



speculative fiction FOR THE REST OF US

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Plastic Forks and Wooden Geta by Kenna Greer

1.

The Judge has frown lines as deep as Maryland mud-ruts, but he must know of magic. He speaks with a gravelly voice, wheels on tarmac, and the world shakes.

Spark tells herself: that's three times, now. The first was when she lost her magic, the second when her brother found her and gave it back. And the third is a rainy Tuesday afternoon in March, in a stuffy courtroom with someone coughing in the back row.

The Judge says: The Court, having heard all the evidence filed in the matter of Jennifer Marie Cooper, aka Etsuko Arakawa, hereby awards custody to Respondent Tetsu Arakawa.

Those, Spark knows, are magic words, because now the world has changed.

Outside, the two people who'd raised her look at her like a stranger, though her once-father pushes money into her hand with a sad smile before following his wife. Gray rain muzzles the air. She shivers, shuffling her feet; her brother flags down a cab. Spark wipes her tears when he looks the other way.

Excitement coils in her belly, mixed with fear.

She can't tell if he's happy, doesn't know how to ask. Their reflections in the cab's window are so close: their father's black hair, their mother's blue eyes. He's not a stranger, but blood isn't enough to take away the strangeness. She plucks at her black skirt, courthouse best-behavior clothes.

Spark wants something, to give him, to show him, but the words are stuck and she can't shake them loose.

###

2.

Tetsu drops her off at her new school; she climbs the stairs on unsteady feet, getting turned around twice on the way to class. She hunches her shoulders, but no one notices her, no more than when she slept beneath winter's silence, dreaming of a brother she'd never met.

At lunchtime she lingers at the bulletin board, unnerved by the cafeteria's clamor reverberating in her bones. Cornrows and shocks of kinky hair, crude taunts and loud laughter, Hispanic accents swaying hips with rolling R's. A muddle of slang, catcall, flirt. Spark thinks of her backwoods drawl and her half-Asian eyes. Her skin itches beneath her polyester blouse.

A bright pink sign with flowers catches her gaze; she reads and the noise around her recedes. Carefully, cautiously, she copies the information onto her palm for lack of ready paper, then puts the pen away, satisfied. She cups her hand and carries the secret all day, grasped close.

###

3.

Lynxen pulls up to the curb and Spark clammers into the car. He lives just upstairs, and works with Tetsu downtown. He's Tetsu's best friend and travels to Japan often; if anyone might know what to wear, he would.

"What if the cherry trees don't bloom?" She stares out the window rather than meet his gaze. He's too handsome; when he looks at her, it scares her, just a little.

"I checked the web page before I left work. So far, they're on schedule." He shrugs. "No worries, Etsuko."

She nods, still uncertain. "Will there be a lot of people?"

"Probably. It's the biggest festival in the District, not counting Fourth of July." The city rolls past, grand offices left behind for neighborhoods with stunted trees along the curb.

"How much..." She takes a deep breath, thinks of her once-father's unexpected gift. "How much does a kimono cost?" He says nothing and she stammers, "I c-could get a job, pay you back-"

"None of that," he says, but not unkindly. "It's a gift."

"Oh." She feels both guilty and privately relieved.

He parks at a house whose concrete porch braces it from falling face-first into a winter-bare yard. "Ready?" He twitches his hair out of his eyes, knocks on the house's door, grins down at her while they wait.

The door flies open. A tiny woman, swamped in a rumpled bathrobe, ushers them into a cluttered

kitchen. She abruptly halts Spark, turns her in a circle with arthritic fingers like claws.

When the woman speaks, it's syllables of water. Lynxen replies with the same, but with laughter in his voice. The old woman snorts, smacks him in the elbow, and he skitters out of her way to sit at the kitchen table. Spark is stunned: they're flirting. It's only once the old woman smiles into a crease of wrinkles that Spark can see a much younger woman's sashay.

A tape measure appears, whips around Spark. She's poked, prodded, arms raised, arms lowered, turned. The woman barks a command.

"Aa." Lynxen holds up his hands, mock-surrender. "Hai, hai."

Spark notes the words, stores them away with the scent of tomatoes and rice vinegar. The old woman returns with armfuls of fabric, spilling bolts across the table. She steps back, imperious.

Lynxen waves a hand over the fabrics. "Pick one."

Cranes and foxes on obsidian, a bird with long tail feathers flying out of sapphire, fishes and rabbits dancing on lime green. Spark hesitates, sets her hand on the burgundy, pushes it aside. The green, the pink, and down to the bolt of soft blue: the old woman unwraps it and Spark can't breathe. Quiet blue, like Tetsu's eyes, with white cranes rising up from rolling waves.

"I like this one," she whispers. "Back home, there are cowbirds." She shrugs, self-conscious. "I used to make up songs for them."

The old woman just stares. Spark doesn't know what she's done wrong. She wants words she understands, to tell her what to do, what to say; she shoves her hands into her jacket pockets, wondering if that's apology enough for trespassing on something beautiful.

"You have a good eye." Lynxen and the old woman speak for a bit, then he guides Spark to the door. "Cranes are the bird of poetry."

"They are?" She tilts her head back to look up at him; he's giving the woman a deep bow. She mimics him. The old woman's barking laugh chases them out the door. Back in the car, Spark slouches. "I did something wrong, didn't I."

"What's that?" Lynxen gives her a puzzled look, backing out of the driveway and heading into traffic. He drives as if he is the car, attention easily divided between her and the rest of the world. It's stark contrast to the focus that makes her afraid to speak when her brother's behind the wheel.

"When I bowed. I thought..." She sighs. "Never mind. I guess I'm being silly."

"Oh, that." His lips curl at the edges. "You had your hands in your pockets."

"That's bad?"

"Just not proper. Put your hands together when you bow, or hold them against your chest."

She considers that; she can feel a smile growing in her throat, reaching up. Perhaps she's found her dictionary. "What else?"

"What do you mean?"

"What else am I doing wrong?"

He's quiet, then, "it's okay, Etsuko, you're being yourself."

"No, I mean..." She slumps again, fiddling with the hem of her skirt. "I know sometimes I'm doing

things wrong but I don't know what. I want to do things right, so Tetsu..."

He doesn't laugh, and that matters. "In Japan, a girl doesn't sit cross-legged. Very unladylike. When she laughs, she covers her mouth. A nice girl doesn't wear red underwear," he says, with an arched brow and just the barest hint of a smile. "Only bad girls do that. But the most important is that a girl wouldn't call her older brother by name, but title. It does him honor, to be reminded of his role. His obligations."

"That's...onii-san," Spark murmurs, piecing together Lynxen's words and Tetsu's rare explanations like patchwork fabrics. Every clue holds a crane, white with black-tipped wings, darting up from blue.

###

4.

For a month Spark waits, watching the sky with a worried eye; the trees have to bloom at the right time. It's part of the magic, like the Judge's words, the old woman's bolts of fabric.

Every night before turning out the light, she reads the children's book her grandmother sent from Japan. Spark's name is on the inside cover: a Z with a dash over it, a U knocked onto its back. A second Z, but with the middle missing, top line hooked, bottom line hooked. Below that, a delicate hand lettered her name in English. She spells it out, under her breath.

E...tsu..ko.

Pages of gold-and-brown watercolor creatures with black masks and ringed tails, plump in striped bathrobes. Tanuki. Spark can't read the Japanese but she picks out all the places where the characters from her name appear.

The Tanuki are playful, raccoons the size of border collies. They laze about, drinking from large bottles and playing tricks on men in flowing robes who carry tall staffs. Tanuki become bottles of wine, pairs of shoes, teakettles, rolling in laughter at the men's confusion when a Tanuki-kettle scurries away of its own accord.

Spark wonders if she could play tricks like that; she doubts her brother ever has. He's too serious, too grown-up. She wishes Tetsu would read her the story, but she's almost sixteen, and only children ask for bedtime stories.

When Tetsu pats fingertips on her door, it means: lights out. Reluctantly, she puts the book away. If not for sometimes glimpsing Tetsu's furry ears peeking from his perpetually messy hair, she wouldn't believe he's also Tanuki. She turns her face to the pillow, pulling the covers up as if someone were tucking her in.

On Fridays, Lynxen comes down for dinner. He and Tetsu speak Japanese in hushed tones, breaking off when she enters the kitchen. Lynxen hands her a dish to take to the table, his calm smile a promise: her secret is safe.

###

5.

Spark wakes to find the sunrise pinking the city rooftops. The cherry blossoms have been blooming for two days along the tidal basin. She shoves her feet into house slippers and creeps from the apartment, up to Lynxen's place.

He answers the door with a growl, bare-chested, jeans half-buttoned. "Spark," he says, weary, "it's six in the goddamned morning."

"I didn't know how long it'd take to get dressed." She shifts from one foot to the other.

He groans and opens the door wider. "Good point." He points to a stack of white boxes. "I got them from Fujiwara-san yesterday."

"There's so many." Spark barely dares to breathe. She looks down at her tank top and sleeping shorts. "What do I do?"

"Hunh? Oh." He runs a hand through his hair, crouches by the boxes, opens and closes until he finds the right ones. "This is the hadajuban and the susoyoke." One is a T-shirt, the other a large rectangle. "Undershirt, and half-slip." He drapes them across his body, demonstrating. "Put those on. I'll be right back."

By the time he returns, her pajamas are on the floor and she's wearing the slip and shirt. He's drinking a beer; he's put a shirt on. He sets the drink down, squints at her, untucks the loose top from the half-slip.

