

## Like This

For Na Hoang. An old Soul I met outside of Seoul.

“I’m Lolly, Baby” she says, with a voice that pulls me closer and makes the decision for me right there on the spot. On cue, she smiles, and pulls a red Blow Pop out of her purse. Slowly, she takes off the wrapper and brings it up to her mouth, staring at me the whole time with round emerald eyes. She’s wearing a green and white slip that flows down past her thighs, underneath a faded gray hoodie, three sizes too big. The slip looks like it’s about to drip off her body and evaporate before it even hits the sidewalk. Her hair swims out through the hood, down past her shoulders, so black it’s glowing, outlining the edges of darkness around her. Her face is the sun.

Without looking directly at her, I pull out a handful of money from my wallet and hold it out the window. She stares at me for a few seconds, and then stuffs the bills into her purse. Time stops as she walks around my mini-van and then slides through the open door into the passenger seat, as smoothly as a cube of Jell-O. She puts the Blow Pop in her mouth, already adjusting the seat, already rummaging through my cassettes, as though she has been here before, been here forever, been only here.

I drive away from the curb, thinking of that very morning when I dropped off my stepdaughters at school. Thinking: the same rubber, reinforced, silver lining above us now will be the same lining that will be here tomorrow for the same trip as this morning, existing all above and beside them.

Out of the blue, a homeless man comes staggering across the road, and I stomp on the breaks, throwing Lolly and I forward. She braces herself on the dash, as Emmy’s pink soccer ball rolls in between her slip-on black shoes. After a few moments, she

reaches down and tosses the ball into the back, without looking behind her. She pretends like she doesn't understand, acting all nonchalant and demur, but for one solitary moment she's frozen. A breath escapes through the wall.

There's a silence where we stare outside the windshield at the crumbling tenements, at the sunken faces of the people on the streets, at a stop sign hanging like a broken limb, and everything is put back into perspective. *It's always been there.*

I'm on the verge of pulling over to tell her that this is a mistake, but when I turn to look at her again she speaks: her movements hypnotizing and nimble, the shape of her cotton underwear visible through her slip, and all thoughts cease. She directs me, and after a few minutes I turn into a secluded alleyway that looks as if it exists solely for the purpose of what we are about to do now. The one streetlamp is either shattered or dead. It is *really* dark.

"So what's your name Baby?" she asks, slowly taking the Blow Pop out of her mouth. A thread hangs from her lips attached to the top of the candy. She dips her chin and licks it back up, without breaking the thread. I swallow, barely able to speak words.

"I'm Harry."

"Harry, oh my big strong Harry man." *That voice.* Seamlessly she lists over to me and reaches her hand across my lap, to turn off the car. She smells like oranges fresh on the tree. Suddenly I'm not exactly sure which decade we're in.

Her body is the sea, her hands are water being poured into a glass, her hair is a waterfall frozen in time, falling always. She stretches toward the ceiling, wraps the Blow-Pop back up, dropping it into her purse, and licks her lips in such a way that for moment I think she actually wants to do this—that this is something shared. Dizziness

rises up inside me.

Her liquid fingers move closer and she finally touches me for the first time, digging her claws into my jeans. Instantly she puts her hand on my lap, her mouth whispering into my ear. Her hair is everywhere; it has teeth. I forget everything.

“Don’t stop.”

“Oh you’re going to have to beg me to stop, my big strong Harry man.”

A few minutes later, we’re in the backseat and the mini-van’s windows have completely fogged over, blocking out all light outside. Lolly’s body is underneath me, meant to explore without sight, but I *have to* imagine her face: lips wet, tongue squirming, eyes wide open. I’m pushing harder now, grabbing tufts of her hair, kissing, nibbling, licking. Her breath is the only sound; her voice is lost somewhere in the darkness.

Suddenly a shard of light from a passing car bursts through the windshield, lighting up her face underneath me, eyes closed. This happens before my mind catches up, before I realize what has just happened. Something I should have known the second I pulled up to the curb, no even before that, when I saw her from half-a-block away. I stop pushing and start feeling around the floor for my clothes.

Scrambling shadows, stumbling silhouettes dance in a darkness darker than the one outside, and she’s grabbing for me, saying, “What’s wrong my Harry? My big Harry man.”

Raindrops begin to shatter on the roof of the car, and within seconds it’s difficult to conceive of anything else outside the perimeters of this moment.

“No, no stop you don’t understand. This is wrong, all wrong,” and her response is

to try to pin me on the seat, saying, “She’ll never know baby. No one will,” thinking my sudden reluctance is about my wife—that an onslaught of guilt has hit me. But this is not about guilt; this is about forgiveness.

