

## Flash Life

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She slowly raised her heavy eyelids and gazed upwards. The black spots were slowly merging into one big shadow. Some stubborn ones trembled slightly as they danced around the big black hole, as if trying desperately to decide whether to join forces with it or stand alone. But it wouldn't be long now. She could feel that; that was the only thing she was certain of anymore. Her breaths were getting shallow. It took almost all her effort to keep her eyelids from sliding down, and yet in an ironical sense, she had never felt more alive.

Somehow she had thought the pain would be much worse. But in fact the dull throb was almost soothing. It was the very thing that was making her feel alive. She wondered how long it would be before someone discovered her. Despite herself, her blue lips twitched feebly into a dry, humorless smile. She heard the faint squishy noise as her dry lips cracked open and began to bleed.

The stinging sensation as the beads of sweat from her forehead drifted in thin streams into her eyes made her blink feebly. Her vision was instantly clouded up. She had a slightly resigned feeling that it probably wasn't going to clear up completely for her ever again. A snapping sound attacked her right ear. She slowly turned around to the direction of the sound, and cringed backwards as she found herself almost nose to nose with a face staring right back at her. The exertion triggered her heart to run faster; she could hear the quickening pace echoing around the walls of the bathroom.

The face stared back at her unblinkingly for some seconds, and then drew back with a scornful sneer on her face. Then, from her kneeling position, she got to her full height and towered over the bathtub.

“Well, well, well,” the face scoffed. “If it isn’t the most pathetic thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Natasha,” she said softly, addressing her fifteen-year-old self, who had her arms crossed and was looking down at her with undisguised disgust.

“Yeah, that was what you named me during this age, yes,” Natasha agreed. “What was the story again? Oh yes, you watched an action movie with this Natasha heroine, got all dreamy-dreamy and thought you could be her one day, and started calling yourself Natasha? Haha. How long did this name last by the way? And what do you call yourself now?”

“Nothing. I am nothing,” she whispered. “I am none of them... all those names, inspirations. I am just... nobody.”

“Now now, don’t be too hard on yourself,” Natasha said carelessly, examining her nails. “You are plain old SeinSeim. The original that your parents named you. That’s not a bad name, either, is it? Dipped in diamonds... Although, there is none of that diamond-like quality in you at the moment... Oops, what am I saying... you have no more moments.”

“You can scoff all you want,” she said tiredly. “But yes, I have given up. Nothing is going to change.”

“You’ve always been weak,” Natasha accused. “But of course, we both know that, don’t we? That’s why you keep hiding behind your little self-given names. To hide your real weakness within, you try to put up these personas of people you find admirable. Jane, Jenelope, Catherine, Natasha, Willow. You hide behind all of us. But now you’ve grown tired of hiding all your life, have you? Pathetic.”

“You make me feel nostalgic, Natasha,” she smiled. “I remember myself when I was fifteen, when I was... well... you. Full of dreams, ambitions, and... life. It wasn’t all that long ago. And maybe twenty-two is too young to give up, but...”

“Wait, wait, let me fetch a pen,” Natasha interrupted sarcastically. “I feel like a suicide note is coming up. You want me to write it down as you speak?” She flipped her long, luxurious

waist-length hair back, pretending to take a pencil from behind her ear.

“My life is falling apart all around me,” she continued, ignoring Natasha’s sarcasm. “Naive as I was, I thought getting a job would finally be the pathway to get as near as I possibly could to that independent path I have always dreamt of. But I am far from independent. My life and decisions are still not in my grasp. The higher I climb in life, the higher their expectations become. No matter how much I achieve, it will never be enough in people’s eyes; they will only choose to see the downfalls. I am tired of always climbing and looking up to a higher goal, and never having the time to appreciate everything I have accomplished so far in hand. I am sick and tired of being pressurized all my life. I don't want to do this anymore. I just want to escape... but escape is not coming.. If the only release from this hell is death, then I gladly welcome it with my bare open arms...”

“Well, welcome is an understatement. You actually beckoned it,” Natasha said dismissively, eying critically at the red-colored water her twenty-two year old self was lying in. “We all have to fight for what we want in life. It’s your pathetic problem that you decide to give up before even a half-attempt.”

She bent down and picked up a black book lying helplessly on its spine near the bath tub.

“So this is the book the Lady Orange-Jasmine gave you when you were nine. Took you long enough to write in it. And wouldn’t you know it, the entries are all addressed to Daddy! All of your other alter egos writing to Daddy, eh? How rude of you not to give me a part.”