"Fujiwara-san gave me directions," he mutters, sorting through the boxes. "But I warn you, I'm only good at removing these things, not putting them on. Okay, next is the nagajuban."

"Nagajuban," she repeats.

"Under kimono." He wraps the white linen around her, checking the collar, whispering to himself. Collarbones and lengths, shapes and padding. He grins, sly, but doesn't explain. "Date-maki. Under sash." He belts the sash around her waist.

"Is that it?" Disappointed, she smooths the white fabric. She'd hoped for the blue, but maybe... She's afraid to ask, to make it true.

He kisses her on the forehead, unexpectedly. His morning beard scratches her skin; he smells of beer and cigarette smoke.

"Now, the kimono." He pulls out a length of blue. "This is a jofu, which means it's linen." He helps her into it, smiling when she gives the lengthy train a worried look. "Arms up. You tie here, and here-"

He hums to himself as he works: pulling the fabric snug, tucking it over the waistband, adjusting so the hem is at her ankles, straightening the collar until the white nagajuban shows just a sliver under the jofu's collar. Cords dangle, tied to other cords. Another waistband, the date-jime. Spark giggles when he pokes her.

"This is the han haba, a modern obi." He places it around her waist, mutters to himself, then pulls it around to the front. "Fujiwara-san put up a fight on this, but it'll be easier for you. Tie the bow, and slide it around to your back."

"Do I have to?" Spark tries to follow his directions, but the fabric dazzles her, silvery, shot with blue threads and glimmering in the morning light. She's certain her results must be awkward, ugly.

"Absolutely," he says, amused. "Only prostitutes wear the bow in the front. That'd be a fast track to giving your brother apoplexy." He helps her situate the obi's neat butterfly-ends in the middle of her back.

A tiny part of her brain knows what she'll do if Tetsu ever gets on her nerves. When Lynxen raises his eyebrows, she smiles and asks if that's all. She isn't surprised when he produces more boxes.

###

6.

She knocks on Tetsu's bedroom door, instructions rattling in her head. Sit up straight. Go down the stairs with the left foot leading, or else the kimono will flash open and show leg, which would be bad. Don't slouch. Make sure the back neckline is just so; only bad girls show a lot of neck. She wonders for a moment how Lynxen knows so much about what bad girls do.

Hold the sleeves out of the way when eating. Make small movements. Walk with the toes together, pointed in just a little. She raises an arm to study the cranes rising from the waves, across the front of her dress and into the right sleeve, startled when Tetsu opens his bedroom door.

At first he only stares, mouth opening, closing. Abruptly his spirit-ears appear, tilted forward, giving him even more of a surprised look.

"I'm here-I thought-do you want to go to the Sa..." The pronunciation flees, despite her labored practice: sakura matsuri. She tries again. "The Sah-kra Mat-surry."

He gives her a bow, and a tiny smile. "I'll be right out."

Spark clasps her hands together above the obi's decorative cord and bows. She has to cock her head to watch him, but is pretty sure she's bowed a little lower than he. Thrilled, she straightens to see his smile open up: pleased, startled.

She beams and pads away on socked feet to make him coffee before they leave.

###

7.

The festival is a noisy pinwheel spreading through the city's streets. A woman plays the koto not far from the Metro station; Spark wriggles her toes in the tabi-socks, the wooden geta both unfamiliar and just right. Today, she will be the Japanese sister she should have been. The hope is jittery, bouncy in her stomach.

She studies Tetsu, clandestine. His dark blue jacket has crisp edges; his full pleated pants swish with every step. The bottom edge of his squared sleeves fall to his waist; hers fall to her knees. She doesn't ask why.

She fiddles with her bag, its deep blue matching the waves on her kimono; there's a line between Tetsu's brows. Maybe the music isn't as good as what he's used to. She hadn't even thought of that, of making him homesick. The decorated facades of Federal Triangle stare down their marble columns at her, taunting; she clutches her bag tighter. She's not a runaway anymore. She belongs here. She just needs to make sure Tetsu knows he does, too.

At the vendor stalls, she points out tiny ceramic tiles. Tetsu says they're for chopsticks, but Spark can't figure out how. She runs a finger over crimson matchi-paper; its gold-outlined dragon laughs at her and joins the lizards clawing in her gut. What if Tetsu decides he doesn't like her? She studies dolls dressed with intricately folded fancy paper, but Tetsu only moves on.

When he stops, it's to speak with a Shinto priest in precise Japanese, each syllable easily discerned like jewels among river rocks: is-sho-ni-na-ru. Tetsu's eyes crinkle when Spark joins them. He puts a hand on her elbow, drawing her close.

The priest bows to her. Impulsively she bows as well, lower until her high ponytail brushes her cheek and she remembers: don't show any neck. She jerks upright but the Shinto priest has turned back to Tetsu. He doesn't look her way again.

Her heart sinks; she files the moment away to figure out later. Languages swirl around her but she's tongue-tied. Four men with dreads ease through the crowd, joking in drawled patois. A woman pushes a stroller; three women in bright saris hold up festival t-shirts at the next booth.

Tetsu walks as if he knows where he's going, Spark clattering awkwardly behind him. She wants to talk, to spill all her thoughts, to pry open his mouth and peer inside to find out who he is and if he can tell her who she is, but she doesn't. She thinks of covering her mouth when she laughs but nothing seems funny. The dress is tight around her legs, the sleeves flapping in the breeze, the thongs rubbing against her big toes and the tops of her feet.

At the end of the row, Tetsu speaks with an older man selling weapons, then turns to her. "I've agreed to help out," he says. He takes off his outer jacket, holds it out. "I won't be too long."

Glad to be useful, she bobs a quick bow, backing up when Tetsu frowns, then turns away. Her shoulders slump until she remembers, again: stand up straight. She trails Tetsu and the older man, jacket and blue bag cradled in her arms.

The sun's climbed high enough to glare down on the crowd. On the stage Tetsu dances with a wooden sword and invisible opponents; the teacher names each move in flat syllables. Another man steps forward to face Tetsu. Wooden swords raised, they freeze then explode forward, wood clacking in sharp snaps. Tetsu never hesitates, expression unchanging, parry, retreat, strike. Spark imagines he's writing in the air, mysterious lines, secrets she doesn't share.

The men sweep their wood-blades in wide circles to a sharp stop and bow. Tetsu comes upright; she cringes, slinking behind several tall Arab men. The man on the stage is a stranger to her, fluent in something elegant and precise. She looks down at her hands and can't imagine ever moving so gracefully. She feels clumsy, a little girl dressing up in someone else's world.

Tetsu finds her in the crowd a few minutes later, accepts his jacket. "Are you hungry? Would you like to eat?"

She nods, willing to push aside the uneasy respect, the sense that she's related to someone dangerous. He seems no more than human, or no less. She doesn't know which.

"Yesterday at school they had tacos, and some kind of white cheese like Swiss," she blurts, wishing to fill the space. "Mexican food is better orange." Then she sees the line between his brows, stutters to a halt, looks away.

Chastised, she slows, letting him lead. When someone stops them for a picture, she summons up a smile by thinking of Lynxen flirting with the old woman. It's hollow. She wants to tell Tetsu about the woman, but now someone else is taking their picture; she stands with her toes pointed in just so, hands folded over her purse, just below the obi. She smiles with her lips pressed together.

Along the food tents, Tetsu picks one. She studies the signs, bewildered: ramen, teriyaki, mochi. More people take their picture as the line shuffles forward. Tetsu is gracious with each request. She tries to look proper and ladylike.

The wait seems endless. Three college students chatter nearby. An Asian man in front of them carries a boy on his shoulders; his blond wife scolds a second boy who keeps turning around to stare at Spark. She wonders if the boy can see her Tanuki-dog ears. She wants to put her hands over her head, or her face, or her soul, and hide.

Her stomach rumbles just as they reach the front of the line. Tetsu asks what she wants, but she only

shrugs, uncertain. "Whatever you're having," she whispers, and it sounds like a line from a movie, fake and empty.

Tetsu orders in rapid Japanese; the cook's lazy vowels are singsong against Tetsu's clipped speech. The woman turns her broad smile on Spark, more rolling words. Spark has no idea what to say.

"Hai," she finally says, hoping she's right-"hai," again-then she realizes the woman's reaction.

Eyes narrowed, just a bit. The cook's gaze flicks down Spark, and up again, smile tight, not so broad, teeth bared. Then the moment is gone and the cook hands over two bowls of noodles. Another long phrase and a lower bow to Tetsu, and she calls the next people in line.

Spark follows her brother from the tent, then looks down at what she holds. A bowl of noodles, vegetables, meat, in her other hand, a plastic fork. It feels like a reproach, flat against her palm. The plastic is scratchy along the fork's seams, and she thinks: I have been insulted.

The ache becomes overwhelming. Tetsu looks back with a confused expression; she sees the bowl in his hand, his paper-wrapped chopsticks, and it's too late. He opens his mouth but she's crying, blinking furiously to fight the tears. They spill anyway, hot and humiliating down her cheeks.

She's not fooling anyone. Under the pretty clothes she's not her brother's sister, she's not a proper girl, she's a runaway who still carries the scars and dirt of the city. Her lips are glossed but her mouth has eaten rotten food, her fingernails clipped but once they were broken half-moons. She lowers her chin, hating the dress and the cranes and the tight obi and the silver cord with the knot she couldn't figure out even with Lynxen's patient instructions. The smell of food turns her stomach. She imagines the cook behind her, glaring, accusing.

"Etsuko," Tetsu murmurs; he juggles his bowl and chopsticks before putting a hand to her elbow.

