SUPER FAKE LOVE SONG

DAVID YOON

G. P. PUTNAM’S SONS
was now seventeen.

I now lived on the other side of the quad, at Rancho Ruby Senior High.

It was Monday. It was school.
What was there to say about school?
Lockers. Class bells. The pantheon of student archetypes: the introspective art girl, the loud jock, the rebel in black. Put your phones away. Will you help me cheat on the quiz. Who will sit next to me at lunch. The kind teacher. The mean teacher. The tough-as-nails vice principal with the secret soft spot.

There was the hot girl, Artemis, whose locker was next to mine, who answered every one of my Good mornings with a broadcast-quality eyeroll.

There were the nerds, who were me, Milo, and Jamal.
There could of course be no nerds without a bully—for the bully makes the nerd—and mine was and would ever be Gunner.
Gunner the human Aryan Tales™ action figure. Gunner (orig. Gunnar, Nordic for “warrior”), now the superstar feature back of the Ruby High Ravagers, celebrated for his high-RPM piston quads and record number of berserker gang end-zone dances.

Gunner would invade my table at lunch to steal chips to feed his illiterate golem of a sidekick and tip our drink bottles and so on, like he had routinely done since the middle school era. He called it the nerd tax. By now I was able to instinctively avoid him and his sidekick, with an outward annoyance that was actually barely disguised fear.

What a cliché.

I regarded Ruby High through skeptical eyes, as if it did not really exist. It was a school like many other schools in the country, all repeating similar patterns in similar fashion, again and again throughout all ages, world without end.

Track and field—track for short—was where I could lounge with my two best-slash-only friends in the Californian golden hour, picking clovers for fifty minutes straight before performing a few minutes of burst activity: long jump (me), shot put (Milo), and high jump (Jamal).

Ruby High was a football school. Track was what donkey-brained football superstars and their sycophantic coaches did to obsessively fill every minute of every hour with training. No one gave two dungballs about track. No one came to track meets.

I loved track.

Track fulfilled the Physical Education requirement with almost no effort.

“Here comes Coach Oldtimer,” said Jamal. Coach Oldtimer’s real name was We Did Not Care What His Real Name Was.
“Pretend you’re stretching.” He opened his arms and mimed shooting invisible arrows, pew, pew. Jamal (third-generation Jamaican-American) was stretched so tall and thin, he was nearly featureless.

“Oh, stretching,” I cried.

Milo (third-generation Guatemalan-American) lay flat and gently rolled side to side, flattening the grass with his muscular superhero body, which he had done nothing to achieve and did nothing to maintain. He even wore thick black prescription glasses as if he harbored a secret identity.

I, Sunny (third-generation Korean-American), bent my unremarkable physique to vigorously rub calf muscles as tender and delicate as veal, rub rub rub.

Together, we three represented 42.85714286 percent of the entire non-white population of Ruby High. The other four were Indian, Indian, East Asian, and non-white Hispanic, all girls and therefore off-limits, for Milo and Jamal and I did not possess the ability to talk to girls. At Ruby High, we were the lonely-onlies in a sea of everybodies.

“Stretching stretching,” I said.

“Go away Coach go away Coach,” said Milo under his breath.

But Coach Oldtimer did not go away. Coach, an older white man with the face of an enchanted tree scarred by the emerald fires of war, drew near. He’d been with the school since its founding six thousand years ago.

“I like this little dance you guys got going on right here,” said Coach. “Miles, you sure you don’t want to run tight end for the football team? Quick, strong guy like you?”

“It’s Milo,” said Milo.
“I’ll join football,” said Jamal.
Coach gave skinny Jamal an eyeful of pity. “It gets pretty rough,” he said.
“ Toxic masculinity,” coughed Jamal into his fist.
“What?” said Coach, pouting.
“How can we help you, Coach Oldtimer?” I said.
Coach shook off his bewilderment and maintained his smile. “It’s huddle-up time to give all you boys the dope on next week’s track meet with Montsange High.”
A football jock in the distance cupped his hands to his face and juked an imaginary blitz. Gunner.
“Give us the dope, Coach!” said Gunner. Then he gave a crouched Neanderthal glance over to the girls’ track-and-field team to see if they noticed. They did, spasmodically flipping their long flawless locks of hair in autonomic limbic response.
Track was what mouth-breathing football cheerleaders did to ensure they remained visible to donkey-brained football players for every possible minute of every day.
I sat up. “I’m not sure our performance will be significantly enhanced by your dope.”
Finally Coach’s smile fell. “Your friggin’ loss.” He stalked away.
“Final grades are decided by attendance, not performance,” I called.
“Friggin’ nerds,” muttered Coach Oldtimer.
“We’re not nerds,” I whined.
“Okay, nerds,” said Gunner.
“Nerds,” said some of the girls in the distance.
“Nerds,” whispered the wind.
“Why does everyone keep calling us nerds?” said Milo, and
made a worried face that asked, *Did someone find out about DIY Fantasy FX?*

He was referring to our ScreenJunkie channel, where for three years we had been posting homemade videos showing how even the most craft-impaired butterfingers could fashion impressive practical effects from simple household materials for their next LARP event.

