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THE
ELSEWHERE
EXPRESS

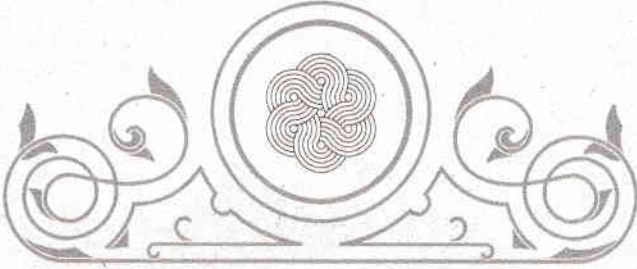
SAMANTHA
SOTTO YAMBAO



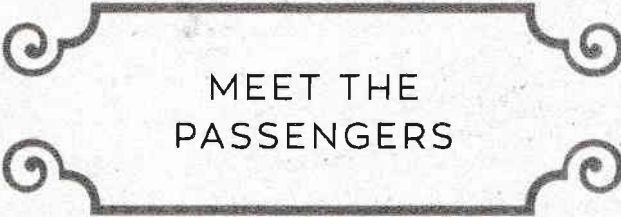
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**YOUR
ITINERARY**



**MEET THE
PASSENGERS**



*“Who can board
the Elsewhere Express?”*

Frequently Asked Questions

THE ELSEWHERE EXPRESS
PASSENGER HANDBOOK

Hiraya Sia

(hee-rah-yah)

Some names are heavier than others. But the tiny premature girl had been weighed before being given one, so her official weight on record was only four and a half pounds.

Despite her small size, or perhaps because of it, she charmed the hospital's entire neonatal intensive care unit. Mary Beth, a nurse on the night shift, enjoyed humming an old, nameless lullaby to her, a song Mary Beth's mother had sung to her, and that Mary Beth had sung to her daughter. It scented the air with sugared almonds and vanilla, and flowed into the girl like warm milk, carrying a wordless wish that every heart, no matter how small, could understand.

Live. Breathe. Be.

The girl did her best not to disappoint the voice that filled her evenings. Its song was her whole world and she wanted to keep it close. When she learned how to move her tiny fingers, she held the lullaby singer's calloused hand as tightly as she could. Mary Beth had never felt a more stubborn grip. This girl, the nurse thought, would need someone to teach her how to let things go.

The girl's strength proved useful on the day of her baptism, when, upon receiving her name, she was made to carry the full weight of

her parents' hopes. Unlike most people who spent their lives searching for meaning, the girl was given a premade one, no assembly required. In her name was a single simple instruction: Save your brother's life. If, on the off chance, she ever forgot her purpose, her name reminded her exactly why she had been conceived.

Her father, Dr. Jason Sia, a linguistics professor, had come up with the idea to call her *Hiraya*, an ancient Tagalog word commonly translated as "imagination." Its actual meaning was more complex. *Hiraya* was the power of the mind to bring that which did not exist into being. The professor could not think of a name that suited his new daughter more. *Hiraya* was a desperate wish. A dream come true. The one chance he and his wife, Cristina, had to save their eldest child's life.

Their son, Jace Sia, was meant to be an only child, but his blood disorder, thalassemia major, had other plans. He had received over seventy blood transfusions before he turned four, and unless his parents found a genetically matched bone marrow donor for him, he was going to need more.

Hiraya did not disappoint them. Growing up, she joked that her name was just a nicer way of saying that she had been born for spare parts. Her parents did not appreciate her humor, even as they kept chips, cookies, and soda out of her reach. Her mother packed her lunch box with apples, whole-grain crackers, and low-fat cheese, along with little notes on pink Post-its reminding her not to trade any of her snacks for candy. After all, it was prudent to be prepared in case Jace ever required a piece of her liver. Or any other part of herself he happened to need more than she did.

But *Hiraya* didn't mind: Jace was an excellent cookie thief and giggled as much as she did when they gobbled them up in her closet in the middle of the night. Their crumb-filled laughter fed the old lullaby that had taken root inside her, making it bear new melodies like fruit. When *Hiraya* learned how to spell, she gave her songs words and wrote them down to keep herself from bursting. Some songs smelled like springtime, others, like fresh bread. Her favorite ones coated her tongue with clover honey. Each song, though distinct, ferried the same wish.