She almost pulls away, but it's too much, so she goes where he leads. On the steps of the Old Post Office, he motions her down onto the cool marble ledge. He doesn't sit beside her but kneels before her, blue eyes wide.

"Imoto-chan," he says. Little sister.

She cries harder, almost spilling her bowl. He takes the dish, putting it aside, but she won't let go of the fork. He doesn't say anything, just lays his hand over hers.

"I'm sorry, onii-san," she sobs, feeling stupid and young and too American, when she only wanted to show him she could do it, too. But now she knows she has no idea what that might be, or why she thought she could, or even should. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Hush, hush," he chides, brushing away her tears with the back of his hand. "It's okay."

"I just wanted-" She chokes on the words: for you to talk to me, for you to like me. She hiccups. The fork bends in her grasp, plastic sticky against damp skin. She hunches over, trying to hide her face from the festival-goers waiting their turn for food that will be served with a smile and a fork and they won't care but she does. "For you to have fun."

"I have," Tetsu sighs. He peels back her fingers one by one, reveals the fork, takes it. "I'll be right back." He rises onto his knees and hugs her.

He's not done that since the night they met for the first time in fifteen years. She'd woken up and he'd held her and called her imoto-chan. Tears bubble her vision and she doesn't even have time to raise her arms in answer before he's gone, but she imagines she can hear the low swish of his pants from where

she sits. In the street, Tetsu speaks with a food vendor, giving a curt nod to the responding bow and returns to sit beside Spark.

"Here." He hands her the chopsticks. "You are Japanese. You've just never known it."

She starts to laugh. She can't help it. Tears drip from her chin onto her wrist, splattering dark dots across her sleeve. "Onii-san," she laugh-cries, "I've never used chopsticks before."

He blinks, stares, and suddenly he's laughing too, deep, rich, rolling across her, but she's part of it and it's not across a distance but closer. Shoulder-to-shoulder sitting on cold marble surrounded by people nothing like them, but for the first time ever that doesn't matter. He snaps the chopsticks and places them in her hand.

"Like this." He demonstrates with his own. She aims the chopsticks at her bowl; he grins, blue eyes crinkling. "Wait, napkins!" He scatters some across her lap and says, "now, try."

It's like holding pencils and writing backwards. The food keeps falling away from her grasp; she scowls but smiles at the same time.

"I'll tell you a secret," Tetsu says against her ear, as if no one else can hear him and maybe no one can. The burble of words around them fades, a magic she's known only once before. He nudges her bowl with his knuckles. "Lift the bowl to your mouth. It's okay to do that."

She looks over the bowl's brim at him, and he smiles. Then he raises his bowl and does the same.

###

8.

They wander the festival and Spark keeps close at his side. He tells her about studying judo in high school, kendo in college. He leads her back to the old man's table and shows her a katana, how to hand it to him. He withdraws it from the sheath and lets her see the rippled black-silver edge of the blade.

He whispers the Japanese words for anything she points out and she tries to say it like he does, says it wrong, but he laughs and just says it again until she gets it right, or close enough. When she giggles, she can feel her raccoon-dog ears flicking forward and back. For a moment she worries: what if someone sees? But Tetsu only tweaks her spirit-ear, before she can swat him away.

Tent to tent, under bright flags rippling in the breeze, and he tells her about Shinto shrines and the largest Buddha in the world. Ramen stands in Shibuya, hot springs and karaoke, working the riot squad and learning aikido. He shows her the scars on his knuckles from the dojo; daring, she shows him the scar on her hand from falling off her bike at age thirteen.

When people take their picture, he barely pauses; he smiles long enough for the camera and then tells her about firefly-lit evenings, carp-flags dancing at a house's peak, the scent of new tatami. He tells her how to say please and thank you and you're welcome.

An hour passes, two hours. Her feet hurt, her throat's sore from talking; she sips the cold green tea her brother insisted she try. It rushes over her tongue, as crisp as Tetsu's accent. A tent's banners flutter in the breeze, black characters on pearl-white paper. Spark joins the children ringing the table, concentrating for a moment before writing her name-Etsuko-top to bottom, like the scrolls snapping overhead.

She cocks her head, uncertain. The lines are angular, coarse where the examples around her flow like Tetsu's sword. "That's no good," she says, disappointed. She starts to crumple up the paper, but Tetsu

stops her.

"I think it's wonderful." He smooths the paper out before rolling it up, tucks it away in his sash. "I want to keep it."

She closes her mouth, manages a smile, and grabs the marker again. "I can write your name," she tells him. An English T, followed by a backwards Z with a dash, and a U pushed over on its back. T. E. Tsu.

He laughs. "Close, close." He takes the pen, left hand holding his sleeve out of the way. Scrawled in broad, forceful strokes down the paper, two symbols appear: a narrow C with a bar across the top merging with the C's upper swish, followed by a laying-down U.

"That's my name in hiragana." Tetsu points, reading them out loud: "Te. Tsu. Your name and mine are actually spelled with kanji, but..." He taps her on the nose with the end of the pen, startling her. "One thing at a time."

"Can I keep it?" When he nods, she mimics him, tucking the rolled paper into her obi. She looks up to realize he's taken her second attempt and put it next to her first; the two peek up from his dark sash, messenger's scrolls.

Tetsu smiles. "Was there anything else you wanted to do?"

The Capital's broad silhouette marks the highest point of the city reaching skyward. It's at the end of Pennsylvania Avenue, flanked by old buildings carved with grandeur and self-importance. It's the landmark, but not her goal.

"Yes." She thinks to take his hand, but doesn't. She points instead. "Let's see the cherry blossoms."

###

9.

They walk: six blocks, another six blocks. They stop outside the Smithsonian Castle, and a woman in a USDA jacket smiles and gives them directions to the Tidal Basin.

Along Independence, Tetsu is astonished at the three-block length of the Department of the Interior. Spark is elated, as much as if she'd designed it herself just to see his wide eyes and startled smile. A little farther, they find a restaurant tucked between the legs of an office building. Tetsu sniffs, pauses, and Spark studies the menu with pursed lips.

"It says Memphis, but it smells like Carolinas." She shakes her head. "Barbecue shouldn't be that sweet, or that messy."

Tetsu gives her a look like he has no idea what she's said.

She's not sure which part didn't make sense. "Georgia barbecue is drier, with a little bit of lemon. Memphis is wet. Arkansas tends to be spicy..." Her words slip away in the shock. "You've never had barbecue."

"Maybe, when I was very little." He looks away, then back, and she can see that sometimes he doesn't have the words, either.

The place is smaller than their living room, but clean. Old men lounge around reading newspapers; a girl behind the counter files her nails. The guys in the back are talking politics, words and hands moving at the same easy pace. Spark trots up to the counter, glances over the lettered menus and reels off an order. Pulled pork, coleslaw-does it have mayonnaise or salad dressing?-and beans.

She carefully counts out the last of the money her once-father gave her, despite Tetsu's protest. She remembers her father's sadness and thinks he'd be happy at how she'd spent it.

"My treat," she admonishes Tetsu. He grumbles, reluctant thanks, but she understands.

Ten minutes later, they're out again, bags in their hands, and it's Spark's turn. She tells him about cattle egrets and buzzards, riding bony horses on a neighbor's farm, heat waves on the tarmac, skipping stones. She tells him about the bear-man on the Metro when she first came to the city, panhandling in the District, throwing pebbles from the Key Bridge to watch them plummet into the dark waters of the Potomac.

When she was little, she wanted to be a fireman and ride on the back of the truck; when she was ten, her once-father took her to the city's Art Museum. For every word Tetsu has given her, she hands it back, turning it over in her mouth and only seeing its worth in the blue of her brother's eyes.

At the Tidal Basin, people stroll among the cherry trees. The sky is a sharp cerulean, the waters indigo; breezes shake petals loose to fall in a snow-pink drift across everything. She waits while Tetsu exhales, long, deep, closes his eyes, bows his head.

"The trees were a gift of friendship," she tells him, solemn. "This city doesn't have a graveyard, just a lot of headstones." She motions to the memorials. "And the trees are here to remember."

Tetsu nods, lips quirking; they choose an empty bench, setting the food between them. She concentrates and wiggles her spirit-ears at him. He makes his do the same and she knows that's his version of a smile.

She eats barbecue with the lacquered chopsticks he'd bought her, practicing. Tetsu eats with his fingers.

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10.

They watch the sun sink into the Potomac, cherry blossoms waving over their heads. The petals drift with the breeze, falling aimlessly to land in the barbecue, the coleslaw, the beans.

When the meal is done and cleaned away, she brushes the petals from her dress, and then turns him around to brush more off his jacket. The path's lamplight catches the circular crests on the jacket's arms, repeated between the shoulder blades. A river wave, circular and rippling: the Arakawa family crest, rough water.

"You knew about the festival," she says, quietly.

"I did." Tetsu stares up at the cherry blossoms. "I was just about to come wake you, this morning."

"You were?"

"I wanted...to surprise you." For a heartbeat he almost looks scared, and she realizes maybe she wasn't the only one. Then he shakes his head, and gives her a shy smile instead. "It's a beautiful dress."

"Oh. Thanks." Her face grows hot, embarrassed but flattered. She can't recall the phrase-domo? domo arigato?

She turns away to catch a handful of cherry blossom petals, tucks them into her little purse. She'll press them between the pages of her Tanuki book. Overhead, the cherry blossoms glow white-pink in the sun's last ruddy rays, dipping in the wind as if blessing her plans.

"Look." She points, a little sad. "That branch didn't bloom."

