

Angela Yang

12th Grade

St. Ignatius College Preparatory

Sincerely, Darkness

Third Avenue moves faster when I arrive. It stops holding doors for strangers. It glances over its shoulder. It grips keys and checks watches and snuffs out casual conversation.

Today I am late. The people drift over melted pavement and up boiling elevators. It is one of those evenings when windows fly open to let in the cool of night, the fumes of other people's cars and radios, the dregs of laughter and dishes after dinner.

I try to approach gently, to avoid startling.

First, the alleys. I erase the cracks in the pavement, the cigarettes rolling in the breeze, the graffiti cussing out nobody and everybody at the same time. I draw out the shadows to warn the stray cats of my approach. When the church bell tolls eight, I spread my wings over the sidewalk and the exhausted road. And just when I begin to believe that they will not resist my existence, the streetlamps stutter on, followed by the headlights of cars, the glow of fluorescents, chandeliers, reading lamps behind curtains, each light triggering another.

The city is programmed against me.

Nine o'clock, I follow the ivy up the west wall of the building at the end of the street. Apartment 2A, the old woman swallowing her vitamins as she watches me swallow the sun. 4A, a near naked mound, sheets thrown aside from the heat, stirring at the alarm clock sounding for his night shift. 5B, a place so hollow I struggle to fill the spaces between its frameless white walls and the FOR RENT sign on its window. 7A, Mama opens the cabinet beneath the kitchen sink.

"It's time for bed, Jin."

Jin shuts her eyes and shrinks further back inside the cabinet, where she hides with me during the day. She hates her own name.

"Come on. It's past nine."

Jin cranes her neck and finds me in the window, and she slides onto the cold kitchen tiles.

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In 7B, X wonders how long she can stand to be alone with me. She managed four minutes yesterday but cannot quite reach five today before she gasps and bolts for the light switch. Then she clings to her bedroom door frame and with peeled-open eyes watches me in the narrow hallway, the other rooms, the windows. She inhales. Holds her breath. Clenches her fists. Darts to the switch in the hallway. She repeats this all around the apartment, gathering her courage before racing out to confront me with another light.

When she looks around, nothing has changed. There are half-eaten boxes of takeout on the counter and newspaper clippings of job openings stuck on the refrigerator door.

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Mama deposits Jin in her room, where she climbs into bed and forces her eyes closed to feign sleep.

"You can't keep hiding in the cabinet," Mama whispers, stroking Jin's jagged hair, the scars on her scalp. She finds herself hazily reflected in the closet mirror and searches her face for wrinkles, but I press myself against her eyes until she only sees a silhouette.

It is too warm for sheets, but Jin doesn't stir. She lets her mouth fall open and her breath grow heavy.

Mama kisses her. "Alright, baby. Good night. Love you."

Once the door closes and the footsteps fade, Jin pushes the sheets aside. She wiggles the night light from its socket so she cannot see anything in the mirror, cannot see her face that makes the family oblong instead of square.

At school, they teach her that hate is a bad word.

She hates her name. She hates mirrors.

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X cannot stand it when her parents are home, but she wishes they were there, in the living room, turning up the volume on the television so they think they can talk about her - how she still hasn't gotten a job, how she could return to college and finish her degree - without her hearing.

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Jin remembers the first photo she took with them. Jane and Mary sat on the two swings at the park, and Mama and Papa stood behind them, as if to push their swings. They'd hired a photographer who first deposited Jin between the two swings and then, thinking it looked awkward, placed her on Mary's lap. Then Jane's lap. Then Mama held her. Then Papa. And she returned to the center, standing, kneeling, sitting with her legs in front, sitting with her legs crossed, standing again.

They put the picture on the mantle, next to the old photo they'd taken at the exact same swing set. Just the four of them. Jane and Mary and Mama and Papa and their perfect golden hair and gray eyes.

Mama used to hold Jin up every day to look at the picture.

"Fa-mi-ly," she sounded out, and she would snuggle Jin against her neck, her smooth cream skin.

"I love your hair, honey," she would say. "Look how dark it is. Look how it catches the light in that picture. Like a halo, my angel. Like a halo."

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X had not always been X.

She was still Daphne when she thought somebody was following her that night, still Daphne when she clutched her laptop closer, still Daphne when his footsteps quickened and she broke into a run, still Daphne when she noticed how cold his fingers were, still Daphne - especially Daphne - when she elbowed and lashed, when she twisted around to punch him, when she tripped and collapsed and woke up and everything was wrong.

She was Daphne when they sued, Daphne with her hands steady when he made eye contact with her in the court room, Daphne when the jury pronounced him guilty.

She was Daphne when the hallucinations began. She was Daphne, running away from him in the dark the second time, third time, in her nightmares. But it got darker and darker. When she ran, she could see nothing. Darker, until she was all darkness inside. Darkness covering everything, even her name.

In her mind there are no witnesses. No one to see her fight and fall. Only I am there.

I cradle her in her nightmares. I recede so the moonlight can slant across her face as she sleeps.

I am your witness, I try to tell her, and you have not fallen.

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Some part of Jin is convinced it doesn't matter; nothing that shows only in light truly matters.

Some part of Jin is convinced it will not matter once she fixes herself.

First, the hair, she thought. She was watching Papa cut the bad ends off string beans with the pair of old orange scissors, how he cut just enough to remove the ugly blackened ends.

He rinsed the scissors and hung it with the chopping boards to dry.

That was last week, when the heat wave had begun. Once Papa left the kitchen, wiping sweat from his forehead, Jin slid from the windowsill where she'd been catching the breeze scented with the cigarette smoke from the window below theirs. She coughed, jarring the remnants in her mind of cement-floored rooms and dirty wallpaper, the babies wailing and the caretaker's smoke that wove through the corridors, the bars of their beds.

When she tiptoed, she could just reach the scissors. She faced the stainless steel refrigerator and scrutinized her hair.

In a second it came spiraling onto her socks and the immaculate white tiles. Her reflection distorted. What was that on her head? A crow. A big black bird hunched over her. Her face reddened, and she attacked it with the scissors, trying to cut it off, but it raised its wings and claws in new places. On the floor there were drops of her blood, proof of the battle, when Mary walked into the kitchen for a Coke and screamed.

After they had bandaged her, they brought her to a mirror and told her to love herself.

But who was she now? Why was she no different?

That evening they found her curled up in the kitchen cabinet. And the next evening, and the next.

I know, I wanted to tell her. I know how it feels.

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X wanders back to her room and, on her phone, finds the playlist she'd been listening to that day. She squints at the bare bulb on her ceiling and remembers it all.

Some things, she realizes, remain the same in light and darkness, as if they have embedded themselves so deeply in her that they have become inescapable by mere avoidance.

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Jin untangles herself from her sheets and her sweat and her fingers pulling at her hair. She hears music pulsating softly from the adjacent apartment.

In the darkness, she realizes, she feels a perfect lightness, as if everything insignificant has fallen away.

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It is one of those nights when everything seems to melt, when the walls are only notions. They sit on their beds, separated by a notion, backs nearly touching, reflections of each other. I find it impossible to tell which is the person and which the image, and perhaps they are both real.