Jason and Cristina weren't too worried about the hours Hiraya spent setting the wish to music, playing her glittery sticker-covered guitar, and filling purple notebooks with songs. She was young and had plenty of time to find a real dream like her brother's. There was no doubt that Jace was going to make an excellent oncologist, but music was far too slippery and big a dream for their daughter's small hands. Hiraya would need to learn that the only place her songs would lead her was the corner of nowhere and disappointment. Jason and Cristina were thankful that they had no such concerns about Jace.

That is, until the night all their dreams tumbled out of his cold, limp hands.



Quentin Chen Phillips Jr.

The day after his father, Quentin Phillips Sr., killed himself, a thirteen-year-old Quentin Jr. insisted that everyone start calling him "Q." His mother, Connie Chen Phillips, did not need another reason to cry. Lying to everyone about her husband's death was hard enough. Lying to herself that it had been an accident was harder. Sparing his mother from having to say her late husband's name each time she called her only child down to dinner was the sole comfort Q could give her.

But he could not do anything about his eyes.

Though Q inherited most of his features from his mother, his irises resembled his father's, borrowing their somber palette from an overcast sky. Q hated that they stood out from the rest of his face and made him look like a mistake. When Quentin Sr. died, however, Q discovered that gray eyes had their uses—they camouflaged his dark days and most shades of sadness. But while he was reticent about his pain, Q made sure that his clients' portraits told the whole truth. His father's suicide had blindsided him and Q refused to let anyone lie to him ever again. He was particularly wary of smiles.

Smiles were the easiest of deceptions and the prettiest of open wounds. Quentin Sr. had worn a bright and gummy one every day of his life until the morning he didn't. Q's paintings were the opposite, revealing everything his clients tried their best to hide. Considering how much they paid him, Q did his best to give them their money's worth no matter how much or loudly they complained. At the end of the day, their portrait's appraised value trumped their pride. After all, scarcity drives prices up, and there was nothing more limited than the time Q had left to paint.

Q stood at the doorway of his home studio, surveying the room with what remained of his sight. His degenerative eye disease had shrunk his tunnel of vision to the size of a pinhole, but his home was a place where memory was the only walking stick he required.

He was going to miss this place and the way it smelled of sharpened pencils, paint, and sunshine. He had bought the apartment because of its large windows and had sold it for the same reason. Feeling the sun on his skin without seeing its light turned his blood cold on the warmest of days. The studio was chillier now that it was empty.

His tools and supplies had already been donated, and his business manager had picked up all the paintings for his final collection, save one. Q strode over to the small painting resting on an easel in the middle of his studio, navigating the paint-splattered, scuffed wooden floors like someone with perfect vision. Q might have gotten more when he sold his apartment if he had worked over a drop cloth, but he was always in too much of a hurry to paint to bother covering his hardwood floor.

And his sessions with the sole subject of his final collection never lasted long—this was the biggest challenge when trying to paint a woman who existed only in his dreams. When he woke up, only fragments of her remained: The corner of a lip. The tip of a nose. The shadow in the well of a collarbone.

No matter how hard Q tried to remember her, he could not collect enough details to assemble her face. The song that wafted through his dreams, the same melody that had filled his nights since he was a young boy, however, was unforgettable. It kept him com-

pany while he slept and leaked into his days, its message a record on repeat.

Live. Breathe. Be.

Trying to live by the peace it prescribed, though, proved to be difficult. Painting through his window of vision was like trying to build a seashore one grain of sand at a time. But as the imaginary woman was the last sitter he would ever have, he promised to show up for her for as long as she showed up for him.

Speck by speck, he captured what he could, and in those moments, with all his focus and energy flowing through the tip of his paintbrush, he couldn't let his anger boil over. Being angry all the time was tiring. Still, he preferred being furious about losing his sight to mourning the loss of his dreams. Tears choked you. Rage kept you breathing. Anger needed air to fan its flames.

Q ran his fingertips over his final painting. It was meant to capture the woman's left eye, but he had run out of time to finish it. All he could do was trust his manager's word that even if the piece wasn't done, it was good enough. His show was opening this evening and he needed to deliver its missing piece. It would be a shame not to include the painting since it fit the collection's theme perfectly.

Unfinished

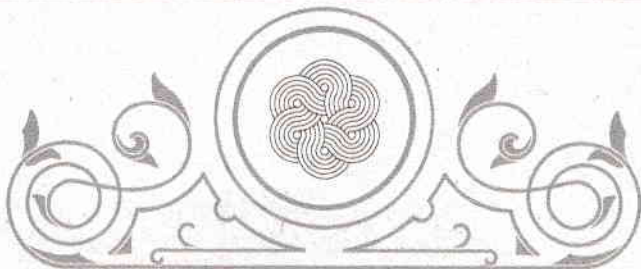
A Silent Auction of the Final Works of Q Chen Philips Jr.

