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The Lives of Flowers

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There are many ways to get rid of girls: you can abort them, drown them, or leave them to die of exposure. You can also suffocate girls, starve them, or toss them in the rubbish.

When I was young and innocent, I thought the death of infant girls the most tragic. Their loss was absolute, because all existence rests between two points of life and death.

I know better now. There is existence – the place, the person, or the object, and then there is the understanding, the knowledge, and the memory of the person, place, or thing. As a photographer, I keep photos that embarrass me. They are worthless objects, but they invoke valuable memories. The families that killed their girls wait a generation, and realize their entire village has done the same. They needed girls for birthing male heirs, if nothing more, so they kidnapped young women, women of childbearing age. The families of the second generation of lost girls keep photos, too, images of their stolen girls.

It is most cruel to give a glimpse of what could have been, and then take it away.

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The city is beautiful in the small hours of morning – the hum of electricity softening the silence, the cloudy smog made invisible by the darkness, the drizzle of rain polishing the windows. I pound my head against the painted wall. I'm not drunk, I swear. Not *that* drunk. I did become suspicious when I saw the stranger with the lopsided gait in the lobby, and I did run when I saw the man with the sagging jacket waiting by my apartment door. It's just the rain like oil slick – it covers the city in rainbows that make the world spin.

My knocks echo in her apartment door. She – the receptionists said it was a woman – moved in perhaps a week ago, into the apartment directly above mine. If I could climb back to my apartment through her window, I may be able to grab the photos and some cash.

The door opens. She looks like my little cousin. The smile is a small bloom of blood against her skin, the color of cherry blossoms. It's at least midnight, but she still wears a lab coat with her hair pulled into a strict ponytail. The woman grimaces and slams the door. Too late, I realize how I must look, doubled over like a question mark around my camera, drenched in rain and smelling of drink.

When I rap against her door the rhythm is hollow, slow, steady like the quieting beats of my heart. Light continues to spill from the seams in the wall, and there is no sound trail of her footsteps leaving. I picture the young woman on the other side, her back pressed against the door, the two of us standing less than three meters above the plainclothes one floor below.

When I speak as loudly as I dare, the murmur is still too loud. It blows like a foghorn through the haze in my head. I rest my head against the woodwork,

“I live on the second floor. I'm a reporter. The media police are outside my apartment.”

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My little cousin was still too young to understand death when we first met. She ventured onto the rooftop garden of my family's seventh floor apartment, distracted by the cherry blossom tree, while our parents spoke. We kept goldfish in a bathtub on the rooftop garden, and my cousin found the green nylon net sitting in the holes for the faucet. It seemed innocuous enough, the most unlikely murder weapon, so I had left it there last weekend. My little cousin chased my goldfish around the bathtub with the net. To exercise the goldfish, she said, and her parents stopped to take photos because that was so cute.

The next morning half my fish floated belly up on the water's surface. I had to clean them out, scoop them all into a cooking pot to flush one by one down the toilet. My father called hers because I was crying with rage. She had just watched *Finding Nemo*. “Oh, good,” my cousin said, “My cousin no longer needs me to exercise his fish. All toilets drain to the sea, where fish are free and may exercise freely.”

My father wisely decided to never pass her words to me. I did not find out until she told me herself, many years later, after the bathtub had been stocked, restocked, and her uncle, my father, had grown old and moved away.

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“Why?” I can’t hear footsteps. The second floor hallway remains empty, except for my neighbor’s question hanging in the air.

“I’m a photojournalist. I write about female infanticide,” I say, and hate the way it sounds. ‘Female infanticide.’ So clinical. “I don’t want to disappear.” I say.

The door clicks open. “I’m familiar with your work.” The woman says. “The Lost Girls,” she murmurs in softly accented English before she switches back, “Yes?” I nod. She seems interesting. It is unusual that she would know, when most doctors work for the government here.

The neighbor tosses me a towel from across the room. She has perfect aim. I dry my camera bag, drape the towel around my shoulders, and lean against her window. The window has no ledges, only faint decorative marks etched into the concrete, and I can see my window box two meters below.

She turns to me, sees her towel draped like a headscarf, sighs, and crosses the room in four steps to towel my hair dry. Her fingers are surprisingly strong through the fabric. Perhaps she’s a surgeon. Perhaps she works with her hands.

“You’re unlikely to escape the police if a cold catches you first.” The doctor smirks. She doesn’t have a TV, so her couch faces outside. I can see her reflection in the window.

