

# **NOVELLA SALON**

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MARCH 19, 2018

NOVELLA OPENING

# Crybaby in Love

For my seventh birthday I asked my parents for a Gameboy. We lived in the middle of nowhere, New Hampshire, and during the summers swarms of mosquitos that bred in our community pools and ponds reserved playing outside as an activity for the fearless or idiotic. I had never asked for a toy as expensive as a Gameboy before, because my mom stayed home to play with me instead of having a job, and I didn't want her to think she wasn't enough for me when I was enough for her. But the delight in reading old library books to her inevitably faded, and at school during lunch all the kids would crowd around their Gameboys playing with each other, a club I desperately wanted to join.

A week before my birthday, while my parents were out playing ping-pong at the church, I moved a chair around the house, stopping to examine all the upper shelves in our closets. I found the

Gameboy box hastily tucked under some blankets, as if it were napping until the big reveal. My glee betrayed me and when my parents stepped through the door I ran to wrap my arms around their knees, surprising all three of us. I found the Gameboy! I said, and my parents looked at each other, before my mom replied, Well, I'll just make sure your card contains all the surprise this year!

Since we moved to America, every 1st of June my mom would cut a heart out of a manila folder and use whatever office supplies we had lying around to draw my current obsession—aquariums, the red candy flakes I sometimes ate as a snack, Clifford the big red dog—but more importantly, write “Happy Birthday Bao Bao! I love you.” By this time PBS Kids had taught me “I love you” was something American families said to each other, but I had lived more of my life Chinese, and my parents even more so, so I never asked them to say it. During those birthdays, after I was all pooped out from the sugar of the cake, I would sleep with the cards clutched against my chest, lapping up whatever explicit affirmations of love I could get.

I had a hard time focusing in class that June 1st because I couldn't stop thinking about the Gameboy. For once the card seemed secondary to the birthday gift. But when I came home, I found my mom crying at the kitchen table, a bunch of opened mail scattered across it. My father sat on the couch, his gaze like a statue's. “Go to your room,” he said when he saw me. I froze in the hallway.

“No,” said my mom, punctuating the silence. “Our child deserves to know. What do you have to say?”

“Go to your room,” my father repeated.

My mom rubbed her eyes and took a shaky inhale. “Do you talk to Tanya’s children like that? When you treat them to Chez Maman when our own child eats microwave dinners?”

“This has nothing to do with you,” my father said, I wasn’t sure whether to me or my mom. He grabbed me by the shoulders and my mom made no move like I thought she would, instead glaring knives at my father. He guided me to my room. “Be a good kid,” he said, adding before he closed the door, “happy birthday.”

From my room I could still hear them arguing, though they switched to the Shanghainese dialect of Chinese so I could not understand what they were saying, only the rise and fall of my mother’s hysteria, my father’s trenchant responses. It made me sad that my mom was sad on my birthday. I wanted to go back there, tell them that I didn’t mind eating the Kid Cuisines, that I liked how the mac and cheese was shaped like penguins and the fake chocolate taste of the brownies. But the imprint of my father’s grasp was still fresh on my shoulders, and my doctor told me that I had to stop picking at the place where I scraped my knee, that I had to give the scar space to heal. So I did what I knew my parents both would have wanted, and started on my homework.

When I heard the muffled start of the car engine (my father) and the hiccups steady from the kitchen table (my mother), I carefully squeaked open my door, carrying my chair back to the closet where my Gameboy still lay, waiting. We (the chair, the Gameboy, and I) all returned to my room where I read every page in the Gameboy’s instructional manual before turning it on. Late into the night, when the only sounds were my fingers against the buttons and the insects buzzing outside, I shut the Gameboy off, placed it next to my pillow and fell asleep, crying.

When I woke up the next day, it was to the smell of rice porridge—just like any other day. I didn't bring up last night and neither did my parents. And so the days continued, though the birthday cards stopped.

After acquiring some form of the American Dream, my parents hauled ass from rural New Hampshire to a wealthy, largely white suburb of Los Angeles, enrolling me in a high API high school before they had even signed the apartment lease. My first day there, I thought I had seen all my classmates before as extras in Hollywood films. As I waited for my mom to pick me up, I would watch the other parents pick up their children in shiny sports cars. Then, when the children turned sixteen, they would drive their own sports cars to school.

