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Cathy's Key

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Extract

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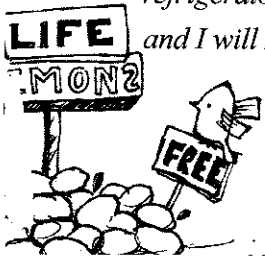


Leaving St. Louis (Hour of the Late-Night Greyhound Station)

It was just past midnight and I was trudging through the St. Louis Greyhound station, a grim building obviously brought to you by the people who design high school bathrooms. I had spent two and a half days on the bus to get here, and now, after only a few hours in St. Louis, I was about to spend another two and a half days getting home to San Francisco. My hair smelled like diesel fuel and my teeth felt as if they were covered in Greyhound upholstery. But the fighting spirit of the Vickers clan means we never give up. We just whine to our friends.

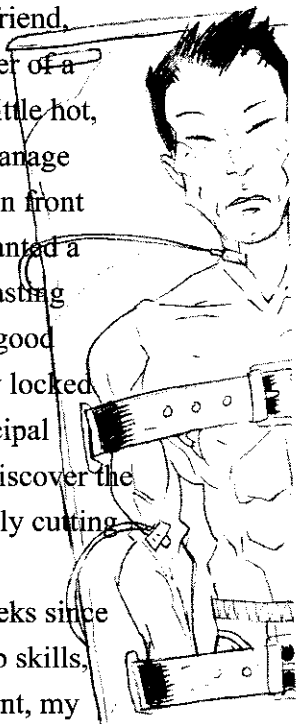
I flipped open my cell phone and called my best buddy, Emma, for the ninth time in the last hour. For the ninth time I got to listen to her voicemail message.

"I'm sorry, Emma's answering machine is broken. This is her refrigerator. Please leave your message at the sound of the beep, and I will stick it to myself with one of these little magnets."



"Hey there, this is Cathy. Answer your phone before I blow it up with my telepathic death rays." I snapped the phone shut and stuffed it back into my pocket.

How I Spent My Summer Vacation (Hour of the Recap)

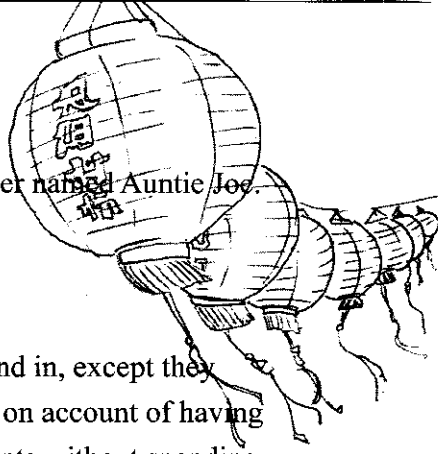


It had been six months since I found out my boyfriend, Victor, was immortal. Yes, immortal: as in, the owner of a literally perfect body; strong, fast, and more than a little hot, which a young man ought to be if he can possibly manage it. I had seen Victor, riddled with bullet holes, heal in front of my eyes. It sounds great, I know—who hasn't wanted a boyfriend you could push in front of a bus with no lasting consequences?—but in practice it didn't do me any good because I never got to see the guy. He was currently locked in a secret lab somewhere working two jobs—"principal scientist" and "number one guinea pig"—trying to discover the biochemical secrets of immortality. This was severely cutting into our quality time.

Beyond my elusive boyfriend, it had been six weeks since I graduated from high school with no measurable job skills, unless Advanced Doodling counts. To my amazement, my mother's gloomy assessment of the job market for eighteen-year-old cartoonists with short attention spans appeared to be fairly accurate, and I had been getting fired from roughly one crappy entry-level job per week since school got out.

Q: Cathy, why did you take a Greyhound to St. Louis in the first place?

L.



A: To see an immortal fortune-teller named Auntie Joe. Aren't you glad you asked?

About Immortals

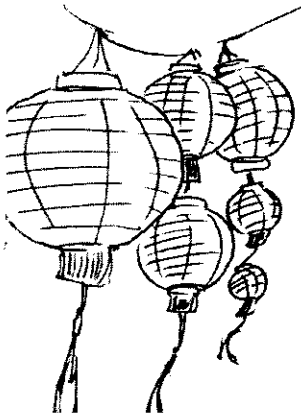
They exist. For the most part, they blend in, except they tend to have a little extra spending money on account of having a jillion years to fatten their savings accounts without spending a penny on life insurance.

