

THE FAVORITE

Cess Alessandra

Her room was no longer where she kept it last. She had eaten dust in attempts to turn over every corner of her father's house. She had crumpled herself to fit the space between the roof and the *kisame*. She had all but made out with the vinyl floor. Yet, nothing.

There was not a trace of her things when she arrived. There was only a sorry ass of an office standing in their place. A bookcase was pushed back against a wall, each shelf displaying a certificate for being the most outstanding teacher of a school, each shelf trying to look incidental. What was incidental were the printer, the personal computer, and the stationery supplies crowding the desk.

Her papa, Sir Carding to his students, must have been inviting over many guests to require this charade. Only someone like him would find opportunity in his own teenage child's disappearance. It wasn't the first time Maja had wondered how long he had prepared for her departure. Maybe it had always been in the cards.

As though to rub it in, her sister's room remained undisturbed, but clean. It was the only part of the house, Maja wagered, that had met the proper end of a broomstick. She couldn't imagine her dad bending his toothpick limbs to reach for elusive spots, yet when she set foot in the room for the first time in eight years, she found the underside of Luna's bed to be spotless. Everything had been put aside, folded neatly, just the way Luna always kept it.

The only anomaly was the Apo Hiking Society album art. It hadn't been there when Maja left. Perhaps her sister *did* learn to loosen up a little bit after all. The poster was skewed. Otherwise, the room was in perfect order.

Weeks had to pass before Maja decided to make the rest of the house just as immaculate. Perhaps it would be best to leave her sister no other task than to appease their incarcerated father. In her last attempt to make the house presentable to Luna, Maja scrubbed mildew off the toilet tiles. It took all of her concentration.

Through the pungent scent of bleach, the smell of burning meat managed to reach her. It set her in motion, which for Maja, sometimes meant leaving a trail of objects in her wake. After turning off the stove a few seconds too late, she glanced back at the hallway clutter.

"Anak ka ng pating," she grumbled, blaming the stove for her haste. It was the first thing she had noticed upon her return. Despite no longer having daughters to spend his thirteenth month pays on, her father had kept the kitchen criminally underfunded. If the stove had been an induction cooker with a timer, instead of being, well, a stove, she would not have ruined the hallway she had spent the entire morning cleaning.

Why couldn't Papa just ask Luna to be here instead? Surely her sister's boyfriend, if he even existed, wouldn't mind a few weeks away from her. She could even bring Leo along if he didn't mind roughing it. The dude was supposed to be this elusive artist, going by Luna's description. Maja could not, for the life of her, imagine how anyone could stand living with her micromanager sister. Let alone an artist.

Maja balked. Who was she to question the crazy things people do for love, when she was here, housesitting the very place she had run away from? Despite there being absolutely no sense in her being her father's first call?

It had not surprised her to receive a call from a Parañaque precinct. She figured she had it coming for burning her client's prototype contraceptives, when they refused to pay her for her logo design. The only surprise was that the police afforded the courtesy of a phone call, instead of barging into her shared two-bedroom apartment.

"Are you the daughter of Ricardo Castillo?"

"Who?"

"Carding Castillo," the man spat out like he would rather be rubbing the *libag* off his neck than dealing with her. "Are you his daughter?"

"Yes, I'm his daughter." *The wrong one*, she almost added. The crime described didn't even faze her as much as the possibility that Luna, the golden child, was not in their father's 'in case of emergency' phone calls.

"I didn't do it," he said, when she visited him in jail. He had already met with his lawyer, whom he claimed, owed him. There was always someone who owed him favors.

Maja had half a mind to act confused, if only to watch him squirm. Instead, she sighed and nodded. Of course, he didn't do it. He was not *that* interesting.

"So the pack was planted."

He wearily nodded like he had gone through these details for the thousandth time. Maja did not mind skipping the details. They had a million other things to talk about: The House, Her Twin, His Retirement, The Last Eight Years. Yet, after merely implying that she was now responsible for the house, along with his stupid 1969 Norton Commando that always needed oiling, all he said was, "Don't call your sister."

