

LBRIS

We know
books

I fell in love with hope

Lancali



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Foreword

THIS STORY TAKES pieces of my heart and spreads them thin on paper. Told from the perspective of an all-knowing narrator, it is an exploration of friendship, sin, illness, love, and all things that make us human.

These pages are full of real memories given the shape of different characters, similar places, and the same ideas. It's important to mention that many of the technicalities of disease are portrayed fictitiously in this novel and should not be analyzed as medically reviewed cases.

This story contains domestic abuse, eating disorders, intense physical bullying, self-harm, suicide, rape, depression, anxiety, and gory descriptions of disease.

Autoimmune disorders are a tricky thing from an outsider's perspective and even more so from an insider's experience. It's a wide spectrum, a pendulum that swings from chronic to terminal. A large majority of people with autoimmune diseases can expect to live normal lives. A small minority can't.

This story is for both. It is for all who know loneliness and for all who search for themselves.

I hope you find a piece of you in Sam, Hikari, Neo, Sony, and Coeur as I did.

before

THE LOVE OF my life wants to die.

That's a tragic thing to say out loud. No. Maybe not tragic. Maybe just unfair. But as you begin this story, I think you'll find that tragedies and injustices usually stand under the same umbrella.

Before the love of my life decided he didn't want to live anymore, he told me the stars belonged to us. We spent every night together, our bodies softly intertwined on harsh roof tiles, memorizing the patterns in the sky. So even as he withered, as his body became less body and more corpse, I believed our stars would give him faith. I believed they would keep him alive so long as he could look up and see they hadn't fallen.

Tonight, he and I stand on a bridge as the river rushes black and streetlamps cast a golden halo on our winter-numbed fingers.

"Are you angry at me?" I ask, because tonight, I tell him the truth. I tell him the truth about me, the truth I say to no one, the secret that makes me different from everyone he knows. I throw it like a lasso around his neck, a lifeline, something to keep him from taking that final step into the dark.

He shakes his head, grasping the railing. "I'm just curious." The yellow-flared eyes I've always fallen into find mine. "What does it feel like? To be you?"

"It feels like I've stolen," I say. "Like this body isn't really mine."

Confessions can be brusque and surrendering, but mine are gentle. The truth of who I am doesn't make sense, but it doesn't have to. He knows that. He's been sick since he was born. Being sick teaches you that reasons are just poor attempts at justifying misfortune. They give you an illusion of *why*, but *why* is a loud question, and death is quiet.

"Do you believe me?" I ask.

He nods.

"Do you still love me?"

"Of course I still love you." He sighs, palm cupping my face, thumb trailing my cheek.

I smile.

Love is our staple. Love made us pretenders.

As children, we pretended the hospital was a castle, and we were its knights. We used to play cards on patrol, and he let me win every time. We ate on the ground floor as he made up stories about the commoners in gowns that walked past. We slept in the same bed as he whispered about the adventures waiting for us outside the palace walls. Then he kissed me because we were alone and each other's and everything was all right.

We had to pretend.

The air was just thin. That's why his lungs failed to draw breath. He was just sad that day. That's why his heart couldn't beat on its own. We were just tired. That's why his muscles gave out, and he collapsed in my arms.

We spent our whole lives together pretending, but if you pretend for too long, reality reminds you one way or another that it doesn't like being insulted.

Tonight, we argued. We fought like we never have before,

and he came to this bridge alone to get away from me, I think. I'm not sure. Now that my secret is free, now that he knows who I am, *what* I am, the anger we shared dissipates, like it was housed in a sore muscle starting to heal.

He puts his coat on my shoulders when I shiver. His arms slip beneath mine, and he pulls me against him. I lean into his warmth, our silhouette interrupted by specks of white sinking into the scene.

"Are the stars falling?" I ask.

"It's snow," he whispers. He runs his touch up my spine, reverberating with chuckles. "It's only snow."

Cool and delicate, *snow* falls to my lips.

"Is snow ours too?" I ask.

"Yes," he says, his mouth against my neck. "Everything is ours."

"Thank you." My fingers tangle in his hair. "For the everything."

"Thank *you*." Hurt etches his throat. He presses himself against me even harder, like he could disappear into me if he tried. "For making me want to chase it."

He tries to laugh again, but it's not the same laugh I've always cherished. The laughs I cherish echo. I roused them from his chest when he lay with needles in his veins. When he squeezed my hand, desperate to hold on to something real. Now his laughter falls flat. It ends abruptly rather than fades.

