



VISION.

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VISION

VISION is a journal by students, for students. Together, we shed light on UTM's creative student body and provide a safe space for creative expression, growth, and reflection. Through thoughtful storytelling, unique perspectives, and an ignited passion for creativity, our journal has something for every student to take away from.

This year's theme UNMASKED showcases the shared experiences we have while growing up. As children, we view the world with curiosity and confidence. Every new sight, sound, touch, taste, and feeling is new and exciting. But as we grow up, this sense of excitement shifts. The world around us changes, and in turn, the world changes us.

UNMASKED

Societal expectations warp our vision and we create facades conforming to what we believe society wants from us. We hide behind false versions of ourselves because we think that the world won't accept us for who we really are.

Alas, as adults, we seek the one moment. The one moment where we return to childlike wonder. The one moment where all fear and expectations disappear and we finally reveal the person we've always wanted to be. The person we've always known we were. And it's then, when we finally remove the mask we've been hiding under for so long, that we see the world with a fresh set of eyes again.

***That's the moment we live for.
That's the moment that matters.***

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EDITOR'S NOTE

"Unmasked" teaches us about the unveiling of truth, authenticity, and vulnerability. It explores the journey of removing masks that society sees us wear, revealing one's true self, and confronting inner conflicts. Our facades are stripped away, leading to self-discovery, personal growth, and deeper connections with others. It encapsulates the rawness of human emotions and the liberation found in embracing one's true identity.

- Disha Prabhu (Editor In Chief)

MEET THE TEAM

OUR TEAM LEADS

Disha Prabhu

Editor in Chief

Tala Abu-Ali

Writing Lead

Aubrey Pratama

Co-Graphics Lead

Joshua Tan

Co-Graphics Lead

Habiba Abdelwahab

Co-Marketing Lead

Suhanee Sood

Co-Marketing Lead

Keira Johannson

Photography Lead

SPECIAL THANKS TO

Illustrators

Eva Chen

Aria Zheng

Zoya Rizvi

Designers

Hannah Grace Wang

Shannon Peng

Photographers

Faiza Haque

Keira Johannson

Editors

Hannah Grace Wang

Maram Qarmout

Writers

Massimo Bozzo

Dana Alhabash

Moon Phan

Rio McKen

Koko Johnson

Naiii

Naiii

Naiii

Written by Moon Phan
Edited by Hannah Grace Wang
Illustration by Aria Zheng

Naiii

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Nailbiter

Xuan flinches at the clatter of pots and pans smashing onto the floor. One of Achai Group's directors has thrown a fit in the building's main kitchen again. She and her coworkers stand, bowing their heads in what's slowly becoming a dreadful weekly occurrence.

The director picks up a floral scarf with his thumb and index finger, nose scrunched. "And this? Miss Roseanne, you should know by now that accessories are banned. That includes jewelry, coloured shirts, and..." he pauses, narrowing his eyes at another co-worker. "And painted nails. I can't have you making our company look ridiculous. Does everyone understand?"

"Yes, sir," the kitchen staff respond in a chorus.

When he finally scurries away on a phone call, he drops the scarf on the ground. Xuan's closest co-worker, Roseanne, picks it back up, leaning on the counter with a big sigh.

"Just my luck," Roseanne grumbles. She holds the scarf up to her neck, using a nearby fridge to view her reflection. "I'm so sick of wearing our plain, white uniforms. We're assistant cooks, sure, but not blank canvases."

Xuan shakes her head, looking at her friend. "I know, Rose, but it's not worth it. We need to be perfect. Attitude, uniform, work, and all."

"Sometimes," she begins, seeing as the other staff have left the kitchen. "Just some days, I think about how nice it would be, to wear a nice suit, to sit in a nice office, to never have to worry about anything, ever."

"That's—"

"How pathetic, right?" Roseanne cuts Xuan off. She exhales. "But you should still try it. Do a little rule-breaking, like a rebellion for once. I thought the feeling was sorta nice."

"As nice as keeping our jobs?" Xuan asks sarcastically. She thinks about Achai Group for a moment, the biggest corporation specializing in medical technology. The wage for working in their kitchen and cafeteria alone kept Xuan away from a supposed "rebellion".

Roseanne points to Xuan's gloved hands. "While you bite your nails when no one's looking... I happen to wear my scarves so everyone can see. That's the difference between us."

As she takes in her friend's words, Xuan can't understand. This job is all they have. Their utility bills, their student debts, and their chances of ever really living. The world spins even when their minds are sane. What risk could ever be worth it?



Xuan rubs her arms and looks at her appearance, reflected in the shiny steel refrigerators that cost too much. Her hair is tied in a neat bun. She adjusts her white buttoned shirt under a white apron, her shoes equally bright. Xuan frowns. This outfit fits all the guidelines. The guidelines that eat at her each day.

Her days flicker away.

She clocks out at midnight. Her hands are dry from serving, and washing dishes upon dishes. She shoves them in her pockets before she walks home.

—

Xuan wanders down the street after work. Drunk-en steps, sober mind. The city has shut down for the night. She lets her gaze skip across the shadows.

