

Perishable

Smoke plumes out of the car wreckage, panes of metal shatter the road, remnants of the well loved accord wagon. It has already started to fade and disperse over the dead grass of the plains. And soon it'll be forgotten, just like the millions of other tragic car accidents.

The trunk has been deeply dented, one side practically gone. The brown paper grocery bag has tipped over onto the hot asphalt. The only thing braving it all - a single can of Campbell's A to Z tomato alphabet soup, rolling out from the trunk debris.

The entire right side of the can has crinkled into sharp points and lines. Angular triangles, misshapen dents, scratches on the shiny metal exterior. Half of the label peels itself off the can, the other half delicately clings to the dull metal. *Campbe... A to toma... bet soup*. The expiration date clings to the metal. *EXP070324*.

A girl climbs out from the back seat of the flipped car. She winces and crawls, attempting to dodge the larger pieces of the uprooted road. She sees the bystanders. It's a car crash, you can't take your eyes off it, even though you probably should. She looks about sixteen, maybe younger without the blood everywhere. Small stones of granite and asphalt line the bloody exterior of her knees. The stones stick to her elbows too, but they cover the blood in their black detritus. She clutches a dirty beige knit sweater in her hand. Sirens ring from a distance. She looks at the car, what's left of it really. Her knees shake, her shoulders shake, her head shakes, her eyes falter. Her head begins to slowly droop lower and lower, the alarms still ringing. Nobody moves. She looks up and turns around to the trunk. She readjusts her grip on the sweater and leans down. She picks up the can and nestles it in the warm tangled fibers. The ringing is now closest, the tires screech and protest.

Paramedics, clad in dark jumpsuits and masks, pull out a fluorescent yellow stretcher from their trunk. They yell at each other. Nothing can truly prepare a human for trauma, no matter how much you try.

A woman is assigned the girl, she walks toward her and places her hand on her back. She tries tugging at the sweater bundle. It doesn't work. The figures in the background kneel down near the

smashed windows. A long thin puddle of blood continues to dribble away from the car. Tiny traces of the translucent blood are everywhere. The bystanders already know. The paramedics already know. The girl already knows. *I shouldn't have said anything to distract her.*

They pull out a body. What's left of it. It's funny how people become "it's" when they're dead.

"Time of death," he takes a long look at his watch, "4:26 pm."

The woman next to the girl holds her by the shoulders.

"Can you tell me what your name is?"

"Clementine."

"Hi Clementine. Could you maybe tell me who that was?" her voice softens just the slightest.

"I'm sixteen years old. That was my mom." *What did I do?*

Clementine looks up from the floor and directly into the woman's eyes. She twists her shoulders, shrugging off the woman's hands, shrugging off the woman's superficial sympathy.

"So, Clem where've you been these past few days?" The girls with the obnoxiously high ponytails sat down at the bright blue lunch tables. They snap open the plastic lids of their organic salads as well as the caps of their dressing. One nudges the other, "it's like 400 cal. I just use like half". They pour their dressing and set it back down half full.

"Oh yeah, something happened with my mom but uh..", she scrambles to divert topics, "what'd you guys do over the weekend?" Clementine pops open her own glass Tupperware container. Light brown glass noodles are littered with small shavings of orange, yellow, and purple carrot, bean sprouts, and slices of juicy rib eye fillet.

The girls peer at each other. They weren't taught how to react to death. At least not to deaths they couldn't care less about. A moment of booming silence spreads through the table. They move on to chomping their Romaine lettuce and change to peering into Clementine's bowl.

“What’s that? I thought you normally have those Dino Nuggets or whatever they’re called.”

“I don’t know. My new foster family said it was like jap-chay or something like that. They’re Korean I think. So, Emma I heard you got a new lake house? That’s so cool.”

