

Spring sprang forth, Juni-Q thought. From disastrous nothing, towards calamitous reckoning. On the ocean, a Life adrift found Wind and set a course.

Before that, though-

1. Escaping the stale bedroom

Juni-Q was traveling by train to San Francisco, where she would spend Spring Break with her beloved best friend Flenner. She tried to be nonchalant, but self-consciously darted her eyes around the station anyway like a sparrow with something to hide.

Nobody looked at Juni-Q. Everyone in the train station buried their noses in their phones.

Juni-Q was often pinned by a glance, whether from the scornful body-elitists who razed the land, a tsk-ing relative, or the occasional desirous lurker, usually a perv geezer. Looks, looks, looks.

Nobody's looking because they think I'm fat.

Only one in Juni-Q's life had gone beyond gazing. Dean Fogle had dug his hands into her belly, rolling and pulling, smiling. She didn't like the empty masochism of thinking about Dean.

Seeing herself on the security camera feed, Juni-Q's triangular face hinted at her Japanese ancestry and said more than she herself knew about it. Her mother had been deposited in an Escondido orphanage by an unknown figure, and Juni-Q only knew the story through the mirror's tale of vaguely Japanese eyes decorated with Caucasian freckles.

She paid for her ticket, quickly putting her card back in her wallet.

“Enjoy your trip, Juniper!” the cheerful teller said.

Juniper Quinten was “Juni-Q” in the minds of all within about one fucking second after hearing her full name.

She sometimes wished her name were closer to the Welsh original, Guinevere. *Goddamn that's a pretty name, Guinevere*, she daydreamed. “Juni-Q” was only cute as hell, like her. It didn’t wreck her game, there were other culprits for that damage, but she wasn’t always pleased to be without any alternatives. Still, she didn’t know what else to do about it. If she insisted on Juniper, people would just call her Juniper Berries. Or mangle it into Jupiter. Or merely Juniper, the absolute worst.

*Oh have you, have you, have you seen Jupiter?
No, I have only seen the moon of Juniper*

She found that the nomenclature “Juni-Q” forced a certain aura upon her. One of girlishness, but also resourcefulness. She envisioned the anime version of herself in schoolgirl clothes fighting demons. *Don't worry, Takeda-san, Juni-Q has this handled. Packing any good meat down there, Takeda-san? Don't worry if you don't know how to use it, Takeda-san. Juni-Q always saves the day.*

She imagined Takeda-san to be very appealing. She googled hot Japanese guys and they all looked prettier than her. Now Toshiro Mifune, that was a hairy, sweaty, burly man’s man, and if he ever came back from the dead he had first dibs on Juni-Q’s velvet. She was not into mere boys.

San Francisco called to her.

Soon, and please let something be different.

Juni-Q sat tightly in the corner of the train station, looking at her smartphone. She flipped through her social media feed, liking a thinkpiece on Kieślowski’s *Three Colours Trilogy*, Harajuku girl shopping sites, science news, and a listicle titled “*Heaven’s Gate* and 50 other film flops.” She went incognito and googled Dean Fogle.

Dean Fogle: Born 1873, died 1931, nope. Dean Fogle: “See Dean’s stats playing for the University of Colorado basketball team.” Nae-that-be-not-it. Down the row of Deans, she tried the News Index, then last-resorted to

Images. A fat old man; a young moron in sunglasses with black-and-white skin under a bright red beanie. Old women, young women, an actress named Jennifer Fogle, the trail was dead by the end of the first row. Then his face, dopey and amoral.

“You dick.” *Ob, well.* It wasn’t a terrible loss. Dean had been practice. She got a little warm thinking of him; it didn’t matter if he had flown out of her window backwards and hitched the wind into the cold, demanding arms of Fay Vance. *He gave me a gift,* she thought on her last night in his bed. Something she would remember, but Dean was disposable. Disposable Dean, so he would be named. She could teach other men what she wanted. The plural term didn’t bother her. At nineteen, she didn’t imagine she was anywhere near her final round of monogamy. She hoped, instead, that she was closer to her first. But she didn’t hope too hard, because desperation was the Consuming Devil. *Dean Fogle? Fuck Dean. I did!* But Dean wasn’t around anymore so Dean could go to Hell.

He had been a shitty math teacher anyway.

She was gonna glide around for a while. San Francisco and beyond. Juni-Q had solar panel wings, she could fly forever.

She had to escape the bedroom at her parents house where her life had gone to die.

Juni-Q was nowhere going nowhere.

She wouldn’t be thinking about Dean as much if she weren’t high. The blue light glowed, lighting up the inside of her coat as she shielded the public from view. Her soul vibrated with pleasure and nostalgia. *Good God, how can I be nineteen and lost in the past? Here is the answer in my hand, in my lungs.* Dean wasn’t so good she couldn’t give him up. The weed was too good to give up.

Risen, totally like Jeebus, she stretched. Blood coursed into her chambers, filling her legs with strength. She tried to bend and touch her toes. Some other time.

Dean Fogle had hair everywhere. His chest hair she'd grabbed in fistfuls. She tried peeking between his cheeks once when he was sleeping, but it was too dark. Best she could figure was that he had a Mediterranean king's mane around his asshole. She caught a whiff of his nether fecal aura and concluded her investigation, but decided she was glad to have that much glorious fur at hand.

Sometimes she wondered if she didn't need to pay more attention to their personalities, but c'mon. They were only hetero dudes.

And Dean? He was a teacher who slept with a student one week before her eighteenth birthday. She'd been happy to take advantage of him, but she didn't need a guy who attracted drama. Fucking a teacher was a pretty big win for her. Fucking a student made Dean pathetic in her eyes. Juni-Q imagined herself doing such wickedness in her theoretical thirties and gagged, although mostly at the thought of hairless teenage boys with skin like hot dogs.

What a dipshit Dean Fogle was. Fuck that bitch Fay Vance and her weave.

Juni-Q was going to stop thinking of Dean Fogle any day now.

She was going to leave this train station any minute now.

2. Flenner will do anything

Her Spring Break date, Flenner LeCabre, a name that refused to sound right in English: so was cleft a fellow youth of nineteen who Juni-Q had known since she was in kindergarten at Montrose Elementary. A ten-year gap in their acquaintance had followed, about which he refused to say anything except, “you don’t want to know.” They reunited at sixteen when he strolled through the doors of the Einstein Academy in skinny jeans and a Pulp t-shirt, sporting stubble and platinum hair. She had frozen in front of him, causing their collision.

“You bitch!”

“You’re back!” she squealed but he was already hugging her.

They instantly re-bonded the dangling nerve ends severed the day she arrived in kindergarten asking, “Where’s Flenner?” and received the answer:

“Flenner will never be back, it’s best to forget about him, dear.” The mystery of why a sociopath would want to be a kindergarten teacher was never solved.

It didn’t take long for teen Flenner to become known as Tricky LeCabre in the school. If he had a hobby besides seducing straight boys, it was linguistics. “LeCabre is, Miss Juni-Q, from the French, referring to a horse rearing up on its hind legs. Or when applied to a human it means *rebel*.”

He erupted with laughter when the fire alarms went off.

“Who bet you?” she gleefully scolded him.

“I can’t tell, but he’s on the football team and he let me blow him. I had to do this to get a second date.” Ammonium nitrate smoke poured out of every air vent in the school stinging nasal cavities. Students tumbled out of classrooms, threatening to stampede them. “Quick, look slightly worried and walk out with the crowd.”

As Juni-Q emerged from the smoking school holding hands with Flenner, she contemplated the moral injustice of what he was doing. Past the faces of cheering students, she heard the bothered ones.

“I hope my painting doesn’t burn.”

“My brownies are gonna taste like smoke!”

“Do we have to retake the test?”

“I have to redo my oral presentation!”

Juni-Q calculated that these students would survive. But the faces of the teachers bothered her more. She saw their furrowed brows and didn’t mistake it for reflexive adult sourness, but rather she saw people interrupted in the task of trying to make the world a better place. She saw Mr. Childers, who wasn’t yet jaded and who put every ounce of faith he had in students, betrayed once again, forcibly advanced further along a road to disillusionment and apathy. Other faces spoke to her in the same way, disappointed, holding onto hope. All so Flenner LeCabre could fuck a football player. Juni-Q knew it wasn’t right. But she also knew the world wasn’t all right, and on the grand scale of life’s interruptions this was a relatively harmless one. Yes, there was fear in a few darting eyes as some speculated that it was a bomb or a fire, but she suspected Flenner had learned a few lessons in fear those ten years, and that from his perspective people needed their feathers ruffled periodically. Looking over her shoulder, she saw Dean Fogle staring at her ass and planned her own act of caprice

At the time she couldn’t help feeling Flenner’s philosophy was short-sighted and not the stuff of eternity,

but now he was in college and she wasn't so what the hell did she know.

There it was, the light illuminating the tunnel. Juni-Q fought the temptation to run out onto the tracks.

3. Spring Break it is, then

Juni-Q remembered how last week the illuminating spark of Flenner's voice pierced her darkness.

"Hey, Bitch, what's up?"

"Flenner! When do you come home?"

"Spring break is two weeks away."

"LeCabre, get your faggot ass down here faster."

"Round-eye hoe, Juni-Q, come visit me! We'll hit the Hill, round up a pile of dicks and climb them."

"Can you save a hoe?"

"Juni-Q, let me tell you something, I can save a hoe. I have saved many. You however, are my culminating endeavor, and I will retire after I get you married- "

"Bite your tongue before I chop it off, queen!"

Flenner cooed, "This is a long-term plan, no need to rush things, stay calm, stay mellow, don't let the bitch out of the barn, okayBitch?"

"OkayBitch but I can't visit."

"Bitch you need this."

"Bitch I know that's why I called you, Bitch!" said Juni-Q.

"Did you call because you needed me?"

"Flenner." Juni-Q's voice faltered. Were rain clouds passing overhead? "It's not going so well, Flenner."

The gap of silence was barely a hiccup in their staccato rhythms, but it was equivalent to a long deep sigh from Flenner. "Okay, I'll visit this weekend, if you come stay

with me for Spring Break.” So it was, this path opened before Juni-Q.

Juni-Q, settled into her Amtrak train seat, planned on being on her phone most of the trip, digesting culture, art, news, reflection, whatever was out there. She anticipated alleviating her nervousness by furiously scanning through headlines and Reddit topics, then going back and reading articles she’d passed over, inevitably getting into the underworld of the internet known as comment threads. She rarely posted herself because as soon as someone figured out she was female it was like fighting through a snowstorm of confetti while coated in glue, perverts and misogynists swirling and sticking to her. *Except it isn’t glue.*

Juni-Q had prepared the requirements of a Spring Break visit: cash, time, transportation, relief from family obligations, weed, and mental strength for whatever wild escapades virtual or real Flenner would have planned for her. Six things, all but the last two easily acquired from her parents, Florence and Hugh Quinten.

Weed was easy. The last thing, mental strength, hung around her neck like a pillory (Flenner, had he known her thoughts, would have informed her that a pillory is fixed on a post, and the term *cangue* would be better, like she could remember that shit).

She loved Flenner more than any other friend; he was The Friend, the one who held sway over her entire existence. Ten years she had needed him, so much she had no idea, not until he came smashing back. Those final two years at Einstein had been heaven. They had positively oscillated with joy like tabletop football players, and when they graduated it was all *touchdown, bitches*. Except Flenner kept vibrating, onto a bigger playing field.

Juni-Q, instead, came to a standstill. Her train was equally as hesitant to take off.

It wasn't that her parents didn't want her to go to college. Objectively, they did. They said as much, anyway. They smiled and talked about reasons to go.

"Juniper," Hugh had said, Florence handing him a coffee and rubbing his shoulder, "I can't think of anything else in this world for you to do than to go to college."

"So there could be other things?"

"Perhaps, but I can't think of them."

"Can you let me think about that for you?"

"I will! Do you need time, Honey?"

"Completely."

Florence rubbed Hugh's meaty shoulder harder. Juni-Q knew they were about ready to go upstairs for their mid-afternoon ugly-bumpin'. Via overheard whispers, innuendo, and box springs, Juni-Q had figured out that they mostly had sex in the daytime. She had had sex with Dean Fogle once in daylight and found it to be excessively mortifying. The light took all mystery away and the sight of herself forced her eyes shut. In the shadows she felt sexy, in the dark she felt alive, in the grip of sensory deprivation she felt properly sensual. She knew her reality was different that Hugh and Florence's, yet she would have better odds of understanding quantum entanglement than her parents' daytime fleshy cavorting.