She won’t stop. She keeps reaching for me. It *is* mutual. She persists, until I say another name.

Everything freezes. Time stops. Ten years pass, until I feel her move away from me. The rain amplifies to such force that it feels like one endless wave is crashing on the van, not just individual drops.

“What did you say? What did just you call me?” she asks in a new voice as familiar to me as the voice of my wife.

Then a door opens, and light explodes in the dark, brighter than I can ever remember, blinding me. When I can see again, she slowly comes back into focus, edges first, and then her center. She’s sitting in the driver’s seat, with her hoodie pulled back over her head, holding her purse in her hands. She’s looking at my face like she’s trying to solve a really hard puzzle.

I watch as recognition bursts through eyes of the same face the same face. In a rage, she reaches in her purse and throws a cloud of money back at me, saying something that I can’t make out over the sound of rain pounding on the roof. She kicks the driver’s side door wide open, and it swings back and slams into her side. Cursing, she stumbles out onto the pavement outside. A few moments later, I see a blur running away through the rain.

After fumbling around in the dark, looking for my clothes, I throw myself into the waves, chasing after her. I catch a glimpse of her, just as she’s running around the corner

of a dilapidated building. I can't turn around; there's no choice now. I'm candy stuck to lips by a piece of thread.

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Two hours later we're inside a room at some cheap chain hotel with wallpaper that resembles bark. Lindera is in the bathroom taking a shower, and I'm sitting in a chair, in the corner, staring down beneath my feet. I'm shaking in my wet clothes, which makes my face come alive with more pain. Rain patters hard on the roof. There's only one bed in the room, but Lindera said a single was all they had left. Steadying myself on the arms of the chair with my good hand, I get up to turn on the heater. I turn it up all the way, but I don't hear any sound. I kick it until small whirring sounds slowly begin to emerge from inside.

I walk over to the door and make sure that it's locked. Then I put my forehead against the door and go back to the chair. I'm staring up at the ceiling when she walks out of the bathroom wearing jeans, a long red shirt, with Tigger and Eeyore on the front, and a new pair of fancy black shoes that she must have all had hidden in some cavern inside her purse.

She goes over to her hoodie draped over a desk chair, near the one lamp that's on, and feels the material. Then she throws it over her head and zips it up. Her real hair is the color of wheat blowing in a field. Her eyes are brown, like two small pieces of Axinite. She stops in the middle of the room, as pivotal as the planet Earth.

"Your face looks awful. Your nose is definitely broken," she says without any expression at all.

"You know it was because of your hair." I pause. "And your eyes. That's why I

didn't know it was you."

"It's going to get infected, you know."

"And your face. Your face... Wait is that the *same* hoodie you had before? The one that used to be blue?" She blinks fast three times.

"I'll go to the store and get some alcohol and peroxide."

"Wait, don't leave. Let me go with you." She looks flustered.

"There's a bodega I saw that we passed on the way here." She moves towards the door. "It's not far."

"How do I know you'll come back? You didn't even want to come with me." She laughs: one sharp rising note.

"Because why not. Because someone from at least one side is probably at my apartment already." She closes the door before I can say anything else.

After she leaves, I get up and walk into the bathroom. Except for the fog on the mirror Lindera has not left a single trace of herself in the bathroom—there's no hair anywhere, no make-up, no wet stains on the floor. Everything's white: the towels are white, the sink and soap are both white, the little disposable toothbrushes are white, the hairdryer clamped into the wall is white, the shower curtains are white. I open them and see that the tub is green, with white showing through the cracks. I take off my wet clothes and step in.

It's impossible to get the temperature right. I wash everything but my face and then splash a little water on it and watch cherry threads swirl at my feet, through the pain. Then I get out and dry myself—my hair, my back, my legs. I tie a towel around my waist and go lie down in the bed, under the covers. After a few minutes Lindera walks in,

carrying two plastic bags and a rainbow umbrella. She snaps the lock on the door and shakes the umbrella closed.

“I brought you Aspirin and clothes.” She throws the aspirin on the bed, and while I take out the cotton she sets one of the bags next to the T.V. then walks over to the bed, laying down a white t-shirt, an oversized navy blue sweater, a pair of long white socks, and some sweatpants with an Eagles logo near the hem.

“What are we going to do now, Lin?”

“I have no idea what *I* am going to do,” she says very slowly looking across the room at some distant point. “I have even less of an idea about you. And don’t call me...”