“I knew you would want to have the last word. So I saved the last entry for you.”

“Very thoughtful, I appreciate that. And since you have already slit your wrists, you cannot contradict me as you’ve always done,” Natasha said maliciously. “But for now, let’s see what your pathetic lot has to say, shall we? I feel sure it is all very informative, very

sentimental, and very boring. But it will pass the time. For you, that is.” Another dark chuckle. SeinSeim just let her purple eyelids droop shut without any further word.

“First entry. By the original herself. Hear Ms. SeimSeim,” Natasha announced.

*SeinSeim:*

Hi Papa

Remember when I was young, and everyone would ask me, “When you are big, what are you going to be?”, and I would answer “I don’t know”? Well, the fact is that this is still sadly the case at this present day and age. Maybe this is one of the reasons of my downfall. My inability to stand up firmly to my beliefs, opinions, or understand my real self... my weak-mindedness as mother calls it.

You asked me in one of our last conversations, “Have I ever let you down as a father?” My answer was of course, “No, Papa.” I don’t really know why. Maybe it was because I felt that my faults and my wrong choices were my own fate. Or maybe it was that life-long, somewhat frustrated desire to always please you.

You see, since very early in life, I understood life only as you paved it for me and that my sole purpose in living was following that path. One of my early memories in life were your zealous eyes as you spoke, staring fiercely into the air, “They make fun of me, because I cannot afford to send my daughter to those fancy international schools, eh? I’ll show them.” The bright, overzealous eyes turned to me. “You will show them. You will show those high-and-mighty folks that my common home-schooled daughter can beat any of those international schooled brats in terms of English language skills. You have to!” Yes, I understood since I was seven that my sole purpose in life was to make you proud. And believe me, I tried as hard as I possibly could until the harsh realities of life caught up with me, and I gave that up as a hopeless task.

But I seem to be straying the point here. You asked me that day, if you were at fault. The point is sometimes in life, it is hard to distinguish where one's fault begins and one's ends. You wanted me to achieve everything you were not able to in your life, in other words, to live through me. That was not a fault. And I admit, by the time I entered the rebellious teenage stage in life, I resented this pressure. But that could not be said as a fault either, as I am only human. I did not have what one would call a very normal childhood. But again, that was not your fault.

When one reflects carefully, I actually have a lot in common with you. But unfortunately, they do not happen to be those qualities you are proud of. They are those little characteristics that you obviously hate in yourself and try to hide, and maybe that's why it annoys you so much to see those in me.

But I seem to be babbling. I think to answer your question, it is better to let *them* speak for themselves. *SeinSeim*

*Jane:*

Hey Daddy

I am the early childhood version of SeinSeim, and I am probably the most cheerful one of the lot. After all, at the time I was created, life was pretty serene and happy, wasn't it? I had come to this beautiful foreign city for real, and I was thankfully allowed to leave that horrible primary school I hated with all my childish heart. And I was introduced by you an entirely delightful way of learning English. Gone were those boring English textbooks I was made to study in school, and in were those graded readers that were supposed to steadily increase in level as my English improved. Life was serene, living within the four walls of our home, drifting off to the fantasy world within the novels. But underneath all that happiness, there had to be a certain unfulfilled need or a certain unhappiness, otherwise SeinSeim wouldn't have created me, would she? You see, your daughter is one of those people who conjures up

shields, or alter egos as psychologists call them, whenever she couldn't face something in her life, and hides herself behind that personality.

So why did she decide to create me? What did her life lack at that point? Well, I admit there were some times in my time, when I would stare woefully out of the window at the outside world; a world that was out of my reach. And sometimes at those children around my age playing wildly, running around, and just being... kids. I was not allowed to leave the room to that world outside without someone to accompany me and hold my hand. But mostly, it was okay. After all, as I repeatedly told myself, I was able to escape into sophisticated worlds within the stories I was reading. Why would I want that normal, common life of those children? What was so interesting there in that forbidden outside world anyway? See, I told you I was a cheerful soul. But there might be something to observe here. What is the mentality of a child, growing within the four walls of her room, being exposed to no real society or culture, except those that she experienced while reading in those stories written of the Western world and culture? *Jane*

*Jenelope:*

Hello Father

You might be familiar with my name. You thought it was just a silly little pen name your daughter adopted when she started writing. But in reality, I am much more than that. I am the person who has to step out in order to face all the bitter disappointment your daughter faced in life. Suffice it to say, during all those incidents that led your daughter to gradually start losing the hope that she was capable of ever making you proud, you were actually interacting with me. Let us take a trip down that memory lane, shall we?

