

The shoes on Irene's feet were slightly smudged, scrawled over in a storm of permanent marker. Their mother had made the slip-ons a year before Irene began university, and ever since, their father dutifully patched any holes that appeared, stitching the canvas into a quilt of multi-colored stripes. And, year after year, Irene scribbled new inky images into the surface.

They were old but loved, just the way Irene liked them.

However, it came as no surprise when several years into their degrees, Honey disagreed. "They look like they're gonna fall apart at any moment!"

That was an exaggeration. "You just want to buy new shoes for yourself."

Honey's eyes were wide, like a deer caught in headlights. Only this deer owned way-too-many pairs of white platform tennis shoes. "No! Okay, maybe," they spluttered. "But not today! Today we're helping you."

Irene didn't think that was necessary. But they felt bad every time they arrived home with a new hole, so, "Fine. If I see something I like."

The must and leather of the department store washed over them, and Irene resisted the urge to cover their nose. Honey didn't seem bothered, darting between rows of rubber sneakers, sleek boots, and colorful sandals with a grin. "What about this pair? Those are cute! I think you would like these."

Irene tried them on. They felt claustrophobic, like strangers crowding into Irene's personal space, gripping and grasping at their skin. Not to mention, Irene didn't like the way they looked, too sleek and clean and new. "They don't fit."

Honey regarded the shoes sadly. "This is so hard," they lamented. "But maybe it would be less hard if *somebody* helped us out!"

Chán turned to grin at them from several rows down. "Sorry, Honey. *Somebody* got

distracted.”

Next to Chán, Kie was leaning over a display of very bright, very expensive sneakers, fingers wiggling in a cartoonish manner. “What do we have here?”

Chán’s grin vanished. “You’re not getting those. You’ll get mud on them in an hour and then complain about wasting money.” All four friends glanced down at Kie’s feet, where a pair of dirt-stained, rain-stained, mud-stained sneakers stood emphatically.

“I wasn’t going to beg the old man for money anyways,” Kie sniffed, turning away.

Honey harrumphed, hands on their hips. “If you’re done being distracted, I called all of you to help Irene, remember?”

The group split up, each wandering to a different corner of the store. Irene had just begun their half-hearted search when a gentle hand tapped their shoulder.

Linh’s smile was framed by her bluntly cropped hair. With three boxes stacked in her arms and her chunky brown hiking boots, she looked strangely rugged. “I found some you might like. You should be able to draw on them, too.”

Irene indeed liked these better than the ones Honey had suggested. Still, “I’m sorry. I’ll help you put them back.”

“No worries!” Linh gathered the boxes. “Hopefully, we’ll find something.”

Watching Linh walk away, Irene felt guilty. All their friends were trying so hard. But no matter how hard Irene steeled their resolve, the moment their eyes landed back on the labyrinth of boxes, it faltered.

Irene... really didn’t want new shoes. Sure they were a little old, but there was nothing wrong with their current ones.

Irene dawdled between their friends for the rest of the afternoon, and by the end of the

trip, Chán and Honey were the only ones who held shoeboxes.

Irene squinted at the picture on Chán's box. They were the same thick-laced high-tops made of thin black cloth she currently wore. "Did they break again?"

"Not yet, but they're going to give soon. I can feel it." Whenever Chán's shoes wore down, she insisted on buying the exact same brand in the exact same cut in the exact same color. *If it works, it works*, she'd said.

Irene shrugged. Fair enough. Honey, on the other hand—

"Are you seriously getting two new pairs?" Kie demanded.

Even Linh looked hesitant. "You should probably pick one."

Honey deflated, looking between the two open boxes mournfully. "But I like both." They suddenly brightened, turning toward Irene excitedly. "Irene, you should decide. Since this trip was for you."

As expected, both of Honey's selections had ridiculously tall platforms. But one was pure white, like 90% of their other shoes, while the other was accented with dark green.

Irene chose the pure white. Honey accepted with a happy chirp.

"Why do you weirdos always get the same shoes?" Kie complained.

"Your shoes look the same, too," Honey snapped, "when they end up covered in mud!"

"Don't fight, kids," Chán sang. "You're both quirky."

Linh regarded their bickering mess fondly before nudging Irene. "Didn't find anything you like?"