“Thanks.”

I press the play button on my camera and scroll through the photos of the lost girls, smiling faces on the family altar, picture frames gathering dust on office desks, locket worn over the hearts of friends and lovers. The woman looks over my shoulder. The textbook on her desk shows an anatomical model, skin peeled away to reveal blood and muscle. I have those photographs, too, tucked away in a folder I won’t scroll to, not because the pictures disgust me but because I sometimes stare for too long. Years ago another journalist caught me at an abortion, taking pictures with my camera, trying to get the right angle and the right lighting on the glistening little corpse still tucked in its unconscious mother’s arm.

We are alike, doctors and photojournalists. We capture life when we can, and when we can’t, we make death pristine, clinical, beautiful and terrible both.

“Are you a doctor?”

Her hands stop in their motions, stilling against my hair. She flashes a smile at no one. The smile is an instinctive upwards twist of her lips, directed at no one in particular.

“I am studying to be one.”

I take out my camera, rub the dew off with her towel and flips through the photos until I find the picture I am looking for, a picture a father sent me of a girl in a school uniform laughing at something offscreen as she approaches the camera in a soft shower of pink cherry blossoms. I give her the camera.

“She was, too.”

She skims the photo and returns his camera to me. I zoom out to the icons, flips through a few more until I find another, a framed yearbook photo of a young women in a cap and gown set between burning candles.

“So was she.” The camera passes between us back and forth until I show her the last photo in the series and the first I took.

“She looks like you,” the woman observes quietly, and falls silent. She looks towards her anatomy textbook, “Do you keep all your photos on your camera?” She asks.

“And on photo paper, in my apartment. I’ll back them up when I relocate.”

Her hum is neither agreement, disagreement, nor support.

We are on the third floor. Two floors below an ever-shifting stream of cars speed by. One floor below the police search my apartment.

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Before my cousin left for America the summer of the Olympics, she shouted into the phone at me the only English sentence she knew, “Give me freedom or give me death!” She had a heavy, sharp accent. She heard it in a movie, and I don’t believe she understood. I didn’t tell her that. I told her about my girlfriend, who hated our athletes’ hideous uniforms because they were bright red and yellow, like eggs scrambled with fresh tomatoes: delicious, and terribly ugly.

Four years later the Olympics moved to England. Our uniforms were no less garish, but my girlfriend and I had broken up. My cousin never answered my calls. She was too successful, too busy with college. My family excused her, for she was a prodigious student preparing for medical school in the Ivy Leagues on the other side of the ocean.

I drove by our old apartment and found the cherry tree on our former rooftop garden, in full bloom, grown tall and strong without me, and I felt a bitter little twist in my heart.

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I had seen many doctors before, visited them as a patient, knew of them as my relatives, surveyed them at the abortion clinics, but the woman in the third floor apartment is the first doctor I observe in her natural habitat. When she is satisfied with the dryness of my hair, she returns to her book. She reads with both arms braced around it, hands supporting her forehead, absolutely motionless except for the slow rise and fall of her chest.

Someone knocks on the door. She rises with military efficiency. Her eyes flicker away and glance me towards the closet. I slide in and shut the door. It's empty, except for a few dark items.

It's late, and the voices are so soft that I cannot tell who is speaking. I catch the conversation in snatches, "Excuse us, doctor..."

"...wiped photos found in his apartment..."

"...retrieve sensitive information from his camera..."

"...return in two hours..."

"...good..."

The door shuts. My neighbor's measured steps retreat into the apartment. Ten minutes later she knocks on the closet door.

"I think they're gone. You can come out now." She takes the towel, "Would you like some coffee?" She asks, "Help with the hangover."

I thought it didn't, but I accept.

"You're the doctor." I say.

"I am." She smiles, a bitter little motion. Outside, a streetlamp washes the darkness in a triangle of light. Dust motes drift through it, like golden cherry blossoms falling.

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My cousin and I, we went stargazing in July, under a summer sky. She reappeared suddenly the summer she graduated from college, and she stuck to my side the entire season as if she had never left, the younger sister I never had in a country that only allows one child per family.

I had gotten into photography in graduate school, and we drove out beyond the light pollution into the highlands where it was winter all year long. My friends stayed in the car, turned on the heat, and shut off the lights. My cousin followed me into the cold and took long exposures of the night sky. I insisted a dozen times that she return to the car before she caught cold. She refused and waited until the last photo before she asked if she could try. I put the camera carefully into her smaller hands, showing her which buttons to press. She stilled with surprise as I handed her the thousand-dollar camera.