When she's a few blocks from home, she catches a glimpse of a flashy window display. The advertisement reads, *"Colour your world! Susan Helen Nail Polishes. Over 20% off this week!"*

Xuan snorts. The turquoise, striped poster could erupt in giggles if it came to life. She could imagine her marketing professors, in baggy clothes and unkempt hair, criticizing the tiny font, the outdated design, and the photoshop.

She had long given up on marketing for a quick way to pay her debts. She was now a manager for the company cooks, and managers don't need nail polish. Besides, polish was useless. It would come off the next day.

Xuan continues and takes a couple of steps down the road, yet the words linger in her mind. Her mother had said something about nail polish once.

—

"Mom!" the little girl shrieked, her toes grazing the muddy puddle of water. In spring, the rain was heavy, and the sun was light. The foolproof recipe for messy picnics at the park.

"Oh, Xuan! Be careful. You must be careful, or your clothes will get all dirty," her mother scolded her. But her voice was too soft, too hushed for a six-year-old to ever listen.

Xuan sat down on the yellow gingham picnic mat. She rested her hands on her mother's warm lap, tapping away. "What colour?" she asked. "Pink? Blue? Polka dots, stripes, and purples?"

Mom let out a small chuckle, covering her own mouth. "Would you like all of them, honey?"

"I can do all of them?" Xuan questioned with a cheeky grin. She's never had so many colours on her nails before. Since she had ten nails, does that mean she could even do ten colours?

She received a small nod in reply. Mom laid out the polish bottles. Carefully, she brushed strokes of colour across her daughter's nails.

Five minutes passed by.

Xuan yawned, nudging her mother's arm. She almost messed up her nail colour. She looked up to her mother. "Can you paint faster? They're gonna come off after I play anyway."

Mom blew on Xuan's nails. "You're right. They won't last very long. Not when you run off into all sorts of places," she laughed.

"Then why are you going so slow?" Xuan asked, pouting.

"It's important," her mother told her, beginning to paint her daughter's thumbnail with red polka dots.

"Don't ask me why."

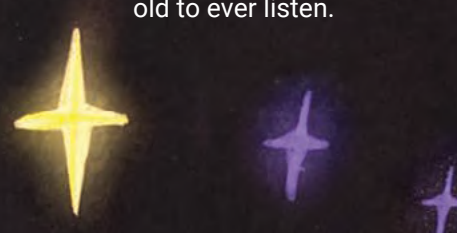
With a tilt of her head, Xuan looked at her half-finished nails. "Really? Why?"

"Hm..." her mother trailed off, searching for an answer despite her earlier response. "Beautiful things last for a moment, and nothing more."

"And bad things?"

"In your entire life... they last for an *even* shorter moment," Mom whispered, as though she's let Xuan in on a big secret. It's enough to send a breeze of giggles from her daughter's lungs. "Now come, let me finish those nails of yours."

Half an hour later, Xuan danced around her mother, still seated on the picnic mat. "Pretty!" she exclaimed with a big giggle. "Do my hair next! Super fast, please?"



Her mother gestured for her to sit down, so she did. "Do you remember *anything* that I tell you?"

"Uh huh. You said... I'm the prettiest? Smartest?" Xuan guessed with a playful look.

Mom's laugh quickly turned into an uncontrollable coughing fit. She reached for her coat and scarf, wrapping them around her frail arms before smiling at Xuan. "Yes, remember those things. No one can take them away from you."

"What am I doing?" Xuan asks herself out loud. After last week's dream, she bought a discounted Susan Helen nail polish bottle from that store. Her short nails are messily painted red. Xuan sits alone in the work changing room, resisting the chance to chew on her nails.

But her mother was right. They look pretty. They look strange.

As footsteps approach the changing room, Xuan slips out the door with her hands in her pockets. She stands up straight and clears her throat, disguising her exasperated expression with a smile. "Good morning, director."

He nods, waving her off, walking past her with a side-eye.

When she's in the clear, Xuan presses her lips together. *For a medical company that cares so much about health, they really don't care about mine, she thinks admittedly.* She rushes down the hallway to the main kitchen to start her shift. There, she slips on clean gloves like a weary, experienced surgeon.

Repetitive work. Repetitive hours. Red nails scream through her tight, black gloves. As she serves plates to corporate men and women, in suits more expensive than her Toronto rent, Xuan smiles at her little secret.

"You've been smiling all day," Roseanne whispers in her ear. She stacks the cafeteria plates beside her. "You heard a new rumour, huh? C'mon. Share it with me, huh?"

Xuan shakes her head. "No, I just feel like... it's a really nice day today."

Roseanne laughs at her simple reply. "Really?" Xuan smiles again, and Roseanne continues, "You better text me the details later," she says before turning away.

Soon, Xuan's twelve-hour shift ends. In quick steps, she peels her gloves off, dumps them in the trash, and sticks her hands into her jacket, catching just a glimpse of red.

She digs for her apartment keys, somewhere deep in the bottom of her leather work bag. Then, as usual, she sticks the metal key in the door. But she pauses.

Her fingernails. Streaks of red smudged across the tips of her fingers. Nails, now chipped and stained. The joy of her rebellious secret is gone. Xuan stares at them.

The blood-like colours, oddly, make her laugh. She worked hard to hide them, all to protect this ridiculous, trivial sight. It's nearly 2 AM, so she stifles the next laugh before heading inside. She drops her bag on the floor and flops down onto the couch with her phone tightly in hand. Her position gives her the perfect view of her bookcase.