In other words, Florence was checked out on her daughter's future in favor of her husband's dong.

Juni-Q noted that she didn't have the same option. Dean Fogle was *exed* out of the picture, shacking up with him would let the cat out of the bag and besides, Dean Fogle was a douche for whom Fay Vance allowed anal. She couldn't help keeping his name in a glass case, but Fay wouldn't have to know, despite this memory:

"Hi, Dean."

"Juni-Q? Why are you calling?!"

"I'm coming over."

"What?"

"Clear off your fucking bed and drop your shorts."

"I can't!"

"You have fifteen minutes."

"(woman's voice) Honey, who's on the phone?"

"You gotta be kidding me."

"Don't call again, Juni-Q. Please."

Douche.

Her home was a graveyard. Juni-Q was decomposing.

I needed you, Hugh, to stand up and tell me what to do. Fill me with parental ambition, paternal domineering, fatherly force. Impose your will upon me. Correct your child, Hugh. Knock the stupidity out of your offspring's head, Hugh! But no, not a scrap of it. Just stifling freedom. It was theoretically engineered to refrain from inhibiting Juni-Q, yet all it did was bind her in the darkness of her bedroom.

Juni-Q had deflected the one teacher who asked her about her future, Mr. Calvin-Fry, with a rock-solid, "Got it all covered, Mr. Calvin-Fry, gotta run and mail in some scholarship forms!" He pushed up his glasses, nodded, and resumed his pace. He had not come to a stop. Juni-Q was different that way.

Finally, time to leave.

Wait.

Where was that damn phone?

The train started moving. Juni-Q looked with panic at the receding station.

Mother of God, her phone was gone. Juni-Q dug through her bags twice. She was rewarded with a book to read, *My Sweet Revenge: The Margaret Whittington-Corningstone Story*. She stalked up and down the seats nearby, empty-handed. There was nothing more to be done. She dug in and tried to read, but distracting thoughts continued to buffet her.

4. Burberry, Bitch

Juni-Q knew, primarily through reading online and television, many stories about people in the second or third act of their lives. People who had crashed and burned and fucked it all up. People who had exhausted all their money, friends, and family. People who had ruined their careers, served jail time, and been forced to start not at zero but in freefall. One woman's story astounded Juni-Q.

Margaret Whittington-Corningstone, *nee* Corningstone, had soared through an academic life and popped out at the end bedecked with degrees and honors. A mathematics-chemistry double-major, she leaped ahead of her department and joined the Department of Defense, calculating dispersal and soil retention rates of experimental chemical weapons. When she caught her husband molesting their daughter, she blew his brains out onto their mauve shag with one shot while he was watching television, set the pistol down on the living room table, and called the police.

She naturally had to go to jail, where she became addicted to methamphetamine and was furthermore indicted for trafficking in a jail-wide sting that snared twenty prisoners and twenty guards. She spent the rest of her incarceration making bathtub perfume that she sold to both prisoners and staff. She left prison at 50.

Today she sells *L'esthétique de la vie* perfume and is worth \$1.1 billion. Her daughter, Valerie Jansson-Corningstone, is vice-president of the company and sole heir. Valerie wrote four inspirational books about healing from

abuse, basing the first one on her experiences with Mr. Whittington and interviews with her mother, spruced up with her own primal but beautiful pencil sketches. Her later books expanded to stories from other victims. She won't require Margaret's inheritance, though gossip magazines loved printing stories about her avarice.

Juni-Q wondered if Margaret and Valerie sat at home reading these stories incredulously and laughing about them. *Don't people understand the kind of relationship a mother and daughter have after such an ordeal?* Juni-Q knew Valerie would jump in front of a mall shooter for her mom. Juni-Q would for Florence and she'd never had an ordeal at all.

Juni-Q was impacted by this story, but ultimately she disregarded it. Margaret Whittington-Corningstone was a genius. She was destined to succeed. Even in jail she had mostly run the roost. Juni-Q would have sat in jail like a dumb chicken, laying pellets of heroin in a metal toilet rather than a nest.

Well, maybe not, but Juni-Q blushed internally before daring to visualize herself cracking skulls in prison.

As she put down her book and looked out her train window anxiously, she was saved from encroaching despair by a memory of the blue blur of Flenner as he ran to her front door.

Juni-Q nearly tumbled down the stairs.

Juni-Q hit the ground floor running but heard the front door slam. She went to it, felt the cool breeze across her neck, and registered the scene. She knew what she'd find in the kitchen.

Flenner LeCabre, dark-complected, only two inches taller than her, yet with a delicately proportional frame hugged by very tight clothes, was flipping the lid off the ice cream. Juni-Q squealed. Flenner stuffed his face with a scoop, and then ran to Juni-Q. "OMG, girl, come here," got past the ice cream, words warm as blankets.

They embraced for a million years. Ice cream dribbled out of the corner of his mouth and down inside the back of her shirt. It was still the old Fenner.

When they unlocked their arms Juni-Q felt a moment of chill as she lost Fenner's body heat. Something seemed odd though. He wasn't the same old Fenner.

"What are you wearing?"

"Girl, you like these? Let me tell you all about them and the circles I circulate now. This is the attire of the nouveau riche. Burberry, Bitch!"

"Burberry?"

"Bitch- "

"Bitch, you wear Burberry? Who are you fucking?"

Fenner smiled. "It's top secret. But I'll tell you this much: Lots of chest hair."

"Oh, you gay bastard."

"But I have a daddy now, Mommy. Hey, do you like it?"

"Fenner, you look like *un gigolo glorieuse*."

"Juni-Q you are so precious. I've missed you so much this year. This year, Juni-Q, has been the age of my awakening. I didn't know I had a purpose, but now I do. This reaffirms my belief that you, Juni-Q, still have a purpose waiting to be discovered, and that when your core is unearthed the heavens shall tremble. This is what I experience, Juni-Q: Trembling heavens. You don't know what it feels like but you will."

"And what is causing this celestial earthquake, Fenner LeCabre?"

"Duke."

"Is that his name or his title?"

"I have met someone very wonderful, and his name is Duke Preamble."

"I expect you to pronounce it Prem-BLAY," Juni-Q said.

"Preamble Distributions, silly. He's literally worth billions."

“You said nouveau riche.”

“Me, darling, in love and coin. For now.”

As California’s urban sprawl sped past, Juni-Q’s mind jumped back to Margaret Whittington-Corningstone who broke her chains with a bullet. *What price was Flenner going to pay?* She stilled herself. *Nothing had to be wrong. It didn’t have to be so.*

Nae, it would though, she knew.

5. **Premble Time assures, but something is different**

Duke Premble, according to Flenner, had inherited one billion dollars on his eighteenth birthday. Upon his father's death, it could be ten billion more, or it could be nothing. The chance, however, that he would inherit nothing depended largely upon pestilence or nuclear war. Premble Distributions, Inc. was responsible for thirty-three percent of North American shipping. There wasn't a highway in America that didn't have at least two Premble trucks on it, night or day. Electronics, clothing, food, commercial, publishing, medicine, manufacturing...virtually every corner of American life was running on Premble Time.

Premble Time was razor time. Routes were calculated to the second and charted on nationwide servers in real-time. A Premble truck didn't show up late, and neither did its customers. There was a surcharge for any delay in delivery caused by the destination service, but it was rarely levied. People set their watches by Premble. They watched with awe as the truck rolled in at the same time every day, and they cancelled surgeries to avoid missing a drop-off. Premble Time was Newtonian. Court Premble, the founding CEO who won a lawsuit against Pizza Boys after his manager beat young delivery driver Court unconscious, on security video, over a late delivery, remarked to people that failing to dodge his boss's punch was the last time he'd be late.

His son, Duke, grew up with Premble Time embedded into his nature. He learned to pee on the hour every two hours. Adapting to the world necessitated varying

the time, but even to this day Duke Preamble spends exactly 35 seconds in the restroom when he urinates and four minutes when he defecates. Flenner said that Duke always climaxed in just under five minutes. Duke had to be a top. He couldn't bear the thought of being at someone else's orgasmic mercy. By the end of minute one everything was at full speed, and thirty seconds before he came Duke put it into fifth gear. Exactly thirty seconds. Every time.

Duke was ugly. Mean ugly, pock-marked and rigid. Nothing on him was pretty. Even his dick, while a meaty nine inches, was an unpleasant, veiny blushed red against pale white waxy skin with bones jutting everywhere. He was hairy, but it all stood straight up instead of meshing and lying tight against his body *like Dean Fogle's*. *Fuck, Juni-Q, you said that, not Flenner*, but right at that moment-

“Yeah, I know, not like Dean Fogle's body hair.”

“I wasn't-“

“It's okay, darling. You'll sleep with other men and expand your frame of reference. It doesn't have to be today.”

“Maybe it will be today. Sooo he's your sugar-daddy?”

“We do love shopping together.” Flenner smiled.

Juni-Q observed the timing of Flenner's smile. *Was it on Preamble Time?* It felt too quick. Too greedy. Juni-Q knew the feeling, being sometimes too eager to borrow money from her parents. She felt guilty afterwards, but then she borrowed again, didn't she?

“But you like him?”

“He's the nicest person I've ever met. Kinda scary, you know?”

“What about that dad?”

“All he has to do to keep his dad happy is always be on time.”

“Parents are too easy to please nowadays.”

Flenner nodded. “It's not like the good old days when parents were infuriated that children existed. Now even being gay isn't enough to make them stop loving you.”

“Pro-gay dads rule.”

“-my hole. So, dearest Juni-Q, Arbiter of Cool, Queen of Japan, what should we do this weekend?”

That was weird. Usually Flenner had four ideas about what to do and didn't ask Juni-Q for input until they'd gone through all four and he came up with two more. At three in the morning, bleary and sticky, he'd ask, “What should we do now?” She rarely got an answer out before he had them screaming down the road towards the nearest 24-hour burger stand. Now the space between them sat there, deflating.

Juni-Q's stomach flipped. She panicked. She smoothly braced her hand against the kitchen island to steady herself and her nerves. Something was so wrong. So very wrong. Something she'd picked upon moments ago instinctually and was trying to fight past- here again, a fine delicate trigger inside her was being pulled. *No, it's fine. We've been away from each other most of the school year, it's natural he'll grow and change while I stay the same. I haven't stayed the same, entirely, I've done a lot of growing putting high school behind me, putting Dean Fogle behind me. As if I've put Dean Fogle behind me.*

Juni-Q felt bitter lava rising up her esophagus. She couldn't panic over feeling like she was losing her best friend without turning it into another treatise on the first and last person she slept with. Was it Flenner? Wasn't that proof that it was she who had drifted? That she had failed to follow her best friend into new frontiers, that she had spent the months eternally baked, listening to Tame Impala and Fleet Foxes records, painting her toenails, shopping, biding time at her dad's computer repair shop “on the payroll,” but mostly chatting with customers while the actual professionals worked. She hadn't followed her friend. Could she be surprised now that she was out of sync with him? She had left him. *This is my fault.* This all rushed through her mind in the awkward split second it took her to reply, “What do you want to do?”

Flenner flinched, his smile working but his eyes disengaging. She saw it.

Total fucking destruction. Her eyes went dead as she yanked power cables, tore out memory cards, and unplugged her keyboard. She did everything she could to disconnect her thoughts from her face.

Nevermind, she sobbed anyway.

“Flenner, I’ve missed you so much.”

As her eyes pinched shut, and Juni-Q looked down, Flenner’s stasis interrupted. As if all either of them needed was a signal of surrender. They’d been trying to dance around it, their tones false. Juni-Q’s tears signaled that the charade had gone out like a match in the ocean, without so much as a wisp of expiration. They couldn’t keep up illusions. They couldn’t pretend the distance wasn’t there. After ten years they had smashed back into each other and stuck like magnets; they shouldn’t be daunted by seven months. As if coming up for air, Flenner yelled, “Dear God, girl, Juniper, come here and hug me.”

Juni-Q was a razed building, the last of her crumbling into Flenner’s arms. She felt his warmth again. She felt a deep black chasm within her rush full with waters. Flenner was crying too. She felt his back muscles spasm.

“It’s okay, girl. I’m sorry I left you behind- “

“No, it was me- “

“Don’t be silly, I abandoned you. So much has been happening, and it was impossible to tell you everything even when we’re texting all the time. Experiences are like that, Juni.”

