

Megumi Mandish

### It Was Spring

The butterflies had just emerged from their cocoons when Violet died. I saw one crawl out of its brown husk outside my kitchen window, all black legs and abdomen like one of those horror movie aliens, hanging on to the new buds on the hydrangea bush my landlord had planted three years ago to ‘spruce the place up’, as she put it. I didn’t make coffee that morning because I didn’t want to scare it with the sound of my grinder. It just looked so fragile, sitting there with its crumpled orange wings, trying to catch every bit of sunlight it could reach from its shaded corner. The last thing I wanted was to make its life even harder from the get-go. So instead I poured a bowl of cereal, pulled up a chair, and watched as it spread its wings, catching the breeze and craning upwards towards the warm sun.

Maybe the lack of caffeine made the phone call easier. I missed the first two. My ringer was on silent. When I picked up the third, I’d just gotten dressed for work. Ivy could barely get out two words between her sobbing, but she gave me the news. All I remember is that I needed to buy more tomatoes for next week’s lunches, and that I could see my sock through the tip of my left tennis shoe. The butterfly had disappeared when I hung up. I never got to see if it flew or not.

I got in my car and turned the ignition. It wasn’t anything special, just a Subaru; the blue paint was chipped and falling off both bumpers, and the front license plate was hanging on by a rusty nail. The plastic to the rear brake light had a hole in it that filled with water when it rained. It stank of oil and old leather, even through the lemon-scented

cleaner I used on the seats and the three lavender air fresheners I'd hung on the rearview mirror. I never bothered switching them out after the smell wore off. They made my car look nicer than the hunk of scrap it was. Like mother, like daughter, or whatever they say about cars and their owners. I cranked the ignition two more times, the car started, and I drove off to work.

We held a funeral for her the weekend after. Everyone was crying. Her mom stood up to say something nice, but could only get a couple sentences of flowery bullshit out before basically wailing onstage about how she missed her 'chubby baby', and made everyone uncomfortable with all the stories she told about her sweet daughter being a fuck-up. She made me get up too. I thought about walking out then. I didn't own anything nice anyways— her mom insisted I borrow some fancy dress from her friend at the little boutique shop downtown, said she'd put in a word and I could get it free of charge. It wasn't free. Even death costs money, I guess. At least the flower arrangements looked decent, though I would've preferred something other than white. Maybe orange, or yellow. Something that would make the butterflies come visit her. People said they liked my speech, so that's good. I went to work again on Monday.

A couple weeks after the funeral, Ivy started stopping by. It felt really weird at first; we never talked much before, and we barely talked whenever she visited now, but I still kept letting her stay over. She cried a lot, about a lot of things. I never minded. If she was doing homework, I helped her with math and chemistry, and I proofread her essays for her. Most of the time, she asked to go through my stuff. Well— her sister's stuff. I figured she would take better care of all of it than I could, so I let her see the stuff that got

left here. I usually came back from work or class and found her sitting in front of my apartment door, still wearing her school uniform and scribbling away in her sketchbook. Today, she's bundled up in extra wool stockings and a puffy jacket that's definitely a couple sizes too big for her.

“Hi, Morgan.”

“Hey.” I wait for Ivy to stand up, then I unlock the door and let her inside the apartment. She heads straight for the couch while I go to my room. My laundry reeks when I open the closet, but I hold my breath and pick out a clean sweater and sweatpants. I'll get to it later this week.

Ivy's already grabbed the basket of yarn and started knitting. She's been at that one for four months now; a few weeks after she first visited, I caught her trying to finish the sweater her sister had started knitting. The poor kid was sobbing when I asked her what happened, seeing the huge knot of blue and orange yarn and her hands shaking so hard she couldn't even hold the needles right. She kept apologizing, like it was somehow her fault for ruining Violet's memory. I gave her some of the knitting patterns that were still around the apartment, and I found her some online tutorials. She's gotten pretty good since then. I can see the other half of the tip of a butterfly wing that she's added to the original pattern her big sister started.

“How was school?” I ask as I walk past her to the kitchen. She shrugs without looking up.

“It was good. I aced my math test, and I talked to Nathan. He sat with me and my friends at lunch. And he went with us to get tacos for dinner.”

Good, she ate. “Wow, I can hear the wedding bells already.” I smile a little as she tosses a ball of yellow yarn at me. It sails way over my head and lands on the counter, where the water boiler is hissing. I open up two packets of cocoa mix. “Kidding. Preston’s the dream guy for you, right?”

