



Trapping a Comet in Plaster



*"Dedicatēd to my sister who finally
agreed to illustrate this for me."*

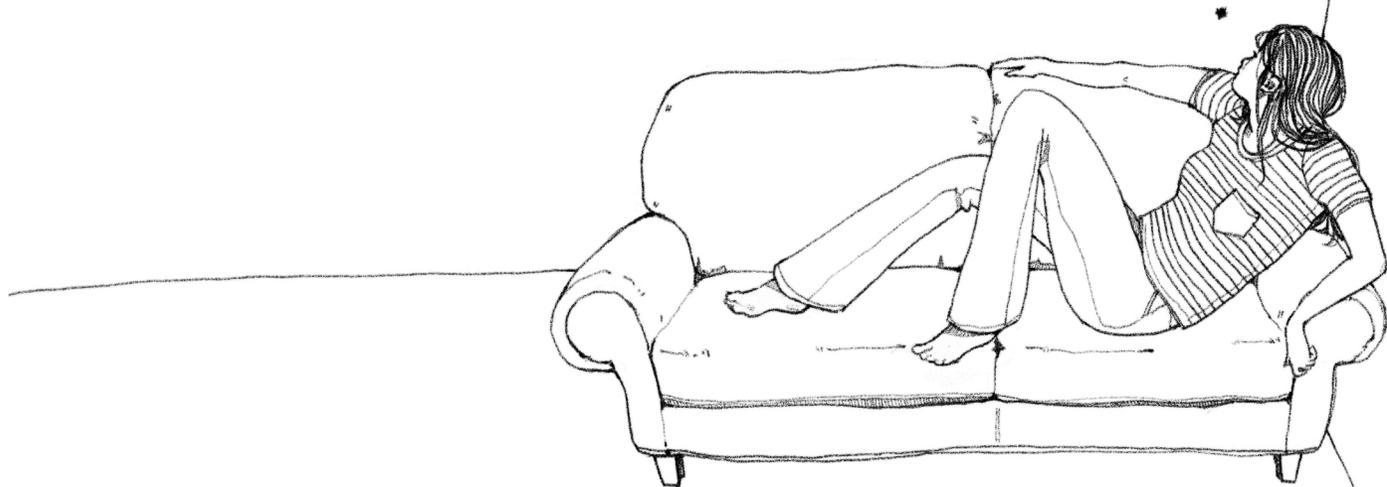
- Gemma Park

*"Dedicatēd to my sister who is actually
kind of okay at writing I guess."*

- Sam Park

The orange leather sofa in my bedroom doesn't do much good other than look tremendously out of place against the faded walls where ages of wallpaper and paint had been stripped off completely to make room for my little life. It sits in its ugliness like an old, blind stray cat cowering in the corner of my room, likely put there by the previous owner to cover up a stain in the carpet, which was also no longer there.

One tired evening though, as I noticed with subtle exasperation the emptiness that flooded my confused apartment, I found the beaten thing oddly welcoming. I reluctantly let myself sink into its rough, greasy fabric and leaned my throbbing head against the chewed up wall. And through the plaster, I heard a little tunnel of noise emerging from the other end and gently humming against my left ear, as I involuntarily listened to its wonders and hilariousness.

