

Justine Chan

Keeper

When you declared to your mom that you would not be requiring her services of waiting outside the bathroom door as you took a bath since you would not be killing yourself that particular morning on account of your friends coming over later to pick you up, she just laughed. A lot. And it hurt.

“Nice try, Wes,” her voice rang clear through the not-so-solid-as-you’d-like wood door.

“But it’s true,” you said, but your voice came out wrong—sulky and indignant—and you felt like a little kid again. Especially with all those bubbles around your chin, touching your ears and your bony knees poking out from the foam like martian mountains in marshmallows. The green and white wallpaper. The all-natural brown lump of soap, a carved whale melted. The water was too warm and everything was silly.

You had actually tried to beat your mom to the bathroom too that day by waking up early when the sun glowed a soft red through the blinds, and dew clung in glass beads to the grass. She wasn’t in bed when you checked but you figured that she was off doing yoga somewhere she could salute the sun, twisting into strange, incomprehensible shapes that supposedly represented animals. She had only turned into a yoga freak when you left for college three years ago but you figured those three years should have been enough experience for her to have mastered breathing

KEEPER

and meditation to the extent that she wouldn't hear the floorboards creak under your bare feet or the hot water rushing into the bathtub.

But alas, there she was. She didn't even have to say, *hello, my little chicken*, as she said every morning—you just knew by the scrape of her stool, the tottering of the uneven, creaky legs, the flipping of glossy magazine pages. She wasn't going to leave any time soon. Not only did she have infinite patience from yoga, her parents had kept bees when she was younger so she was used to white astronaut suits and gathering up prickly, finicky creatures and snitching their honey. She always told you she loved purple honey the best, made from the nectar of violet starthistles, eating it straight from the jar on a big shiny silver spoon. But when you asked her if it tasted any better than regular honey, she said no. It tasted the same. Maybe sweeter. But it had been three weeks since you had come home, since she started waiting outside the bathroom as if there was no other way to love you, to keep you from jamming a gun to your temple and blowing your brains out.

But you were a starthistle, all sharp needle thorns and violet petals. You just wanted to be left alone for once, to sink all the way underwater—except for your nose—and listen to that filmy high sweet song of seashells, the pinkness of ears within, of frosted blurred glass.

So you tried again. “Hey, Mom?”

“What?”

“Are you trying to inculcate me into having an Oedipal Rex complex?”

“What's that?”

“Well, it's that thing based on that messed up Freud story, you know. The guy who falls in love with, I mean, he marries his mom

JUSTINE CHAN

and then he kills his dad,” you said. You weren’t a doomed, obsessively morbid English major for nothing. A little Hamlet with water ringing in his ears.

“Yay—kill that bastard,” your mom laughed and clapped and you couldn’t help but smile a little too. Even though it wasn’t that funny. Your dad had been there in the waiting room after you failed to commit suicide properly, all dirty grey and white striped polo he always wore and salt-and-pepper hair and lumpy dark bags under his eyes, waiting for you with your mom. Of course they sat a polite two seats away from each other. And when the nurse led you out in that thin hospital gown and bandage cuffed wrists and the ugly brown tube socks with the little non-slip sticky bumps on the soles, your mom threw her strong arms around your neck, kissed you on the eyebrow, even though every inch of you breathed scraped rawness and you wanted to scream until the sky turned red. You felt too much. Too much.

Your dad was clever though—so smart—standing there with one hand in his pocket, a rolled up newspaper clamped in his armpit, and another hand outstretched. As if for a handshake, a polite distance. *Congratulations, son! You ain’t dead!* He was missing that cigar in the side of his mouth but his teeth were still tightly clenched and his lips curled to form a small cigar-sized hole and if he started to say something at that second, between his teeth, you would have seized him around the neck, under your arm, and rammed his head into the white walls again and again until there was a good dent, haloed by cracks.