LARP, or live action role playing, was when people dressed and acted like their Dungeons & Dragons game characters out in real life.

We did not LARP. We could never. In this temporal plane, we would only get discovered and buried alive under a nonstop torrent of ridicule. As it was, we made sure to never show our faces in our videos—my idea.

Jamal leaned in. “So there’s some pretty exciting audience activity on our channel.”

“Give us the dope, Jamal!” yodeled Milo, and gave an ironic glance over at the girls’ team, who glared back at him like tigers in the sun.

“We finally broke a hundred,” cried Jamal.

Me and Milo exchanged a look. One hundred ScreenJunkie followers. One step closer to advertisers and sponsorships.

“And,” said Jamal, with a wild smile, “we sold three tee shirts! Three!”

Me and Milo exchanged another look, this time with our mouths in twin Os.

“And finally,” said Jamal, hiding his glee behind his very long fingers, “Lady Lashblade *liked* our ‘Pod of Mending’ episode.”

“She liked my glitterbomb,” I said.

“She liked your glitterbomb,” said Jamal.
I gripped the turf like it had just quaked.

Everyone knew how influential Lady Lashblade (best friends with Lady Steelsash (producer of *What Kingdoms May Rise* (starring actor Stephan Deming (husband of Elise Patel (head organizer for Fantastic Faire (the largest medieval and Renaissance-themed outdoor festival in the country)))))) was.

“That is huge,” said Milo.

I hugged Jamal, who recoiled because physical contact was not his absolute favorite, before hugging Milo, who was big on hugging as well as simply big.

“We gotta keep going with new episodes, you guys,” I said.

“Heck yeah we do,” said Jamal, with a grin as wide as his neck.

“We gotta brainstorm our next custom prop,” I said.

Milo pushed up his glasses. “Right now?”

“Right now,” said Jamal.

“So, I was thinking, what if we made a—” I was saying when a football glanced off my temple.

“Catch,” said Gunner.

“Asswipe,” I muttered.

“What?” said Gunner. “What did you call me?”

Coach Oldtimer reappeared upon a fetid cloud of menthol rub. “Ladies, take a powder.”

“He started it,” I said, instantly wishing I hadn’t sounded so whinging. I pointed at my temple and the football on the grass.

“I don’t care who started it,” said Coach Oldtimer. “Warm-ups, let’s go.”

“Coach said warm-ups, nerds,” sang Gunner, who caught up with Coach Oldtimer to share a side-hug and a laugh.

I heaved myself up. “Right as I was pitching my idea.”

“Asswipe,” said Milo, loud enough to make Gunner glance
back and make Milo cower. This made as much sense as a pit bull backing down to a Chihuahua—Milo was big and strong enough to easily kick Gunner back into first grade if he wanted.

“To be continued, you guys,” I said. I broke into the world’s slowest jog, still rubbing my temple. “To be continued!”

I ran my long jumps and averaged three meters, a new personal low.

Milo threw the shot put \( n \)-meters, \( n \) being a number Milo neither remembered nor cared about, because shot put meant about as much as playing Frisbee in the dark with a corpse.

Jamal got the high bar stuck between his legs while midair and abraded the groin muscle next to his right testicle.

But who cared? Who cared about track, or Gunner, or his football? What was important was that DIY Fantasy FX had reached some kind of tipping point. Its next phase was about to begin.

———

The week accelerated until it became a multicolored blur smearing across time and space. This happened whenever I focused hard on a new prop project. You could say this was what I loved most about DIY Fantasy FX: the effect it had on time.

I spent my school day sketching prop ideas on the sly, then holding my phone under my desk to text photos of those sketches to Milo and Jamal. In this way we held our design meetings.

Materials too expensive and not common enough, Milo would say.

Totally fun FX but maybe not quite feasible for a real-world use case? Jamal would say.
No but how about this one, I would counter, moving my previous concept into a cloud folder named Idea Archive. The folder contained more than a hundred note clippings spanning my entire friendship with Milo and Jamal.

Milo was the Production Adviser. Jamal was the Promoter. I was the Idea Guy.

Our group chat was named the SuJaMi Guild, for Sunny, Jamal, and Milo.

In Chemistry, we three huddled in the back of the classroom and drew on notepads while the rest of the students boiled strips of balsa wood or whatever those bucktoothed lemmings had been told to do.

Me and Milo and Jamal were strictly B students.

“Excuse me,” said Ms. Uptight Teacher. “What do you three think you’re doing back here?”

I thought fast. “It’s STEAM.”

STEAM referred to any activity that involved Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math. Falling off a skateboard could be STEAM. Eating tacos could be STEAM.

Ms. Uptight Teacher peered at my scribbles. “Huh?”

“STEAM,” I insisted.

“STEAM,” said Jamal.

“Okay, but—” said Ms. Uptight Teacher.

“STEAMSTEAMSTEAM,” said me and Milo and Jamal.

She left us alone to brainstorm in peace.