They let it all out, holding each other, digging into each other, finding safe purchase. After the furor, the quivering peace.

“I should have gone with you.”

“Juni, you’re nineteen, not dead. What if you do it in September?”

“Nobody takes a year off then starts college. My future is night school with kids at home and a piece-of-shit husband.”

“My dear Juni, I’ve got two words for you.”

“What?”

“Duke Preamble.

6. He ain't much to look at, but...

Juni-Q looked at the blood on her finger from her lip. The violence scared her. She looked out the window and saw the sea boiling-

Juni-Q pulled her sleeping face off the train window.

Juni-Q's dreams did not agree with the prospect of adventure, but she wanted to do better than tolerate it. She hadn't much to tout in her nineteen years, having homebody parents who were affixed to the living room couch on a nightly basis, cuddling and groping while watching television like older generations did. "Netflix and chill" would mark their gravestones.

Juni-Q did not rebel lightly, and couldn't confront her heightened resignation. College hadn't seemed urgent enough. Everything was good enough. And yet nothing new happened to Juni-Q anymore.

Flenner wanted Juni-Q to meet him in his dorm Thursday night, after he finished his last test (the Friday class was an essay final he already submitted). He tried to explain the advantages of Preamble Time and pleaded that she arrive at 8:00pm. Duke Preamble would be waiting with a limo at 8:15pm. Flenner understood- but perhaps Juni-Q did not- that if Flenner failed to walk out of the door of his dorm between 8:15pm and 8:16pm, Duke would have no choice but to assume he meant nothing to Flenner and would just be on his way. Juni-Q had to wrinkle her brow at Flenner's plea that Duke only held others to the same standards he had for himself. A man who is never late? *Seriously, put that bullshit on*

a plate for someone who eats bullshit. Admittedly, she felt a little surge of excitement inside, like she was going to meet a celebrity or an exotic circus performer.

And a billion? *How the fuck was Flenner getting in on that kind of action?* People with a billion dollars didn't interact with people who lived in Juni-Q's world. They lived behind walls and ordered eight hundred-dollar shirts through personal shoppers. They drove down secret streets and threw up if pre-packaged lunch meat touched their stomachs. The ultra-rich were so rarefied the illness could not be faked. It was a product of complete indoctrination. If you pressed them on their privilege too far eyes widened and voices tore at you until you were skinned. They did not merely grow up in the absence of need, as Juni-Q had with two parents who owned a solid business. They were created and built as machines of entitlement, bulldozers in Juni-Q's rainforest, ready to rumble and raze everything in their path for their luxuries and nothing else. Juni-Q did not want to call attention to herself. Would Duke Premble grow cross with her and open a cheaper competitor across the street from the shop, or saddle her family with baseless lawsuits and smothering legal costs? Her stomach knotted with fear of imaginary, vengeful Duke Premble.

As Flenner told it, it was nothing like her pre-existing conceptualization. Duke went to Stanford, west of San Francisco Bay, but dance clubs were dance clubs. Flenner had felt his rebelliousness sap away as he discovered college life at Cal State East Bay. Dance moves that had only been unleashed in his bedroom could now be unveiled. As Flenner walked into his first gay club in San Fran, Powerhouse, the house music (see what they did there, Flenner uttered as Juni-Q's eyes rolled) animated him. Also, the prospect of sex with a sizable percentage of the other young men undulating their bare chiseled forms in the red strobes -- that was also very exciting for him. His first trip to the restroom was honestly for a piss, but he left after ejecting two kinds of fluid from his cock. Thus, it began.

One night, Flenner had grown a little tired of the shirtless boys and started noticing that in the strobelight, a wallflower grew.

In the stony pockmarks of Duke Premble's face, Flenner's affection also bloomed. He'd become inured to beautiful gym rats. Friction was found only in their man-holes, everything else was smooth. Duke was the opposite of smooth. Flenner recalled his own nearly forgotten intellectual predilections, dulled by the masterful grooming habits of Latino men. One needed more in life, sometimes.

Duke had blushed red above his white fitted polo shirt when Flenner invited him onto the dance floor. Flenner put his own shirt back on. Duke spoke haltingly, Flenner motormouthed. Duke laughed. Flenner turned the goof on and yammered. Duke giggled. Flenner launched his ambitions in the air like fireworks. Duke grew misty-eyed. He had no dreams. Everything was in his power. Except when he found that dance club, paying a hailed taxi driver cash. Yet he could only lean against the wall and stare longingly. Flenner admitted he didn't really know anyone there personally, that he'd found hookups but no friends. He almost blew it when Duke told him his name. "You can feel it all over!" Flenner sang.

"What?"

*"For there's Basie, Miller, Sachmo
And the king of all Sir Duke
And with a voice like Ella's ringing out
There's no way the band can lose.
They can feel it all o-o-ver -"*

"Who is that?"

"You don't know Stevie Wonder? 'Sir Duke'? As in, Ellington. Nobody has ever made that reference to you?"

Duke was wistful. "You're too fun for me."

"I don't have to be."

"You can't help but be."

"How can anyone be too fun?" Flenner cooed.

"How are you you?"

“Spontaneity. Homosexuality. Alchemy.”

Duke brightened. “Three is the magic number.”

“What does it all mean?”

Duke shrugged. “Don’t make fun of my name.”

“I accept your request, Sir Duke.”

“So you were mocking it.”

“No, and I never will, your Highness.”

“Do you want to go somewhere and talk, like maybe a Denny’s?”

“I would kill for a Four Dollar Slam right now.” A luxury for Flenner, he typically had toast and an egg, he felt like he was going big.

“What’s a four-dollar slam?”

Of course, Flenner said, that’s when he should have known something was different about Duke. He had thought Duke was a hopeless nerd with a few flakes in his hair and likely his only tailored shirt hugging his solid body. He could be okay. He could have potential. Flenner had no idea how much of a catch Duke was.

Juni-Q cast a shrink-wrap of possessiveness over Flenner, and panicked once more about Duke Premble. How much of the awkwardness with Flenner had been caused by the fact that Duke had somewhat replaced her already?

Flenner was not privy to this thought, but his ongoing monologue was tailored to fit. Over time, Duke and he hit Denny’s, and IHOP, and then nicer local establishments like Buttermilk Southern Kitchen where the proprietary pancakes swole his belly in similar proportions to his fondness for Duke. Their tastes crossed over in many ways, and Flenner could go on and on about Danish and Old French’s steady infusion into Old English that birthed Middle English. This interested Duke. Flenner dreamt of seeing a movie filmed in Old English. Flenner shook with synergy when Duke mentioned an interest in film. He wondered why Duke wasn’t in his classes. It was a week before it ever occurred to him to ask.

Duke had been grateful for Flenner's narcissism. When he confessed that he went to Stanford and had nearly completed his own double-major in Linguistics and History, Flenner's balloon nearly deflated. "How, Juni-Q, was I supposed to hold my head up high again? He knew everything I talked about, all that Old English shit, and nodded like it was new. He was humoring me. I was stammering and blacking out, looking for the door." Duke asked him to stay. Flenner felt a connection at the four minute-thirty second mark of their sex that night, coming thunderously in his prostate as their hips grinded together organically until long after Duke's huge cock was thoroughly milked. A circuit of love had been completed, positive and negative, and it would not be broken without great interruptive force.

7. If I blow you, will you let me be?

Flenner's story felt interrupted. The Stanford thing was the big reveal? Okay, Juni-Q thought, but she couldn't help herself fixating on Duke's one billion. *When did that come up?* Flenner said, "Let's go to the movies!" and Juni-Q felt self-conscious about initiating that line of inquiry. She recalled the maxim that the last thing the rich will talk about is their money.

Juni-Q and Flenner went to the art house cinema and watched an old Bergman, *The Virgin Spring*. Juni-Q watched as the chaste daughter had sex exactly once in her life, and it was rape. The girl had only moments to process how her world had been destroyed before she was dead under a Swedish sky, all of it in sterile black and silvery white.

Juni-Q considered death. Her obituary would contain no great murdered hope for her future. She would not signify the loss of a priceless, unforgettable person. Local woman dead. Classmates could not remember much about her. Dean Fogle would rest easier, feeling his secret affair was buried, his career was safe.

Flenner's stories of Duke Premble trickled dry. As a subject, he was an empty plate. Juni-Q wondered more about that as Sunday dawned and Flenner had to say goodbye.

"So, week after next, Thursday, ok?"

"Yes, Flenner. I'm excited to meet Duke."

Flenner kept on saying his goodbyes without missing a beat. Avoidance. Perhaps nobody should really be excited

by Duke. She didn't ably hide her flinch at the renewed distance, but Flenner paid no mind. *So here is the new path. Stay inside the edges, we must not speak of what dwells beyond.* She'd obey for Flenner's sake. She had no will to fight.

The subject of Duke seemed to require delicate care. Juni-Q wondered if it was Duke she would not challenge. *Why?* She could not imagine this hushed feeling over just any boyfriend. How much was she already in sway to Duke's money? *Everybody dropped what they were doing and straight-lined it to the front when money entered the room, so don't announce it, don't speak of it, let others remain unaware. How will I make him like me? Will Flenner shift his demeanor and let my jokes fall to the ground?* Juni-Q felt again the load-bearing stress in her flying buttresses that the subject of wealth inspired in her. Why not say it? It felt like an answer. What else better to solve her dilemma and sidestep college than to piggyback on wealth towards the opportunities it so easily provided? What project could she even hope to have funded? She was unsure of her talents, beyond an extraordinary sense of taste in film and music. Could Duke help her become a producer, an arbiter of culture?

After Flenner left, she felt cold breeze howl through her cavernous chest. What a pathetic worm she was. Flenner shows up in nice clothes and she assumes the gravy train is on. *Like any other rat on the ship. Scurry, Juni-Q, back home where your shiftless dull self belongs.* How could she think herself to be enlightened after that cascade of ugly thoughts? She deserved nothing. She would not go to Spring Break. She would fold in upon herself infinitely until there was no trace left. The world would be spared.

Juni-Q saw Bakersfield pass by. Even without her phone she knew it was near the halfway mark. On her left soon was a tiny town called Buttonwillow. Juni-Q couldn't imagine the despair of dating in a small town.

She remembered letting a bothersome IM message from her old classmate, local chessmaster-turned-grocery clerk Lionel Warren, mutate into a date.

After two hours of silence during a limp action movie stitched together from older, better scripts, Lionel put his hand around her shoulder and she smelled his deodorant, poorly masking flop sweat. She looked at his protruding lower lip and heavy brow and hated his crude face. In the theater bathroom, she texted Flenner, “Bad date, emergency save!”

In the car at the end of the night, Juni-Q considered giving Lionel too much of what he wanted.

“Juni, I had a good time tonight.”

“Yeah, Lionel, it wasn’t so bad.”

“Gee, that doesn’t make me feel too good. What did you think, it would be terrible? I always liked you, I thought you were nice.”

“Thanks, Lionel. I’m sorry.”

“I can be a nice guy too. What if you went out with me? I guarantee you, I’d try real hard to keep you happy.”

“If I blow you will you just let me be?”

Lionel’s face went blank with shock. He looked down. Of course, he wanted the blowjob, she thought, but her radar was flashing red as she detected something other than lust at work within Lionel. *Good fucking God*, Juni-Q snarled internally, *he actually thinks he likes me*. Juni-Q scrambled for the rewind button-

“If you want me to forget you that wouldn’t be the way to do it,” Lionel said with some ember of hope still meekly burning at the bottom of his life’s woodpile.

“I don’t like you, Lionel. Not that way.”

Lionel turned like festering, poisonous meat. “You’d think just once I could find someone who didn’t judge me so quickly- “

Her phone rang. White panic filled her eyes. She wanted to stop being in the car that instant. Here was her

exit. Lionel was a colossal shit-show and she already felt her contempt mushrooming into intolerable indignity. She went for the fast-forward button instead.

“I’d better take this then, seeya Lionel!” She exited the car shuffling her short legs as fast as she could, ten steps away she slowed to answer Flenner. Lionel was standing outside his car yelling at her.

“I’ll take that blowjob after all-“ was what he started to say or maybe it wasn’t, Juni-Q had parachuted out of that motherfucker’s ninth cloud and the gust of Nature that was Flenner LeCabre carried her to safety. She interrupted his burst of girl-how-bad-was-it with rejoice in the form of barking laughter that distracted until tears came.

“I thought you wouldn’t call.”