“Where’s your purse?” I ask. She suddenly looks frantic.

“Shit. Oh shit.”

“It’s ok,” I say. “It’s ok. I have money.” She looks me at me like I’m piece of cordwood.

“Everything was in there. I have to go back.”

After she leaves again, I put on all the clothes she bought me. The rainbow umbrella is still in the corner where she left it. My phone starts ringing in my jeans in the bathroom. After a few minutes I get up and walk into the bathroom. I grab a small white cup, tear the plastic off, and fill it four times with water. Then I rub the mirror off with my arm and take a look.

Everything around my mouth and nose is swollen and busted. There’s a long gash on my cheek, which is where most of the blood is coming from. My nose is twisted and there’s a deep purple bruise from my mouth all the way up to the bottom of my eyes.

My right eye is completely shut. It looks like I slammed into a telephone pole.

The door opens, and I hang up my jeans on the shower curtain, powering off my phone. I take the water and phone and walk back out to our hotel room. I put them on the dresser next to the T.V.

“You found it.”

“Yeah, I found it.” She sighs, dripping water on the floor. She walks into the bathroom with her purse, and in a few seconds I hear the hairdryer through the wall. When she comes back out she goes right for the plastic bag on the dresser, next to the T.V.

“Sit down. This is going to hurt.” She takes rubbing alcohol, peroxide, a small sewing needle, gauze, black thread, band-aids, and cotton balls out of the bag, setting them on the bed.

“Sit on the edge of the bed.” I sit down.

“Lindera. We need to talk.”

“Shush now.”

“You went to medical school after you left. I looked you up. You...” She laughs again, backing up a step.

“Actually I just started up my own practice in SoHo. I just do this on weeknights to make a little extra.”

She goes into the bathroom and comes back out with a cup. She fills the cup up with hydrogen peroxide and drops the needle inside. Then she puts two cotton balls on the top of the bottle of rubbing alcohol and turns it upside down.

“You know not all of us end up with these perfect lives. I don’t know if you



know this, but some people's lives are made up of these things that they don't want to do. Who do them because they started to do them, and it just became easier and they got trapped doing those things instead of the things they were supposed to do. Ok? Are you ready?" I nod my head and close my eyes. She starts to dab at my face with the cotton. She smells like trees.

"Here. You have to turn towards me."

"Do it faster." I have to grab the bedspread into my fists to stop from yelling out.

"Stop moving. You can't move."

"Jesus. Stop. Stop!"

"I'm almost done." I grab for her wrist to move it away from my face, but she moves it away first.

"That was the easy part. Now you're going to need two or three stitches on your lip and maybe seven or eight on your cheek. Except for your cheek the bleeding isn't that bad, but it's all going to swell a lot more."

"Just wait Florence Nightingale. Just wait a minute. What's in that brown bag?"

"It's Bourbon. I bought Bourbon."

"And how long were you going to wait to tell me that?"

"Who's to say?" She shrugs.

I get up and drink the rest of the water in the little hotel cup. Then I take the already open bottle out of the bag and fill the cup up with bourbon. I walk into the bathroom, rip off the plastic from another cup, and pour from the bottle into her cup. I walk back over to the bed with both cups. I hand her the cup.

"Cheers," she says.

“What are we going to cheers to?”

“To cheap alcohol in cheap places. To random chance. To your *face*.”

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Even later, I can see that the liter of bourbon is hovering somewhere near the middle of the bottle. Somehow the room has grown three times bigger. The clock is blinking 12:00, but I have no idea what time it really is. Some of the bark looks like it's coming off the wall. Linder is stretched out on the bed next to me. The ceiling is spinning, and the pain is some distant thing hovering over my face and hand. There's just the sound of the heater whirring distantly, the rain finally letting up outside. We're both on our backs.

“How come you didn't know it was me?” I ask. “How couldn't you have known?”

“I don't see the men who pick me up. I look at them, but I'm off somewhere else, far away.”

“Where do you go?”

“To somewhere where I'm invisible. The setting changes. Sometimes I'm a radio host; I like being just a voice.”

“Linder in the morning. I'd be your number one listener.”

“I think I'd prefer a late night show. Maybe in Kansas City. I'd only have female guests on the show, and I'd only play music from the 1980's and discuss media and world events that happened in the 1980's.” She pauses. “Nostalgia hour.”

“I loved the 1980's. It felt like so much more innocent back then.”

“That's because we were six.”

“I was six. You were like twenty.” She smiles and hits my arm.