"I don't think I'll get anything." Irene looked down, balancing back on their heels. "I like these shoes. Besides, I don't want to break in new ones."

“Where’s the green onion?” Chán threw open the cabinets under the sink, as if the elusive plant might be growing from the pipes below. “Did our plant baby die?”

“I moved it to the other window.” Irene pressed the knife into the celery and nearly took off a finger. Irene hated using a knife but was even less interested in finding Chán’s fingers in the stir fry.

“Oops, sorry about that. Forgot my glasses.” Chán didn’t wear glasses.

Irene snorted as their roommate slipped to the other side of the room, past the thick-laced black high-tops made of thin cloth. It was rare for Chán’s shoes to have nowhere to be and nowhere to go, so Irene was going to enjoy every second with their friend.

“How much celery do you want?” Irene asked when Chán returned, a long strip of green onion twirling between her slender fingertips.

“Put the whole bag in. I can eat my body weight in celery.”

“It’s not going to fit in the pan.”

Chán grinned, teeth out and eyes sharp. “Never underestimate the power of my father’s wok. He says Grandpa blessed it before he died. Changes to whatever size you need.”

“Well, *my* grandpa says not to do stupid things.” But Irene reached for another piece of uncut celery anyway.

—

In between ledger lines and violin strings, dirt-stained, rain-stained, mud-stained sneakers knocked against Irene’s ankles. “What?”

Kie peered up pitifully from the table. “Has it only been 15 minutes?” she groaned, despair seeping into the wood, boredom pooling on the surface. “If I pay you, will you write this paper for me?”

“You already asked yesterday.” Irene flipped a page. “But I’ll look over it when you’re done.”

Kie perked up. Humming a distracting jingle, she made it through half an hour before her eyes glazed over again and she reached for her phone. Irene was about to ask if she was all right when the screen lit up and the puddle of boredom evaporated.

Kie’s hand scrambled over the keyboard. “Iori just asked where I am. Do you mind if she joins us?”

Irene paused, suspended in midair. “Iori?”

No one had been surprised when Iori Mackey and Kie Isobe started dating, and Irene was no different. Irene liked Iori. Iori was nice and bright and funny, but Irene did not recognize her shoes, and—

Kie’s fingers were poised over the keys, face glowing with hope.

“Of course. That sounds great.”

—

The beginning of the end started when Honey met Sanjay Mathai, which was funny because Irene already knew Sanjay, and the world hadn’t exploded when they met. But different planets have different gravities, and comets collide with ever-changing velocity.

“You didn’t hear him sing,” Honey wailed, languishing on the couch in Irene and Chán’s apartment. “You wouldn’t be like this if you’d heard him sing! And he was cute.”

Chán shoved Honey’s legs off her lap. “Does he like math?” she asked, gaze not leaving her Sudoku book.

“What? I don’t know.”

“Lame.” Chán scribbled down a number. “Cute is temporary. Math is eternal.”

“What does that even—”

“He does,” Irene said, crunching on a bowl of Chex Mix. “We worked on a project together during freshman geology. He’s data science.”

Another cry. “I knew he was smart, but I’m way too dumb for him.”

“No, you’re not,” Irene said at the same time Chán sang, “Definitely.”

Irene handed Honey a mini breadstick. They were Irene’s least favorite, but Honey couldn’t get enough. Honey chomped it before tossing an accusing finger at Chán. “Why’re you always so mean? It’s like you don’t care about my feelings!”

“Honey, you have new ‘feelings’ about new people every week,” Chán reached over and grabbed some pretzels from the bowl. “Seems tiring.”

Honey frowned, betrayed. “Don’t you think it’s fun to be in love?”

“Wouldn’t know,” Chán said. Irene shrugged.

Honey bolted upright, staring at the two. “Have you never liked someone before?”

“Nope,” Chán said.

Irene shrugged again. Kie and Honey talked about this kind of thing often, and Irene had always tried their best to tune it out. They didn’t mean to be rude, but the conversations were... uninteresting at best, unpleasant at worst. The type of unpleasant that made Irene want to crawl under their covers and call their parents to ask why they felt so sick. So Irene could stand being rude every once in a while. “It just never happened? I’ve only ever wanted to be friends.”

“You’ve never looked at someone and thought... Uhm, just thought like...” Honey’s face turned red, mouth opening and closing wordlessly. ““Wow?””

