

It is a beautiful day to be released.

The trees are cloaked in the vibrant, fiery hues of yellow, orange, and red, and the occasional leaf drifts to the ground. The bright rays of the afternoon sun tickle my skin with their warmth, and the gentle wind playfully tousles my hair.

Once upon a time, I would've relished the experience. I would've raked the colourful, fallen foliage into piles and jumped in them. Then when I became tired, I would've laid down amidst the mess of leaves, and savoured the warmth of the sun and the coolness of the breeze.

But that is in the past. I can no longer run as carefree as I had before, weighed down as I have become with my fleshy body.

The beauty of this day taunts me with what I can no longer do, and I long to return to the cold emptiness of my hospital room. But the nurses there had already ushered me out with the words "eat healthily and eat your medication as prescribed," and there is nowhere left for me to go except home.

So that's where I go.

A month has passed since that day, and it is Christmas Eve.

The Subject of the Portrait 2

My oldest friend, Yiqing, visits me. I hadn't known she was the one who had rung the doorbell. If I had known, I would've never answered the door at all. But now she is here, inside my dark apartment, telling me she wants to bring me to a small Christmas party hosted by our mutual friend, Ahanu.

"I know you've been recovering at home for now," she begins, her voice as bright as ever. "But it's been so long since we've all have had a proper reunion and--"

I shake my head, rejecting the proposal before Yiqing can even finish shaping it with her words.

"You've been hospitalised for 3 months, and then you've been resting at home, alone, for another month," she approaches me and enthusiastically clasps my chubby fingers in her slender hands. "Isn't it lonely? Come out and spend some time with us."

I decline and pull away.

"Don't tell me you've grown tired of your friends," Yiqing laughs, the sound airy and light. "And you don't want to see us anymore?"

It's not that I didn't want to see them. I just didn't want them to see me.

I don't want them to see the ugly mass that I've become.

But to tell Yiqing this truth would be to expose a part of myself that I never wished to unveil to anybody else. So in place of the truth, I craft something else, an excuse that isn't quite the truth but also not quite a lie.

Even so, Yiqing isn't dissuaded. "It'll be fine! Look, I even bought you a nice Christmas sweater, just for this occasion." She waves a gift bag in front of my face. "It'd be a shame to waste it."

Still, I refuse.

And so we go back and forth, back and forth, until finally, I cave in, agreeing to go on the condition that I would only have to be there for an hour. She looks a little disappointed in me, but I'm used to it. After all, since when have I not been a disappointment? I take the gift bag from her and trudge into my bedroom.

I emerge from my bedroom moments later, clad in the Christmas sweater. It had been difficult to put on, and it

stretched particularly thin over my problem areas. While I may have no mirrors in my home, for I had removed them long ago to avoid looking at myself, I know this sweater hideously emphasises my bulkiness.

The affirmation of my fears comes in the form of the expression of worry that flashes across Yiqing's face. Now I want to turn around, to retreat to my dark bedroom and seal the door shut.

Just as my heavy feet begin to shift, Yiqing claps her hands together, "I knew the Rudolph sweater would look good on you!"

Pleasantries. Lies.

I open my mouth, ready to tell her that I no longer intend on going. Before I can, however, she takes me by the shoulders.

"No turning back now," she says in a singsong voice as she steers me out the door.

I dig my heels into the ground in resistance. I'm much heavier than her, so she can't drag me out by force. But for some reason, I'm moving, and I briefly wonder how she has grown so strong.

I struggle against her vice-like grip and protest.

"Please," she pleads, and there is something about her voice, something about its tone, that makes me still. "Let us help you."

A sense of hollow disbelief fills my chest. How were they going to help me? Were they going to help me miraculously lose all this wretched fat that not even all my years of dieting and exercising could not stave off?

"Please," she says again, and her voice quavers.

The fighting spirit fades from my body.

I follow her out the door.

Yiqing rings the doorbell, and I stand behind her, tugging at my sleeves.

The ring of the doorbell echoes for a brief moment before the door opens, and Ahanu steps out.

He smiles a bright smile at the sight of Yiqing. A bout of nerves strikes me, and I take a step back, thinking I should leave.

But then he sees me, and his eyes widen. "You came!"

My window of escape is now gone, and I end up waving my hand stiffly.

He approaches me and wraps an arm around my shoulder. "I wasn't sure if you'd come, but I'm so glad you did," he says with a grin. He then gestures at my shirt and says, "You look great!"

I see the false sparkle in his eyes. He did not mean what he said.

I respond with a "thanks, I think so too." A lie for a lie.

He releases his hold on my shoulder and beckons us inside. "Come on in, I have dinner ready. Everybody else has already arrived, so join us in the kitchen when you're ready!"

The faint sound of a rambunctious laugh emanates from the Anahu's home, punctuating his words. The sound causes the unease in my heart to stir anew, and I hesitate. But then

Yiqing casts me an expectant look, and I end up following her inside.

"The bathroom is on your right," Ahanu calls over his shoulder as we take off our shoes at the entrance. "Feel free to wash up before you eat."

Yiqing moves into the bathroom, and I'm left in the hallway. I don't want to eat, and considering the way my flesh droops from my figure, I shouldn't eat.

"Are you not going to wash your hands to eat?" Ahanu asks when he turns around and sees me standing awkwardly.

I say I'm not hungry.

"Just try a little."

I add that I already ate, and it isn't a complete lie. I ate an apple in the morning.

At that, an unreadable look fills his eyes, but it is quickly replaced with his signature puppy eyes. "But I worked so hard to cook it."

I shake my head, apologising.

Ahanu heaves a comically exaggerated sigh. "What a shame."

I force a slight smile to my face at his antics, and tell him I'll wait for them elsewhere.

"You can go to the living room," he gestures at the staircase on his left. "If you climb the stairs and go straight down the hall, it should be the room at the very end. I left the TV on, so you can watch it while you wait."

I nod before hastily making my escape.

Contrary to Ahanu's words, the TV is not on when I enter the living room, and without the TV to make any sound, I am left in an uncomfortable, suffocating silence.

With nothing to distract me, my mind wanders to wonder about what the people are talking about in the kitchen. *Have Ahanu and Yiqing already told them of my weight?* I fret. The thought makes my head spin, and I lean heavily against the wall to steady myself.

I tell myself not to think about it, and I scan the room desperately for anything that can save me from drowning amidst

my worries. My eyes catch on a glassy-sheened portrait hanging above the fireplace mantle across from me.

The portrait's subject is terribly slender with eyes so dark, so desolate, that they look empty. It's like nothing exists behind those eyes.

As if enraptured, I move towards the portrait.

And the subject of the portrait moves too.