“Shut up. You’re older than I am.”

“Only in real time. You’re an old soul.”

“I’m just more experienced in life,” she says casually.

“No, it’s just that you’re stronger than everyone else. You always have been.”

She doesn’t say anything so I use the opportunity to finally bring up what happened.

“What I did earlier,” I say. “I’m sorry; I wasn’t trying to make it worse. I was trying to set you free.” Silence.

“Is that what you were trying to do ten years ago too?” she asks after a minute, an edge in her voice. “Set me free?”

“I just can’t stand the thought of anyone hurting you. My love always gets backwards and twisted up.”

“But you can’t do that. It’s my life. It’s not yours. *I deal with it. I do* Gavin. I always have.”

“But you don’t Lin. You disassociate. You don’t confront anything. You just bear it.” I say as softly as I can.

“Maybe that’s how I deal with things. Maybe that’s the only way that works for me. You don’t have any right to interfere with my life. Not ten years ago. Not tonight. You don’t even know what you’re talking about, and anyway I never asked for your help.” Her voice is rising.

“Have you ever asked anyone for help in your entire life?”

“Fuck you. I don’t ask for help because they always want something back. It’s never free. It always costs something.”

I reach over to touch her but stop when she says, “You wanted a mansion with a beach house.” I’ve never heard her get angry before, or reveal this much about herself. I’m not sure which outburst surprises me more.

“Lin.”

“I told you to *stop* calling me that,” she hisses and then turns away from me, shutting down.

I think about how I can’t think of a single lie Linderia has ever told anyone in the whole world, except herself. I think about before. I think about how I used to mouth the words “I love you,” when she wasn’t looking, hundreds upon hundreds of times, on two different continents. I think about those two sentences inside her diary; I can still remember where they were on the page. I think about all the time I’ve spent stringing together every single word, every memory, every sentence she’s ever spoken, and how she’s still the biggest mystery in the entire world. I think about that last weekend together in D.C. when she was lying on her bed, in her open white bathrobe, saying how she couldn’t believe how comfortable she felt around me, in astonishment and self-reproach. I think about what I did tonight and what I did ten years ago, and how they’re two branches of the same tree. I think about her father.

Endless black time passes. Finally I ask her if she thinks I did more than hurt them (even though I already know), but she has already fallen asleep or she’s just pretending, like she used to.

In the bathroom, there aren’t any more cups so I make a cup with my good hand and inhale water from out of the faucet. I press down on the butterfly bandages on my nose and inspect the stitches on my cheek and upper lip. Up close, it doesn’t look like

my face.

When I come back out she's purring softly, turned over on her other side. I swallow more Aspirin, then grab my phone off of the dresser and step outside. Out on the balcony, I watch the traffic move below me through a steady drizzle.

The sun is starting to come up somewhere behind all the buildings. There are puddles in the street, and everything looks wet and blue. All the people on the street and in their cars look asleep. I dial my wife's number, having no idea what I'm going to say. She picks up on the second ring.

"Gavin where are you? Are you ok? Where have you been?" She sounds frantic, wide-awake.

"I ran into an old friend from school. We had a few drinks. I'm sorry I didn't call you." There's complete silence on the other end of the line.

"Kathy listen..."

"You can't do this. You can't just not come home. I thought you were lying in a ditch somewhere. What friend? Who did you..."

"I got beat up last night. I got out of my car and these two guys just came out of nowhere. My nose is broken. My eye's swollen shut. I just woke up."

"Oh my god! Honey come home ok? Just come home, and I'll take you to the hospital. I'll take care of you. Where are you?"

"I don't know. I don't know. Not far."

"Just come home honey, Ok?" I take a deep breath.

"I love you."

"I love you too. Just come home baby. I'll fix you all up. I'll take care of you."

When I walk back through room #14 Linder is still purring, lying on her side, turned away from the door. I walk over to the bed and sit down on the edge. She smells like soil—like the land itself.

“Hey,” I whisper. “Hey, I have to go home.”

“Don’t go. Stay here with me.” She yawns and stretches out her arms, still turned away, still half-asleep. She reaches for my arm and pulls me onto the bed. Her touch bridges a decade. It burns like steam.

“I love you,” I say. “All the parts and pieces of you. I always have.”

“Just stay here until I fall asleep.”

“It’s going to get better,” I say. “All of it will. For everyone Lin. It’s already starting.”

“Just hold me.” She pulls my arm around her, closer until we’re two spoons locked away in some cupboard for the last ten years. The bed settles.

“Like this.”