But he didn’t say anything—worse—just looked and looked at you like you were The Boy Who Cried Wolf for the first and only time too many. He came all the way from Ohio, abandoned his “better” family, waited for an eon with his dopey ex-wife in an awful room where white walls were supposed to keep people calm

KEEPER

but didn't. And you were supposed to be dead. It was part of the deal. You couldn't even believe he was there. He missed everything else, like your conference track meets and your high school graduation—forgot the date, forgot to call, had to work, that is, watch golf on the TV in the dark, his muted face flickering in green, perfectly cut lawns—but this time, it was something truly special. Something worth dying for.

You shook his hand but it made you feel ill. Your hand felt like a dead, limp fish, stitched back on with thick black thread, your wrist in a fancy white cuff but no sleeves. You just needed a pair of cufflinks—gold ones—but that would have been wrong. Everything was wrong. You could have solved everything by saying, *Unfortunately, Dad, you know I would have liked to be dead at this point in time as well but one doesn't always get his or her way, eh?*, and then turned his head into a hospital wall battering ram. But you didn't. Your wrists hurt and you hurt.

He had the tact or the guts to send you a package a week later. When you slit the box open, there lay a small stack of faded, chewed up Superman comic books, the kind you read as a little kid. There was no note so maybe it was a *forgive me* token, but each one had *25¢* scrawled over the cover in black permanent marker which meant that he had just picked them up from some grubby garage sale, especially for you. You folded down the flaps and chucked the box into a special place, with all the other boxes of the things that were once yours from your apartment, left unopened.

“Well, mister, are you worried about me having a crush on you or you having one on me? I just need to know the nitty gritty details so I can prepare,” your mom said.

“Prepare for what?” you said. It was strange not having the bandages on your wrists anymore, the thick sheets of soft gauze

and medicine tape firmly wound around, your delicate shields. You had healed. You didn't need to rubberband bread bags on your arms before you took a bath, to gingerly hold your hands above your head or close to you, to keep them safe and dry. You were better, except for the dull ache, the terrible scabs like clusters of little black ants eating your flesh. Festering raisins. It would be better if it didn't itch, but it itched and itched and it made you look at it.

"Well, I gotta tell you—this will never work between us. I'm too old for you," she laughed. But her laugh had a sad note to it that made you sad. Like when she said, *Look at you, all grown-up*, when all your cardboard boxes were moved into your new dorm room and there was no room for her standing on the curb in her red coat, shivering. She had to go.

"Mom, you're not old," you said, trying to laugh it off. You wished a toucan with shiny black and yellow feathers, a beautiful bright green and orange beak, would fly through the window and land on her shoulder and nibble strands of her wavy hair. Sweet little blue feet.

"But you don't need me, huh?" she said.

"Mom—I never said that."

"Yes, you did. You said so yourself, or don't you remember? Your friends are coming and you aren't going to kill yourself—again," she said, each word spoken with a hush, taking up its own space. "I heard you. I hear you."

"Mom, I didn't mean—" you called but you knew she was leaving and you couldn't stop her. The stool wobbled and her footsteps crept away. She was gone—a flash of black and gold feathers—like you wanted, so you could think about seeing your friends again. But the bathroom was so empty. And you didn't want to see anyone anymore. Even though after that day in the

KEEPER

hospital, you hadn't seen anyone besides your mom and it was good for you to see Nolan and Zooey and Soto again, to spend time outside in the fresh, fresh air. It was good for you. Healthy. To face the big old world again.

But you didn't want to. You just wanted to lie in the bathtub until the bubbles dissolved and the water grew cold and a pink ring rose slowly from the depths around you, to hem you in. To keep you safe. You who held the brown lump of soap that was once a whale you were once.

