'm sure I could get my old job back."

"No!"

Jae flinched as April's voice echoed off the mostly bare walls around them.

"I'm sorry. I just really don't want that for you. I don't want you to work those crazy hours and have to deal with all that stress. We don't need so much money anymore. I'll be taking pictures. I can do portraits at home, no traveling. No standing even."

Jae shifted in his seat, obviously uncomfortable about the scenario April was putting forth.

"We can do it together," she suggested.

Jae perked up, a glint in his eye.

"Together?"

"Yeah. You can do my books. Do all the billing and organization. I was always horrible at that stuff. We can be a team."

Jae sat up tall in his chair and winked at her before offering his hand to shake.

"Ok, boss. I accept the position."

She put her hand in his and he shook it but didn't let go. Instead, he pulled her gently out of her chair and onto his lap.

"I don't know if HR is going to like this kind of behavior," she said, giggling as he kissed her neck.

"Who's going to report me?" he whispered in her ear.

"Not me," she said breathlessly before he kissed her passionately.

Just as he had pulled off her shirt, there was a knock at the door. He put his finger to his lips and she stood up so he could sneak over and look out the peephole. He motioned for her to move to the side so that whoever was knocking couldn't see her and he opened the door a crack. He said hello cheerfully and the unmistakable voice of their landlord filled the room. April had to smile as soon as she heard him. He was always so animated and welcoming and she wished she was dressed so she could say hello but Jae was rushing him away, promising he'd bring the work down to his apartment later that evening. She was pleasantly surprised how much of their conversation she understood.

After the old man had gone, Jae turned back to April and she almost didn't notice because she was trying to figure out some of the words they had used.

"What was the last thing you said?" she asked as he sat on the arm of the sofa and unhooked her bra.

"I told him that we would be out by the end of the month."

April's eyes rolled back as he expertly kissed and sucked her breasts, his hands desperately roaming the rest of her body, tugging impatiently at the clothes she still had on. She pulled on the back of his hair, forcing him to look up at her and she engulfed his open mouth with her own. Finally, he reached back and pulled her pants over her womanly hips and she stepped back to allow him room to undress. She watched breathlessly as he pulled

his shirt over his head and rose to take off his pants when they were interrupted by another knock on the door.

"A *jinjja*?" he grumbled as they both quickly dressed again.

April tried to calm her racing heart as Jae again looked through the peephole but this time he didn't open the door. Instead, he looked back at April and shrugged.

"*Ayeonghaseyo*?"

The person on the other side of the door answered but April's distance from them kept her from hearing what was being said. She did notice, however, that Jae's cheeks, which moments ago had been flushed with passion, quickly became pale as he froze in place. April approached him and he looked at her in a way he never had, as if he was silently begging for help.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"It's my father."

Hal-abeoji

“What does he want?” April whispered.

Jae shook his head and shrugged, too shaken to respond verbally.

His father spoke through the door, his tone solemn and his footsteps began to retreat, slow and heavy, as if weighed down by his regret. April could tell Jae’s mind was racing with questions that no one but the man walking away from him could answer. Suddenly he ripped the door open and stepped out into the hall. April gasped, as shocked by his actions as he seemed to be. His hands were balled into fists at his side, shaking with anger or fear.

The man, hearing the door, turned and for the first time in over twenty years was face to face with his son. Instantly, tears began to fall from his eyes. He rushed towards Jae, sweeping him up into an unexpected embrace. April’s heart wrenched watching his father’s outpouring of emotion met with Jae’s cold response.

When finally his father stepped away from him, Jae crossed his arms in front of his chest in defiance. April stood feet away but could feel hatred emanating from him. As soon as his father opened his mouth Jae cut him off, speaking matter of factly words she knew were dripping with disdain. The older man stared at his shoes as his son berated him. He didn’t defend himself or argue, he simply took it silently. The more Jae spoke the angrier he got, his memories fueling his hate and before April could stop him, he grabbed the man’s collar with both hands and shook him as he began to cry, repeating one of the words April actually knew. “Why?”