Chán grinned, all sharp teeth and dark eyes. “Aww,” she cooed. “It’s okay. You don’t have to say it. But the answer is still no.”

Irene thought for a moment. Did they ever think someone was *Wow*? Maybe, but they didn't think watching Linh breeze through physics was what Honey was referring to. And the thought of someone else finding them *Wow* was— "I don't think I'm interested."

"Huh, weird." Honey's lips pinched before widening excitedly. "But when you guys get your first... That's going to be so much fun! I can't wait to give advice."

There was a strange, sickening sensation in Irene's stomach, like the Chex Mix had suddenly rotted in their digestive tract. Irene... didn't want to listen to any advice Honey had to give. It wasn't because of Honey. It was because of...

*Is it really that weird?*

Chán stood up. "Well, this was fun, but I've got to run."

"Are you going to be back for dinner?" Irene asked.

Chán cracked her neck, left, right. "I'm not sure how long it'll go, but you don't need to wait for me."

Once the door had closed, Honey turned back to Irene with hopeful eyes. Briefly, Irene wondered how intensely Honey's comet had collided, and whether Sanjay's had felt any impact at all.

Irene sighed, patting the empty spot on the sofa. "Tell me more about your feelings."

—

Honey left soon after for dance rehearsal, and Chán, shuffled between a hundred commitments, didn't return that evening.

Irene accidentally cut their thumb and ate dinner alone.

—

Irene wondered if they had too much free time. These days, their shoes spent a lot of time sitting

alone at home. Irene had things to do, but overthinking was their loneliness' best friend, and Irene did not like it when they met.

When the high-tops were gone, it felt like Irene was living with a ghost. A ghost that left orange peels in the trash and empty shampoo bottles in the bathroom. A ghost that disappeared before Irene woke up and reappeared after they'd fallen asleep. A ghost that had other homes besides the house she was haunting.

Maybe Irene had grown stagnant, waiting in an empty apartment for ghosts that haunted other people. But then Kie texted to say Irene didn't need to read over her paper because "It's for my film class and Iori's a film major. I'm so dumb! hahahahahahaha" and—

Even if Irene did leave the house, they didn't think they could catch up to everyone else.

—

The next time Irene had lunch with Honey, the white platform tennis shoes were gone. The white and tennis parts were still there, but the newly purchased shoes were distinctly platform-less because "I don't want to be *that* much taller than Sanjay."

"Does Sanjay care?" Irene asked.

Honey looked embarrassed. "No. But I do. And maybe I want him to notice one day."

"Okay." A glob of mac-and-cheese fell off Irene's spoon.

Honey's face was oh-so-bright. "We've been hanging out a lot recently. I was scared of annoying him, but I think he mostly doesn't mind." Even brighter. "Do you want to meet him? I can introduce you! I feel like you'd get along."

Irene knew they'd get along because they'd gotten along when they'd worked on the project. "We've already met before, remember?"

"But it's different this time!"



Irene didn't want different. "I'll let you know if I have time."

—

"Are you okay?" Linh asked as they crossed a shallow stream during their biweekly hike. Her brows were curved in worry, chunky brown boots waiting as Irene scrambled to catch up.

Irene hadn't realized it was showing. "I'm all"—Linh's eyes were earnest—"I've been feeling a little lonely recently."

The lines on Linh's face deepened. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Chán's just been really busy, and Kie spends most of her time with Iori. I hang out with Honey, but all they want to talk about is Sanjay, and I'm just... not interested." Irene winced. "Does that make me a bad friend?"

"Not at all!" Linh laughed. "I'm kind of tired of hearing about Sanjay, too."

"But—" Irene swallowed, not sure if they wanted to release the words threatening to burst forth. "Sometimes, when Honey goes on one of those rants about Sanjay, I mute our chat for a few hours, and"—there was no judgment in Linh's eyes, only sympathetic surprise—"I know I always complained when Kie asked me to spell check her papers, but now that she doesn't anymore, I get sad about it, and—"

Linh wrapped them in a hug.

—

"Oh my god, why is she so hot?" Kie glared at her phone before waving it around. Irene caught a glimpse of braided hair and exposed midriff. "Seriously! She needs to stop sending me these."

"But you're not actually complaining." Honey poked her shoulder with a laugh.