“Juniper Quinten, I want to slap your ass in the face.”

She shrieked with delight. There’s no way she wasn’t going on Thursday.

8. Things one doesn't say to Dad.

Hugh gave Juni-Q a ride to the train station. After she turned eighteen, her father had no new words to say to her on any subject. It was always a remix of the greatest hits, and the prospect of college-level Spring Break without the corresponding college experience amped his fears into overdrive. “Your mother and I would prefer that you only have sex in a loving relationship.”

Thanks for the “feminist” paternalism, Daddy. But I had hot sweaty butt-slappin’ sex with a math teacher and Baby Girl ain’t done, she ain’t even Baby Girl, she’s Mama now and Mama needs to stretch her toes. Yeah, there are guys out there who prey. I can be a predator too.

She thought about the day of the senior breakfast when she stayed behind and kissed Dean Fogle in front of his marker board. It had been too easy. Sure, his eyes bugged out when she got too close, he had wanted to resist, he said, “I shouldn’t,” but when she pressed her stomach against his erection, said resistance resembled a parachute in a wind tunnel. She lashed out her tongue, trapped him and swallowed him up with amphibian efficiency. She had never before felt such power, nor since, but that day she ruled with an iron fist. She knocked him down and took what she wanted on his floor, her favorite 8” latex cock having already cleared the path for pleasure. She squeezed his face, pinched his nipple and told him to just shut up and keep doing what he was doing. When she came, she tasted the universe. So much out there, unseen, a mere hint of it revealed to her.

And then nothing. Eons passed.
She hugged her father and said goodbye.
I promise, Dad, it's going to be on my terms again next time.

Juni-Q had spent enough time feeling sexually frustrated and resumed reading her biography of Margaret Whittington-Corningstone.

9. A handsome lad!

Queasiness from reading in motion finally persuaded her to look up.

There salvation was, sitting right across from her.

He was reading a book she wasn't familiar with, but it was clearly science fiction based on the fantastical illustration of a ring-shaped world curving up into the sky. His platinum-dyed hair hung over his jaded eyes, and Juni-Q saw the boy sure had a purdy mouth. She let out a sharp bleat of laughter at her musings. His eyes darted to her in shock. Juni-Q thought that was even more hilarious and she cackled. The lad widened his eyes in confusion, but soon had no choice but to smile and laugh in return, nervously.

"What are you laughing at?"

"I'm sorry, I'm not laughing at you, I just- I just didn't realize you were sitting there already. The terrible things that happen when people read, amIright?"

He smiled. "Well, I can't say I was looking up from my book very often either. We were sort of like an old married couple there, weren't we?"

Oh, hello there! "We've been married so long I can't remember your name, and I find the sound of your voice is drowned out by my memories of you when you were young and thin, and had platinum-dyed hair."

"How about you just call me Honey and I'll call you Dear?"

"Okay, Honey." She giggled.

"Thank you, Dear." They beamed together.

As it was so often with Juni-Q, the situation immediately began deflating.

“Charles.”

“Is that your name?”

“Most of the time. You?”

Erf, not a fan of the name Charles. Still, his gaze had revealed warm and pleasant blue eyes. “Juniper. Quinten. People call me- “

“Juni-Q?”

“It’s that obvious, isn’t it?”

“Really, I guessed it?”

“You win a prize.”

“I do? What do I win?”

Her heart started moshing in her ribcage. “Whatever you want, unless it’s reasonable.”

Charles cackled himself. “Oh, my! Well, uh- I hope you have a brother as cute as you.”

Get the fuck out.

Within five minutes, the conversation put out of its misery, he was back in his book and she had earbuds plugged in. She was going to give his number to Flenner if he needed a third.

Maybe she’d just get everyone else in the world laid and go garden by the hillside.

10. Difficulties in expression

Finally free of the train, wandering the campus, Juni-Q sniffed out Flenner's room in the Pioneer Heights dormitory halls through vague directions Flenner had evidently texted simultaneously while perpetrating some *other* act. She barged through campus life, assailed at every angle by purpose-driven people and amorous couples, both of which repelled her for a reason that did not escape her: She belonged to neither group. She imagined any second now someone was going to point a finger at her like Donald Sutherland and scream, alerting all the others who would also point and send shrill alarms across campus. She would be given a choice: Assimilate or flee. Flenner was safety. *Push on, Juni-Q.*

She saw the burnt-orange and yellow desert-chic dorms ahead. She realized she didn't fit in because she was carrying a suitcase instead of a backpack. Otherwise...something refreshing was happening. Faces called out to her, harmonizing with her frequency. Her *people* were here, mixed in with the rest. Many quiet, bookish types walked past with heads down and Juni-Q projected onto them her isolation. A girl with some charming goth infusion going on in her style and a sharp, piercing analytical gaze sweeping in front of her like a blind person's cane locked eyes with Juni-Q immediately. She had a plaid head wrap contrasting her dark lace-looped attire, and her pale skin was inlaid with two glorious chestnut eyes above bloodwood lips.

Juni-Q had an instant friend hard-on for Chestnut Girl, knew she could listen to this person talk all night. Juni-Q wanted to live in Chestnut Girl's world. Her eyes already felt opened, her range of sight expanded, but then too naked and powerful a wave crashed over her. Juni-Q had to abort before she fell to the ground staggered by emotion, so she averted her eyes. Chestnut Girl raised an eyebrow and kept walking. Would they ever see each other again? Juni-Q's heart sunk with heavy knowledge, for there were simply too many people here and she would not linger for long. *Maybe I wouldn't be lonely at college after all*, she thought, but then she wasn't going, was she? It would take a formidable pessimism to imagine this moment being worse.

She felt a pang of triumph finding Flenner's door and knocked on it. *So far from home, all by myself, here in the world autonomously*. It was exhilarating to think that Flenner lived freely now. She felt every second a deepening sense of how much she screwed up by not going to college. Could she start in the fall? Or was she frozen by inertia, subsumed by complacency?

Flenner snatched open the door and whisked her inside, shushing her like she had the jewels.

"I don't have the damn jewels, Flenner, what the hell?"

"Welcome, girl, come inside, very busy!"

"Do you not want someone to know I'm here?"

"Do you want someone to know you're here?"

"Never mind."

Juni-Q glowered. Flenner wasn't looking at her. She looked around his minimalist 12x12 living space and saw his suitcase packed on his bed. Flenner was grabbing more items and tucking them in: a brush, boxer briefs, lube. "No condoms?"

"Duke is clean."

"Not anymore."

"There's my hoe, now hoe shut your mouth! Oh, Guinevere, I'm so glad you're here. I'm just getting ready.

We have to be ready by 8:15 I told you. Duke's heart won't be able to take it if we're not ready."

"We have nearly an hour, Amtrak got me here neatly. I lost my phone somewhere, dammit."

"Phone? Oh no!"

"It's too late. Let's just go."

"I need five more minutes, Juni-Q, just wait five damn minutes please."

"Fine!" she harrumphed. But she felt at ease, barking at her best friend. It meant their relationship was secure. Juni-Q felt a warm glow of belonging somewhere so far from home. She almost permitted herself a brief ecstatic glimpse of a possible future attending college there at CSU East Bay with Flenner. It was too good to be true so she put it out the back door, but time passed slowly and she could hear the shunned dream calling to her, weeping. *Believe in this, Juni-Q.* She puffed on her vape pen to drown it out.

Flenner came to rest in front of her. "Finished. Fifteen minutes to talk. What do you think of Preamble Time?"

"I'm sold. Small bursts of intense assholery and then complete chill. Is that what he's like?"

"No, this is my variation. He's always tense, always worried about the next deadline."

"Why are we hanging out with this person again?"

"Juni-Q, noted bitch haggler, don't haggle! Duke's really sweet deep down. He's a tender soul. You'll like him."

"I feel like I'd better be on my best behavior."

"You're always on your best behavior."

Juni-Q smiled. "Do you miss me when you're here? It seems so busy and exciting. I can already see interesting people here."

"Of course I've missed you. I don't know most of these people. Gay people don't stick together as much as the old days, they're so unthreatened. You can find sex, but, well, I haven't had a single date since I've been here. Not until Duke. I didn't miss you right away, because with all the

texting and video chatting you were practically sitting next to me. Then you didn't contact me so often, and I looked- "

"I didn't contact you so often? That makes no sense-"

"Shall I show you the distribution chart I made one weekend when I sat in this room for 36 hours straight?"

Juni-Q flushed with embarrassment. She hadn't... She hadn't meant to.

So much for being cognizant of your own flaws, Juni-Q. She knew Flenner was probably right, but all she knew was her own sense of abandonment. She sighed. "I'm not a very good friend."

"You're the best friend."

"I guess I figured you were abandoning me again, and-"

"-got fearful, and so you retreated. Yes, Juni-Q, I figured out that much. And I didn't fight it, so maybe you were right."

"It's more like you're outgrowing me. I don't know what to talk about with you as much when your life is this now."

"Ask me anything."

"Anything?"

"I'm so nice you make me say everything twice."

"Where were you for ten years?"

Flenner had been grooving back and forth in his stance like he usually did, except now he spun 360 degrees. "Thirteen minutes to go and this is how you talk?"

"You said."

"And you accept that for nearly three years I have purposely made myself clear through misdirection and obfuscation that my mental health necessitates keeping it private?"

"Private means not telling others. This is me."

"Even you. Telling you is a form of telling myself, yet you assume I speak to myself about it."

“I don’t believe that, Flenner. Not a whisper? Not a quick stomp whenever it raises its head? Get back down there evil memories!”

“Constantly, naturally.”

Juni-Q knew Flenner needed permission to not tell her in order to tell her. She veered away from connivance to simply giving her friend what he needed. Certainly pressing further wouldn’t give him his due. She knew she had to be at peace with his right to be silent, which meant not needing to hear. *Come what may, Flenner.*

“I’m sorry, never mind. As long as you know I’m here for you, I’m satisfied.”

“Juni-Q, are you using reverse psychology on me?”

“I thought about it but I realized that was wrong. I’m kinda excited now about this Duke thing and where we’re going, so fuck it. Really, who needs the past?”

“We all do, Juni-Q. How else do you know which direction to run from?”

11. Evil memories poorly received

“So let me tell you then.”

Juni-Q’s eyes widened. “The evil memories shouldn’t get back down there?”

“Maybe I need your help to keep winning.

“The first day I saw you again at Einstein I went home that night and cried in my closet for hours. I saw you and remembered you instantly, and everything came back. Well, the first five years, mind you. I’d been retaining memories for a while, but mostly drew a blank on ages five to ten. I didn’t question it much, like forgetting the womb. Missing pages in a calendar. By the time I got back to Einstein, I’d been living pretty normally with my sister Angie.

“So, boom, I run into you and I knew your name and that I loved you so deeply from my core, but I had completely lost kindergarten in my memory. Suppressing memories is an imprecise art. Your love, Juni-Q...it grabbed a thread and unraveled the self-deception I thought I needed.”

“But you were so fun that day- “

“-indeed so, yes, that much is true. My pretender skills were finely honed, Juni-Q-who-let-the-truth-out.

“Nonetheless, my sweet Juniper Quinten, I remembered the day my father, whom I’d never seen before, arrived at our house. I asked him who he was, because I didn’t recognize this smelly, leathery malcontent. Even after the rare shower he still looked grimy, wearing pleather pants and a yellowed t-shirt; he had this mottled skin like his filth

was embedded underneath the dermis. I later discovered his name was Jeps LeCabre, as it is on my birth certificate, but that first day I knew something was wrong, dear Juniper. When I said my name was Flenner Saville, he knuckled me right in the lip, like that -“ - a vicious snap of Flenner’s knuckles outward and down at the angle a still-innocent young boy would be standing from him- “-and it stuuuung, holy shit, Juni-Q, it stung like nothing I’d ever felt before. He got real close to me with methamphetamine and cigarettes on his breath and said to me, ‘Your last name is LeCabre, little faggot.’”

Juni-Q interjected, “Well, yeah, something was wrong, Flenner; that’s so mean. How does someone do that?”

“How did my mom come out and tell him, ‘Little fucker is yours now, I’m keepin’ his sister’? How did he knock her out and take both of us? So Angie fights him and he throws me and her in the trunk. Five hours later, he lets us out all piss-soaked and choking. He says, ‘Alright, time to make you two useful,’ and pushes us towards this steel building that doesn’t say anything on it except this faded painted sign, it just says, ‘LOCUS.’ Angie is all out of fight after the first night. I’m in shock, because I’m fucking five, and after that it was brain-wipe time until I saw you.