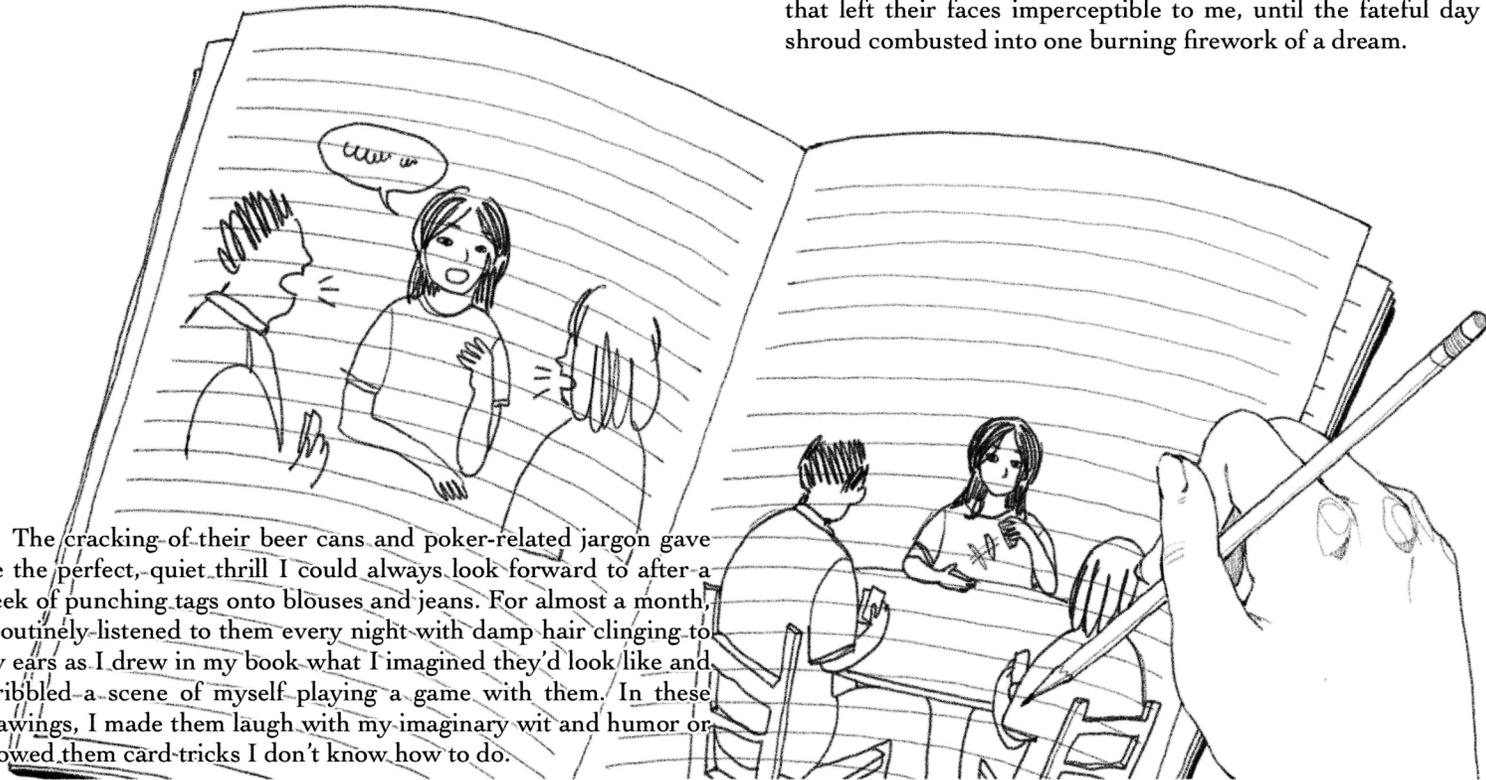


I was not familiar with any sort of excitement growing up, besides the rare chance of seeing stars through oppressive urban skies, so you must understand how things so miniscule and inconspicuously pricked with insanity could contain so much fascination to me.

There is a small hole with the same diameter as that of my index finger, or perhaps the size of a bullet, punctured through the wall of my bedroom. You couldn't make out a thing if you looked through it, but it carved a somewhat clear pathway for the sound of clattering poker chips and bent, uneven conversations in the next unit to reach mine every Friday evening.

I wanted more than anything to be a part of their esoteric noise. Sometimes I caught a glimpse of the couple that were my neighbors, whether it be the woman's casual eyes at the words on their postage or a sliver of the man between closing elevator doors. Even so, there constantly remained a shroud of an unknown, opaque feeling that hovered around their bodies, like a gray light that left their faces imperceptible to me, until the fateful day the shroud combusted into one burning firework of a dream.

