

I remember you...

By Stephanie Konu



Once upon a time I thought I would be a great artist, and world traveller. Unfortunately for me, I never warmed up to airplane travel, and felt better with my feet on the ground. I tried to travel by boat, yet even the overwhelming feeling of being surrounded by water was too much to overcome. I thought that I might drown just from breathing the air. Or that being on a boat could result in a wave cascading over us and obliterating everyone on board into nothing.

So I stayed on land.

Travelling by car or bus was to be the only viable way to travel for me; but the traffic and pollution suffocated me in my small Toronto neighbourhood. Any trip on a motorized vehicle seemed to take ages. A bus made too many stops. A private car or taxi was too constricting; and even motorcycles had their dangers that made them impossible to depend on. And so, I would ride my bike to anywhere I needed to go. When I wanted to travel, I would organize a ride share, hop on a train, or pick up a book and visit the desired destination mentally.

I worked nearby at a government building pushing pens and paper from one side of my desk to another each day from 8:30 am until 4:30 pm. I didn't literally push items around my desk, but that is the way working for the government feels. At the end of any given week, I feel as though the only difference I made was in the moving of the items on my desk from one end to the other. Nothing changes when you work hard in a government job. No real rewards are granted- and unless your goal is to dig yourself deeper into the proverbial bullshit, (buying-in and moving up the chain into management): you must find a way to survive. You need to make your existence about something else other than work.

My life was supposed to be different. I was supposed to be an artist, but none of it was in the cards of lady luck for me. My day to day life until now has been filled with work, being at home, and artistry. I am hopelessly single, and have no prospect for oncoming romances unless I am blindsided by a stranger who probably doesn't exist.

Monday

Sunday night went late. I stayed up past midnight to finish a large painting I had be doing in acrylic paint. I started it on Friday night; doing all of the line work using an idea I sketched out from the week before. I had dreamed of a beautiful young woman who was being followed by a dark figure who seemed to have a glowing heart-shaped light pouring out of its chest.

The dream wasn't new or unfamiliar. I had dreamed of it, or a similar thing, before. During the most recent time, I awoke with a chill and knew I needed to sketch the scene so that I could paint it. The idea translated so well onto the canvas that once I began, I was captivated and could not stop.

When Monday came, I got myself ready to leave for work. I admired my progress as it sat drying near my dingy windowsill. She, the woman in the painting, was beautiful. She was me. The dark figure could have used some extra detail though.

Work, work, work. My life was consumed by being at work, traveling to work, and leaving work. I needed to plan a weekend trip to break the monotony. When I took my lunch break, my co-worker Larry met me at our usual spot. I suspected that he had a low-key crush on me based on how he would always stare at me in meetings- even when I wasn't saying anything. In the event that I did speak up in a meeting, Larry was always the first person to agree or praise my comments.

“Patrice, I grabbed you something sweet for after lunch. My wife made chocolate cake on the weekend so I brought you a slice.” Larry said as I sat beside him.

“Thanks Larry. You know I love your wife’s baking.” I responded giving him a pleasant smile. After eating our meals and clearing our utensils we would always go for a walk.

It was necessary to physically leave the building where we worked during lunch. Management always found a way to get employees to do more work or find ways to shorten breaks when anyone stayed kicking around on lunch. So we left. We had our best and most honest conversations when we left. Monday was no different.

“So... my wife wants me to ask if you have put anymore thought into letting us set you up on a blind date...”

I let out a sigh. Larry and his wife Belinda had been trying to set me up for a year now. To Belinda: I was a free-spirited feminist who needed to be shown the “right way”, by settling down and getting married. She didn’t know I needed freedom to live my life above anything else.

“Larry, I don’t know... I’m still trying to figure things out right now.” My response revealed annoyance that I was sure Larry did not want to bear the brunt of.

“I know, that’s what I told her. But she keeps bringing it up alongside comments about how ‘weird’ it is that we hang out. She keeps hinting that she doesn’t like me hanging out with you, because you are single.” He responded.

“Well Larry, I like having lunch with you, but that sounds like an issue between you and your wife.” I volleyed back.

“Yes...well I like to spend time with you too. And I thought we were friends. Why don’t you come over for dinner and just meet the guy

she has in mind. Then I can get her off my back. Please? For your chocolate cake bringing friend Larry?" he asked sweetly.

