

Clutter of a Good



by Rachel Singh

image info

Up the stairs, third door on the right. Beyond that door, another, holding all the scraps I left behind. The closet in my childhood bedroom is an archive of sorts, it makes memories solid, coming up with artifacts I did not know existed. Old math workbooks. Pictures I drew with intense passion at the age of four. A Girl Scouts button, pieces of a handmade Christmas ornament that didn't outlast the winter of its making. Things my mother doesn't want to get rid of, so she sticks them in boxes until the boxes burst. Crumpled papers unfurl like seasonal plants when I open the closet door.

One of them—a Know Your Classmates Bingo worksheet—falls out as I sift through a pile of papers, bored on a trip home with nothing better to do. There's a bingo board on it, a clown dwelling in the free space in the middle, and facts written at the top of each box with room to write corresponding names below. The font is huge and bold to make things simple, much like the boards of the real game that my grandpa likes to play at the community center. Our teachers, frazzled and in a midday slump, would pass these out to fill some time and create some distance, safely announcing the next cue from their desks. Twenty-one-year-old scrawl from seven-year-old me filled each box with a name—all kids in my first-grade class. So much had happened to these people, names forgotten and remembered, since then. The box in the top right corner—*Is left-handed*—held my name—K-I-R-A. We weren't supposed to

write our own names down, but I was the only leftie in the class. I remember beaming with pride as I wrote my name in the box.

Is good at drawing—

You didn't raise your hand for consideration when our teacher called those words out. Neither did you ask anyone to put your name down, but I wrote L-E-V-I in the box. I sat next to you, Levi; you were my best friend. I didn't like Haley, the proclaimed artist of the class; everyone shouted her name when we got to this one. I thought her art was too perfect, her buns too pristine at the ballet class we went to after school, and I didn't think she deserved praise just because she could draw within the lines. Even then, I was an opinionated critic, a Taurus through and through. Your art was chaotic, wild, and promising. It still is. Back then you used crayons and colored pencils and markers all at once, your instruments all jumbled in your tiny hands. The teachers sometimes spoke to your parents about attention problems, trouble listening. They didn't like it when you were just you.

Likes the beach—

Jake, whose family owned a vacation home on the coast. He shot his first music video there at the age of nineteen, a flashy affair including floodlights and a drone, and became known farther than I would have thought under a stage name I always get wrong. I served

Jake when I was waitressing in the city to supplement the minuscule pay of my research position. As my hands shot through the gaps between him and his friends to grab empty glasses and dirty plates, he did not look at me, but one time we locked eyes, and there was strained recognition in his face. “I think I went to school with that girl—Amanda,” I heard him say, mistaking me for another Indian girl we knew and getting her name, Anaya, wrong also.

Plays a musical instrument—

The next box held Hunter’s name. When I think back, he comes into focus. He had sandy hair that swayed over his eyes as he thrummed his fingers on tables until the teacher asked him to stop and wait till he got home to his drum set. Hunter and a few others had a band throughout high school, the classic kind that practiced in a garage, and I secretly wanted to be his girlfriend nodding to the beat, twirling her hair while sitting on a car, but I settled for pretending to be uninterested when he performed at the school talent show. I ran into Hunter at the library during a summer back from college and asked him if he still played. His eyes widened, and he laughed a bit because what I had mentioned was so disconnected to who he was then. “Not at all,” he replied. I remember telling you, and we agreed that was a shame.

Has been out of the country—

I couldn’t discern what name I put in the box. It started with an S. But I know Alia, whom we went to school with for ages, moved to Spain with her parents in the middle of tenth grade. She had dark hair and pale skin like her mother, her face bright red with tears

as she was released from hugs and left our school for the last time. You studied abroad in her city, sent me sangria-sponsored selfies across the ocean with chaotic texts. I, in my snow-encrusted college town, was sober, studying for finals, and jealous. You walked past Alia on the street, lost with your hands in your pockets, regretting how much money you spent to make them so empty. Neither of you realized it till much later when the other’s face, in a blur, came forward in your mind like déjà vu.