Xuan watches the red nail polish bottle that rests alone, on the top shelf. She wasn't ready to fully take off the facade of a perfect corporate worker. Hiding her nails, breaking the strict guidelines, Xuan felt like a child again.

What a life we would live if it was ours to begin with, she wonders.

Then she swipes at her phone, adding all kinds of things to her cart. Nail polish and clippers, rings and bracelets. Finally, a blue floral scarf. One that would match Roseanne's.

After tapping the check-out button, Xuan stands up to grab the same nail polish bottle. She gets back to a comfortable, cross-legged position on the couch. In a few messy swipes, her nails are painted red again, though they remain so bumpy and chipped. She throws her head back onto the coffee-stained cushions.

Whatever. Rose-tinted nails work fine. Broken nails grow back.

Misunderstood

Misunderstood Me

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Misunderstood

Misunderstood Me

Written by Rio McKen

Illustration by Eva Chen

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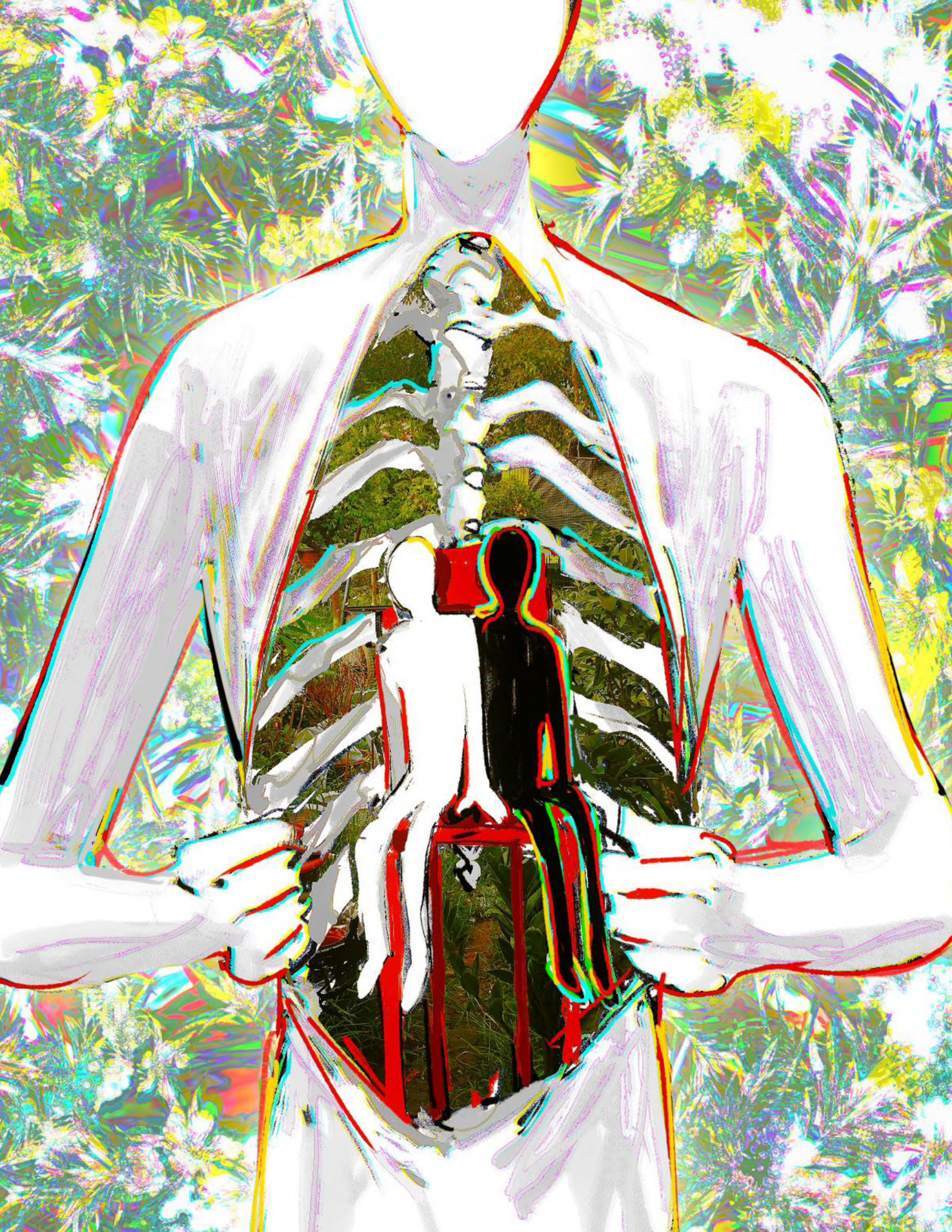
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A person of might, yet shrouded and lost, in the abyss their spirits tossed.

Beneath the mask, a tear unseen. A place of sorrow, tucked between.
The fear they hide, a fragile core. A side of them, they can't ignore.

Your eyes, so sad, with tales within. A grin so thin, your smile, a fleeting whim. In stillness, you stand tall, all alone. Your "mean" worn, a looming thin tone.