* * *

There were two pieces of toast, slightly burnt whole wheat and buttered, and a scrambled egg on the kitchen table. Just like when you were younger, before you headed out to school in the early mornings, except for the cup of black coffee in a pale yellow mug, the serene smell always fresh, always your favorite, the beans crushed by hand. And when you sat down at the same spot to eat, it felt strange how everything was the same—the red and white checked towels, the burnished copper pots, the train magnets on the fridge—but you were different, a mere sliver of that little boy, your face gone thin, terrible scars on your wrists. Your mom wasn't there in her usual spot by the stove but you knew she did it all. For you. But it was too late.

You were terrible. You had to say sorry to her, for something. Sorry you missed all those mornings, the simple ritual. Sorry for going to bed too late and sleeping into the afternoon. Sorry for leaving for college. Sorry for growing up but not understanding what it meant to be a responsible, self-respecting human being. Not a) neurotic, b) suicidal, c) demented, d) sorry. But the more you thought about the word *sorry*, the weirder it became—just

JUSTINE CHAN

two syllables, two notes, that could have been a name for a dog, a fluffy little white terrier, scampering along the grayish blue waves of a beach dusted with clumps of snow. Snow in your hair and in your eyelashes, smirring everything. *Come here, Sorry. Come back. Come back.*

Even though you had never been to the beach during the winter, never had a dog named Sorry. You were there, in the kitchen, eating everything small bite by small bite, sipping the last drop of coffee, like it was your last meal ever. Because it hurt to swallow. So much. It wasn't that the toast scraped your throat—just that there was a dog named Sorry getting soaked, dashing through the water, a blur of white running too far away. It was cold. Sorry barked and disappeared under a huge wave. So neatly tucked away. You were too late, snow in your hair, snow in your eyelashes—too many tides pulled by moons floating in serene black coffee.

You found your mom in the backyard. She was lying on her back in the dewy grass, her limbs straight and tucked close in a straight line, her palms open to the sky. She lay so still—a shock of pale skin and dirty blonde waves against the lush green of the grass—a body—you thought she was dead for a moment. Until you came closer, knelt beside her, saw that her chest rose and fell. It was so peaceful. The sky gleamed a lovely, soft blue, blurred with wisps of cirrus clouds, and birdsong filled the air. It smelled a little like rain, like the lovely smell of water from hoses. You used to drink straight out of the hose coming back from a run, a victorious run, along the dirt road through the farms, the golden cornfields with Nolan close behind you. Yes. Oui. It would have been alright if your mom was dead. There was a beauty, an un-touchableness.

But then she opened her eyes and gave you a small smile.

KEEPER

“Corpse pose,” she said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Lying there, while the world kept spinning. She never pushed *you* to get better, to get off the couch, to see that psychoanalyst the doctor recommended, to drink chicken noodle soup even when you weren’t sick that way. She let you be. But she let you destroy yourself. And yet, you were still alive.

“Oh,” you said. And all the sorrows died in your bitter throat and you couldn’t say anything. You just circled your pointer finger and your thumb around her wrist, a handcuff. But loosely, not enough to feel her pulse, just to keep her close somehow. She closed her eyes, so far away. And the world dragged on, clouds like windless sails drifting. You bent your broken mind into shapes like toucans, like silver spoons.

* * *

You were lying half-asleep on the couch in the living room when a car pulled up, crunching, onto the gravel driveway and blared its strident horn. Soto’s car, no other. Beat up, scrunched, and peacock blue like always, the glare of the windows flicking a square of sharp light through the lace curtains, across the teal walls. It was here, like you wanted, like you didn’t want.

You stopped and waved through the screen door at the car and pulled on your dark red sweatshirt, the one with the extra long sleeves that swallowed up your hands, even though it was really warm outside already. That way, your friends wouldn’t see the scabs. They would ask questions—*does it hurt? Why, Wes? Why did you do that? To yourself?*—awful questions you couldn’t answer because there was no answer. It was all subjective—rhetorical, even.

“Mom, I’m leaving now,” you called in the direction of the

kitchen as you put on your sneakers, only because it was right to tell her, and not because you belonged to her anymore. Your feet felt swollen, the laces too tight.

