

Forever

Kamilah Wong

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Warning: implied depression, suicide

Reader discretion advised.

It was hot when I first met her. Blisteringly so. I'll forever remember the smell of burning concrete and the unforgiving glare of light that hurt my eyes. Even the rushing river had gone still. She was like a breath of fresh air amongst the stifling heat. I hadn't even noticed her behind me until she hurled herself at me, pulling me into the river with her. The cool water was searing on my skin, and a moment later I felt alive again. When my head burst back up to the surface for a well-deserved breath, her face was the first thing I saw, grinning down at me with such satisfaction, it made my confused questions die on my tongue.

"You looked hot." She said. "Thought a dip was what you needed." To her, it was all the reason in the world.

That was how we met, her pushing me into the river on a blistering summers day.

I don't quite remember how we got so close. She was just constantly there, like a shadow... or perhaps I was the shadow. Her smile seemed permanent, and it was contagious. Her two front teeth were slightly crooked, so I gave her the nickname "Rabbit," and she would flash her teeth at me on purpose every time I called her that. She never seemed bothered by her crooked teeth, in fact it might've encouraged her to smile even more.

I hated her at first. Perhaps it wasn't hate, just distaste. She got too close too fast and I didn't have time to adjust. I wouldn't consider myself anti-social, but it does take me a while to warm up to people. She was the total opposite, calling out to me whenever she saw me around, even coming to my classroom all the way down the hall just to tell me about her new keychain. I avoided her a lot back then; she creeped me out a bit. No one had ever been so enthusiastic to be my friend. My classmates had given her weird looks too, asking me who she was and why she came over so much. I don't even know how she knew my name.

But oh, did she grow on me. I have no memory of how it happened; just how annoyed I was at the beginning and suddenly realizing how close we had gotten. Like waking up and feeling like I

had dreamed about something, but not being able to recall anything, just the lingering sensation.

Like two peas in a pod, my teacher said. Like soulmates, our parents said.

We sat by the river one day. It was fall, and the water was covered in a blanket of oranges and reds. She could make up stories about each leaf, about how they got into the river and where they were going. As we watched them float down and out of sight, she would wave and yell, “Bye-bye!” before moving onto the next leaf. She handed me a pendant, dug out from her jean pockets and stuffed it into my hand. I stared at the half-heart, “Best” was written on it, and then one line down it had “For.” She had the other half, “Friends” written on it, then “ever.” Best friends forever, it read when put together. I thought it was pretty lame. I almost refused to wear it, but I couldn’t refuse her pleas and before I knew it, the cheap plastic necklace was around my neck, and had been ever since.

“Now we’ll be best friends forever!” She said with so much joy it made me believe it. Really believe forever existed. Forever seemed so much closer as a child sitting next to her best friend.

It feels like a long time since I’ve come here. Three years, to be exact. It’s hard to believe I could be graduating high school next year. The river looks the same as always, the grass soft against my bare feet. The wind is gentle through my hair, unlike that day. I’ve left so many precious memories here, but I tremble as I stand by the sandy edge. “I’m sorry,” I say, watching my reflection and imagining her face instead. “I’m sorry I left for so long.”

“It’s fine.” She would’ve said. “I knew you’d come back. We promised to be together forever, right?”

“Yeah.” I answer with tears in my eyes, the words so heavy on my tongue, falling into the air like bricks. “Yeah.”

I can still imagine the look on her face when I told her my necklace fell into the river. It was raining so heavily, and I couldn't tell how much of it was tears.

The water is cool as I wade in, unafraid. It welcomes me in its embrace like old friends. The river remembers me. It's been waiting for me.

I remember how I screamed and cried and begged for her not to go.

Every second of those three years were excruciating. Every time someone asked, I would answer, "Yes, I'm alright now. I'm fine. I'm doing better." I would smile and laugh and nod in conversation. Each time I said it, my mouth tasted of lies. I was exhausted. Each breath I took left an aftertaste of guilt, each step felt like betrayal. It wasn't fair.

She had the most determined look on her face and she smiled. She smiled. She said she'll be okay, she said she'll get the necklace back for sure.

The water is up to my chest now, and I go in deeper still. I am not afraid...just tired. So tired. So tired of being alone. So tired of remembering.

She never came back up.

We promised forever. But forever is bitter. Every syllable is a lie. I can barely touch the sand and rocks underneath my feet, the current quick and unrelenting. Just like that day. Merciless. Cruel.

I close my eyes, and I stop fighting.

Somehow, I wonder if this is what forever feels like.