"No, I really am." A deep sigh that seemed pained. "How am I supposed to get anything done when I can't stop thinking about her?"

Honey leaned left, and Kie leaned right. “I know what you mean. But that’s just the natural way, isn’t it?”

And maybe, for the briefest moment, Honey felt that something was wrong, because they turned to glance at Irene before looking away again.

Bodies were bodies. Skin was skin. Love was love. And Irene was made of all of those things and none at all.

—

In between classes, Irene saw Iori. Irene wondered if they should wave. Iori would probably wave if she saw Irene first.

A hand lifted and wavered and dropped.

Irene didn’t see Iori’s shoes. Iori didn’t see anything.

—

*“It’s okay not to know why,” Linh had said on the mountain trail.*

—

Irene’s mother liked to do origami to relax. Irene had never found it very calming, legs too jittery to sit still and fingers too wobbly to master the delicate folds. Still, one day, they found themselves sitting in front of a square piece of paper.

1. Fold the paper diagonally.

When Irene was twelve, a neighbor’s child had given them flowers. Irene liked scabiosas, but after their grandmother made a joke, they threw out the petals anyway.

2. Fold the paper diagonally again.

Sometime, someplace, somehow, the people around Irene learned the word hot.

Hot as a way to describe people, to describe a feeling that went beyond the sun scorching your skin. Irene never figured out what that meaning was.

3. Flip the paper over and fold it in half.

Geology and violin didn't make a melody, but Irene and Kie had been inseparable all of freshman year. For part of sophomore year, that'd been the truth as well—with the addendum, of course, that Iori sometimes showed up. And then, one day, Kie stopped.

Oh. (The origami something lay unfinished between Irene's fingers.) That was why.

—

They underestimated how cold it would be, so Linh suggested cutting the hike short. Now, at the visitor's center, the heat from the hot chocolate seeped through the Band-Aid on Irene's thumb.

"Linh," they began, "have you ever liked anyone? Romantically?"

Their friend chuckled. "There was this one kid in elementary school who wanted to be a magician. We were close."

"That's not what I—" Irene swallowed. "I guess what I mean is, do you want to like people? Romantically?"

Linh tilted her head to the side, mulling. "If it happens, it happens. But if it doesn't, I'm okay with that, too." She regarded Irene softly. "I suppose there's more to this?"

"I've... been feeling kind of"—the word felt foul in Irene's mouth—"sad around Honey and Kie recently, and I think it's because they're 'in love.'"

"How do I say this without sounding awful?" Irene groaned, rubbing their face.

"Sometimes, it feels like people are forgetting about me. Or I guess, people are exchanging me for someone else. And I get I'm not the most interesting person ever, but I know that *I'm* not

going to exchange—”

Irene broke off, and when they didn't speak again, Linh tentatively said, “Do you think you're jealous?”

“Jealous?” Irene bit their lip. That would explain the unease, but what could they be jealous of? “Maybe? But not of their relationships!” they hastily added. “I don't... I don't think I want to date. But still, when I think about them dating, I'm still *sad*.”

Linh's eyes widened. “Do you feel like they're not spending enough time with you?”

Irene winced. It sounded stupid out loud. “I guess? But I don't think that's the only reason because it's never bothered me when you make new friends. It has to be the dating thing, but I just don't know why.”

“Since you don't want to date,” Linh said slowly, “could it be that you're jealous that they do?”

Irene froze. Fragments of sound, snippets of time, and flashes of color spasmed through their mind. Of hearing Kie and Iori laugh as they studied together, of watching Honey's face glow when they thought of Sanjay, of reading the most sickeningly sweet subplots in novels and feeling nothing but *sad*.

“I'm not jealous.”

“What?”

“I'm scared. That they'll find someone they like more than me, and they won't want me around anymore.” Their leg started to tremble. “Maybe it'd be okay if I found someone like that, too, but I won't. So what'll happen to me when everyone else leaves for better things?”

“Irene—”

Irene didn't hear her. “But that's selfish, isn't it? They're happy, so what's wrong with

me? Why am I so selfish?"

"Irene, stop!" Linh's voice was loud, mouth set in a firm line. "Stop beating yourself up! It's not like you want Kie and Iori to break up, right?"

Irene recoiled. "No way."