“I know you’ve had a good life, Juni-Q, I don’t hold it against you. I just don’t know how to tell you how living in LOCUS felt, except imagine everything you had at age five with your family, and how much you take that for granted as part of who you are, and then replace it all with pain and hatred inflicted upon your very existence, teaching you horrible lessons.”

Juni-Q did her best to grasp it, but fumbled. There was no life without her parents at five. There was no frame of reference without hugs and Christmas. Dion had been a pretty mellow older brother, which Juni-Q had learned was statistically anomalous. They played Barbies together when Dad wasn’t around, and when Dion put on masculine airs and wrestled with her in the back yard, he had done so

instructively, teaching her how to manipulate her size and weight against a larger opponent, in between facefuls of grass. Grandparents had hugged and doted on her. She had experienced birthdays, movie nights, vacations. She had thrown fits over ugly pants and haircuts. She had expected laundry to be done for her. She ate meals and didn't say thank you.

With that, she felt pain as she tried to connect this horrible story to Flenner LeCabre. He had worn the surname with such pride. *How could he do that? How could anyone in this story do anything they were doing? That pigfucker father, that bitch mother, that poor sister.* Juni-Q recoiled in horror just projecting ahead where this story was going, with Angie and -- no, she couldn't visualize Flenner there. Not this sweet boy who was her dear friend. Not this well-balanced person making her look like a head case. Not this beautiful angelic- *no, he's too good, Flenner's too good for this, I'm not good enough to handle this weight.* She fought it. She felt it yank on her neck and drag her underwater. This knowledge was indecent. She could not bear further the thought of her best friend being subjected to villainy, when all he needed was a hug and some toys to play with, *what the fuck, fucking bitch-face Mom and piece-of-shit Dad!?* She remembered the mom was named Joely. She wasn't trying to hold onto Angie out of love, else she should have clasped both children to her chest and defied Jeps to kill her. *That would have been Love,* thought Juni-Q. Joely seemed like the name of a kind person, a vibrant personality. *Little fucker is yours now.* It stuck into her head and throbbed, growing. *How could Flenner tolerate it?* And yet she didn't want to hear what was in the steel building, the LOCUS of a childhood ripped apart in the jaws of monsters.

Juni-Q looked away from Flenner, towards the door. Was Duke Premble there yet? The door emanated stillness, interrupted briefly by a whooping crowd of students barreling past. She wanted to go outdoors and wait without Flenner. It was oppressive in his room. Juni-Q's internal alarms went off; *I'm being a ridiculous bitch, this isn't about me, I should repeat*

that to myself a hundred times, I should meditate to that mantra, itsnotaboutme, itsnotaboutme, itsnotaboutme...

Flenner LeCabre is straight up detailing a world of horror to me that he's survived and I'm this soft goddamned brat who can't even stomach discomfort enough to hear someone else tell me such a world exists. She could mark a bubble on a piece of paper next to "Such a world exists" and pass the test with flying colors. She couldn't be told that the one person she'd hung her happiness in the world on was defiled by that world. No memory. She knew what that meant. Where'd your fuckin' memory go, dude? Only a few things make a kid zap five years from the noggin -- what the hell you think, Juni-Q?

"It's okay, Juni-Q. I'm done for now. We have enough time to lock up and wait outside so Duke isn't pissed at us." She nodded dully, *lock it all up*. "Leave it to me to pack more than you, would you mind grabbing my red leather bag?" Juni-Q slowly scanned for it, her heart frazzling less now, her attention out of focus. Drifting back down. Receiving. *I'm here. There is the red bag, shiny leather.* Duke had bought it for Flenner, she knew. She picked it up and paused when she heard glass jars clink inside. Flenner wasn't paying attention. The *clink* resonated through the fog and Juni-Q snapped to as they exited through the door of her culpability; her window in time to help heal her friend passed her, trapping her in this state. The calm and serene smile on Flenner's face killed her with its acceptance. She felt the tainted relief of sailing over lowered expectations. *Sorry, Flenner. I didn't make the cut.*

12. Alternate-worlds engine in overdrive

Chestnut Girl passed in front of Juni's gaze again, heading towards the entrance blocked with Flenner and Juni-Q's bags both leather and flesh. Her nostrils flared and awkwardness shot up through her belly into the chaotic chambers of her heart. They had locked eyes before in a tender moment Juni-Q had planned on remembering the rest of her life as one in a series of myriad doors into alternate histories. However, she had no computations for how to handle a second encounter while the mind was still warm with Chestnut Girl's initial presence. Here was Chestnut Girl again flopping back into the seat, someone who likely had no idea what hallucinated adventures she had recently partaken of in Juni-Q's fevered imagination. *You were my friend too, and it was the best freshman year anyone ever had, capped off by an experimental lesbian kiss in an upstairs bedroom during a house party as The Sundays played* (Juni-Q had previously ranked Harriet Wheeler, a relic of her dad's tastes that did stick with her, as one gal capable of getting her to go dyke for a night, so it made sentimental sense) *before awkwardness ensued and calls were not returned.* It was a presumptuous conceit to imagine that a girl with goth stylings would necessarily heed the ways of Sappho, but *Hell*, Juni-Q thought, *we're only talking about one night here.* Reconnecting on the phone after they were both married, garbed in blue jeans and blush, they would cackle about it. Juni-Q's alternate-worlds engine was going into overdrive and Chestnut Girl was almost there. *Meltdown alert, circuits are frying, pay it no nothing mind Juni-Q dammit think of*

burritos on Mission Beach, lobster tail at the Blue Pointe- dammit, she was firmly intertwining fingers and locking lips with Chestnut Girl on the steps of Sunset Cliffs at midnight, that wouldn't work. Desperate measures needed! Juni-Q returned her thoughts to Flenner's half-confession and her failure to be a good listener. She didn't want to lay her guilt on Flenner, however she was reasonably sure Chestnut Girl-*shit!*

"Flenner!"

"Hey girlfriend, how ya doin'?"

"I'm alright, you taking off tonight already?"

"Tests are all done, we're out of here."

"Cool, cool. Who's your friend?"

Juni-Q's face had the rictus grin.

"Oh, right! Evangelina, meet Juni-Q!"

"Hi, Juni-Q. Like the handle." She just had to be named Evangelina. Her lips were big as pillows. Juni-Q nearly came smelling her.

"Hi, Chestnu-." Er-

"What?" Flenner and Evangelina said simultaneously.

"Your eyes, they're chestnut colored. I like them.

They remind me of my bed. Frame."

"Now, Evangelina, you see how blessed with friends I am? Even the ones who don't talk so good, special indeed."

"Very; she's cute as a button. We'll see you around, Juni-Q."

"We'll see you, Round...Eye." *Ain't nothin' but a chicken wing.*

Evangelina whoop-cackled at that as she passed between them, though Juni-Q felt it was a bit automatic-sounding. *This chick is going to be leading staff meetings someday, when she's done being quirky.*

"Enjoy your trip, where are you going?"

Flenner intoned, "Wherever Sugar Daddy wills."

"I want a sugar daddy!"

Juni-Q: "Come with us!" *This was how college people acted, no?* She swung extra casual. "Ain't no thing!"

“Juni, we have two minutes until Duke gets here.”

Juni-Q just smiled at Evangelina. Evangelina looked back before closing the door on them. “You are a cutie, aren’t you? Come back alive, we’ll talk.”

Well, Juni-Q thought, *surely that was a low bar to achieve*. She’d do that. Goddamn, she would do that.

Duke Premble’s limo was already there. Flenner was hustling his bags to the car. “Come on, Juni-Q, let’s go!

Juni-Q locked her gaze one extra half-second on the back of Evangelina’s head, then tried to get a peek to see how those hips swung. They swung like a hammock and she wanted to climb in that hammock.

As she handed her bags to the sturdy driver standing by the trunk, she didn’t look forward to the romantic void within the limo, disheartened. The liquid black and lustrous chrome had doubtlessly accompanied several high society affairs, yet Juni-Q knew that Duke Premble would not be attending to her needs. *Hell, he won’t remember my name*.

Juni-Q treated entering the limo as a de facto choice to spend the next week in utter boredom. The torment would be endurable by the illusion of control. She wondered then if that maxim had worked for Flenner in LOCUS and hated herself.

13. Mixcommunicating

“The one and only Juni-Q, so nice to finally meet you.” Duke’s clammy palm softly clasped her hand.

She was taken aback by his tragic facial structure and pestilent skin, but moreso she found him rather agreeable and meek. *Seems like a sweet guy really.*

They had been on time, after all. Would she like him so much if she were late and he threw a bitch-fit? She didn’t have to worry about that yet, so she didn’t. *Best to stock up on good times, get some pull, and let him do some striving to please her.* The acolyte of Margaret Whittington-Corningstone didn’t let someone rule her roost just because he had a billion dollars lying around. Margaret Whittington-Corningstone would shoot a motherfucker. Margaret Whittington-Corningstone bestowed grace upon others.

“Would you like something to drink? I have some Grey Goose here and some orange juice?” Duke proffered humbly. The glass was engraved ornately, the ice clinked like a dinner bell.

“Hey, how about some Grey Goose and orange juice?” Juni-Q felt the leather under her ample ass and marveled at the nearly soundproof limousine. The material comfort count skyrocketed as she looked around. Embedded refrigerator. Embedded touchscreen connected to embedded speakers playing electropop. Carpeted floor. *Guess who’s ready to be embedded up in this muthab,* Juni-Q announced to herself.

“I hope you like the limo, Juni-Q, it’s not as epic as my dad’s.”

Flenner burst out laughing. “Duke, Duke, Dukedukeduke- slow down, honey, we haven’t made it two miles and you’re one-percent-of-the-one-percent-vibing her already!” Duke bristled with a sliver of indignation, but Flenner kneaded it out of his shoulders.

“Oh, you’re right, Flenner. I’m sorry, Juni-Q, I wasn’t always raised with normal values, though my father tried. I need Flenner so I don’t forget.”

Juni-Q laughed, “Really, I didn’t think anything of it. That’s just honesty. Here, I’ll mix that drink myself and we’ll try to make do with this shambling wreck that’s better than anything I’ve ever ridden in my life and we’ll be chill and breezy like dis and dat and whoopty-doo to the world, know what I’m sayin’?” As she fumbled in the fridge, she spotted Flenner planting his hand right on Duke’s dick and heard Duke’s nervous moan followed by slapping Flenner’s hand away. “Okay, gentlemen, perhaps some fellatio is in order? I’m new to your world, but I’m not sure that’s how it rolls in a Royce, are ya comprehending my words, Duke Premble?”

“That’s correct.”

“Juni-Q wouldn’t mind if we did, Duke. She’s not saying she’d mind.”

“Flenner, you disgraceful twat, am I mixcommunicating here?” Juni-Q’s drink was clear with a tinge of orange. “Not until this is done, darlings.” Alcohol would bring relief.

The limo headed downtown and the music got louder. Halfway through her translucent screwdriver, Duke and Flenner followed suit and Juni-Q felt herself among old friends, young and free.

The last thing she remembered was sitting in a booth in a club called FLEX while Flenner and Duke were grinding on the dance floor. Juni-Q tried to explain why she was living with her parents to a six-foot thick-boned girl named Paula who was rubbing Juni-Q’s breasts. Juni-Q felt completely unwilling to go anywhere with this girl while Evangelina-with-the-chestnut-eyes lurked out there in the dark swirls of her

memory, but Paula's hands on her chest kept the world from swirling and so who was Juni-Q gonna argue with anyway-

14. Penises will wait

-and the next thing she remembered was waking up naked draped in satin sheets.

Something wet was going on between her legs and two hands were cupping her ass. She lifted the satin to peek. Paula looked up at her, smiling and glistening. Her rugged facial bones were man-like enough.

“Don’t let me stop you,” Juni-Q slurred and let her head fall back down into darkness.

She rose from the depths at some indistinct point as a tight, potent orgasm made her yell “Goddamn” a bunch of times before the whirlpool claimed her consciousness again.

Down, down we go, yo-ho...

“Doesn’t she have wonderful breasts, Duke?”

Flenner’s voice nearly ripped the zipper right off her brain.

She shot up and stuffed her clothes back on, mouth vaginally pungent, eyes unfocused, head throbbing. Duke tried to gently smile when she squinted at him through cranial reverberations. She knew the look that would be on that fucker Flenner’s face right now, but it was Duke’s face that would mete out her embarrassment.