My smile widened as I rolled my eyes. I had to acknowledge that on some days, Larry was the only other human I had any communication with aside from emails and phone calls. He always cared about how I was doing. He always cared about what was going on. When my aunt, who was my last remaining family in Canada passed away, he and Belinda offered to cook dinner for me, and invited me over for holiday dinners. My parents had both died years ago, and I had no siblings. Their diaspora to Canada from their respective countries had left us disconnected and without much in the way of familial connections.

I felt like I owed it to Larry and Belinda.

"Ok. I will come over. Tell Belinda I will meet her guy. Maybe I will sleep with him on the first date just to seal the deal." I joked.

Larry laughed hesitantly at the last part, giving me a sideways glance that revealed worry as he held the door open and we re-entered the building to return to work. I didn't want him to be in trouble with his wife, but I knew this idea of setting me up to meet another man was not to his liking. My mind went back to the image I had been painting that morning. I looked forward to working on it that night when I got home.

WEDNESDAY

I rode my bike, against all reason, to the dinner at Larry and Belinda's second floor walk-up. I had been running late. I decided at the last minute that I should straighten my hair and try to make it look sexy for my date. My poufy and frizzy hair looked amazing when straightened, and when it fell against my caramel complexion, I looked exotic.

Larry was a good friend of mine, but I knew that his hesitation for this event was not based in any desire to protect me from potential heartbreak. His hesitancy resigned in his desire to keep me for himself. As a woman, I could easily understand how Belinda probably felt. I was the 'other woman', even though I never had any inappropriate dealings with Larry. I treated him as a friend; avoided provocative talk and clothing around him, yet I could not control how he viewed me. I could not change my face or voice. Ultimately I could not change the fact that I am a woman. Or that his wife believed single women should not be close friends with married men.

I smoothed my outfit spread my lipstick again and again over my lips and knocked on the door of Larry and Belinda's apartment. Larry promptly opened the door with a sheepish grin.

"Patrice you came! I half hoped..."

"Larry I promised I would come. You know how I am about promises." I interrupted him, not wanting to bicker about what I knew he was thinking. His eyes said it all. He was jealous and wanted to keep my attentions all to himself. His glassy eyes betrayed that he had likely fallen into a bottle of wine and when I gently hugged him as I crossed the threshold I could smell the deep alcoholic scent on his breath.

"Is Belinda still here? I didn't mean to be late."

"Hi Patrice," I heard her voice call out from the rear of the apartment. The layout of their place required walking through the kitchen to get to the dining area. When I entered the narrow kitchen, I caught a glimpse of a man from behind who was sitting at the table. I greeted Belinda with a quick hug, and she kissed my cheek.

"Come on in and have a seat. Clark just got here a few minutes ago," she said.

I was uncharacteristically nervous. I walked around the table to face my blind date. As I approached he turned to face me and stood to shake my hand.

“Hello Patrice. I’m Clark. Clark Chen.”

We shook hands and sat down. Larry poured me a glass of wine that was much too full. I immediately took a long sip.

Clark was handsome in a classical sort of way. He kept his jet black hair on the long side; wearing it loose and allowing it to fall near his chin. He had a strong jawline and his complexion was unmarked. His smile exposed two dimples on either cheek and somewhere after my first few sips of wine, I decided that he was too attractive for me.

“Patrice,” Larry initiated “how goes the art business?”

“The art business is fine.” I responded.

“Patrice did you know that Clark is also an artist? He paints murals and large-scale works for the city.” Belinda chimed in.

“Yes, I just finished a mural for the Parkdale Public Library” Clark added. My eyes widened and I’m sure my pupils dilated as well.

“Oh, I’ve seen that one. It’s very good.” I quietly responded. “How do you know Larry and Belinda?” I asked hoping not to appear rude. I was confident that this gorgeous man would not find me interesting in the least. Plus I always thought that it was rare for an Asian man to find a Black woman attractive. In my mind guys from Asia usually kept with their own kind due to cultural pressure. He seemed nice, but I was weary of how much effort to put in for a guy who would probably never pursue me. Which, by the way, is important for me to acknowledge because I need to be pursued in a relationship. I vowed to never again chase men, (or anyone), a long time ago. People always abandon you when they know you need or want them. My heart was not healed from the failed relationships of my past and they took their toll.

