

She looks the same.

Yeong isn't sure why that surprises him so much.

A river of coarse, midnight darkness pours from her scalp to the end of her ribcage, straightened to resemble expensive silk. Her soft, round nose casts a subtle shadow over her downturned, blush lips, and her thin bangs only show glimpses of the olive skin of her forehead. So heavenly, so delicate. He yearns for time to memorize the placement of the beauty marks scattered across her face and neck, but the line behind him is not getting any shorter. So, he affectionately strokes her cheeks of velvet for the last time before tearing himself away from her spruce casket.

As unpleasant as the entire day is, Yeong finds engaging in small talk with her family to be the most nauseating part. Before asking how many inches he has grown, they force themselves to laugh at their demonstration of how small he was the last time they had seen him. Next comes the questions about his life in Philadelphia and subsequently, the comments about how impressive they think it is that he decided to go back to university for his masters degree. To a stranger, it might seem that Sunhi is the last thing on their minds, but he knows this family almost as well as his own. Avoiding a conversation is their way of having one. They share a mutual understanding that speaking of her death would mean admitting to all of the things she had become before it, so they save their anguished sobs for their bedroom floors, where no one can watch them crumble away from their own guilt and sadness. If they are feeling brave, they let a quick sentiment slip from their tight lips: "She really loved you, you know?"

He leaves early, before the service begins. Yeong invests his endurance into not crying when he says his farewells to her parents. He even forces a smile when her mother reminds him that he is still welcome to join them for dinner the next time he's in town. His greatest test of strength comes when her tender grandmother clings to his shoulders during their final hug, as if holding him somehow feels like she is holding her baby again. Yeong expects himself to break down the moment the funeral home disappears from his rearview mirror, but he doesn't. Instead, he drives to nowhere in particular, trying to blink away the film of misery coating his dull, sunken eyes.

After a while, muscle memory takes over. By the time the sun sets and paints over the once clear, blue sky with warm hues of pink and orange, he is pulling his car into the student parking lot at his former community college. There are no dorms, only two buildings barely spacious enough to house the dining hall and few academic classrooms, which means nobody is there to occupy the campus on this Saturday evening. Yeong is completely alone. He opens the door and stretches his sore muscles that had grown stiff from the rigid position he has driven in for the past two hours. He knows he will later curse himself for burning that much gas on aimlessly driving around his hometown, but he is kind to himself and allows his bustling mind to succumb to the numbness. With one hand, he loosens the sleek tie wrapped around his white collar, and with the other, begins to pat down his black, weightless slacks.

Yeong finds his gold zippo lighter resting comfortably in his left pocket and removes it. He flicks it open to observe the energetic orange flame it produces, then opens the middle

console to retrieve a single cigarette from the diminishing pack. A few years ago, his mother made him promise to quit, and he has honored her wishes until last week, when everything and nothing changed. He steps out, propping himself against the side of his car and in turn, closing the open door with a soft thud; he takes a long drag from the Marlboro resting limply between his middle and ring fingers. The smoke scratches his lungs and momentarily relieves the pounding sensation at the base of his head. Beyond the thick, grey cloud swarming his head, he sees the vague glimmer of the inviting front doors. He remembers entering them for the first time with a cheap, plain messenger bag on his hip, an MP3 player in his pocket, and a wrinkled class schedule in hand. Life seemed so simple then, he reflects, so easy. Yeong often wonders how that silly, uninvolved boy turned into the attentive, reliable man he is today, and always, he reaches the same conclusion.

DESPITE attending the same schools their entire lives, Yeong never spoke to Sunhi. In fact, he remembered several occasions where he found her to be rather annoying. She started as the kindergartener who pulled her classmates' hair when they were looking in the other direction, and she grew into the fourth-grader who asked the teachers silly questions to make her friends laugh. In middle school, she was the person who talked too loudly for someone whose mouth was filled to the brim with mediocre cafeteria food. She took her final form as the inconsiderate underclassman who bumped shoulders with her peers while running against the general flow of traffic because *she* was about to be late. Fortunately, the evolution stopped, for she became more mellow as she grew older--so mellow that Yeong rarely saw her outside of class anymore. He was too prideful to admit he to himself that he had a small crush, but he noticed each spell of silence that occurred after her name was called during morning roll, and he remembers the first time that the keychains attached to the zippers of her backpack did not announce her arrival long before she entered a room--she unexpectedly removed them.