Even though my parents and I never spoke of the subject, it was abundantly clear to me the sacrifices they had made so I could be here, here being just a stepping stone on the path to a prestigious university. They would have launched into space and grabbed a burning star with their bare hands if it meant I could go to MIT or Yale or Stanford in four years. They knew even less than I did. Having no college experiences in this country to draw from and no friends who spoke their language in our new neighborhood, my parents would scrounge the Chinese forums, bookmarking individual posts until the toolbar on the internet browser was overflowing with advice. And so I joined yearbook, because every Chinese-American kid played violin, just like me, and one extracurricular wasn't enough—after all, we were spending all our waking hours being our best academic-and-more selves, while simultaneously trying to prove to the admissions committees that we were kids

with real feelings, kids who weren't just our SAT scores, and that we only loaded our schedules with AP courses and volunteering and math olympiads because we had to excel two, three times as much as the white kids to be given an equal chance.

I had read online the common factor between National Merit Semifinalists was that the whole family ate dinner together every night. Either this knowledge never made it to the Chinese forums or it was the only advice my parents chose not to religiously follow—seeing all four seats occupied at our dinner table was on the order of an extraterrestrial alignment. My mother was the constant, there because she made the food. After she called to come eat, my brother, who was in second grade, would complain that the rice or the dumplings or the lotus tasted bad—*of course* he knew this without trying it, he was tasting with his eyes. My mother and brother would have their daily scripted argument, which ended in him begrudgingly taking a plate of food to his room while he watched Minecraft videos. I pitied my mother so I would sit across from her and tersely answer her questions about my day—good, lots of homework. Around yearbook deadlines I wouldn't be there at all. If we were lucky my father would come home twice a week, usually because, he said, his job mixing chemicals for drug test kits was pressed for a large shipment so he had to pull overtime. My mother and I both knew he was actually spending time with his friend Margaret, who showed up at our doorstep one day demanding money. Whenever he didn't come back for dinner, my mother would double bolt the doors and watch Chinese dramas until I went to sleep.

Despite my best efforts, I was still the same person at fourteen as the one I was at seven. As a cross-continental transplant, I lacked the privilege of having friend groups carry over from middle school.

My classmates only spoke to me to ask for answers or to make fun of my outfits—to hide my fat arms, I always wore a brown velour jacket no matter the southern Californian sunshine, often with matching brown velour sweatpants, because my mom bought the set from JCPenny and not wearing them would be a betrayal of her love. A group of Mexican girls took pity on me and invited me to sit with them at lunch. They mostly talked about how third period math was, which I wasn't in because I had skipped a year. While I ate I was silent, and after I finished eating I always thanked them for letting me sit with them and then moved to the library, where I played my Nintendo DS in between the mystery and romance bookshelves.

Sophomore year, orchestra saved me from this loop. I had seen a blogpost that said the two requirements for friendship were persistent contact and emotional vulnerability. I had known my fellow budding-musicians-slash-ivy-league-optimists for a year when, after a particularly average concert, we all hopped into C's parents' minivan and were exported to Denny's where we dared each other to order the oiliest things off the menu since we all knew you weren't supposed to eat after 10 PM. A week later A invited us to her house to pet her cats. Then V invited us to her house to pet her dogs, and we all piled onto the fort her dad had built for her and her brothers when they were kids, which we realized we were, still, when we were around each other. I felt, finally, like part of a tribe—their tribe, not mine, but it was a tribe, and an excuse to direct my love towards someone other than my family.

“This would go great with your style,” said A, handing M a pair of bright yellow shorts, in the days when we were comfortable with each other, but still not cool enough to realize shopping malls were where losers went to hang out. Our suburb, like every other suburb, was designed to banish all mystery, to give the wealthy mothers

peace of mind by stretching predictability towards infinity. So we had to create our own conflicts, even if they were mediated by marble floors and chandelier lighting.

M threw them back, as if the mere act of touching the shorts would infect him with disease. “There’s no freaking way I’m wearing those!”

“What’s the harm in just trying them on?” said V. “You could be America’s Next Top Model, and you’d never know.”

“Wear it!” I said. “Wear it wear it wear it!”

