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Snail

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Illustration by Kevin Lee

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It is after lunch. In this town, every family has lunch at the same time, goes to their afternoon naps at the same time. Listen, you can hear snores undulating from neighbor to neighbor. Breathe in, you can catch the lingering smell of white rice and cooked fish.

The daughter, who has refused to take a nap, is now sitting in the backyard next to a plum tree. The sun gently touches her back. She yawns. What a nice day. What a nice afternoon. It almost feels so nice that it irritates her.

Mr. Snail, do you honestly enjoy your life in this town?

Shhh! What a stupid question.

A pause.

I guess where you live, it doesn't matter that much. You seem happy just hanging out here in this small bottle.

Lifting it to the level of her eyes, the daughter studies

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the world through its translucent body. This must be what the snails are seeing right now: golden sunlight shining through the purple leaves, moist soil filled with clover, a patch of red peeking out from the back door.

A patch of red?

She quickly puts down the bottle and finds her mom entering the yard. Startled, she kicks the bottle behind her back.

“What are you doing here?” the mom asks.

“I thought...I thought you'd gone to bed already,” she answers.

Looking at the door entrance, she is surprised to find a pile of dried chili peppers lying there on the stairs.

“I’m too old for this afternoon nap thing.” Her mom turns to the door. She sighs with relief. The handle turns and she picks up the bottle again.

Mr. Snail, this is my mom. She can be annoying at times. Hope you don’t mind.

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Why would I? She looks so caring. You are lucky to have her.

Suddenly, the sound of the handle stops. The mom turns back.

“What about you?” The mom asks.

The daughter hears the chirpings of cicadas.

“Why didn’t you take a nap? I remember you telling me on the phone that you need some rest. That’s the reason why you are here right?”

The song of cicadas becomes louder and louder, reaching the chorus.

“I am resting.”

“With your snails?”

Oh shit! How did she know?

“I picked them up today, no, yesterday,” she said. “In the morning, after the hard rain. They looked so joyful and their shells shined so delicately with the dew, so I

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just... I wanted to give them a home!”

“Can you give yourself a home first?”

She opens her mouth, waits for a second, but nothing comes out. She is tired of people asking the same question over and over again. What can she say? Hair down, no make up, bare feet sitting on a folding stool her dad bought her when she was six. In the eyes of her mom, she is still that little girl.

But Mr. Snail, will you believe me if I say that I tried?

“I tried hard.” She seems to be speaking to the snails. For the past six years, she has squeezed herself in a shoebox, turned her body into a lifeless vending machine, left her friends from home and threw away her heart. All she wishes is to have a small room of her own to write in a city colorful with neon lights and lively with sirens and people talking. She has always been fascinated by people’s stories. That’s her source of inspiration. However, they have become so loud and so harsh in the city that they have started to bite her. She got swallowed by the countless sleepless nights and awakened almost daily with the fears of failure and time passing by.

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Mr. Snail knows nothing about her struggles. In his little mind, she must be no different from hundreds of other girls in this town: seemingly satisfied with her life.

“I just wanted you to have someone to lean on,” says the mom, breaking the silence.

“Well...I have snails. They can be my family members now!”

This makes them both chuckle. The mom tucks her hair and stares at the ground. It is no longer soggy like yesterday. Remnants of the storm scatter around the tree, occasionally poking through the earth.

“You must have at least met some new people, made some friends, right?”

Had she?

The daughter lifts her head and stares past her mom’s dress into the chili peppers behind. “Making friends must come easy for you,” the daughter says. “Always surrounded by people who adore you. Growing up,

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they always tell me how beautiful you are and how grateful I should be to have you as my mom.”

A gust of wind wakes up the tabby cat that has been lying on the fence since lunchtime, and pushes it to jump to the neighbor’s yard. The snails slowly work their way towards the cap. Which one is Mr. Snail?

“The only wish I have is for you to be happy.” The mom sighs.

“That’s a lot to ask.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, things are different there ”

“I was born in that city. Did you forget? I lived there for twenty years before you were even born.”

“Then why did you leave it?” The daughter says it with her eyes fixated on the ground.