Linh smiled. "Then, I don't think you're doing anything wrong." The smile turned a little ragged. "I haven't spoken to magician kid in years, so not everyone important is going to stay in your life forever. But that's why you've got to find the people who will stay. Like for me, it's you!" She kicked Irene playfully with her brown boots. "You'll always love me, won't you?"

Irene kicked back with their slip-ons. "You know I love you." A little more shyly, "You love me, too, right?"

"Of course I love you. We're soulmates, after all. We all are, in a way."

Irene believed her but, "I thought you didn't believe in fate."

"I don't," Linh laughed. "But I'd like to believe that in another time, another place, we all would've chosen to be friends anyway."

—

Kie was on her phone again, so Irene said, "You can invite Iori. If you want."

Kie looked up, eyes wide. "I wasn't— Sorry." She shoved her phone into her pocket. "I shouldn't have been texting."

"No, I'm sorry," Irene said, the horrible feeling of tears creeping into the corner of their eyes. "I know I've been distant recently. I've been going through some stuff, and it's not an excuse, but..."

"It's all right," Kie smiled, a little awkwardly, but no less kind. "You haven't... I mean, I know I've also been..." She cleared her throat. "Do you want to tell me?"

Irene rubbed their wet eyes. “That’d be great.”

—

One night, Chán returned early. Or perhaps Irene stayed up late. Either way, when the door opened, Irene rolled over and said, “Chán?”

“Shoot, sorry.” The door closed gently. “Didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“You didn’t. I couldn’t fall asleep.”

“Something on your mind?” Chán’s soft voice was ghostly. “Want to talk about it?”

“Do you remember when we were talking with Honey last month? And you said you’d never liked anyone before?”

Chán hummed. “You said the same thing, right?”

The words weren’t difficult; Irene just felt difficult asking them. “Do you think you’ll ever like someone?”

“Nope. Never.” The words were easy.

“How can you know that? How can you know you’ll never meet someone or something will never happen?”

Irene felt Chán turn to face them. “I don’t think there’s an answer to that?” For once, Chán’s voice sounded uncertain—more solid and less ghostly. “It’s just always felt right to me. You just have to know yourself.”

“But what if”—inhale, exhale—“I don’t?”

“Well.” A contemplative pause, then, “My dad gave some good advice once: As little as you know yourself, who would know more? Point is, don’t listen to idio—” Chán broke off, as if something horrible had seized her throat. “You’re not being pressured to date, are you?”

“No.” At least Irene didn’t think they were. “But sometimes I wonder, is this it for me?”

All my friends are gonna experience this big, shiny love of a lifetime, but is this the end for me?"

"Of course not!" Chán almost sounded offended. "Does it look like the end for *me*?"

"No! And that's why I feel stupid!" Irene took a breath, large and throbbing and alive. "I wish I was more like you. So I could just accept it and be sure."

There was another pause. "Sure the world would be a better place if more people were like me"—Irene snorted—"but not you. I like you as you are. And that's not going to change, whether you 'fall in love' or not."

"But what if I don't? What if I do?" Irene wasn't sure which was scarier.

"Well, it's three in the morning, and three in the morning is not 'what if.' Three in the morning is now." Chán yawned. "Maybe four o'clock will be different, but I've always hated waking up before the alarm rings."

"So to answer your question, I guess I won't always know it's never. But I do know that it's never, for now."

When Irene thought Chán had fallen asleep, in a tiny voice they said, "I think it is never. At least for now."

"Then, never it is. For now."

—

"I don't think I like people," Irene blurted out, one day.

"Huh?" Honey nearly fell off the stool.

That didn't sound right. "I mean I don't think people are attractive. And I don't think I want to date them."

"Wait, what do you mean?" Honey looked no less confused. "You've never dated anyone before, right? How can you know that?"

Irene winced. That was the question they'd expected but still felt unprepared for. "I... I've never liked anyone romantically before. So maybe it's not for me." Not good. They sounded uncertain.

"You could meet someone someday," Honey suggested, hesitant.

"Maybe." Irene tamped down their frustration. This was Honey—Honey with big, affectionate eyes and a big, loving heart. "Maybe not. But right now, I don't think I will. So if you could stop asking me about that, I'd appreciate it."

Honey started to look sad.