Tetsu reaches up and brushes his fingers along the tight buds clinging to the silver-gray bark. The petals unfurl, green to pink to white, blossoms breaking open in the sunset. "Better?"

She gasps. "How..."

"You can do it, too," he whispers, as if telling a secret.

"I can-" And she believes him, believes her own words. He stands beside her and there's no distance, no reproach in his gaze. The strangeness is there but he's no longer a stranger. "I'd like to learn," she says.

"I'll teach you." He holds out his hand.

In so many ways they're different, after a thousand miles of ocean for fifteen years. It stretches out between them, crossed as easily as putting her hand in his. His palm is calloused, his grip firm. He won't lose her again. Ever.

"Come on," he says. "Let's go home."

The Strength to Bear by Phoebe Harris

Look, I know you've got a job to do, but the truth is not everyone's got a story worth telling. Yeah, I've had a nice string of luck in the Arena lately. It's been six weeks since I lost a match, and three months since I've died. And I like it that now the posters say: "Beware the Rage of Ursula" instead of "See Ursula Bear it All." But we both know that won't last. Soon enough I'll be back to dying three times a week in the tourist shows. I mean, I've been a gladiator for thirty years now, and this isn't the first time I've been at the top, and my next fall won't be the last time I'll be at the bottom. That's just how it goes in this business.

No, of course the dying doesn't bother me. I actually find it rather cleansing. Things aren't going well, your timing gets off, or you put on a little bit of weight -- bam! -- all you have to do is die, and your body goes right back to how it was when you were first killed. Better to die than diet, as they say.

Of course, my sister Jenna thinks that the only life that counts is the one we lead before we die for the first time. She says that the Trees don't keep us from becoming undead, they just turn us into a different kind of undead. One that still has a mind, and a will. But no longer a soul. Kind of a silly revelation for her to have, really, cause we'd both died dozens of times before she'd had it. But you know, it gives her something to worry about.

The first time I died? I was sixteen. Also the second, third, fourth, and fifth time. It was a pretty good year. It started getting dangerous after that.

Where was this? Traskinham. Of course you haven't, nobody's heard of it. Nothing to hear. Maybe if you were of the Flame; it's a Temple outpost now. Wasn't when I was growing up.

No, now see, that's where you're wrong. That's a very cosmopolitan attitude you have, though I daresay if there were any templars around, you wouldn't be quite so loud about it. And believe me, there's no love lost between me and the Flamers -- they'd as soon have me cleansed for my fur as you for your pallor. But give them their due: they care. In their creepy, strait-laced, blinkered, ass-backward way, they're just doing what they think is right. They didn't enslave us, they rescued us. And no one else bothered to do that.

Do you know about the Harrowers? Well, maybe that was a local name. I guess you could call the Harrowers the local warlords, but that would make them sound too organized. I'd call them a horde of barbarians, but that would be an insult to my Northern friends. Really, they were a bunch of punks that ran a large area. But they were strong, and they'd taken control of the local Tree of Life. No, they'd taken it early on, soon after the world broke, and the heavens closed to any new souls. It had just been discovered how the Trees would tether the souls of the rejected dead, so that they would be reborn whole and pure in its branches, instead of returning as ravening spirits. So Trees were being planted all across the land to combat the plague of angry spirits. But it hadn't really occurred to anyone in Traskinham that the Tree would need protecting. We all learned soon enough. But once the Harrowers had it, there wasn't anything we could do, and no one from outside cared. Nothing worth fighting for in Traskinham.

So the Harrowers had the run of the place. They controlled the Tree, they controlled the roads, and they controlled anything else they wanted whenever they felt like it. No one could get out, because the Harrowers had the only horses, and the terrain didn't offer any cover at all, it was just grasslands and tilled fields. And just to make doubly sure, they put up what they called the Burned Zone -- an ashen strip about a half mile wide around their territory, which they patrolled constantly. That way, there was absolutely nowhere to hide.

I was just a kid when they first took over, maybe ten. They had patrols out all the time, but everyone else stayed holed up near the Tree, partying, and whenever they ran out of something, they'd set out raiding. Pretty normal looting, raping, and pillaging. Killing anyone who resisted. Oh, don't look so shocked. I was a soldier for twenty years; I know the drill. It's not like dying means anything anymore. I mean a lot of times it's more work to clean up the mess than to walk home from the Tree.

But then, I guess they figured that it was getting to be too much work. You kill a trouble-maker and let him go, and pretty soon he's back to causing trouble and you have to go out and kill him again. So they started keeping a lot of the people they killed as prisoners. And once you've started keeping prisoners, well, it's only a matter of time before you start playing with them, seeing what you can do. Then you develop a taste for it, and things really start getting ugly. It's an old old story that's happened lots more places than poor Traskinham. But in Traskinham, they had the Tree.

When I was eighteen, my parents disappeared. We never did find out what happened to them, whether they'd been captured or escaped to a better life. I'd like to think they got out, but it's not very likely they did. So it was just me and my little sister Jenna, who had just turned thirteen. We'd gotten pretty good at hiding from the patrols, and at scavenging off the land -- you couldn't really call what we were doing farming, though we tried -- so we were able to survive all right. I'd been killed and captured too many times already, so I knew what that was about, and knew that I wanted to protect Jenna from it if I could. But then we began hearing new stories.

One of the Harrowers had developed a taste for torture that was slow, methodical, and disfiguring. He called himself "The Sculptor" and he had started torturing people in ways that wouldn't kill them, but would ensure that they healed, well, badly. Yeah, some of it was scarring, but he'd also break bones and have them knit back together at bizarre angles, and do things involving surgery that I still don't believe the stories about. They say he was a healer himself, and so could make sure that his, ummm, "art" didn't die until he was ready to move on to something else. I saw some of his work, and I feel very fortunate that I never attracted his attention myself. But as horrible as his work was, for most people, if they could only manage to die, they would be reborn whole again. The Sculptor liked this--it meant that he could correct any mistakes he made along the way. But it also frustrated him, because the whole point

of his art was to do something permanent. And so he became obsessed with finding virgins -- people who had never died.

I think you can see where this is going. The day came when I sat down with Jenna, and we decided that I should kill her. Because as bad as it would be for her -- and believe me, I told her everything she could expect to have happen, and how I had gotten through it -- as horrible as it would be, it would be so much worse for her to be captured alive, and then forced to exist through all eternity as the handiwork of the Sculptor. And I still believe that. Truly I do.

So a few weeks later, I killed her. I did it as cleanly as I could, but I wasn't a warrior then, so I know that it took too long and there was too much pain. But I did the best I could. And then I cleaned up the mess, and waited for her to come back to me. And waited. And waited. When a month had passed without her coming home, I knew that it was very bad.

Finally, one hundred and two days after her death, Jenna came back, looking for all the world like she had right before I killed her. But she was nothing like she had been, of course. She told me everything that had been done to her, and she cried and I held her, and I said all the right things and she said all the right things, but that didn't make her the way she had been. It didn't make her able to sleep, or keep her from hiding at the slightest strange noise, or give her the strength to actually care about anything. Eventually the terror and the horror faded, even if it never went away.

Time passed. We dreamed of escape, but there was no escape. People had adapted to the situation, as they always seem to do, and instead of fighting against the Harrowers, most of them were trying to join up. For most of the kids life had never been any other way, so why even try to resist? That's the hell about people. We'll get used to anything.

Until finally after one too many times of taking Jenna's meals to her hiding place under the house, of looking into her haunted eyes, I decided that we were leaving. We were either going to make it out together, or we would die together. And either way, we weren't going to be separated again, and I would be there with Jenna through whatever might happen.

I know, I was young and grandiose then. We all are sometime. Jenna leapt at the idea, and just seeing the life come back into her eyes made it all worthwhile. It took a few weeks for her to be strong enough to travel, and to get all our supplies together, and in many ways those were the happiest weeks we'd had since our parents had gone. For the first time that we could remember, we had hope.

Our plan was too simple to really be called a plan. We travelled at night. On the plains, we stayed below the level of the grass, even though that meant we crawled most of the time. We burrowed into the ground like hedgehogs to sleep. We knew that our only chance was to stay invisible to the Harrowers during our journey, even if that meant it took weeks instead of days. And it all worked well enough, until we reached the Burned Zone. Once there, the only thing we could think to do was rub ashes on ourselves, in the hope that that would help hide our shiny skin, keep low, move as quickly as possible, and pray that we wouldn't be seen.

We were fifty yards from the other side when we heard the beating of the horses' hooves. I ran as fast as I could. Jenna froze and huddled on the ground. The first four horsemen just trampled her, before the fifth beheaded her with a lazy swordstroke. And so it was my duty to die too. That was the promise I had made her. We would escape together, or we would die together. And I meant to. I really did. As difficult as it was, I stopped my flight, and turned to face my doom, as I felt the rage welling up within me that we should fail when we were so close to making our escape. A rage at my entire life, and Jenna's, wasted. Rage that my baby sister should be falling again into the hands of her tormentors. Rage

at the gods for allowing this to happen at all. And as the rage expanded in my chest, I felt myself expanding too. Growing in size and strength and speed and power. Everything from that moment was a blur, until I found myself standing over the mangled bodies of five swordsmen, and two horses. I was wounded, but only a little, and I was so dazed I barely noticed. Of course, you know what happened.

It happens every day in my matches, and twice on Sundays. It's my whole act. I became a bear. But that was the first time that it had ever happened to me, and I'd had no idea that something like that was even possible -- no one had ever told me about weres. I was utterly and completely bewildered. And scared.