She was eleven years of age. She felt she had read enough English materials by now to actually tackle the higher skill of writing. She had written a short story, her first ever which she was very excited

about. Finally, she presented her last draft to you and waited anxiously as you read it. But as soon as she saw your brow knitting into a frown, she quickly jumped behind me, and there I was, standing in front of you instead. You said the first part seemed to have no connection to the rest of the story, and until that was fixed, you refused to read any further. Personally, I felt that you were a bit harsh on a kid who had just produced her first piece of writing at eleven, but the girl took your criticism to heart and worked hard to repair her mistake.

The next incident was a bit harder on her mentality. You had a guest in your house whom you wanted to impress through your daughter's English skills at such a young age. But as fate would have it, your daughter simply refused to speak English to a person of her own nationality. But she could see the fury ball you were swallowing back for later, and of course I was summoned. And explode the fury ball did. You called her all kinds of names. But what hurt her most was your comment that she will never go any further in life than washing plates as a servant in people's house due to her disability to communicate with people. I was biting my tongue to refrain from asking you what else you expected when you confine a kid within the walls of her house without much interaction with society outside. You were scared that any interaction with the outside world would cause her to lose interest in her books, and while that strategy certainly served its purpose, it also had its drawbacks, and this was it. But what could I do? I was only a shield, I had no power of speech. And when I left her, she cried all night until her pillow was soaked. These are just two of the many incidents that made her finally realize, she would never be successful in making you proud. No matter how hard she tried, she would never be good enough.

*Jenelope*

*Catherine:*

I was the one who witnessed the whole saga of the Lady Orange-Jasmine, which began when SeinSeim was nine. Of course at that

age, I could not fully understand the significance behind the reason why you wanted me to lie about us meeting that lady under the bridge, or why mother was upset about it when she eventually knew about it. I shall refer to her as Lady Orange-Jasmine, because when I think back to the beginning of this all, the sweet strong smell of orange jasmine that grew in front of her place fills my nose. You told me you had found a really smart friend who would be great for my personal growth as a woman. "Aunty is really skilled in English and all other things," you gushed, your mood uncharacteristically good. "Hang out with her and you will go far." I didn't really understand the reason for your positive mood, but I liked the idea of having a friend. After all, the word 'friend' had become an alien term since I left our country. And Lady Orange-Jasmine was very nice and seemed like an easy-going, fun adult.

Mother wasn't pleased about my new friendship, and she was even less pleased about your friendship with her. But being a dependant woman who had given up her career to be here with you, she didn't have a lot of power to voice her feelings. She resorted to having mysterious illnesses and heart flutters, and of course gossiping about you and her to me. Looking back, this could be another reason why I was so attached to Lady Orange-Jasmine. She represented the strong, independent figure in a woman that I once tried to find in mother, but failed.

I remember the first meeting between Lady Orange-Jasmine and mother. We had invited her over for lunch, cooked by mother. It was filled with that meaningless social talk you grown-ups like to engage in. Lady Orange-Jasmine praised mother's cooking, and Mother beamed widely while piling food in the Lady's plate while urging her to eat more, as if she hadn't been secretly calling her all kinds of name that ever existed during her rants with me as audience. This was the first time in life that I observed, to put quite frankly, the fakeness of adults. The so-called social etiquette that you grown-ups like to hide behind. I had never enjoyed Shakespeare much, but at that instant, I understood the meaning of the line

where Lady Macbeth said to be sweet as a flower, but to be the serpent underneath it. When I grew up, would it be also expected of me to be skilled in this social etiquette, which I now associated with insincerity and fakeness; poison hidden underneath a sweet smile or polite words? It was a scary thought. But otherwise I was content. Lady Orange-Jasmine was a good friend to me. And I noticed that when you were around her, you normally didn't have that ready-to-explode temper you usually employed at home. So if she made you happy, I was happy, too. I told myself mother's unhappiness would heal with time.

But of course, as usual, there is a reason for my character being born. No matter how much SeinSeim told herself she was fine with all these events, a part of resented being brought to the middle of a case that had nothing to do with a child. She sometimes felt she was being pulled from all ends; her mother wanted her to be her sympathizer, a task which was too emotionally heavy for a child her age, and on the other hand, she couldn't bring herself to dislike the lady that was her only friend in the world. And so, I was born to take her guilt.