"And that one time you made a comment about attraction being the 'natural way,' I know you didn't mean anything, but it still bothered me."

Their eyes wobbled. "I'm sorry! I'm really sorry. I'm just dumb, you know I am. I'm so sorry!" Seeing their quivering lip, Irene felt sad, too.

"I'm not mad at you. I just needed to say something."

"Okay..." Honey still looked guilty. Their mouth opened and closed like they wanted to speak, but nothing came out, and they shrank even further despite their tall frame.

Irene panicked, and the first thing that came to mind— "I'm free next weekend, so I'd love to meet him. Sanjay, I mean. If Sanjay is also free, I'd love to meet him."

"Really?" Honey beamed. There was still a lingering shame to their lips, but they curled up in a smile anyway. "I'll tell him immediately!"

It was cute when Honey was happy. Irene hoped Sanjay found it cute, too.

—

Sanjay, unfortunately, was busy, so it was several weeks before they finally bumped into each other. And when they did, it was by total chance. Irene was sitting in the dining hall, a spoonful



of cereal halfway to their mouth, when—“Sanjay?”

He jumped from where he'd been passing by. “Yeah?”

Irene waved, more than a little awkwardly. “Hi? It's me, Irene. From Geology?”

Some emotion washed over him, though his expression didn't change. If Irene knew what his shoes looked like, they would've guessed he was resigned. “I'm sorry. Your hair's longer now; I didn't recognize you. It's good to see you again, Irene.”

He was about to leave, but a quick glance told them every other table was taken.

“You can stay here if you'd like.” Irene gestured to the empty chair across from them.

“Thank you so much. I really don't like sitting next to strangers.”

“Does anyone?”

Sanjay sighed. “I don't know if Honey told you, but I have face blindness. I get by well enough that it's not obvious, but I don't always know if a stranger is actually a stranger, which can get... awkward.”

“That's why you didn't recognize me?”

He cracked another smile, more openly embarrassed. “I usually tell people apart by their hair, which I'm sure you can imagine is not the most consistent indicator.”

“No, I understand what you mean.” Irene felt bright as a curious look crossed Sanjay's face. “I know Honey hasn't told you this, but I remember people best by their shoes, which I'm sure you can imagine is not the most consistent indicator.”

—

“Hey, Irene!”

Irene might not recognize the shoes, but they did recognize the voice. Irene never realized how much time they'd spent together because the familiarity caught them off guard. Higher than

Kie's but just as resonant. "Iori?"

Iori grinned, not as sharp as Chán and not as sweet as Linh, but still nice. "How are you doing? I've been meaning to catch you. Here." She thrust out an envelope. "It's an invitation to my birthday party." Her watch beeped. "Someone's looking for me, so I have to go, but let me know if you can make it! I'd love to see you there." And she was off.

As Irene watched Iori dash away, they couldn't help but glance at her shoes. Of course she could make even Crocs look cool.

—

Chán was still there when Irene woke up. More specifically, Chán was outside of their window, shouting from below. "Irene! Sharer of rooms! Caretaker of green onions! Scholar of shoes! Love of my life! Please wake up! I'm running out of ideas."

Squinting against the sunlight, Irene poked their head out. "What, o great solver of Sudoku?"

Even from a distance, Chán's grin glowed sharply. "Got some flowers for you." In the crook of her arm were three massive bags of Chex Mix, taped together haphazardly into some approximation of a bouquet.

"We live in the same room. We share a pantry."

"Hey, I'm just trying to be platonic." A quick glare at her phone, which Irene noticed was in her free hand. "Well... I'm not supposed to be the only one here. But *someone's* car ran out of gas on the way to get the cake, so they had to make a detour."

Irene could almost hear Kie yelling from the other end.

The grin returned to Chán's face. "Linh and Honey are dropping by later. Now get down here so we can open the pretzels. I haven't had breakfast yet."

Irene waved in acknowledgment before moving from the window. They got dressed and made their way to the front door, where a new pair of shoes rested beside the old slip-ons. They were the same cut and color, but the new pair hadn't been decorated yet, bare when compared to the colorful marks that crawled over its neighbor. But five doodles were scrawled across its surface—a green onion, a violin, a bumble bee, a mountain, and a pair of slip-ons—and Irene thought that was a good start.

They slipped on the shoes and headed out the door.