

Little Things

*A Short Story* by Karina I. C. La'O

My cousin Jason flexes his thumb backwards, revealing a divot in the back of his hand created by a tensed ligament. He fills it with a fine, white powder out of a tiny plastic bag.

‘Since when did you do coke?’ I ask. All I came here to do was piss, but as I was leaving the stall Jason shoved past me, telling me to latch the door. In the dim light he brings his hand to his nose, sniffing so hard that I’m surprised the stall door doesn’t shake. The sickly green of the walls peeks out from under the stickers plastered across them.

‘Hasn’t been long,’ he says, then sniffs again just to make sure it’s all up there. ‘Co-workers do it, so. I know about you and all, but I reckon that I don’t have an addictive personality.’

The bass of the music outside pulses in my chest. My nose twitches. There’s a prickling running all over the surface of my brain and I stutter, ‘I should go.’

‘We’re just hanging out,’ he says. A grin breaks across his face. The bag hangs from his fingertips like fruit. My jaw tenses. Jason laughs at me, tells me that it’s just coke – I should relax.

‘What’s it been, like a year now since your last high? Jesus.’

‘A year, two months, and three days, actually.’

‘Fucking hell.’ His pupils are beginning to dilate.

‘A year, two months, and three days,’ I say again. The words are cotton in my mouth.

‘I heard you.’

I close my eyes.

*A year, two months, and three days. A year, two months, and four days, a year two months and five days ago, back when I was so high, I easily lost count of the days in a week.*

*Back when the email on my phone screen detailed a deposit from Dad. 8,000 pounds. The transaction note: 'Pls call.'* My mind reeled itself back into the gaunt, lanky thing I called a body, consciousness spreading from a leak. Bile pushed against the back of my throat. I reached for a mug on the coffee table for something to wash it down. Bubbles of oil glistened on the dark surface, mold beginning to sprout on the sides, but I didn't care. I downed it. I tapped away on my phone with my other hand, settling my share of the rent before I had a chance to spend it elsewhere.

I didn't want to call him.

*Back when the jingling of keys sounded behind the front door, laughter filtering in through the gaps.* Vince swung the door open, a girl on his heels. His Prada button-down was open till his sternum. A Chrome Hearts chain shone around his neck. I wasn't one to show off, but Vince didn't hesitate to wear his wealth knowing he looked good doing it. Girls seemed to agree. They always fawned over him, wrapping his chain around their fingers, high off weed or cocaine or ecstasy. Their faces were a blur; he never brought the same girl home twice. I guess it helped that Vince wasn't picky. His subscribers weren't either. With the nauseating stuff he did for them, that didn't come as a surprise.

'Mi casa, es tu casa,' Vince said. The girl behind him shut the door with her heel. I stared at her – at the fullness of her cheeks and how they flushed with alcohol. Her round eyes were heavy-lidded, but her irises restlessly fluttered about the room.

*Back when I thought there was no way she could be older than eighteen.*

‘Why thank you,’ she said.

‘This here is my flat mate, Seth,’ he said.

I nodded at her.

‘Nora,’ she replied. She wore a little black dress and slick high-heeled boots. Crystal jewelry winked in the light. Her dark maroon lipstick was smudged around her mouth, fading onto her pale skin. She giggled.

‘You look like shit,’ she said.

‘Thanks,’ I replied.

Vince then told her that I didn’t bite; she could sit next to me while he went to freshen up. She walked over, plopping down on the other end of the couch as Vince disappeared down the hall.

*Back when I had no idea what to say to her, my brain still clogged from the comedown.* My thoughts snagged and ripped, unable to complete themselves. I looked at her. Her feet flexed up and down, eyes glazed. Had she even graduated high school? How many years had it been since Vince and I were in high school? *Where did the time go, you sad sack of—*

‘You live here long?’ she asked. Her gaze seemed to zoom in and out on me, unable to pull my frame into focus.

‘Aren’t you a little young to be here?’ I asked back.

She narrowed her eyes.

‘Seriously,’ I pressed.

*Back when she had said she was old enough, her voice wavering in the air.* What Vince did was his business alone. Seeing all his messes over the years, I was content having nothing to do with what he did. But she felt different.

*Back when I told her she should go home, my hands were itching.* I took my tin from the coffee table and unclasped the locks. My insides began to constrict within my body. A heaviness was weighing on my shoulders. Memories of the last six years began flashing in my brain like firecrackers: me on the floor of my bedroom, me puking out of a car window after a hit-and-run, me with my dealer and my hands going places I couldn't see... I lifted the tin lid and took a clouded, crystalline rock from a plastic wrap.

'Woah. That's like, *drugs drugs*,' Nora said. Another giggle left her throat as if it was pulled out of her. Weighing the rock in my hand and my metal spoon in the other, I realized I was about to shoot up again.