"My love," I say, my voice half-lost. "Why did you come to this bridge?"

The streetlamp flickers. The stars start to fall with urgency. The dark creeps into the scene, gripping the edges of the halo.

He bites down. His eyes squint shut as snow beckons his tears.

"I'm sorry, my sweet Sam," he says, his breath catching, his

fingers wrinkling the coat like sheets on my back. "I wish I could keep pretending with you."

Our castle stands behind us, listening. As he cries into my shoulder, I only feel every moment he ever opened his eyes when I thought he wouldn't. I feel the smiles we shared when death decided to give him back to me, over and over again.

So I can only whisper, "I don't understand."

He presses his forehead to mine, streams burning trails down the frosted edges of his cheekbones, and a fear I used to know too well takes the place of his embrace.

"I'm happy you told me your secret," he says, tears catching on the curve of his smile. "I'm happy that you'll keep living even when I'm gone."

He kisses me, snow and salt between our lips.

He kisses me like it's the last time he'll ever have the chance.

"Remember me," he says. "Remember that just because the stars fell doesn't mean they weren't worth wishing on."

"I don't understand," I say, but the kiss is over.

His touch has already fallen from my face. He's already turned around and walked away. I reach for him again, to interlace our fingers, to pull him back as I always have, but death takes his hand instead.

"Wait." His footprints fade beneath the white, erased. "Wait!"

He doesn't hear me. He only hears the night calling from the other side of the bridge with the promise of peace.

"Wait—please—" My tears find fruition because no matter how hard I try, I can't follow him.

The shape of our memories thins, disappearing from the streetlamp's glow and off into the shadows.

"No, you can't—you haven't"—I shake my head—"you can't go yet—you can't leave—you—"

You.

My light, my love, my reason.

"You'll die."

- The fear digs between my ribs. It breaks my body, my lungs, and my heart.

When the dark swallows the last of him, reality comes to reap, and pain lies heavy in its hand like a scythe.

The snow turns into a storm. I try to gather the dancing flickers in my hands and somehow send them back to their sky. My knees fall to the earth, burning from the cold. My castle watches me with pity. My tears rain into the river, my whimpers turn to sobs, and my memories turn to nothing.

My stars are falling.

And I can't save them.

1

yellow-flared eyes

years later . . .

WHEN HE DIED, I became someone else. I used to dream of us, thinking that within his yellow-flared eyes there was a future I could count on. Futures are never certain. Nothing will teach you that better than watching someone you love walk away.

Nothing will teach you that better than growing up in a hospital.

The steady white noise keeps you sane. Stretchers pass and staff walk in their assigned lanes like they're on some kind of medical highway. Apart from that, there is bland, tasteless food and bland, tasteless decor to accompany your sentence. That's all a hospital is, really. Not a place to get better or a place to be treated, but a place to wait.

Imagine a bomb chained to your wrist. It makes sounds. Like a heart monitor. Day and night. A countdown. A countdown, by the way, that you can't see. Look at your bomb, hold it up like a watch. All that'll stare back at you is a blinking red light with

that barking beep. Reminders that this bomb *will* go off. You just don't know when.

That's what waiting to die is like.

A bomb drifts through your veins by the name of illness.

You cannot defuse it. You cannot destroy it. You cannot run from it.

Time, disease, and death are rueful mechanics that way. They enjoy crafting nooses out of fear, and they love playing games. Shadows are their tools, curving over your shoulders with eerie fingers, coaxing you into the dark, taking your body, your mind, and anything they please with it.

Time, disease, and death are the greatest thieves in the world. Or they were.

Until we came along. Four friends who do not believe in bombs.

Sony barged into my life not lying on a hospital bed but kicking a vending machine that had robbed her of her chocolate. The second she saw me her frustration melted away, and we shared crappy chocolate and spoke of far-fetched dreams sitting on a cold hallway floor. Though I didn't know it at the time, she had survived a loss far greater than one of her lungs. With hair the color of fire and an air of freedom, she is a gladiator, the bravest thief I know.

Coeur is a much calmer being. He's our muscle, our ever-guilty muscle. His mother is French, his father Haitian, both pretentious namers. *Coeur* means *heart*, though the heart in C's body is broken. Literally. But the heart in his soul is the biggest among us. He is the lover in the bunch and the worst thief among us.