Duke said, “They’re not for me, but they are really very good ones. Don’t worry, Juni-Q. Everybody had a lot of fun last night. It was all permitted. We aren’t late for anything because we don’t have to be anywhere. I’m trying to avoid deadline situations.”

Juni-Q got her pants and bra back on, pondered Paula’s long awkward nakedness on the bed, and resigned.

“Yeah, well. They are remarkable mammies.” Her head wasn’t ready yet. Back to the bed it was. She threw some pillows in between her and Paula and passed out again.

Later: Flenner and Duke presumably were at breakfast. She opened her eyes to see Paula up on one elbow, warmly smiling at Juni-Q.

Juni-Q put a hand up. “Hi, hi, hi, er, Paula- it’s, ah- “
 “It’s all right, Juni-Q. You told me several times you’re straight.”

“I did? Well, I thought so.”

“It’s all right. Last night didn’t have to change that.”

Paula was very matronly and soothing, and soon Juni-Q felt again put at ease by her. They spoke longer with some dramatic differences from last night, namely that Juni-Q could listen to Paula (instead of being the one drunkenly babbling) and remember things she was told. Like how Paula grew up on a ranch that hosted at-risk kids.

Paula had accepted she was gay when a horse kicked her in the face and she looked at the sky through pooling blood, speaking a promise to God. She already had the flannel and the blue jeans, and the at-risk kids provided several burgeoning lesbian teens for her to start romancing. One got jealous with Paula and beat her up with a horseshoe. Although it was the second time a horseshoe had threatened her life, she felt peace. The other kids pulled Paula’s violent lover off of her. She would have been okay dying.

Juni-Q felt a tear. “I’m sad now; I don’t remember being with you.”

“The boys won’t be back until 11:15.”

Juni-Q wagered that was Preamble Time, money in the bank.

Juni-Q didn’t mind Paula’s idea. It felt like an honor.
Penises will wait.

15. The lighthouse yet beckons

Juni-Q walked through the lobby of the hotel with Flenner as Duke finished check-out. Paula had slipped away sweetly just minutes before.

Only now did Juni-Q realize how marvelously swanky the place was. Money was piled on top of money, and every worker looked like a catalog cutout. As much as Duke had put her at ease, scanning the faces around her turned her queasy stomach. *Why wasn't anyone smiling?* Flenner read her mind.

“A sense of entitlement goes straight to the face, necessitates the plastic surgery.” She could only nod. The residual warmth of Paula was dissipating.

The rumbling of the limousine tires renewed it as they pulled away from the hotel.

“Juni-Q, you just had a night of lesbian sex, how do you feel?”

“Oh, not bad.”

“Duke, she says that after having lesbian sex, she felt ‘not bad’. Does that compute?”

“That’s what she says, Flenner. It must be true.”

“It’s true. It didn’t bother me.”

“Oh, girl, you was bothered!”

Duke cornered the market on kindness. “Paula was cool.”

Flenner nodded, “Oh, she was a doll. I wish I’d been able to go to that ranch, the hookups in the barn have to be

super-hot, though wouldn't that straw get where it shouldn't?"

Juni-Q wrinkled her nose. "I'm thinking them be some stinky hook-ups."

"Speaking of which, we're all grateful you washed your face, Juni-Q. You too, Duke."

"I could say the same to you—"

"You're only saying that because I ate your ass."

"That's a good reason to say that."

"Okay, I was just narrowing down your reasons."

Juni-Q's stomach rolled again. "Something else would be a preferable subject."

Duke, conciliatory but putting Juni-Q on the spot: "What do you want to talk about, Juni-Q?"

"I didn't mind the general subject, until it got into stank-face showdowns."

Duke, diplomat: "Did you like Paula, Flenner?"

"I was a little concerned Shrek would roll over and suffocate you, but otherwise she was nice."

"You piece of crap, don't talk bad about her," Juni-Q steamed.

"Be nice, Flenner."

"Oh, you two bitches, come on now. Flenner LeCabre knows nothing in his heart but love for all the world, except for my father. She shone with the Light, Juni-Q."

"Better, now so do you."

"Are you saying I did not shine with the Light, Juni-Q?"

"You dimmed a moment there."

"So I was still shining?"

"Maybe there was a glow."

"A glow?"

"A flicker, anyway."

"A flicker?"

"Or two."

Gasp, "Or two?"

"The Light went out for a minute."

“A minute!?”

Duke getting in on the joke, “Or two?”

“Or two,” Juni-Q said.

“My comment did not last two minutes!”

“The lighthouse yet beckons,” Duke slyly mocked.

Juni-Q felt this cold hungover morning that Duke’s ugliness was far more noticeable now, and he knew it, undercutting his attempts to be funny. She liked him, but his insecurity had to be tolerated. As Flenner’s mouth dropped in mock-indignity and the laughing continued, Juni-Q felt herself have a terrible thought: If Duke weren’t unbelievably wealthy, she had no confidence Flenner would be hanging out with him. Guilt by association tainted her as well. This was not someone she would be friends with outside of, say, work, or jury duty. But as Juni-Q found a growing sense of camaraderie alleviating the ill fit, she saw Duke’s own Light.

For it did shine in all the people. Life was long and perhaps much would be forgotten, but Juni-Q saw that her experience with Paula, while not necessitating a second such adventure, could become an integral part of her life’s journey.

It wasn’t to be her ultimate path, but a notion temporarily shook her conviction: making love to Paula had sure as hell felt a lot more dignified than having sex with Dean Fogle.

Worse, she had liked feeling dirty as that disgraceful ape penetrated her. *Sweet, sweet Paula. Perhaps I shall never have enough grace to settle for a life with you. I shall never forsake men. There’s yet a quality in me that needs to be split and spilled upon.*

As Flenner and Duke babbled about city monuments, Juni-Q reached into the freezer, grabbed an ice cube, and popped it up inside.

The fever broke, but for how long?

16. Persuading the surly bitch to go shopping

Juni-Q wondered how she would die. Usually a couple times a day, sometimes with a lovely visual image but usually centered on the experience of the moment, the instance of it. *What will the last second feel like?*

Today, it was merely the thought of the limo and the physics of a high-velocity crash in which a spinning car became a pinball table for unrestrained bodies. Looking around twice, she didn't see seatbelts.

"Duke, why doesn't this limo have seat belts?"

"Limos are classified the same as buses. Plus, it makes a difference that we're remaining within city limits."

"Ah, thanks."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm cool." She felt her eyelids stretched to the tearing point.

Flenner was looking at his flip phone, bored with the exchange. Juni-Q nudged him with her toe. "What's wrong with you?"

Flenner put down his phone and smiled. "I know the answer to that question. Duke, what's wrong with me?"

"Nothing a little shopping couldn't fix."

"Precisely. Alright, Juni-Q, my kimono-less queen, you're about to get a taste of some real purchasing power."

"What? I didn't bring shopping money."

Duke waved her off. "You wouldn't have enough anyway. Don't worry about it, Juni-Q."

Flenner gleamed. "Isn't he a good boyfriend?"

Juni-Q wasn't having it. Flenner was being low. All his chaos, his daring, his strength...and now he was just going to be some rentboy for an ugly rich dude? Was it any wonder she had had difficulty reconnecting with Flenner? It was one thing for personal growth to drive a wedge between them. Juni-Q knew the path of stagnancy was no path at all, by definition, and therefore could not be followed, only joined. Flenner had been dynamic and ambitious, which she admired. She fed off it, sometimes, guiltily, needily. But now he was a fuckin' goldbricker.

"Are you goldbricking Duke?"

"Juniper Louise Quinten!"

Duke objected, "Juni, no, it's not--"

Juni-Q retorted, "Asuckersayswhat."

"What?" Duke's expression leaked distress.

Flenner, "Juni-Q, stop, stop, stop!"

"Why, am I threatening your Burberry, bitch?"

"I'd burn it all right now if I could spit-roast you over the flames."

"More at the store, I'm sure."

"More for the fire, 'til your bones be blackened!"

"Juni," Duke pleaded. "Please, give me a second."

Juni-Q's steam turned to blush. She felt completely alone and outnumbered. "What?"

"Look, I get it. But it's not Flenner's fault. It's all me."

"Even if that's what you think you need to do to get a boyfriend, that doesn't mean he should let himself be bought."

"Will you let me explain?"

"Explain what?"

"Yes, or no: Are you going to let me explain?"

Juni-Q recognized a certain tone in Duke's voice. Respectful certainty. He knew she was upset, but he had complete, serene conviction, and was only fighting to be heard because that was all he needed, an audience that would hear truth if spoken. Juni-Q's anger was still flooding her engine, but she

knew where this was going: she would be in the wrong. She was going to be embarrassed further, exposed as having nothing to be angry about, as an instigator.

“I’m sorry.”

It wasn’t the yes he wanted, but Juni-Q’s head hung low and still as a single tear stained her department-store denim. Alleviating the defenseless silence, Duke spoke.

“I don’t know if you know much about Court Preamble, my dad. But he came from a humble background. He worked his way to the top by the time I was born. I grew up not wanting for much. But my dad worked just as hard to keep us grounded as he did to lift us up. Behind the big estate mansion, we had a small house, that was where we lived. I shared a bedroom with my little brother, Freddy. We had chores to do around the house. The nanny, Claudia, was only there for adult supervision when my parents couldn’t be there. Her main job was to kick us outside and tell us to play, albeit with a very strict return time for washing and chores. Sure, it was our own forest and we had a guard tailing us, but really we just felt like ordinary American kids kicking up dirt and looking to see what made Nature tick.

“But it was important to Dad that we have real friends. We went to public school and Dad forbade us to ever mention our money. We said we were distant cousins of the famous Preamble family. Mom would pick us up in a Plymouth. As far as anyone knew, we were nobodies. And this was a really, really small school. I had fifteen kids in my graduating class. Most of them were poor. I loved them, and felt loved. Most of them had never cared that I was gay, I was just family. The effect was such that by the time I had graduated high school, I’d never hung out with another rich kid. Dad had kept us quarantined in normalcy.

“And Juni-Q, let me tell you this, after graduation I got to attend the grown-up parties in the estate and meet other rich kids: God bless my fucking dad, okay? Those kids were such incredible assholes! Not one of them was worth less than a billion, and not one of them was worth pissing on.

“So when I inherited my money, my dad asked me what was the first thing I wanted to spend my money on. Well, it was easy! I set up a foundation for my school to keep it from ever getting closed. They’ll have enough money to keep it running fully staffed with no kids for thirty years. Then I covered college for every kid who attended, and made the rest of them owners of the businesses they were working for. Every teacher got their house loan paid off along with renovations. A few student loans still needed to be paid off too, took care of that. Oh, and an indoor swimming pool addition to the gym, that was awesome. I swear I didn’t let them put my name on the wall!

“Then my dad asked me what was next. So I took my class to Hawaii. After that I was out of ideas, so my dad said, ‘Son, now I know I can trust you to live your life the way you were raised. You’ve honored me.’ And then he put another billion into my bank account, where he knew it would be safe.

Two billion???

“All the same, college is college and I knew I needed to get the best education, thus Stanford. Everybody knew who I was there, so I had to keep going out off campus, undercover. That was the only time I felt myself. Wherever people didn’t know my pedigree, I got to be free. And who I was was a kind of unlucky-looking, fairly lonely gay kid in the big city. That’s when I met Flenner, most fortuitously. Without knowing what he was getting into, he found me and treated me well. When I was hungry, he gave me the ramen noodles he lived on.

“Friends deserve anything and everything, Juni-Q. One only needs to know that they are a true friend first. Once I’m satisfied that the relationship is real, I let them see my kindness. I generally insist on things that will meaningfully improve people’s lives, which is why Flenner will graduate debt free from college, no matter how much longer we stay together. But what I want to let my friends know is this: the money means nothing. Only relationships count.

“Have you ever bought Flenner dinner, Juni-Q?”

“A million times.”

“Three times, woman!”

“Or three.

