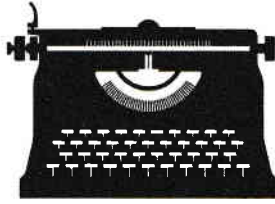


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THE NIGHT I WATCH ATHENA LIU DIE, WE'RE CELEBRATING HER TV deal with Netflix.

Off the bat, for this story to make sense, you should know two things about Athena:

First, she has everything: a multibook deal straight out of college at a major publishing house, an MFA from the one writing workshop everyone's heard of, a résumé of prestigious artist residencies, and a history of awards nominations longer than my grocery list. At twenty-seven, she's published three novels, each one a successively bigger hit. For Athena, the Netflix deal was not a life-changing event, just another feather in her cap, one of the side perks of the road to literary stardom she's been hurtling down since graduation.

Second, perhaps as a consequence of the first, she has almost no friends. Writers our age—young, ambitious up-and-comers just this side of thirty—tend to run in packs. You'll find evidence of cliques all over social media—writers gushing over excerpts of one another's unpublished manuscripts (LOSING MY HEAD OVER THIS

WIP!), squealing over cover reveals (THIS IS SO GORGEOUS I WILL DIE!!!), and posting selfies of group hangs at literary meet-ups across the globe. But Athena's Instagram photos feature no one else. She regularly tweets career updates and quirky jokes to her seventy thousand followers, but she rarely @s other people. She doesn't name-drop, doesn't blurb or recommend her colleagues' books, and doesn't publicly rub shoulders in that ostentatious, desperate way early career writers do. In the entire time I've known her, I've never heard her reference any close friends but me.

I used to think that she was simply aloof. Athena is so stupidly, ridiculously successful that it makes sense she wouldn't want to mingle with mere mortals. Athena, presumably, chats exclusively with blue check holders and fellow bestselling authors who can entertain her with their rarefied observations on modern society. Athena doesn't have time to make friends with proletarians.

But in recent years, I've developed another theory, which is that everyone else finds her as unbearable as I do. It's hard, after all, to be friends with someone who outshines you at every turn. Probably no one else can stand Athena because they can't stand constantly failing to measure up to her. Probably I'm here because I'm just that pathetic.

So that night it's only Athena and me at a loud, overpriced rooftop bar in Georgetown. She's flinging back cocktails like she has a duty to prove she's having a good time, and I'm drinking to dull the bitch in me that wishes she were dead.

ATHENA AND I ONLY BECAME FRIENDS BY CIRCUMSTANCE. WE LIVED on the same floor at Yale our freshman year, and because we've both

known we wanted to be writers since we were sentient, we ended up in all the same undergraduate writing seminars. We both published short stories in the same literary magazines early on in our careers and, a few years after graduation, moved to the same city—Athena for a prestigious fellowship at Georgetown, whose faculty, according to rumor, were so impressed by a guest lecture she gave at American University that its English department inaugurated a creative writing post just for her, and I because my mother's cousin owned a condo in Rosslyn that she would rent to me for the cost of utilities if I remembered to water her plants. We'd never experienced anything like kindred spirit recognition, or some deep, bonding trauma—we were just always in the same place, doing the same things, so it was convenient to be friendly.

But although we started out in the same place—Professor Natalia Gaines's Introduction to Short Fiction—our careers spiraled in wildly different directions after graduation.

I wrote my first novel in a fit of inspiration during a year spent bored out of my skull working for Teach for America. I'd come home after work every day to meticulously draft the story I'd wanted to tell since my childhood: a richly detailed and subtly magical coming-of-age story about grief, loss, and sisterhood titled *Over the Sycamore*. After I'd queried nearly fifty literary agents without luck, the book was picked up by a small press named Evermore during an open call for submissions. The advance seemed like an absurd amount of money to me at the time—ten thousand dollars up front, with royalties to come once I'd earned out—but that was before I learned Athena had gotten six figures for her debut novel at Penguin Random House.

Evermore folded three months before my book went to print.

My rights reverted back to me. Miraculously, my literary agent—who had signed me after Evermore’s initial offer—resold the rights to one of the Big Five publishing houses for a twenty-thousand-dollar advance—a “nice deal,” read the Publishers Marketplace announcement. It seemed like I had finally Made It, that all my dreams of fame and success were about to come true, until my launch day drew closer, and my first print run was reduced from ten thousand to five thousand copies, my six-city book tour was reduced to three stops in the DMV area, and the promised quotes from famous writers failed to materialize. I never got a second printing. I sold two, maybe three thousand copies total. My editor was fired during one of those publishing squeezes that happen every time the economy dips, and I got passed along to some guy named Garrett who has so far shown so little interest in supporting the novel that I often wonder whether he’s forgotten about me entirely.