You see, I offered you maximum understanding when it was your turn. But when that same understanding wasn't returned when I was the one making mistakes now, I started to reflect more on the significance of this saga on my life. That night, when I told you I was in trouble, you said to me, "People had warned me about this. But I sincerely thought my daughter had more sense. I thought my daughter would know better than to commit this mistake." What I didn't reply, father, was "When my own father couldn't avoid this mistake, back when he was aged 42, what are my odds, at age 22?"  
*Catherine*

### *Willow*

I started my first job at age nineteen. Well actually SeinSeim did, and as the environment was too hectic and stressful for her to

handle with her inapt social skills and low self-confidence, she became Willow at work. And that's when I met him.

When one was feeling helpless and lonely, a supportive co-worker could mean the world to them. And that was how he made himself out to be. It is embarrassing to remember just how far I fell into the pit of deception. But in the beginning he was a welcome change to my stressful life. In so many ways, he started out as a father-figure for me, but without all the pressures that came with a real father. He couldn't care less if I didn't achieve GPA 4.00 in my Masters studies, or if I never got the title of 'Dr.' attached to my name, as long as I chatted with him and just be his friend.

But things got out of hand, as they usually do in SeinSeim's life. Soon friendship took another level before I even had time to think. But after nearly three years of struggling, I was finally strong enough to decide that down that path, there was hardly anything else except pain. I made up my mind to leave that path for good, but I didn't escape with much luck. And the rest is all public knowledge now, I believe. *Willow*

### *SeinSeim*

Well, Papa, maybe it is strange I am addressing all these posts to you, but I have always been a better writer than talker. And at this point, so much damage has been done to our relationship, which I believe both of us are equally responsible for, that it is impossible to ever have interaction with each other again. This is yet another path that would be filled with only disappointment on both sides if we walked on further. And what we have in common is our pride where we would never admit if we were at fault and strike defensively like snakes if anyone dared to point out our weaknesses, isn't it? But I would like to conclude by saying that to human is to err. So if I forgive all your weaknesses, will you also forgive mine? *SeinSeim*

“Touching. Almost melts my cold, unfeeling heart,” Natasha remarked. There was no reply from SeinSeim. “Now my turn.”

*Natasha:*

Dear Dr. SeinLwin

I am the strongest one among your pathetic daughter’s creations, which is why I am the only one that is able to exist outside of her mind. Your daughter spent her entire life apologizing for her existence and feeling inadequate. But do you know what I have learned from my bemused observations of your daughter’s oh-so-messed-up life? That nobody is ever perfect. You, God forbid, are not perfect. Neither is she. Let’s get one thing straight. No human being can be a faultless angel, and that includes parents too. So instead of parents trying so hard to take up the role of God-sent leaders who are supposed to teach us to differentiate from right and wrong, why can’t we walk side by side instead on this journey of life and learn from each other’s mistakes as equals?

But I am truly grateful to you as you have made me the person I am today. And there are some certain philosophies of yours on life that I truly admire. I remember when, long ago, your wife warned you to be careful because people were starting to talk about Lady Orange-Jasmine and you. You sneered and said, “Is SeinLwin supposed to be scared because people are talking about him? You’ve got the wrong man, sir! People need to mind their own business, that’s what. And not poke their noses into matters not concerning them.”

Well, I don’t know if you really meant that, or if the words just came out in a fit of anger. But I have always been a bit impatient with the Asian society’s obsession with what the neighbors think of us. Maybe I am a bit too western in my thinking, but if you grew up out of the touch of the surrounding world and with your nose in western books, so would you. So don’t judge me here. In this society we live in, everyone’s actions are governed by the thought

'What will the Neighbor say????' It is kind of ironic how much energy and consideration gets put into this question that can drive people to do anything to stay on in the good side of the neighbor. Because one day, when you are dead and buried six feet underground, with only worms for company, I bet the neighbor will be merrily moving on to the next hot topic while doing their daily tasks.

Your daughter was too weak to realize that, but I am not. But luckily, I will be the one taking charge from now on, after your miserable daughter signs off. Because you see, she has given me life by taking away her own. After she ceases to exist, I shall step into existence. So where was I? Oh yes, the neighbors. I owe the neighbors nothing. And soon, there would be something new for the neighbors to talk about, so why should I care? There always is something new that comes up to replace old topics, isn't there? In any case, I was not born to make anyone happy. I was born to be me. My name is Natasha Vassari. And I make no apologies for my existence. *Natasha Vassari*

Natasha got up from her sitting position. She outstretched her hands and flexed her fingers. She was real. She was solid. And she was taking control of her life. Turning to the now empty bath-tub, she asked, "And what did you ever do with the life given to you, except meekly walk the path paved for you by others?"