“I’ll wear it too!” chimed in C. “It’s...bro code?”

“I’m your bro, but I’m sitting this one out,” said J, who then sat down on a bench by the dressing room.

“What are you waiting for? Let’s go!” said S, pushing M towards a stall, C following. She closed the door on both of them.

“Do you think they’re sucking each other’s dicks in there?” I said, and V rolled her eyes, which meant I had fucked up. I was still learning.

“Gimme your iPod Touch?” asked A, which meant she was going to record their fitting room exit and potential runway debut. I wondered why I was toiling away at a 400-paged yearbook when we already shared this film archive of ourselves in its immediacy, unmarred from a layer of bad high school journalistic reporting.

M appeared first, his voice before his body. “Listen, you know what, this is the worst—” but we wouldn’t let him speak over our laughter. In the recording, I am laughing the loudest—not at the

shorts, nor at the display of fragile masculinity, but at the hilarity that I had found people to laugh with.

Junior year hit and so did love. V and M, A and C, J and S, and me. Every couple told me some variation of, You're just as important as my new girlfriend, and the third wheel became the fifth became the seventh. During our annual Disneyland trip I sat next to J's freshman brother on all the rides, who talked far too much for his social standing and perpetually had boogers in his nose or dust in his eyes. The most humiliating place on earth.

The hangouts also changed, though everyone pretended they hadn't. In A's room we would listen to music and fold paper cranes. A and C on the bed, J and S on the carpet, V and M on the couch, me rotating from the side of the bed to the corner of the carpet to the arm of the couch to the single seat at A's desk.

I was working late in the yearbook room one night when I opened a private browsing session and Googled, Why are all my friends in love with each other and not me?

*15 Signs You're More Than Friends*

*Quiz: Does He Like You More Than a Friend?*

*It Happened to Me: I Married My Best Friend*

Replied the internet. Out of self hatred I clicked on the first one. *When you're mad jealous. You start sabotaging their relationship.* Was I jealous? Sure, but moreso at the concept of coupling than at any specific person. The friendship and company we provided each other was enough for me, was it not enough for them? And I couldn't even imagine myself sabotaging anything—what kind of person wants to cause harm to their friends? *You want to sleep*

*with them. If you're at this point, it's too late to put out the flames.* I definitely didn't want to have sex. All the girls at my school were having sex in their sports cars—when I left yearbook I would see a graveyard of used condoms in the parking lot, before the janitors came at sunrise and scrubbed away the semen. I was different from those girls. Who had time for sex when AP exams and yearbook deadlines loomed in the distance, which were unequivocally better, longer-term releases of pleasure? I was pretty sure the girls, with their spaghetti straps and spray tans, were headed towards community college, or state schools at best. Sex was a distraction, I decided. And love? Asian kids weren't allowed to love. Love had trapped my parents, who had made it clear to me that my stratification into an elite educational institution would beckon their release.

These thoughts swam around in my head, as I switched the window back to InDesign, absentmindedly rearranging photos on the page about dating, ignoring the pain in my chest and tears in my eyes.



## WRITING EXERCISE: COMPRESSION

# Home

A week into November, my dad lost his job serving orange chicken and chow mein at Panda Express. None of us were surprised. We didn't know until Thanksgiving, because after he was fired he would drive his car, which had trash stuck in the cup holders, in the direction of Panda Express but swing back behind the neighborhood to go to his friend Margaret's apartment instead. Margaret was trying to start a business selling soap made from the fat drippings she snuck from her shifts roasting pig sucklings at Kam Po Kitchen. My dad would drive her to the rich neighborhoods, where they would take walks and pluck herbs from people's gardens to mix into the soap in an attempt to mask the sour smell of pig grease.

Then, on her way to buy the Thanksgiving turkey, my mom saw them together.

“You came to America to study to be an anesthesiologist, but you flunked out of school,” she said as she set the table with the porcelain dishware my uncle gifted her before she left Indonesia, which we only ate off of twice a year. “You then wanted to become a chef—*Daddy’s food is so good!*”—my mom raised her voice, mockingly, while slicing chunks of turkey breast with an electric knife—“But said your Mexican co-workers were dirtying the food and stopped showing up. Now you’ve been fired—from fast food! I didn’t think that was possible! What example are you setting for your son?”

