

Carolyne Geng
Grade 11
Amador Valley High School
“Adrienne, or Panic Incarnate”

“When will you tell them?”

Lina crinkles her nose at the question and instead chooses to snuggle closer to Adrienne, fingers tracing circles in her palm like a prayer.

“Not in a while — you know that.”

“Just a question. Sorry.”

Lina pushes herself onto her elbows. Despite her sleepiness, her heart flutters like a newborn bird, airy and bright and disoriented. Her voice stutters too, stumbling like a child who is trying to walk for the first time but isn’t certain on when to push itself off the ground. It, nevertheless, drips into the air.

“But you know how awkward it would be, with all the cultural and age gaps. I think I’ll wait a little longer to say so.”

“Hmm?”

“What is it? Did I do something?”

“I’ve never heard the word *awkward* before, Lina,” she murmurs, and Lina is consciously reminded by the singing, faint accent and softly enunciated lilt that Adrienne was born to a tiny village on the Provencal countryside, where her family had spoken rushed and sharp Niçoise in lieu of conversation.

Despite so, Lina can’t help but giggling, throwing her head back into Adrienne’s lap and covering her mouth to stifle the noise. When she shifts her gaze skyward, Adrienne is blushing uncharacteristically hard.

“Does that word just not exist in French?”

“*Ouais*, but could you explain, *chérie*?” Her voice is calming and easy, like honey sliding down her throat when she’s shivering under the blankets at night, sick as a dog.

“It’s that feeling when you’re talking to someone, but something doesn’t feel right. Or maybe it’s that feeling when you freeze up in front of a crowd and you’ve forgotten something: I don’t know — does that explain it?”

She watches Adrienne think, and she thinks she gets a tiny yes when Adrienne brushes her fingers over her head in a caress. She closes her eyes.

“I’m going to get my French up, Adrienne, and then it’ll be perfect. It will be.”

A laugh. “Maybe there’s a word or two you can’t say in English, so then I can help you too.”

With that, Adrienne leans down to kiss her forehead, and she feels her sun-like warmth spread all through her chest, soothing the odd ache that beats desperately against her paper-thin ribs like she’s drunk on it.

(*Adorer*. To love into a milky haze that rolls in spring-bright grass and a sprinkle of white cherry petals.)

She’s staring at her phone when her mother asks.

“Lina, has anyone asked you to the dance?”

She feels a spot of warmth snake into her stomach that immediately drops to a low, sharp buzz. “No, not really. Not anyone you’d like.”

“Like who?”

Lina searches her brain for names of boys that she isn’t sure exist. “Charlie. Jordan. Uh, Randy gave me a card or something, but I told him I wasn’t interested.”

“What about Robert? He seems to like you quite a bit too.”

Robert is gay, she thinks, but she stays silent and continues to scroll with her thumb. Her mother continues, voice too loud and close to her head — it vibrates and bounces off her ears with a simpering whine.

“You need to be more appreciative of these boys; you’ll have a husband when you’re older. There’s a proverb in Chinese — *Fú wú zhòng zhì, huòbùdānxíng* — that I’d like to teach you. Do you know what it means?”

Not for the first time, she blocks out the noises that surround her. Her head brings her back to the first time, when she was stupidly infatuated with the pretty French girl who came to her middle school with twin braids and bubbling energy in her limbs. Lina had watched her flirt and dance with boys too, feeling impossibility sink around her in waves of shame and confusion — up until Adrienne introduced herself in Niçoise French during class and Lina felt herself dissolve into a fluttering, pinkish puddle at her feet.

Soon after that day, uniforms still plastered to their sweat-soaked skin, they held hands for the first time in a blazing field of grass and weeds that crumbled into dust with a single touch and a gentle breath.

When Lina refocuses on her mother, she's explaining the proverb whose words punch at her with each Mandarin word — with each character that she can't fit in her American mouth like a proper daughter of immigrants.

Her phone boasts pictures of the couples that populate her school — the people who don't need to make names for their lovers.

Panic.

("Lina, fortune doesn't come twice, and misfortune doesn't come alone.")

A tiny boy is slumped against the dumpster when Lina locks the door behind her. His down jacket is punctured, and every so often, feathery plumes leak out of the soft polyester. He's a downed bird, fragile and guarded, who doesn't look older than thirteen.

Whispers are often exchanged behind her with sticky sympathy. *It was his parents. He came home to tell them, but they pushed him out. He didn't have anything with him when he left.*

Poor boy. If only he didn't say it.

Lina used to want to ask him why, but his blue eyes pierced through her skull once. She had felt heat rush to her to head, slowly at first, then with a staggering wave that froze her in the street and left her paralyzed. Cold flashes and hot bursts cycled through her body like frantic swarms of mosquitoes, like broken white noise, like a long tunnel that wouldn't ever stop or leave —

(When someone shook her out of her tunnel that day, there were cars along the roads furiously honking at her. When she touched her face, her skin felt flaky, stretched dry across the bone and stained with salt.)

Today, she turns her back carefully away from the boy and walks a little too hurriedly to the bus stop. Her feet feel too large, too wrong today, and the ache in her chest reminds her of its presence.

Panic.

(What's the word? *Das Fernweh* — longing to be away.)

It's sweltering in the classroom, and Lina is somewhat lifted from mopiness when Adrienne taps her and slides a note across her desk. Lina's grateful; she's hopeless at reading lips.

She reads it, muffling the crackle of the paper. A small smile curves her lips, and she leans over to whisper in her ear, voice strained — always — to keep it low. "Yeah, a walk at the park?"

"Where else, *ma chérie*?"

