

Verity

by Hye-won Yoo

I was at the ripe age of four when it happened. When the dreams started. When I met her. At such a young age, I never processed that she wasn't part of my day-to-day life. The sliver between the radiant day and the depths of the inky night was nonexistent to me, melding together into one rushing stream of time. She just happened to pop up when the sun had hidden behind the horizon, the soft silver light of the moon washing over my room.

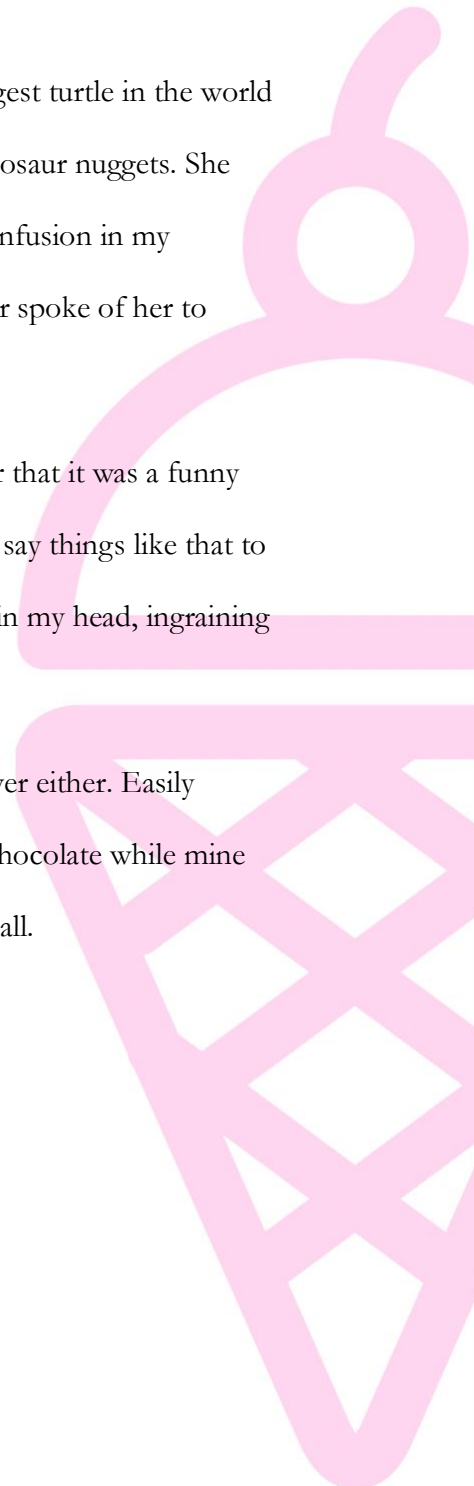
Prancing around the dining table, I had rambled on about how the largest turtle in the world weighed 2000 pounds to my mother who had been heating up my favorite dinosaur nuggets. She had asked where I had learned all these random facts. Only when I saw the confusion in my mother's eyes at my answer did I realize the truth. That was the last time I ever spoke of her to anyone.

I was 10 when she finally gifted me her name. Mariposa. I had told her that it was a funny name. She had smacked me across the back of my head, saying that I couldn't say things like that to people. I had pouted and wallowed at her actions but took note of her words in my head, ingraining it into my brain.

She apologized the next day, saying that violence hadn't been the answer either. Easily reconciling over a pair of ice creams we had conjured up—hers a fresh mint chocolate while mine was a sweet strawberry—she asked for my name. She had given me hers after all.

“Will,” I said, sticky pink sweetness dripping onto my fingertips.

Silence had descended upon us, wrapping us in its warm embrace.



I was 15 when she first disappeared. I had fallen into a routine at this point, expecting to see her lopsided smile the moment I was pulled under the hazy blanket of sleep. The grainy sand under my palms and the rhythmic lapping of water in my ears had all been the same, greeting me once again. But there was a void space next to me, the emptiness screaming louder than everything that was before me. The hours had slugged by for an eternity, almost never-ending. Dread and doubt had flooded my lungs, making my breaths ragged. I woke up in my bed, tears prickling my eyes. She had never shown up. Of course, she had come rushing the next night, stumbling on about how she had pulled an all-nighter to study for an exam and was sorry that she had left me alone. The knot of worry had loosened at her jumbled words, my lips pulling up into a small smile, but the seed of a thought was left to grow in my chest. What if she wasn't real?

I was 17 when I first let reality merge with the unknown. The elusive night had always been a time when I could escape from the tar that dragged me under, consuming me in its harsh whispers. The silent promise of keeping the conversation about our lives outside of our beach-side dreams had always hovered between us. However, over the years, the seed had grown into a sapling. Its thorns had ripped my insides apart until only the thin shreds lingered. Clawing thoughts bloomed from its trunk, a few gnawing at the back of my mind. What was the point of keeping my life separate if Mariposa was merely a figment of my imagination? So, I didn't. That night, a fragile boundary between us was broken, a shift in the trembling air occurring.

I was 21 when she first made the suggestion. The hushed promise that would be the first step to my sanity shattering.

"Why don't we meet up in real life?" she asked, her eyes glued to the ever-constant sunset, its dusty orange splashed across her pupils. All I could do was nod along as she planned my doom down to the exact second. Frost crawled up my skin, the ghost of hypothermia numbing every cell

of my body. The small flower embedded at my core had roared up in defiance, pushing against my ribs until my breaths became ragged. “So, what do think?”

I had whipped my head toward her, squeezing out a wide smile. “I think it’s a great idea.” Her eyes had lit up, light joy dancing across her face.

I am 21 and 6 months and am currently settled in a wobbly chair at a Tea-Licious—as bubble tea cafe. The small plump spheres are concentrated at the bottom of my untouched chai milk tea, my fingers intertwined. The giggles and soft chatter echo around me yet I am deaf to it all. I only emerge from my cloudy mind at the piercing tingle of the door, my heart racing as I snap my head toward the entrance. My eyes search for the familiar high cheekbones and loose curls but they are yet to find them. I thread my fingers through my hair, sweat clinging to my skin.

Ring.

Time slows as I twist my body around, wisps of regret brushing against me for not choosing a seat with a better view of the entrance. Swirling flowers cover her loose dress, her tan skin contrasting with the vibrant colors. Her billowing hair is pinned up, a few strands falling astray. Bright curiosity fills her eyes until I’m convinced it will spill down her cheeks. Yet all of it is nothing compared to her smile. I’ve seen it a thousand times but never like this. Everything is magnified by a thousand, the misty veil of sleep no longer there. Hot fire churns through my chest, burning the unceasing flowers until their sharp petals are reduced to ash. And for the first time, I feel like I can breathe.