“Oh, okay.” She appeared, drying her hands on a red and white checked towel. “Where are you guys going anyway?”

“I don’t know.” It was true. On the phone, Zoey had just asked if you were free. That was all. You were free. You had to get out of there, but when you tried to stand up, you felt so weak all of a sudden. It was easier to focus on the fine grey grid of the screen door than the bright light, the grass, the gravel, the peacock blue car, your friends outside. Outside.

“Do you need me to bandage your wrists?” your mom said, touching your shoulder.

“What?” you said. You didn’t need her anymore. You didn’t need her before. It wasn’t her fault at all but she didn’t love you enough before. It wasn’t enough. And now, it was too late—you were healed. You were better already. “Why?”

“So your friends—they won’t see—”

“No—just—” You held onto the handle but it was locked. The knob of the lock kept turning and turning and wouldn’t come undone. You were trapped.

“Wes, look at me,” she said, her hand on your cheek. But you couldn’t. You had to get outside and not smell the damp, mossy smell of her hair. Like she had just woken up from a hundred year nap in the roots of a colossal tree and missed everything.

Soto honked again. Your skin blasted clean off. Every inch of you screamed red, so raw. Nothing had changed since that day in the waiting room. It had become routine, ordinary.

“Don’t let them hurt—”

“Let me go,” you said, almost shouting, your throat tight. “Let me go, Mom.”

KEEPER

The lock clicked somewhere, in your brain. And suddenly, with a whoosh, you were outside, blinking, in a strange, bright universe all a pretty blue sky. There was air. You could breathe. Yet, there was still a prickle, pickled little warts, along your neck—the uncanny feeling of being watched. When you looked at the car, the faces quickly jerked away, in different directions. Soto’s arm dangled limply beside the side mirror. That meant the windows were rolled down and they had heard everything, seen everything. You swore you heard whistling. Mozart. “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik.” Unacceptable.

But somehow you heard the screen door slam moments after, like the synapse between lightning and thunder, or maybe it was just your mom locking up after you, with a loud clack, just a smoky sad silhouette in the doorway, dark against the dim of the empty house. The sunlight was so bright. You didn’t mean for it to happen that way, but it just did. You were a bratty little kid again. And all you could do was stumble away and meet your friends and grow up and die a little on the way.

* * *

“Hey, Wes!” Zooney called, leaning out the back window, waving with her whole arm as if you were very far out at sea. She looked the same as she did in high school—nerdy but gracefully so—her eyes googly behind her huge, thick black rimmed glasses, her long bushy orange hair spinning out in frizzies from her head. She wore a white Mickey Mouse Club tee shirt and that—everything—was nice.

“Hey, you,” you said.

She beamed, her eyes gone squinty. Her glasses made her face seem small. She was the only one who called right when you got

JUSTINE CHAN

home from the hospital. She couldn't talk very long because she had to study but it was beautiful how her voice could stream so many miles broken bits of sound glass through the sky, sifted through the tiny holes in your cell phone to you, only you, whole and lovely. The songs she sang. It was like listening to one of her old cassette tapes from the recorder she used to carry around—all the little pieces of her fake British accented museum tour guide commentary, of her singing, of her laughing with everyone, rewinded and overlapped and crazy. It didn't make sense, but you could have listened to it, her voice, forever. It was her voice that asked, *Wes, tell me—seriously—are you alright?* Of course, you weren't "alright" but when you said, *Yeah—I'm okay*, to her, you could believe it too. If only for just a moment—the particles rose suspended, the cacophony before music.

Of course, Soto was behind the wheel, a red gangster cap on his head, the brim turned off center. He was bobbing his head and drumming his fingers along the steering wheel even though the radio was off. "Hey, man," he nodded to you and reached his huge arm across the girl beside him to bump your fist. "Long time no see."

