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“Your Time”

Today, like Meursault remembers, you lose her again. You get the message on your way home from Safeway, walking while the birds chirp in the foliage: *Qianliu will be remembered. Hope you can come to the funeral.* Your phone hums like a eulogy, each vibration sinking something soft and heavy into your chest.

You keep walking as you tilt your head towards the sky. The sunlight drips into your eyes and the clouds swirl counterclockwise -- a scorching hurricane in the middle of your suburban Californian winter. The stone in your chest settles softly, weathered by bone and blood and something terribly unkind.

You talked to her three days ago, and she smiled as if everything were the same. As if both of you didn't carry little shards of regret from holding each other once upon a time. As if your arms could embrace her without cold warning seeping into your veins like adrenaline, like the residue from a long-dried water stain.

And yet the birds still chirp. And yet you still walk on the snaking path past your post office, into your neighborhood and into your home. Your earth, it seems, still spins.

By tomorrow, the news will spread, and with it cometh the flood.

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You sit among friends, hearing their words snare in their throats as the rainclouds pass briefly over the sun. There's a stark rainbow through the window: *one-way glass is confidential*, you remember the counselor assuring you once. Little pieces of irony, scattered among these remains.

“Grief comes in unusual ways: beyond the five stages that some of you know,” comes the counselor's voice. It rings quietly across the office, but it's not soft like you expected. When you imagined the people around you stooped over with the weight of tragedy, you thought his words would be crooning and soothing and utterly empty promises. The type of person that Qianliu always hated.

“If you'd like, you can introduce yourself and how you feel on a scale from one to ten. If you'd like to skip your turn, just say so, and remember that this is always a judgment-free zone. Your emotions are valid, and you are always welcome to express whatever you're feeling.”

When the introductions come to you, the *onetwothreefourfive* drifts aimlessly on the tip of your tongue, and you swallow it before it betrays you.

There is movement again when the counselor gestures to the butcher paper and the set of markers on the edge of the table. Together, you spread out the roll of translucent paper onto the table and break the seals of the dollar-store pens and Mr. Sketch markers that smell like burning rubber and blueberry. This is

catharsis, you're told, for the memories that now only belong to this 200-square-foot room. You thumb at a red calligraphy pen, brush tip already frayed from the air.

Your friend Lina bumps at your elbow. Her teary eyes shimmer with grief. "These pens are terrible for calligraphy," she jokes, "and if I'd known we were writing and drawing for Qianliu's memory, I'd have brought something better for her."

Qianliu told you that tears came in different types. She told you that the emotional ones dropped cortisol with them, so after you cried for hours on the day she wanted to die, you felt better, even as your skin stretched dry with salt and cracked itself hollow. You'd wanted to be her friend, know her flaws and embrace it all, but these deals come with strings attached that only cynics see. You wanted to learn so much, but you only see those strings now when it's too late to change yourself.

You shake the pen and think of her name, smiling faintly at those precious memories. You press the tip lightly over the paper, and you hope for the stroke to curve properly, to work normally, to pretend that it was worth more than it seemed to give. It should be more. It should *feel* more. But when the ink feathers unevenly over thin paper, no catharsis has happened. You don't feel the phantom wave of disappointment. You haven't drained yourself dry because all you feel is a vague and unconvincing puppet of grief hollowing your bones.

The counselor notices your staring and pulls you aside after the meeting, genuinely asking if you're feeling overwhelmed, if you need to sit out 5th period even as the bell rings from a speaker in the ceiling. You thank him quietly and walk until you reach your English classroom, and you step back into odd public school odors and trite conversations about making online friends via Instagram. Your teacher seems delighted to see you, sitting you down to watch *To Kill A Mockingbird* in class even when she must see the ground beneath your feet. A cracked-dry riverbed. The scent of dirt that crumbles away with a feather's touch.

You tell yourself the same old flood will come soon.

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You carpool to the funeral, and the calla lilies sit quietly next to her portrait. Qianliu's name is written in hand-inked calligraphy on a tiny scroll -- in black ink, no less. Red is for New Year's parties and *baijiu*-drunk wedding guests, along with your own personal sense of irony. It cannot belong in this little church filled with mourners in black.

It's still quieter than other Chinese funerals. You've heard of professional mourners, and you went to a distant great-aunt's funeral a year ago, where one of her sons took to the microphone to lay out her faults in life until he was pulled away by the rest of her bereaved family. This one has none of the spectacle nor the agitated misery you've built up in your memory.

You remember talking to your therapist in a grey-cushioned couch, voice quiet as you recounted Qianliu when she was with you. When she cut her own bangs in a \$3 pocket mirror and you watched, faintly impressed at how easy it looked. When she watched *Inception* with you, curled up by your side and sipping milk tea at four in the afternoon. When she stared at a basketball hoop at freshman homecoming and told you she was hallucinating. When her light laugh twisted itself into something bitter and angry that snapped at you once you left, once you found out what a 5150 was. You were once heavy with terror because even though she was still alive, you'd never know if you could save her from the yellow-red haze that stained both of your thoughts.

You wish you still had your therapist. You wish Qianliu still had hers. In the end, saving face for “*your own*” good was your standard.

When you read your eulogy for her, you see the tears. You see the heavy veil of grey that hangs over their heads. The paper creases beneath your fingers, yet your voice is far too steady to be real. Once you arrive home, your father searches for matches inside the garage to burn on the ground, telling you that the smoke will wash away any negative energies before you enter the house. No need for a therapist now.

You lie in bed as you guiltily stare at the ceiling. The flood never comes.

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“How are you feeling?”

