

I Knew Him By Night

By: Vicky Lee

It's 2 AM

A stream of light passes through the crack of my bedroom door.

I panic that it's a robber,
or a UFO from Scooby Doo and the Alien Invaders
but my mind eases at the sound of the microwave buzzing.

He's back from work.

The cool ground sends goosebumps to my arms.

I squint at the kitchen light and watch my dad's back
as he pours a glass of Pinot Noir 2001.

A good one apparently.

He says I have 14 years to go
before I know for sure

Like usual, he tells me to go back to sleep
so that I'll be taller,
but I know he's sad that he's not at home
to see me grow older.

I brush past him and sit across with a glass of water.

The calluses of his hands
soften under balancing hot dishes of
duck confit
seared in a gooseberry reduction
with a side of roasted asparagus
garnished with thyme
on his fingers, wrists, and arms all night.
Gliding from the ballroom to the kitchen
trading dishes to serve the next course

He hands me a toothpick
and I take a bite of the paper cup of leftovers
from today's menu
He laughs when I twist my lips, at the
strong herb taste
but he doesn't mind it, and pours the juices
right over his bowl of
cold rice.

Silence settles as he inhales the rich aroma of his glass,
soothing me with his breath, like when he makes me
honey lemon tea
in the winter.

I keep him company
every few white slushy nights
we reunite.

He tells me to help him
dye his hair back to black.
I comb the grey goop through his salt and pepper straight locks,
and he tells me to not miss the back of his head
like last time.
So, I brush
back and forth
side to side.
Careful not to mention
the small bald spot.

My eyelids droop, and he tells me to
sleep soon
but I fight the drowsiness.
His laugh lines relax
and there's a lightness to his shoulders that I only notice
at night, when it's just
us.
He tells me to drink more milk,
but he doesn't remember that I don't like the taste.

It's 4 AM
I stir under the duvet and push my pillow away
It's too hot.
There's a sound of rainfall in the distance.
No wait. It's from the shower.
I lay quietly counting how many seconds go by.
I lose track twice, but the water stops at 24 this time.
He clears his throat, flicks the lights off, and closes the bathroom door.
I hear the sound of rain again.
No wait. It's from the fish tank.

It's 7 AM
The morning sun filters through the window,
catching light on a spoon left on the kitchen table.
I fix a bowl of Raisin Bran, for once
it was something I didn't have to share with my brother.

I sit down across from the figure that I was with
just a couple of hours ago.

The sunlight takes away the red tired streaks in his eyes from last night.
His shoulders hunch forward,
barricading his hollow chest
from the cool breeze slipping through the stained window
that is still stuck from last year.
He says he'll get to it soon

He brings his coffee to his lips,
never trembling at its boiling heat.
He says he's going to work again.

Half a glass of red wine sits unfinished at the end of the table
wrapped in plastic,
waiting to be savored later tonight.
The deep cherry liquid seems to almost evaporate
with each passing minute.
Dust collects on the clear plastic,
and the sun leaves a raspberry colored halo on the table.
My math test lays beside his coffee ring with a post-it stuck on top.
His signature scrawled beside the 72%,
and even though it was upside down I already know
he wrote, 'try better next time.'
He slides the paper over
and sighs into his coffee.

I avoid his gaze and focus on the purple clouds
that dot behind the gentle trees outside.
They glaze over the milky sky like the residue
of the dirty dishes of his I find most mornings.

He tells me to not eat cereal,
and to make something more filling.
It's a waste of time making pancakes for one,
but he doesn't know I spend my mornings alone,
how I scraped my knee falling down at recess
how I have a \$2 fine at the library
how I fell asleep in Ms. Chen's math class

The brunch shift starts at 10,
but he needs to help set up tables starting at 8:30, and he takes
a hour train ride to work at 7:30,
and it's a ten minute walk to the train station,
and it takes him ten minutes to get dressed and ready,
so he needs to leave the house at—
7:10.

I want to remind him
to add more math problems
to the list he leaves on my desk
to practice and solve
without his help
without my brothers help
without my moms help
but on my own
when I get home from school.

But I know he'll forget again,
like last time.
He sighs into his coffee.

I chew as quietly as I can.
The raisins is too hard, the brans is soft, and the milk is sweet.