In their senior year, they had the same first period class, psychology. One day, Sunhi came in late, drawing stares from all of the noisy teenagers. This was when he first realized how pretty she was. Because she traded those bulky, aquamarine eyeglasses for round, wired frames that had a shimmer of gold in the metal, he finally caught a good look at her deep-set, amber eyes. She even abandoned her signature hairstyle of uneven, messy braids for a neat, partial updo, and she stopped covering the blemishes on her face and neck with cheap concealer. As the semester went on, he took note of the way she bit the inside of her cheek to suppress her laughter and how she absentmindedly bounced her mechanical pencil between her fingers while she concentrated on the work in front of her. He realized that she loved social studies, not science or math or english, just social studies from the way her eyes glowed when the professor dove into an interesting topic. All the music that exploded through her flimsy earbuds while she walked through the corridors to her next class were songs that Yeong himself adored, though he never mustered up the resolution to talk to her about them, or about anything, really.

After graduation, he lost himself in his summer jobs and did not have time to think about anything else; at least, that's what he told his friends. He failed to mention the occasional image

of Sunhi his mind would conjure. Because their paths did not cross once that summer, he started to suspect that she moved away for college, never to be seen by the locals again. He pushed away his thoughts of her and did his best to adjust to being a full-time cog in the workforce. He did this so successfully that when he turned the corner to the lecture hall where freshman orientation was being held, he felt incredibly out of place. This junior college practically served as a two-year extension for the three neighboring high schools, so he expected it to feel like another senior year. However, his busy schedule wedged a maturity gap between him and his old friend group, the people he had known since he was five. Their conversations were infrequent and stale, but he knew that they were still kind enough to pity-invite him to sit with them. To avoid that awkwardness, he waited until the late bell was only a few minutes out to enter the classroom, a time when nearly all of the seats would be filled.

Yeong shuffled in from the back entrance with a nervous gaze, he found an open seat on the edge of the last row of desks with nobody sitting near it. It was the closest to the door, which was perfect in case he panicked and needed to rush to the questionable public restrooms to contemplate his life choices. The class had at least seventy people, all of them chatting about mundane subjects within their own circles and paying him little to no mind. He took a deep breath and reached into his bag for one of the several composition books stored inside. As soon as he sat it on the table, he felt the atmosphere shift in the space beside him. He glanced back just in time to see that Sunhi was taking the empty seat beside him, even though there was a free one to the left of that one. Freckles spotted her sunkissed arms, and her rich, black hair was free from the confines of those elastic bands she used to wear everyday. At that moment, Yeong decided that he wanted to know which part of the sky her pale skin darkened under, where she had been hiding away during the break, and what stories she collected during this time. She smiled at him warmly, and his heart fluttered. Doing his best not to embarrass himself, he bit his tongue and offered a meek *simper* and flashing wave in return.

It started small. At first, they would only exchange polite smiles when they saw each other. With time, those smiles became short greetings, and those greetings became friendly conversation. The floodgates burst open, however, when they were assigned as project partners. Somewhere in the sea of stolen glances, intertwined fingers, afternoons spent driving through snotty neighborhoods and making up stories about the people who live there, nights spent taking turns reading each other to sleep, whispers of secrets they had never shared with anyone else before, and dances that happened whenever and wherever they could, Yeong fell in love. Unlike the moment when she fully captured his interest, he could not discern the exact instance when it happened, only that it did. With every unfinished piece of himself, he loved her.