In stillness falls, as night draws near. Alone they gaze into the sky. Their 'mean' unravels, growing thin. He yearns to let the light in.

A softness dwells in secret space, a gentle kindness, hidden grace. But terror binds, their past unwinds. And still the darkness in him blinds.

He dreams of taking just one stride, to look within, to not hide.
A step so small, yet brave and true. To find the good he always knew.

His battle rage, his path so steep. In dreams he yearns to cross the deep.

To mend his soul, to heal his mind. And find the light that's buried inside.

But destiny, a chain so tight. A struggle in the endless night.
Yet hope remains, a distant gleam. For even villains dare to dream.

In whispers soft, his heart shall call. A plea for mercy, for a fall.
To find redemption, to be free. And let his true self finally see.

Written by Massimo Bozzo
Edited by Hannah Grace Wang



SCRUNCHIES

Photographed by Faiza Haque

I don't know how it happened. To this day, it still doesn't make any sense to me. How could it end? Just like that?

Maybe I'll never know exactly what happened.

One of my closest friends, Michael, was in a relationship with another of my now-closer friends, Bea. It all started when I found out they liked each other. Michael and I walked down Bristol Road on a sunny midafternoon in July of 2019. It was rare that we hung out just the two of us. There were at least three or four people every time we went out. I was too busy with track and field practice and my part-time job at Kumon to be the one making plans. Blank squares on my calendar were like gold to me.

"How's the romance scene going?" I asked with a nudge and a laugh. I never knew how to talk about these things, but I had to kill the silence somehow, plus I was curious. Finding out someone's crush always fascinated me.

"Well, there's this one thing, but I don't know if I should tell," Michael responded with a smile. I knew it. There was something going on, I could feel it. I knew because he smiled and tilted his head away from me slowly in embarrassment.

"Who is it?" I chirped back. My eyes lit up as if I was a kid getting a full-sized candy bar for Halloween.

"You wouldn't know her, at least I think you don't. You probably don't," Michael sputters. He makes a street's length of excuses not to tell me until I get him to cough up a name once we arrive at Frank McKechnie Community Centre.

"Bea."

Michael stared at me with a huge smile plastered all over his face.

"I had my first kiss right after the last day of school. My parents left, and it was just us in my living room. I haven't told anyone, you're the first," he continued, seeming both over the moon with joy and nervous at the same time.

"You can't tell anyone, not, yet, I mean. This just happened, we're keeping it a secret for now," he reported. I wasn't one to tell secrets. It was rare that I'd tell someone a secret about someone else, especially a new secret, but I didn't even think of doing that.

We got a summer's worth of fun out of the beaten-up foosball table inside the community centre which we stood hunched over, playing for hours. Michael had to go to British Columbia for Sea Cadets for most of the summer. I wouldn't be able to see him until he came back, which was at the beginning of grade 11. Over the summer, the secret—of my closest friends, that is—became the talk of the town. Luke managed to shake the secret out of me like a mob boss trying to get secrets out of a goon. Once the new school year began, our whole friend group knew.



Michael and Bea became closer. They talked more in school, held hands, and even wore matching scrunchies. The same yellow ones that Bea and Michael bought together at the Uniqlo in Square One on Valentine's Day. They were velvety yellow, like the emblem on our school uniforms. You could always pick them out of a crowd. Once Bea was officially knighted into our friend group, we all became closer friends. Her relationship with Michael was like something out of a novel or a movie. It wasn't showy or popular, but they looked like the happiest couple at St. Francis Xavier Secondary School. I could always pick them out of a crowd of white polo shirts and navy pants; Michael always slung his arm around Bea's shoulder whenever they sat together at lunch, and Bea always put her hands over Michael's eyes to surprise him from behind. She made sure to give him positive notes written on cute stationary, ones with little hearts and smiley faces. I was certain that they'd stay together.



Until the unexpected happened.

I was standing slouched and overtired outside of the computer room as usual, waiting for a teacher to let me and the other white shirts and navy-blue slacks into class, until something caught my eye; it was Bea. She had class in the room right across from mine, so I usually saw her when I was heading to third period, but something was off. She was silent. Dead silent. Usually, she'd greet any friend of hers with a cheerful hello, but she just shuffled up to me in sadness and wrapped her arms around me without making any further movements. "What's wrong?" I asked.



"We broke up."

I stood there as still as her, also with nothing else to say. I didn't know how to respond. I was shocked. All I could do was wrap my arms around her in comfort and breathe out an "I'm sorry." Bea was my friend. She was friends with everyone in my friend group, and even though I was closer with Michael, I didn't stay mad at either of them. Neither of them was at fault. They didn't end the relationship.

Bea's parents did.

I found out later in the year when Michael and I walked home from school, the same way I found out how the relationship had begun. They took a break from seeing each other after Bea's parents forbade her from seeing Michael the moment they found out. Bea wasn't allowed to date until she was an adult, and getting caught before that time meant no more Michael. I still talked to both Bea and Michael, but not at the same place or at the same time. Our lunch table felt emptier. Our rowdy card games of president felt quieter. Our conversations had something missing. The scrunchies never made a return. Both Bea's and Michael's wrists remained unwrapped, with no yellow elastic to band their bond. Bea sometimes wore hers.

She took the breakup really hard.