'Oh. Yeah. Don't do these, they're terrible.' I said it how I remembered those ads on TV usually did.

'Can I watch?' She moved closer.

*Back when I was a spectacle; a magician about to perform a magic trick.* I set the rock onto the spoon and grabbed my lighter. We both stared at the way the flame licked the metal, mesmerized by the rock melting into a pool.

'What does it feel like?' she asked.

I answered without my mind. The memories weren't stopping, but my mouth kept running. About floating and feeling warm. About the way my body filled up with air until I popped and became nothing. Life wasn't life then. It was pure existence. Just being. Happiness. That was what it was the first time, and I'd been chasing that ever since. The comedowns though, I told her, made me sick. The only way to get better was to shoot up again.

*Back when she stared as my veins bloated and rose.* With a full syringe, I slid the needle into one of the healed over craters.

'Sounds amazing,' she said. It looked as though she were about to cry.

'Nora?' Vince called out. My heart was racing so fast it was painful.

'You should go home,' I said again. She stayed still, blinking slowly and steadily. Then with a teary smile, she got up and followed the sound of Vince's voice.

*Back when I thought I tried.* At least I tried. I felt the weight beginning to lift off my back. The images in my mind began to blur like photographs in a vat of acid. And then I was gone, gone, gone.

*A year, two months, and three days ago, back when I ate whatever rot was in the fridge when I woke.* I was at the dining table, spooning something congealed and slimy into my mouth. Vince came in through the door and I learned I had 'been out for a disgusting twenty hours'. As if he wasn't high himself every other day. He placed his hands on the back of the chair opposite me, white bandages snaking around his forearms. How he wouldn't look me in the eye made me start grinding my teeth together.

'Do you... I don't know. Remember anything?' His voice came to me as though it were behind a wall.

'Like what?'

'Come on. You know.'

'I honestly don't.'

'The girl, man.'

*Back when Nora's face flashed in my mind, fading into focus like a fresh polaroid photo.* She was crying. I didn't remember her crying when I spoke to her. Her running mascara made her eyes look unnaturally deep in her skull, as if I had to hold my hands out to catch them in case they popped out.

Vince kicked the leg of the chair in front of him, demanding my attention. The food slid around my mouth like wet, shredded cardboard. I asked if she had hurt him.

‘Stop playing,’ he snapped. The image of Nora moved then, beginning to cry even harder. I saw her shake my body’s arm and I couldn’t understand what she wanted from me. Why was she so upset? Her mouth moved soundlessly. Her lipstick had smeared further down her chin. She was scaring me.

‘Bitch had nails like a goddamn cat,’ Vince sighed.

He entered the memory. There were jagged marks down his arms, gleaming a menacing dark red. He grabbed her by the hair. Ripped her from me. Her cries reverberated in my bones and as Vince spoke to me at the dining table, I swore that they were still vibrating. I didn’t understand then. All I knew was that fear began to cut into my numbness and I wanted it to stop. Needed it to stop.

*Back when Vince dragged her away, I fumbled for my tin.*

‘Is she okay?’ I asked him. The air was as congealed as the food; it slid into my lungs in a paste. Chills ran down my spine.

‘She’ll be fine. Wasted a good two pills to calm her down, though,’ he said. I wanted to vomit. I wanted to claw my face off. I wanted to punch Vince until his caved in.

‘If anyone asks, you’ll say that you were there, yeah? That nothing happened?’ My hands were shaking so hard I had to set my spoon down. He called my name. Twice.

I stumbled out of my chair and rushed to the bathroom, throwing up splatters of food and acid into the shitter. I heaved and pushed. Sweat dripped from my temples. Her crying face was plastered against the backs of my eyelids, sharpening into focus the tighter I squeezed them shut. The bile kept coming, shifting into blood once there was nothing left in my stomach. I thought

that was it. I was going die, my head halfway into the bowl, Nora etched into me. How was she going to live with herself? How had I been living with myself?

I had passed out on the floor in a puddle of my own piss and shit when Vince finally thought to check on me. He took me to the hospital, almost genuinely worried. Almost, because he'd seen this one too many times and felt sure I'd bounce back to the needle soon enough.

I woke to the crushing disappointment that I was still alive.

'Call my dad,' I told him.

'Huh?'

'Call my dad. Tell him I'll go to whatever rehab he wants.'

Now? Now. Jason is here, in this gross, green stall. His pupils are dilating, and the little plastic bag hangs from between his thumb and forefinger like fruit. He is swinging the thing in front of my face, and I feel so sick with myself. I'm so goddamn sick of myself.

'Congrats for one year?' he asks.

My hands are itching so fucking bad.

'Least it's not heroin,' he singsongs.

A chill runs down my spine.

*'Sounds amazing,' Nora said, but she was frowning.*

*Shut up, shut up, shut-* 'Just a bump. A little one,' I say.