

Little Rabbit

Cindy Truong

Seventeen, it shines, one of the two digits on the porch now faded to resemble a malformed 11. It was the house you had grown up in, squeezed into a narrowed block so that when you couldn't sleep, it was not the rising dawn sun that you watched from your window, but the column of little ants crawling between the cracks of your neighbour's brick veneer. You watched them intently then, those uniform marching men, and tried to ignore the shouting outside your door.

You've forgotten, now, whether to press the bell or knock. Your father taught you how to drive, heartbeat like a rabbit's, as you stepped on the accelerator for the first time. After, he clapped you on the back just once, then left. You remember the thrum of your friend's convertible as you sped down the freeway months later, the dizzy swirl of arms and voices laughing out the moonroof, the long-necked bottle pushed into your hands.

You wanted to be a mechanic after. It was a strangled whisper tucked between nursing school applications and internships. Your mother had grimaced and waved you away, saying it would be a waste of her only daughter. That week she accidentally threw out your manual for *Collision Repair & Refinishing*, but didn't look apologetic when you asked.

You were seventeen when you snapped at your father. The game show host on the TV that night spoke a little too high for his liking, was a little too colourfully dressed. You said it was rude to judge people using "little too", as if wearing polka-dotted ties took up all the space in the room. He looked at you, eyes narrowed, and accused you of becoming corrupted by 'those people', your school, your friends. But that had happened years prior, when you sat in the park with the blonde girl who lived down from you and closed the distance across the bench.

There's the familiar sound of kitchenware moving, of three bowls at the table always. That park, too, is still there, devoured by two-decade grass that would reach above your knees. Your steel-toe boots tap out the motion on the dull wood: up the road, two lefts and a right, and a left again. You half wish that someone would open the door and see your frame hardly taller but without the chubbiness of youth.

You were making dinner that one time, when your mother came up behind you and held you tight. She smoothed out your hair. She was proud of you. To cook, little rabbit, she said lovingly, was to care for your husband. Your tofu burned on the pan.

It seeped itself around your skin to fester mould, a pot of water that had been bubbling at the edges. You remember every birthday in which you were ushered inside to drink tea, talk about school, while your cousins wrestled in the grass. Aunts and uncles who gave you money every year would pinch your waist and suggest that you could afford to get smaller. Your father, who laughed. (You remember his words -- *She'll grow out of it, start dressing like a real lady.*) You remember the way your throat clogged when you were young, and you nodded obediently. But the front door rattled on its hinges as you slammed it behind you years later.

That night you steeled your swirling fear at dinner. You told them of your friend down the street, who had long moved across town. And the girl, briefly, in your Advanced Physics class. You told them this, circling around your truth, and hoped they would understand. They must have, because your father shattered his bowl when it hit the wall behind you, and your mother screamed like it was her heart breaking. This time you fought, though there was nothing to fight about. That fear had transformed to bitter anger, your hands shook from the strength of it.

So you flung that door shut. Sat in the driver's seat of the Honda Civic and rang your blonde friend, whom you loved. She said little while you vented your frustrations in that four-wheeled home until the cold chattered your teeth, your fingers clutching the phone like a lifeline. No one spoke about it again, that night, in the days after – like ignoring a burning pan, smoke filling up your lungs. What did you want? your friend had asked you. What do you want? You thought of the ants and sobbed, but you didn't know why.

That year you graduated. When she suggested you leave with her for the city, the things you wanted to say dug into your side so sharply you couldn't breathe, so you simply held her and packed your things. An offer for a nursing course at university came in the mail and your parents said nothing but framed it on their bedroom wall. You studied your reflection in the glass like you would forget it, before you kicked it in. Your blood stained the carpet.

There is the sound of the knob turning. A moment later, your mother peers at you. Her hair is grey, as it would be after twenty years and she is shorter than you as she had always been.

You see the gentle sorrow in the lines of her forehead. You feel as you did the night before you left, when you placed your doubts into the boot of your friend's car and wanted to let go.

She is watching you, a lifetime between you like a shield. You want to reach out, but she moves first. Your mother holds you to her so close it hurts, muttering words into your shoulder like a prayer. You feel the pain that bubbles up from your chest in your throat. It's hard to tell whether it's love or resentment. You see the red welts on your arm forming where she clings so hard.

You set the table for her. There are only two bowls at dinner.

Cindy Truong is a Vietnamese-Australian Year 11 student from Melbourne's western suburbs. She enjoys drawing and playing music in her spare time, with most of her writing being scattered throughout workbooks and in the depths of her phone's notes! In addition to her love of literature and the arts, she is also probably one of the only people her age that enjoys black licorice. As for aspirations, she hopes to one day pursue a career in law or a humanities-related field.