But as summer passed, things changed. When I thought that a four-month absence would be permanent, the impossible told me otherwise. Michael and Bea started to talk again, in person and at school, with our friend group, and even in after-school clubs. They slowly reunited, not in a relationship, but in a friendship. They were always friends from the beginning, but they didn't let the breakup get the best of them.

After months of uncertainty within the friend group about what was going to happen, things went back to normal. It seemed even better than normal. Our lunch table felt full again, our card games felt more enjoyable, and our conversations got back what was missing: Michael and Bea being together. It didn't matter whether they were dating or not. Just having the two of them as friends brought our friend group closer together, whether it was Bea's wholesome doodles of us all or Michael's ability to make a song out of anything. It made even the smallest interactions morale boosters when we least expected it.

Relationships didn't always work out in our high school, but that didn't stop them from being together. One day, months later, I saw something familiar. I forgot about it for a while. It had been a while since I'd seen it and frankly, I didn't think I'd see it again.

Both Michael and Bea had a scrunchie hung on their wrist. The same yellow one.



“Paddle faster!” my friend, Rawan, shrieks.

“Okay, I am trying,” I pant. The kayak sways side-to-side. We’re in the middle of a lake in Huntsville, Ontario. The May sun beams down on us.

It’s our annual family trip. Every spring, our family and friends book a cottage to stay at for three days. Every year we roast marshmallows, swim in the lake, and sing along to traditional songs.

My sister, Joud, calls for us and lets us know there’s a surprise at the shore.

Rawan sits across from me and struggles to paddle through the waves. We attempt to budge the kayak forward, but the paddles weigh down our hands and resist the current.

After a few minutes of panic, we finally arrive at the shore, roll out of the kayak, push it to the sand, and return the paddles to the shed.

I sprint as fast as I can to the plain field of grass and wooden cottages located above the lake. Baba, who stands with Uncle Alsier, carries a life jacket, a paddle, and a gun.

Not a gun, a rifle.

I freeze.

Uncle Alsier laughs at my reaction and carefully grabs the rifle from my father. I approach them faster and Rawan tags along. “Do you want to try? It’s a BB rifle,” Uncle Alsier says.

“Yes!” Rawan’s face lights up.

“You can go next, Dana,” Uncle Alsier says. “Oh yeah, okay.”

Baba side-eyes me.

Uncle Alsier loads the pellets in their place and hands the rifle to Rawan. He adjusts the rifle against her right shoulder and peeks through the rear and front sights.

“Now, all you have to do is aim at the target, then pull the trigger,” Uncle Alsier instructs. “Easy,” she says.

My friend flawlessly aims at her target— three industrial rubber planks that look like little black rectangles from our distance— and pulls. She’s a natural. She perfectly nails the planks, one by one. She hands the rifle back to Uncle Alsier.

It’s my turn now. I reach for the rifle from Uncle Alsier when Baba

Paddle Faster

Written by Dana Alhabash

Edited by Maram Qarmout

Illustration by Zoya Rizvi

snatches it from my hand.

"She won't know how to use it. Let me try first."

I step back and glare at Baba. I watch the simple steps once again. The pellet soars and hits the planks.

"Yallah, you try," Uncle Asir says to me.

I grab the rifle. It feels heavy. I struggle to hold the weapon straight. I stumble a few times before the rifle rests against my left shoulder.

"Right shoulder," Baba scowls.

I nervously shift it to my right side. I attempt to follow the steps.

"Right shoulder, peek through the hole, pull the trigger," I whisper to myself, like I'm chanting a prayer.

I can do this, I got this.

I place my finger through the trigger's loop. I prepare to pull the trigger, when Baba, who stands behind me, adjusts the position of the rifle.

"You need to rest your right hand here," he points to the top surface of the rifle with his finger. "And move your left hand here."

"Okay, I can do it now," I respond.

"Now lift the rifle closer to your eye level, and make sure your right index finger loops through the trigger guard."

"Okay, I got it now," I respond again.

"Now try to shoot at the target," he steps back.

I take a deep breath and pull the trigger. The pellet digs straight into the ground, nearly five feet ahead of me.

I look back at Baba. He places his hands on his hips and sighs.

"You did good, Dana!" Uncle Alsier says and grins.

"Good job, Dana!" Rawan proclaims.

I scan Baba's face for a reaction, anything at all.