"Don't call Luna," he repeated, as though Maja had any other sisters.

So she didn't. For a while, that is. While she was putting away the pieces of the china she had managed to break, the buzzer rang. In true Luna fashion, her sister had not texted to confirm whether or not she was coming. She simply arrived, exactly twenty-five minutes early. Maja felt the hint of a smile.

"When will you ever learn to reply to my texts, Luna?" she asked over the steel gate of their townhouse unit. Luna must have grumbled something she couldn't hear through the screeching metal. The handle sure needed some grease.

For passive onlookers, the only other indications that they were two different people could be found in their choice of clothing, their choice of expletives, and the way they moved. Take Maja's darting, jumpy glances at the neighbors, and Luna's staring straight at one of them. Several heads turned away, pretending anything was more interesting than the rare sighting of Carding's twin daughters. News sure traveled fast in a *barangay* where nearly all houses shared walls. They decided to settle first at the dining table before they could say anything more.

Saying more, it turned out, was not easy. The sisters saw each other about two or three times a year, but it was always in a café or at some event, never within the confines of a private residence. Maja had never even caught sight of Leo, and the life Luna said they had been living in the past year.

In avoiding Luna's eyes, she glimpsed the scar on her forehead. It was barely noticeable. Hardly enough to set them apart. Maja once pointed out the irony that out of the two of them, Maja was far clumsier, yet it was Luna who sported a facial scar. She remembered Luna not saying anything to that, and Maja never joked about it again.

It was only noticeable now, when they didn't quite know what to do with themselves. Maja got up, preoccupying herself with switching on

the ceiling fan, the swivel function of the much smaller desk fan, and other buttons that no longer worked.

“So what is so monumentally important, you can’t talk about it anywhere except,” Luna said, gesturing vaguely at the space around them, “here.”

“Didn’t I tell you Papa’s in jail?”

“You did,” Luna replied. “Instead of taking me there.”

“That’s because he doesn’t want you to know about it.”

“He doesn’t,” said Luna. It wasn’t a question.

“And you’re going to tell me why. Over lunch.”

“Are— are you bribing me with food?”

Maja had uncovered the slightly burnt *bistek*, which didn’t look as bad as she had feared. In fact, it smelled spectacularly good enough to warrant the bribing accusation.

“Aren’t we supposed to talk about the evidence you said you had found first?”

Maja was about to argue, when the ladle she had just plunged into the rice cooker met loose, overly-soaked grains of rice.

“Okay,” she said, making a show of considering it. “Fine, you’re right. Let’s talk about the case first. We can talk about you and papa over lunch.”

“You forgot to turn on the rice cooker didn’t you?”

“What? No,” Maja said as she pressed her thumb on the lever.

“Well, you might as well make me coffee, too, if you insist on making me talk.”

“You don’t even drink instant coffee.”

Luna grimaced.

“You are a hopeless *burgis*.”

Maja set up the video as if they were in for a movie night. She had half a mind to order popcorn. And because her twin was hopeless, she flanked the laptop with a steaming cup of 3-in-1 coffee for herself and a cup of Jasmine tea for Luna. The lone teabag she had rescued from the musty cabinet might or might not be expired.

“Besides this,” Maja said, hand waving about her laptop. It was taking forever to boot up, what with all the pirated Adobe Creative programs crammed in its drive, “we were able to ID a potential witness. A potential witness who doesn’t want to be found.”

“Who’s we?”

“The lawyer. And Papa’s old friend from another precinct.”

“Old friend?”

“You know,” said Maja. “The one who came by a few times when we were kids. Papa’s beer buddy for like, a while.”

Luna blew on her cup of tea. She neither flinched nor commented on it after two sips. Maybe it wasn’t expired after all.

“Oh, him,” Luna finally said. “SPO Something Espinosa, was it?”