“Then you’ve already spent more of your lifetime earnings on him than I ever will. You did that because that’s what friends do. They should give something of themselves, something that hurts a little to give. The kind of money I have is an absurdity. Mathematically, you can’t even comprehend it except as a bunch of zeroes. Buying you dinner is nothing to me. Buying you dinner for a year is nothing to me, beyond the thought. I could hire you to eat food for me the rest of your life. The dollar amount is meaningless. All it means is that I think you should be nice to your friends whenever you can. And I hope that were the situation reversed, you would do the same for me. Now, you’re a bit different, Juni-Q, because Flenner spilled the beans on my wealth before you met me. His recommendation was enough, and you’ve been very gracious. Above all that, just a moment ago you got pretty surly over the idea of money defining a relationship. So as far as I’m concerned, Juni-Q, you’re vetted.”

“I am?” Juni-Q ears were ringing with Duke’s words. *How could anyone be that decent?* Had she vetted *him*? His story could only be true. At least from his point of view it was valid, but-

“Yes, you are, so there’s only one question left.”

“What?”

Flenner yelled, “Are you gonna go shopping with us or what, surly bitch?”

Juni-Q surrendered. She laughed all the way to the stores, and her friends could not help but laugh with her.

17. Dirty capitalism and weaponized sighs

Juni-Q was blitzkrieged by joy at the prospect of a shopping spree with a billionaire. *Oh, Duke, you're a sweet boy after all!*

She marveled that Flenner had found such quality boyfriend material. She couldn't be jealous, given that Duke was one of the least sexy people she'd met in her lifetime, but she could respect the pairing. Flenner was better than her in several ways, she felt: he was socially more adept, he was academically more industrious, and now he proved to Juni-Q that he was romantically more enlightened. *Elegant. He was simply elegant.* His spiritual proportions, she was learning, adhered to the Golden Ratio. The high school libertine who was content to give as many straight boys a taste of forbidden fruit as Time permitted was in a delectable relationship based on more ethereal qualities than lust. For his faith, untold riches were now at Flenner's fingertips. She pondered Margaret Whittington-Corningstone's moment of grace in prison that ignited her upward rise. *It does not matter, mere surrounding or situations,* Juni-Q testified to herself. MW-C's journey had begun the moment her heart changed. *The wealth was a mere consequence.*

She could not be jealous, nor mystified. Perhaps that could be okay though, today. She was only nineteen, she thought. *Salvation can wait when there's shopping to do.*

Besides, at least this resembled forward momentum. Hanging out in the computer shop avoiding alumni was no revolutionary act.

She followed Flenner and Duke out of the limo on Post St. directly in front of Saks Fifth Ave. She whirled around and took in the milieu, but the park-like area across the street was gashed with walk rails, an underground parking lot entrance, and a lot of concrete in general. At the far end was a modest children's play area, not much different from the one in the park down the street from her home. The insertion of normalcy impressed her with its lack of remorse. It fought for greenery in the grey battlefield. There it would stand until the world razed the last green shaft of it.

"Watch out in here, Juni-Q," Flenner muttered under his breath.

"Huh?" but Flenner was through the doors and she was playing catch-up.

Eventually she tired of hovering behind the boys, and Duke spotted it. "Go ahead, Juni, check out the women's clothing, shoes, perfume, whatever you want. Send whatever you want to the front cashier, just remember we only have so much trunk space!" He warmly smiled then turned back to enjoy Flenner going agog over the leather pantwear display.

Juni-Q saw the women's section and started walking over there. She walked past the silly perfume section. She wanted her own smells to excite a man. Dean Fogle had licked her armpits and huffed her juices from his fingers.

"Excuse me," a svelte dark-haired girl behind the counter nearly yelled at her.

"Sorry?"

"Yeah, you didn't sample any of the perfumes."

"That's correct. I'm heading to women's apparel, thanks."

"Come over here, please." *Impatient, what the hell?*

"I'm sorry?"

"It's okay, just come here already."

Juni-Q's mouth remained open slightly as she struggled to process what was happening. Did she fuck up somehow by not stopping at the perfume counter? Did this bitch really think Juni-Q had actually apologized to her? Juni-

Q couldn't resist the chance to gain clarity. She stepped to the counter.

The dark-haired dominatrix douchebag was unbelievably pretty, as if her face was CGI. The uncanny valley swallowed Juni-Q. Her eyes were stern, her luscious lips pursed. Was Juni-Q misbehaving, really? "I can tell you don't shop here normally, which is why we need to get you something good but not too expensive, just enough so you know what the real stuff is, give you something to strive for in life. *Acqua di Parma* should do, this bottle is only four hundred and seventy-five dollars. See the nice vaporizer there, like the movies?"

"Four hundred and seventy-five dollars?"

"Yeah, I know already you don't shop here, but this is a good start so just put it on a credit card."

"I'm not shopping for perfume. I'm trying to walk over there to women's apparel. Which I said to you already."

"Well, that doesn't work for me if you don't pay for this now, I'm not going to be here from one until two-thirty. Come on, it won't take a second for your time." She plopped a box of the perfume into a bag. "There, I've already got it bagged, let me swipe your card and give you your receipt. All sales are final on opened products or once we close for the day."

"What's your name?"

"Candace, thanks."

"Cool. Bye, Candace!" Juni-Q walked off as Candace devolved into a huffing, sighing monstrosity. Juni-Q couldn't be bothered to visualize what snarling venomous beast that CGI face had morphed into.

Candace was Florence Nightingale compared to this fucker Jerod.

Did Candace press a silent alarm? After twenty minutes of looking over clothes, no store associate came near her. Not only that, but she saw, at least twice, employees moving out of her path as she approached. She caught a glimpse through a clothing rack of a face sneering at her, watching

her. White-framed glasses bobbed as the head shook back and forth, half-lidded eyes locked in on Juni-Q. She drifted right and looked directly at the face, which was nonchalantly gazing upon clothes to be folded. Observing the full frame, Juni-Q surmised that this scowling salesman was perhaps more genetically gifted than Candace's chemically-obscured face would permit judgment to assess. *Oh, he was purrrrrrrretty.* Assuredly, that perfect mouth gave better blowjobs than Juni-Q could. Yet, she aspired.

"Alright, Cunt McCunterson, bring it on," she muttered under her breath. And then there was this goddamned character standing in front of her. Jerod's name plaque was too nice to be called a tag, engraved in burnished steel.

Juni-Q looked over the Eileen Fisher tops. As if camouflaged he disappeared.

Juni-Q jumped at the voice that bleated from those cocksucking lips through the tops. "Plus size is this way, darling. Put that back on the rack, please?" Juni-Q shrugged.

"Sure!" She draped the top she held over the rack instead of hanging it up. The gale force of this candy-frames-wearing motherfucker's sighs nearly knocked Juni-Q over, but she rolled with it and glided towards the plus section as he chased and commanded her. She asked, "What's your name?"

SIGH "Jerod, you're welcome. Now, you should look through things over here."

Juni-Q preferred dark tops that added a bit of mystery to her curves and obscured the occasional, unintentional jelly rolls. She locked eyes on a smart looking Jane Post top.

"Are you sure you can afford Jane Post? We have to be careful about how much those clothes get handled, this top is fifteen-hundred dollars right now."

"Fifteen-hundred!?"

"So you see my point about handling things one can't afford?"

“Could I, Jerod, make a point about being a stank bitch to someone who will buy a Jane Post shirt if she feels like it?”

“You’ll need to take that up with management. I’m just here to help.”

“Are you also here to make money? Because I’m not so sure.”

“I’m sure your sureness is relevant?”

“I’d like to try this top on.”

“Ah. Well, let me look for the key to the dressing room.” Jerod fluttered away.

Ten minutes passed, no sight. Juni-Q sneezed jade snot into a shirt, dropped it on the ground, and kicked it under a rack.

When Jerod came back, Juni-Q had an armful of tops, pants, and a jacket. “What’s this?”

“I’m going to be trying all of these on. Did you find the key to the dressing rooms, Jerod-sweetums?”

“I’m sorry, I just remembered they’re not locked. OH NO.” Juni-Q barely cared to notice, but Jerod’s face was turning bright red under the white glasses. He seized a Maria Rinaldi coat. “This coat is thirty-four hundred dollars; did you do this?” He lifted the sleeve and pointed it at her accusingly. Juni-Q couldn’t see anything wrong.

“What?”

“The sleeve is stretched out.”

“Seriously?”

“I’m going to need you to either pay for what you have or leave. We have to maintain the quality of our product, I’m afraid it’s not an option.”

“Oh, Jerod, you’re full of options and you don’t see it. I didn’t touch that goddamn jacket, go check your security cameras back in the office instead of clawing at your hemorrhoids over the unholy sight of me daring to shop in your fucking high-end bullshit store! Now why don’t you get the hell out of my way and let me go into the *putain* dressing room you prancing ninny!”

“Credit card, please.”

“I’m not ready to buy them yet!”

“I need to swipe it for a deposit in case you cause further damage to any more clothes, it’s a formal procedure.”

“How the hell do you people make any money? Is this what you call customer service? You’ve been either neglecting me or harassing me the entire time.”

“Look, Miss, I’ve had about enough of this game. If you want to know the truth, you’re clearly wearing a hoodie purchased at Wal-Mart, so your Glory is looking mighty Faded to be lippy with me.”

Duke’s voice: “I’d like to speak to the manager, please.” Jerod stepped back and looked Duke up and down. Jerod turned white. Flenner grinned behind Duke, eyebrows bouncing.

“Sir, of course! Might I ask what this is about so that I can help you first?”

“You’re offering shockingly horrific customer service to my friend. I was interested in knowing what I’d have to spend here today to make it a condition that you be fired.”

Jerod silently fled. Juni-Q’s heart soared. *What a fucker!* And there again, sweet Duke Preamble making Preamble Time, showing up exactly when it would be most gratifying for her. *No Salvation could be gained without a little Hell.*

It took \$20,000 to get Jerod fired, although that was the first number Duke threw out there. Odds were they’d have settled for \$5000. Such a luxury, and she felt no sympathy for justly-dealt Jerod, but was it wise? Juni-Q wasn’t sure.

Juni-Q eagle-eyed the stately silver-haired manager in immaculate clothing for signs that she would have treated Juni-Q poorly given the same chance as Jerod, but Juni-Q couldn’t tell. *What really drives this woman’s actions?* For today, Duke’s cash carved her into a model of congeniality.

Juni-Q looked dope as hell in her livery once all was said and done. She blushed with stingy pride when Duke and Flenner whistled at her.

18. Cracka-lacka

San Francisco turned purple.

Juni-Q thought, *it's only been twenty minutes.*

Oh.

Oh, this limousine feels so nice.

Categorically caught in the cushions, Juni-Q wasn't sure of many things in her life at that moment, but what she felt as she rubbed the plush leather with cracka-lackin' fingers bespoke security. She was sure she was sinking through the floor of the limo. She should have been neck deep five minutes ago at this rate. She felt the gravitational pull of the street tugging on the blood in her veins, and the tide was high. Uh-

"Flenner? I thought you said it would take an hour to kick in?"

Flenner morphed but was still Flenner. "You're okay, Juni-Q."

"Flehen," said Duke.

Juni-Q started up. "Who's driving us? Is it that same guy who helped us load the bags?"

Flenner gaped. "What? You're not sure who's driving? Duke, who's driving?"

"Who's driving?" Duke didn't understand the question.

Wait. Juni-Q gathered her thoughts and sank a few more feet through the cushion.

Flenner had put the tabs in their mouths twenty minutes ago, and said they'd arrive before it kicked in. An

hour, but no hour it was. Kicked-in wasn't right; Juni-Q's brain was reassembling. Its parts hung in the air, finding new synaptic connections. Through the windows the world blurred and smeared. There were other moving cars with organisms steering them, perhaps. Could they be self-steering? Automobile kaleidoscopes, swirling around. She knew the location of every car surrounding them. *No, they've all moved now. Nobody is in the same position they were two seconds ago. I'm not in the same position I was two milliseconds ago. My mind has changed since then. Also, now. And though my mind has changed again, instantly I snap to its complete configuration.*

Now it's all lost again.

The process went on forever. So much data, so much information...

Whoa, Juni-Q thought.

Oh, there was Flenner and Duke again. *Did they see it all?*

"Do you guys see it all?"

"Juni-Q, I love you so much right now."

Duke turned to Flenner. "Hey, uh...we're going somewhere." Flenner took Duke's hand and kneaded it anxiously.

"Juni-Q. My doors are open to you, Juni-Q. You know that?"

Juni-Q comprehended for a moment. *Not these car doors. Flenner's speaking in four dimensions. Space dialect.* She understood that she was also speaking space dialect.

"So we speak the same language, Flenner? Space dialectal..."