“Ugh. Preston’s a sleazeball.” She rolls her eyes and sinks further into the couch. I sit next to her and hand her a cup of hot cocoa, topped with marshmallows. “I can’t believe I thought he was cute.”

“Better luck with Nathan, then.”

“Maybe I should just wait until I get into college like you did.” She blows on the cocoa, then takes a small sip. “I mean, Violet told me about dating in high school, and she made it sound like a nightmare. Imagine if Mom found out I was dating someone. I’d probably never be allowed to have friends again. You know she went through all my texts yesterday? I got yelled at for an hour because she thought River was a guy.”

“Yeah. That’s pretty shitty.” I study the coffee table. There’s still a stack of books I haven’t read, dust gathering on the topmost cover, turning the green to a gross grey. Just looking at them makes my stomach twist up. Reading takes too much energy these days—I do so much of it for school, that reading for fun feels more like a chore. Maybe I’ll get to it some other time.

“Morgan?”

I look up from the books. “What?”

Ivy points to my phone. A ping emanates from it. My chest feels tight at the sound, and my hand feels heavy, like it’s moving in slow motion as I reach out to pick it

up. The screen lights up, and a different kind of heaviness settles in my stomach when I notice the name hanging from the top of the messages. Ivy peeks over my shoulder.

“Ooh, a text from lover boy?” She grins, punching me lightly on the arm. “You didn’t tell me you had a date planned for Saturday.”

I swipe the notification away and shut off my phone. “It’s not a date. I broke up with him last month.”

“What?” Ivy stares at me as I get up from the couch. “Wait, you broke up with him? Why? What happened?”

“Nothing happened.” The dark green hoodie hanging on the dining chair makes me nauseous. I need to lay down. Maybe I should take a Xanax. “I just... wasn’t in love with him anymore.”

“But you’ve been dating him, like, basically since you moved here!” Ivy gets up and follows me towards my room. “Violet always said you and him were gonna get married after college—”

“Well, we’re not.”

Ivy flinches. Guilt gnaws away at my stomach when she steps back, fidgeting with the hem of her polo tee. Fuck, I sound like her mom. I sigh and gently ruffle her hair.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to snap.”

“It’s okay,” she whispers. I lean down a little to look her in the eyes.

“Hey, you know those books on the table? If you want, you can have some of them. There’s some fun fantasy ones in the pile that you’d probably like.”

She looks up at me with those big brown eyes of hers, and for a second I feel like the air got punched out of me. Like I'm seeing a ghost. "Really? Are you sure it's okay?"

"Yeah." I try to smile; it feels like someone grabbed my face and stretched it too wide, ripping at my chapped lips and yanking on my cheeks. "It's not like I have time to read them anyways. Too busy working and taking classes."

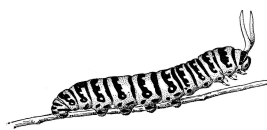
Ivy smiles back, and her eyes look a little brighter, and the gross weight in my stomach feels lighter. "Yeah, super not looking forward to college. Thanks, Morgan."

"No problem." I feel better now, knowing the books have a better home. "Just try not to stay up too late reading tonight. I'll drive you to school in the morning before I head to work."

"Okay. Are you going to bed already?"

"I'm going to study for my final exam next week first." I open the door to my room. "Just knock if you need anything."

The door closes, and it takes all the energy I have just to walk over to my bed. My back smacks against the old, hard mattress, and all I can do now is lay there and stare at the grey ceiling. The plastic stars lost their glow a long time ago, but I could never bring myself to take them down after we put them up. That's fine. The next tenant can decide what to do with them. I roll over and grab my Xanax bottle from the nightstand, tap a pill into my palm, and swallow it. I stare up at the stars until my eyes can't stay open anymore.



I wake up to my phone ringing. I don't remember falling asleep. My whole body's cold and covered in sweat, legs tangled in damp sheets. Did I have pants on before I went to bed? I have no idea. All my limbs feel heavy, pinning me to my mattress while my phone rings by my ear. My heart feels like it'll fly out of my throat. What did I miss this time?

It takes forever for me to finally sit up and grab my phone. By the time I answer, I can barely get out a strangled 'hello' because my lungs are so constricted.

"Morgan, thank god. Are you okay?"

His voice sounds so nice. "Yeah. Why?"

"It's half past five. We agreed to meet today, remember?"

I lower the phone and squint at the screen. The numbers and letters look blurry, but I figure he's probably right. "Sorry. I took a nap. Are you here?"

