

The Future
of
Beauty

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THE FUTURE OF BEAUTY

These are sketches of the way the future might be, or will be.

The character Bopha's name is pronounced "boh pah". Chanthavy's name is pronounced "chan ta vy". Ngoc's name is pronounced "nowp", but you close down on the "p" instead of expelling air afterward as you usually do after a "p" in English. If curious, you might look up the pronunciations of other names in these short stories.

PART 1

“What a truly consensual day,” said Vinay to Hazel and Midori. They agreed. The wind was blowing, in a way that fully respected each of the people it blew on. The sky had little clouds that were moving in a way which reassured each of the three young people, clouds that knew where they were headed to. The young people walked along a street with beautiful sighing trees; these trees were tall, maybe 60 feet tall, conifers. They kicked the cones at their feet and spoke of what they were going to do next. They walked by the shadow of a giant windmill of glory, they looked up at the arms of it, seeing the sun shine through. They each stood still to absorb the moment. They would remember that moment, even the angle of the arms, for the rest of their lives.

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Lech, Aster, Tamar, and Fabrizio sat at the bar, with its classily-wiped shiny bartop, its gorgeous low key saxophone and piano and hushing drumkit trio in one corner, three musicians who were thoroughly absorbed in

music and in chilling out. “The vibe in here is amazing,” said Fabrizio. “I know!” rejoined Aster. “The only thing that could make it better would be if...”

Everyone knew what she was about to say, and the AI made it manifest. The bartender, a beautiful man, made a signal, and a stately woman in a linen robe came in, taking her time, not saying a word. She made gestures of invitation and initiation, not saying a word, and the adventurers looked at her, their hearts waiting. She took out a wooden box, and opened it up, and removed an ornate atomizer, rich with tasteful decorations, with a bulb wrapped in cloth woven two-colors-against-each-other. Then she took out of the box two small phials of colored liquid and a larger bottle of a clear liquid. She opened the atomizer and put a few drops from the small phials in the atomizer, then filled it up with liquid from the bottle. She shook the atomizer. Then she pointed it toward the ceiling and sprayed a fragrant cloud.

“Wow.” said Lech. He didn’t have much else to say in the moment, and neither did anyone else.

They came back to being able to speak.

“It reminded me of the beach,” said Tamar.

“An afternoon at the beach, with an onshore breeze. Being 8 years old.”

“I second that,” said Aster, “But I would also add that it’s the day after my birthday and I’m remembering how much fun I had.”

Lech didn’t have anything to say. “I don’t know what this brings up for me, but I feel it.”

Fabrizio said “I’m thinking of a friend of mine, the way he smiles.”

The adventurers talked about past adventures, of delicious food they had eaten, food that tasted like the color of mahogany wood and the warmth of a campfire. They talked about crossing the grand canal in order to get to the cotton fields, where they had picked cotton (the

easiest thing in the world, like cutting butter with a knife) and wove clothes for themselves on looms they found in cool halls, in buildings which were set aside for the purpose.

And then their perfumer prepared another scent, and they were taken to a garden in which there were cool walkways and roses out in the sun, and the day was hot but the adventurers were glad to be in the heat, after having been not too long but just long enough in a cool-morninged house. And they were going to experience a third scent-cloud, but Tamar said that she had to step outside while they did that. “Is there something wrong?” they asked.

“Oh no, it’s just that all this perfume can make it difficult for me to form sentences. It’s too beautiful for me.”

The others understood. “Okay, maybe another time!” and they continued to savor the perfection which the perfumer offered without stint.

Tamar stood outside, meanwhile, until Ngoc and Juan Carlos approached. She waved at her friends in the bar and they waved back, and she went off with Ngoc and Juan Carlos.

They found three horses tied up by a fountain. The horses were proud and noble, and the three used what they knew about horsemanship (learned from an afternoon of the closest attention) and mounted the steeds.

They rode through the city, through the wide boulevards, the main part of the streets empty, but the sidewalks well-populated, and people were looking at them go by. Tamar knew that she was queen, and that Ngoc and Juan Carlos were her inner advisers, and they knew that as well and were fully in accord with her. They galloped to the center of the city, to the great square, where there were other horses and riders, and they all trotted around each other, partnering up for equestrian dancing. The AI caused trees to grow up over the horses and riders when they tired, and the riders

dismounted, and the horses walked away, and the riders introduced each other to each other, something which was impossible during the equestrian dances. Ngoc, Juan Carlos, and Tamar found themselves introducing themselves to Katrine, Nigel, and someone named 16. “It’s spelled one six, sixteen.” They decided to go over to a restaurant and have dinner, an early dinner on a clear summer’s day, after all their bracing horseback riding.