“Jae!” she shouted, rushing to pull his father from his grip.

The older man didn't fight, he simply slumped against the wall when April freed him as though he wanted the fight. He deserved it.

Jae stood behind her panting, angrily wiping tears from his flushed cheeks.

"Joesong haeyo," his father muttered, *"naneun nappeun abeojiueossda."*

"He says he was a bad father," Jae told April as if the man had been speaking to her. "He wants my forgiveness. He thinks coming here after she's gone will somehow change my mind."

"No," his father said sternly.

April turned, shocked by his response.

"Your mother kept it from you but I've been in contact with her. I visited as often as I could for the past few years, until my work took me to America. When I found out she was in the hospital I came back as soon as I could but it was too late. When I came to collect her things the landlord told me you were staying here."

April looked around the apartment as though somehow the ghost of Jae's parent's time there might still be visible. She imagined them eating at the table, sitting on the sofa engaged in conversation about a son neither of them had seen in years.

"She would have told me," Jae said softly.

"No," his father answered. "She didn't trust me. She talked to me about you but she would never tell me where you were. I asked many times. I left you once; she didn't believe I wouldn't do it again. As a mother she was protecting you from me. "

Jae's eyes welled with tears as he tried to process his father's words. She knew none of it made sense to him, that so much he thought he knew about his parents had been wrong.

“ en m e w? Jae asked.

“I just want to talk. Can we go somewhere?”

Jae looked to April as if for permission and a part of her, a very selfish part, wanted to deny it. Everything had been so peaceful. They had gotten through the Kenny situation, his ex-wife, even the death of his mother. April feared, though, that the Jae she had been blissfully coexisting with the past week was going to walk out the door never to return. Instead, the dark, brooding, closed off version of him would remain. That fear, the fear of losing the man she loved gave her pause but she couldn't be what kept him from the one person who knew anything about his past.

She nodded, but held on to his hand, desperate to keep things the way they had been between them though she knew she had to let him go.

He kissed her cheek and she watched the two of them, strangers but the only family either of them had, as they walked down the hall in silence. Jae looked back and waved before they got on the elevator and April, her heart pounding, closed the door.

While she waited for Jae to come back, she busied herself refolding already folded clothes, cleaning already clean windows, washing spotless dishes. For the first time since she'd been there, she felt the small size of the apartment as she paced the length of it in a few steps, her long legs making easy work of the low square footage.

Finally, she opened up the bed and turned on the television but instead of watching the variety show that was on, she stared at the door unmoving, both wanting him to come through the door and afraid that he would. In his absence she tried to imagine what he must be feeling, the conflicting emotions battling in his heart and mind. His mother had deceived him but only in an attempt to protect him. Was that reason enough? He had grown up feeling unloved and unwanted. Could his father's reappearance so long after he abandoned them, when Jae's beliefs and opinions about himself had shaped the man he would become, actually change anything? Would it help

or hinder the progress they'd already made towards convincing him that he was worthy of love?

April's heart began to race when the door lock beeped and Jae walked into the apartment alone. In all the time they'd spent together, she had gotten no better at reading his emotions by the look on his face. She turned the television off, and stared wide-eyed as he came towards her. She didn't say anything, instead she allowed him the time he needed to gather his thoughts. He exhaled and looked her in the eye and, taking her hand, did the last thing she expected. He smiled. A true smile. Even his eyes smiled, free from their dark sadness for the first time she'd ever seen.

"What happened?" she asked, unable to stand the silence any longer.

"He told me everything. My God," he said, sitting back and running his fingers through his hair. "I've been so wrong. I should have gone to her. I should have told her how I was feeling but I thought I had to be strong. For her. I was so wrong."