DURING the summer months, West Point Cinema hosted an outdoor movie night each Friday at 7:00pm. This was Sunhi and Yeong's second year attending as a couple, as it had become a tradition in their relationship to attend at least a few of the films that were being shown. Sometimes, they missed the showings due to a late night at work, but they always made up for it by waking up a bit earlier the following morning to entertain their inner children by

catching up on the morning cartoons. With their arms locked, the couple strolled down the pathway that extended along the pier, doing their best to dodge various vendors who sought to entice the attendees with overpriced snow cones and stale bags of popcorn. Sunhi had a quilt with patches of ink blue and ivory--the colors of the senior college in Tacoma that they would be attending in the fall--draped over her free arm, while Yeong kept a firm hold on the wooden picnic basket Sunhi packed full of food so they could avoid overspending. They outgrew their childhood bedrooms that were twenty miles apart, so they decided they would budget their money, spend a few weeks apartment hunting, and hopefully move into a place that was both comfortable and within their tight price range. Sunhi spent entire days dreaming of the decorations and how she wanted to arrange the furniture, and Yeong stared at her with an entire galaxy in his eyes when she daydreamed about it. He already found his home, but if it made her happy, he was content with her fine-tuning the details.

"I'm just saying," Yeong continued. His grin became wider with each twinge of amusement that appeared on his girlfriend's face. "Gru was onto something with his whole bit about stealing the moon."

Sunhi released a wisp of laughter, "Was he?"

"Yes! Can you imagine if a real villain did that? Wait, babe--no, look at me. I'm serious." This was untrue. He wanted to say whatever he thought would make her laugh at that moment.

She ran her free hand across her forehead and tried to swallow the cackle that threatened to jump out of her throat. "I know," She chuckled. "I just think it's funny that you're talking about it like you're gonna try to do it yourself."

"And why is that funny to you?"

"You barely passed physics, that's why."

"That's entirely unrelated to the point I'm trying to make."

"What would you even do with the moon once you had it?"

"I would give it to you."

Despite how long they had been together, sweet comments like that flushed her cheeks. Sunhi chewed down on the corners of her upturned lips. She teased, "Could you be any chessier?"

He responded, "I'm not sure, but we have the rest of our lives to find out."

With the world reflecting in her eyes, she beamed at him while playfully nudging his ribs. "C'mon and pick up the pace, or we're gonna miss the previews."

They did, in fact, miss the previews. By the time they settled themselves behind the crowd of people huddled around the front center of the screen, the film--the name of which Yeong can no longer recall--had already begun. However, this didn't bother the pair. They came for the communal atmosphere that came from shared laughter and the slight discomfort of sitting on slabs of warm concrete for the entirety of the ninety-minute runtime, not because they were dedicated to mediocre, PG-13 films. Sunhi unpacked the basket while Yeong, motivated by his grumbling stomach, curiously peered over her shoulder and rested his chin in the crook of her neck. She passed him the bowl of leftovers from last night's dinner, as well as a container of

watermelon cubes and a peach tea, both of which were his favorite snacks. He mumbled a sincere “thank you” and placed a quick kiss on her cheek before he scooted over and began the challenge of quietly opening tupperware lids. He turned back to see if she already took out the cutlery, but his face fell slightly when he caught the glimmer of her stainless steel flask she sneakily wrapped in one of their cloth napkins.

Sunhi caught his odd expression, and she touched his forearm delicately. She whispered, “Don’t worry, you aren’t gonna have to carry me home.”

He kept his voice low when he questioned, “Are you sure this is the best time? There’s kids around.”

She squatted her hand dismissively and replied, “I’ll be fine. It’s mostly water, and you know I’m no lightweight.”

Yeong reluctantly conceded and tried to brush off his concern. She rose the alcohol to her lips and grimaced as she took a few small sips. She laughed quietly, “Hopefully this makes this movie funnier than the first time we watched it.” He smiled along with her and propped himself up on his hand that rested behind her back. Eyes glued to the projector screen, she absentmindedly tapped his leg with a fork wrapped in another napkin, but it was too late. He already lost his appetite.