Ngoc, Billingara, and Tamar found each other outside the Grand Library. They walked around the colonnades, looking at the bas reliefs of legendary writers, like Sir Ronald Moore and Wisteria van Helft. They wondered what to do. Ngoc suggested that they go down to Smuggler’s Pond. The others agreed. They set out from the Grand Library and went walking for many hours out into the hills around the city.

Finally, they came to a stream running down into a hole in the ground. The hole was significantly larger than the stream. There was a rope leading down into the hole, and our three adventurers let themselves down into the darkness of a karst cave system.

Their feet were sure on the yet damp limestone, and they had with them flashlights by which they illuminated their surroundings. They found themselves in a boxy room, where lying on the ground was a pile of treasure! They looked through the treasure, looked at the inscriptions on beautiful coins, and then put everything back.

Then they continued on and found a tight passageway which they got through, with both a sense of adventure and the certainty that they would get through it, and they arrived in a catacomb, complete with human bones.

They saw ancient inscriptions, which they were able to interpret after just the right amount of effort. They thought about the past, about all

the dynasties which must have existed to produce the things that they saw.

Then they moved on. “Where’s Smuggler’s Pond?” asked Billingara. “I don’t know,” replied Ngoc. “Okay, we’ll find it sometime or other.”

They kept looking through the cave system. They found a room with amazing stalagmites and stalactites. The room had a light pink look to it, from its minerals. They found an underground waterfall, which roared from far away. They sat in the dark, and inhabited a moment of simply hearing.

They didn’t feel like going any further down the waterfall, so they turned back and took a different branch. They could hear the sound of a guitar playing. “I bet that’s it,” said Tamar. They came out of the passage onto the shore of an underground pond. There were young people playing guitar and sitting around. Some of them were playing with the water, splashing and idly leaving their hands in.

Little cave creatures climbed up out of the pond and then ran away from the light, except for the blind cave creatures, which came to sit next to the guitar player. The guitar player was singing a beautiful song. Everything else, except for the splashing of hands in water and the skittering of the cave creatures, was silent, everyone was quiet. Ngoc, Tamar, and Billingara silently got out the sandwiches they had brought with them, and tasted their watercress and provolone cheese, which was simple food, but especially welcome after their exertions in the dark.



Ngoc, Billingara and Juan Carlos could smell something they couldn't put their minds to understand, something spicy and strong, and they followed their noses outside to see a whole festival of flower-sellers, marching through the streets and setting up their stalls. The flower-sellers were singing in their sopranos and altos, songs that skipped and echoed, interlocking

parts that were improvised according to an old tradition. The flowers were not the source of the smell, though, and the three adventurers walked on through, several streets down, never losing the trace of the smell.

Eventually they came out into a plaza where there was a herd of unicorns. The unicorns had a sweet smell, the smell of blessed pastures, but this was not the smell that had spoken so persuasively to our adventurers back inside.

They continued several streets further and at last came to a table where was laid cheese and bread and wine and olives and pineapples and lotus blossoms and artichoke hearts. They began to eat the food, but as they ate realized that they could no longer smell the fragrance that had called them, but could only smell the foods in their mouths as they ate them.

They talked about adventures they had had.

“Do you remember the time we went down to visit Smuggler’s Pond, and the cave fish were sparkling with bioluminescence?”

“Yes, I do. It is said that that only happens once in a long while. We were very fortunate to have seen it.”

“What about the time we were climbing the sheer rock walls of Mount Eyal, and the rope broke, and I think it was Chifung who fell, and he fell right off the rock face, and his ropes disappeared and he grew wings. And he started to fly, so much to his surprise. Do you remember that time?”

“How could I forget? We were all moved to tears at the beauty of it.” As they ate and talked, Midori joined their company.

“Midori, did you come out here to smell the smell?”

“What smell?”

“We smelled something we couldn’t put into words, so we went out to find the thing that made the smell, and it led us here. But now the smell is gone.”

“Oh no, I didn’t come out to smell any smell. I was just walking in the streets. How fortunate to have run into you all.”

They finished up the spread of food, exactly as full as they needed to be, and then continued to walk. “I’m not tired,” said Juan Carlos, “But I think it would be good to rest inside this museum.”