There it was: my function in this family as a scapegoat, like a hundred dollar bill crumpled and spitballed through a straw. At 7, my mom, who had sacrificed everything in the world and more to raise and protect me from daddy, was my best friend. At 11, I stopped sleeping in her bed and in my own. At 15, I became the family messenger boy, passing on correspondence to my dad from my mom who had constructed an additional bed and bath with their own set of keys in what was once the vast courtyard of our Eichler house. But instead of building more walls to keep out the noise, I wanted nothing more than to be no part of this house.

“Stop with it. You know nothing,” spat my dad. “Me and Margaret will make a successful company. The luxury bath market has 15 billion, I read it on Forbes. Many whites who spend a lot to feel clean. Then I will be rich, and you will always be poor woman.”

My mom forked some turkey breast onto her gold-laced plate and got up from the table. “Your son comes home for the first time in three years. You can’t even give him a proper Thanksgiving dinner. I was delusional to think this could happen.”

She went to her side of the house. I heard the door lock, and then the quiet hum of the television.

A few months later it wouldn't stop raining. My walks to class were cast in grey, peppered with the smell of car exhaust released from the damp asphalt. In the middle of this my mom called. She never called.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," I said. "What's up?"

"I'm divorcing your daddy," she said.

"Congratulations," I said. *You're an adult.*

"Thanks. Just wanted to let you know." She hung up.

An hour later came a text from my dad. *Your mommy cheat on me, I see semen in Volkswagen passenger seat, she wants she cheat and I cannot pleasure her. I will contact the pastor Thio and Her daughter Claudia that she gave suggestions not to marry Mommy, I will contact her boyfriend Alex who studies Architecture in Berkely, her boyfriend destroyed her Indonesian Passport, all these people will be my witness in the court, and some more.*

Then my mom called again. "I need you to serve your daddy divorce papers for me."

"Okay," I said, half punctuating it as a question. "How...would I do that?"

"You can look it up online. I'll pick you up from school this weekend." My house was an hour drive away.

At home, I handed my dad a manila folder of documents awaiting his signature. He threw the folder on the floor, papers scattering everywhere, also trying to escape. "No, I will be homeless," he protested. "You don't want daddy on the streets, daddy's life will

be in danger, the homeless people carry knives and are all crazy. Mommy has her side of the house. Daddy has his side of the house.”

“You can live with Margaret,” I offered, staring at the paper jetsam. “You’re always there already.”

“No. Her apartment not as big as mommy’s house and smells too oily, the countertops very sticky, not good for eczema. I stay here, Mommy give me a loan for rent, I will pay back in three months, or I will pay increased interest rate.”

I thought of the supposed semen stains in my mom’s Volkswagon, which I last rode in 9th grade before my dad took her keys and lent the car to one of his co-workers who drove it to Vancouver and never came back. I thought of the last time I came home: three years ago, when I asked my dad for a ride but Margaret showed up instead, and we exchanged not a single word, her Beatles CD filling the space in the car. *She’s leaving home*. At that time, I thought I could leave, that I had fled from my parents, like how my mom left Indonesia to attend college in America. But thirty years later, she was still on the run, trapped in the house and life she built to escape in the first place.

WRITING EXERCISE: MEMORY

## Storrs, CT

My mom says when we first set foot in this country it was my dad and Liping Shu Shu who waited through the night for us. I had finally fallen asleep at approximately hour nine out of thirteen in our flight from Beijing, exhausted from grabbing things I shouldn't and the general restlessness of sitting in one place for too long. I was still sleeping when my mom carried me out of the plane through the sticky east coast summer to the backseat of Liping Shu Shu's old Toyota. Even as the car bumped along the potholes in the nearly three hour drive to Connecticut did I not awaken. I entered America eyes closed.

"Well, here we are," my dad said when Liping turned into a side street a few miles from the university campus. Four apartment complexes popped out from a manmade opening in the forest. Crows sat on the power lines.

“The playground looks good,” said my mom, who had already accepted the death of her American fantasy of high rises and businessmen in suits. “Our daughter will enjoy playing there.” She did not comment on the paint flaking from the building faces or the oppressive quiet of the woods.