Lunch passes in a monotonous discussion of avocado toast and lake houses. Fifth period Algebra passes, sixth period PE, and seventh period Science. Clementine walks out of the giddy classroom last, once the rest of the students have dashed, somewhere in between one and two seconds after the bell. Bright blue shirts litter the floor. *Class of 19!* She picks up her own shirt gingerly. She takes the bus home and unlocks the door gently, cracking it open and sliding through. *Please don’t make any noise. Please be asleep.*

A voice chirps from the kitchen on the right, not squeaky like a pirate’s parrot but delicately like how you’d imagine a hummingbird chirps if they did. “Hi Clementine! How was school?”

She sighs and averts courses, from the inviting staircase to the cool gray tiles of the kitchen, “It was good Ms Jang. I have a lot of homework if you don’t mind me leaving.”

Ms Jang sets her knife down, cutting sopping leaves of napa cabbage, and wipes her hands on her apron. She walks across the kitchen and holds Clementine’s hands in hers, lining her own glimmering eyes with those of the girl’s. Her hands are cold and chilling, but one could say her smile and cartoonish eyes make up for it.

“Are you sure you’re okay Clementine? I lost my parents a couple years back too and it took so long for me to feel comfortable again. I can’t imagine what you’ve been through.”

“I’m doing fine Ms Jang,” Clementine looks away at the walnut cabinets attached to the wall, at the spidery granite of the island, listening to the low humming of the fridge. “I’m just tired and I have a lot to do,” her eyes settle on a plastic bin shoved under the counter filled with steel cans of oddly non-perishable veggies, radios, gallons of water, and flashlights.

Is it because I’m half Korean? I don’t think it should matter this much. I hope she’ll leave me alone. I’m not your daughter.

“Okay then. Let me know if I can do anything for you. Don’t work too late into the night alright?”

she lets go of her hands and walks back to the cutting board.

“Thanks. Could you make a sandwich for me tomorrow? I’m going to be busier and I think it’d be more convenient.”

“Sure.”

Clementine jogs up the stairs and enters her room, placing the backpack on the floor, next to a beat up can of alphabet soup. She pauses and picks it up, bottom facing up. *EXP070324*. She scoffs and kicks it behind the door.

Clementine sits at her desk in Ms Jang’s house, her head held up by her palm. Her entire body is slouched onto the arm of the chair. Her head slips out and lands on the math worksheet sitting on the table. Someone knocks on the door. She finally sets the pencil in her other hand down.

“Your lunch is in a bag behind the door Clementine.”

She gets up and retrieves the bag through a crack in the door. *It’s supposed to be in triangles. That’s what mom did.*

She fishes a blank piece of paper out of her desk drawer and picks the pencil back up. Tap tap tap. Her eyes screen the room and arrive at the can on the floor. It’s placed behind her closed room door. She picks it up and places it in front of the paper. She sketches the oval, the straight lines, it soon becomes somewhat of a can on her paper, without the dents. *Not bad Clementine*. A perfect label covers the cylinder, “Campbell’s Tomato Soup”. It’s the type of can in her cartoons, when the main character pretends their canned soup is the best thing in the world when it’s the only thing they can afford in New York City.

She sets the pencil back down and folds the paper up into her backpack.

“Clementine, this is your third home this year. I’m not sure what else I can do and you’re nearing eighteen soon,” Eliza, the childcare worker, tries her best to attach concern to her statement.

Clementine nods.

“The last one said the same as the first. You’re unkind to the other kids of the house and uncommunicative. What’s going on?”

She leans on Eliza's blue car. It’s perfect; there’s no dust or bird poop or dirt. *How’s it so bloody clean.* She adjusts the backpack on her right shoulder. Eliza waits for her, but the type of waiting that seems timed and deemed necessary to seem humane and kind on the outside. Two minutes up! She nudges Clementine off the car and towards the driveway.

“C’mon Clementine. I know it’s hard, just try for me. Okay?” *Nobody knows how hard it is. She’s not even here anymore. Because of me.*

Clementine knocks on the door. They open it, she’s welcomed by an older white couple. She unpacks her bag in the empty room. A couple books, a phone charger, a notebook, and a dented can. She picks up the can from the neat, creased sheets of her bed. She picks at the edges of the can. It’s not hard to peel off. She rips a corner off.