The admission to the museum was free, and there were people who had set up places to rest inside it, canopies and beds. The museum was dim and cool, with a high ceiling and a stone floor. There were exhibits everywhere. Our adventurers looked around at the artifacts, for hours on end. Finally they realized that it was becoming dark outside, but they were so engrossed in the exhibits that they decided to keep looking. The lights of the museum were

coming on and it was certainly possible to keep looking. Finally they thought to go outside, to go back to where they usually stayed, each to their own home, but as they approached the entrance of the museum, got out into the atrium that was ordinarily so full of sunlight, they could see through its great glass windows a wonderful and awful scene. The wolves were in the streets! They padded through with lethal purpose, only stopping to howl at the moon. The wolves had somewhere they had come from, and there was somewhere they were going. Someone was out among them, was surprised, and turned into a bat and flew away. The wolves kept coming, their silvery river rapids flowing, and then they were gone. But as they ran, there began the falling of snow, and by the time they were gone, the snow was falling far too thickly for anyone to dare leave the museum. So everyone gathered in the main room, and the docents cleared away the central exhibit, and set up stones to make a fire pit, and high above, in the dome of the ceiling, the skylight was lifted, and the docents brought in the wood from old benches replaced by new,

and piles and piles of old papers – not priceless manuscripts, but obsolete documentation from the beautifully ever-changing Regulations of Museums – and in the old stone building which was sinking into coldness, they started a great fire to warm the people who were going to wait out the blizzard in the great museum.

The people there told stories and played card games with decks of cards, which the docents had taken off the racks of their own gift shop and had made a gift to everyone. Our adventurers became acquainted with two others, Eamon and Nigel, and they made a merry and grateful party. They spoke of the depths of history, as revealed by the exhibits in the museum. And they spoke about what they would do when the blizzard was lifted. It was said that there was a river that froze when it was cold. Perhaps they could go out on that river and go across it to the other side, which was ordinarily not easy to get to. What would be in that land? They wondered.

As night progressed, the snow stopped falling, and eventually light returned to the sky. Our adventurers: Billingara, Juan Carlos, Ngoc, Midori, Nigel, and Eamon; walked out into the invigorating cold, and walked through the powdery snow, in the direction of the edge of the city, and from thence out into the countryside. Everything looked as it should, covered in a foot of snow. Their feet became cold and they loved it. They made it out to the edge of the river, and overnight, it had frozen over. They walked across and found themselves in countryside that looked much like what they had known. But after walking a few miles, they found themselves in hills with tall pine trees and broad oak trees, and then increasingly pine and cedar trees, all of them covered in snow. They continued to climb the hills, until they found themselves in foothills. Then they crossed a saddle and found themselves descending into a warmer, drier place, and then into a desert.

In the desert, the air was a little warm, and noticeably dry. Their feet warmed up and the

legs of their pants dried out. They walked among the washes of the desert, and followed one down into a great alluvial fan. Then they saw in the distance a fire burning in a steel barrel, and a few people gathered around it. So they walked toward them, with the landscape not presenting any sort of resistance to that particular path.

When they arrived at the fire in the barrel, they met a group of adventurers who were cooking some food. They shared a meal and talked about the weather. All the adventurers soon found themselves mingled together, telling stories to each other. Then, after having had their fill of words and food, they gathered up their backpacks and set off toward the badlands.

They walked along the beautifully, daringly, eroded landforms and saw desert sheep leaping across their path. A rattlesnake rattled at them, and they looked at it with the utmost respect but without any fear. They climbed up to the top of one of the landforms and looked

out at the whole picture. The clouds which brought snow were now only shading the sun, so their eyes were not as dazzled by the glare, and instead they saw everything in a muted calmness. "All of this," they said, "exists, as far as the eye can see."

They found themselves finally walking out toward a desert village, as night fell. They checked into a desert resort hotel, and lounged around and looked at all of the desert objects which had been brought in and mounted on the walls. The carpets in this hotel were of the finest quality, and all of our adventurers greatly enjoyed the feeling of their bare feet on the floor. The evening meal was of roast meat and desert vegetables, sage and cactus leaves among them. Then everyone sat around a fire and told stories, until dawn came. At this time, the adventurers decided to part ways. Ngoc, Billingara, Midori, and the rest from the city decided to retrace their steps back to where they were from, and our adventurers from the desert decided to keep going into the desert world.

PART 2

These are some things that I remember. I have written them down so that you can see what my life was like for me when I was your age.

“Why do children laugh but adults never laugh?”

“Laughing is good for you when you’re young but it is better for adults not to laugh. We need to watch our hearts, because adults are capable of great evil.”