Neo is a writer, a bitter poet. Unlike Sony, he is silent, and unlike C, he is remorseless. His spine is fragile, but his words make up for it. He's bony and short, so small we call him Baby, although, for a baby, he sure has a temper. I'm fairly certain he's never worn a smile in his life. I've known him the longest, and though he's scowly and mean, it's all a mask, his protection. He's also the smartest person I know—observant, creative, resilient—the one who plans and records our great feats of thievery. He claims that Sony and I are extroverts who've kidnapped him and coerced him into being our friend, but I know he secretly enjoys the company. Hospitals are lonely until you find your people.

It's been years since Neo, Sony, and C have been in and out of the hospital.

Now, when they go home, they don't go home for long. Disease is greedy. It takes pieces of you until you no longer recognize yourself, and Neo, C, and Sony don't recognize themselves outside this place anymore.

Whether you're sick or not, the night creates mirrors out of windows. In the past, it showed my friends images of corpses in the glass: skeletons with bones unwrapped by flesh, organs falling through the rib cage, blood seeping from the mouth. They trembled at the foretelling, their fingertips grazing the surface that entranced them. Diagnoses, pills, needles, and so many new mirrors they never meant to find encroached on their lives. Their reflections became their realities.

So rather than meet the new versions of themselves made vulnerable by the beds they slept in and the gowns they wore, my friends turned off the lights. They climbed a staircase and met on a rooftop. They let their fingertips graze the sky with no barrier to stop them from touching the stars.

Defiant.

We should just steal everything, Sony said. Even with a low-burning flame, she was brave. *Let's steal everything we can before we go.*

Everything? C asked.

Everything.

Everything's a long list, Neo said.

Your lives were stolen, I said. *Why don't you steal some of it back?*

That was the day our hit list was born. But so far, everything isn't ours yet.

Stealing is an art form, and we've yet to become artists. But it doesn't stop us from trying.

On a cloudless afternoon we slip out of the hospital. Sony leads the charge, C pushing Neo in a wheelchair across the boulevard. We make our way down the sidewalk and inside a mini-mart. Sony sidles up to a kiosk filled with sunglasses and dons a pair of aviators, scopes out the place, and nods her head.

"Now," she says, the price tag dangling from her temple.

C makes his way toward the refrigerated section.

"Now?" Neo looks up, caressing the book that never leaves his side. His copy of *Great Expectations*. It's a constant, like a beauty mark or the shape of his nose. And it's bent at the spine, just like him.

"Now," Sony commands, chest high.

"Won't we get caught?" I whisper, looking around the gas station mart. Three people roam the aisles; the cashier flips through a magazine.

"We're definitely getting caught," Neo says.

Sony smirks down at him through the periphery of her soon-to-be-stolen sunglasses.

"Why would we get caught?" she teases.

Neo snorts. "We *always* get caught."

"Today is different. Today is on our side," Sony proclaims, taking a breath, deep and dramatic. "Can't you taste it, Neo? How sweet the air is?"

"We're in a candy aisle, you idiot!" Neo's wheelchair creaks when he throws his head back to look at me. "Sam. Tell her she's an idiot."

I would, but I value my life.

"Sony, you're an idiot," Neo says, grabbing a pen and notebook wedged in his chair and slamming the book open, and scribbles, 4:05 p.m.: *Sony is an idiot.*

Neo is our scribe—the one who records our great deeds. Granted, he didn't exactly *agree* to the job. He didn't even agree to come along on this mission. But when your spine is hook-shaped, you can't escape the shackles of friendship. The wheelchair groans as I pull it just out of Sony's reach.

"It's a wonder you need back surgery at all, Baby." Sony doesn't have a job per se. She's the giver of jobs, doubling as the devil on my shoulder with toothy, shameless grins. "That stick up your ass could surely serve as a spine, no?"

"You talk a lot of shit for someone who can't go up a flight of stairs," Neo growls. I pull his wheelchair a little farther back.

"It's a gift." Sony sighs, her one lung filled with ambition. "Now watch me work, and don't break my concentration."

Neo and I watch as Sony marches to the front counter, her dirty white sneakers squeaking against the tiles. The devil doesn't forget to sneak a lollipop into her back pocket on the way.

Neo grumbles, "Klepto."