All proceeds to be donated to blindness research.

Q took the painting from the easel and wrapped it in brown paper. He did not have time to have it framed, but it was just as well. Frames were doorways into a painter's truth and this piece only led to a dream's end. His patrons would simply assume that this was yet another piece where he broke the rules, just like the swarms of scorched moths he vigorously denied spray-painting on the city's walls.

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BOARDING



*“Where do I board
the Elsewhere Express?”*

Frequently Asked Questions

THE ELSEWHERE EXPRESS

PASSENGER HANDBOOK

Raya

It had been ten years to the day since Raya had sat by Jace’s hospital bed, holding his bandaged hand. (She no longer went by the name Hiraya, but it was still the name printed on her first-year medical school ID.) She had squeezed her brother’s fingers harder than she should have, convinced that if she held on to him tightly enough, he would stay. Their parents stood at the foot of his bed, unable to speak or cry. They had braced themselves for the cruel twists of his disease but failed to foresee that what would actually leave their teenage son brain-dead would be a drunk driver in a red pickup, a few blocks away from their home. This, however, was only half of the truth of what had happened that night.

The other half hung above Raya’s head, hovering in the hospital room’s arctic air, a secret only she could know.

Raya kept her eyes on Jace’s bandaged face, aware of how every breath the blinking machines forced inside him extracted every drop of meaning from her bones. She ground her guilt between her teeth, counting down the last moments she could call herself “Hiraya.” She did not care to be reminded of what she had become: She

was now a wasted wish. A pile of useless spare parts. She had had one purpose. And now he was gone.

She clung to Jace's hand more tightly than she had held on to anything before. Mary Beth had been right about the strength of her grip.

Tonight, as she rushed to catch her train home, Raya used that grip to clutch the straps of the overstuffed bag swinging from her shoulder. The blue tote was made from ocean trash and shimmered like the sea. Raya was not too proud to admit that she envied the bag: The plastic bottles it used to be had been given a second chance to be new.

At twenty-five, Raya swore her bones creaked as loudly as the steps to her sixth-floor walk-up apartment. She didn't have to be a doctor to know that her diet of candy bars, sour gummies, and energy drinks did not do her any favors. But if living off simple sugars and caffeine was what it took to stay awake for the next four years of medical school, diabetes, osteoporosis, and renal failure would just have to sit in the waiting room and flip through old magazines until she could see them.

A man ran into her bag and scampered away. Raya apologized when she had meant to swear. Saying sorry and smiling were default responses that came with living on autopilot. They had their uses but sometimes left her mouth coated in ash. Raya grimaced and took a quick inventory of her belongings. A dented laptop, a dog-eared textbook, a binder containing her anatomy notes, and a purple notebook peeked through an assortment of ultra-processed snacks that had no business being called food.

As far as she could tell, nothing was missing. Her upcycled bag still strained to carry a downcycled dream. Raya conceded that she was never going to be half the doctor her brother would have been, but holding on to half of a dream was better than letting go of a dead one.

Raya transferred the tote to her other shoulder even if it didn't make a difference—invisible loads were at least twice as heavy as any that you could see. She slipped the bag off and then returned it to its bruised home. Her skin welcomed it back with a silent sigh. Old

pain trained the body to miss it. Over time, flesh forgot the difference between what it had learned to tolerate and what gave it relief.

Wind blew through the subway tunnel, whipping Raya's newly dyed lavender hair. She slipped a hair tie off her wrist and secured her hair in a messy ponytail. The electric-blue elastic had matched her previous hair color but clashed with the pale purple. She made a mental note to replace it. Though she never colored her hair the same shade twice, she could not bring herself to throw any of her old hair ties out. The rainbow of retired elastics in her drawer grew each year, always a few days before Jace's death anniversary. Raya insisted that it was a coincidence just as staunchly as she denied that changing her appearance was the only way she could stand looking in the mirror. But today, despite her new hair, she took pains to avoid her reflection. The lavender only reminded her of Claire, a cadaver who shared her hair color.