While picking clover in the golden Friday afternoon light of another track practice, me and/or Milo and/or Jamal—it was hard to remember who said what first—came up with Raiden’s Spark: electroluminescent wires spring-launched from a wrist-mounted device.
“It fulfills our CREAPS requirement,” said Milo.
“Cheap parts,” I said, counting on my fingers.
“Readily available,” said Jamal, counting on his, too.
“Easy to assemble,” said Milo, nodding.
“Awesome effect,” said Jamal, nodding too.
“Portable,” I said.
“Safe!” cried Milo.
“We got ourselves a plan, Karaan,” I said, referring of course to the god of all lycanthropes.

I reached out both arms to exchange high fives with Jamal and Milo at the same time. Jamal’s was gentle as a baby’s kick. Milo’s could break a cinder block.

“Hey,” yelled Coach Oldtimer. “Let’s get lined up for sprints, pronto.”

“In a minute, beef strokinoff,” I snapped, irritated.

“Jeez, you guys, come on,” said Coach, waving his clipboard in vain.

I turned back to Milo and Jamal. “I’ll get building over the weekend.”

“Early start,” said Milo. “Bravo.”

“The early bird rips the worm from the safety of her underground home and bites her in half while her children watch in horror,” I said.

I spent all Saturday shuttling back and forth between home, Hardware Gloryhole, and Lonely Hobby in Dad’s sapphire-blue-for-boys Inspire NV, an electric car that cost triple the average annual American salary and was crucial to looking the part. Mom had one too, in burgundy-red-for-girls. She was forever taking it in for service because the more expensive the car, the more attention it needs—but the more attention you get.
Armed with supplies, I holed up in my room.

Here in my room, I felt safe. I felt free. Free to be 100 percent me. I had all the things I loved surrounding me, all hidden away in Arctic White airtight storage containers.

In my room were maces and shields and swords. There were dragons and dice and maps and pewter figurines, all painted in micro-brush detail. There were elven dictionaries and fae song-books. There were model pliers and glue and solder guns and electronics and wood.

I banged containers open and closed, and gathered the tools I’d need. I had a whole system. I preferred opaque containers because I did not want anyone to see, and therefore judge, the things I cared deeply about. The things that made me me.

I flipped my face shield down and got to work. I soldered. Glued. Test-fired. Live-fired. I took notes in my lab book. I fell into a fugue state deep enough to alarm even Mom, who took a full ten-minute break from her twenty-four-hour workday to cautiously offer a plate of simple dry foods to keep her younger son alive.

Mom tapped her ear to mute her call—a gesture gone automatic over the years. “Even nerds gotta eat,” she said. She was working, even though it was a Sunday. She wore a creamcolored work blouse incongruously paired with yoga pants and horrible orange foam clogs, because Video meetings are from the waist up.

“I’m not a nerd,” I said from behind my face shield. “I’m an innovator for nerds.”

“Right, Jesus, okay,” said Mom, hands raised.

By the time Monday evening came around, I was up to version twelve of the Raiden’s Spark. I turned off the lights. I aimed
my hand at the door, thumbed a button, and let fly a ragged cone of neon-bright wires.

The wires streaked across the stone chamber in a brilliant flash and wrapped Gunner's steel helm before he could even begin a backswing of his bastard sword. The rest of my party cowered in awe as a nest of lightning enveloped Gunner's armored torso, turning him into a marionette gone mad with jittering death spasms, with absolutely no hope for a saving throw against this: a +9 magic bonus attack.

The wires of Raiden's Spark retracted smoothly into the spring mechanism via a small hand reel. Gunner lay steaming on the flagstone.

I turned the lights back on. I flipped my face shield up. I blinked back into my room.

I opened my lab book, which I had meticulously decorated into the hammered-iron style of medieval blacksmithery.

DIY FANTASY FX—SUNNY DAE

From the tiny arms of a tiny standing knight I took a tiny sword that was not a sword but a pen, and muttered words as I wrote them.

“Raiden's Spark, success.”
You're not wearing that,” said Mom.

“I always wear this,” I said.

“Not to dinner at the club, you're not,” said Mom. She had traded her yoga pants for a long gray wool skirt.

I looked down at my clothes. Glowstick-green vintage Kazaa tee shirt. Cargo shorts the color, and shape, of potatoes.

Dad appeared in a suit and tie, which is what he always wore. He put down his phone, sighed at my room and its many white plastic storage containers, at the newly completed Raiden’s Spark, and at me. He shook his head.

“Still with the toys,” he murmured to Mom. “Shouldn’t Sunny be into girls by now?”

“The book said kids mature at their own pace,” murmured Mom back.

“I hear everything you're saying,” I said. “And the Raiden’s Spark is hardly a toy.”
Dad went back to his phone. Dad also worked twenty-four-hour days. Dad and Mom worked at the same company, which they also owned and operated.

“We're at the club tonight,” said Mom. “Please wear slacks and a button-up and a blazer and argyle socks and driving loafers.”

“And underwear and skin and hair and teeth,” I said.

“And a tie,” said Dad, eyes locked to his screen.

“Get your outfit in alignment—now, please,” said Mom, and turned her attention back to her buzzing phone.