Is wearing pink—

Kyle wore pink all the time, and kids made fun of him. He would wear a pink t-shirt with local businesses advertised on the back so much it started to fade into a creamy white. His mom got it in the town 5K, and he was proud of her because even at eight he had the awareness that she did not do many things for herself. Pink was Kyle’s favorite color—not bubble gum or magenta, but a subtle, pastel pink the sky is coated with sometimes at sunrise, easing people from sleep to waking. You defended him when Jake teased him, and since you were the tallest in the class at the time, Jake backed down. I have no idea what Kyle is doing now, but I looked him up on Facebook and his profile photo featured a sharp jawline and an apartment in the background I admired.

Has been to New York—

A fake apple with an “I LUV NYC” sticker on it sat on our teacher’s desk, courtesy of Brianna, but now I could substitute her name for ours a couple times over. We first went to celebrate graduating, twenty-two and intoxicated by

the insomnia of that city. At the MoMA, we stared at Robert Rauschenberg’s *Bed* till our vision went hazy because we were stoned and enthralled at the way fabric and paint succumbed to gravity but also didn’t, the different materials informing each other’s architecture. I thought about how it was my eighteenth year of knowing you and how love is something you build. I never told you how I was feeling that day, about you or about *Bed*, because I didn’t really have the words.

“Are you okay?” you later asked nervously outside an Italian restaurant we couldn’t afford. We had taken the wrong train after leaving the museum, and you thought it was your fault and that my quiet meant I was mad, even though I was just lulled by the edible. The anxiety collected under your curls on your forehead in small drops of sweat. I realized I liked how you were just a bit taller than me.

“I’m perfect,” I said.

Has gone on a road trip—

I remember him—long hair and a sweet, toothless smile. Micah, whose parents were divorced and whose mom lived across the country so his dad packed the car every summer, taking highways westbound. You did a similar drive to get to and from your Midwestern college. From the road, you’d text me pictures of terrain I’d never see for myself. Whenever I got those pictures from you, an oddball sightseeing trap, an unfortunate flat tire, or just a picture in the reflection of a cooler in a gas station, I thought about our friendship, the strain of it across states, how there was only an hour time difference but forgetting that threw us off. “We’ll call at seven,” we said. Selfish me and cognizant

you always landed on my time, we talked for hours after we should have reasonably gone to bed. Yet sometimes the identical stamp of our starting points failed us, and we didn’t have much to say. In college I went STEM, and you followed your heart into the arts—and unemployment, as my dad liked to remark. When we strain, that’s where we feel it—in the gaps in our foundation, not where we came from but elementally, who we are.

Favorite color is yellow, red, or blue—

These papers were a bit classist, I think back. Always asking who went where, who did what. Some people got to brag about their New York trip while others resigned to answering fun facts, like how their favorite color was yellow. Sitting outside on a damp porch at an awkward party where we drank beer for the first time at sixteen, Erica tugged at her shoelaces and confessed she was afraid of living and dying in the place she grew up.

“That’s not going to happen to you,” I said. The air was so humid my straightened hair was starting to curl.

“It happened to my grandma,” she replied. “And my parents have never left the country.”

I tried to console her, but we ended up drinking too many beers to have a conversation, which I suppose was its own brand of comfort. A decade later, Alia, the involuntary expat, commented on one of Erica’s posts for her sewing blog, saying she was amazed by her talent. After much messaging, Alia invited Erica to visit her in Berlin, and Erica never left. They got married in pastel dresses Erica made. Seeing the subdued sunflower shade Erica wore in their wedding photos, I thought that yellow, in the right hands, is a very important thing.

Has a dog—

Half the class raised their hand for this one, but the dog I really remember was June's German shepherd, Fox, who stuck his head out of the back seat of her grandma's truck window every day at pickup. His tail wagged as he gazed happily at the children. His huge mouth set into something that truly resembled a smile. Your mother always said that dog was going to bite June one day, but Fox never did. He died ten years later in a veterinarian's office. June's hand slipped off his chest when it stopped rising. Two days later, at her locker, I told her I was sorry.

Has a birthday the same month as you—

Penelope and I ended up going to the same college, sending each other texts with phone numbers received from other friends, saying, "We should hang out!" I sometimes caught the flutter of her signature black bangs in the corner of my eye as the wind pummeled us as we trudged to the library, fighting a hangover, and thought: *huh, you too*. Every few months she texted me to ask if I wanted to go get dumplings with her. We sat in mostly silence while carts pushed by older Asian women kept us fed with some of the best food I've had in my life. Penelope and I probably could have gotten closer, but she was responsible and adult and that scared me. I didn't know how to be friends with someone who was smart about money, wore bangs as a fashion statement and not a lapse of judgment, got to class on time, or knew how to cook meat without poisoning anyone. It didn't help that you had a crush on her in high school, but at the time, I couldn't explain why that bothered me, even to myself.