“*Inspector* Espinosa. He was promoted.”

Maja could not be sure if she really did remember, or if she had only formed the memories after meeting him recently. So she asked, “How do they know each other again?”

“I don’t know.” Luna shrugged with one shoulder before continuing, “but he was here a few times after the accident. I think he even dropped by after you left.”

“Wait what acci— right, Mama’s accident,” Maja said in between sips. She winced at the slight burn on her tongue. She really should’ve blown

air on it. “That was an accident,” Maja added, nodding to herself.

The cushions sank as Maja shifted to face her sister. “He says there’s nothing he can do to get Papa out of this, but he’s been helping with the investigation.”

When Maja played the video, she didn’t watch it, not really. She had already committed every detail of the video to memory. She allowed herself to glance at Luna’s face, like it might reveal clues, any clue at all that she might know more than she ever let on.

In the first part of the tape, a policeman roams a popular university belt’s *chilluman* spot. SPO2 Roño is his name, Maja later learned. He hovers around the area, alternating between lurking and sticking out. By some colossal stroke of luck, the camera has caught the policeman slipping a packet in his victim’s pocket.

“That isn’t Papa,” was Luna’s big epiphany, her sense of urgency rivaling that of a sloth.

“The lawyer said that if I can’t find anything, I should find something to discredit the cop who nabbed him. That’s all we could find, which is unfortunate.”

“Not necessarily,” Luna said. “How long have you had this?”

“A week?”

“And you haven’t turned it in?”

“It’s not solid evidence,” Maja said, her cup suddenly feeling too big in her hands.

“A record of behavioral history is still a factor in court, believe it or not. That, and finding a witness can really help.”

“What? I’m not a *summa cum laude* like you, but believe it or not, even *I* know this video doesn’t prove anything.”

Luna shrugged. "It proves that SPO2 Roño is a liar."

"But it doesn't prove that Papa isn't."

"Do you seriously think that Papa," Luna said, turning in her seat, "of all people, would be dumb enough to carry *shabu* around in a police-infested area?"

"No, I believe him. Duh. He cleared the drug test. It's not like he's capable of keeping up with relationships, much less drug cartels."

Luna did not laugh.

"This video is *not* nothing, Maja. Why haven't you shown this to his lawyer? You don't need a witness just to turn that in. Why did you even need to call me?"

"Well, it's Papa," Maja said, as if that explained everything. It should. "Wouldn't you call me if Papa got arrested, too?"

"I would," Luna said without hesitation. "Immediately."

"Well, here you are now."

"Three weeks is not exactly immediate, Maja. Why didn't you call me right away when he called you?"

"He specifically told me not to tell you, remember?"

"He did," Luna said, nodding to herself. Again, not a question. "But when has being told what to do ever stopped you?"

Maja placed her cup back on the table, finding herself combing her memories.

"Okay," she said. "I might need a lawyer for that one."

They did laugh then, letting the fan blow air into their guffaws.

"Wasn't I the one who asked questions first? You haven't told me why you and Papa aren't talking."

“Well, I’m going to need that *bistek* then,” Luna said.

Once they had eaten, they sat themselves on the sofa, and they watched the video again. And again. As if the other victim would morph into their father if they repeated it enough times. It was Luna who paused the video on the fourth run.

“Leo,” she said, not shifting her gaze from the paused screen. “Leo is short for Leonora, not Leonardo.”

The things that had shut Maja up could be pinned down to only a few incidents in her life. This was now one of them.

“Oh.” After years of mastering the art of having the last say, that was all she could come up with.

“Oh,” Maja said more loudly. As if that would catapult her to the finish line. She chanced a glance at her sister, hoping she would make fun of her for the lapse. But Luna was still staring at the bright pixels of the laptop.

“Well,” Maja finally tried. “Poor girl.”

Luna frowned. Maja had almost forgotten how Luna looked when she frowned. It was one of the ways people could tell them apart. Often, it was Maja who looked like she was recovering from a punch in the face, not Luna.