Hearing no answer from her mom, she starts searching for her camera, a second-hand old model she got from the flea market. Nowadays the only thing

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that interests her is taking pictures of snails. She is enamored by them. Since her mom first pointed out a snail to her, it has always been her dream to capture their beauty, that spiral shell like a maze she can never escape. It was a rainy night draped in fog. She was dancing on a bench, with her skirt still wet, and her mom was complaining about the moistness to her dad, while her dad was reciting a poem about storms. “Be careful,” she remembers her mom saying. “There are snails on the bench.”

She has dreamed about that night many years later, when she was on the train to school, in the elevator to work, and at the dinner table with her date at that time. While he was staring into her eyes thinking about what would happen later at night, she was staring at his handlebar mustache thinking about how it resembled snails in her hometown.

“I got the news that our local newspaper is hiring editors,” the mom breaks in.

“I won’t stay long.”

She has to leave. There is no use for her to stay here too long. She is afraid that once she takes too long a

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rest, she will be stuck here forever like everyone else in this town.

“The salary is decent. They have two months off every summer. You can go back to the city if you want during the break.”

She is on the verge of saying “Yes, let me do it” but something holds her back.

What do you think about this job? Mr. Snail?

If I were you I would say yes without any hesitation.

But I can't. I really can't.

It is not about the money—she earns even less in that city—but is it about her future? Does she still care about it at this point? Then what is it that makes her so scared?

Pointing her camera at the bottle, she takes a snapshot.

The photo turns out to be overexposed again. She frowns. Her mom, still standing next to her, frowns

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too.

“Can I see?” The mom takes over the camera, looks at it for a while, and turns a few knobs. The daughter finds her mom grinning with satisfaction, and without realizing it, a photo of her unkempt hair is taken.

“What are you doing?” She grabs back the camera from her mom, and right before reaching out for the delete button, she stops.

“How did you do that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you change the setting?” She scrutinizes the photo. “You must have.” She takes another photo of the snails. This time, she can clearly see their spiral shells and their soft bodies pressing against the plastic bottle. There are six of them.

Mr. Snail, suddenly you look so beautiful.

The mom, now staring at the knobs on the camera, stands silently. The sun is slowly being covered by a passing cloud.

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“Where did you learn that?” She asks her mom.

“In college.”

“There was a photography class?”

“No, a film class.”

“Film?” She jumps up.

“I...” the mother hesitates. “Never mind. Let’s talk about your job.”

“Wait...Didn’t you go to college for accounting? That was why they hired you for that job, right?”

“Yeah, I studied accounting. Maybe you should also look for something like being an accountant, not too stressful, not too...” The daughter interrupts. “Then what about this film stuff?”

Memory of those endless summer days comes back to her: she would take her nap with the rest of the town, dreaming about a life in the city, while her parents took the train to that same city to watch

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movies. They would come back right before dinner.

“It was just a class I took,” the mom adds.

“I knew it. I always knew it! That explains the hundreds of discs in the basement. I remember rummaging through them one day, when you forgot to lock the door. Then suddenly they were all gone, and the door has never been locked since.”

“I met your dad at film school.”

“Film school? Why were you two at film school?”

Her dad has always been working in the office ever since she was a kid. She has secretly looked down on that. They did boring stuff they don't like. That's why she went to the city all by herself. She wanted change. She wanted to step out of the loop of her parents. She wants a life with dreams, but she didn't know that her parents were once like her.

“It was just a night school.” The mom turns away to the door. “I wanted to be a director.”

The daughter stands up. The stool falls down, barely

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missing the bottle with the snails. All these years she thought she was running away from her parents, walking her own path, but it turned out that her steps fell exactly the same as her parents. Her mom gave up on her dream and came to this town, just like her.

“Then why do you get to comment on my life? How stupid I was to let someone who gave up on her dream teach me how to lead a happy life!”

“You are overreacting.” The mom pulls open the door. “Let’s take our nap now.”

“You don’t know how many times I’ve asked the universe what I did wrong? Why is everyone moving forward without me? Why am I abandoned by time?” The daughter's voice is shivering. The cat jumps back on top of the fence, curious about others’ gossip.

“You are still living in a dream, aren’t you? It’s time to open your eyes.”