You pick at the yellow hall pass, and the corners crimp at jagged angles.. You're doing alright, you say. You joke unoriginally that you're perpetually exhausted, as is usual for a student taking too many APs in a year. The counselor earnestly explains this is all a routine check-in for everyone at the support groups, just for the sake of checking your state of mind.

There is no long-winded probing of your psyche. There is nothing much except an attempted start of conversation. He asks about the summer camp application you're filling in, some Ivy League resume booster that seems too short to be worth much. You tell him how your teachers fill the days with study sessions. You briefly mention going out for boba tea runs with your friends, fifty-percent-sugar and zero-ice earl grey milk tea condensing a film of cold droplets against your fingers.

You know how easily people are expected to adapt. Qianliu's death is a hole, ripped from the seams of the world. There are condolences. Grief shared in group chats after the funeral. Instagram stories and closed window shutters. The gaps are never permanent, however; they are soon filled with the bustling of the group that comes after, moving and shifting and testing until the world goes back to normal and its people wait for the next loss over again, like a wound sealing itself in a blast of heat.

When you heard of her death, you expected you'd keel over in the street, feeling too much and too little in one stroke. You imagined the inky excuse of devastation, wailing and thrumming, heartbroken

and gone. Emptiness would sweep into your limbs, grotesque in its beauty, and you were willing to welcome tragedy as your elegant fall from grace. Whatever story it'd take to hide reality.

Your reactions now, it seems, are struggling to keep up.

After a lifetime, the counselor smiles again. He tells you, "Take care."

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You're walking on the path towards the post office, the same road tread again and again, when Lina calls you and you tell her the flood has finally come. That it hurts. That stones are dropping again and again from your throat into your chest and chest.

"You aren't wrong to feel," she murmurs.

You miss Qianliu. You tell Lina you miss the arroyo that leads to the hiking trail off the side of the bridge, where your conversations with Qianliu could tumble down concrete into the river like chunks of loosened gravel. You tell her about the hug you shared in front of the post office, when you and Qianliu were friends who didn't drop the world on each other, expecting each other to hold it on their shoulders.

Lina's voice is muffled but insistent against the speakerphone. "I can tell you, right here and right now, that you two left impacts on each other. For better or for worse, now you're here. What I can't tell you to do is how to handle the rest."

Poor you, wanting so much from a high school sophomore. Wanting so much, waiting for the Dionysian part of tragedy to spiral yourself into doomed platonic romance. Wishing for so much suffering so you could understand someone else's.

Her voice drops a little. "You haven't been sleeping. You're not eating nearly enough everyday. Do you think you deserve the pain like this?"

You know you don't.

"What are you going to do when you get home?"

You aren't sure.

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You spend \$100 in a fit of rage to recover your text messages with *Contact: Qianliu Huang* on Fonepaw.com, clicking through a series of "Claim Your Free iPhone!" and "Offer Ends Now!" alerts with

unseeing focus. You hover your mouse over her icon, but the conversations have blinked away. The time of the past erased, and along with it, your hopes and regrets for her have gone.

Nothing belongs to you, either way.

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Have you moved on?

Cheery orange pumpkin spice candles flicker next to boxes of lotus egg-yolk mooncake, and you've grown into junior year. This is where school counts, they tell you, and you're grateful for the opportunities to bury yourself into a grave for academics' sake. It must be better than sentimentality to begin with. You're allowed the time to stare into tests. You become so stuck to the chair in your dining room that your mother jokes she'll erect a statue in your honor when you get off your ass to exercise (or something). Months soften the stones caught in your ribcage; it does feel better once your heart learns again how to beat of its own accord.

You're holding a fifty-percent-sugar earl grey milk tea, but you left the ice in accidentally like Qianliu often forgot. You're rewatching *Inception* in your living room. You shoot hoops in the same hoop that she saw twisted by a tired brain. When you cut onions and rub juice in your eye by accident, you curse and try to remember Qianliu's remedies for reflex tears.

You circled past her family's apartment, never approaching the door, and you toss a pebble down the arroyo. You feel the ground beneath your feet, and your eyes brim again with the tears that will drain the stress from your limbs and might crack your skin if you let it too loose.

So, are you doing better now? Is this what you expected in grief, days away from when it started?

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You finally text *Contact: Qianliu Huang*. Your hands shake a little, raw and freezing, and the stones still roll there in your chest. You text her number about TV shows and junior year and *Casablanca* and AP testing. You imagine what she'd be like now, vibrantly filling up the space around you that took you too long to feel and so much longer to mend.

The counselor who helps you (Mr. Yu) sometimes sits back in his school-provided rolling chair and waves hello to you. He is immeasurably proud of your tenacity, and even in the moments when you felt alone, he believed in the path of your grief.

Lina texts Qianliu's number from time to time. It's stupid memes. It's a sketch of a Mario mushroom or a picture of her new French girlfriend because Qianliu would've found a way to tease the hell out of her taste in girls. Your worry of texting a number to cope? Lina's done it months before you, always resolute in her silence because her fear of weakness mirrored your own plunge into tragedy.

You text. You cook. The air shimmers sometimes, on the days when dirt feels like powder or when sunlight drips and blinds in your eyes. You live. You dream.

Hundreds of days ago, you lost someone. You didn't know and still don't know what to do, especially in the cracks between the days. Grief came slow. Grief lingered and still stays, making a home in the ventricles and hanging in your ribs. Grief smells like rain after a thunderstorm, despite the rainbow in the mist. Grief hovers, filled with irony and ringing bells. Not a curse. Unpredictable. Unexpected. Sweet. Someday you might find your grief perched on the moon, out of reach but always there; and today, unlike in Camus's absurdism, you will find her again.