A sharp piece of unease jolts her suddenly — *aggravatingly* — and her mouth dries up. Lina takes in a too-quick breath and prepares to tell her, *no, not now Adri: don't call me that — something will happen* —

Adrienne reaches out to rub calming circles on the back of her suddenly-sweaty hand when the teacher's voice echoes across the room. The voice is jagged, heavy — enough to send Lina pushing Adrienne back around, enough to send her heart pulsing across her cracking chest and her head drilling into itself.

"I should separate you two," he rebukes. "You talk too far too much."

Adrienne murmurs an apology, but Lina's mouth stings and pounds on her head until imaginary drops of blood drip into her lashes.

Why am I like this?

Her hands tighten on the wood, and her head is fluffing her brain with clouds and some shit that's supposed to block out the terror but *don't*.

Useless. Panic.

"*Putain*," she hears, and suddenly Adrienne is outside with palms over her own, and Lina is trying to match her breath with hers. Adrienne's eyes bore into hers — like the boy outside the dumpster with his broken bird-like jacket and cold repugnance.

"What are you doing? *T'es fousse*? He didn't mean anything by it, but just to keep the classroom quiet! We've talked about this, nevermind all this shit that comes our way."

"I thought — you were —"

"*Petite idiote*."

(The curse words don't sting as much through French.)

"Adrienne, I don't know what happened," she finally spills, and she clutches at her because she can't lose her, or maybe because she's scared, or maybe ashamed, or —

Maybe...

When they separate, Adrienne is smiling but it's all wrong; her eyes don't crinkle properly or light up, even as Lina presses a shaky kiss to her cheek. She wants to ask the obligatory *are we okay* but she's trapped again, watching herself stammer again for the clumsy apologies she's reaching for, and —

Why am I like this?

("But it's not your fault, Lina," she wants to hear.)

One day when she feels particularly desperate, she asks the question while carrying red stains on her eyelids..

"Do you love me?"

Adrienne tightens her mouth and unfocuses her eyes to look somewhere else. Lina follows her gaze to the dumpster, where — to her surprise — the down-feathered boy has left with only a dusty imprint left on the industrial plastic.

Adrienne tilts her head in that direction. "I do, Lina, I do," she whispers, voice taut as a rope across a beaten bridge that is struggling to piece together two mountains with four fibers withering away with each passing minute. For a bit, she holds back something, but when they come, they slice into her stretched-out lips.

"Lina, you should know I'm moving away. To Portugal. My dad's work needs it — maybe just for a few years, but it's going to be a while, *chérie*. We need time to focus on ourselves."

Liar, with or without question.

The bridge has tumbled into the valley, and Lina feels it in her chest. "*Bião zi*," she hears herself saying. (Only they don't curse in English. Ever.)

The poisoned-black words seem to slap Adrienne on the face, leaving her reddened and — for the first time in months — snapped in half. She seems stripped down and rainy when she stands.

I...

Her stomach sinks until she feels it in her toes, pulsing and bleeding blueish-gray.

Dusty grass. Cold fingers. Loud regret.

Panic.

(Another random word, she remembers, is *saudade* — the longing for something that's flown away already and can never happen again. The longing and pulling of the aorta to beat along with someone's pulse and to mix their bloods together, reclaiming the past in one fell swoop. The glass-sharp wail that needs to be starved until she dissolves apart, just so she can strangle the ache and the *I am alone again* until its eyes glaze out.)

“I’m sorry it turned out like this, Lina *nü ér*.” Her mother is sitting besides her, and she sobs with her head in her hands.

“Sh— They left because of me and how damn needy I was every single *day*. Because I hounded them one too many times and then I lashed out again. Because I couldn’t help myself, they l-left.”

Her voice completely trembles apart at that, and she curses herself when she skips over her words four times. It’s too much to say but all too close together, like blocks of words and apologies that jostle for the space she can fit in her mouth.

Her mother probably already knows anyway— is she judging, cold, angry?

Fuckall.

The words continue to mix like hell, rising in pitch until she feels a ringing that forces its way to her ears. There is a starkly gray bubble that surrounds her, beating into her stomach like slippery coins clinking against her veins — maybe. It is nothing and everything — little paradoxes and pieces of gibberish when her tongue fails her in all she can speak.

And she *misses* because what else can she say? Is it *tu me manques* or *wo xiang ni*? Or are they both blubbered-out *I miss yous* that still sound like English in her mouth and flutter nervously in the attic?

(She’s learned that English is drawn-out staccato that cuts dark across her lap; Mandarin winds around her in slippery bubbles and cold water, light and heavy; and French springs from foot to foot on still-warm coals. But with her, they drip sluggishly into a grate and mix into something that is none of those things.)

The city beats, and she is there. Today she’s speaking French to a boy, low and teasingly and filled with the old vitality Lina remembers.

But how dare she?

Questions beat like a memory, spilling over her hands until they tremble in little sporadic bursts.

This time, she stares at Adrienne until they’re locked in an old tunnel that’s littered with pieces of stalactite which break off from the ceiling.

Désolée. One piece breaks down to puncture her neck, but she stays. Adrienne mouths something across the street, but — *doesn’t she know?* — she’s not sure what she said.

I’m so sorry for being scared. Another, and she’s quietly gone blind.

She stays.

Through the spots, though, she sees Adrienne sling an easy arm around the boy as if Lina weren’t watching, but it’s not supposed to hurt, right?

It will be alright, she decides instead.

(*Adrienne*. Someone who danced hip-hop in her free time and laughed like a church bell and read ridiculous horoscopes to explain the world around her. Someone whose name rings out only in her head with a low acoustic buzz. Someone to fend off a few of the plunging depths. Someone — someone real.)

(*Flâner*. To wander aimlessly until you find gold in the cracks, or until you become a sleeping and full thing, waiting and dreaming under a silent night sky.)