The photo was terrible – she tilted the camera too far and a red glare obscured the stars. I printed it on expensive photo paper, framed it, and kept it on my desk until the summer when she disappeared for the last time.

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I am suddenly, inexplicably tired. I can't seem to keep my eyelids raised. It is by lying sideways on the doctor's couch that I realize something is off about the doctor's apartment: it is empty. There is no furniture except for the couch, chair, table, and lamp that I also have downstairs. These come with the apartment. Nothing identifies this room as *the* room which belongs to the young woman except for the single medical textbook lying on the table.

“A prop.” I murmur.

“No.” She smiles kindly, out of reach at her desk, “I am going to be a doctor next.” She shrugs, “In a few months I'll be someone else.”

Her fingers brushes over my eyes, the doctor shutting the eyelids of a patient who passed. Her small hands are strong, but gentle. It strikes me then, a lightning realization that shocks me awake for a moment, that the government can't possibly keep all the people whom they disappear.

Her reflection is framed in the window. She stands behind the sofa and gazes down at the flow of cars outside. There is a coldness about her.

“You remind me of her.”

“I beg your pardon?” Her gaze shifts to my reflection.

“First photo. My little cousin.”

I shut my eyes and dream of her, of endless fields filled with infant girls and stolen brides.

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I was away when she left my city for the last time. I called my father, who was with them, and asked him to pass the phone to her. The conversation had me reciting the usual questions, asking if she had fun, whether she enjoyed her visit. Within ten minutes, my little cousin had roped me into taking her into the highlands that winter, to take photos of the fat, white snowflakes, which fell like petals even after the cherry blossoms died.

As a medical student she understood why I liked photography, she said, because it preserved things and made permanent that which does not last. She found it dangerous – my tendency to capture the wild and the free to make it last.

It was a foolish, petty thing. We disagreed over it until we shouted at each other, and finally it was I who slammed the receiver shut and, when she called, refused to reply.

Our arguments raged like wildfires before they burnt out, but time grows forests over the ashes. I never said sorry, because we never spoke of it again.

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The sun is rising when I wake. The girl is gone, along with the mug and her medical textbook. In the center of the space where it sat sits my camera. I check my photos and find they have all disappeared. While I slept, the last image of my little cousin was replaced by a photo of a plane ticket with my name, bound for America, like the flight my cousin missed years ago except I would not miss mine.

There is a shout downstairs. Three plainclothes officers scurry about below, running in circles around the apartment complex, trying to catch the photos that fall like cherry blossoms from my window box. The wind sets them free into the mid-morning traffic. A car stops in the commotion. A driver snatches up the photo that has been caught on his windshield wiper and flings it away angrily, into the air.

The photo of my little cousin falls lightly to eye level, and I reach for it but the wind picks up and sends it sailing, past the flow of cars, into the sky, and I cannot follow. I watch it fly from me and I count the steps that take her away. It dips behind a truck. I stop in the middle of the street, between honking cars, and step back onto the curb to wave down a cab and rejoin the flow of traffic.

In the last four years my cousin has become a myth that our family tells. At first her parents told us stories of her to keep her real, to keep her alive, but my aunts took her canon and made it bloom. As with all flowers, it bloomed and then it wilted. My cousin became more the brilliant doctor and less the girl who tried to

exercise goldfish, until she was no longer herself. I did not – do not – know what she was – is? – but sometimes I still delude that a little of her had been given to me.

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The last time we spoke was through video, before she disappeared, before when she was supposed to leave for America. My cousin complained that her parents wanted her to drop med school and settle down. She refused. Her life was hers to give and to take, not theirs. Then she vanished from our capital, where the old Olympics stadium still sat, rotting, the day before her flight.

I wonder still if she had fought for her freedom with her hands or her heart. In my heart, I believed that she would have won because I knew her as the girl who withstood the cold of the highlands at night to take photos with me. But in my mind I know that the world is cruel, that she had caught a terrible cold that left her bedridden for weeks afterwards.

The last time we spoke, my cousin plucked a flower from a tree behind her on the other side of the video feed. The flowers were unresolved in the video background, but in her hands I saw they were cherry blossoms. Her small hands gently brushed the petals, and then she crushed the flower between her fingers until it bled, staining her fingers with shiny sap.

“I don’t like cherry blossoms. Did you know?” she murmured as she tore it apart, petal by petal.

“I think they’re beautiful, but too short lived.”