And happy. And that's when I should have killed myself. For Jenna. So that I could be with her. Like I'd promised. But it's one thing to let yourself be killed in battle, and something else again to actually end your own life. And when it came down to it, I just couldn't do it. Not even for Jenna.

And sure, later I came up with all kinds of reasons why that was the best choice. I mean, the Harrowers would never have let me go again, not knowing what I was. Even Jenna was safer in their power than I would have been. The Sculptor would have crafted bear shapes to his heart's content. But you know, that's not why I didn't kill myself. I didn't kill myself because I didn't want to die. I wanted to be free, and freedom was at hand. And that's really all there was to it. Damn it.

So anyway, I crossed the Burned Zone and hurried to the next town over, Padelford. It was another week of travel, during which time I learned more about being a bear. And a bit about being human. Once I got to Padelford, I realized that I had no family, no friends, and no skills -- no way to make a living. That thought had never occurred to me; I'd forgotten all about things like money. And it soon became clear that the only way I had to make any was to sell my body. So I became a mercenary, since I preferred killing to sex. As a profession, at least. I didn't know anything about fighting, but I could turn into a big strong bear, and that was a pretty good start.

Which is all there is to tell. I was a merc for twenty years, and a pretty good one, eventually. But once I found out about the Arena, I switched in a heartbeat. The hardest part about a soldier's life is the travelling, and as a gladiator I got to avoid all that, and just get straight to the fighting. Besides, we both know how glamorous the Arena is; who wouldn't want a piece of that?

Oh, Traskinham? Well, the Temple of the Flame went in and liberated it about a year after I escaped. They had a crusade going on, and Traskinham was just another town for them to save, and then rule. The prisoners were freed and the Harrowers were all put to the Flame. Justice and Divine Retribution in action. Of course, eventually some of the victims ran afoul of the Temple and had to be thoroughly cleansed, and some of the Harrowers repented and joined the Temple, but that's just how life is. It says more about power than it does about the Temple. I hear the Sculptor has become one hell of an Inquisitor.

I used to go and visit Jenna every year or two. No, she never left; she has a small feed store in town. In Traskinham, well, they understand things there that no one else does. I don't think she'd last very long around people who didn't know her. She forgave me, of course -- I think I'm the only one of her betrayers that ever apologized for it. But we don't really talk about the past any more. If we did, that would mean she'd have to think about my being a were, and as a devout Flamist, that would be hard for her.

But I think it's been ten years or so since I've been by to see her. I stopped going when I got to be too well-known to pass as human in the Temple lands. So for Jenna's sake I stay away. She doesn't need any more trouble, and anyway I don't like to go out of my way to fight templars, though it would be nice if they would return the favor. I mean, like I said before, I don't much care for the Temple myself.

But you have to make sure you hate them for the right reasons, for the things they actually do wrong, and give them due credit for the things they do right. It's only fair.

Myself, I mostly feel sorry for them. Jenna goes to the Temple every morning -- every morning, mind you -- because she just can't keep her mind pure enough to suit her. Last time I was there I went with her, and listened to her wail and moan and plead until the local Inquisitor relented and agreed to turn the Flame on her and cleanse her sin away once again. I watched as the Holy Flame engulfed her body and I watched as Jenna exulted in the agony of purification. And I saw the look in the Inquisitor's eyes as he followed through on their daily ritual -- channeling the Flame, and dropping it again when it became clear that she felt he had done enough.

And you know, all we can ask for in life is the strength to bear our appointed burdens. Mine may be quite heavy, but after this long beneath it I know its heft, and that I will not fall. But the weight I saw in that Inquisitor's eyes? It is more than I would have the strength to bear.

Desiree and Me by Susan Tsui

I remember my first moment as Desiree very clearly. I was standing in the shadows behind the left-most door of my high-school, peering out its window at the crowd of exiting students and waiting parents. The real Desiree had told me her mother would be the first picture in the photo album she'd given me. I glanced down quickly at the wallet-sized image cradled in the palm of my hand and began scanning the crowd for a matching face. I finally spotted her waiting beside a parked sedan. She was leaning against the side of the car, her arms crossed in front of her. She was beautiful; she looked like everything a mother should be. Her red hair was in complete disarray, and she wore a simple floral dress. I wondered if she smelled like home-baked cookies.

Clutching several textbooks tightly to my chest to still the shaking of my hands, I bounded down the steps to meet her for the first time. "Hey sweetie," she said. "How was school today?" She reached out a hand and ruffled my hair. Without meaning to I froze. Did Desiree normally let her mom do that, or would she have pulled away with a protest of, awww mom?

My new mother looked at me with a slightly puzzled expression. I tried to remain calm and control my breathing, reminding myself that as far as anyone was concerned I looked just like Desiree now. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

I gave her my best embarrassed smile. "Just a stupid boy," I said.

There was a sudden twinkle in her eyes. "Oh, Paul what's-his-face, isn't it?"

"Yeah, he's a big, dumb jerk."

"At some point every boy is, but don't tell your father that." She opened the side door for me and patted my shoulder gently. I breathed a sigh of relief. First hurdle down; just the rest of my life to go.

#

The first week in my new home I sent regular e-mails to the real Desiree, one at the end of every day. I told her how her family was doing, what I did during the day, who was doing what at school, and so on. I had been in all of her classes, which made the swap a little easier.

I even told the real Desiree a little bit about how I felt, how grateful I was that she had given up her life for me. I knew she was getting something out of this too, her freedom and independence and a chance to live the way she wanted to without curfews and rules, but I couldn't shake the sense that I was the one who had won the jackpot. I was the kid who finally had a family, and thank you so much Desiree for giving that to me. You have no idea what it feels like to jump from foster home to foster home to foster home.

At the end of that first week, Desiree finally sent me a reply. It basically told me to shut up and leave her alone unless I had any questions. She didn't want anyone to find her. I stopped sending updates.

I could tell I wasn't being entirely successful at playing Desiree. There were moments when Mom and Dad would say something and look at me expectantly. I would shrug or remain silent, unsure of how to respond. I found myself trying to pay careful attention at all times to every word spoken, hoping the context of the conversations would help me out.

I was immensely grateful Desiree didn't have any siblings. I think someone that close to me and more in my age group could have easily exposed me. I was already having trouble with some of Desiree's friends. For one thing, I didn't really like any of them. I found them fairly shallow and off-putting. They were constantly making vague references to things I didn't always get. Whenever they noticed I was being weird, I pinned it on my lame parents. For the most part that seemed to work. I would still get the occasional frown or side-long glance though.

It didn't help that I missed my old friends. Several times I walked by them or paused to listen in on their conversations. I learned that someone called the cops when I disappeared. People talked about how it seemed I had run off, though some people still thought I had been kidnapped. I heard that the police interviewed my foster parents. In class, the teachers tried not to talk about my disappearance much, but I could see how worried they were. Some of them, anyway.

After a few weeks, they seemed to forget me, to forget that I had ever existed, and life moved on. There was only the Desiree I was pretending to be. It hurt to realize exactly how little the real me had mattered. In a way it was a reminder that I was better off now than I had been before; I had a family now. That was something I wouldn't give up for the world. Still, for a very long time, I felt very much alone. It seemed like I was the only one who really missed me.

Then a little over a month into being Desiree, Mom came into my bedroom while I was doing homework on my computer. Usually she knocked, but this time she just sort of tiptoed in, like she had something to say but was afraid of disturbing me. I thought, uh oh, the gig is up. I tried to pretend she wasn't there. Finally she cleared her throat, and I had to notice her. "Your father and I noticed you stopped smoking recently."

My eyes grew wide in shock. Desiree was a smoker. Damn it, why hadn't she told me? I wasn't particularly fond of the idea, but I would have done it if I had to.

Mom mistook the expression on my face. "I know you think we don't know these things," she said. "But, honey, the smell was a little bit hard to hide no matter how much gum you chewed or how often you did your laundry. That smell stuck around, and it's not like we didn't empty your trash. You can wrap the pot up in as many paper towels as you want. It doesn't work."

I could feel my eyes widen further at the word pot. I couldn't help it. She gave me a little squeeze. "We meant to talk to you about it, but we never knew how. I'm just so glad that you stopped on your own. We're proud of you."

I muttered a thanks and turned quickly back to my homework. I knew my face was all red. I didn't bother hiding it, hoping that she would just mistake the expression for extreme embarrassment or something and leave. When she finally did, I stopped typing and just stared at my computer screen. Desiree smoked pot. I was such an idiot. I had thought the smell was incense and even gone out of my way to purchase some. No wonder I hadn't been able to get the smell right.

I lay in bed that night thinking over what Mom had said to me. She and Dad were proud. Those words gave me a little tingle of pleasure along my spine. All this time I had been trying my best to be just like Desiree, exactly like Desiree, so no one would notice how different we were or how lame and unlovable I actually was. I was now better than her in my new parents eyes. I didn't need to be just like Desiree anymore.

The changes didn't happen all at once. I didn't want people to think Desiree had suddenly lost a screw in her head. I started out tiny at first. I took Desiree's clothes and separated them out into things I liked and things I didn't like. I did the same with her books, her music collection, and her dvds. I gradually got rid of the stuff I thought was junk a little bit at a time and bought other stuff to cover up my efforts until I had replaced almost everything.