Likes to dance—

Jeremy was the name I put down, but I can't remember why. Perhaps he sat next to me and asked me to write his name there. But when I think about dancing, I think of the second time we were together in New York. That time, I was the only visitor between us. You met me at the airport and took me to your tiny apartment, which, under your hands, felt like a home. That night we went to a club playing eighties hits and danced for what felt like days. Later, you tore through my grocery store tights in your bed with the streetlight shining in, reverberating off the chain on your neck. The rest of the week dragged by with a tense weight, and your roommate sensed it, tried to bring levity where not much could be found. After walking through rain that was forecasted but not planned for on our part, we spent the day understanding we had fractured something sacred, and we could only mesh further or split, but we couldn't go back. Drawing closer was impossible. We lived in different states with immobile jobs, and I had just gotten out of a relationship. You decided for us. "We're never doing this again," you said. But I wore the tights again, made a lame joke about easy access at a dive bar, so we did it again, but not for years since.

Is a fast runner—

Simon, the capture the flag champion, the fitness test star, the track wonder—until he broke his ankle at a neighborhood soccer match after he had his first kid. People who ran into him at the grocery store said he walked with a limp, but I saw him at a summer barbecue that was more awkward than the first party I ever drank at, and he seemed fine.

The pain will quake him harder in old age, his bones straining in spots tampered with by the break. When it rains, he'll predict the weather before it comes. His grandchildren will jump on that leg, and with a wince, he'll smile as they call him magic. His doctor will recommend he move to Florida. I remember, as a child, watching his red hair bob ahead of the pack as we ran around the field, jumping over sticks and rocks with an energy that came from things not yet tamed.

Knows how to play chess—

Adrian—that name is written clearly. Etched in stone somewhere else too. Adrian died in a car accident not long after we filled this worksheet out. Sometimes, in my early twenties when I felt particularly lonely with burdens on the mind, I'd remember him and be sent over the edge with tears at the frozen memory of his face. We've been to one or two funerals since. Those are the only things that seem to pull you out of the city you now know like the back of your hand and bring you back to this town. I've seen you across the room at churches we're out of place in, your dark hair framed by stained glass I can't help but think suits you better than a rigid pew, sitting next to a woman I don't want to know. Yet you introduce me anyway, and amidst her elegant and cool aura, I'm hit with the shock again of our difference, that we grew up to be such distinct people. I sit silently in labs measuring, recording, equating, and you stand at ritzy events, conversing with people I'd be afraid to talk to but would like to meet. The shock hits dually when I realize that despite this, I'm lucky. Most people don't get to see their favorite people grow up, but I got to see you, except I didn't realize what I was witnessing

due to the jolt of my own metamorphosis. In my defense, what I went through was much more disarming. Our bodies went from looking roughly the same to me growing boobs, the left one always slightly bigger, and not bleeding predictably once a month, but whenever my body felt like it, so you often had to shimmy behind me and say "Kira" gently but deliberately in my ear. Not many people know each other like we knew each other. And even though I've only seen you in black in the last few years, sometimes I think you might come back again, dressed in color, and knock on my door.

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When I reach that last box, I put the paper down, but I don't let it go. I close the door to my closet, but I leave something within me open. I think about Rauschenberg and oily hot dogs from vendors on the street. I think about jumping on your back and you carrying me on tired legs all the way home. I used to get embarrassed when I remembered our reunions, cluttered with bad decisions and spilled drinks, but now I delight in thinking that if we caused a scene, we're a memory to someone, and they will picture us together, still.

I dream of you. I stand and watch you pin bedsheets from your apartment to blank walls. I hear the slap of plastic photo albums throttle through my ears, but I don't see what they hold. You tell me you're going to make a portrait of all of us, everyone you've ever known. I've always felt useless when it comes to the art you love, mute without the jargon to express what I feel. But in my dream world, I can aide you. I unfold that crumpled sheet of paper that could've bounced into a garbage bin long ago and realize what I hold. I tell you I know everything about all of us, everything there is to know. ❖