LIKE their relationship, Sunhi’s addiction started small with inconspicuous things like slipping a nip of whiskey into her purse before leaving their apartment to try out a new restaurant with friends. On the weekends, when Yeong went to discard the remains of his lunch, he would notice one or two more empty bottles sitting at the top of the nearly full trash. She needed to lean on him more than usual when they were leaving parties, and the aspirin needed to be replaced more often than usual. Then, those small things turned into medium-sized things, like receiving a call on their home phone asking why she missed her shift at work, or not waking up in time for class because she had a hangover. He had to keep the blinds closed while he got ready in the morning because the light hurt her eyes too much. Yeong worried about her, but he refrained from bringing up her habits in conversation. He often reminded himself that Sunhi was an adult, and she wanted a partner, not a babysitter who tried to define her own limits for her. She was too dedicated to earning her degree to let it get any farther than this, he would say. She would never abandon her ambitions for something so senseless.

She effortlessly melded with the college party scene, even when classes started to pick up intensity, and her involvement only escalated when she hit the golden age of twenty-one. While Yeong spent his evenings hunched over a desk whose legs were just slightly uneven because he had to put it together himself, his girlfriend was attending sorority parties with a group of girls whom he had never met before, bar-hopping, or, on the rare occasion, scrambling to finish her missing assignments from the previous two weeks. He did not understand why he could not pinpoint the moment he fell in love with Sunhi, yet he could feel each tug at the stitching of their relationship as her actions began to slowly rip it from the seams. She soon realized that no matter how many times she leaned on the side of his unsteady desk and begged him to join her to attend

some party being hosted by someone her friend's girlfriend's cousin knew, he would still insist on his final objections. So, she eventually stopped inviting him to accompany her to events all together. And he dealt with the bickering that sprung from this. He dealt with everything--the moodswings, the way she spoke down to him when he asked her to not refill her plastic cup at family functions and the empty spot beside him at the dinner--because he loved her. At least when she went out, she always came back and spent the night sleeping safely in his arms, no matter how angry she had gotten with him before she left. These few hours were the only times when he could pretend nothing changed between them.

As months passed, she began to come back later and later each night. The first time he awoke to find the right side of their bed unoccupied, he let it go. And the second time. And the third. And the fourth. At least she made an effort to tell him where she planned to spend the night before she inevitably passed out on the bathroom floor of one of her almost-acquaintances' homes. At least she didn't leave him in the dark about what she was doing, about if her substance abuse had gone farther than alcohol. At least this, at least that--it made Yeong so exhausted. The night he found the baggie hidden in a shoe box that she tucked away in the back of their closet happened to be the same one where she became entirely unconcerned with keeping in touch with him. His anger subsided as he frantically paced around the kitchen with his phone in hand, calling her cell repeatedly and dialing in the numbers scribbled onto the crumbled slips of paper he would remove from the pockets of her jeans when he did the laundry. He imagined her lying face down against the hard, frozen earth, barely able to produce a coherent thought, or her drunken giggles echoing down a lonely street while she drove recklessly for the amusement of her friends. He wondered if her nose was full of the contents missing from her stash in the bedroom, or if she was choosing to torture him for the fun of it.

For hours, he anxiously bit his nails until they started to bleed and he walked in circles until his legs began to cramp up. The moment he heard the shime of her text tone, he pounced on his phone so quickly that he didn't even realize he had done it. Dimmed by the early rays of sunlight pouring through the window, his screen displayed a single, three-character message.

*Omw.*

The last stitch holding them together lodged itself in his chest with a deafening pop, and his heart began to bleed out in his own body. Dozens of missed calls and texts pleading with her to give him an indicator that she was okay, and she still did not bother to respond to him with complete words. He couldn't do this anymore--he *wouldn't* do this anymore. More than thirty minutes passed before he heard unsteady steps echoing from down the hall. He sharply rose to his feet and wiped the tears staining his face. Her decorated keyring knocked against the door handle while she tried to fit the piece of metal into the narrow slot. Instead of relief rolling down his back, a sickly, grim sensation of dread washed over him, for he knew that the sight of her stumbling into their home with bloodshot eyes and vomit on her shoes would signal the beginning of the end.