At first Mom and Dad complained about how much of my allowance I was suddenly spending on frivolous items. That scared me for a week, and I almost stopped, but I knew I couldn't hide in their former daughter's shadow forever. I would need to be me someday. Eventually the scoldings stopped to be replaced by thoughtful expressions of consideration. One day, I found my allowance had increased. I couldn't figure out why until I realized the majority of the clothes I was tossing out were black, not only black but thin, small, and too tight. I felt naked going down the school halls in those outfits, and I never enjoyed it when some of the guys smirked at me. I'd known too many sicko boys in my time. My replacement outfits were longer skirts of brighter colors and pullover sweaters, the kind of dorky things I imagined kids in loving families wore on old sitcoms. The kind of things I used to picture myself in whenever I imagined finally being adopted and living with a real family. I remember smiling at the sudden insight into my raise. Again, I was proving myself better than Desiree.

From that realization on it didn't take me long to start getting great grades in school, join a plethora of clubs, dump some of Desiree's old friends for some new improved models, and start helping out more around the house. Becoming better than Desiree was now an obsession. I didn't need to prove to anyone that I was better than her; I knew I was better than her. I just didn't have anyone to gloat to but myself and trying to excel at everything was my way of gloating tons.

#

One Saturday afternoon I came home from a sleepover at my friend Chrissy's to find several police officers in the living room. They were standing around the coffee table looking slightly uncomfortable and staring at my parents who were weeping and clutching at each other on the sofa. Before I could start to panic, Mom and Dad were off the sofa and squeezing me in giant bear hugs. At first I thought they were trying to hold me prisoner so the police could haul me away and bring back their real daughter, but captors don't normally repeat over and over again that they're so glad you're alive. "What's going on?" I finally asked.

"They found some girl, honey. They thought it was you, but it wasn't," Dad said.

"Found?" I asked. The police officers were staring at me, slightly opened mouthed as if in disbelief themselves. I could feel my skin beginning to crawl, and my hands started to shake. "What do you mean by found?"

"It doesn't matter," Mom said. "You're safe, and you're sound, and you're home." She pets my head. "My sweet Desiree."

The police apologized profusely before leaving. Something about dental records can be fallible. The girl apparently also had part of a student id from my school. They admitted the photo in the id had been burned away. My parents accepted the apologies, saying they understood, but their voices were cold and held a touch of scorn, just enough to make me feel guilty.

"How did she die?" I asked once the officers were gone.

"Oh, honey," Mom said.

"I want to know."

My parents shared a look, debating what to tell me.

"There was a fire at a motel," Dad said. "Poor girl had an overdose of something and passed out while smoking."

No wonder the police officers so easily thought they were wrong about Desiree dying. She must have burned beyond recognition.

Mom gives me a kiss on the cheek. "I'm sorry you had to come in on us crying like babies. We should have realized you would never do anything so stupid."

I wanted to throw up. I dashed upstairs to my bedroom before anyone could say anything else.

Dinner was a quiet affair. Mom and Dad seemed to notice that I didn't really want to talk. For that I was grateful. It wasn't until dessert was almost over that someone finally spoke. "We're sorry," Mom said.

"For?" I took the piece of cheesecake on my fork and smeared it all over the edge of my plate.

"What your mother is trying to say is that we should have trusted you. We should have known better than to think you could be irresponsible enough to do drugs and end up with some boy at a strange motel when you told us you were going to Chrissy's."

I dropped my fork and put my hands over my ears. I didn't want to hear this. Didn't they realize this was their real daughter they were bad mouthing? Their dead daughter. The wonderful troubled girl who ran away from home and gave me a chance at having a real family.

"It's just that you used to do a lot of questionable things, and we were never quite sure what you were going to do next. We should have known better; you've changed so much in the past year. You've finally gotten your priorities straight," Mom said. "Don't let your parents' stupid insecurities ruin that for you."

"Will you forgive us?" Dad asked.

"It's fine," I said. I didn't know what else to say to them to make them shut up, to make them realize they were mistaken about why I was upset. I couldn't explain. I couldn't tell them their real daughter was dead, and that I was an imposter sitting in their living room eating their homemade cheesecake. "Can we just not talk about this anymore?"

I laid in bed that night and thought about all the horrible things Mom and Dad had said about Desiree without even really meaning to say them. They think I'm better than her. For once the thought left a sour taste in my mouth. They never helped her. They never knew what a good person she was. They never took the time to care. They just wanted to change her, reshape her like clay and stick her in a

mold that would have transformed her into their version of the perfectly well-behaved little girl.

I wished I wasn't in Desiree's home. I wished that Desiree had never come up to me and told me she knew my secret and would I like to trade places with her. I wished a lot of things. What I wished for most of all during that moment in time was that Desiree could get a proper funeral, with her parents there to wish her good-bye and to tell her how much they had really loved her.

It was a little past three in the morning when I got up to go to the bathroom. I locked the door and turned to face the mirror. I watched my face and body shift and change like warped plastic until all traces of Desiree disappeared, and it was just me standing in light blue, floral printed pajamas. I pushed aside a strand of wispy black hair and blinked black eyes. It was the first time in months since I had seen myself. The face in the mirror was now a stranger to me. "Hello," I whispered. I wasn't entirely certain who I was talking to, me or Desiree.

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The day of the funeral was sunny. I wasn't certain how to take that. I found myself somewhat offended on Desiree's behalf. Mom and Dad were standing beside me, looking a little uncertain. I had told them some story about how I looked back on my life and realized this girl could have been me and how sad it was that she didn't have anybody. They had murmured words of understanding, but it was obvious just looking at their uncomfortable stances that they didn't really understand. They were only here because it was important to me. I told myself that since they thought I was Desiree they were really here because they thought it was important to her. Either way, they were here. That was the least I could do for the girl who had given up her life for me.

As the years have passed, I have considered telling Mom and Dad the truth. I'm not who you think I am. I'm not your Desiree. She died at the age of sixteen, and you went to her funeral with me on a clear September morning. Do you remember when I put the lilies on her grave? Sometimes in my fantasies I'm selfish, and they tell me that they love me anyway. Sometimes I have nightmares in which they tell me to get out and call me a shape-shifting monster and murderer. Most of the time I just look at them and see the utter devastation and confusion they would experience if they were to ever know that their little baby was really dead. They've said things about the dead druggie in the motel that they can't take back. They've praised me over my improvements enough that I can speculate about how guilty they'll feel for never realizing the truth. I haven't told them yet. I seriously doubt I ever will; I don't think I possess the courage.

I'm twenty-nine now. I'm married, and I'm going to have my first child in about four months. I am hopeful the baby will look more like my husband than me, but I try not to worry about it. I try to ignore the nightmares I have that my parents will see my new boy or girl and start pointing fingers at me demanding to know who or what I am- or thinking I had an affair. If that happens, then it happens- there's not much I can do about it.

I stopped trying to be just like Desiree a long time ago. I don't even try to pretend that I am Desiree anymore, and I don't want to go back to pretending. I still answer to her name, but I don't fake what she remembers or try to laugh at her jokes or wonder what to say so I'll sound a little more like her. I've lived enough of an adult life by now to relax beyond changing my wardrobe and my music collection. I feel a little guilty about that on occasion, like I've sort of left the real Desiree all alone. It's bad enough sometimes that I think I stole her life; it doesn't matter if switching places was her idea or not.

Then I'll go home to visit Mom and Dad, and they'll sweep me in their arms and hug me. They'll sit me and my husband down and show kiddie pictures of Desiree and talk about what a darling five-year old

she used to be whenever she ran around in that pink dress with the bows all over, all the while thinking they are talking about me and apologizing for embarrassing me and being unable to help themselves. I always tell them I don't mind, and I really don't because thinking about them reminiscing about her helps me sleep at night. Desiree's not really gone after all.

A Mother's Dilemma by Jasmin Nanda

Shammi lay sobbing quietly on the bed as her husband Ravi snored merrily on the other side. In between them, their only daughter Bobby slept peacefully. It was past midnight but Shammi was awake; sleep eluded her for the third night consecutively.

Her hand caressed the back of Bobby: her daughter, her darling daughter, her only daughter. Her tears flowed again and dampened the already wet pillow. A sigh escaped her lips as she remembered it all.

Bobby had been the centre of her little universe for the past five years. She doted on her lovely girl. Bobby too loved her mum very much, never letting her go out of her sight and clinging to her constantly.

Her relatives and friends envied Shammi, as Bobby was the cutest of all the kids. However, it could not be said the same, of Shammi and Ravi. Shammi was fat and short. Her nose was the most visible part of her big round brown face, full of pimples. Ravi was tall but heavy and seemed intimidating, he looked a bit pleasanter than his wife did, however.

She still remembered the day Bobby was born. The baby was cute, cuddly, as fair as snow, and as lovely as a Lily. Shammi and Ravi were awestruck at her beauty and astounded that she resembled none of the members of the family. They adored her and soon she was the most loved child in the extended family and their neighborhood.

Everybody wanted to carry Bobby around, take her for little walks, or just play with her. However, Shammi was very possessive about Bobby and never let her out of her sight. Even Ravi used to rush home from work to play with his little angel. He just loved the way she lisped and laughed when he tickled her wobbly tummy. They were a happy little family. Shammi longed for a baby boy but Ravi did not want another child in the family as it would take the limelight away from Bobby, their darling daughter.

They had a lovely home in a posh locality in a city in Northern India, a double storey, three bedroom flat with a small well kept lawn in the front. The rooms were small but were tastefully furnished. Shammi loved home-keeping and looking after her family. She was a graduate but since Ravi had a flourishing business of readymade garments, she never felt the need to work.

However of late she had noticed strange behavior of Bobby. She would keep staring at the house, the members of the family and not respond to them the way she always used to.

Shammi and Ravi celebrated her birthday every year, in a lavish manner, throwing parties for relatives and friends, which Bobby thoroughly enjoyed. She was fond of gifts, which consisted mainly of dolls and pretty dresses for her. Her room was full of dolls of all kinds and plenty of teddy bears, toys, and dainty dresses.