"Excuse me . . ." Sony waves her arms over her head to catch the cashier's attention. His sidelong glance becomes a double take. Sony's pretty. The kind of pretty that's brutal, bright-eyed, and heavy-handed. But I'm guessing his stares have more to do

with the breathing tubes trailing the space under her nose and around her cheeks.

The cigarettes she points to behind the counter dig her grave.

“Just those, please,” Sony says.

“Miss, I . . .” the gas station attendant interrupts himself, looking at the cigarettes and then back at her. “Are you sure? I don’t think I could give these to you in good conscience.”

“He’s staring at her chest in good conscience,” Neo bites out, like he’s about to chew on the fist holding his head up.

“Oh no, sir, they’re not for me—um . . .” Sony recoils, dipping her head. “My friends and I, we . . .”

The devil is quick to tears. She presses a hand to her lips. “We don’t know how much time we have left. Neo, the boy there. He has to get surgery tomorrow. Cancer.”

She points over her shoulder to Neo and me, the attendant making eye contact with us. Neo and I instantly look away. Neo goes so far as to pretend he’s browsing for chewing gum by looking at the ingredients on the back.

Sony snuffles dry air and wipes at tears that haven’t fallen. “We just wanted to go to the roof like old times, rebel a little,” she says, shrugging her shoulders, laughing at herself. “I don’t know what I’ll do if he doesn’t make it. He’s such a good soul. He lost his parents in a fire, you know, *and* his puppy! I—”

“Okay, okay!” The cashier grabs a pack. “Just take them. Go on.”

“Why, thank you,” Sony chirps, taking them without a second thought, and prances out the door.

Shocked that even worked, Neo and I chase after her. He manages to swipe a bag of gummy bears, tucking it between his leg and the armrest. Once we’re out and the door shuts behind us, we both exhale our jitters while Sony takes a few giddy steps and stops.

“Write it down,” Sony commands, pointing at Neo’s book.

Neo does as he’s bid, writing in the notebook, *4:07 p.m.: The idiot has successfully conned a boob looker into giving her free cigarettes.*

Sony flips the pack in the air and snags it with one hand.

“I don’t have cancer,” Neo says.

“No, you don’t. But cancer just saved us ten bucks, which is the only good thing it’ll be doing anytime soon.”

“Sony,” I whine.

“What? The cancer kids love me. They always laugh when I run after them and keel over from lack of air. Quid pro quo, yeah?”

“You sure they weren’t crying?” Neo says.

“Quid. Pro. Quo?” I ask.

I’m not well versed in commonalities, things everybody knows. Sarcasm, irony, idioms, sports. It all eludes me till Neo explains.

“It means ‘something for something’ in Latin,” he says. Neo knows everything.

“Yeah!” Sony chimes in. “Like when you kill somebody, so they kill you. Like karma! That’s how quid pro quo works.”

I look at Neo. “Is it?”

“It isn’t. Is there a reason *I* had to be here for this?” he asks, his wheelchair suddenly creaking, the weight disturbed by something slipped into the cubby beneath it. Neo’s brow crinkles. He turns as much as his back will allow and sees a six-pack being placed beneath his seat.

Our mission’s brawn has arrived. C looks more man than boy, tall and beautiful. With his hands tucked in his pockets, he gently shoves the beer farther into its hiding place with his foot.

“How’d it go?” C asks.

Sony’s quick to show off her spoils.

“I saved ten bucks with cancer!”

C cocks his head to the side. "On cigarettes?"

"And gummy bears," I say. Neo tosses the bag over his shoulder into C's chest.

"C'mon, C." Sony puts her hands on her hips. "What would we be without irony but boring clichés, yeah?"

"Not using a wheelchair patient as a mule?" Neo tries to roll himself away, but C holds on to the back like you'd hold a shirt collar.

Neo rolls his eyes. He takes out another notebook from the side pocket, this one with the front torn off. As we start making our way across the street, back home, he adds today's conquests to our hit list.

Cigarettes (the cool ones in Bond movies)

Beer

A lollipop

Crappy sunglasses

Gummy bears

An afternoon outside

A heaping pile of jitters

Hospitals are bland, tasteless places. But even if I do not dream as I used to, there is no more thrilling company than the company of thieves.

"Baby, you are a pillar," Sony says, pride and camaraderie lighting up her face. "Without you, the mission would fall apart. Who else would keep track of our glorious histories?"

"Plus you make an excellent shopping cart," C adds, petting the top of his head.