Seeming to realize he was rambling he apologized and for her benefit, started the story at the beginning and for the next hour he explained to her everything his father told him, most importantly that his father left only because his mother made him. The man had been an expert at hiding his flaws from his son and Jae had no idea that he had been an alcoholic and had been gambling away his paychecks for months before his wife had enough. Rather than put up with it any longer, she chose to take on the role of a single mother in an effort to keep her son from being influenced by the father he so looked up to. She told her husband he could come back when he was worthy of Jae's admiration.

Dejected, he began drinking more, having lost everything he cared about. One day, as he wandered the streets, he came across Jae playing in a park with some friends. He called out to the boy, disobeying his wife's strict orders to stay away. Jae, however, didn't recognize him and immediately ran home to safety. That was the moment the man realized he had to change if he was to return to the family he still very much loved. For the

next few years he worked on getting and staying sober. Then he studied for and received a college degree. The day he was offered a position as an accountant at Bank of America, he returned to his former home, ready to show off his accomplishments and reclaim his place in his family, only to find that they were gone. He had waited too long.

“Where were you?” April asked, enthralled with the heartbreaking story.

“I had just left for college and my mother was here.”

When his father had finally found his mother, Jae had been gone for years, living in America, believing his father didn’t care for him, when nothing could have been further from the truth. He had changed his life, become a better man, all for the son he had been forced away from.

Jae said that his father didn’t blame his mother for kicking him out. He believed Jae was much better off without him but Jae had broken down, telling his father that he never knew the truth and that he had grown up believing he was worthless in the eyes of his father. Pulling him into a long overdue embrace, he told Jae that his love for him was what woke him up every day, what spurred him on whenever he was ready to give up. The only information he could get out of his wife was that Jae was in America. When he traveled there on business, he said that he would look into the night sky, wondering if they were both watching the same stars, were they in the same city, walking down the same streets. He admitted that he found himself staring at strangers, looking for a part of himself in them that would let him know it was Jae. Until he showed up there and learned that Jae was staying in his mother’s apartment, he had given up hope of ever finding him.

April sat, mouth agape as Jae recounted everything he learned from his father. It must have been such a heavy weight off the man’s shoulders. And finally, Jae knew the truth, that for all these years the father he thought abandoned him, had been not only thinking of him, but looking for him.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“Confused. I don’t know what to think. He wants to get to know me.”

“That’s wonderful.”

Jae nodded but he didn’t look convinced.

“Do you know what this means?” April asked.

“What?”

“It means our baby could have a grandfather.”

As soon as she said the words, Jae’s demeanor changed from that of a confused son to a determined father.

“Then I’ll do my best to make sure he has one.”

Jae kissed April’s cheek and she lifted the covers so he could lie beside her.

“So, now what?” April asked.

“Now,” Jae replied, “we go home.”

The End

As April and Jae prepared to return to the United States, April reflected on all they'd been through. She watched as Jae collected the photographs from around the apartment and lovingly packed them in his carry-on bag. She was glad she decided to travel with him to Korea, to meet his mother and to comfort her in her final moments, to be there to thwart the efforts of his ex-wife to reconcile and to witness his reunion with his father. They had grown even closer and had learned to trust and lean on each other. Together they would navigate their uncertain future and together they would show the world that love can conquer all.

As they flew over the ocean that separated her home from his, they talked about baby names, both favoring traditional Korean names over all others. April suggested naming the baby after his mother, but he felt that her name carried a burden he didn't want to lay on his daughter's shoulders. He wanted a name that was new and full of promise, not laden with memories.

Jae was already proving to be a doting father, just a week after learning he was going to be one. He dreamed of the child's future and was excited to give all his love to his little family. He would never repeat the mistakes of his father; instead he was determined to learn from them.

His father, who was still mourning the death of his ex-wife, his one true love, planned to meet them in Washington after her affairs were in order. They had both suffered enough. If there was some way they could find common ground in their love for Jae and April's baby, they would use it as the catalyst to form a relationship, one Jae had been certain he'd go the rest of his life without.