"How have we ever spoken?"

"Speaking?" from Duke.

Juni-Q and Flenner looked at him. Juni-Q wasn't connecting to Duke. His eyes were flat and far away. "I think Duke is out there too far."

Juni-Q dashed her eyes towards the driver, and saw with reassurance it was the same man. Leonard, she remembered. She replayed their introductions from the day

before. He had warm eyes and was very strong. Maori. She had never met a Maori person in person before, she believed. Not that she knew of. Who knew what threads of DNA weaved through the crowds of San Diego? She recalled that uncoiled DNA could reach the moon from the earth. A Maori web would cover San Diego, so close across the Pacific from New Zealand. Now imagine all the webs at once. She imagined San Diego waist deep in incomprehensibly uncoiled-then-knotted deoxyribonucleic acid strands. At some point, people grew tired and trapped and sunk below the mesh waves into posterity.

This was definitely a Maori chauffeur, she had that much figured out anyway.

Juni-Q felt serenity sweep over her. As long as they were in the limo. As long as Leonard was driving them. Nothing bad could happen.

In the ebb of hyperspace-thought, Juni-Q marveled that this was her first time ever dropping acid. She tried to get a lock on the experience, how it was different, what it was doing to her. What was it doing to her? Nothing, really. She was thinking differently. Different thoughts, not necessarily something happening in her body. Her body? She was barely aware of it. It seeped energy. The seats allowed her to retain energy.

Cracka-lacka.

“Juni-Q look at that! Look at that!” Flenner was pointing out the windows at the bay water.

Juni-Q looked out at the undulating waters and smiled. There must be a breeze gently licking the bay, peeling the water up in iridescent candy tongues. They rose and fell, rose and fell. *Seymour Rosenfeld?* Juni-Q was hypnotized by the rhythms. At once: every water molecule smashing up against every other water molecule, violent yet at the nano-microscopic level obeying perfect order. No molecule could break the rules and move where force did not direct it. Interactions upon interactions, trillions mounting. A human

had nothing on this body of water. It smiled, like Dean Fogle.

There must be something more she could do in her mind than continue crashing into thoughts of Dean Fogle. The relationship was too static. There were only her thoughts, he was long gone into Fay Vance's brown sugar bowl. Juni-Q needed to be free. She needed to be like those waves. Her brain waves could move with unprecedented fluidity. She could manipulate them according to her will. Instantly she saw this truth:

Her brain waves were suspended in darkness in front of her. Every thought at once, pressed up against each other. Not just the Fogle but the Flenner and Duke dynamics, her missed college aspirations, her smattering of other friendships and associations, enabling parents, her body image challenges that she mostly won YET THE STRUGGLE, her deeper ambitions whatever they were...

...and with the thought of how her childhood musings interspersed her normal daily thoughts, she saw all of the thoughts in her mind as a cross-section. Juni-Q turned them and observed their third dimension as they trailed back, back throughout her life, twisting and turning every second of every day, combining and recombining. It was a chaotic rope that narrowed and faded into the lost depths of her toddler years. And yet now the present was adding to the past, and the rope grew, instant by instant. By observing it she was changing it. By recognizing that change, she changed it further. Thought looped into thought, into thought, into thought. Her inputs were eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin, and her own mind. Six inputs.

I need a seventh input.

"It's everything, isn't it, Juni-Q?" a voice pushed through the darkness. It sparkled within the rope. She oohed.

Juni-Q certainly hoped that she was not adrift outside the existence rope permanently. *Was that even possible?* She had to be able to reengage with the world, but she was

drifting further from it. *Is there no tether?* She could not spin away as freely as an astronaut, right? This wasn't space. Hyperspace, sure. She felt that. She could control this. Juni-Q did not idly cruise. *Cruise?*

Cruise. They're going on a cruise. Duke has a boat. Flenner had whispered to her the facts: Five bedrooms, \$35 million dollar sticker. It was a floating hotel with a built-in swimming pool and a basketball court. It would float upon waves much like these bay waters which - she could not see anymore. Cool grey concrete and other manmade constructions interfered. Juni-Q turned back to the limo interior.

Flenner was snapping at her. Duke had his face in his hands.

Juni-Q pushed out some words. She was depressurizing and couldn't hear them. No, she could. She could hear Flenner too. She heard sounds, inasmuch. Sounds meant to be decoded. She misplaced her decoder box. It sounded like this: "Er fleh na mon das instner, compralana, comprehinda iz ta na preforance, tonalambra upka hippocampus, I don't think he can-" *oh, good, English now, what the hell had those sounds been?*

"What was that again?" Oh, well, look at that, she was speaking too, she'd finally reassembled her tongue.

"I think this acid went straight to his hippocampus, he's not here at the moment. Are you here, Juni-Q?"

"I'm here. Definitely for now I'm here."

"I'm here too. This isn't my first time, but understand me, third time on a rollercoaster is still a motherfuckin' rollercoaster, you grok that Juni-Q?"

"It's okay. I've just been seeing some new things in a different way, or maybe old things in a much older way. I could have that backwards. Works both ways, I suppose. You grok?"

"I do, Juni-Q. What should we do about Duke?"

"I don't know. Isn't he taken care of? Leonard will take care of him. He'll take care of all of us."

“You’re right, we’re pretty safe with Leonard.”

“You think he can tell anything is wrong with us?”

“I don’t know.” Flenner looked at the back of Leonard’s head. Juni-Q looked too, then screamed.

“What?”

“Oh shit! I just saw myself in the mirror.” She looked disorientedly around the cabin. She spotted it, in the wall. She tilted it towards eye level and her jaw dropped. Flenner nuzzled up beside her, his body burning coldly, and pressed his face up next to hers. They stared.

Wax sculptures gazed back.

“Okay, we definitely shouldn’t have done that,”

Flenner snapped as he flipped the mirror around, hiding it in the paneling. He pulled out a joint and through the abstract came a wave of joy. Juni-Q whoo-ed. “Let’s take some of the edge off, okay?”

They smoked and indeed, the spikes in body voltage became less-pronounced, almost smooth. The acid translated her state of existence; a high state translated into something much more pleasing. Flenner shotgunned the joint into Duke’s mouth, and although he coughed and billowed, he got plenty.

Now that hyperspace seemed to have receded into the background more, Juni-Q was feeling better able to converse. She worried about Duke, and the worry amplified. “Is this Duke’s first time too?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. I told him everything was going to be okay. I think he’s okay. Duke?”

Duke’s eyes were still unfocused, but they tightened. He looked at them both.

“Yes. I’m with you.”

Flenner and Juni-Q sighed in relief.

The limo came to a stop. The acid flooded it.

19. The Rain-Coated Lover

Leonard led the LSD-laden.

From the limo window's perspective, Juni-Q wasn't sure where the boat ended. It was forever.

First priority: getting out without falling into the water. She typically needed Flenner's help to get out of a car sober without staggering into something, but he was floating precariously through acid-country also. They stepped tentatively into the white blue yonder. Juni-Q gripped the limo door with cold hands and felt blood roar as it redistributed, fleeing extremities and her exploding brain, receding into a gastrointestinal singularity.

So many sails in the air, so much water nearby. There was a lot of information to process. Seagull squawks echoed inside her skull, obscuring their origins. She spun around trying to locate them. One perched on a wooden pillar six feet from her. The eyes bore into her. She looked back into the seagull. Its mind hummed with elegant simplicity. No wasted synaptic activity there. The seagull existed perfectly. Its eyes contained nothing less than billions of years of relentless evolution. Something had been lost with humans? Self-awareness took perfection and doubled it upon itself, magnifying irregularities, legitimizing them. Among humans, Juni-Q possessed a mastery of self-reflective undoing that folded on itself once more via chemical interpolation. With faint surprise, she enjoyed the sensation of accidental nirvana. Her soul hummed.

Pressure to move. Flenner and Duke had Leonard's arms around them, guiding them towards Juni-Q. They formed a human sieve, caught her and propelled her down the rugged salty pier, towards the personal cruise ship owned by the human being next to her named Duke. Could a single human really own such an enormous thing?

"What do you call this boat?"

"The *Rain-Coated Lover*."

"What does that mean?"

"Flenner, why did I name it that?"

"I thought of it."

"You said you got it from a song."

Juni-Q fried in the sunlight. She felt relief at the back of her neck where Leonard's shadow rested. She couldn't turn back while moving forward; resigned, "Thank you, Leonard, for guiding us. I'm very concerned about walking into that water."

"No problem, Ms. Quinten. Just doing my job."

"God, I sure hope it pays well because this has to be a fuckin' sorry spectacle."

"It's not as exciting as you might find it to be at the moment, Ms. Quinten."

Flenner purred. "Leonard, you are wise beyond your earth years!"

Leonard paused at the end of the dock before the boarding ramp. The three of them turned to look at him. "There was one chapter of my life when I dropped every day for a year, like John Lennon," he said. "At the end of the year, I realized I still hadn't written *The White Album*, nor had I done anything else for that matter, so I concluded my journey. But it never truly stops. You will use the wisdom you gain today the rest of your life."

Juni-Q said, "You did this...THIS every day for a year! Such is impossible to equal by the likes of me."

"Well, Ms. Quinten, to tell you the truth, the first day, I saw everything. I was just afraid to let go of it."

Flenner, “Is that how you can stand being a chauffeur?” Juni-Q hated that Flenner asked that question, but-

“You imply that being around you is difficult to stand.”

“Touche`.”

“I provide a service, I am exceedingly well-paid, and I have all the time in the world to think and read. May you ever be so lucky.”

Juni-Q was humbled by Leonard’s serenity. More than the pot, his placid waters resonated within her, calmed her, and gave her strength as the acid ate at her foundations. “Duke, Leonard should come with us. You don’t need him to drive you anywhere, come on, Leonard, come with us, please.”

Duke was in a difficult-to-judge place, asking flatly of Leonard, “Do you want to come with?”

Leonard smiled, obliging. “At your service, sir.”

Alarm bells within Juni-Q diminished and blended into the din inside her head. Leonard would save them.

Leonard tried to escort them up the ramp, but quickly found that it was easier to take one across at a time and return for the next one.

As Leonard escorted the others, Juni-Q immediately felt surprise over the stability of the yacht on the water. As her dials narrowed, she detected the sway of the boat and grabbed a rail to avoid any overcompensation that would land her in the deep deep blue.

Deep blue you call to me

Within you I cannot see

Except my sodden doom

My bones your pale heirloom...

By the time the other two got on the boat, Juni-Q had pitched forth and drowned within the cold waters in a few different mental scenarios, feeling the saltwater fill her lungs, seeing her limp form nestled among seaweed tendrils. Confronted instead with this white leviathan, so far empty,

she developed new priorities. “Who’s going on this boat with us?”

“Who do you want to come with us?”

“We can do this alone? Yes, yes...crew, right?”

“I have Leonard. He’s enough, honestly”

“Okay. Then first priority is a safe, comfortable room.”

“Juni-Q, we are not spending this cruise inside your room,” Flenner said.

“But we are going there right now, that much is settled. Leonard!”

“Mr. Duke, should we take your guests to their rooms?”

“Yes. Want. That. Want.”

Flenner, “God help us if he doesn’t pull it together soon.”

Leonard responded to Duke instead of acknowledging Flenner. “Understood.”

Juni-Q looked up at the yacht trying to comprehend its dimensions. From where she stood on the rear deck, it was impossible. She felt like she was standing on someone’s fancy back porch. They passed through a door, only to see another that looked very familiar to Juni-Q.

“That’s an elevator?”

“Three floors, Ms. Quinten.”

Flenner said, “I-know-right, Juni-Q? This is what I was trying to tell you. While you’re with Duke, you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“You mean while you’re with Duke.”

“As long as I am, you are.”

“That isn’t right.”

“What part?”

“Nevermind.”

“Juniper Quinten, are you displeased?”

“Shut the fuck up and get me in that room.”

In the elevator a few beats later, Juni-Q realized Flenner was quietly crying. Duke stared at him. Leonard put

a hand on his shoulder. Juni-Q counted backwards and tried to figure out how long she had listened to him cry without understanding the sound. To also then interpret what this crying sound signified- *fuck, I don't have time for this shit.*

She was working hard enough already to keep the pillars of her own universe from crashing in. *God, this fucking drug lasts how long? Twenty-four hours he said?* It had been maybe one.

The doors opened to the master suite and, bedroom forgotten, Juni-Q heard the sweet song-call of serenity from within.