I changed my clothes, hissing. Then I prepared to descend the stairs. I hated stairs. People slipped and fell down stairs. Our old place back in Arroyo Plato had not been cursed with stairs.

Gray, my older brother, once called me fifteen going on fifty. He didn't call me anything now.

Dad's blue-for-boys Inspire NV wound silently through the spaghetti streets of our neighborhood: Rancho Ruby.

Rancho Ruby was developed all at once in the late nineties as a seaside mega-enclave for the newly wealthy. It was the setting for Indecent Housewives of Rancho Ruby. It had its own private airstrip for C-level executive douchebags of all denominations.

If you thought Playa Mesa was fancy, that meant you'd never seen Rancho Ruby.

Rancho Ruby was 99.6 percent white. We, the Daes, were one of the few minority families, and one of two Asian families, possessing the wealth required to live in such a community.
Being a minority in a crowd of majority meant having to prove yourself worthy, over and over, for you were only as credible as your latest divine miracle. For Mom, this meant seizing the lead volunteer position at my school despite her unrelenting work schedule. For Dad, this meant pretending to care deeply about maintaining an impeccable address setup and swing amid the endless poking and ribbing at the Rancho Ruby Country Club.

Mom and Dad’s company, Manny Dae Business Management Services, was started by Dad’s late father, Emmanuel Dae, a first-generation Korean immigrant who gave his only son his name, his charisma, and his client list. Once upon a time, the company was run out of his old house in Arroyo Plato, which after his death became our house.

This was the time when big brother Gray and I would rattle the floors of the old craftsman with our stomps and jumps and sprints. When clients—all immigrant mom-n-pops from the neighborhood, understandably intimidated by American tax law—would happily toss back any toy balls or vehicles that happened to stray into the living room, where Mom and Dad held meetings in English, simple Korean, and even simpler Spanish.

It was also the time when Gray helped me make my first costume—a tinfoil helmet—so that I could play squire to his knight. Together we conquered the backyard lands and stacked the corpses of pillow goblins ten high, often joined by customers’ children enchanted by Gray’s charms. Even back then Gray had charisma like no other.

*Magic missile!* Gray would scream. And I could practically see it!
Magic missile!

But.

Mom and Dad—hustling like hell all over in every county in Southern Californiand—landed their first C-level client with C-level cash. After that, they could not imagine going back to the mom-n-pops with their handwritten checks and collateral jerk drumsticks.

Landing a few more C-level clients—all in Rancho Ruby, all acquired through word of mouth—enabled them to move us into the seven-bedroom monstrosity we lived in today.

“We’re here,” said Dad.

I jerked awake. The Inspire NV had taken us to the cartoonishly oversized carriage house of the Rancho Ruby Country Club. Three young valets—one for each of us—helped us out of the car. They wore hunter green. They were all Hispanic.

“Sup,” I said to my valet.

“Have a wonderful evening, Mr. Dae,” said the valet. He looked about twenty-one. Gray was twenty-one.

Dad handed him the car fob. “I appreciate everything you and your team do,” he said.

The valet, unaccustomed to such sincerity, brandished the fob with a smile.

“Of course, Mr. Dae,” said the valet.

Lions-head doors opened to reveal a heavily coffered oak corridor leading us toward the restrained din of a dark velvet cocktail lounge and beyond, deep into the cavern of the dining room proper to sit in deep leather booths as rusty crimson as a kidney.

A waiter—dressed in real steakhouse whites with a real towel draped over his forearm—led us to our booth.
“Thank you, Tony,” said Mom.

“My pleasure, Mrs. Dae,” said Tony. “Medium rares all around, extra au jus?”

“You know us so well,” said Mom.

The dining room murmured away, for this was where the serious networking happened; I watched Mom and Dad as they alternated between scanning the room and checking their phones, scanning and checking.

“Now, will we be needing this fourth place setting?” said Tony the waiter.

“Not tonight,” said Mom. She'd been saying this for three years now.

Tony began stacking the place setting.

In order to distract Tony, I pointed and said, “Is that stag head new?”

Tony glanced back at the wall, giving me time to palm a miniature teaspoon.

“That thing’s been creeping me out for years,” said Tony.

I glanced at Mom and Dad, but they of course did not notice my pilferage.

Tony whisked the plates and utensils away. That fourth place setting had been meant for Gray. It was sweet that the staff still put it out, just in case.

Gray had forgone college against Mom and Dad's wishes. He was living forty minutes away in Hollywood, the glowing nexus of every dazzling arc light crisscrossing Los Angeles, and well on his way to becoming a rock star.

I imagined Gray, lit from all sides by flashbulb lightning.

“Honey, did you get my Hastings Company email?” said
Mom, tapping at her phone. “They’re asking about reseller permits.”

“What the hell do we know about reseller permits?” said Dad.

“Just make something up, Mr. CEO,” said Mom.

“Fake it till you make it,” said Dad, and he high-fived Mom. Then they returned to their phones.

“Sunny,” said Mom. “Did you get my email about later tonight?”

“Uh,” I said.

