

Hafnium

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Home comes in three boxes.

I stack them in front of the door and wonder if I should perhaps take some time to freshen up, but I feel my knees buckle a little and decide not to bother. Knocking. Silence. Repeat a few times, but I only hear the wooden heartbeat echo in the long hallway. My phone is dead. I keep my palm on the door and slide to the ground, too tired to think. I grab a sweater from my comfort box, some chapstick and a chocolate bar. I lean back. A draft slips in through the corridor window and I watch the growing dusk swallow up buildings and trees, from roots to fluttering leaves, until my eyes meet darkness.

Keys rattling in the lock. I blink sleepily at the outline of scuffling sneakers beside me, they stop still.

"Hey."

"Hello."

"Of all the ways I thought we would meet. But, I swear you said Tuesday." His voice cracks a little, but is surprisingly warm and naturally invites conversation. He holds out a hand. I stand up, feeling awkward, not knowing where to begin.

"I had to come early. I tried to call but I..." I cannot, for all the effort I put in, remember the word for charger. What is worse, I seem to have forgotten the translation for lost. My thoughts turn bitter with memories of a failed day. As so many times before, I resort to a pathetic display of gestures, my little and index fingers becoming a cell phone and my other hand running over my throat dramatically. His eyebrows knit together. I'm a terrible actress.

"So... I'm Daniel. And you, I assume, are to be my new roommate?" He smiles, then gasps in realization. "Oh, and please come in! Let me take your stuff."

He grabs two boxes and I take the third. "I'm Linda. Li Mi-kyung. But Linda is easier to remember and I think it suits me now that I'm going to be an English girl." A sentence I've practiced on the flight. What a useless thing to be worried about, knowing how to introduce myself right. I haven't gotten much further in conversation so far. As in this one. We tread water for a few minutes, but pauses get long and questions forceful, so I am happy to finally excuse myself to my new bedroom. I swear I'll try harder tomorrow.

But no matter how hard I try, I keep tripping up and getting nowhere. I spend the evenings studying THE GREAT ENGLISH DICTIONARY. It towers over all the other volumes of the book box in both size and boldness of font, it's colors so big and bright I feel like it is screaming

at me. Read THE DICTIONARY. Learn ENGLISH. Be GREAT. I keep getting stuck on words, their empty black and whiteness barely filling in the blankness of my mind with grey.

No, that is not true. I almost believed it myself. My mind is hardly blank. It is very much alive, bursting even. I saw a cat catch a bird mid flight today, but had no way to tell of it. I had an idea of how to solve a complicated equation today, but no idea of how to explain it. I observe things, make new opinions, form new thoughts, but they stay trapped within me. I try to shut down the outer world to keep my mind from becoming overburdened, but my demons only multiply. So I escape with them to my own world. A world that is neither English nor Korean. That is not limited by any language. A world in which anything can be expressed in its purest form, untouched by the deforming process of translation into that which can be sensed by others.

But I do wish for some simple conversation, sometimes. A friend or two. Daniel has given up on trying to communicate with me. He is, however, making friends by the dozen. I admire how easily it comes to him. He became acquainted with Alex, a fidgety boy from France that moved into the rooms next to ours, by knocking in his apartment and asking for some butter. They are inseparable now. I can't believe that this neighborhood condiment exchange is a thing that actually happens, and that it inspires lasting relationships. I should have brought eggs in the third box.

It's two days from classes starting, and I'm lying in bed, flipping through the dictionary. The pressure of the upcoming event has made me pick it up again. I don't need English to be brilliant at science, of course. I would have never gotten in if that were the case. But I need something to hold on to.

The letter H. Habilitate. Hackle. Hafnium.

There is some noise coming from Alex's place. These walls are paper thin and I always hear what goes on beyond them, usually Daniel and Alex laughing and watching the Simpsons.

Hafnium. Haft.

The laughter is louder today though, and there is more than two voices joining in. I hear the sweet, sing - song voice of the girl living a story below us, a blonde that brings us the mail sometimes, to have a reason to chat with Daniel, I suspect. There is more than one girl though. More guys. They get noisier, I hear things getting turned over, obnoxious cackling. They are no longer conversing, but rather shouting and hooting at each other in drunk excitement. I would never have expected to be invited, I guess.

Where was I, Haf...

"My roommateee"

A chill goes down my spine. This jeer was unmistakably Daniel's.

"Good with numbers I heard. But otherwise, she's as dumb as a bloody rock. The girl can hardly tell you her name. And you know what?? Mate, she can't even decide on that."

I realize then, that perhaps spending two weeks here has improved my understanding skills after all. Right now I wish I was nameless. I want to disappear. I crave oblivion.

"I thought it would be cool to live with a chick."

I never thought it would be "cool" to live with a guy. I wanted a challenge. Admittedly, this was a bigger one than I had anticipated.

"Man, and she just comes in, with these, like, boxes. Not a suitcase. Or a backpack, or, just, whatever, any kind of a bag. No, boxes. She never opened the third one. Course, I'm morally upright and all that. I wouldn't peek. But..."

Blood rushes to my temples. I get up and walk over to my wardrobe. I checked yesterday. I checked. It's ok. I'm just paranoid. Open the door. Open the drawer. Open the box. No box.

I don't notice that I'm moving, objects are just rushing toward me. I turn. I run into the hallway. I'm in front of the door now.

"But I'm sure you guys would."

Hafnium.

Try crossing the border with that.