“Larry I just met tonight, but Belinda and I met last year. As you know she works for the City of Toronto. She was part of the staff that helped to unveil a mural that I completed” Clark replied.

“I understand that you and Larry work for the Ministry...” his voice trailed off.

“Ministry of Government Services. Boring stuff!” Larry answered for me. “Patrice and I often joke that all we do is push paperwork from one end of our desks to another!” Larry and I laughed at his interjection while Belinda shot him an icy stare and Clark had a tight look on his face. He and Belinda seemed to lock eyes in that moment.

“Honey” she said, “Can you help me with serving dinner in the kitchen?” Her thinly-veiled plan to leave Clark and me alone was successful and Larry followed her out of the room.

As soon as they left Clark scooted his chair closer to the table. I sat directly across from him, so I took it as an attempt to move closer to me. In a hushed tone he leaned in smiling and said “Wow, Belinda wasn't kidding.”

I took another sip of wine.

“Kidding about what?” I asked between sips hoping that my nervousness would have decreased with my rising inebriation instead of the opposite.

He held my eye contact for a second longer than I could bear, so I looked away. He sat back in his chair again. “Belinda wasn't kidding about how drop-dead gorgeous you are.” Clark responded. My face went hot. I scanned his face, but he only winked at me as Belinda and Larry re-entered the room.

The dinner went well, but I couldn't fully warm up to Clark. It was only

my first time meeting him and despite my attraction to him, I couldn't let my guard down. We had dessert and coffee before 10 p.m. rolled around and I had to go home to prepare for the next day.

"It's been nice meeting you, Clark" I said as I gathered my belongings and stood up to leave.

"Do you want me to walk you home?" Clark asked rising from his chair. Larry looked like he might be ill.

"She's fine!" Larry interjected, causing Belinda to shoot him another look. I looked from Belinda to Clark and responded.

"Yes, that would be nice."

I walked with my bike along the sidewalk while Clark walked alongside me. I was pretty inebriated and at that point I realized it was not a good idea to ride my bike lest I have an accident. We chatted about art. Clark had been working as an artist for a few years, and since his parents passed away was now doing projects full time. He was born in Toronto, but both parents emigrated from China as young people. He stood much taller than I had initially thought and I had to look up to see his face.

In my drunken state I felt comfortable with him. We bumped into each other repeatedly as we fell into a matched pace as our steps led us nearer to my apartment. I felt that things would disintegrate if I allowed this blind date to continue. Please excuse my virtue signaling; but sleeping with someone on a blind first date was not something I was prepared to do. My guarded heart would never allow it.

Our chat along the mostly calm Toronto Street lulled as I paused in front of the main door to the building in which I lived. "This is my place Clark. It's been so nice to meet you."

"It was nice meeting you Patrice. Can I see you again?" he responded. I felt my heart rate increase. This was one of those

situations where I could start fresh. I could start over and act differently from how I always did.

Clark was not Larry. He didn't know me or know my backstory. He didn't know that I always ran away; hiding myself to stay protected from the hurt that always followed after exposing my heart. So without warning or providing a verbal response, I leaned my bike against the kickstand and turned around to face Clark. I kissed his bare lips with my own. The quickness of my actions startled him. But when the shock wore off he kissed me back traveling his hands down my sides to rest on my hips.

Our kiss lingered for what felt like 10 minutes, although I am sure it could not have been longer than one. The kiss made me feel dizzy or perhaps it was the alcohol. Either way, I felt like I might be sick and suddenly pushed away. I quickly made my escape up the stairs to my apartment, unlocked the door and flopped on the bed; stupidly forgetting my bike on the sidewalk where I had left it leaning.

I woke in the early hours of the morning with a thirst for water and a throbbing headache. I was experiencing a searching feeling like I had forgotten something important.

I remembered my bike.

A sinking feeling overcame my gut and I shot out of bed to the hallway where I saw two notes on the door that said: "lock the door" and "open me". When I locked the door, I stepped back and noticed my bike leaning against the wall where I couldn't see it previously. I reached for the other note and found my explanation.