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I remember back when I was younger, younger than you are, flying high above the playground with my arms out as wings, running around on the decomposed granite of the playground, firing my machine guns at Amraz, until he joined my squadron and we fought the enemy that was always available to us as soon as it was time for us to fight. Several of the other boys were attracted to the action, including Qasim and August. We swooped past the enemy and scored several casualties. Then

some of the girls entered the fray. We thought they were our enemies at first until we realized they were on our side. We flew around for a while, but then time and life told us that this pursuit needed to be laid aside, and we landed on the ground and surveyed what was there. Amraz looked at the corpses of the enemy pilots and decided that we should have a funeral for them. So we got our guns out again and fired them off into the air above the playground, to honor each of the pilots we had killed. Then we gathered stones for them and built cairns over their graves. Wouldn't the playground attendants move the cairns? We tried to tell them not to move them, but they said to us, "We honor the dead as much as you do, but we don't want anyone to trip on them. We have to care about the living, too."



When I was younger, some of the kids I played with were named Amraz, Bopha, and Qasim. Amraz had red hair and blue eyes. Bopha had different eyes, kind of slanted, and she had

black hair. Qasim had a round face and dark brown skin and hair. Sometimes I played with Bopha's friends, too, like Kamaria and Chanthavy. Amraz would come and play with them when I was playing with them, but he did his own thing sometimes, too.



I remember one time it was raining and I was over at Bopha's house. Her parents were in the other room talking and, later on, making dinner. So we had the whole afternoon just to sit in the living room playing with toys. It was going okay for a while, but then we started to get irritated at each other, and she started to get mad at me, and she yelled at me to give her back her toys and go home. And I didn't want to go out in the rain and get wet on the way back home and she started yelling some more. And her parents came in, and she looked at her parents and yelled at them too. And they came up to her and sadly said, "Bopha, dear lass, come sit with us on the couch." And she stopped yelling and sat with them on their

couch. “Bopha, you have played very much this afternoon.” “Yes, Bopha,” said her mom, “You have played a lot with your friend.” Bopha was quieter. “Bopha, your friend is very hurt. Do you see how he cries?” And I was crying, and she looked up at me and said that I was crying. “OK, Bopha, now you see him,” her mom said, and they got up and went back to making dinner in the kitchen. And Bopha sat on the couch for a little bit composing herself, and I sat on the carpet composing myself. And then she got up and put the toys away and said, “I have an umbrella and you can have one, too. We can go walking in the rain. But first I have to ask my parents.” And they said that we could, but we would have to leave our shoes on the porch instead of putting them on the tile in the entryway. (They said this thinking we would bring in mud, which was a wise prediction.) So we went out on the sidewalk out to the end of the neighborhood where there was some undeveloped land. And as we set out, she said “We have to be careful not to step on the snails. When we get out to the forest” (the undeveloped land, with towering 12-foot-

high bushes) “we can’t lose each other, we always have to be in sight of each other.”



One time Kamaria and Bopha were playing jump rope and wanted me to play with them. I was not feeling like playing jump rope, but I wasn’t feeling like not playing jump rope either, and they were feeling like playing jump rope, so I played jump rope. They gave me a doll to hold. “Lauren needs to exercise, so you have to hold her and do the jump rope.” I got really tired doing this and I said, “I can’t do it anymore. I’m getting tired.” and they said, “OK, you can take a rest.” And Kamaria said “I can hold Lauren now, and you can hold the jump rope.” So Bopha and I moved the rope, and Lauren and Kamaria jumped.



I used to like to read when I was your age. My parents had a bunch of books and I would ask

them what they were about. “What is *Madame Bovary* about?”

“It’s about a woman who has nothing to do, and then she goes off to have a relationship with some men who are not her husband. In the end, she kills herself.”

I felt sad and confused when I heard that. “Did that really happen?”

“The story is a novel, but that was the kind of life people used to lead.” I felt a little bit sad when I heard that, but my parents looked like they were even sadder.

One time I was reading a Sherlock Holmes book and I asked my dad about it. “What’s cocaine?”

“People used to want to feel different, so they would put different things in their bodies.”

“Like food?”

“Kind of like food. These things they put in themselves made them feel good and they relied on them a lot. I think in the story he takes it so he can think better.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right. Why does Sherlock Holmes use cocaine? Isn’t he really smart without it?”