"I'm in my car. Do you need a few minutes?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. I'll be up in a bit. Hey, do you want dinner—"

I hang up and stare at the ceiling, wishing those plastic stars would just catch fire. As soon as I think it, I feel awful again. So instead I drag myself out of bed and stumble into the bathroom. I look like shit. My hair's grown at least a few inches, almost touching

my elbows. My sweatpants feel like wet blankets tied around my legs, and more sweat is rolling down my sides. I reek of B.O., and a huff leaves my mouth at the sudden mental image of me as some beachside surfer, ‘hang ten’ and all that, covered in oily sunscreen and ocean spray. Better that than the greaseball I’m looking at now.

After liberally applying deodorant and changing my clothes, I send a single thumbs-up text. Barely a minute later, a knock sounds at the door. I take a deep breath and open it.

“Hey, Mori.”

“Hey, Jay.” Shit, and I’ve already messed up. I step back to let him in. Jason moves close for a second, reaching for my face, then stops. He clears his throat and looks away.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Because it’s really okay. It’s not like I’ve missed him or anything. It’s just habit— dating for three and a half years does that. “Don’t you have a key?”

“Yeah, but we’re not really... y’know. I figured it’d be rude to barge in now.”

That’s nice of him. I don’t deserve someone as nice as him. “Thanks. You said you wanted to talk about something?”

“Uh, yeah.” Jason holds up a paper bag. “But before we talk, can we eat? My dad made chicken alfredo and garlic spinach.”

“Sure.” I don’t know why I agreed. I’m not hungry. But I let him steer me to the couch and wait for him to set up dinner. This reminds me of the first time I went to his house. His dad made chicken alfredo and spinach for dinner that day too. Jason



complained that it took him half an hour to fix his hair, and his dad mussed it all up within the first five minutes. I still remember all the baby pictures his mom showed me. He looked adorable in his Blue Sox tee and Little League participation trophy. I wonder sometimes if his younger self would be happy to know he's the best hitter on our college team. Or that he dated me. Somehow I'm doubtful of the latter.

"Mori?" I look up. Jason's leaning over the back of the couch, frowning a little. "I said I'm done setting up."

"Oh. Cool." I follow him to the table and sit down. It looks amazing. The smell of pasta and chicken makes my stomach churn. For a while, we just sit and eat— I try to eat, at least. Each bite feels like choking down a mouthful of sawdust. I settle for twirling the pasta around my fork, pushing it around my plate like that'll make it seem like I'm actually eating. Jason's eyes are burning a hole through my forehead.

"Does Ivy still visit?"

"She was here a couple days ago." I stare very hard at my plate. "Stayed the night. I drove her to school yesterday. Her mom was patrolling the neighborhood like a goddamn hawk. She thinks Ivy's got a boyfriend and wants to catch her with him."

Jason frowns. "Is she with her mom today? I told her my family would be happy to let her stay at their place."

"She's at a friend's today."

"Good. I get really worried when she's home alone with her mom." Jason studies me again with a weird look in his eye. "Are you doing okay, Mori? I know the past eight months have been really rough since Violet—"

“I’m fine.” I’m fine. I’m doing okay. “Thanks for checking.”

Jason lets out a very long breath and sets his fork down. The clink hurts my ears.

“Morgan, people who say they’re fine like that are usually not fine.”

My chest hurts. “I’m fine. I’ve moved on.”

“That doesn’t sound like you’ve moved on.” Jason leans back in his chair. “Mori, we need to talk about what’s been going on with you. Why do you keep pushing everyone away? My parents are really worried about you too.”

A sudden, bitter taste enters my mouth, and before I can stop myself, I open it.

“No one was worried about Violet before she killed herself.”

The silence that follows my words is thick enough to tie with a rope. Jason’s eyes, those gentle green eyes, shine with tears. I feel sick.

“That’s not fair, Morgan,” he whispers. I can’t look at him anymore.

“Sorry.” I can’t tell if I mean it or not.

Jason takes a deep breath again and looks up at the ceiling. I can feel the floor shake from his leg bouncing. “Wow. Fuck, okay, yeah. Let’s go there. She was my friend too, you know. She was my roommate for longer than I’ve even known you. The only reason we met in the first place is because she brought you over. You remember that, right?”