"Yeah," you said. Your scabs itched. Your fingers twitched. You waited for him to smirk and say something about what an ass you were, taking so long, but he didn't. He knew. They all knew. There were no secrets. You tucked your hands into the warm kangaroo pouch of your sweatshirt—the first two folds to origami-ing yourself into a paper pair of scissors, then a paper sumo wrestler, then a paper cut, just a sliver, still open and bleeding. You didn't know how to make any animals. How to fold so much you'd disappear.

It was odd that it wasn't Zooley sitting in her spot next to him, but this girl sporting a low cut tank top, straightened brown hair,

KEEPER

brown eyes, a symmetrical face, snapping a wad of blue bubble gum between her glossed lips and twirling her hair around her finger. She cradled a half-full ambered bottle of whiskey in her miniskirted lap and she was pretty, yes, but only generically so. Yet, there was something familiar to her but you couldn't quite place it.

"How's your mother?" Soto said. He looked sincere, or bored, enough, but you knew he had seen everything. And you felt kind of stupid to be standing at the side of the car talking to everyone like you were some gas station attendant with an oily rag sticking out of your butt pocket.

"Be nice, Soto," said Zooey. Her voice was nice and it had been too long.

"What's wrong with asking the dude how his mother is? He can ask how my old man is any day," said Soto. "He's spectacular, in case you were wondering."

"Fine," you already said, the word automatically tumbling out of your mouth. *I'm fine. I'm fine.* But they weren't listening anymore.

Nolan slouched asleep in the seat behind Soto in his usual place, arms crossed against his chest, his head drooping on the curve of the seatbelt. He was dreaming, without his eyes. His mouth slung low, almost happy, in his sharp face. His whole rail thin body had been carved by the wind as he ran. It was easy to forget he was blind when he was asleep, half curled. Zooey leaned over and gently pushed up his dark Stevie Wonder sunglasses that had slid down to the tip of his nose with her finger, but with her head resting on his shoulder, the crook of her elbow slipping around his neck. It seemed a gesture so small, yet, so intimate, so tender. So strange. It made your intestines curl and tangle into a big hairball knot. There was no room for you and your scabby

wrists. The peacock blue car fit four people perfectly and it could very well drive off perfectly into a gorgeous coral sunset, raising billowing dust clouds all dyed sand and golden, without you.

Unless you sat on the lump between Nolan and Zooey. It shouldn't have been weird—all you guys had been good friends since before high school and you were just being silly—afraid. But it was okay. You were better. Better. Better.

“Guess I'll just sit on the bitch seat,” you tried to laugh.

The girl next to Soto brought her fist up to her mouth and coughed dryly.

“Oh,” Soto said, “Wes, this is Cameron, my girlfriend.”

“No, it's okay,” Zooey said, scooting onto the lump, closer to Nolan, and patted the now empty seat. “Sit, boo-boo.”

“Okay,” you said to the both of them and climbed in. Somehow you fit. “Nice to meet you.” Even though it wasn't nice. But Zooey smiled, squeezing your shoulder, and it was okay.

Soto started the car and pulled out of the driveway and down your street. It was the first time you were leaving, blasting away in a space shuttle, the gravity pinning you to your seat, the stars turned to streaks. A little white dog named Sorry swallowed by waves and all you could see was snow.

“Hey, I think I know you from somewhere,” Cameron said. She turned in her seat and squinted at you through the headrest hole. “We were in Brit Lit together, right?”

“Oh yeah.” That was it. She looked different, pouring whiskey into the cap and throwing it straight down her throat. “But how do you know Soto then?” It was a reasonable question—everyone went to a different school.

“Hey, Nolan, wake up,” said Zooey. She shook his shoulder.

“Why don't you just let him sleep, dumbass?” Soto said. He was back to being *sincere*. The houses were already farther apart,

KEEPER

the plowed fields blooming tiny white flowers in the spaces.