“I sent it this morning?” said Mom, growing disappointed in her son. Tony swept a drink in front of her, and she swept it to her mouth for a sip in a fluid motion without breaking eye contact with me.

I was terrible at email. I would leave it unchecked for days at a time. Email was the awkward transitional technology between snail mail and texting. Pick one or the other. Even the word email—electronic mail—sounded vintage, like horseless carriage.

Mom frowned. “Your morning email is what sets the tone for the rest of your day.”

“Email is fundamentally incompatible with my workflow,” I said.

Dad raised his eyebrows as he worked his phone. “I got your email, dude. The Sohs, right?”

“Yap,” said Mom. Something appeared on her extremely large smartwatch, and she flicked it away. “So, to reiterate what was in the email: Our old friends from college, commercial development consultants, you’ve never met them, are here
from London for the next three to six quarters, working on this ginormous mixed-use project in downtown LA, but, and, so, we got Trey, who should be here tonight, to score them a condo just down the street, anyway, their daughter, Cirrus, you've never met her, same age as you, she'll be at Ruby High starting tomorrow, so we figured you could show her the ropes, because we and the Sohs have always done favors for each other."

"Sohs?" I said.

"Jane and Brandon Soh, S-O-H," said Dad.

"Cirrus isn't gonna know anyone," said Mom. "So I figured you could be her orientation buddy."

"I'm the world's worst orientation buddy," I said, because it was true. My main interest was in cataloging the imbecilic spectacle of human folly, not justifying their inane rules and customs with explanation. I bit a nervous fingernail.

"Friends in need, Sunny," said Dad, eyes on screen.

I hated meeting new people. New people terrified me.

"Tha-anks," chanted Mom.

Dad looked up from his phone and narrowed a hunter's gaze. "I see Trey Fortune," he said. "Right there."

"Take the conch," hissed Mom. She swatted his shoulder.

"Go, go, go."

Dad holstered his phone, took a breath, and whispered a little prayer: "Keep a super-duper positive attitude."

"There's my CEO," said Mom. She patted his back.

Then Dad slunk off into the dark. Within moments, he reappeared with Trey Fortune.

Mom shot to her feet. "It's so good to see you, Trey," she chirped.
I groaned silently and rose, as etiquette demanded. “Hi,” I said.

“Love the tie, Gray,” said Trey Fortune.

I could only blink at the man.

“I mean Sunny—my goof,” said Trey Fortune. “You and your brother are practically twins.”

I wanted to point out that Gray was five inches taller than me and eight points handsomer, but I could not. I said nothing. For a good couple of seconds, too.

“All Asians are technically identical twins, at the genetic level,” I said.

Trey made a horse face: Did not know that!

Dad, who often confused my jocularity for unhinged derangement, erupted into the fakest laughter in the annals of laughing, dating all the way back to the prehistoric walrus. Mom picked up on Dad’s cue and laughed as well. Together they laughed loud enough to cover up their mortification at their son.

The laughs did the trick, and soon Trey Fortune was laughing right along.

All of us laughed, except for me.

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Later.

Back in my room.

As I changed back into my cargo shorts and placed my dress slacks into a white plastic storage container, a miniature teaspoon fell out.

I smiled.
I took the little spoon across the hallway to Gray’s room.
I walked in. I sat on the bed, which was perfectly neat from years of disuse. When Gray moved into his own apartment in Hollywood, he took only what he needed from this room and left the rest sitting wherever it sat, giving the place the feel of a ship abandoned mid-dinner:

Posters, old vinyl, three guitars, a bass, amps, club flyers. Graffitied Docs in the closet; a frayed wardrobe of black pants and tee shirts, all still hanging; a leather jacket.

Gray had left it all without a second thought, creating a ruin frozen in time. A Tomb of Cool.

I opened Gray’s old desk drawer. It was full of tarnished teaspoons, all stolen from the country club by either me or him over the years. It had been our little gag ever since we moved to Rancho Ruby. We had performed this small act of disobedience without fully realizing why. Without fully understanding that it was our small way of claiming this new, unfamiliar neighborhood as our own.

I dropped the spoon in and slid the drawer shut.

Who knew what Gray was up to these days? I imagined him on a stage bathed in light. I imagined him in a slick studio booth, transfixing a team of producers with his rock star magnetism.

Gray had been in a few bands in high school—pop, rap, folk, whatever was trending at the time—but the Mortals were my favorite. They were dark. They were metal. Gray played a growling dropped D, as metal demanded. They had played the legendary Miss Mayhem on Sunset; Gray was only eighteen at the time.
We are mere Mortals, Gray would boom into the mic. And so are you.

Behind an amp head I spied a royal-yellow club flyer taped to the wall.

THE MORTALS—OCTOBER 15—FINAL NIGHT OF
THE 2ND ANNUAL ASIAN AMERICAN AND PACIFIC
ISLANDER ROCK AND ROLL FESTIVAL SPONSORED
BY KOREATOWN AUTO MALL—AT THE WORLD-
FAMOUS MISS MAYHEM ON SUNSET STRIP
IN HOLLYWOOD, CA

It had been torn; a corner dangled.