According to Victor, immortals don't know they are immortal until the moment they should have died. Something about the near-death experience seems to flip the switch on the immortality gene. Victor had been twenty-two when he was trapped in the mining accident that should have killed him. Now he would be twenty-two forever.

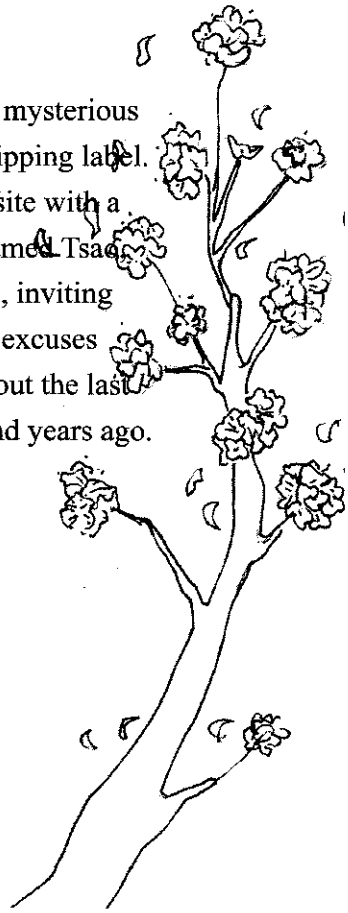


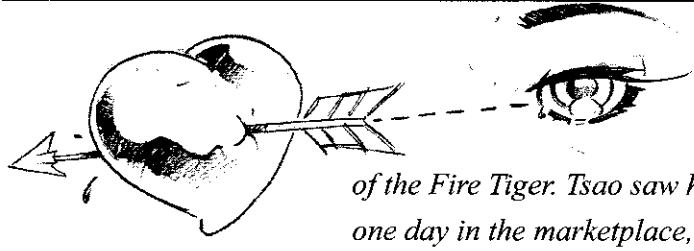
About Auntie Joe

At the end of my last set of adventures, I got a mysterious package with a St. Louis phone number on the shipping label. When I called the number, I found it led to a website with a message just for me. It was about an immortal named Tsao who had been haunting me for the last six months, inviting me to dinner, dropping by my house, and making excuses to be alone with me. The message was a story about the last days before Tsao had become immortal, a thousand years ago. Here's the business end of the story:



...Now it chanced that in the royal city at that time there lived a young woman of great spirit born on the first day of the year





of the Fire Tiger. Tsao saw her one day in the marketplace, and her glance passed through his heart like an arrow: the breath and life struck from him in an instant, and the sound of the bowstring still humming.

He pursued the girl and waited on her and sent her gifts. She was flattered by his attention but her heart was promised to another man—a cheerful shoemaker whose little shop was but two streets from her home.

The next day, the bodies of the shoemaker and the girl were found, stabbed and broken, at the bottom of a well...



If you add in the fact that I, too, was born on the first day of the Year of the Fire Tiger, you can see why that story got my attention.

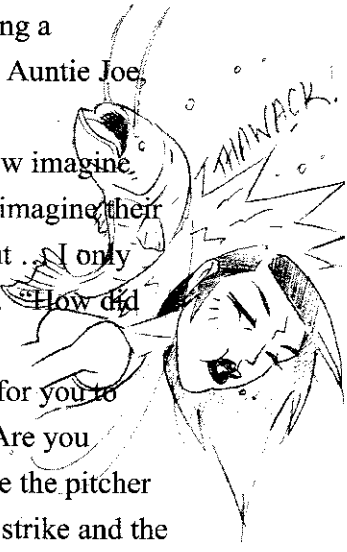
When I called the owner of the website, she said she had some special news she wanted me to hear in person, so off I went to St. Louis. When I got there, the fortune-teller's address turned out to be Busch Stadium, home of the St. Louis Cardinals. So there I stood in the parking lot, feeling like a moron, while people streamed by me to see the Cardinals play the Chicago Bulls. Since the next bus back to San Francisco

www.luckyfortuneforyou.com/cathy.html

Or was it the Blackhawks?

wasn't going to leave for a couple of hours, I bought a cheap ticket and hiked up to the nosebleed section in left field.