“I mean,” Maja said. “It must be tough being stuck with you.”

Luna looked even more confused than she thought possible. The musty side of an under-stuffed pillow hit Maja in the jaw. She caught it and pressed it to her face, letting it muffle her speech.

“Is that why you moved out?”

When Maja didn’t hear a response, she peeked from behind the pillow, as though to check if the coast was clear. It wasn’t. Luna was looking

away like she would rather not continue. There was at least the tail-end of a nod. Maja put down the pillow and tried again.

“So moving out wasn’t because you went to college?”

Luna smiled then, and said, “College was *because* of moving out.”

“You mean...”

“I needed a reason, so I got a scholarship.”

“Of course you did,” Maja said with a laugh. She rolled her eyes, if only to hide how impressed she was. Now more than ever, Maja was sure she was a fool for thinking she could ever keep up with Luna.

“Is that why papa won’t talk to you?”

“Not immediately,” said Luna. “He still called me up when I was in college.”

“And then you got a girlfriend.”

Luna nodded, no longer looking like a kicked puppy.

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this, though?”

Luna stared like Maja was missing something that needn’t be said, a look familiar only because their mother used to look at her father the same way. Then something passed over her sister’s face. She shifted in her seat like she would rather be talking about the case instead. Maja wasn’t so sure anymore that she wouldn’t appreciate a change of topic.

“You were too much like him,” Luna said. Despite the sound of tireless kids, and the cars passing through the overpass, Maja knew she had heard her sister correctly.

“I’m what?”

“Too much like Papa.”

“You thought I’d give you a hard time?”

“Of course not,” said Luna. “Not really, but sometimes, you make things that aren’t about you... well, about you.”

“No, I don’t.”

“It’s kind of why you and Papa fought all the time,” said Luna, leaning one shoulder against the back of the sofa so that she was still facing Maja. “You had the same reactions to too many things like you were his twin, not mine.”

It took everything in Maja not to present a case study of why she was nothing like her father, of how she didn’t make everything about her. She had to bite her tongue to allow Luna to keep going.

“Remember Jepoy? Remember when I once told you he was stalking me? You said it was probably because he was trying to get back at you for rejecting him in fourth grade.”

“Well, it most probably was. Why else—”

It took a ridiculous hot minute of avoiding Luna’s eyes before it hit her.

“Wow. I *do* make everything about me.”

“Okay,” Luna said.

“I’m sorry? I guess?”

“You guess.” Luna only raised an eyebrow, but it was enough.

“No, I know,” Maja said. “I’m sorry.”

“Sure,” Luna said, trying not to smile for some reason. “In the spirit of making this about you. You are now going to tell me why *you* left.”

“What?”

“I just came out to you, Maja. You literally cannot deny me anything.”

“Since when did you become the scheming one?”

“Since when did you not like talking about you? Tell me why you ran away.”

“Ran away? I moved out, Luna.”

Luna laughed. “What are you, American? Maja, it was a month before your high school graduation. You really had to make a statement? The award-winning teacher’s uneducated daughter.”

“I was a teenager,” Maja offered.

“We’re twins, Maja. We were both teenagers.”

“We’ve been over this. He wanted me to become a teacher. I wanted to be an artist. We were a fucking cliché, him and me, but that’s it.”

“That’s it? Come on, even *you* are not *that* dramatic.”

“He and I just didn’t get along,” said Maja, her fingers digging into the pillow she had been clutching. “I’m still having whiplash from when he called me instead of you.”

“I mean,” she added quickly. “Surely he would ignore your having a girlfriend, if it meant he didn’t have to depend on me.”

Luna showed no signs that she understood. Top three in CPA boards and she couldn’t get the simple math of their family. So even though Maja had told this story more than a few times, she still spelled it out for her.

“He burned my first oil painting when he found out someone wanted to buy it. I soaked the bass guitar that took him years to save up for, and he cursed me and my future children like it’s 1866.”