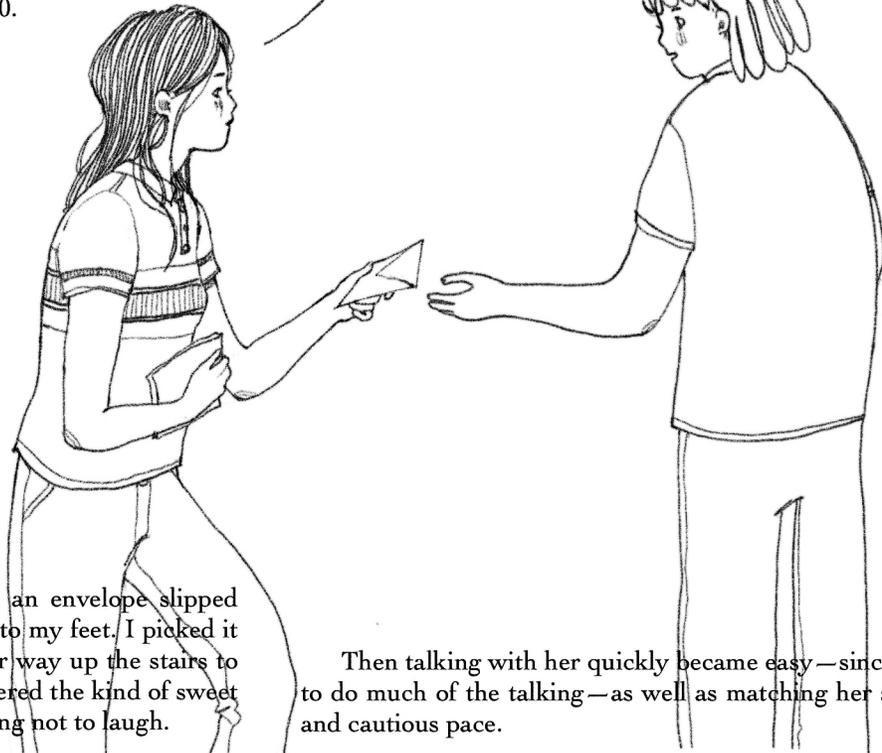
The cracking of their beer cans and poker-related jargon gave me the perfect, quiet thrill I could always look forward to after a week of punching tags onto blouses and jeans. For almost a month, I routinely listened to them every night with damp hair clinging to my ears as I drew in my book what I imagined they'd look like and scribbled a scene of myself playing a game with them. In these drawings, I made them laugh with my imaginary wit and humor or showed them card-tricks I don't know how to do.



Their mail compartment was to the left of mine. One Friday morning, when I finished digging my key into my mailbox, a woman politely requested my pardon as she unlocked hers. I promptly moved two paces to the right with letters in my hands. Instantly, I knew she was the woman next door, the one who laughed loudly when she was drunk and was terrible at dealing cards, as I noticed the number 609 engraved on the compartment's metal lid, preceding my apartment number 610.

I said hello.

She said her name was Dorothy.



As she slipped away towards the stairs, an envelope slipped from the pile in her hands and onto the floor to my feet. I picked it up and caught up to her as she was a quarter way up the stairs to our level. When I presented the letter, she offered the kind of sweet and nervous smile you make when you're trying not to laugh.

Then talking with her quickly became easy—since I didn't have to do much of the talking—as well as matching her strangely slow and cautious pace.

"I don't know what to do with myself half the time," she repeatedly muttered whenever she realized the way her words ran astray from what she wanted to say. She had the idiosyncrasy of repeating herself a lot, with more emphasis on every word if she spoke too quietly the first time.

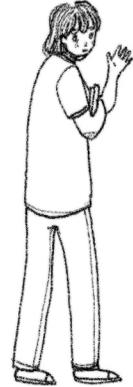


She didn't mention poker once, strangely enough, and spent most of the stairs going on about vintage magazines she collected from the '60s and '70s. Dozens of different issues rolled out of her tongue, as she desperately talked through her favorite writers and artists as if I had to know all of these names in time before we parted ways.

"—And every Friday evening," she went on, "Robert hosts a poker game with me, himself, and some of his friends from the office."

When she uttered this, it gave me that same thrill I mentioned previously. I felt as if I had just been broken out of my eternal slumber for this very moment. She tightened her lips before continuing.

"I would love to have you over tonight. Can you play?"