There was a fat black lady with gold hoop earrings and polyester pants sitting in the seat next to mine and chugging beer from a plastic cup. "So, Cathy Vickers shows up at last." She belched and I realized she was wearing a luckyfortuneforyou.com t-shirt. "You can call me Auntie Joe, Sugar. I've been expecting you."



Imagine somebody completely astonished. Now imagine hitting them in the face with a dead catfish. Now imagine their expression. That's what was on my face. "But, but . . . I only bought my ticket five minutes ago," I said weakly. "How did you know I would show up here?"

"What about the words 'fortune-teller' is hard for you to understand?" Auntie Joe said. "Come on, Blue! Are you blind?" she shouted at the umpire, moments before the pitcher threw the ball. A second later the umpire called a strike and the fans around us groaned. "That's why I needed you to come out here in person. You needed to understand that when I say I can see the future, child, I ain't just whistling Dixie."

My brain was cramping like it was in labor and the baby was stuck. "I was expecting you to be Chinese," I whimpered.

"Oh, I'm every kind of psychic that pays, honey," Auntie Joe said indulgently. "I got businesses to cater to every kind of clientele. Chinese I Ching, voodoo dolls, Gypsy tarot card reading, you name it. I even got a nice little application my software dude programmed that can tell your fortune from the spam in your junk mail folder," she said. "Anyway—about Mr. Tsao. If he can't marry you, he *will* kill you. You know that, don't you?"

The look on her face said she wasn't kidding. I gulped. It wasn't the romantic marriage proposal of every girl's dreams, that's for sure. On the plus side, Tsao had become an immortal when he was still a young man, so it didn't feel like being hit on by a dirty old guy. He was handsome, sophisticated, and very, very rich. On the down side, he was apparently a psychopathic killer, and, just to make things especially weird, he was Victor's dad. That's right: the man stalking me was my boyfriend's father.

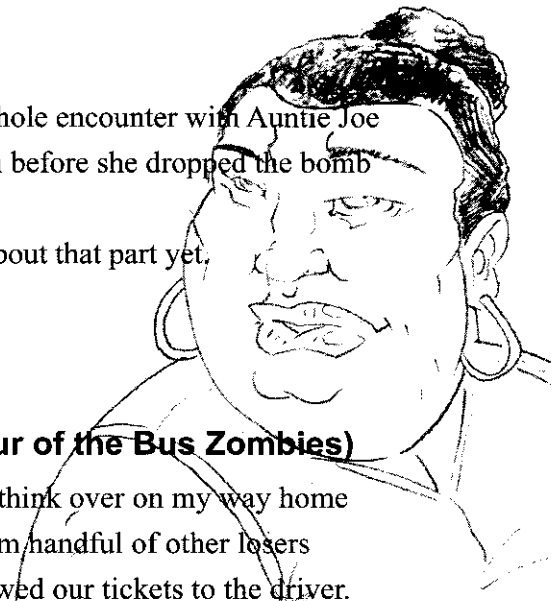
Ew.

As you can imagine, the whole encounter with Auntie Joe had me pretty shaken up, even before she dropped the bomb about my father.

But I don't want to think about that part yet.

Recap over.





Just Past Midnight (Hour of the Bus Zombies)

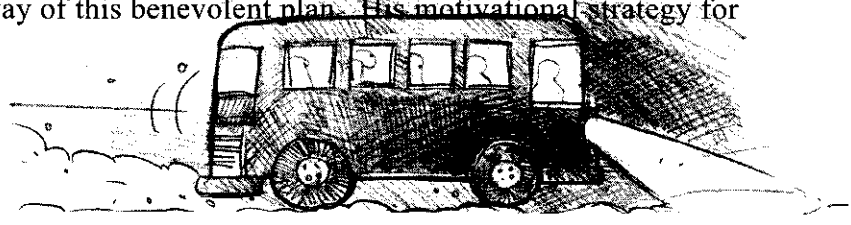
The point is, I had a lot to think over on my way home from St. Louis. Me and a glum handful of other losers shuffled onto the bus and showed our tickets to the driver. There weren't many people getting on this particular bus, especially since it was delayed by six hours of mechanical breakdown, but on the bright side, at least I had a whole row to myself. Ah, back again into that familiar Greyhound smell: "dirty bathroom" was the foreground scent, of course, punching through an underlying aroma of cheap motel room, with an added fragrance of gasoline and topped off with a delicate hint of strangers' socks. I was contemplating a line of fashion accessories to go with the experience—perhaps

mascara in "Tire-Skid Black" and eye shadow in "Dazzling Dashboard Blue."