But that’s par for the course, everyone told me. Everyone has a shitty debut experience. Publishers are Just Like That. It’s always chaos in New York, all the editors and publicists are overworked and underpaid, and balls get dropped all the time. The grass is never greener on the other side. Every author hates their imprint. There are no Cinderella stories—just hard work, tenacity, and repeat attempts at the golden ticket.

So why, then, do some people rocket to stardom on their first try? Six months before Athena’s debut novel came out, she got a big, sexy photo spread in a widely read publishing magazine under the title “Publishing’s Newest Prodigy Is Here to Tell the AAPI Stories We Need.” She sold foreign rights in thirty different territories. Her debut launched amidst a fanfare of critical acclaim in venues like the

New Yorker and the *New York Times*, and it occupied top spots on every bestseller list for weeks. The awards circuit the following year was a foregone conclusion. Athena's debut—*Voice and Echo*, about a Chinese American girl who can summon the ghosts of all the deceased women in her family—was one of those rare novels that perfectly straddled the line between speculative and commercial fiction, so she accrued nominations for the Booker, Nebula, Hugo, and World Fantasy awards, two of which she won. And that was only three years ago. She's published two more books since, and the critical consensus is that she's only gotten better and better.

It's not that Athena isn't talented. She's a fucking *good* writer—I've read all her work, and I'm not too jealous to acknowledge good writing when I see it. But Athena's star power is so obviously not about the writing. It's about *her*. Athena Liu is, simply put, so fucking cool. Even her name—Athena Ling En Liu—is cool; well done, Mr. and Mrs. Liu, to choose a perfect combination of the classical and exotic. Born in Hong Kong, raised between Sydney and New York, educated in British boarding schools that gave her a posh, unplaceable foreign accent; tall and razor-thin, graceful in the way all former ballet dancers are, porcelain pale and possessed of these massive, long-lashed brown eyes that make her look like a Chinese Anne Hathaway (that's not racist for me to say—Athena once posted a selfie of her and “Annie” from some red carpet event, their four enormous doe eyes squeezed side by side, captioned simply, *Twins!*).

She's unbelievable. She's literally unbelievable.

So of course Athena gets every good thing, because that's how this industry works. Publishing picks a winner—someone attractive enough, someone cool and young and, oh, we're all thinking it, let's

just say it, “diverse” enough—and lavishes all its money and resources on them. It’s so fucking arbitrary. Or perhaps not arbitrary, but it hinges on factors that have nothing to do with the strength of one’s prose. Athena—a beautiful, Yale-educated, international, ambiguously queer woman of color—has been chosen by the Powers That Be. Meanwhile, I’m just brown-eyed, brown-haired June Hayward, from Philly—and no matter how hard I work, or how well I write, I’ll never be Athena Liu.

I’d expected her to skyrocket out of my orbit by now. But the friendly texts keep coming—how’s writing going today? hitting that word count target? good luck with your deadline!—as do the invitations: happy hour margaritas at El Centro, brunch at Zaytinya, a poetry slam on U Street. We have one of those skin-deep friendships where you manage to spend a lot of time together without really getting to know the other person. I still don’t know if she has any siblings. She’s never asked me about my boyfriends. But we keep hanging out, because it’s so convenient that we’re both in DC, and because it’s hard to make new friends the older you get.

I’m honestly not sure why Athena likes me. She always hugs me when she sees me. She likes my social media posts at least twice a week. We get drinks at least every other month, and most of the time it’s by her invitation. But I’ve no clue what I have to offer her—I don’t possess anywhere near the clout, the popularity, or the connections to make the time she spends with me worthwhile.

Deep down, I’ve always suspected Athena likes my company precisely because I can’t rival her. I understand her world, but I’m not a threat, and her achievements are so far out of my reach that she doesn’t feel bad squealing to my face about her wins. Don’t we

all want a friend who won't ever challenge our superiority, because they already know it's a lost cause? Don't we all need someone we can treat as a punching bag?