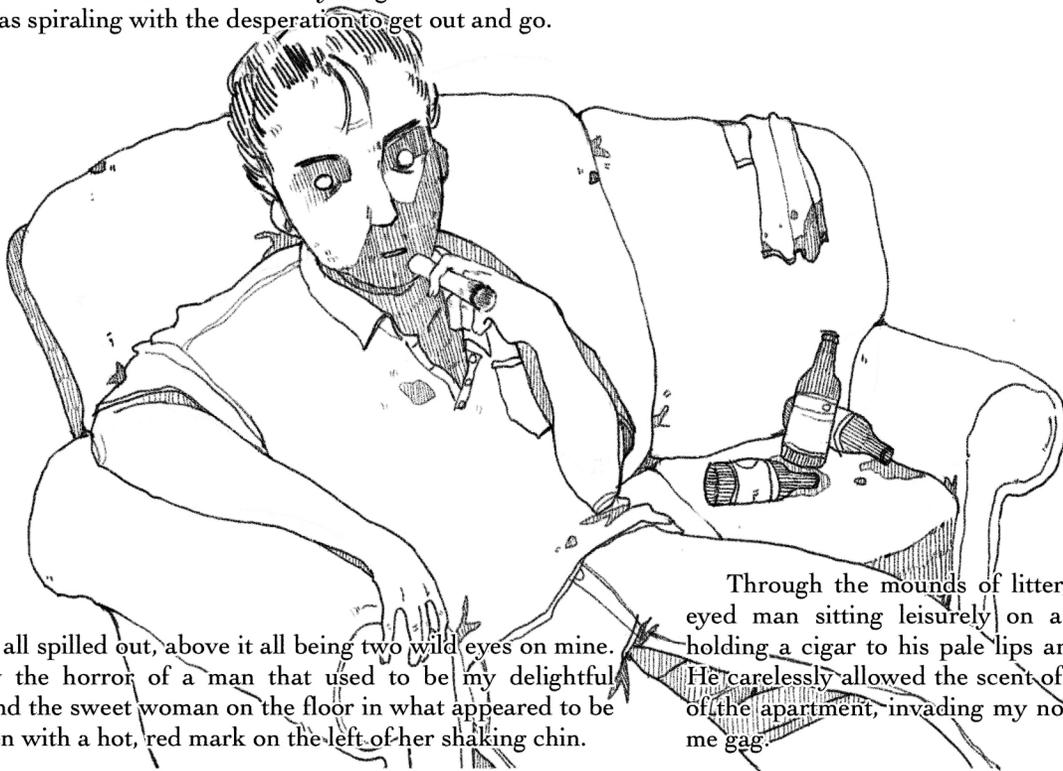
I couldn't think of a reply. Her offer struck me with the sharpest, most delightful pang that rang loudly in the hollow drum in my chest. Those very words turned back and over in my mind constantly like a piece of film as I tried to remember over and over again that utter ecstasy occurring just in the previous second.

"I'll show you how. Oh, it'll be a grand night! And I'm sure he won't mind..." she said with a smile so restrained she seemed to wince.

This statement marked the end of a conversation once fantasized as she waved goodbye and disappeared into the oblivion of next door.

I paused before knocking their door, making sure all of myself was intact for the spectacularness that awaited me. But before I could finish my last breath—the breath that believed in angelic neighbors, that believed my evening would be perfect—I heard a disastrous collapse, followed by the sound of a hard strike along with some shouting, coming from the inside of their apartment. Everything in me shut down, while everything on the other end of that door was spiraling with the desperation to get out and go.

Everything was dark; they had no lamps or any windows, as far as I could tell, besides the lame bug of a light fixture dangling from the ceiling above the gentleman's head. The way it swayed and caused the shadows in his face to change made me feel dizzy. But even so, it was plain to see that the inside of their home was a horror, brimming with nothing but old beer cans and broken glass.