“The inside is quite spacious,” said my dad, as Liping pulled into our designated parking spot. “There are two bedrooms.”

“What would we need two bedrooms for?” asked my mom. “Our daughter is not even four years old. She is sleeping with us.”

“When the time comes,” replied my dad.

It was a game of waiting. To them, the apartment was just a rental, a two bedroom partially aided by the state, sufficient for the time it would take my dad to finish his graduate degree, for my mom to learn English, for us to move somewhere with a highly ranked public school system. But to me, it was the only home I would come to know: the home of the scar shaped like Texas on my elbow before I learned to not ride scooters down curbs, the home of the first time my shirt rode up as I showed off my cartwheel and my friends’ parents were more concerned with my nipples than my athletic prowess, the home of crawling around the linoleum floors on all fours, pretending to be the pets we weren’t allowed to have.

Our next door neighbors were also my best friends. To the left lived the Quioñes: Monica with her straight cut bangs and light up shoes trailing the heels of her older brother Clemente who already knew how to drive. To the right were the Fasihuddens: Labib, much taller and fatter than the rest of us, inseparable his basketball. Next to the Fasihuddens were the KCs: Pratik, a class clown at 8, a multi-millionaire college drop-out at 20. I would find this out

through his Instagram, for between the photos of Rolex watches and lingerie models there was a single portrait of his parents with a heartfelt confession of the reason why he goes to work—to retire them early, to pay them back for their sacrifices so he could realize his American dream—and how he had done just that through an early adoption of cryptocurrency.

Before the days of bitcoin, when I could not yet discern ethnicities other than my own, I thought Labib and Pratik were both Indian until the former said he was from Bangladesh and the latter from Nepal. We were all the same age, which was enough basis for friendship for us. But we were all also connected by the thread of optimistic parents who threw all their eggs and children in the melting pot that was America, only to have jobs at Dunkin Donuts and kids on free school lunches and in ESL classes when their English was no worse than their peers', but also kids who got pulled out of the classroom when it was time for math and made to do accelerated workbooks which they finished in 20 minutes before taking out their Gameboys and battling each other in Pokémon.

We never had homework. We had balls and bikes, mainly from Walmart. We hung out with each other outside every day until dusk, sometimes shooting hoops, sometimes racing our bikes around the big hill at the center of the complexes, sometimes swinging our feet and doing nothing at all.

By the playground there was a dip in the ground with a collection of cattails so thick we deemed it The Swamp. We declared The Swamp to be full of quicksand, daring each other to step and sink into this foreign land. But even after all the shoving and squirming, none of us ever ventured forth.

If we stood on our tip-toes on the grassy knoll too short to be called a hill on the opposite side of the complex, we could see, through a clearing in the forest, the top of a rusty factory building. We were sure it was abandoned; no road could have made it past the trees. This was The Haunted House. Every year when the end of October approached we would plan our break-in, colonizing someone's living room with diagrams scribbled on the backs of our homework, boxes and arrows like a football diagram. On Halloween, after we had swapped candy and crammed our small bodies full of sugar, we would sit around vibrating until one person suggested it was too late in the night and we should try going to The Haunted House next year and we all nodded in agreement.

During the summers we would wander to the very outer edge of the woods, hunting for frogs and dumping them into a tall bucket full of tap water. We would inevitably forget about them when our mothers called us home for dinner, and the frogs would float there, bucket walls too high to escape, croaking and soundtracking our meals where others might have put on the news or a classical record. During the winters, when the snow arrived not as white puffs but brown slush, we would dirty our mittens with futile attempts at slushmans and then pile into one person's toboggan, sliding down and stumbling up the center hill like dogs playing fetch.

I was the first to leave. My dad had a doctorate and a job lined up on the other coast where it didn't snow. My mom's English was still thick and awkward, but she was a beast in a wet lab and a bi-lingual employer would realize this, two years later. My friends sent me off with a Bollywood dance party that left all of us inexplicably crying. It was our parents' job to survive and ours to be self-actualized—an insurmountable privilege we only came to realize when, a few years into our own careers, we found ourselves without real problems.

