

*'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 her bedroom...**

Juni-Q was traveling by train to San Francisco where she would spend spring break with her beloved best friend, Flenner. Scuttering past the fountain in front of San Diego's Santa Fe Depot, she felt like a grub on an upturned stone, bitterly exposed to the world, twitching her appendages with vain desire to return to safety. Yet today, beautiful Flenner was safer than her bedroom, and so she pressed on.

As a deer will cross the highway to get to the forest, Juni-Q pushed open the door to the train station. Horror of horrors, it was filled with people.

*I press, I press on, for the air of my bedroom did choke me so. I need to see Flenner!*

Left foot, right foot...

Her attempts to be nonchalant failed spectacularly. She was unable to keep her eyes from darting around the station like a sparrow with a frumpy feather complex.

Nobody noticed her anxious gaze anyway.

Nobody even looked at Juni-Q.

Everyone in the train station buried their noses in their phones.

Juni-Q, historically, 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 even 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 and quickly returned her card to her wallet.

“Enjoy your trip, Juniper!” the teller chirped.

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.* “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.

The digital boarding sign flashed her train's imminent arrival.

San Francisco called to her.

*Soon, and please, let something be different.*

Juni-Q sat, limbs pulled in tightly, in the corner of the train station looking at her smartphone. She flipped through her Twitter feed, liking a think piece on Kiesłowski's *Three Colours* trilogy. On her browser, it was 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 eighteen-seventy-three, died nineteen-thirty-one. Nope. Dean Fogle: “See Dean's stats playing for the University of Colorado basketball team.” Nae-that-be-not-it. As she neared the end of the row of Deans, she decided to try the News index, then last-resorted to Images after coming up empty-handed. A fat old man, then 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.”

*Oh, 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 ultimately, 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, so 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, was a fellow youth of nineteen whom 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 Tricksy LeCabre in 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. “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 now opened before Juni-Q.

Juni-Q settled into her Amtrak train seat, planning to be 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 gone and she had no idea of exactly how much she had needed him until he careened back into her life. 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 on to 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.

“Juniper,” Hugh began, 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?”

Hugh smiled like he had every day of his life. “Probably, but I can't think of them.”

“Can you let me think about that for you?”

Florence leaped in, saying, “We 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 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 than 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. Panicked, Juni-Q looked remorsefully, and somewhat bitterly 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, returning 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, *née* Corningstone, had soared through an academic life and popped out at the end bedecked with degrees and honors. A mathematics and 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 fifty.

Today she sells *L'esthétique de la vie* perfume and is worth one-point-one billion dollars. 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 love 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.

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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 container. Juni-Q squealed. Flenner stuffed his face with a scoop, and then ran to Juni-Q.

"OMG, girl, come here!" He said through the ice cream, yet his words were 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 Flenner.

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

"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?"

Flenner 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?"

"Flenner, 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, Flenner LeCabre?"

"Duke."

"Is that his name or his title?"

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

"I expected 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."

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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.

Preamble 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 was the founding CEO. As a young man delivering pizzas, he won a lawsuit against Pizza Boys after his manager beat Court unconscious

over a late delivery. Court 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 Preamble 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 thirty-five 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 unpleasant and veiny, blush red against his pale white, waxy bone-jutting body. 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 twenty-four-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 up on 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, so it’s natural he would grow and change while I stay the same. But I haven’t stayed the same. Entirely. I’ve done a lot of growing and 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.

Never mind. 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 eight that evening. Duke Preamble would be waiting with a limo at eight-fifteen. Flenner understood – but perhaps Juni-Q did not – that if

Flenner failed to walk out of the door of his dorm between eight-fifteen and eight-sixteen, 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 flayed.

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, he 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 strobe light, a wallflower grew. In the stony pockmarks of Duke Preamble’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 inside that dance club. Yet he could only lean against the wall and stare longingly. Flenner admitted he didn’t 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, so 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 Preamble. 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 Flenner 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.