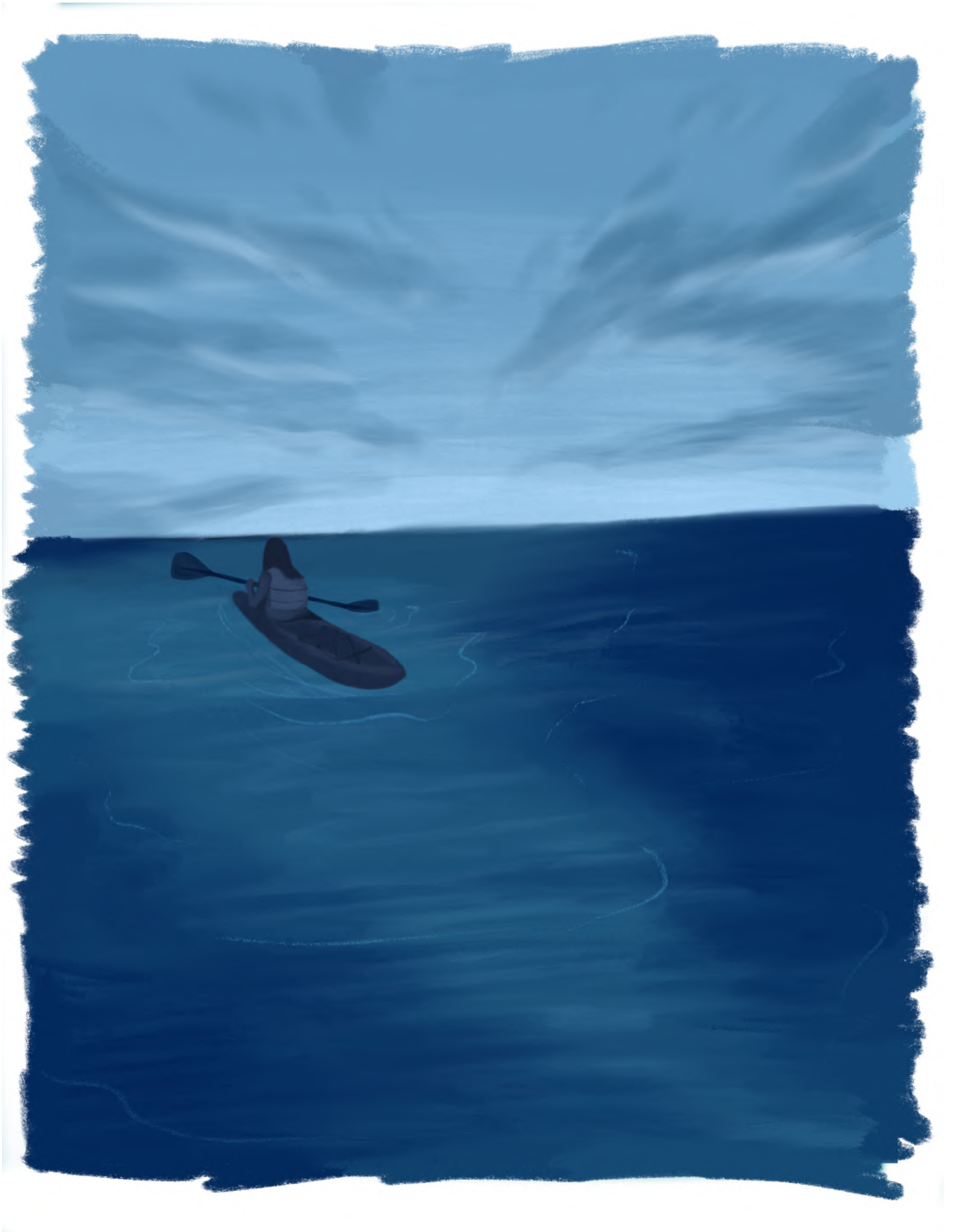
He looks unamused, and his expression makes me think.

I think about when I was twelve years old and he wouldn't let me ride a bike to school because I wasn't cautious enough, and I think about when I was fourteen years old and he thought I was going to fail science, and I think about last month when he wouldn't let me drive with him because he was worried I'd wreck his car. He never believes in me.

"This wasn't even fun," I lied.

My hands grip the rifle, but my mind tells me to drop it, it thuds on the floor and Uncle Alsier winces. I walk away. I hear Rawan shout, "Dana! Bro, where are you going? Come back!"

I don't respond. I push a kayak into the lake, get in, and paddle faster and faster while it sways aggressively, away from them.