Finally, the weary couple opened the door to their apartment, ready to fall into a jet-lagged coma, when Kenny jumped out at them, causing April to immediately regret telling him when they'd be home. She had done it

mostly so that they wouldn't walk on him half naked in her bed. Kenny's new girlfriend stood close beside him. When they last talked he let it slip that she had been staying with him there. April would learn later that she was a Kenyan model he met at the gym. They started seeing each other just before April left but he didn't want to upset her with stories of his new relationship when at the time the future of hers had been so uncertain.

Kenny hugged April tightly and she hugged him back, so glad he was always there, even though sometimes it was inconvenient.

"I have a surprise for you," he whispered into her ear.

She pulled away, wiping her tears which began to fall again when her mother cautiously stepped out of her bedroom.

"Mommy," she cried as she ran to her mother's arms.

"Oh, baby. Look at you."

April knew she was a mess after a long flight and little sleep, but she hoped her mother could ignore that for once, and be happy to see her.

"I know," April said, tucking her hair behind her ears.

"You look beautiful."

After about an hour of catching up, everyone left and April and Jae were alone, basking in the loving glow of their family and friends.

"I thought of a name," Jae said suddenly.

They were sitting on the sofa, his arm around her, watching as the sun descended through the sky.

"Really, what?"

“Well, I was thinking if we have a girl we could name her SooAe.”

April looked up at Jae, surprised he remembered the girl’s name after hearing it only once or twice in the middle of a very emotional time for him. But she realized she shouldn’t be surprised because it was so indicative of who he was. He was so aware of her feelings even when dealing with pain of his own.

“I think that’s a wonderful idea,” April replied.

And so, time passed as it always does. Many nights were spent just like the night they arrived from Korea. Life wasn’t perfect but April believed it was as close as anyone could get. She and Jae happily worked through her pregnancy, her highest paying client being Kenny when he asked her to photograph his wedding. His bride, Kione, looked like royalty as she walked down the aisle and true to form, Kenny wept uncontrollably throughout the entire ceremony.

It was an uncharacteristically warm spring and Jae and April were walking through the cherry blossoms in an attempt to bring on her labor, as she was a few days overdue, when she stopped.

“What is it?” Jae asked. “Are you alright?”

“I think,” April said lifting her skirt to her ankles, “that my water just broke.”

“Oh my god,” Jae exclaimed. “Stay here. I’ll go get the car.”

Of course, Jae was prepared and always had her labor bag in the car whenever they went anywhere for the past month. So, April waited on a bench while Jae ran at a full sprint the few blocks to where they had parked. When he pulled up to her, she started to get up but he shouted at her in Korean to stay where she was, he would get her.

She couldn't help but smile, despite the strengthening contractions, because she had made a bet with herself that throughout her labor he'd be shouting in Korean. He had a tendency to revert to his native language when he was feeling especially passionate. He rushed her to the hospital and before they could even call anyone to meet them there, SooAe Kim was born.

While April was recovering, Jae stayed by her side the entire time, welcoming guests and shooing them away when she was too tired to visit. Their parents, who had become good friends, arrived together and took turns holding their granddaughter, looking into the eyes of the future of their families.

When everyone had gone, April and Jae were talking about whether or not their parents were dating when SooAe started to fuss.

"She's hungry," April said.

Jae immediately jumped up and took the baby from her bassinet next to April's bed. As she ate, Jae sat back and watched, in awe of April's body, even more so than usual.

"You're amazing," he said.

"No I'm not. All women can do this."

"Not just because of this. In every way. You're amazing. You've given me so much that I thought I'd never have. If it wasn't for you coming to Korea with me I never would have developed a relationship with my father. My mother would have left this world with worry in her heart. Because of you I have a family again. I am so thankful and I am so desperately in love with you."

He wasn't saying anything he hadn't said to her before but the look in his eyes was more intense. She knew this time was different.