“Please.” Luna scoffed. “I know that pattern. Too much, I’d say.”

“Well, it doesn’t exactly amount to me being his one prison phone call.”

“You and Papa had your own little club, Maja. You, him, and *Queen*.”

“What? Well, you were our Freddie. Whenever we recreated the videos, you were our Freddie Mercury, remember?”

“Well, you’re not wrong about that,” said Luna, eyes narrowing.

“I’m not wrong about *everything*,” said Maja. “At least not about you being his favorite.”

Luna looked at her like she had just grown wings.

“You don’t believe me?” Maja got up, tugged her sister by her perfectly pressed sleeve, and pulled her to the hallway.

“*Aray*,” Luna said, stopping to inspect her naked heel. “Did you break something again?”

“Oh, that,” Maja said. “You should’ve worn slippers.”

After checking to make sure the shards from the vase didn’t cut her, they turned the corner.

“This was my room,” Maja said, as the office came into view. “Or at least it used to be.”

“I know,” said Luna, pointedly not looking at her. “He turned it into an office when you ran away.”

Maja blinked. “Wait, he did?”

“I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“See. He didn’t even wait. Now it makes even less sense that he called me instead of you.”

Maja led Luna to Luna’s room. “It’s like you never left,” Maja said.

“You cleaned?”

“Of course not.”

“I mean I did clean the house,” she added when Luna raised an eyebrow. “But your room was this neat when I got here.”

"Maybe Mama got bored in the afterlife and decided to clean up?"

"Honestly, that's a more acceptable explanation. Now that I think about it, maybe it *was* a ghost I saw the other night."

They lingered at the doorway, not quite entering, and it was *not* because of the possible presence of ghosts.

"He kept my room as it was."

"Yeah, of course, he did. Why is that surprising? Luna, he named you after the moon. It was his thing. Mama got him a telescope when they were just dating, remember?"

"How could he have had a favorite when they named us? We were babies. We came out at the same time."

"Not really," said Maja. "You came out three minutes after me. Plenty of time to realize I wasn't all that." Luna rolled her eyes, finally taking a step inside.

"Mama painted these walls. I said I wanted the room to be blue, so she moved all my things out and painted it blue."

"Oh," Maja said, her voice hardly above a whisper. "I don't remember it being any other color."

"It was pink," Luna said. Slowly, she raised a hand to The Apo Hiking Society poster, hovering until her fingers settled on the upper right corner. Peeling it off would have been easier than picking lint off a black jacket, but she didn't. Luna stopped, dropping her hand to her side, and then holding it behind her back as if to stop it from doing something.

"Mama liked Danny Javier the most," Maja offered.

"Who?"

"That guy you were staring at?" Maja pointed at the poster. "Wait, you don't know him?"

“Oh, yeah, no. Of course, I know him. I just forgot. I don’t think I ever heard Mama singing their songs, or any song at all.”

Something must’ve been more interesting to Luna than their mother’s singing, because she suddenly crouched by the plastic bedside drawers. “Oh wow. These are still here.”

It was a bright yellow clear book, each sleeve filled with cut-outs from magazines. Maja lowered herself next to her sister and watched her flip through it. With each page, there were more and more middle-aged women cut-outs. She *had* seen this before.

“Oh my god,” Maja said, nearly going off balance. Unlike Luna, her Achilles tendons have always been too damn short for a balanced crouch. “All these women in suits and I didn’t realize you’re a lesbian?”

She was relieved when that made Luna laugh. In fact, it seemed hard for Luna to stop. As if fueled by this release, Luna opened the first drawer and pulled out a thin box, clearly surprised to see it had survived. When she opened it, Maja understood why. It was a stack of 5r-sized photos Luna might have printed herself. These ones, Maja had never seen before, and she guessed her sister would not just go to any shop for printing. They were paintings of women intimate with each other. Some naked, some not. Most were surrealist, some, overwhelmingly close to real life. When Luna handed them over gingerly, Maja gave in to the urge to sink to the floor, tucking her legs under her. The paintings were beautiful.