Everything felt familiar, but it should already have been familiar. It was the same way, the same cracked road that took you to the woods, your glorious woods, where the four of you (minus Cameron) used to roam free. Back when you all loved the same music and waited all night—and Soto was just another ordinary dum-dum weakling and you weren't so sad and neurotic and ran on Track with Nolan who could feel the light of the stars fade as the sun came out and Zooley stood on the hood of the peacock blue car parked in the grass, singing, her arms thrown out—for this. It was nice sneaking back home when the quiet air was still chilly, slipping into bed, and sleeping until noon. You, they, were so little then. Drifting, but together. It was different now.

“Don't you remember he came to visit?” Cameron said, pointing the lip of the bottle at you. She was there now. Her cheeks were really pink. “Whiskeeeey?” She smiled too big and there was a spot of lipstick on her front tooth. You thought about telling her about it, but you didn't.

Of course, you remembered Soto's visit. You didn't go out with him. He puked on the sofa and dropped your toothbrush in the toilet. And he slurred, *Dude, you know you're only kind of being emo. You're not even doing it right. You're supposed to be cutting your wrists and all that shit—not half-assed.* But when you said, *I'm not trying to be emo!*, you just sounded emo. Not cool.

“But Wes is here. And Nol always falls asleep in the car,” said Zooley. “It's not nice. C'mon, Nol.” She took Nolan's wrist and shook his arm. Your own arm felt numb, your head squeezed between a clamp over your ears.

“Besides, Soto's an artist,” sang Cameron, throwing her hands

up and raking the ceiling with her nails.

“What?” you said. It felt like everyone was talking at once. The car was too small and the voices were bouncing everywhere.

“Tell him, babe,” Cameron hissed in Soto’s ear. “How you’re an *artiste*. *Magnifique*.”

“Yeah, I’m building my body,” Soto said, squeezing a bicep together. But he was already huge. A beastly paragon of muscularity—some Michaelangeloan monstrosity.

“I thought you were already doing that for some time now,” you said, or thought you said. The clamp was getting tighter and tighter on your brain and you kept hearing the beginning notes of “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik” again and again. Your scabs itched and itched but you couldn’t push back your sleeves and expose them. It had to do with that existential problem of if a tree falls in the forest and if nobody is around to hear it, does it exist? Of course not.

“No, I was building my *strength* before. Now I’m building my *muscle*. I’m *sculpting* my *body*. It’s an *art*.”

You could have laughed, if it didn’t hurt. It didn’t make any sense, or the clamp that was supposed to be fixing your brain somehow was really a claw—one of those skinny, piercing ones in the arcades, stabbing at teddy bears and picking up nothing. So silly. There was a crunch somewhere, like when the wise old owl of the Tootsie Roll commercial cheated and chewed off the whole Tootsie Roll pop before the count of 3.

And there was Nolan—awake—sunglasses off and rubbing the crust from his eyes on the back of his hand. To your shock, Zooley kissed him on the corner of his mouth, his face cupped between her hands. And he sat, like always, assumed himself, with his impeccably straight back tilted forward, hands clutched at his jit-

KEEPER

tery knobby knees, as if something exciting was about to happen. His terrible, milky eyes staring straight ahead, seeing nothing.

* * *

The badminton net was torn to just a shred and Soto's rackets each had a big duct taped patched hole and the birdie's feathers were smashed in every direction but it didn't seem to matter. Soto and Cameron still played, drunk, barefoot and spraying sand, frayed pant legs rolled up. Nolan, Zooey and you sat on the hill away in the grassy shade and watched. The tree leaves rolled fresh green and it was cool, like cold tea. Nolan yanked out handfuls of grass from the ground in his fists, the blades poking out in the gaps between his fingers, to make a small pile on his knee. A little nest.

"Fuck," screeched Cameron as the birdie flew over her head and into the grass. "Sotty, that's an out."

"No, that's not," Soto said. "Your drink, missy." He poured some whisky into the cap and waved it, shaking, at her, spilled into the sand.