“I will go back tomorrow,” the daughter shouts.

“Enough rest for me.” She breathes heavily; this is not like her at all. She walks towards the stool and without sitting on it, she picks up the bottle beside it and

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starts to observe the crawling of the snails. They always leave a brown trace wherever they go.

Mr. Snail, did you know all this time?

Now she knows what is so scary about this town, about staying here. It's the never moving clock hands. Everyone here is abandoned by the time. They've drowned in their own happiness. Just like the snails in the bottle. They don't know how slow they crawl. They move relentlessly and pretend that they will get out of the bottle some day. They need this lie. They need this lie to feel a twisted happiness .

“Are you still wearing the ring dad gave you?” Now is the time to expose this lie. “Why don't you take it off already? Why are you still making those dried peppers? None of us like spicy food. Who is living in a dream? How long has it been since you guys last talked?”

“I am just giving him time to figure things out.”

“Ha! Figure things out. Do you still believe dad will come back after ten fucking years?”

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“Watch your mouth!”

“Who are you fooling?” she cries, and her eyes are puffy now. She gets up from the snails and walks towards her mom. “Are you happy? Trying so hard to pretend like nothing has happened. Trying so hard to lie to yourself. Trying so hard to live a happy life like everyone else.”

The mom stumbles back and steps on the peppers. Seeds sprout out to her heels.

“I can't let him break my life.”

“Can you even call this a life? Are you satisfied with a life without a dream?”

“Are you satisfied with a life with a dream!” the mom shouts. “Look at yourself! A 26-year-old adult living under her mom. Where did all these years go? Chasing your dream? Tell me, when was the last time you picked up a pen from the bag? And when is the last time you pick up a snail from the bench? How dare you comment on my relationship when you have never, for all twenty-six years of your life, been with someone before?”

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The cat folds back its ears. This is too much. The daughter finds herself scuffing her feet like a kid. She looks at the bottle lying beside her right foot. The snails, ignorant of their surroundings, slowly drag their bodies towards the cap. There are a few holes on the cap to let in some fresh air, but, oh, our stupid snails, they can never get out.

Mr. Snail, why don't you question? Why don't you find this town as strange as I do? Won't you ever get tired? Why do you keep moving?

A sudden urge comes to her. With the strength of her whole body, she stomps on the bottle.

One time, two times, three times...she can't stop. She has dimly heard the crack of the shells, but she just doesn't care. The plastic bottle turns flat. Four times, five times, six times...She can no longer tell if she is doing so to vent her emotions or if her body just moves on its own. The only thing she does know is that she feels good, but the fact that she is happy makes her want to cry. Her blood flows and she feels like she is being swallowed by the world, but also far away from everything. Seven times, eight times, nine

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times...the tiny snails grow bigger, bigger than her body, bigger than her mom, bigger than this town and even bigger than her dad. Why would anyone create snails? They are useless, sluggish. Why would anyone create her? She is no different from the snails. She cries and thanks the universe for bringing snails to earth.

“But you could have done better!” she yells at the cloudy sky. “You could just leave me there!”

The neighbors are awake now. Today is the day. There is always one day in a year when they will wake up from their naps and find something worth eavesdropping on. They get themselves a glass of water, and listen. However, nothing else comes. The sun appears from the clouds. They wait for another few minutes, but only the cicadas care to give them a response. They shake their heads. It is time to resume their afternoon chores.

“You are not following me,” the mom whispers, cupping the face of the daughter. “I was born in that city, but I know I don’t belong there. But you do.” She looks down at the bottle, and a tear drops from her face.

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The crushed bottle lays on the ground, reflecting the golden sunlight of an autumn afternoon. Some noise. The cat walks toward you with its tiny white boots and tiger stripe cape. So close you can hear the purring sound she makes. Both of you find each other exceptionally nosy that day. From the bottle, you can see remnants of the storm, but if you care to take a longer look, you will know that over the debris, there are bare feet and heels. The mom and the daughter. They hug.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Q Mao is a second year IMA student with a passion for storytelling and live performances. Her love of art, writing and building meaningful connections with people from different backgrounds has inspired her to pursue a career that plays at the intersection of art, humanities and technology.

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