“I’m surprised Papa didn’t burn them,” Maja said, if only to let Luna know it was okay. “He wouldn’t hesitate if these were my paintings on actual canvas.”

When Maja met her sister’s eyes, she found Luna frowning, not quite as ready to agree with her as she had hoped.

Instead, Luna asked, “You don’t get it, do you?”

“Get what?”

“He kept this room as is, for the illusion of the perfect daughter. He had people around. Our relatives, colleagues. People who owed him favors for some reason. He got rid of your room as fast as he could, because he couldn’t stand any reminder of you. I was not allowed to talk about you, you know?”

Maja stood up before pins and needles could assault her legs.

“Huh,” she huffed, collapsing on the bed, surprised to find it still a little bouncy. “You think he even, you know, loved us?”

“I guess not in the way we needed him to.”

“Not even Mama,” Maja found herself saying.

“Why do you say that? He adored Mama.”

“Only when she was the way he wanted her to be.”

Luna glanced at her, no rebuttal at hand. This did not feel like the right moment, but judging from how today had been going, there might never be a right moment.

“What do you remember from that night?”

“Which night?” Luna said, a weak attempt at diversion. When Maja didn’t offer a clarification, Luna sighed. “I was eleven.”

“We were both eleven.”

“I remember that we were eleven,” Luna tried again, “that Mama slipped, and that she hit her head.”

“That’s what we were told. Neither of us saw that. What do you remember?”

“I didn’t see anything, Maja.”

“Did you hear anything? What happened that day?”

Luna rose from the floor. She walked a few feet away and sat on the bed.

“They were fighting, and I think, I think you and I were fighting, too.”

“Of course,” Maja agreed, letting this memory fill in the gaps. “Because if we hadn’t been fighting, we would have been in the same room. You always slept over in my room when they fought.”

“Do you remember what the fight was about?”

“Probably the lyrics to a Jolina Magdangal song.”

“Not *that* fight,” said Maja.

“Oh,” said Luna. “The usual, I guess.”

“There was a usual? I thought it was something new every other day.”

“Except I remember they had been talking about Mama’s new job for a while. Something about Papa thinking it meant Mama wanted to leave him.”

“He does have a way of making all things about him. Luna, do you think— do you think it was an accident?”

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The kids and the cars could no longer be heard from the outside. It was as if the world knew to how stop for this moment.

“Maja, what are you trying to say? We were only eleven.”

“Why do you keep saying that?”

“Because our memories might be wrong. There’s not enough evidence.”

“And what was it you said that might be enough for the police? Behavioral history and witnesses? Well, Luna. *We’re* the witnesses to *Papa’s* behavioral history.”

Maja stood up to pace back and forth between the bed and Jim Paredes' frozen smile. The poster really had no business being there.

"You said it yourself, Luna. They were always at each other's throats."

"He might be homophobic," Luna said, more to herself than to Maja. "But he's not a— he wouldn't."

"And why do you say he's homophobic, Luna? What else did he do to make you think that?"

Luna shut her eyes. That did nothing to slow Maja down. If anything, it opened the damn gates.

"We both know disagreements are not enough to make you leave your comfort zone. You're the queen of sucking it up. Isn't that what you kept telling me to do?"

"That's not fair." Luna's voice was so weak, it almost made Maja back down.

"What made you realize you've had enough?"

"I left to be with my girlfriend."

"Bullshit. You and Leo hadn't even met yet."

The more Maja paced by the poster, the less sense it made. Her eyes zeroed in on the corners, held by masking tape. Luna would never use masking tape. Without warning, Maja picked at the top corners just above the Apo Hiking Society label.

"No, don't!"

She had never seen Luna move so quickly in her life. And then, she tripped, leaving Maja enough time to get over her shock and peel the poster off the wall.