However, all these things had lost their flavor for Bobby. She had started throwing tantrums on the slightest pretexts; refused food and even the sweets, which she used to love so much. The house, which

earlier reverberated with her spontaneous laughter, was now full of wails and cries. Bobby was losing weight and the glow on her face had faded. She looked like a withering Lily.

Shammi and Ravi were worried to death by her falling health. They took her to numerous doctors and soothsayers. However, nothing seemed to help. Finally, they had given up trying, on the advice of the family elders. Bobby started recovering of her own but she was a changed child. She remained detached from her parents and wandered around the house like a zombie. Her parents just watched her behavior closely but allowed her to do as she wished. This strategy worked and Bobby looked more pacified than before.

Her most recent birthday, few weeks before, was not a grand affair as usual, but a low-key celebration with close family and friends. The elders in the family had wished for it to be so since, as they thought, Bobby was a victim of the evil eye of envious people due to lavish parties and her glowing beauty. Shammi and Ravi too thought the same. However, the small birthday cake and fewer gifts still upset Bobby. She was now old enough to register her protests and show her resentments. Her pout destroyed the mirth of her parents but they kept smiling to entertain the guests.

The volcano burst when the party was over and the guests had left. Ravi had gone out to work. It was nearly dusk and Shammi was clearing up the drawing room. Bobby stomped in angrily and threw the gifts on the floor. Shammi was shocked to see Bobby in a new avatar. Shammi recoiled in fear when she went ahead and picked Bobby up in her arms. Her eyes were glowing with anger and the face was red. Shammi could hardly recognize her daughter. Bobby growled in a heavy voice in such a manner that Shammi inadvertently dropped her on the floor. Bobby got up and ran towards the living room. Shammi followed her and caught her hand from behind.

Bobby growled again, "Who are you to touch me?"

Shammi left her little hand and stood numbed with shock at the question.

She swallowed her pride and said, "I am your mom, Bobby."

Bobby looked at her quizzically and growled, "You are not my mama, who are you and why am I here?"

Shammi was now shaking with fear. Her heart beat loudly and she felt dizzy. She took support of the chair nearby and moved closer to Bobby.

"Bobby darling, stop playing games, you are scaring me now. Come to mom."

Bobby stood stony faced and said in a monotone as if in a trance, "This is not my house and you are not my mama. Take me to my mama and papa."

Shammi was now totally devastated. She wanted to call Ravi home, but she felt too weak to move. She slumped on the chair. Her body shook in horror as she watched her daughter transform into a stranger. Bobby had always called Ravi her 'daddy' and never 'papa'. Moreover, she called Shammi her mom, and never 'mama.' She felt so grief stricken and lonely. It was cold and dark outside and she was yet to switch on the full lights of the house. The single, yellow bulb, on in the drawing room, lent a strange eerie light to other dark rooms. Bobby still stood defiantly before her.

Shammi said a little prayer to Goddess Durga, the Hindu goddess of strength. She felt strangely empowered and got up and switched on the lights of the house. Bobby looked a bit more calmed than before and was now out of trance. She looked tired and vulnerable. Shammi tiptoed towards her and picked Bobby up. Bobby did not resist and collapsed in her arms. Shammi heaved a sigh of relief, took

her to the bedroom, and put her on the bed. She quickly prepared warm sweet milk, poured it into the feeder, and sat besides her daughter. Bobby looked so weak and like her own daughter again. She took her in her lap and started feeding her. Bobby quickly finished the milk and lay sleepily in her arms. Shammi stroked her for a while and then put her back on the bed, and covered her with a light blanket. It was late October and the evenings were getting colder gradually.

Shammi lay against the bedpost, staring at the ceiling, going through the events of some minutes before. The revelation scared her. Some evil spirit possessed her daughter. Shammi looked around in fear, closed her eyes, and said a small prayer. Just then, the doorbell rang.

Shammi rushed towards the window and saw Ravi, standing, happy and humming a song. Shammi rushed to open the door and hugged Ravi as he entered the room.

Ravi was taken aback by the sudden show of affection. Her face looked pale, as if she had seen a ghost.

"What happened? Is everything all right? Where is Bobby?"

Shammi just could not bring herself up to narrate the recent events regarding Bobby. She did not want to upset the buoyant mood of her husband and scare him. Maybe, Bobby was just too tired and angry and that is why she behaved in such a peculiar manner. She let the matter rest and hugged him again.

"Oh, I am just too tired and Bobby is sleeping, she had some milk, a while before. Should I make some coffee for you?" she turned her face away as she collected the things from the sofa and sauntered towards the kitchen.

Ravi nodded as he sat on the bed and stroked the brown curly hair of his darling daughter. He bent and kissed the sleeping child, unaware of the storm that had visited his sweet home shortly before.

Shammi was soon back, with two coffee mugs. Her hand shook as she handed over the coffee mug to Ravi. Ravi was quick to note it, shifted aside, and made a place for Shammi to sit on the bed. She was reluctant, though, as she was not sure if she could camouflage her true feelings. However, saying no to Ravi could make matters worse. Therefore, she sat near him and clicked on the television with a remote control to watch their favorite serial. The loud sound disturbed Bobby, and she moved in sleep. Ravi wanted to wake her up, but Shammi quickly went over and stroked her back to sleep. She was too scared of her daughter now. Ravi observed Shammi, and asked if anything was the matter. She assured him that everything was fine. They had a quiet dinner and went off to sleep.

Shammi, however, lay awake. Her mind was in turmoil as she thought of Bobby. By early morning, however, she was snoring in harmony with her husband.

Ravi had gone to work, by the time Shammi woke up. Bobby was all washed up and dressed for the day. Shammi looked at the clock; it was nearly ten in the morning. She rushed to the living room in confusion. Bobby was playing with her dolls as she had missed her school. Shammi gathered Bobby in her arms and showered her with kisses, as her tears flowed incessantly. Bobby looked at her mom in surprise.

Shammi hugged her tight and murmured, "You are my daughter, my daughter!"

She took her to the kitchen and gave her warm milk and cereals. Bobby sat on her favorite red chair, in the kitchen, as Shammi went about making tea for herself. The events of the past day were still clear in her memory but Bobby's normal behavior allayed her fears.

The day passed peacefully, though fear lurked in Shammi's mind. She had a premonition that it was a lull before the storm. Ravi was back in the evening and was relieved to find his wife and daughter in a

good mood. He playfully teased Bobby, as Shammi got up to make coffee for him. Bobby laughed hysterically, as Ravi made faces and noises like clowns. Just then, he bowed and produced the most beautiful, talking Japanese doll for his angel. Bobby shrieked in joy and ran to her mother, to show her the doll. Ravi stood happily, as Shammi smiled at her daughter's antics. She tried to be happy but something had snapped inside her. She was in a melancholic mood and feared all would be over soon.

She sighed and brushed her dark thoughts aside, said a quick prayer to her deity and joined her daughter and husband in their childish play.

She slept well that night with her hand resting protectively on Bobby. She got up early and attended to Ravi and Bobby. However, Bobby looked a bit off color; therefore, Shammi did not send her to school.

Shammi kept a watchful eye on Bobby as she played with her Barbie dolls. She looked normal, much to her relief. Shammi made sweet rice porridge for Bobby- her favorite. She garnished it with blanched almonds and raisins. She poured it in a bright red bowl with a matching spoon and took it to Bobby.

"Here, Bobby, your favorite porridge."

Shammi took a spoonful and Bobby took it in her mouth as she played happily.

Suddenly, Bobby grimaced and spit the porridge out spitefully. Her face was glowing with anger again.

Shammi panicked and sat down on the marble floor. Her heart was pound and she breathed hard.

"You don't even know how to make a porridge! My mama made a delicious porridge. Where is my mama? Why have you brought me here?" and Bobby shook in anger.

Shammi stared at Bobby in disbelief and horror.

Shammi bleated with rare courage, "Who is your mama, Bobby?"

"I am not Bobby, I am Sunny, a boy, and Sonia is my mama." Bobby spoke in a trance.

Shammi felt giddy and shrieked in horror.

There were voices and sprinkles of cold water on her face, which brought Shammi to consciousness. All around her were her house cleaner, mother-in-law, and sister-in-law. She was on her bed and Bobby was sitting on the couch, munching a red apple. Soon, Ravi rushed in too. Shammi realized that her loud shriek had attracted the attention of the women in the family, while she lay unconscious thereafter.

Ravi enquired about the events from his mother. She told that they had rushed to the kitchen, after hearing Shammi shriek, but they found her unconscious on the floor as Bobby sat in her chair quietly.

Ravi sat besides Shammi and stroked her forehead. Shammi lay quietly, not knowing whether to reveal the reason or not. Ravi fixed an appointment with the family doctor and took Shammi for a thorough check up.

The doctor examined her and said, "Nothing is wrong with her, she is just under stress. However, she does need to reduce her weight. I will prescribe some medicines for fifteen days. However, she needs mental rest."

Ravi drove her back home in their car. Shammi sat quietly next to him, looking away from him, towards the trees running past their car. 'How life runs past, like these trees!' mused Shammi to herself.

Back home, all were waiting for them. Bobby came running to her and clung to her legs. Shammi did not know how to respond to her affection. She feared the emergence of Sunny, the boy, questioning her very existence. She did not want to lose her only beloved child. Moreover, revealing their dark secret

would only create chaos in their harmonious life. Thinking thus, she picked up Bobby and took her to her room. Ravi told his family about the doctor's findings and cautioned them to give complete rest to Shammi. There were a few whispers as Ravi followed his wife and daughter. Soon the family retired to their quarters as Ravi took charge of the kitchen and made milk for Bobby and coffee for themselves.

