

Junk Journal, James Hyun Lee, Honorable Mention

DAD – *a photograph of his father dressed in hanbok, beaming at the son in his lap. An empty mini-can of diet ginger ale. A final hospital bill.*

On your first date, he told you about how Joel died. Queer dating is just exchanging equal parts pleasantries and trauma.

He told you how he could not remember much about his father. For some reason, the memories of Joel were inaccessible, so his brain simply remembered *around* Joel – the fizz of saccharine soda, the stale air of a shared hospital room, the vermilion scrubs of nurses who checked his pulse more and more frequently. Five years old is a terrible age to lose a father.

He told you how when Joel died, he inherited the diagnoses. The month after Joel’s death, he was doubled over with abdominal pain and was stamped with type 1 diabetes. Years later, he would start hearing voices, and because of “family history,” he was express shipped a diagnosis of schizophrenia.

Two for two. A rough combination. He asked if this was a dealbreaker. You said you’ve had much worse. It’s true – you have.

Several dates later, after he sneaked you into his place and showed you the frames on the wall, he pointed to the photograph of his *doljabi*, the Korean tradition of setting objects in front of the new one-year-old and seeing which one they reach for. A prophecy of sorts. A calligraphy brush representing intelligence, a stack of coins promising prosperity, a gavel signaling a just nature.

He ended up choosing the spool of thread. Longevity. His parents were overjoyed. Finally, a son who could break the family curse of dying young.

SEX ED - *seven unopened condoms way past their expiration date. A sticker that just read "WET AND WILD!"*

You were his first kiss. And everything else too.

High school barely taught sex ed, his father was dead, and his mother was a fire-and-brimstone Baptist who believed that he was too damaged to understand what sex was. He was not going to be able to pick up on cues for consent, his voices would make unreasonable demands, he would not have impulse control, he would be too forgetful, his paranoia would explode.

Your rebuttal: he deserved pleasure too. You suggested rules, created easy tap-out systems, crafted some codewords. You reminded him over and over that his diagnosis should not exclude him from the human adult's right to feel good. Oftentimes, he would decline when he felt paranoid or angry or empty. But when he was feeling like himself, usually off at least one of his meds, the sex was fire.

NANCY - *a pocket New Testament. Twenty-seven birthday cards in chronological order, the first half in Korean, the latter in English, all of them with her exquisite penmanship.*

He reflected frequently on the cruel fate of being the only child of immigrants. Gay, schizophrenic, and feisty – none of which were ideal traits of a Korean successor. Every time his mother looked at him, he flushed hot with shame, the feeling that she crossed an ocean just for him to be sick and depraved with unsustainable dreams of becoming a baker.

You first met Nancy five years ago under her roof, where he labeled himself as gay and you as his boyfriend. She did not know that you had slept over that night, nor did she know that this had been going on behind her back for the last eight months.

Her eyes narrowed, reining in her biblical rage and sorrow. You were a predator who took advantage of the weak. You were seeking out frail souls to drag into drugs, to further fracture a shaky mind. You took joy in corruption.

You forgot how hot homophobia felt. You briefly considered if hell were hotter.

Later, she pulled him aside, attempting to convince him that his “gay thoughts” were just a part of his illness too. It was another one of his delusions, and he needed to snap out of it. Maybe Risperdal would help.

You were so proud of him when he said that if being gay was part of his psychosis, he wouldn’t dream of letting any of it go.

THE VOICES - *sizable chunks of his lower left incisor in a small Ziploc.*

He had named the two voices in his head, but he refused to tell you their names. He worried that by telling you, they would materialize as the full-fledged bullies/conspirators he felt them to be. You ended up learning their names when you walked into his room one day and he was curled up in bed whispering for them to stop. Crying. Panicking.

You ran to the kitchen and prepared a bucket of ice water for him, one of his most reliable coping tools. Something about how dunking his head activated a “dive reflex” that caused his heart rate to slow down. While white-knuckling the bucket back to his room, you heard the sharp crack of bone biting into the elm bedpost. The tooth was shattered.

Later, he would tell you how the voices were overwhelming, and he did the only thing that came to mind to shut them up. You wished you hadn’t run for the bucket.

You hated how Nancy’s gaze sizzled through you after that day. You had always been able to hold your own against her. But her eyes humbled you, asking if you could really handle him, if you deserved to be there at all.

INHERITANCE – *his first lottery ticket, a losing one. An unopened Father's Day gift.*

He always hated the idea of "losing the genetic lottery." What kind of lottery is one where most people win? It was easier to envision his schizophrenia as a curse, one that he resented Joel for passing on. His father knew what it was like, so how could he create another human to suffer just as he did, repenting for the sins of a tainted bloodline? When he was feeling particularly worthless, he saw himself as a mere echo of his father. The multiple suicide attempts, the complications of missed insulin doses, the fast-tracked decay of his kidneys, his already-cloudy vision.

He swore he would not become his father. He would live longer, celebrate harder, never forget an anniversary or birthday. You sometimes wondered if he was doing something to spite Joel rather than by his own motivation, and then you wondered if there was a difference.

COMPROMISE – *the envelope that Nancy gave you a year after you met her. An old medication schedule.*

She grew to appreciate you, albeit begrudgingly. After all, when his paranoia kicked into high gear, you were somehow always exempt from his ire. You were able to convince him to go to sleep when he was feeling out of control and drink water when he wasn't feeling thirsty. You drove him to his appointments when she broke her arm. You corrected the grammar in his culinary school application essays. You gave them the breaks away from each other that they deserved. She hated your queerness, but eventually had to recognize you loved him as passionately as she did.