SPRING suited Pennsylvania the best, Yeong came to find. Although he spent well over a year contemplating his choice to return to school to obtain a master's degree in education, the view of blooming cherry blossoms and lush, bright grass twirling in the wind reaffirmed his choice each day. He missed his parents, of course, but he adored the peacefulness that comes from living in a town that does not constantly remind him of unpleasant memories he would rather forget. For his third year of postsecondary education, he transferred to a big university on the other side of Washington, but the distance still did not feel far away enough from the city he both grew up in and grew to despise. It was there, a hundred miles away in those humid, cramped dorms, that he smoked his first cigarette to test the boundaries of dependency. To see just how strong his cravings for something that had the potential to shatter his life could become. To find out if it was really worth it.

His parents inevitably asked that he quit, and he did without hesitation, which is why Yeong became increasingly hurt by the fact that Sunhi could never seem to find the motivation to do so, not while they were together anyway. She promised to honor the ultimatum he gave her over three years ago, and to her defense, there were times where she really tried. They just...weren't enough, no matter how desperately he wanted them to be. The first year after the breakup was the hardest. She messaged him frequently to update him on her progress, only to leave a voicemail where her words were so slurred that he could smell the whiskey on her breath a hundred miles away. He forced himself to stop responding to her, even though it shattered a piece of her heart that he feared could never be rebuilt. The last time he saw her in person was a few months ago, when he came to Tacoma to visit his family for the holidays. He only caught a glimpse of her as she turned the corner off of the street he drove on, and for a moment, their eyes locked. In the split second that passed before she was out of his sight, Yeong noticed that she looked less ghostly than she had before--he took it as a sign that she was turning things around. Yeong knew that it was best to only celebrate her success with himself, from a safe distance where she could not suck him back into the whirlwind, but he would be lying if he said he did not spend his Christmas Eve staring at her contact information. Maybe he fell out of love, but the care he had for her never went away, not even a little.

Yeong found out during his lunch break. It began with 253, the area code for Tacoma, but because he did not recognize the number, he let it ring. He absentmindedly sipped the chilled peach tea as he doodled small moons on the margins of his assigned reading. His schoolwork did not interest him in the slightest, and he welcomed the persistent ringing as justification for his wandering mind. By the third time the person called back, he figured it must have been something serious, so, against his better judgement, he answered. He stayed silent for a few moments, waiting for the person on the other line to speak. A feeble voice called his full name.

"Minji?" He questioned, his voice growing small with shock.

"Hi, dear," Sunhi's grandmother answered, her sweet voice softened by a somber tone.

Hearing her speak momentarily cured his homesickness, but the comfort ceased when it realized she would only reach out if it was something serious.

“Oh--hi! It’s, uh, nice to hear from you.”

“You too, sweetheart. What are you up to right now?”

“I’m at home. It’s--um, my next class starts soon, and I swung by to get a bite to eat.”

“Mhm, okay, okay.”

“Minji, if you don’t mind me asking, why are you calling?”

“Yeongie, I...I’m not sure how to say this, but...” She inhales hoarsely and clears her rough throat. She must be sick again, he tells himself. Yeong questioned if her cancer had a recurrence, or if a new sickness came on with her increasing age. His mind wandered to his former partner and the feeling that rose in his chest when their eyes locked last year. She must be so concerned; the two of them had been best friends ever since Sunhi was old enough to choose her company.

Minji whispered, “It’s about Sunhi. The police came by this morning and told us that...they found Sunhi in the old West Point theatre. She overdosed.”

His stomach dropped. “Overdosed? I-is everything okay?”

She spoke softly, “No, honey. She passed away last night.”