Ravi's mother prepared the lunch, as Shammi slept under the effect of medication. She felt drowsy the whole day. After dinner with the extended family, they retired to their room. Bobby was already asleep and Ravi too went off to sleep.

And here Shammi was sobbing now, in the pillow, as she dwelled upon the identity of her child.

The medication did elevate her mood and she felt in control but her fears remained the same. She tried her best to appease Bobby, so as not to arouse her inner demon, which she hated now. She dared not share her anxieties with anyone. Bobby was normal for a couple of days, which comforted Shammi.

However, a week later, the inevitable happened.

Ravi, Shammi, their parents, and other family members had gathered for the birthday party of Ravi's nephew, Deepak, in their living room, on the ground floor. It was decorated with balloons and streamers. Deepak was younger than Bobby was and was the centre of attraction, being a birthday boy. Little Bobby just could not tolerate this shift of limelight from her to him.

Deepak was wearing a mini three-piece suit, gifted to him by his maternal grandparents. He blew the candles on the lovely cake as his mum helped him cut the cake. There was a loud applause as filmy music blared on the music system. Deepak beamed as his grandfather lifted him up in the air and others clapped in cheer.

Bobby, standing in a corner, a little away from Shammi, went into her trance. She was growing angry at every cheer. Suddenly, she could take it no longer and started throwing gifts lying on the table onto the floor. Her face was red and teeth clenched. Shammi felt shattered, as she knew what lay ahead. She held her husband's hand tightly as she waited for the wretched moment, beyond her control.

Bobby's grandparents ran towards her, as hush fell on the party. There was a commotion, and the old couple tried in vain to stop Bobby from hurling the things at others.

The loud noise of a slap on the tender cheek of Bobby, from her grandfather, sent the room into a stony silence. It was as if the time had stopped in its tracks. Ravi looked at his father dumbfounded as Shammi clasped her head and collapsed in the chair.

Bobby stood defiantly facing the old man, as she growled like a hurt and caged animal.

She shouted at the top of her voice, "Who are you? Why did you slap me? I will tell Ashok papa and my dadaji (paternal grandfather). Where is my Sonia mama? Why have you kept me here? I want to go back to my parents."

It was as if a volcano had exploded. The family stood stunned looking at the little angry girl.

Shammi wept copiously as Ravi understood the real reason of her illness. He looked pale and haggard as he supported himself against the wall. The old couple was the worst hit. They had to be escorted out of the room.

The party was over; instead, a pall of gloom descended on the house. The guests whispered among themselves and left the house, in a state of disbelief.

Bobby was a bit pacified. She sat on the floor crying loudly. Her uncle picked her up and took her to

the room of her grandparents. They held her tenderly and stroked her head. Soon, Ravi and Shammi, too, joined them.

There was a noisy family discussion as all pitched in to tell the reason of Bobby's weird behavior. Some called it the effect of evil spirits; others called it possession by the demons.

However, Ravi's father asked for silence and said something, which devastated Ravi and Shammi.

"The actual fact is that our Bobby is in an identity crisis. She has remembered her previous birth. This is her rebirth, in our family. I know of such cases in our ancestral village. Bobby is in dilemma, she wants to go to her parents of her previous birth as a boy Sunny. She does not recognize Shammi and Ravi as her real parents and us as her extended family. For her, Sonia and Ashok are her real parents!"

There was a fearful silence as all listened in rapt attention. Nobody had a clue about how to deal with Bobby.

"We must show her to a psychiatrist." Bobby's uncle suggested.

Ravi shook his head vehemently.

"We can take her to a sorcerer. They know how to evict demons," Ravi's old aunt chipped in.

Ravi's mother frowned at her and said, "she is not possessed!"

"Then what is the solution dad?" Ravi asked his father.

"Well in our village, they had taken the boy to the village of his previous birth, and met with his ex-parents. They verified the events narrated by the child and were overjoyed to meet their young daughter, now in the re-incarnation of a boy. It was difficult initially for both the families to accept the new relations in opposite sexes and age, but gradually both the families came closer and forged a bond. The boy used to live with his old and new parents, in turn, though he was more close to the parents of his previous birth as he had more memories and love to share with them, than with the new family of his present birth."

All listened with interest about the story of rebirth but nobody took notice of Shammi, sobbing quietly in a corner of the room. Her sobs attracted their attention towards her.

Ravi went up to her, hugged her lightly, and brought her nearer.

"Nobody is asking the mother of the child, about how she feels, broken by this all," and her sobs intensified.

Ravi held her close and kissed her hair and said, "Shammi we all are facing a similar turmoil, and know what you feel as a mother. What do you want to say?"

Shammi, cleared her stuffy nose and throat and said, "Nobody, will ever, broach this subject again and never ever think of contacting her ex-parents. That was past. Now the present is that, I am her mother, Ravi is the father, and I gave birth to her. Nobody can dispute this. Legally, she is my daughter and I will never allow her to meet her relatives of previous birth. They have no right on her."

Nobody stirred, and sat reflecting on the peculiar issue.

Ravi's father broke the silence, "Shammi, you have the right over her body, but what remembers the previous birth, is her soul, over which you have no right. Soul is immortal and never dies. It collects all the memories of previous births but forgets about them in a new birth. However, in rare cases, sometimes due to unnatural deaths, the soul remembers all until the age of five, which is the age of our

Bobby. Moreover, I find no harm in contacting with her old relatives..."

Shammi rose in defense like hurt tigress, and picked up the sleeping child, "Nobody is going to contact anyone," and ran towards her bedroom as Ravi followed her.

"But dad, we do not know anything about her ex-parents, how will we find them?" Ravi's brother asked.

The old man kept mum.

Shammi sobbed as Ravi assured her that nobody would contact the old parents. Ravi too was shattered by the turn of events and felt helpless.

A few days later, as all sat in the living room, Bobby got up and said, "I want to go to my parents' house. This house is so small. We have a big bungalow number 7, at Chandigarh. There is a huge lawn. We have a big car."

Her revelation of previous birth, without getting angry stunned all. Her grandfather affectionately took her in his lap and said, "Well that sounds very good. Tell us more about yourself."

Shammi rose to take Bobby, but her father-in-law signaled her to stop.

Bobby sat quietly, playing with teddy bears, as all waited for further revelations.

"I have a big room full of toys, guns, and cars. My papa is a doctor. My dada ji loves me very much. My name is Sunny and I am in seventh grade. A priest comes at our house on my birthday and puts a tilak(vermilion) on my forehead. We do not cut birthday cakes."

All looked at her in awe. Shammi looked quietly at her, not knowing how to respond.

"How did you come here?" Ravi's father asked gently.

"I do not know. I had gone out on the road to play. When I came back, I was in your house. Who brought me here?" Bobby questioned innocently.

The innocent revelation melted all hearts. All were in tears, as they realized how Bobby must have been feeling. How terribly the parents must be missing their Sunny. It was a queer case with many emotions and relations of past and present, involved.

Bobby stood wondering, looking at the faces awash with tears.

"Will you take me to my parents? I miss them so much. They must be waiting for me. I have never been away from home for so long." Bobby's voice seemed more mature than her five years.

This was certainly someone other than Bobby who was addressing them. A hush fell, as they understood the gravity of the situation.

Shammi burst into tears again. She felt so empty and barren. She felt childless, as her own blood, her daughter disowned her and longed for her parents of another time.

Destiny was so cruel to her. Everybody has a past but nobody remembers, that is the way God has made it. Otherwise, there will be chaos in the world, as all old relations of numerous births pop up to create confusion.

Shammi understood the dilemma Bobby was facing. However, her maternal instinct overtook her sympathy for Bobby alias Sunny. She loved her too much to let her go to her old parents.

The only way she thought was to give Bobby time to forget her past birth, as she grew up and start a

new life as her daughter Bobby. The family agreed as Time heals fast and sure.

They assured Bobby that they would take her to her parents soon. Meanwhile they decided not to broach the subject again and keep her happy and busy in play and studies as before.

Gradually the past memories would fade as Bobby would adjust with them and fall in love with them again, as before.

However, Shammi would never forget and a dilemma will always remain -- whether she did the right thing by not allowing Bobby to return to her parents of the past birth.

Contributor Biographies

Kenna Greer

Kenna Greer used to own a bookstore, is passable in reading and writing Mandarin (but has an accent so atrocious that some listeners have been left in tears), and holds an undergrad degree once voted one of the top five most useless degrees ever. However, mentioning her coursework in an interview once prompted the interviewer to ask for an explanation of Heideggerian Existentialism, so the author likes to think her studies were vindicated.

Phoebe Harris

In a former life, Phoebe Harris was a Clarion West graduate, a CPA, and a sword-wielding father of two. In this life, surprisingly, she finds that very little has changed, though the swords are smaller now. This is her first publication.

Susan Tsui

Susan Tsui is currently working on an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Goddard College. She is a former recipient of the Eugene M. Lang Scholarship and has been writing on and off for most of her life.

Jasmin Nanda

Jasmin Nanda is a dentist from Amritsar, India. She loves story telling. She writes articles on Helium.com, Howtodothings.com, Storiesthatlift.com, 4Indianwoman.com and is a runner-up in the Olympic poetry contest held by Radio Netherlands and Radio Henan (China). She loves reacting to great programs on Radio Netherlands on their website: www.rnw.nl, her daily addiction.