“It’s hard to be smart. Maybe he was under a lot of pressure to be the kind of person he thought he was supposed to be. Sometimes people would have high expectations for other people, which made the other people push themselves. Other times, people would have high expectations for reality. They wanted something deep and true in the very moments they lived. So they would chase the intensity. Sometimes I feel like that’s what Sherlock Holmes was going for.” And again, he was sadder when saying this than I felt in first hearing it.

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When we got older, we moved on to the middle school, and we rode our horses in to the city. We rode past the great big windmill which reached out to the sky, and in the mornings it was cold, so we made the horses go faster so that they would be warmer. I used to like to sit in the back of class near the heater in the morning. My mind was so fresh.

Bopha and Kamaria and I used to eat lunch together, but we were the only ones we knew from our elementary school to end up at the same middle school. But we were pretty sure that everyone we knew would go to the same high school. And on the weekends, when our homework was done, we would go looking around for Amraz, who wasn't in school, but who wandered around looking for stray animals to take back to his uncle, who paid him two dollars for each stray animal. His uncle had animals grazing out in the wilderness, and some of them wandered into town. After he was done finding animals, Amraz would go to the arcade and play video games for a few

hours and then go out again and do nothing at all.

I asked my parents one time about Amraz. Why was he the way he was? It seemed like no one else was like him. We had a conversation, and at the end of it, my parents said, “Maybe that’s just the way he is.”



I remember one time in middle school, Bopha fell from a precipice. Bopha and Kamaria and I were walking home from school when Kamaria said, “Hey, let’s go look at the precipice.” We were all excited, having read the word “precipice” on the sign to the path, never having had much interest before, but that day we had read in our language arts class about a noble poet who stood proudly above the precipice. We thought there would be a beautiful view down into the gorge or valley below.

We walked and even ran a little down the path to the precipice, and then we came to it. We loved the sight. We saw cattle grazing far below us, and the shelf-like edges of the precipice asserted themselves. We all got very close to the edge, ignoring any fear, and Bopha, egged on by Kamaria and me, started to walk on a narrow shelf, beaming and smiling. I reached down and took her hand and suggested imperatively that she dance. We were having a good time, my hand in hers and Kamaria was laughing so hard. And then Bopha took her hand from mine (only our fingers had been touching) and did her own twirl, and lost balance, and fell off the ledge, screaming. We could see her fall and then saw her body break far below us, her voice cut short.

We had no idea what to do. What would we do? We had read about death in books, but we forgot everything we had read. Would we be in trouble? We thought of how we had participated in what had happened. But we thought that we should tell her parents. So we ran back up the path to the edge of the

wilderness and untied our horses where we'd left them, and rode back to our neighborhood, Bopha's horse following its friends, and tied up the horses outside Bopha's house. We rang the doorbell and Bopha's mom opened the door. "Children, has something bad happened?" "We were out at the precipice, and Bopha fell off and I think she died," Kamaria said. We were scared and upset. "Oh children," said Bopha's mom, "I'm so sorry." And she comforted us as we grieved.

We talked about what Bopha had meant to us, for a while, and Bopha's mom shared some stories of how she was as a little girl. Some of them I remembered, from when I was in kindergarten. Finally, we were more settled in our sadness. And Bopha's mom said, "Okay. You have suffered enough. I'm going to make you some snacks and bring something to show you." We sat in her living room, Kamaria on the carpet and me on the couch where Bopha's mom had sat. And we waited quietly, with nothing to say.

Bopha's mom came back with some little snacks, and then said, "I'll be back soon." She went off down the hallway that led to all the bedrooms, opened a door we could not see, and then soon enough returned... with Bopha. We could not believe what we were seeing, but since we were unacquainted with death, we were ready to believe anything. "Hello." she said quietly. "You thought I died, didn't you?"

We looked at her quietly and felt something we had never felt before, a sadness at joy. We were going to get excited that she was back, but instead we felt a quiet feeling like mourning. The value that we felt for her was more important than our excitement. And she knew her value to us from that, even supposing she hadn't heard our words about her, through the thin walls of the house.



I remember in high school we were giving reports on our personal heritages. I remember that Qasim got up right before I did. He

talked about how his family came fleeing the violence in Somalia, and about their past in the generations before that. I got up and gave my report. In my research, I had discovered many different threads to follow, whether my Irish ancestors or my wealthy English ancestors, but I chose to talk about one family name that came down my mom's side of the family. It was a Huguenot name, Protestants who lived in France and fled to other lands. This was back in the days when people killed each other over religion. The Huguenots in my family moved first to the Netherlands, then to England, then to America, which is where our family came from to come to here.