And there it was, a little crater. It would not have registered as foul

play for Maja, if Luna had not been hell-bent on stopping her. It was forever before Luna spoke.

“He had an outburst. Papa got stuck with the consolation kid, and she just *had* to be lesbian. She looked exactly like the golden child but was nothing like her. You can’t blame him for panicking.”

“Luna,” she said, incredulous. “*You* are panicking right now. What he did to you was *not* panicking.”

Maja could now see nothing else on her sister’s face but that small scar.

“That was attempted murder,” she said.

A part of her wished Luna would argue with her. Maja had never wanted to be proven wrong more than she did now. When it seemed that Luna was too frozen to say anything, Maja said, “Why didn’t you tell me, Luna? It’s not like we stopped talking after I left.”

“Are you really going to make this about you now?”

“Oh, right,” she said. “My bad. How about we make this what it’s really about then— records of behavioral history.”

Maja took one step closer to the hole on the wall, but when she glanced at it, she found herself unable to get any closer. It stared back, like a beady eye.

“We were eleven,” Luna began again. “And yes, I didn’t sleep over in your room that night, but it’s not because we were fighting.”

She rose from the ground and again sat on the edge of the bed. Maja was now standing, unmoving.

“You were probably already in your room,” Luna said. “When Mama found me in the hallway, she steered me to mine and put a hand over my mouth.”

Luna looked up past Maja as if someone else had called her name. It made Maja turn her head. The doorway was empty.

“She was speaking very quietly, too quietly, I think. But it was enough for me to hear her say ‘Lock the door.’ So I did. I locked the door after mama left, Maja, and that was the last thing she asked of me.”

The dent in their parents’ bedroom was considerably smaller, but there was a deeper one, almost like a hole to its left. Like the hole in Luna’s room, they had been covered up by frames. They had to use the claw end of a hammer to dismount the frames.

Maja couldn’t help but think she was right to call Luna. It would have taken her a far longer time to find the evidence. She might not have even entered the scene-of-the-crime at all. Besides the obvious, the fact that Sir Carding did not bother to demolish the wall disturbed her. It was only plywood, hardly a day’s work to replace. Yet he chose to merely cover it up, as if he had already gotten away with the crime.

As they hoped, entering the room and seeing the marks *did* snap their memory back into place. They couldn’t be sure of how it really happened. Just that it did. Did they really hear the loud banging and their mother’s screams, or did they imagine them to explain the dents in front of them?

“Quit pretending you’re still looking for more evidence,” Luna said. “You already know he did it.”

Maja studied her sister’s face. It still took quite some effort to unsee the scar. Luna, for her part, no longer looked keen on denying anything at this point.

“Do you remember who was the first to arrive in the scene? Was there an ambulance?”

They stared at each other then, for once, not minding that they're exact copies of the other.

"Espinosa," they said in chorus.

"Perhaps he's one of the people who owe Papa," Maja said, making her way out of the room. She did not have to turn to know that Luna was close behind. They had both seen enough.

"What could people possibly owe him anyway?"

"I don't know, Luna. We never asked. Maybe he *does* sell drugs or something."

"Well whatever it is, it no longer holds. Espinosa can't or won't help him now."

"Neither can we," said Maja.

"Are you saying you're not turning the video in, even though it's the only thing that can possibly help him now?"

"No, Luna. *I* am not doing anything. We are. We are not turning the video in. We are not following leads on possible witnesses."

"Look who's scheming now."

If the house hadn't been holding up well, Maja thought it might as well collapse now.

"Oh," she said. "No, I didn't know why I called you until now. Not really."

Luna merely stared, unrelenting. "This isn't some rice cooker you forgot to turn on, Maja. You planned this since he called you from the precinct."

Maja turned away, walking to the kitchen. For the first time, she was glad to find greasy dishes and utensils in the sink. She scrubbed, and soaped,

and rinsed twice until nothing reeked of *bistek*. She let the water run loud. If Luna wanted to leave, Maja did not need to hear her exit.