Clark must have left a note for me after I ran upstairs and left my bike on the street. He must have carried it up after I ran away. The note read:

"Sorry if I scared you. I didn't want your bike to get stolen. Luckily, your name is listed on in the building directory. So I knew which apartment to find you in. I hope you feel better." He signed the note as C.C.

Two or three weeks passed. Larry did not make any mention of the blind date. He fulfilled his duty by doing what his wife asked and would not do more. I saw it that way at least.

He was moody for a while after but improved by one Thursday. "Hi Patrice. How are things?" he asked as he sat beside me for lunch.

"Things are good." I replied as I ate my sandwich.

"Belinda wanted to know: did Clark ever call you?" Larry asked.

"No, I didn't give him my number after he left my apartment that night."

Larry choked on his food. "...left your apartment? Did he sleep over?"

He was being cautious. I could see the way the conversation would play out if I allowed him to dominate to me. I did not agree that he could ask questions about my private life.

Larry's problem seemed to be that he wanted to have a wife and to be married; but he also wanted to continue to have a fixation over me that required me to be available and unattached. I never acted inappropriately with Larry. Perhaps I enjoyed the attention that came due to being a member of the opposite sex... but the onus was on Larry to keep his feelings in check. I wasn't the person who was married, he was.

"Larry: why would you ask me that? Let's discuss this. Are you jealous or what?" I demanded.

"Patrice, you know I have feelings for you. Don't you?" he softly informed "How could you not realize?"

"Larry? What the heck are you saying?" I looked at him with a blank look trying to pretend that I was shocked.

"I'm not proud of it, but I felt utterly sick when you showed up for dinner the other night. I deliberately told you the wrong time to arrive so that Belinda might think you didn't show... unfortunately Clark also showed up late..."

My mind was floored. I abruptly stood.

"I'm leaving to go back to work now. I think you should go home and get some rest." I told him. I turned on my heel and walked back to work. I did not see Larry at his desk for the remainder of the day. I assumed he went home and took my advice.

My suspicions were confirmed when Larry confessed my setup with Clark had not been to his liking I pretended to be shocked because I couldn't bear to admit that I knew. I couldn't let myself acknowledge his love, not without admitting my own.

His wife Belinda was doing what she could to keep their union together and my mere existence was a threat to its continuation.

Neither she nor I could control how Larry felt but I could control whether I continued to see him and remain a fixture in his life.

I walked home and cut through City Hall, as I always do when I want to clear my head; there was a crowd gathered to celebrate a ribbon cutting in the southwest corner. My mind went to Clark as I heard the crowd. I thought I could hear someone behind me saying my name softly, but given the size of the crowd, there were probably other people in attendance that shared my name.

I walked further into the crowd and looked up to see a stage where a very official-looking group of people were gathered along with television cameras and microphones. They were unveiling a new sculpture. I could see Clark Chen wearing all black and looking amazing. He shook hands with the Mayor and accepted a plaque. The crowd applauded. Clark began waving to someone nearby to join him on stage. The person stepped up and her hair became tossed by the wind so I couldn't see her face.

My feet kept me motionless, even though I knew what was about to happen. Clark embraced the woman and, surprising the crowd but not to me, kissed her in a grand gesture while slightly dipping her backwards. Many hoots and hollers emerged from the crowd and as their embrace concluded I could see quite clearly that the woman was Belinda, Larry's wife.

My eyes felt like they bulged outward from my face as the recognition washed over me.

"What the F..." The words escaped from me as I felt a hand touch mine.

It was Larry.

"Larry I just saw-" I began to say when he interjected.

"Patrice I'm so glad I caught you. I remembered that you always cut through City Hall when you need time to think and I figured you would be in that mood after what we discussed today. Can we talk?"

He held my hand and led me to the rooftop of City Hall. We looked out over Bay Street and he began to confess.

“Belinda and I have been fooling ourselves into believing that we are still in love.”

“We do have love for each other, but it isn't enough. It isn't enough to overcome the love I have for you. I told her this afternoon after you and I spoke. Turns out: she has been carrying on with Clark for months now.”

“I just saw them kiss on stage.” I added. My surprise was still present in my mind. Perhaps Belinda thought that by setting me up with Clark she would be able to ignore the way she felt for him, all the while loving him from afar. All of this despite resenting Larry for loving me from afar.

“Larry what happened to us?” I asked.