"No, fuck you. That's not the way it works." She stormed to the other side of the net and whacked him hard on the head with her racket. Soto weaved a bit in the sand, rubbing his head under his cap, and dropped the bottle. It tilted on its side and all of it poured out.

Zooey laughed, her face swimming half in light, half in shadow. "He deserved that, didn't he?" she said, hugging her knees. She curled her lower lip over her top lip and blew a frizzy strand of hair out of her eyes. Her crazy hair was the color of monarch butterflies. Nolan kept pulling out grass to put on his other knee.

You didn't know if she was talking to you or Nolan so you

didn't say anything. The itching in your wrists had stopped, just for a moment, but your head still ached, a muted red strand of hurt uncoiled from your lungs. You could only breathe in so much.

"Right, Wes?" Zooey nodded.

"What?" you said. Every word seemed buried somewhere and you were too weak to shovel them out, to dig through the layers to find fossils of thought.

"Well, it's just that Soto—you know—I just don't think he's nice enough to you, that's all." She shrugged. "Nolan thinks so too."

Nolan stopped plucking grass. He pushed his sunglasses up his nose and gripped his white cane, the pricking of ears. It was strange to see him so still, in one place, when you always saw him, in your mind, running. In those long distance high school track races, he would run slightly behind you, his hand on your shoulder to guide him—your symbiotic twin, breathing with you, every step.

"I guess," you said. It didn't bother you that much that Soto wasn't very *nice* or he just didn't care. He was a moron, happy with his booze and muscles and girls. And you were a moron, sad, thinking too much. Too much. It meant you were rational. Civilized. You had control. You were better now. Much better. You could tell yourself you were better.

"I told him to be nice to you in the car," said Zooey. She petted Nolan's light hair in slow strokes. You touched your own hair. Everything still hurt. Your head hurt. She was so cute.

"I know," you said, but you sounded so small. Rolled up tight, tied with white string.

She was trying to protect you, to save you, from something that had already passed, that didn't matter anymore. It didn't

KEEPER

matter. And if anything, you were the one who was supposed save people—*Super Wes*. You, in your blue tights and red cape and mask and shorts, a *W* emblazoned on the front of your blue tee shirt. You, lying on your bed, listening to “Superman,” again and again, when your parents used to fight in the kitchen—the red and white checked towels, carrot peels on the dark green countertop, a broken pepper shaker, torn newspaper. It was just a phase. You failed. You were Wes, only Wes. Not enough.

Zooey stood up and stretched her arms above her head, her shirt lifting and revealing a small stretch of pale skin, like how your wrists used to be. Then it was gone. Her eyes went squinty behind her glasses. Nolan was just silent as usual. He didn’t care.

“C’mon. Let’s go to the river, guys,” she said, as if nothing else that happened before mattered. She helped Nolan up. Not you. They walked down the hill to the dirt path, his white cane tapping the ground, between the dried, dead leaves. They held hands, swinging. You followed, at Zooey’s side, a little behind. Nolan’s stick tapped the ground, a beat, a pulse in your head. It was ringing in your mind and your wrists started to itch, they itched. But they walked. You walked. It was the right thing to do, to keep walking. You thought about the river, the clear water up to your knees, pouring endlessly over the green slimed rocks. You thought about Ophelia. You thought about drowning, the swirl of brown leaves around your fingertips.

But you couldn’t. It wasn’t right. You weren’t supposed to go crazy. You were supposed to be better now, now that you were with your friends. Zooey and Nolan, your old friends. You didn’t need Soto. You were okay now. You had to try. The breeze was cool, skimming through the branches. You were closer to the water—you could hear it gurgling. You could wash everything away.

And listen to Zooey, standing on the hood of a peacock, singing when the sun came up.

“So,” you said to Zooey, “you and Nolan are together now?”