What I remember is her smile. Her brown eyes glittering with excitement, dark curls pinned back with hot pink and neon blue clips, the smell of jasmine and peach perfume. The bottle of smuggled tequila in one hand and plastic cups way too big for shots in the other. None of us actually knew how much a shot was, but that hadn’t

stopped her. She got shitfaced faster than I'd ever seen my parents get drunk. But she was a happy drunk. I didn't mind that. And she never did it again when she found out about my parents.

"I remember," I say quietly. "I'm sorry, Jason. I didn't mean that."

"It's... It's fine." Jason wipes his eyes and focuses on me again. "Look, don't take this the wrong way, but... maybe you should go talk to someone. Maybe it'll help. I went, and some of our classmates did too. They offer free services on-campus."

For some reason, that just makes my chest hurt more. "Like hell I will. I said I'm fine. I don't need to talk about my feelings or some shit."

"What's gotten into you lately? We're all in this together, you know that. This is hard for all of us. You're not alone in this." Jason reaches across the table and sets my fork down, then holds my hand. It's warm. I can't remember the last time I felt warm. "Can you just talk? It doesn't have to be me or any of our friends. You don't have to cope with it all by yourself—"

"I get it already." That bitter feeling comes back, and I yank my hand free and shove both of them under the table. They're shaking. I don't know why. "If being around me is so embarrassing for you, then stop trying to visit."

"Mori—"

"Stop calling me Mori."

Jason sits back and stares at me for a long time. I focus on the table instead. All I can think about is how much I can't stand being in the same room as him. All I can think about is the cologne I smell whenever he hugs me, jasmine and citrus and sandalwood,

and the way he'd wrap an arm around my waist and cup my cheek. I miss him. I can't stand looking at him.

"While you're here, I should give your things back to you," I say more quietly. He doesn't answer, so I get up and grab the green hoodie off the chair next to me and hand it over to him. "Give me a minute."

I leave him at the table and head into my room. There's not much he left here, besides the stuff he gave me. My hands are shaking so bad, but I just feel empty. It's fine. I was never good for Jason or his family anyways. People like me aren't made to last in relationships. This was always going to happen. Better now than later. I stuff a couple more hoodies and a pair of headphones into a bag that I found in the closet. Funny, each item I dump into the bag makes my chest feel lighter. Maybe I need this. A good purge, and then maybe I can finally sleep through the night. I put my old baseball cards and some of my cassettes in the bag.

When I come back out of my room, Jason's cleaned up the table and has started on the dishes. I drop the bag on the dining table. "Here's your shit."

Jason set the dishes on the drying rack and wipes his hands on the dish towel. "Thanks." He takes the bag and glances inside. I find myself holding my breath, hoping he doesn't see the extra stuff, but he slings the bag over his shoulder. He studies my face again, and this time he brings a hand up to brush against my cheek. "Text me when Ivy stops by again, okay?"

"Okay."

“Good.” He kisses my forehead. I want to hug him and never let go, let him tell me that it’s all going to be fine. I push his hand away. Jason doesn’t complain. “One more week until the semester ends. Try to come to class. Stats isn’t the same without you.”

“Sure.” I close the door behind him and watch myself walk straight to my room. Everything feels fuzzy, and even the flickering hallway light makes my head pound. I fall face first on my bed and grab the bottle off my nightstand. I pop a Xanax in my mouth and swallow, and roll onto my back to stare up at the ceiling. The stars are laughing at me in her voice, and I fall asleep listening to her call my name.



I almost bombed my final exams, but staying up to do some extra studying saved my grades in the end— not that it matters. As soon as my final class ended, I went back to my apartment and took a nap. When I woke up, I got a text from Jason saying Ivy would be staying with his family for winter break. I also got texts from both his parents, asking me if I wanted to stay over too— dating or not, they said I was always welcome to come see them. Jason’s two siblings texted too, something about ice skating and movie nights.

Honestly, I don’t know what happened during winter break. I slept a lot. Most days I don’t think I even got out of bed. Maybe I went to see Jason’s family or some of my friends, but I have no idea what I did with them. All I remembered were vague flashes of neon hair clips, knit sweaters and yarn laying everywhere, and plastic stars hanging from

the ceiling. I could hear her sometimes, always just out of sight, humming or laughing just around the corner. I'd take a Xanax, hoping that this time, each time, I would be able to sleep through the night. All I needed was a full night's rest. Just one night. Or even two, or five. I'm tired of being tired all the time.