"IT CAN'T BE ALL THAT BAD," SAYS ATHENA. "I'M SURE THEY JUST mean they're pushing the paperback off a few months."

"It's not delayed," I say. "It's canceled. Brett told me they just . . . couldn't see a place for it in their printing schedule."

She pats my shoulder. "Oh, don't worry. You get more royalties off hardcovers anyways! Silver linings, right?"

Bold of you to assume I'm getting royalties at all. I don't say that out loud. If you tell Athena off for being tactless, she gets overly, exaggeratedly apologetic, and that's harder to put up with than just swallowing my irritation.

We're at the Graham's rooftop bar, sitting on a loveseat facing the sunset. Athena is guzzling her second whisky sour, and I'm on my third glass of pinot noir. We've wandered onto the tired subject of my troubles with my publisher, which I deeply regret, because everything Athena thinks is comfort or advice always only comes off as rubbing it in.

"I don't want to piss Garrett off," I say. "Well, honestly, I think he's just looking forward to rejecting the option so they can be done with me."

"Oh, don't sell yourself short," says Athena. "He acquired your debut, didn't he?"

"He didn't, though," I say. I have to remind Athena this every single time. She has a goldfish's memory when it comes to my

problems—it takes two or three repetitions for anything to stick. “The editor who did get fired, and the buck passed to him, and every time we talk about it, it feels like he’s just going through the motions.”

“Well, then fuck him,” Athena says cheerfully. “Another round?”

The drinks are stupidly expensive at this place, but it’s okay because Athena’s buying. Athena always buys; at this point, I’ve stopped offering. I don’t think Athena’s ever really grasped the concepts of “expensive” and “inexpensive.” She went from Yale to a fully funded master’s degree to hundreds of thousands of dollars in her bank account. Once, when I told her that entry-level publishing jobs in New York only make about thirty-five thousand dollars a year, she blinked at me and asked, “Is that a lot?”

“I’d love a malbec,” I say. It’s nineteen dollars a glass.

“Got it, babe.” Athena gets up and saunters toward the bar. The bartender smiles at her and she exclaims in surprise, hands flying to mouth like she’s Shirley Temple. It seems that one of the gentlemen at the counter has sent her a glass of champagne. “Yes, we *are* celebrating.” Her dainty, delighted laughter floats over the music. “But can I get one for my friend as well? On me?”

No one’s out here sending me champagne. But this is typical. Athena gets showered by attention every time we go out—if not by eager readers who want a selfie and an autograph, then by men and women alike who find her ravishing. Me, I’m invisible.

“So.” Athena settles back down beside me and hands me my glass. “Do you want to hear about the Netflix meeting? Oh my God, Junie, it was insane. I met the guy who produced *Tiger King*. *Tiger King!*”

Be happy for her, I tell myself. Just be happy for her, and let her have this night.

People always describe jealousy as this sharp, green, venomous

thing. Unfounded, vinegary, mean-spirited. But I've found that jealousy, to writers, feels more like fear. Jealousy is the spike in my heart rate when I glimpse news of Athena's success on Twitter—another book contract, awards nominations, special editions, foreign rights deals. Jealousy is constantly comparing myself to her and coming up short; is panicking that I'm not writing well enough or fast enough, that *I* am not, and never will be, enough. Jealousy means that even just learning that Athena's signing a six-figure option deal with Netflix means that I'll be derailed for days, unable to focus on my own work, mired by shame and self-disgust every time I see one of her books in a bookstore display.

Every writer I know feels this way about someone else. Writing is such a solitary activity. You have no assurance that what you're creating has any value, and any indication that you're behind in the rat race sends you spiraling into the pits of despair. *Keep your eyes on your own paper*, they say. But that's hard to do when everyone else's papers are flapping constantly in your face.

Though I feel the vicious kind of jealousy, too, watching Athena talk about how much she adores *her* editor, a literary powerhouse named Marlena Ng who "plucked me from obscurity" and who "just really understands what I'm trying to do on a craft level, you know?" I stare at Athena's brown eyes, framed by those ridiculously large lashes that make her resemble a Disney forest animal, and I wonder, *What is it like to be you?* What is it like to be so impossibly perfect, to have every good thing in the world? And maybe it's the cocktails, or my overactive writer's imagination, but I feel this hot coiling in my stomach, a bizarre urge to stick my fingers in her berry-red-painted mouth and rip her face apart, to neatly peel her skin off her body like an orange and zip it up over myself.