I looked in Gray's closet. I pushed aside a bulging cardboard box full of unsold Mortals merch: tee shirts, lighters, stickers. I found a thermal long-sleeve shirt adorned with skulls. I slammedanced out of my loathsome blazer and tie and put it on. Was it still cool?

Felt cool to me.

I turned, brushing against a guitar that chimed with dissonance. One of these days I should teach myself how to play beyond the six chords I already sort of knew.

Atop an amp sat a darkly glittering thing.

Gray’s Goat of Satan ring.

Metal cool and fantasy nerd, forged as one into a chrome-plated steel homage to Baphomet himself.

When the Mortals were active, Gray's two bandmates would bring their matching rings together in a sacred fist bump and growl the prayer:
To metal.
I put the ring on, relished the weight of the thing.
Elf shot the food! said my phone. It was a ringtone from an early primitive arcade role-playing game. I peered at it, wondering if Gray had felt his ears burning miles from here.
It wasn’t Gray. It was Dad, texting me from downstairs. Cirrus Soh is here!
made my way downstairs, where the front door was already open. Beyond where Dad stood, I could see a ghostly girl straight out of a Japanese horror movie lurking in the dark beyond. Instinctively I clutched at the banister with both hands.

“Hello?” I said.

Dad gestured, and the girl-ghost slowly stepped in. She turned out to be a real girl: heavy charcoal eyeliner, blue lips, in white jeans and a white tee shirt with the words I NO KUNG FU and an illustration of a hand with two fingers—middle and index—held straight up.

Her gaze traveled around the house slowly, as if she had just emerged into a crypt, and came to rest. On me.

“Hey,” she said, as if perplexed by my existence.

I relaxed my grip. I approached. I kept a good eight feet away from the girl. “You’re not a ghost.”

She cocked her head. “Are you?”
“And we're off and running!” cried Dad with a hand clap. He glanced at my shirt Gray's shirt, blinked, then moved on, oblivious. “Cirrus, this is Sunny, Sunny, this is Cirrus.”

My palms immediately grew hot and moist, like they did whenever I was confronted by a pretty girl.

You just said she was pretty.
Well, she is.
I never said I thought she wasn't.
We're actually all in violent agreement.

Cirrus let out a huge moan of a yawn.

“I'm just in from London,” she said, “so I'm good and knackered.”

“Great,” I said. What was naccud?

“So it's Sunny,” said Cirrus, nodding seriously at Dad. “I thought you were calling him sonny.”

“Yeppers, Sunny Dae,” said Dad with a sideways laugh. He turned to me. “Sunny, Cirrus is—”

“Daughter of Jane and Brandon Soh,” I said, like an automated information kiosk. “They are our new neighbors. You are old friends.”

“Your name is Sunny Dae,” said Cirrus, thinking. “And your brother's name is Gray Dae. Sunny day. Gray day.”

“You were named after a variety of cloud,” I said. I added a smile to make that statement seem less whiny, but it did not help.

Dad stared at his son and this girl, waiting to see what happened next.

Cirrus seemed to relax a millimeter. “It's nice to meet you.” She stuck out a hand.
I lunged to receive it. “Nice to meet you too.” Then I lunged right back.

“Intros made!” shouted Dad to himself. He turned to Cirrus. “Anything you need, any school intel, fun hot spots around town, you just ask Sunny.”

“Everything here is so foreign and exotic,” said Cirrus, peering around with mock theater. She smiled. “But really. Thank you, Mr. Dae. Thank you, Sunny.”

The way she said my name was as shocking and brilliant as a thousand diamond beams of white starlight all converging at once on my dumbstruck face.

“Yeah of course you got it hurr,” I said in a single breath.

“Sunny’ll take good care of you,” said Dad, who gave my back an irritating forehand and then vanished.

We stood in our socks in the foyer.

“Great,” I said to Cirrus.

“Yow,” Cirrus said, jumping at a buzzing phone in her pocket. She smiled at it, and began typing. “Sorry, it’s AlloAllo. Are you on AlloAllo?”

“No, yes, I used to be, not that much,” I said, fairly certain she was talking about an app. I suddenly felt intensely stupid for not knowing what AlloAllo was, and fervently promised myself I would sign up as soon as possible even if it meant relinquishing all my privacy and basic human rights in the process.

I knit my fingers at my quaking belly. Just above Cirrus’s collarbone I noticed a tiny triangle of skin, pulsating at a rate definitely slower than my own heartbeat.

“Looks like my friends in Zurich are up,” said Cirrus. She
finished up, put the phone away. “They’re such morning people over there.”

“I know,” I said.

I know?

“You’ve been?” said Cirrus.

“Not for a while,” I said.

What was I saying? I had never left Southern California in my entire life.

Moths were batting away at the porch lanterns, so I shut the front door. “How long you in the States for?” I said, marking the first time I’d ever referred to America as the States.

“Right up until I leave,” said Cirrus with finger pistols and a shake of her long black hair. “Seriously, though. Probably until I graduate. I mean we. One sec.”

She pulled out her phone again, smiled, typed. “School just let out in Sydney. Oi, Audrey, oi, Simon.”