Apparently, I registered for classes for spring semester. I don't know what classes. I showed up the first week because Jason and my friends kept nagging me about it, but every class I sat through just sounded slow and murky, like I was listening to my professors from underwater. It took the clock hours to count down each minute that when I drove home in my ratty Subaru, I went so fast I felt like I was flying. I could have gone faster, but I didn't want to break my car— it's not new, but it's a decent car, and Ivy's going to need it once she graduates high school in June. She made me promise to attend. I said yes; I didn't want to. But I gave her most of her sister's things so she could go through them. I stopped going to my classes. There's no point sitting there pretending I can hear what they're saying. I don't care about graduating anymore.

It's almost time for the butterflies to hatch from their cocoons now. I think I'm ready.



“Hey, Vi.”

I stop in front of a small headstone. The flowers around her are wilted, drooping and turning brown. A small white bouquet sits in front of her name. I push it to the side and set the bouquet I brought down in front of her instead. They're nice; the least I could do after never visiting is get her some decent flowers. I finally showered. Got to look my best, after all. No dress though, because fuck that lady for ruining my friend's reputation. I sit down in the tall grass and dump my bag next to me. Dew seeps through my clothes, staining my hands. Sunlight scatters through new leaves and flower buds, star-shaped and laughing in the breeze. Cocoons line the branches above my head.

"You have a nice view," I tell her. She overlooks the hill dotted with headstones, sprouting up from silver-green grass like ships on the sea. Beyond the iron fence, I can barely see the road bending through the lower hills and down towards town. I lean against the side of her headstone and close my eyes. She hums in the breeze, her shoulder steady and cold, and for a moment, I feel like we're back to the old days, back to that picnic we had up in the southern hills. If I focus enough, I can smell the bread we baked together, the blackberry jam, and the spray-on sunscreen that we used too much of. It had been such a sunny day back then too.

"I brought your favorite."

I pull a bottle of tequila from my bag and yank the wooden cork out. The smell of alcohol wafts up from the open bottle, and I grimace. Like mother, like daughter, I guess. I pour a little in the dirt in front of her, then plug my nose and take a swig. Fuck, it burns. I'm basically taking shots of hand sanitizer. I cough and wipe my mouth.

“I don’t know how you like this stuff. But,” I reach into my bag, “I guess it doesn’t really matter.”

I open up my palm, staring at the bottle of Xanax in my hand. It feels heavy, like I’m holding the weight of the world instead of just some pills. My hand shakes, but I feel... happy, if that’s what you could call it. But still, there’s this small part of me that whispers ‘wait’, and I can hear the breeze echoing it back to me. I take another swig of tequila and uncap the pills, but before I can pour them into my hand, I hear tires screech and something crash far down the hill. My Subaru’s been rammed against the graveyard signpole. Another car pulls up next to it: a white minivan. My hand moves on its own, turning the bottle upside down to dump all the pills into my hands. I don’t know if it was the sudden gust of wind or my own shaking hands or that whisper echoing back to me. But the pills scatter in the grass, vanishing under the green strands. My body feels heavy. All I can do is stare at the ground, feeling my stomach churn and my throat close up and my eyes burn. A pair of hands grab my arms, and I find Jason standing in front of me looking ready to cry.

“Morgan? Hey, talk to me.”

Ivy appears next to me. “Are you– Are you okay?”

I feel dizzy, even with only two sips of alcohol. “I’m okay.”

Jason tugs on the pill bottle in my hand, waiting for me to let go before he checks it. “Did you... swallow the pills?”

“I dropped them. I don’t know where, I—”



A sob rips itself out of my chest and all of a sudden I can't stop crying. I try to get out my words but it's useless now. It hurts so much to breathe, but then I feel Jason and Ivy both hugging me, sitting on the ground with me and Violet and the butterflies, telling me that it's going to be okay, that it's not my fault. And for the first time, maybe I believe them. Just a little bit.

Ivy clings tight to my side. She's crying too, but she's trying hard to keep herself composed. Jason presses a gentle kiss to my forehead. "I know you're tired, but do you think you can make it down the hill? Mom and Dad can drive us back to our house."

"Yeah," I whisper. "I want to go home."

Jason kisses my forehead again and helps me stand up. Ivy takes the alcohol bottle and gives it to Jason, then holds on to my hand. We start making our way towards the cars. A breeze kicks up, and I hear Violet's hum turn to a soft laugh. I turn around. There, on the tree, one of the cocoons has hatched. A monarch butterfly spreads its wings, orange and black hues catching in the sunlight, and then it flutters up into the air and soars away into the gentle wind.