I dropped into my seat and wriggled out of my backpack, which was currently stuffed to bulging, like one of those pictures of a snake that's eaten a goat or a filing cabinet or something. I had crammed the backpack full of enough clothes for five days, a mixed bag of art supplies (pencils, pastels, charcoal sticks, fixative, erasers, etc.), my purse, my sketchbook, and a printout of the pages of my diary that covered the whole strange Victor saga, from the moment he dumped me to the day I found out he was a) immortal, b) inexplicably still in love with me, and c) going to be trapped like a Mad Scientist in a dungeon lab for the foreseeable future.

I was trying to figure out what to do about Tsao in particular and immortals in general. I had printed out my diary thinking that on a two-day bus ride I could pore over those pages, as well as all the extra documents and clues I had found, filched, and stolen, and I would Discover Important New Facts by Paying Close Attention to Them. What really happened is that I stared out the bus window a lot and made killer doodles on the printouts. Careful analysis has never been my long suit.

The fact is, my whole life felt weirdly out of focus. I had a boyfriend I never saw. I missed him terribly—the touch of his hand, the way he laughed at my jokes, and the way he made me feel like I was always the most fascinating person in the room. But Victor was trapped working under the thumb of the most powerful immortal I knew, Ancestor Lu. Ancestor Lu wanted to bring eternal life to everyone, and was perfectly happy to murder anybody who got in the way of this benevolent plan. His motivational strategy for

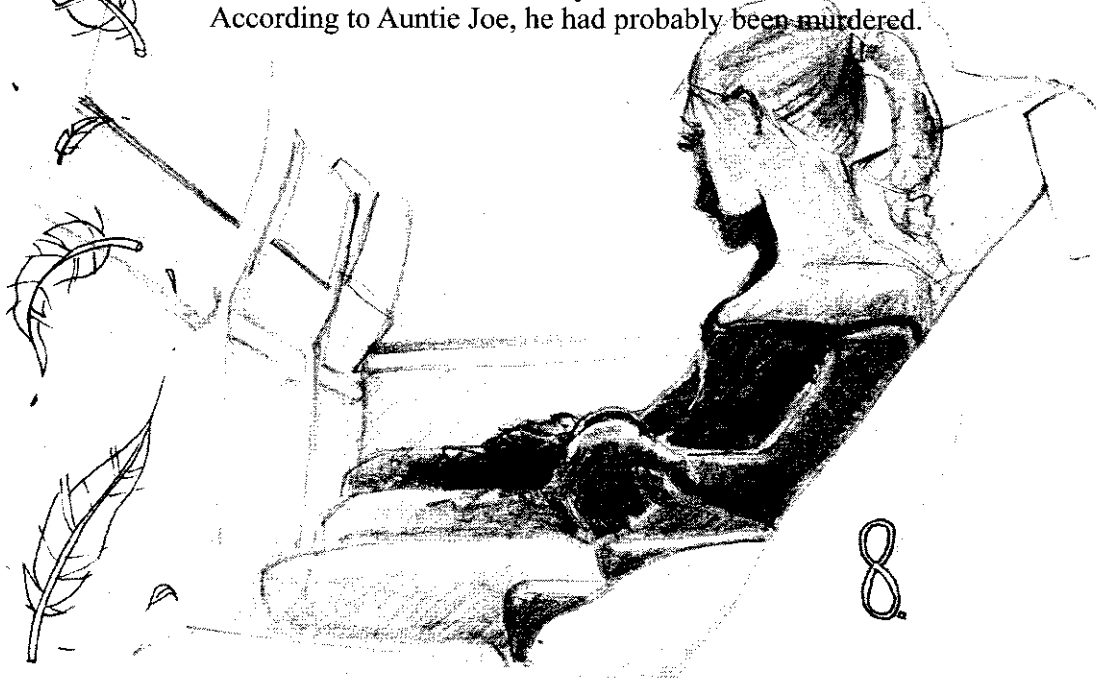


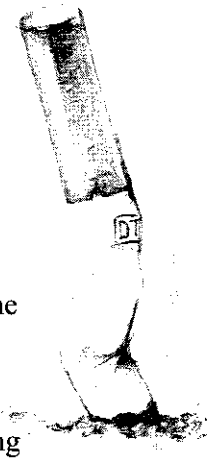
Victor was to tell him that if the research didn't go well, I would be killed.

