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**20/20**

Rucy Cui

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# 20/20

Rucy Cui

*Raven Leilani selected "20/20" as the winner of the 2021 Barry Hannah Prize in Fiction. Of the story, Leilani writes: "The author writes with enormous control and feeling about the nature of habit and obfuscation. The language is precise and surprising, attuned to the emotional and scientific terms of art around containment and loss of control. An absolute joy to read."*



-5.25

Because it's easier, you'll forgo your glasses. It shocks people who know you, the shape of your eyes and the bridge of your nose, as if correctional lenses are as good as blindfolds. And people who don't know you?

"Your eyes are beautiful."

At the nightclub, you're spinning. You blink every so often as lights pulse to music, a single off-beat moment enough to resuscitate the heart in your chest, to wash the world in darkness that feels like forever. The world: a sea of men—some women—but mostly men, with slick clothing, slicked back hair, slicks of sweat on their foreheads as they dance. Early on in your scientific life, you learned that if light moves at the speed of light, then its departure is also moving at the speed of light. Darkness, that is: the absence of light, the byproduct of light that stops arriving, fast as the speed of light. No, nothing lasts forever.

When it illuminates, the stranger's mouth is smiling.

"Thank you," you say.

You follow him to the men's restroom, wondering about anonymity, the eyes of the beholder. If someone were to recognize you: the DJ, the bouncer, the regulars who come every weekend hoping to get lucky in this college town full of students and hangers-on. Here's the joke: If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? If a woman hits rock bottom and no one is around to see it, not even herself in a way—?

Over a toilet bowl, you snort what's given to you. It isn't your usual fare—the opposite, in fact. Down and then straight back up, this speedball confuses you. And your heart. Your heart.

-4.00

In the clouds above the Gili Islands, your lover twists to face you and says, "I can live without it now. So I did a thought experiment."

"Yes?"

"And it turns out that I can live without you, too."

He's always honest with you. You can't look at him. In the window over his shoulder, the Gili Islands are visible, glinting like three jagged pieces of sea glass shot through with light. Amid the blue waters, they are very green, seeming to suggest: life, lushness, a persistent sweatiness in the walk later from the airport to the car transfer to the harbor to the charter boat to, finally, your guesthouse on Gili Trawangan. This trip was booked by him more than six months ago, when, presumably, at that time he could not yet live without you: two addicts skipping off to the part of the world that criminalizes them the most. He wanted to dive with sea turtles.

Now, he sets an alarm to go off every 24 hours, curling what could pass for a Listerine strip under his tongue. You can't sleep because you're on the edge of tears, so then you crush a blue under the heaviest credit card you own, and another when the tourist across the aisle falls asleep, and another when your lover falls asleep, so that he doesn't have to see you. It's the Land of Nod until you remember all over again.

As the plane descends, you reach for him. An object in motion remains in motion, unless acted upon by an outside force. He knows you're afraid, so he lets you squeeze the blood from his fingers. Suppose you were to fly into a bird? Another airplane? Suppose you died like this, imagining what it would be like to unleave from each other.

Later, at the guesthouse, you'll have taken your glasses off for a nap, the scrapings of withdrawal restored by the time you wake, back to your natural state. You'll search your toiletry bag. And when the Tylenol bottle—yes, very clever—slips and scatters its contents, you'll bend to your hands and knees, trying to convert blurriness into meaning. After all, Galileo never actually climbed to the top of the leaning tower of Pisa. He thought about a heavy object tied to a light one, and whether mass or drag mattered more. Ping, ping, ping, each bounce like a hypodermic needle right between the eyes. You're alone, running out of money. For you, it's not so much a breakthrough as a cold seep-through, your lover snoring just over your shoulder, peaceful. The pills are round and sky blue, the floor speckled with shiny black beetles because everything seems to proliferate here, especially the bugs, especially the panic. How could he.

-3.00

You show your mortality in similar ways: both of you full off a piece of toast, both of you with skin around the eyes like inside seams of a plastic bag. But out of the

blue, he has started driving an hour from your suburban college town in Southern California to the coastline, for surfing lessons. He grew up in Iowa, his parents the preeminent ophthalmologists of the Midwest and majority stakeholders at one of the country's largest health provider systems. The ocean, a recent hobby of his. He has a lovely tan now: still a plastic bag, around the eyes, but brown and burnished, as if they're crinkled from the sun.

Lately, he's been training the newest batch of research assistants, one of whom is from Hawaii. Her eyes are tea-colored. While she seems to have sparked his outdoors obsession, you're careful to note that she never accompanies him. They chat about ocean currents over the Van de Graaff generator.

"If you'll just try it—" he says to you one day, about surfing. This a ghostly echo of another conversation, not so long ago.

You're sitting in lab together arguing. Sometimes it strikes you, these incompatibilities, and makes you dig your heels in further. When you were a child, every day was Opposite Day. You would point out the self-referential paradox—"It's Opposite Day" meaning that it's not, and "It's not Opposite Day" also meaning, to the uninitiated, that it's not, the holiday therefore impossible to communicate—and your parents would laugh and laugh. This memory pains you. When it comes to you and him, at least, you like to think that the electrostatic forces between you are unavoidable: a positively charged object will always attract a negatively charged one.

"The drive," you say, and that's enough to shut him up.

Soon, you turn 25 and receive from him a most practical birthday gift: a trip to Iowa for LASIK eye surgery. It's timed so that you can take a week to recover before preparing for qualifying exams, staring at computers all day all over again. For you, plane rides are of course more endurable than car rides because statistical probability is on your side. You have to remind yourself of that throughout the flight.