A decade after arriving in this country, when my parents bought their first home in a Southern California suburb, they would take walks outside after dinner. Sometimes, if I had finished my homework at lunch, I would join them. We lived in a townhouse indistinguishable from the neighboring townhouses at the base of a hill. We paid Homeowners Association fees but the only time we ever exchanged words with a neighbor was when one of their dogs had taken a shit in our lawn. On these walks we would search for the stars through the light pollution and try to feel less full from the food in our stomachs. A small gutter ran down the adjacent street, filled with stray leaves except for in late January, when we would get all our rain for the year, and then the frogs and crickets would come out and sing.



WRITING EXERCISE: DOMAIN KNOWLEDGE

# The Third Bedroom

The human body is a resistor. Some parts of the body resist more than others. Dry skin tends not to let much electricity pass through. A wet tongue: slightly more conductive.

To demonstrate this, on the first day of class the professor takes a 9 volt battery out of his suit jacket, holding it above his head for the whole class to see. He presses a finger along the terminals and nothing happens. He hangs his tongue out like a dog's and licks the battery. It tingles. His students release nervous laughter.

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At night, the television shows many bodies resisting, with hashtags and hats and clever signs. The professor watches as he

eats curry. He has cooked too much, but he hates eating the same thing two days in a row.

The professor lives in an apartment with three bedrooms and zero other people. One room has a bed. Another one has a piano. The professor isn't sure what to do with the last one—he moved in last month, right after defending his PhD thesis.

After the defense, he took his parents to a steakhouse. None of them had ever been to a steakhouse before. Even though he had told his parents they wouldn't be able to understand his talk, they insisted on flying in to watch their only child graduate, despite having to drive four hours past their duck farm to the airport.

When the to-be-professor noticed his parents cutting into a green leaf whose name he couldn't pronounce, he laughed. Ma, Pa, I'm pretty sure that's just a garnish, he said.

It is too precious to not eat, they replied. During the dinner they never stopped beaming. They added: We are so proud of you.

Eating curry in the company of his television, the professor thinks, I have it all. And yet: I am still dissatisfied.

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The professor is a professor of computers. He doesn't say computer science, because the kids do not do experiments as scientists should, they only write code, he jokes.

The professor's date laughs. He also writes. Mainly short stories, but he's flirting with a novel.

The professor makes a note to search the writer on the internet later.

The writer laughs again. No, you're probably published way more than me. I only have two stories in magazines. The professor thinks he sees a flash of sadness in the writer's eyes as he says this.

Well, which one should I read first? he asks.

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When they have enough data, computers can make some amazing decisions. This image? It is of a dog on a beach chasing a frisbee. This man? It is safer if he awaits trial in jail instead of at home.

Every little part of the object in question—the dog's nose, the man's race—is turned into a number and twisted and turned through many layers, a mess of sewage pipes. The computer switches millions of valves on and off, choosing which numbers are important enough to influence the final decision. It is a great muck: the humans can't interpret these choices, but they were taught from an early age numbers are one of the few objective truths left in the universe, so they throw at the numbers their trust. The system is called deep learning, but where is the learning if no one knows how it works?

The discussions the professor sees on the television about this are misguided at best. The computers will take our jobs, our houses, our children. The professor thinks the bigger threat is the faith in the unknown. It is like the civil engineers building a bridge and the bridge is made out of wood or stone or steel, or maybe paper or clouds or cotton candy. Most cars safely cross the bridge. But who knows when it'll collapse.

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On occasion, the professor wakes up collapsed into himself. He is all body—sweat and pulse entangled in the sheets, until slowly his brain reconnects with his muscles and his sense of self. But he never remembers anything before the reboot. When he looks into his dreams he sees only an impenetrable black box. How can he possibly get better.

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There was a point in the professor's life, as there is a point in all our lives, when he was terrible at coding. The best programmers are the ones who can think like a computer, tracking each object they create as it leaps from command to command. Keeping it all in their minds, like overbearing parents—it requires giving up some humanity.

There are two common mistakes in this process. The programmer-parent can write something the computer doesn't understand—leave a parenthesis stranded without its partner, or try to add together two things that can't talk to each other, like a word and a number. When the computer does understand the code, the child-object can misbehave. Follow commands the programmer thought were swept under the carpet. Collect values that are all wrong.