Yeong was stunned into silence. Before his emotions overtook him, he tried to make sense of the situation. “I, um... a-are you sure? I thought she was doing better.”

She sighed, “She was for a while.” He could hear the forced smile on her face. “My Sunhi did so, so well. I wish you could’ve seen her, Yeongie. She came by for dinner every Tuesday, and she started picking up shifts at the convenience store; she seemed so happy...even talked about going back to school...but something happened over the holidays and she fell off the wagon again. Jisu kicked her out of the family home. I to-told her, ‘Come stay with your halmoni!’ but she wouldn’t. Meds are going up, and she...” Her voice cracks. “She thought it would be too much for me...”

Minji continued to speak, but his spinning head distorted her words into something incomprehensible. He stumbled over his words as they frantically jumped out of his throat. “I’m sorry, class is starting in a few minutes. Thank you for calling, Minji. I’ll, uh--I’ll get with you soon.” He hung up the phone before she had a chance to interject.

That evening Yeong stepped inside the gas station down the street from his rental home for the first time. He spent the rest of his evening hunched under his dining room table with the kitchen window cracked open. The distraught man held the nicotine in his lungs for so long that it began to feel as though they were on fire, and he loved it almost as much as he loved Sunhi. At first, he only coughed. Then, he began to scream. He yelled with all of his might, hoping to scare away the stinging ache that now branded his chest.

THE smoke will never truly leave Yeong’s body, even if this is the last cigarette he ever touches. It is a permanent part of his being, just as Sunhi is, and no amount of time will rid him of the ashes of the things he once had. He understands Sunhi far more than he did when she was alive, and he curses the universe for making her death the event that matured him to his understanding of addiction and how to help his loved ones with it. As he watches the sun cast a



heavenly glow around the place where it all began, he questions if he was the reason her life ended the way it did. If he did not seek out the nearest outdoor film after hearing Sunhi mention the childhood stories of attending them with her siblings, would she have instead wandered into a place with other people who could have helped her? If he trusted his intuition when she began overindulging, could he have prevented it from spiraling this far? If he had stayed and saw her through it until she finally made it, would she be sitting beside him, clean and happy? If he was a better partner, would she have never turned to substance abuse to fill the space in her heart that he left empty? If he had grown the gall to sit with his friends, that first day of freshman year, would she have merely remained a passing thought? If they never met, would she still be alive? Is it his fault this happened to her?

Yeong doesn't know the answers to these questions, and he probably never will. He wishes he would have done things differently, but no decision he makes in retrospect seems to feel right either. Someday, he will come to terms with the fact that each choice a person makes in life will change everything about the outcome. That Sunhi was alive, and now she isn't. That they were in love, and now they aren't. That existence is filled by what is and what is no longer.

Who decides if the blame for that falls solely on Yeong or Sunhi? Who says blame has to be placed on anyone at all? Everyone once involved in her life is just a person who made choices, and the combined weight of their choices have brought them here, to a path that is neither right or wrong but rather, just is.

An unfinished Marlboro hits the pavement and is extinguished once and for all by his heel. The wind waves him farewell as it spreads the cloud of grey smoke into the sky. He waves back, hoping that somehow, it will carry word of his care to Sunhi, wherever her soul is now. He hopes she knows that she is so much more to him than someone he used to know. She is more than watching movies while wrapping their arms around each other. More than running around in the rain and belting the words of a song they barely know. More than any teasing banter passed between them, and more than the nights they spent unboxing the decorations she ordered for their apartment. More than all the times he said he loved her and all the times he didn't.

She is his first love and his first home, and she is all the good parts of who he became. Her manner of speech is sprinkled into his conversations, and her method for organizing their dishware reflects in his kitchen cabinets. He buys toothbrush holders made for two so she'll have space for hers, and he still can't sleep on her side of the bed. She is the reason for his every success and his every moment of joy because these pieces of her have an eternal dwelling inside of him; forever will they be preserved in the heart she created for him from scratch.