Iowa isn't as flat as you assumed. At the farmer's market, you buy duck eggs. At his parents' office, you fixate on the posters everywhere proclaiming: Drs. Terrance and Louise Hyver, official ophthalmologists of the Quad Cities River Bandits!

After some initial tests, an aide finds you to deliver the news. Your corneas are too thin for surgery: a highly heritable trait, whereby you've twice drawn the short end of the stick. No one else in your family needed glasses. The aide describes your cornea as if she's talking about the craggy surface of the moon. Most ophthalmologists are too conservative to touch you with a ten-foot American flagpole.

His parents are disappointed. They like you, but more than that, they feel sorry for you. The next day, before you leave, a consolation gift: a DNA testing kit and analysis.

"They know about us," he says.

"What do you mean?"

You're hugging your knees on the front stoop of his house, a stunning Tudor revival mansion a short jog from the Mississippi River. You just learned that his parents built it themselves, which astounds you, this being far outside what you considered, as a Californian, the realm of possibility. If they were alive, perhaps your parents would've retired here: canvassing for the Democratic Party, cooking farm-to-table meals.

"I got the same DNA kit for my birthday," he says. "These things can detect it all. Including, variants in genes for opioid receptors. That's us. Our opioid receptors were fucked from the start."

In keeping with architectural tradition, there's no porch. He stands above you in the doorway, sunlight coaxing the ends of his hair into little fireflies. Despite everything, he is resiliently good and optimistic. The implication being: you're the bad one. He knits scarves he doesn't wear, but donates. At restaurants, you never tip more than 15%. Were you fucked from the start? If not for him? If not for your family?

-2.00

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a remarkable blemish on your body: an ingrown hair that prevents you from crossing your legs or riding your bike to campus. After less than a week, it becomes infected and impossible to ignore.

You're both physicists, and the lab down the hall belongs to who you consider the



lazier scientists, the chemists, who nevertheless have all the necessary supplies, and often most of the desirable ones, too. As graduate students, you're accustomed to the laws of your exceptionalism, to freeloading and freewheeling, stealing everything from food to printing to heavily regulated chemicals from the university. Your roommate synthesizes her own DMT.

That day, the doorbell rings. "Ready?" he asks when you answer. He unzips his contraband: needles, tweezers, disinfecting equipment.

"No," you say.

"Do you trust me?"

Back in your bedroom, you lay down, and he drops his head between your legs. It must be a minor surgical operation, you're thinking, as you gaze up at the popcorn ceiling, listening to your roommate fry up an egg in the kitchen. A pinprick of pain that turns into an incision. When you tense your abdominal muscles and lift your neck and torso, you can't see his expression, but you can imagine the constricted pupils, the brow furrowed in concentration. Him, near and dear. You want to absorb him through your cunt like a black hole absorbs all matter within its event horizon: selfishly, a singularity that destroys as much as it possesses. It sounds contrived—and awfully convenient that he has his head between your legs at the moment. But there you go: later, you'll marvel that this is love.

-1.00

In the very same bed, after the first time you and he have sex, you lay on your back and he lays on his shoulder, facing you.

"I need a better angle of approach than that!" he jokes, trying to spoon you. Despite yourself, you laugh. He's charismatic, intense. But as the sex was unfolding, you felt almost as if you were the one pressuring him into it. Afterward, he disappeared into the bathroom for even longer than you, reappearing shyly, wiping his nose on the back of his hand like a small child. It's a bit of a relief when Thanksgiving and then winter break rolls around; you won't have to puzzle this over. Twice, you drive an hour home to Santa Ana and back. Both times, your mother teases you when you say you're not dating anyone, not really, and your father asks how your research is going. It's nice being coddled. You decide to focus on academic matters only, once you're back at school. And you've returned for about a week—the semester building again from a lull to a bustle—when a Christmas tree tied to a sedan on the freeway comes loose,

slamming through the windshield of the car behind it, your parents'. It was meant for the recycling center. An object in motion, you'll think to yourself. An object in motion.

Now, from him, spooning of the spoon feeding variety. He dribbles pho past your lips, stopping just short of chewing the noodles for you. The counselor you're reassigned is on the payroll of the university, so you speak in platitudes, afraid of losing your graduate fellowship: "I can't believe it. I—"

One day, you forgo your glasses for the first of many times and drive southbound on the I-15. You look at the speedometer: blurry. A miracle you haven't drifted across six lanes of traffic yet. Soon, the border is another twenty minutes away. Growing up, everyone around you commuted to Tijuana for braces before graduating to more serious work: cheap tattoos, LASIK eye surgery. Your mother wanted to take you, would exclaim that you were prettier without your glasses by far. You didn't care. You were the smartest in your class, so you knew what the future held.

Blindly, you merge to exit. In your myopia, the freeway signs swim like chalkboards from your childhood. You fell in love with physics because it governed the natural world around you. But you had to sit at the front of the classroom, always.

He'll cradle you like a small child. "Can I suggest something?" he asks in bed. He rubs his nose, where the cartilage is so soft that his knuckle halves and presses it, like a jelly bean, into the side of his cheek. He sighs. You start to get the idea that you're two small children, the both of you, together, against the world. Gathering momentum. You'll follow him anywhere. "If you'll just try it—" he says.

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**RUCY CUI** is an MFA candidate at the University of Wyoming. Her fiction has been awarded the Bennington Fiction Prize, judged by Pam Houston. Her nonfiction appears in *Lonely Planet*. On Twitter, she can be found lurking @rucycui.