Sometimes it takes the to-be-graduate-student-to-be-professor several days to figure out what's wrong with his children-objects. But other times, they are so in sync, as soon as his fingers leave the keyboard his children do exactly as told. No errors, no complaints. When this happens, he breaks out in a little dance, forgetting to look around to see if anyone else is watching.

To experience magic like this, he thinks. But with real children.

Then he reconsiders: there is too much screaming and feeling with real children. Computers don't talk back, don't slobber over the sheets.

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The writer is over at the apartment for dinner. The scent of roast duck fills the professor's three rooms and the writer is impressed.

Tomorrow, in the professor's class, the students will learn how to represent their code as a finite state machine. Everything is in either a state (waiting, eating, fucking) or a transition between states (the beep of the oven timer, the walk to the bedroom, the hands undoing the belt). This organization groups the children-objects into very specific play pens with very specific door codes, reducing the mess.

The writer chews. Transitions: stories are also all about the transitions, he says. To seamlessly connect the scenes is the mark of a great writer.

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Here is a transition: the first time they touch it is electric. A hunger bubbles out of the professor and then he is leaking everywhere, pressing himself against the writer, the writer pressing back.

There is a class of problem solving techniques formally called greedy algorithms. These algorithms devour the first thing they see that satisfies them, not caring if better options lie down the line. One well-known greedy algorithm is used for finding the shortest path.

The professor's path: the shirt unbuttoned and slid off the writer's freckled arms. Kisses toward the navel, teeth taut on the waistband. He collects the writer in his hands, minimizing the space between them until only their electrons push against each other, quivering.

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The writer is adding a third story to his publications list. He has invited the professor to a small celebratory reading at the local bookstore. The writer sits at the front of the store. Above his head is a poster of the city, skyscrapers stark against a fading purple-pink sky.

As the writer reads his writing, the professor stares at this poster, its purple-pink gradient. The gradient of something is the measure of how much it changes. The gradient of a cloudless day: relatively flat except for two humps at sunrise and sunset, as the sky transitions from black to pink to blue and back again. Taking the gradient of a picture will find its edges. The gradient of this poster: a trace of the skyline.

The writer's story is beautiful and the professor is so proud when the room's applause acknowledges its beauty as well. The writer bows and lists thanks—his parents, his teachers, his residency fellows, his partner the professor.

The last time the professor was a partner was when he was a to-be-graduate-student-to-be-professor making a robot. Even though the four of them were supposed to all be partners, he was the only one up all night, unplugging wires and plugging them in again.

The gradient of the professor's life was a smooth solitude. Then the writer appeared, and he climbed mountains.

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The professor is in a sauna. It is hard to breathe because of the humidity, his sweat. It is hard to breathe because he is swaddled in someone's arms.

Hey, says the writer. Hey. It's okay.

The professor wakes up. A hand on his chest guides the inhale, exhale. Actually, the writer is so gentle.

The professor remembers: he had just bought a house. But when he went furniture shopping, all the stores were empty. Just him and the kitchen and rooms gathering dust.

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The writer feels like he has written the same chapter five times. No matter what combination of words he chooses, they always materialize as rough approximations of each other.

You're stuck in an infinite loop, says the professor. He has just taught his students recursion, one of the hardest topics to understand in computer science. In recursion, the solution to the problem depends on the solution to smaller versions of the same problem. The same code runs over and over until the problem is reduced to its smallest state, which has a known solution—the base case.

But it's easy to mess up recursion. Plenty of students write poor base cases, so their code runs forever, running meaningless laps around the track, blind to the finish line. In solving large problems, it is crucial to know when to stop.

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The novel the writer finishes goes like this: There was once a great professor who did everything he was told in life and was widely revered for his intelligence and insight. But the professor was lonely and lost. His apartment had an empty room, and he an empty heart.

The professor met a writer. They started sharing meals and stories and, eventually, their bodies, their hearts. The writer moved into the third bedroom. The professor was now less lonely, but he was no less lost.

The world of computers is discrete. In the end, everything is a 0 or a 1, electricity through the machine or not. But the professor lived in the real world, where binaries were gross oversimplifications. The professor had to become comfortable with mess, with ambiguity, with possibility. Endings could be left unwritten, and no one would complain.