“We fell in love somehow. It just took nearly losing you for me to realize it.” He responded.

“What about you and Belinda?” I asked.

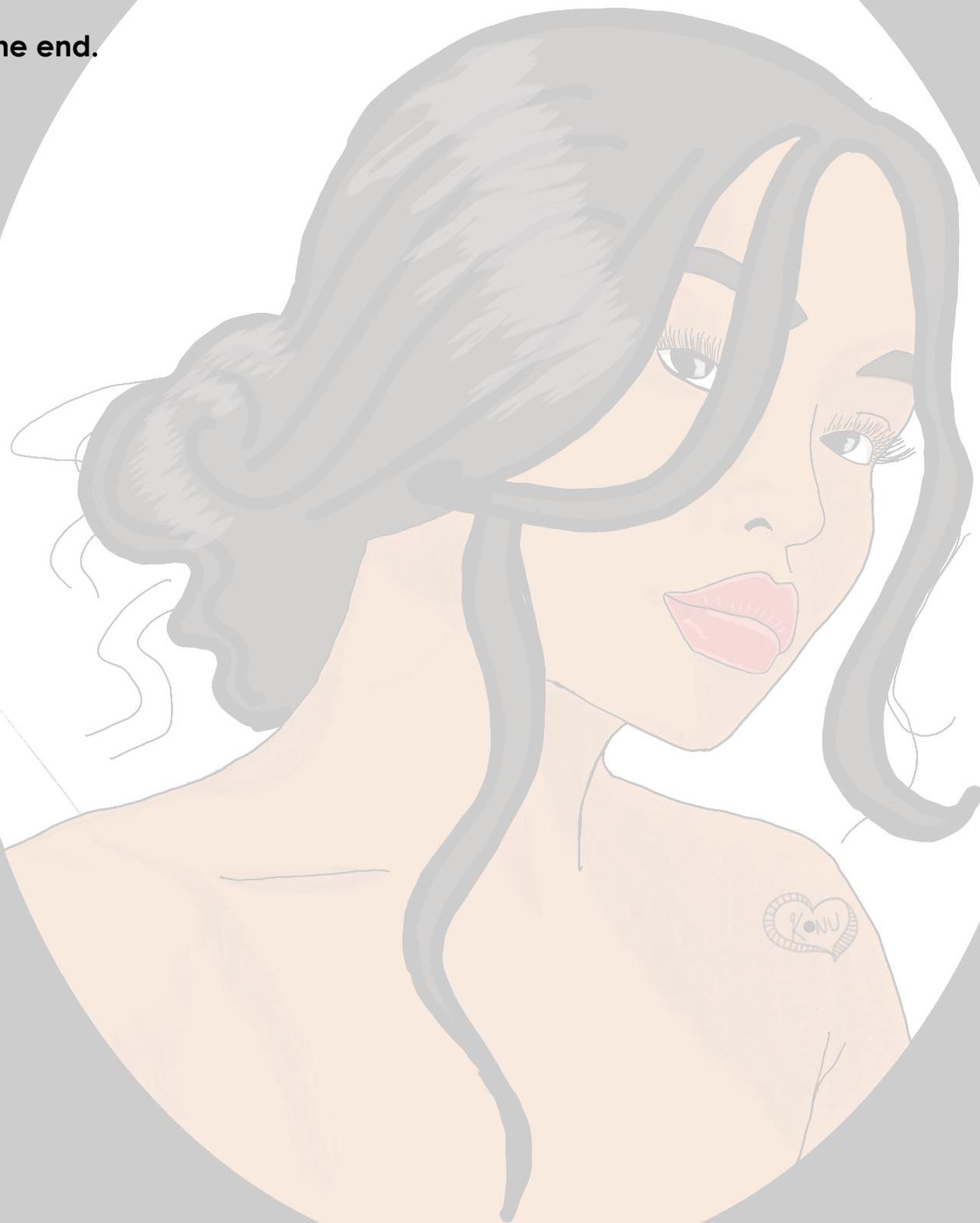
“We talked for hours and realized that our hearts want what they want. She wants to be with Clark and I want to be with you. If you'll have me.”