“Sydney is in Australia,” I said resolutely.

Cirrus tucked her chin at her shirt. “I’m actually wearing Simon, speak of the devil.”

Her shirt once belonged to Simon? Simon was the name of her shirt?

“Great,” I said, making this the third time I used the word great. I was struggling very hard now. Cirrus was cool. Cirrus was so, so cool. She had just arrived from London. She had friends all over the world. Friends who did cool things and were therefore also so, so cool. She came from an entirely cool world. She did not belong in such an uncool house in an uncool neighborhood with an uncool loser like—

“My friend Simon made this tee shirt,” said Cirrus. “Amazing artist. Youngest ever to show at White Rabbit Gallery. He made
it for my other friend. Audrey. She's got this brilliant metal band protesting Asian stereotypes, called I No Kung Fu. Get it?"

"I like art," I said, wiping my forehead. Say *something interesting*. "I hate Asian stereotypes."

*I said interesting! Interesting!*

I knew no artists. I knew no musicians, other than long-gone Gray. I knew no one cool.

I wanted to blurt out, *My brother is a musician!* but managed to restrain myself. Instead, I found myself asking the most non-interesting question possible.

"Where, uh, what are your parents working on, doing?" I said.

"A big mixed-use thing downtown," said Cirrus, "because apparently Los Angeles doesn't have enough luxury malls and luxury condos."

"It doesn't?" I said.

"That was a joke," said Cirrus.

Now my ears ignited, because normally I had at least intermediate to advanced skill at identifying jokes.

"Hahahahahaha," I said, busted as hell. "Anyway, malls are cool."

Cirrus gave me a perplexed smirk: *You know better than to call that sort of thing cool.*

I scrambled to refurbish my last statement. "I meant *cool* in the sense that this new mall will help humanity finally get their carbon footprint big enough to make the Amazon rain forest the planet’s hot new desert," I said.

"Jesus, you’re cynical," whispered Cirrus, impressed.

By this point, my feet were as hot as my hands and my ears. My body was all-hot.
“How is the UK?” I said. UK stood for United Kingdom. Then I remembered Brexit, and the possibility that the UK would no longer exist, and wished I could do it over again to prove I wasn’t an ignorant American.

Cirrus thought. “Lots of history. Bit crowded. Bit rainy. Not like here, which is lovely.”

“Sure, cool cool cool cool,” I said. I made a mental sticky note to add London to my weather app to compare.

“I like your shirt,” said Cirrus.

Instantly my chin shot down to my shirt and shot right back up. I’d forgotten that this shirt was not my shirt. This was Gray’s shirt. It was quite tight.

And she liked it.

“Oh, this stupid old rag?” I said, far too loudly. The old part was true. I didn’t mention the part about it being Gray’s and not mine. Maybe that was the stupid part. I picked at Gray’s shirt’s sleeves.

“The skulls give it a throwback vibe,” said Cirrus.

I had no idea what the hell that meant, so I focused on her shirt instead.

“What does that hand gesture mean?” I said. I held two fingers straight up, middle and index, like it showed on her shirt.

Cirrus demonstrated by holding up two fingers herself, then curling her index finger down so that only the middle one remained standing.

“It means this, but in Australia,” said Cirrus.

I lowered and raised my index finger: middle finger, two fingers, middle finger, two fingers. “So, eff you, eff you, eff you, eff you.”
Cirrus did this thing where she covered her mouth with the back of her hand to laugh—she had the velvet laugh of a villainess—and for a moment I stood spellbound. Finally I put my hand away like an amateur magician stashing his last, best trick.

Cirrus slowly flexed one leg after another, as if tired from standing for a long period of—

**You let her stand in the foyer this whole time?**

“How about we go sit in my room!” I cried, and headed up the stairs.

“Sounds great?” said Cirrus, and followed.

I reached the landing and hesitated. An image flashed in my mind: Cirrus, sitting in my room, amid my stacks of white plastic storage containers. Cirrus, opening the containers one by one. Loudly saying,

**Got lots of swords and shields and nerdy stuff. Are you one of those big mega-nerds?**

I halted abruptly enough to have Cirrus literally bump into my back.

“Oop,” said Cirrus, sidestepping me to slide into my room. Except it was Gray’s room.

“Ohhhhhhh,” I began, without finishing.

Gray’s door was always open, because that’s how Gray liked things. The door to my room was always shut, because that’s how I liked things.

My door was blank and unadorned. My door could have led to anything—a linen closet, a brick wall, an alternate universe.

*You only get one chance to make a first impression, Mom liked*
to say. It was characteristically shallow advice, but there was a truth to it that I only now realized.

I followed Cirrus, heading left into Gray’s room instead of right into mine.

Cirrus had already made herself at home in Gray’s salvaged steel swivel chair. She drummed her fingers on her thighs, as if eager to be introduced to the room’s history.

I started to say something, then stopped.
I started to say something else, then stopped.
I started to—
Cirrus eyed me with growing concern.

“So are you—” she said.