"Look, C, traffic," Neo says, pointing at the road. "Push me into it."

C shoves a handful of candy into Neo's mouth instead as we make our way back.

Sony jumps the white lines of the crosswalk like skipping stones over a stream. C pushes Neo right behind her, two ducklings following in a row. I'm the tail end, the narrator. They always reach the finish line before I do.

Neo carries our hit list in his lap, a glint of light catching on the notebook's metal spirals, fleeting like the sun decided to tease it. I look up to find it, staring beyond the line of cars that branch off after the intersection.

My heart drops.

Just past the cars, a river cuts the city in two. Its bridge is all that connects either side. A bridge I've known my entire life that creates an ache in my chest. Instead of laughing strangers and children throwing coins into the water, I see snow across the railing. I see the dark.

I start to look away, leave the past on its own, but something else emerges behind it.

Yellow.

Just a glimpse of it.

The gray cowers, strands of color carried by the river's breeze. Did the sun descend to Earth and decide to spend a day among its subjects?

I crane my neck to get a better look, but there are too many people on the bridge; the couples, the tourists, and the children block my view, and cities are impatient. A honk pulls me back to where I stand, my friends waiting for me just ahead.

"Sam?" C calls.

"Sorry." I scurry the rest of the way back. As we step inside the hospital together, my chin catches on my shoulder, the bridge too far to hurt me. I keep looking back till my reflection ghosts across the glass doors.

“Well, well,” Sony says, lollipop between her teeth. “The smuggler crew returns from a day at sea.” She tucks the cigarettes in her sleeve once we reach the atrium.

It’s old and falsely joyful, as most children’s hospitals are. Fancy balloons and faded colored tiles attempt to brighten a space where many enter and leave, feeling dimmed. There are posters and banners on the walls about treatments and real-life survivor stories, but those are old too, nurses and doctors clocking in and out to complete the scene. “Now, quick!” Sony says. “Let’s get everything upstairs before— Eric!”

Our floor’s most notorious jailer (nurse), Eric, has a keen sense of timing. He raises a brow at Sony’s tone, his foot tapping away at the ground. His bullshit detector is a honed weapon, and when he gets mad, I wouldn’t wish his wrath upon actual prisoners.

“And right under the idiot smuggler’s nose, history repeats itself,” Neo narrates. “Should I say *I told you so* or rat you out for kidnapping me . . .” C stuffs more candy into his mouth while I open the book from the side pocket and put it in his face.

“Where were you?” Eric asks. His under-eye bags and dark hair match in color, his arms crossed on his chest. He’s worried about us, otherwise, he wouldn’t have made the trip all the way down here to wrangle us home.

“Eric, Eric—first of all—are those new scrubs?” Sony asks, pointing smoothly up and down. “They really bring color to your face—”

“Not you.” Eric puts his hand up, silencing her. Then he looks right at me.

I wish I were invisible.

“Just getting some fresh air,” I say, looking at the ground and scratching the back of my neck.

“Fresh air, huh?” Eric scowls, unconvinced. “Did you forget we have an entire floor dedicated to that?” He’s referring to the garden on the sixth floor.

When Neo’s back still functioned, the four of us would hide in the bushes up there. We made a plan to live our entire lives in the garden and pretend we were woodspeople living off wild berries. It worked for about three hours, but then we got hungry and cold, and C was close to tears at being unable to charge his phone to listen to music. We came back covered in mulch and smelling of soil.

Ever since then, Eric hasn’t been too keen on letting us out of his sight.

“Well!” Sony is undaunted. “Excuse us for needing a change of scenery.”

“Enough.” Eric swipes his arms through the air, the four of us huddling closer together. “I shouldn’t have to tell you not to be reckless.”

He points at Neo—“You have surgery tomorrow”—and to C—“and you have an echo appointment”—then to Sony—“and you aren’t even supposed to be out of bed. Now get upstairs!”

C hurls Neo’s chair forward as we trot to the elevators. Sony presses the button with the sole of her shoe. Once we reach the top floor, C picks up Neo from his chair, cradling his skinny frame, careful of his spine. From here, we have to travel upstairs to get to the roof. I grab the wheelchair while Sony skips up the steps.

Halfway through, Sony and C need a break.

Sony closes her eyes and leans against the railing. Half her chest rises, deep and quick, but she refuses to open her mouth to breathe. Such an admission of defeat is not a satisfaction she would ever give to a mere rise in altitude.