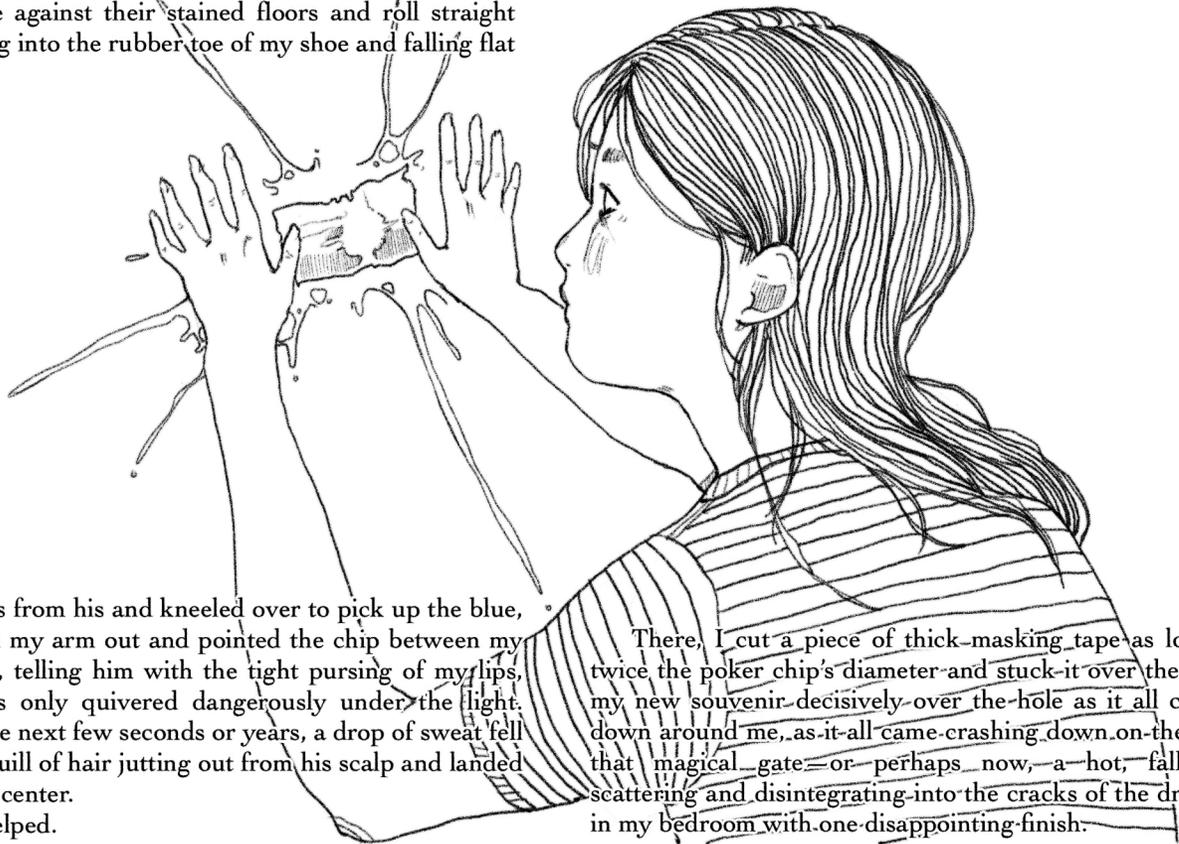
Then it all spilled out, above it all being two wild eyes on mine. I only saw the horror of a man that used to be my delightful neighbor and the sweet woman on the floor in what appeared to be their kitchen with a hot, red mark on the left of her shaking chin.

Through the mounds of litter, I could barely see the yellow-eyed man sitting leisurely on a sofa inside their living room, holding a cigar to his pale lips and looking straight into nothing. He carelessly allowed the scent of tobacco to drag itself in and out of the apartment, invading my nostrils in a way that almost made me gag.

I was frankly both shocked and insulted by the nonsense of what I was seeing, and I could tell that in a way, Robert knew.

But tragically, what he didn't know was that the clutter he just made had caused a single, lonely chip to gain precisely the right friction and balance against their stained floors and roll straight towards me, crashing into the rubber toe of my shoe and falling flat on its side.

I hastily escaped the frozen field of his vision, slipping back into my unit.



I pulled my eyes from his and knelt over to pick up the blue, clay slab. I reached my arm out and pointed the chip between my fingers at his chest, telling him with the tight pursing of my lips, Take it. His pupils only quivered dangerously under the light. Sometime within the next few seconds or years, a drop of sweat fell from a wet, black quill of hair jutting out from his scalp and landed onto the chip's cool center.

It couldn't be helped.

There, I cut a piece of thick masking tape as long as almost twice the poker chip's diameter and stuck it over the chip, placing my new souvenir decisively over the hole as it all came crashing down around me, as it all came crashing down on the other end of that magical gate—or perhaps now, a hot, falling comet—scattering and disintegrating into the cracks of the dry floorboards in my bedroom with one disappointing finish.