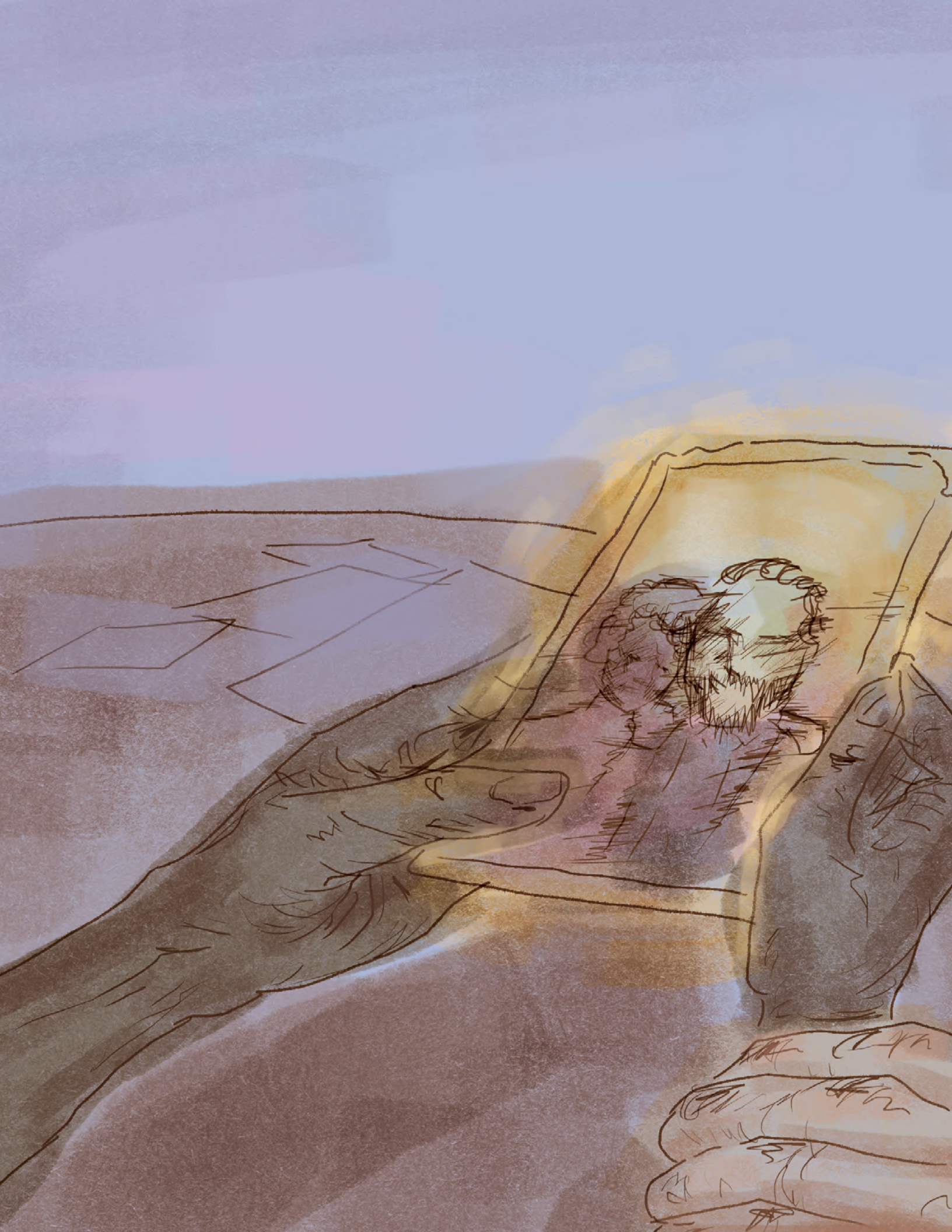


Written by Koko Johnson
Edited by Maram Qarmout
Illustration by Aubrey Pratama





**AN
INDISCERNIBLE
PHOTOGRAPH**



AN INDISCERNIBLE PHOTOGRAPH

The potted pink flowers sway in the soft breeze as they hang off a metal stake. A flash of iridescence flutters into view. I readjust my eyes to focus on the small zipping action. It pauses for a second and hovers just above one of the feeders swinging from the stake. The hummingbird's intricate beauty widens my eyes and forms dimples in my cheeks. Though it's late March, the morning skies are clear, and the sun illuminates the garden outside the window. I continue peering at the various plant breeds. I recognize the blooming New Jersey tea sprouts that were added to the flower bed during my last visit in 2018. I listen to the shuffling of feet behind me, the grating of chair legs across the floor, followed by the struggled opening of a drawer. I focus on the sound of rustling paper, though I still gaze into the garden.

"Oh, this is another photograph I haven't seen in a long time," my grandfather's slow, breathless voice utters. My attention is drawn away from the window. He sits across from me, staring fondly at the photo between his slender, wrinkled fingers. He looks up and reverses the photo. I lean forward to see it better. The photo is monochrome but has a sepia tinge to it. There are rips along the edges. A noticeable crinkle has formed in the right-hand corner. Despite its poor condition, the picture looks beautiful.

A tall man, with pushed-back hair, and a well-groomed beard, sports a fall jacket and a paperboy cap. His expression is confident, but kind. I think he looks stunning.

"Poppa," I chuckle, "your beard looked so different back then."

"Yup! Now, I have a Santa Claus beard," he laughs. I look back at the picture, this time focusing my attention on the woman beside Poppa. She poses humbly, her hands clasped in front of her floral dress. Her dark hair is styled in a bob with curled ends. Her head is tilted towards Poppa. Her smile is subtle yet sweet.

"This photo was taken during one of our first dates, back in 1956," Poppa announces as he reads the date scribbled in pen on the back of the photo.

"Can I see?" Grandma is seated next to Poppa at the dining room table. She had been peacefully humming as I looked out the window. Now, she cranes her head to get a look at the picture. Poppa moves the photo into her line of sight. I watch as she blinks her eyes in frustration, desperately trying to make out the image. "I remember that day precisely," she confirms.

Grandma began losing her sight a few years ago. At present, she can barely perceive what is playing on their big-screen TV. I know she cannot see the photo clearly. Poppa knows it too. He has been taking extra good care of her since her eyesight started diminishing.

"It shows you and I standing in front of that diner we frequented every few weeks." He describes the details of the picture.