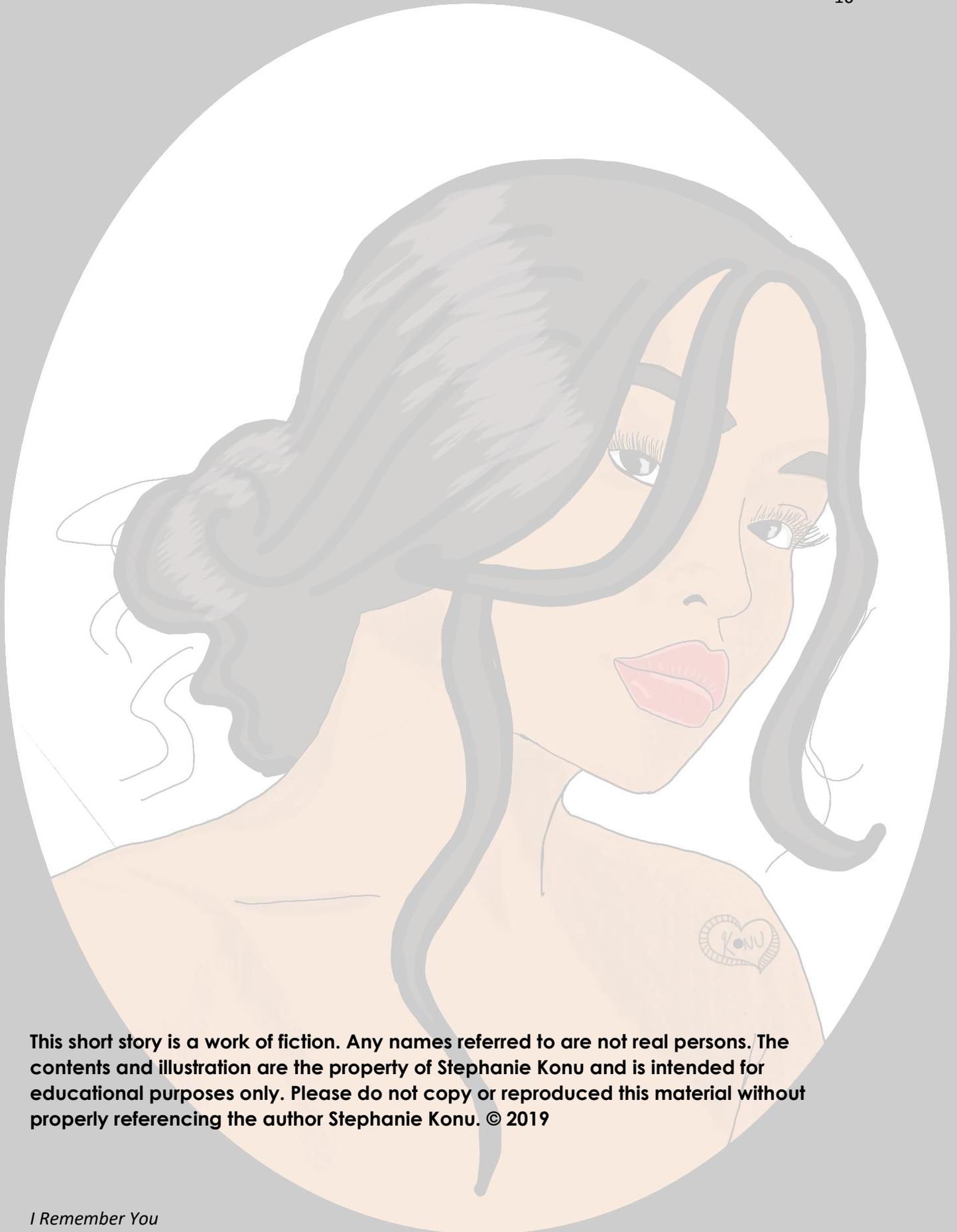
I looked up and into Larry's eyes, and without words, I kissed his lips. We stayed like this for a long time. After we separated he opened his coat to pull out a white rose.

“I remember that you love white roses and that sappy displays of affection aren't your thing. But I also remember how much you love romance and honesty. I remember that you love to be at home. And I also remember how much you like to have someone there with you. I remember you: all of you, Patrice, and you are a person I do not want to ever forget.”

I accepted the rose. We squeezed each other tight, and he walked me home.

The end.





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I Remember You