Claire was not the corpse's real name. Following protocol, the bodies donated to Raya's gross anatomy class were anonymous. Naming her group's cadaver had not been Raya's idea, but she didn't care enough to object. Dissecting a dead body for the first time was just another item on her to-do list, no different from doing the laundry or organizing her notes. Numbness was the sole perk of living in the hollow of someone else's life and Raya took full advantage of it. It came in handy in class when it steadied her fingers as she unzipped the black body bag containing Claire.

Hollow eyes. Ashen skin. Purple hair. The elderly woman's cadaver was as cold and lifeless as the rest of the laboratory's equipment. Raya groaned in her head when her groupmates decided that thanking the corpse before dissecting it was the right thing to do. No one else seemed to notice that the body on the stainless steel table couldn't hear them. Nothing lived inside it anymore. Perhaps, Raya thought as she stared down at the dead body, only husks saw other husks for the empty shells that they were.

Thank you, Claire. The name's single syllable rolled off Raya's tongue without ceremony. Raya regarded the cadaver, shifting her weight on her feet. Its face remained just as sunken, stiff, and gray as it was before its christening. Giving it a name had changed nothing.

Then everything was churning inside Raya all at once.

A breath hissed between Raya's teeth as sharp as the truth that lodged behind her tonsils like a fish bone. She coughed twice but couldn't spit it out, and so she forced herself to swallow the reality whole: Names weren't spells cast on those given them, they bewitched those who said them out loud. While Raya's eyes still saw a dead body, her mind could not stop seeing the woman who had lived.

Wrinkles recorded the smiles that had reached Claire's eyes, along with all the frowns that didn't. The deep creases around her mouth logged a lifetime of laughter while the finer ones documented the words she spoke. But if Claire had felt any sorrow when she passed, death had taken great care to erase every trace of it.

Raya pursed her lips, struggling to describe what remained on the woman's face. She couldn't remember the last time she had seen anything like it in the mirror, not even when she dyed her hair the prettiest of pinks.

Contentment. Composure. Peace. Raya pasted each word over Claire like a label, only to then peel them off. She needed a word with more weight. Dying had stripped Claire of many things, but not the gravity that came with knowing that even in death, she was a gift with meaning and mass, and that not an inch of her was a waste of space.

Raya clasped her hands behind her back, resisting the urge to brush a stray strand of purple hair from Claire's temple. Their choice of hair dye, Raya thought, was the only thing they had in common. Serenity made its home in a lived life's marks, and without a place to nestle on Raya's face, it rolled off her cheeks and chin like tears.

Her brown eyes watered. She dried them on her lab coat's sleeve, blaming the formaldehyde lingering in the laboratory's filtered air. When fresh tears stung her eyes hours later at the subway station, Raya convinced herself that it must be on account of the preservative clinging to her clothes. She wiped them away with the back of her hand before squeezing through the subway car's doors.

Raya made her way through the crowd, her eyes flitting over their faces. She found a seat and began a timer in her head, counting down

the seconds the passengers would share the train with her. Soon, each one of them was going to disappear, just as they did every evening.



Q

Q kicked himself for forgetting to top up his metro card. The musky perfume of the man in line in front of him at the top-up machine lanced his nose. Losing his sight had heightened his other senses, but this was one of those instances that he wished it had not.

He held his breath until the man left, adjusting the brown-paper-wrapped painting tucked under his arm. It would have been easier to deliver the piece to the gallery by cab, but he was stubborn that way. Only tourists used taxis. He stepped in front of the machine and squinted through his thick glasses, trying to make out the words on the screen one letter at a time. Cold sweat beaded on his nape. The woman in line behind him came to his rescue. Q thanked her, unable to tell from what he could see of her lips if she was wearing a smile or a frown.

Q made his way to the platform, tracing the guiding strip along the tiled floor with his walking stick. A blue blur darted in front of him and tripped over the stick, breaking it in two. Q tumbled to the floor, taking his painting with him. The blur mumbled an apology and ran off. A man helped Q to his feet and handed his painting back along with the pieces of his cane.

"Thank you." Q ran his hand over the painting. Its wrapper was torn, but the canvas was intact.

"Are you hurt?" The rasp in the man's voice gave Q the impression that the man either was twice his age or smoked two packs of cigarettes a day. The hint of cloves on his breath made Q inclined to believe that it was the latter and that his cigarette of choice was the same brand of Indonesian cigarettes his father used to hoard.

"I'm fine." Q put on a smile that he would have ripped off his own face if he had known how much it mimicked his father's. "Thanks."