Maja was halfway through the third rinse when she heard something else—the unmistakable voice of their father telling them what to do. She stopped rinsing the dishes, bolting straight to her room, or rather, their father’s office.

Luna was seated in Papa’s chair, the glow of the Jurassic computer playing on her face. She looked more like Maja than she ever had. Her sister flicked her hand to the space beside her. An invitation.

Maja stood behind to watch a nine-year-old Luna—no, Maja—holding a black toy electric guitar. Her little right hand strummed experimentally until she dropped it. A younger Carding hopped from behind a variety of tubs and kitchenware assembled as a drum kit and picked it up for her. He corrected her grip, and turned to Luna, to the center, away from Maja. He began adjusting the mic stand to suit her height.

“I told you, you were always Freddie Mercury,” Maja said, her eyes not leaving the screen. “Did you know Freddie had a husband?”

“Wait, no way. He did?”

“Yeah, maybe we can visit Papa to tell him his favorite pop star is gay.”

The screen glitched, cutting to their young papa tapping what must be a frying pan three times. They started giggling then, their laughter overlapping with the video’s overture of *Don’t Stop Me Now*. The more Maja watched her younger self strumming, the less sense it made that she had never learned to play the guitar. She looked phenomenal. Luna, herself, was not doing a bad job at all. Lip syncing, if not actual singing, was her thing. By the time the video played the chorus, neither of them could help singing along.

Don't stop me now

I'm having such a good time

Before Maja could stop herself, her phone had made its way to her hand, its camera zoomed in on her nine-year-old sister's determined face.

"What are you doing?"

Maja pulled her phone away a little just in case Luna grabbed it.

"Just saving something to show Leo when I meet her."

Luna did not grab the phone from her. She also ceased to sing along with the rest of the video. When it ended, she turned immediately to Maja.

"Are you free tomorrow?"

She imagined what Luna's girlfriend might look like, or what they might look like together. It would be nice to finally meet Leo and not just hear about her like some mythical creature. She wondered if Papa would ever share this moment with them... if he wasn't in jail.

"I don't know," Maja said. "Shouldn't I be heading to the precinct to turn the video over?"

Luna blinked. She turned to the computer to play another video.

"Or I can do that another time?" Their father could rot in prison, and Maja's asking these questions. "Maybe it can wait?"

The frame on the computer screen tilted. The camera was perhaps handheld.

"It can wait," Luna repeated. It was not a question.

When the frame had stabilized, the younger versions of themselves came into view. Their Papa was sitting behind the drum kit, his sunglasses perching on his head. Maja and Luna looked a little older than they did in the first video. They were probably eleven.

“But Papa, I don’t like this vest. I want to wear my black jacket.” The intonation told them it was Maja speaking.

“But we’ve already set up,” they heard their Papa say. “Why didn’t you tell me that before?”

“*Susmaryosep*,” was the reply, a voice behind the camera. “Let her change.”

Maja and Luna stared at each other. By the time they returned their gaze on the screen, little Maja had run off frame, their papa was putting on his sunglasses, and the camera was shaking. Their mama had a wonderful laugh.

Little Maja hopped back on their makeshift stage with her black jacket. An equally tiny Luna met her return with a high five, before taking the mic with both of her stubby hands. She had Freddie’s charisma no doubt. They should have posted this on Youtube even as a joke.

I guess I’m learning

I must be warmer now

I’ll soon be turning, round the corner now

For a group only fake-playing the instruments and lip-syncing, they sure did put a lot of effort. Their mother must’ve thought so, too. The frame shook from time to time until it eased into a gentle sway, the movement no longer an offshoot of laughter. Even through the loud blaring of “The Show Must Go On” in the background, they could hear her. Their Mama had a beautiful singing voice.

Outside the dawn is breaking

But inside the dark, I’m aching

to be free!