“I don’t know why I’ve waited so long to do this. I guess I didn’t want to overwhelm you, but when my dad gave me this I knew it was time. It was my mother’s. He found it in her apartment after we left.”

From his pocket, Jae retrieved a ring. It had two bands and half a dozen small diamonds formed a flower in the center. It was the most beautiful piece of jewelry April had ever seen.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen to us in the future,” Jae continued, “but I know that whatever happens, I want you by my side. So, April, will you marry me?”

As much as April wanted to scream yes, she refrained as her sleeping daughter snuggled against her chest. Instead, with her free arm she reached out to Jae who leaned in close to her.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes,” she whispered.

Jae smiled and kissed her then kissed the head of their child and April exhaled, confident for the first time that she would be loved for the rest of her life.

And she was. Their wedding was small and intimate, only their parents, Kenny, and his wife were in attendance. Jae had wanted to surprise April by locating SooAe in Korea and flying her out for the ceremony but it took him too long to find her, only making contact a few days before the wedding. He did, however, surprise her with a video chat that was beneficial for them both. April could see that SooAe was recovering nicely, her color had returned, her hair cut into a fashionable short style, and SooAe had a chance to meet her namesake. The little girl squealed in delight at the sight of her, startling the baby, but she didn’t cry. Instead, she seemed to smile which made everyone watching “aww” in unison.

The following years were full of triumph and tears, gain and loss. Kenny remained a constant in their lives though often long distance as he and Kione loved to travel. They never had children because their jet setting life

didn't allow for it but Kenny loved being an uncle to their daughter, spoiling her with everything she wanted. It didn't take her long to know to ask Kenny for anything her parents deemed too expensive or frivolous. April would say no just to find whatever it was in SooAe's room a week later.

Of course, Kenny flew right home when he learned that April's mother had passed away. Jae's father called them early one morning with the news. He was going to pick her up for their weekly breakfast date and he found her in bed, as beautiful as ever, as though she was sleeping. SooAe was eleven and took her grandmother's death especially hard. They had gone shopping together every weekend and during the summer they would spend weeks together at a time. SooAe would come back with her nails done, hair done and with ten new outfits. Mostly, though, she would miss their long talks over ice cream in pajamas on Grandma's living room floor.

"What about Grandma's house?" SooAe asked one night as April was putting her to bed.

"I don't know. I guess we'll sell it."

"No, Mommy, please. I love it there. Can't we move in?"

"I'll talk to Daddy about it, ok?"

"Of course," Jae said before April even finished asking the question later that night.

"What? Really?"

"Yeah, why not. It's a beautiful house. SooAe loves it. It's closer to the office. There's plenty of room for the photography studio you want to open in the guest house."

"I just don't know. I mean, she died in that house."

“But it’s also where she lived. It’s where the three of you made such beautiful memories.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Then what’s wrong?” Jae asked, his hand on April’s shoulder.

“I just miss her so much, Jae,” she said, letting him embrace her.

“I know, honey.”

Though it was difficult for April, they moved a few weeks later. It didn’t take long, however, for her to realize they had made the right decision. SooAe quickly made friends with the neighbors and they made friends with the children’s parents. There were PTA meetings, date nights, bake sales, block parties, prom dress shopping. Until the time came to take SooAe to college in Philadelphia where she would meet the man who would become her husband.

Through it all, April and Jae remained as in love as they ever were. Though time greyed their hair and wrinkled their skin, it did nothing to diminish their feelings for each other. Every time she looked at him, she saw the dashing man who pushed her against the wall and kissed her with more passion than she’d ever felt. He saw the beautiful woman who always understood him and cared for him more than anyone else had.

As summer turned to fall and they inched closer to their twilight years, they would sit on their porch swing, watching their grandchildren play in the yard with energy that had long since left them or staring into the sky the way they did the night they met and so many nights since and Jae would turn to April and ask:

“We’ve lived a good life, haven’t we?”

“We have,” she’d reply, squeezing his hand and resting her head on his shoulder. “We have.”