“These are guitars,” I said suddenly. I craned my neck back to look at them. I stretched, sniffed, did all the things amateurs do when gearing up for a big lie. “They’re my guitars.”

Cirrus brightened. “Wait. Are you in a band?”

“Phtphpthpt,” I said with a full-body spasm. “It’s just a little band, but yes: I am.”

Cirrus looked at the guitars again, as if they had changed.

“Very cool.”

I heard none of this, because my lie was still busy ping-ing around the inside of my big empty head like a stray shot. Shocking, how easily the lie had slipped out.

“You’re more than cool,” continued Cirrus. “You’re brave. Most people barely have hobbies, if they bother to try anything at all. Most people let the dream starve and die in the kill-basement of their soul and only visit the rotting corpse when they themselves are finally on death’s door wondering, What was I so afraid of this whole time?”

“Jesus, you’re cynical,” I whispered.
Cirrus spotted something behind my guitars: the torn Mortals flyer. “Is that you?”

I cleared my throat, which was already clear. “That’s, uh, my old band,” I said. “We split up. I’m working on a new thing.”

“Cool-cool,” said Cirrus, nodding blankly.

Then she flashed me a look.

Not just any look.

The Look.

I recognized the Look from when Gray was still at school. The Look was a particular type of glance Gray got often—a combination of burning curiosity barely masked by bogus nonchalance. Everyone badly wanted to know Gray; everyone pretended they didn’t.

The Look was the expression people gave to someone doing something well, and with passion. It was an instinctive attraction to creativity—the highest form of human endeavor—expressed by emitting little hearts out of our eyes. It was falling a little bit in love with people who were fashioning something new with their hands and their imaginations.

I had always wondered what it would feel like to get the Look, and now I realized I had just found out.

The Look was pure deadly sweet terror, and it felt incredible.

I instantly wanted another.

Cirrus moved on, her face neutral again. She nodded at something on Gray’s shelf. “What’s that?”

“My ring?” I said.

It was slightly easier this time, calling it my ring, as if lying were a thing that became easier with practice.

I let her hold the Goat of Satan ring. She leaned forward, accepted it, put it on.
“It’s heavy,” she said, amazed.

“It’s the Goat of Satan,” I said. The goat’s name was Barthomat, Birtalmont, Baccarat—

“And then you make a fist and say ‘To metal,’” I growled.

“To metal,” she growled back. Then she studied the ring with a pensive eye, as if it reminded her of something sad. She took it off, handed it back. I put the ring on with a deftness that implied I’d been wearing the thing for years. My finger absorbed her lingering warmth. For an idiotic moment I felt like we had just somehow kissed.

“So what’s your new band called?” said Cirrus.

She threw me the Look again before turning to gaze at nothing in particular. I realized what she was doing. She was wanting for something from me, while pretending her question was no big deal.

My mind seized up. I fiddled with my fingers at my belly, which had gone a little sour. I shoved my hands into my pockets, only to find it was too hot for pockets. So I took them out again and just kind of rested my fingertips on my ribs. Many people sat like this all the time, except those who didn’t, which was everybody.

“Our working band name,” I said, “is the Immortals.”

Immediately I wished I could take it back.

Cirrus smiled. “So you were the Mortals. And now you are the Immortals.”

“Okay, shut up.”

“And I thought I was lazy,” she said with a chuckle.

“I know, I know,” I said, with a wild marionette’s shrug. “We wanted to maintain brand recognition?”
“No, I like it,” said Cirrus. “Also it’s got this dorky Dungeons & Dragons vibe, like Fools, you cannot defeat the immortals!”

“You’re just being nice,” I said, openly knitting my fingers now. Dorky, she said. Dungeons & Dragons, she said.

“I am,” said Cirrus, then laughed until she had to place a hand on my shoulder for support, at which moment I decided she could laugh however long she wanted. All night would be fine by me.

“Seriously, though,” she said. “I could never put myself out there like that. I’d love to see you guys at your next gig.”

All I could do was shrug and turn the ring around and around. Baphomet. The goat was called Baphomet.

“Ffshhhffshssh,” I said, nodding and nodding.

Cirrus grew quiet. She seemed to be considering something, and gave a wan little chuckle to whatever thought was in her head. She opened her mouth to speak.

My gut quivered. I felt I was about to learn something deep and interesting and extraordinarily personal from this new girl. And only fifteen minutes into our very first conversation! The first conversation of many!

But her lips drew a thin tight line, and nothing came out.

Cirrus’s eyes had reset. It was as if a Topic of Conversation dial selector had just been switched to off by an unseen hand. Her phone blooped again—more AlloAllos—but she didn’t seem to hear it at all.

I blanched. Had I just inadvertently disappointed her in some opaque way? It was entirely possible—ask my parents—but at the moment I could not fathom what that way could be.

“I should head back,” she said, and stood.
“Cool,” I said, blinking. But this was not cool. She was here, she was about to speak, and now she was suddenly leaving.

“See you tomorrow at school?” she said.

“Uh, sure,” I said. I wanted to kick myself, but I did not know why, or if I even needed to.

So I just watched as Cirrus Soh floated away down the stairs to let herself out without a sound.