You knew the answer already—yes, oui—but you didn’t know what else to ask or to say. It wasn’t that you thought about her a lot back then. But every time you passed the stacks of metal chairs chained together outside the closed coffee shop back at school, in the early, early morning, you saw the ghosts of you and her sitting on them, under the green canopy and white Christmas lights. She would sit on the higher stack, like a queen, and you guys would talk about J.D. Salinger and laugh until the sun rose and the sky turned pink. A sweet moment of rare lingering, before the cracking. There was cracking in your head, crab leg shells split open.

“Yeah,” she said. “You could say we’re more than chums. Eh, Nol?”

She had switched to her adorable British museum tour guide accent, like when she used to talk to her recorder and filled it, like the birds, with shiny bits and pieces of her voice.

Nolan nodded, slowly tilting, almost bowing. He should have been the one wearing your red hoodie, his hands tucked away in big sleeves. And you should have been dead.

“That’s cool,” you said, even though it wasn’t cool, not at all. Even though it itched, in your wrists, up your arms, in your neck. The tapping. You were almost there but the itching. The hurt. You clenched your hands so tight into fists but it didn’t help. It was more than that. That was how love worked: breaking everything into a million pieces and gluing it back together with glue that gave you headaches. She didn’t love you because you didn’t love her enough. And now she was with Nolan who was infinitely kind and understanding and better. You were just Wes. She

KEEPER

didn't need you.

"Hey, what happened to—" you started to say but couldn't finish. It had to do with the voice recorder, with a little white dog named Sorry swallowed whole by a wave, with the toucan with blue feet sitting on your mom's shoulder, its wing lifted, nibbling its black feathers.

"What happened to—" she repeated after you. —*Your wrists?* She was going to say, *your wrists? What happened to you, Wes? What happened?* But you didn't hear or you didn't know because of the color red, blaring in your hoodie, in your brain, the color of your cape, the color of your rawness. The bees came. Maybe they weren't real, but neither were you. It didn't make sense.

They stung you. The bees. The center of your chest, your wrists, your forehead, and suddenly you broke into a run, even though you shouldn't have, away from the tapping, the beat. You shouldn't have. That would have made the bees more mad and it wasn't meant to come out that way. But it did. And there was no one to gather them up, to make sure they stayed safe. They weren't fuzzy or yellow or striped—they weren't real—but you were the one who itched, who hurt, with no one to gather you up.

You ran, your skin torn off and away, your hands aching and the sweatshirt was too warm. If you could just make it to the water, the bees wouldn't follow you. If you could throw yourself in the water, you could save yourself. The water would be cool. It wouldn't hurt anymore. You would save yourself, all by yourself.

And you felt like you were wearing your *Super Wes* suit again and running through the woods, the blur of green, and making the world spin faster, backwards, beneath your feet. When there was a hand on your shoulder. You felt it. Here and now. A bony hand of a blind boy that needed you to guide him around the red

JUSTINE CHAN

track made of ground up tires melted together and whole. Nolan. Running with you across the finish line. Yes. Oui.

“Wes,” he said. “Wes, slow down. Please. *Please.*”

His voice. It broke your heart. It was so brave, so splintering. You hadn’t heard it in so long. He was real. It bent your mind, a memory of spoons, miles of cornfields. A single *W*.

It was alright now. You were better. So much better. The bees were gone, dissolved into the air. You slowed down. He slowed down. Right before the water’s edge. The river kept flowing. You were human. Your knees buckled and it was only natural to be lying down on your back and looking at the blue sky, your palms facing up. Nolan must have known you were alive but still, stayed knelt beside you and pushed back your sleeves to your elbows. The tree had fallen and you heard it. You heard it! A brave bit of sound.

Nolan held your wrist in his hand, reading the Braille in your scars and scabs with his fingertips—the stars and the thistles—keeping the strand of pulse safe. Whole.

Justine Chan, better known as Pickles, is a Chinese American writer, poet, singer-songwriter, and troublemaker native to the Chicago area. Her distinctive traits include her curly hair and scat singing. If you don’t happen to find her reading or writing, don’t panic. She’s probably off running and exploring the world.