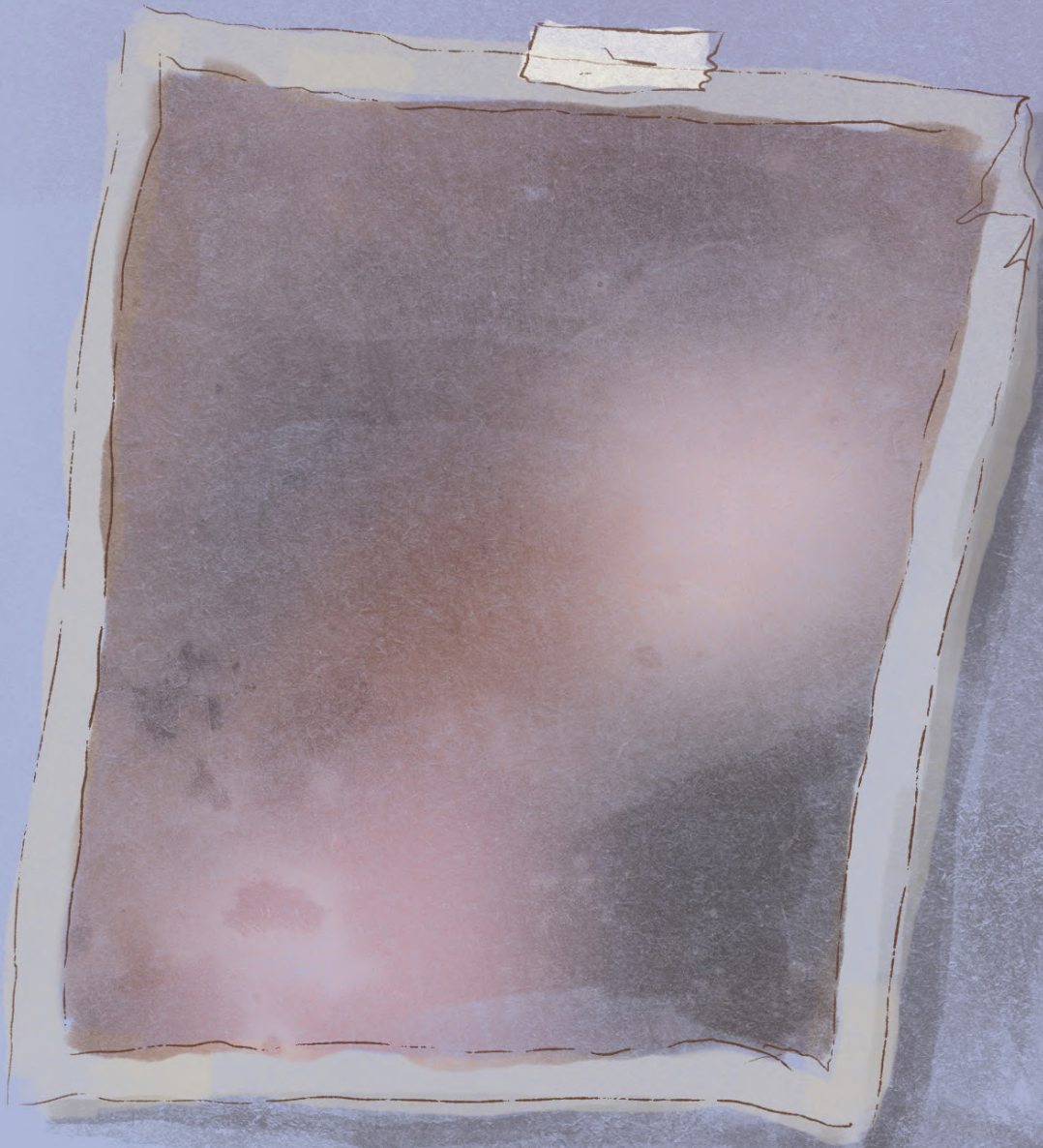
"I know," Grandma chirps back. I can tell she is upset that she cannot see the image. "Your pal Roger set us up," she knits her brow, trying to recall the events of that day. "I remember Jan told me she wanted to go on a double date and invited me to meet some man I had never met before. Some mystery Ralph." Grandma replicates that same subtle smile as in the photo.

"You see, Kori, since your grandma is Black, other White men would not consider going out with her. But I didn't care because I have always seen people for who they are inside, not for the colour of their skin," Poppa explains to me. I try to imagine how they must have felt being in a relationship most people of their time would have frowned upon.

"Yep, your grandpa had no problem dating me. I thought he was so handsome the first time I saw him," Grandma giggles. The sound warms my heart. "I knew he would be the one," she says proudly.

"And more than 60 years later, that same handsome man sits beside you," Poppa grins in her direction.

"Yes, I knew right then," Grandma smiles at me. "And though you may be young now, someday Kori, you'll meet someone and you'll know right then too."





Photographed by Keira Johansson

*"...a childlike **purity** and closeness to the earth."*



GROUND

This photo series explores our connection to nature. The model, dressed in all white, reflects a childlike purity and closeness to the earth. The playfulness of twirling in the water illustrates that feeling of being a kid again and finding joy in simple things.

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SYRE

Child-Like-Wonder

Photographed by Faiza Haque



These are a set of photos that coincide with Jaden Smith's album, SYRE. The colours, the atmosphere and composition, are to make the viewer feel as though they are entering a dream-state world. The album references many messages about dreams, stories from the artist about being a child, and how he is now. I was trying to capture the essence of that with these photos. Feeling like a little kid just trying to dance with the moon.

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*"Feeling like a little kid just trying to **dance** with the moon."*

*"As children, we have many **hopes**, and **dreams**, and **aspirations** that fuel us to reach for the stars."*