Yet there were days when you were her antithesis. She urged him to take his meds. You let him take holidays when he felt like a zombie. She prayed with him every day, clasping her hands around his. You left prayer behind a long time ago when it was used to banish your gay away. She pushed others far from him - they could never understand him wholly. You pushed others towards him – they could learn a lot.

She thought you were the devil, you thought she was a kook. He agreed with her, he agreed with you. He needed both of you. He needed the opposition to keep him intact. And as much as you resented each other, you achieved some semblance of synergy to avoid breaking the boy down the middle.

WOOD - *five pieces of tree bark. A gay anniversary card with two stick figures in top hats holding hands.*

He had insisted on coordinating the entire date. It was going to be a good day. The voices were under better control. He felt normal. Excited, even.

He had decided on a scavenger hunt as your anniversary gift. Each stop had a clue to the next, accompanied by a treat that he baked specifically to get you to reminisce. A mini strawberry cheesecake at the H Mart where he introduced you to strawberry Pocky. A biscotti at the Home Depot where you kept on making jokes about “hard logs.” A mochi at the local Japanese stationery store because of that time you almost ate the erasers thinking they were filled with adzuki beans.

The final stop was the ponderosa forest near his house. A wobbly panna cotta. He asked if you trusted him. You did. He tied a blindfold around your eyes, and a small, stupid part of you wondered if this was how you died. You heard him walking around and scraping bark from the trees, building a pile of the bark next to you. The vanilla scent of the ponderosa filled the entire clearing, enhancing the palate with every bite of the rich cream.

“I wanted to make you a dessert that was as dynamic as you are to me.”

You never expected that a Tinder date would lead to a wooden anniversary. Later that night in your bed, he made some terrible joke about how wood and tinder were actually the same thing, and you slapped his shoulder in faux annoyance. In retaliation, he kissed you and tickled you and embraced you so warmly that you couldn't finish your thought about how crazy it all was and how quickly it could come crashing down.

IDENTITY – a shard of the bathroom mirror that he shattered five years ago when he thought someone was spying on him.

He had always been skeptical of who he was as a person. Were his voices a part of him, even if they quieted on Abilify? Was he always a paranoid person, or was he a person underneath a schizophrenic facade? Was he the good obedient patient who took his medications or the rebel hero who faced his symptoms head-on? How many layers of his surface did he have to peel back before revealing who he truly was?

He then turned to you and asked which parts of him you loved and which ones you could leave behind. You told him you couldn't separate those things, so why bother trying. He pressed you for specificity. You stayed vague.

You couldn't imagine him without his schizophrenia. He would be less *himself* without it. You also hated the illness. It sometimes took him away from you. But on rare occasions, it enriched him – made him more sensitive, thoughtful, intense. It was not a cancer that could be resected, not a cut that would scar over, eventually paling from both vision and memory. You accepted the whole package because you needed all of him.

JUNK JOURNAL - *a dresser filled with forty-nine boxes of various sizes and shapes, each box wrapped in twine and tagged with an index card labeled with silver Sharpie.*

"DIAGNOSIS" "CHEF'S KNIFE" "THROWING HANDS" "NEGATIVE SYMPTOMS"

He loved mementos. Holding something familiar and summoning the memory back, making sure that it was real, that it happened.

Nancy could not tolerate the mess. Honestly, neither could you. The clutter from one-punched punch cards and colorful bobby pins and the disintegrating bag from his first Five Guys burger and dust bunnies and loose jokers made his room a minefield. So, a compromise between everyone. He got to keep some of the mementos, but they had to be organized in some way and fit into his dresser. Throw everything else out.

You helped him clean his room so that he could at least see the floor, but it was his idea to group the objects by theme. He found small boxes and containers throughout the house, squirreling each of the objects away with a label in all-caps.

Now that he is gone, you go through each of the boxes and take in the contents. You're familiar with some of them. Some of them are about you. Objects you never thought he'd notice or keep - the napkin from your first date, an empty bottle of your scented sunscreen, the wig you loaned him when he tried drag for the first time (Nancy was livid).

It hits you that this was his way of saying goodbye. Just in case.

FINALE – *a secret between the two of you.*

He always talked about his death, trying in his quirky, anxious way to prepare you. He knew his illness could sweep him away without warning. DKA, car accident, hanging, overdose, getting lost and starving to death. Every grotesque catastrophe.

He tried breaking up with you three times to save you the trouble. He urged you to move on, to feel relief more than sadness, to leave his sorry ass to die alone. He made you promise you wouldn't grieve, and he knew your promise was a lie.

He thought you wouldn't be invited to the funeral. Christianity had its limitations. You were shocked when Nancy told you the time and address, but you couldn't muster the energy to go, to be surrounded by the people from her church who pitied him, who prayed for his psychosis to be quelled by God's omnipotence, who knew him only from Nancy's paternalistic lens. You couldn't watch him be flattened into some sick kid to mourn. You politely declined, and she nodded with understanding and perhaps the slightest twinge of an apology.

In the case that he died before you could say goodbye, he left a space for you to fill.

You kiss the box you made for him, its contents neatly organized inside. It feels heavier than it actually is. The Sharpie on the index card is fresh as you place your box, the fiftieth, into the dresser. A nice even number that he would have loved.

You close the drawer. Take in the room around you. Set the keys on the desk. Breathe in the lingering wisps of *gochujang* and vanilla and apricot and the generic laundry detergent that reminds you there are clothes to fold back home.