She hesitates when she first steps into the cool space. Surrounded by easels and airpods, paint splatters the walls and aprons alike.

“Welcome Clementine. You called us yesterday wanting to take some basic sketching classes right?”

“Yup that’s me.”

She finds a seat angled towards the group of objects at the center of the room. There’s cubes, apples, grapes, and statue heads. She digs through her bag, placing the can on the floor as she rummages.

She finally unpacks a sketch pad and pencil and begins drawing. The teacher comes by and lightly trips over the can on the floor.

“Clementine, is this yours? Should I throw it away or move it for you?” She looks uneasy at the sight of the beat up steel cylinder.

Clementine looks up from her sketch and at her teacher. The teacher begins to pick the can up and walk towards the front desk. Clementine yanks her earbuds out and stops the teacher.

“Sorry I didn’t hear you.” *What the heck woman.*

She takes the can from the teacher’s hands and returns to her seat, hesitating before finally deciding to place the can back into her bag.

She eagerly clicks on Gmail. That familiar mellow *bing* is typically annoying, but incites too many confusing concoctions of anxiety, hope, happiness, confusion, and thirst.

“Congratulations Clementine. We’d be happy to offer you a position on our Cartoon Design team. Your talent spoke for itself and your kindness and care for the world told us you were perfect. Again, congratulations.”

“Oh my god!” she blurts and hops up once before settling down. Her landlord tilts her head, clears her throat, and jingles the keys in front of her again. *I did it!*

“Oh sorry,” she grabs the keys, “Thank you so much again Lisa.”

Lisa nods and exits through the elevator.

Clementine grips the key and unlocks the suspiciously light door with a click. She steps in, her footsteps echoing in the five hundred square foot space. She comes back out to drag her single suitcase in over the metal grating at the door. She sets down her tote bag with a clink and sits down on the empty, scratched pine floor. She smiles at the sight of the city skyline framed in the window and she looks at the tote bag. She stops smiling and takes a beat up can out from the bottom. A scrap of the original label

remains, *Cam.... alpha-*, but the stubborn sticky adhesive remains blurring the steel.

She stands up, can in hand and opens the door back up. She walks to a small room at the end of the hallway. She walks in and pinches her nose at the smell of rotting fish and overall New York City garbage. She slowly steps towards the metal chute. She pulls at the handle. It was a terrible idea to make the handle such a reflective metal. All one thinks of is the fingerprints of trashy neighbors and the probable excitement of forensic science students. She opens the chute. It's a hole in the wall. She widens the opening and looks down the tunnel, nearly pushing her upper half into the hole. She bounces back out and the door slams shut. She drops the can in her hand as she grips the edges of the hole to haul herself back up. She leans down and picks it up. *What was I thinking? I didn't even bring my actual trash.* She turns around back out the small door and into her apartment. Maybe not.

Clementine enters the grocery store, not particularly sure why she came in the first place. She browses through the aisles, weaving from bright broccoli trees to rows and rows of Italian seasoning to soy sauce. She ends the trip with Hawaiian bread rolls, appealing only to her obsession with soft warm rolls (while not warm and freshly baked, still okay) and bananas. She pays, places them into her tote bag, and makes her way home.

Clementine sandwiches a slice of black forest ham and havarti cheese in between her bread. She peels a banana and begins chewing. She sets it down and stands up, invoking a beautiful metal screeching against her floor.

She walks to her small kitchen counter and opens a drawer. She takes a rusted can opener out. She walks across the studio apartment to the windowsill, where a single can lay resting. She holds it, indifferent to the layer of perspiration threatening her grip. She finally maneuvers the can opener to successfully reveal the bright red contents. She pours the red juice and its yellow letters into a glass bowl. She flips the empty can over and eyes the expiration date. *EXP070324.*

Only by a year.

Clementine tilts her head up after grabbing a spoon, exhaling.

“Thanks Mom.”

She spoons it into her mouth. So it was non perishable after all.