This seemed to work on Victor, but it was a lot of guilt for one girl to carry. A bikini-wearing nun caught betting on dog fights would not feel the guilt I was carrying around at the idea that Victor was strapped to a table somewhere getting chunks of his liver scooped out on a regular basis on my account. Plus, if you're at home keeping score of my romantic troubles, don't forget the thing about Victor's dad being a psychopathic killer with a crush on me. I guess all relationships have their obstacles, but if you come whining to me with the old "my boyfriend is allergic to my cat" complaint, don't expect a lot of sympathy.

Just the plain existence of immortals left me unbalanced. On one hand, it was pretty neat to learn that the world was full of wonders and mysteries I had never imagined but as a practical matter my life was more boring than it had ever been. I was out of high school and broke, with no sign of a good job coming. Worst of all, according to Auntie Joe, my father hadn't died of a heart attack two years ago, like the doctor had told me.

According to Auntie Joe, he had probably been murdered.





Double Trouble

A blond girl about my own age was curled up in the seats across the aisle from me. Her gray sweatshirt said ***Double Trouble,*** and I could smell the stale cigarette smoke on it. She was wearing a pair of ratty blue jeans, grimy at the hems like she'd been wearing them for days. She used cheap blue eye shadow and lots of it. The last remains of a bruise were fading on her right cheek. I looked up and found she was watching me with pickpocket's eyes.

The calculating look instantly disappeared. "Hey there, my name's Jewel!" she said, giving me a big ol' smile. "Say, I don't suppose you might have fifty cents or something for a candy bar?"

"Uh—"

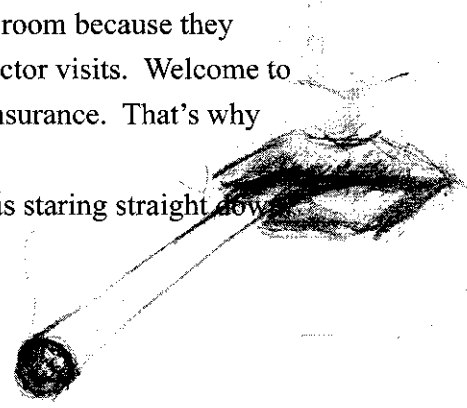
"I have to eat a little bit real regular on account of I have these issues with my blood sugar. My whole family's like that, we get diabetes unless we're real careful. Mamaw—she isn't really Mom's momma but we call her that—she lost a leg from it. Started to rot and they had to cut it off. Then she went blind," Jewel said. "So I need to eat if I can," she added.



My mother is a nurse. She says giving money to panhandlers is a waste of time. Whatever the con is, every dime of it gets spent on liquor and drugs. She sees kids like Jewel all the time. They get stoned or drunk and then they get hurt and come into the emergency room because they don't have any health care to cover doctor visits. Welcome to America, land without public health insurance. That's why they call it the home of the brave.

All the time Jewel was talking I was staring straight down. No eye contact at all.





10.

"I had me some spending money for the trip only I gave it to this guy who said he really needed it because he had to make this car payment which he could have done only he had loaned some money to a buddy. I forget the exact story."

Pause.

"Plus the ticket cost way more than it should have. I don't know if maybe the fare sign on the bus was messed up or something."

Pause.

I finally looked up at her. "I don't have any money."

Big double take.

"Oh! I'm sorry! You and me, we're in the same boat, then!" Jewel's voice was friendly, but her eyes were hard. "That's funny, ain't it? Here I am, telling you my story, only you could just be telling me yours, couldn't you? On account of you got nothing in that purse of yours but...hair ties and lipsticks." I was back to staring down at my sketchbook, but I could feel her cold little eyes pricing out the leather jacket Victor had given me and the silk shirt I had found at a thrift store. "Not a dime to spare, neither one of us," she said. "What are the odds?"

