

The Only Tricks We Know

by Emily X.R. Pan

The day Eugene told me his secret he gave me a bouquet of lilies.
Ice clung to the petals like fuzz.

Sorry about the frost, he said. That was an accident.

I stuck my nose into the flowers but they were too chilled to get
any smell out of them. It puzzled me that the ice hadn't melted—this
was mid-June.

The thing is, he said, my trick is the weather.

The weather, I repeated.

That's my schtick, you know? Everyone's got to have a schtick.

We were in Washington Square Park. There was a guy playing
Rachmaninoff on an upright piano.

Pick a weather, Eugene said.

I crossed my arms. Snow. Bet you can't do snow.

Snow? Well ... might be complicated.

You're so full of shit, I said, giving him a playful punch to the
shoulder.

It's not that. He hesitated.

Then what?

He straightened. Alright, he said, closing his eyes, clenching his
fists.

A breeze crossed my face. The humid air thinned, turned less
compressed. A mushy gray took over the sky and something brushed
my nose.

Snowflakes meandered down from the summer clouds. All over
the park people were exclaiming about Snow! In June!

We stood for a while, watching the sprinkling white. The cold
skated down my back and the pianist ended with his eyes closed on
a dark heavy chord. Eugene smiled at me like a little boy.

* * *

The orange sound of sirens went wheeling past—our restaurant
had opened its front windows. It was a nice evening: the moon

rimmed in red, the air warm but not sticky. I smoothed a thick napkin against my lap.

How about indoors? I glanced up at the golden ceiling.

Eugene snapped his fingers. A miniature raincloud swirled into existence above our table, gray mist shifting mere inches from my nose. Snapped his fingers, and there was a flash and a clap of thunder—the sound was small, like a Chihuahua's bark. Droplets pelted down, putting out the candle, wetting the basket of bread.

Eugene wiggled his eyebrows. The rain turned to hail, tinkling against our plates. A twitch of his pinky and the drumming stopped. The tiniest of snowflakes dusted my soup spoon.

A waitress appeared at our table, clearing her throat.

The cloud vanished.

Can I get another napkin? Eugene said pleasantly, mopping away water that had gotten on his face.

The waitress made a clipped noise of exasperation and turned away.

How do you do it? I asked.

With my mind, he answered. You could call it *brainstorming*.

Ha ha.

He was quiet. I saw how he watched me. He wanted to know *my* trick.

There was a twinge in my chest. I had no obligation to share.

Snow's melted into my wine, I said.

His eyes were dark with disappointment. He looked away and said, We'll order another glass.

* * *

Eugene and I first met by being in the same Wednesday rehab group. The owner of the Hanging Crows Bar let us have the basement for an hour each week. He was a former member, said it was thanks to us that he'd gotten his life back, though we never did find out what his trick was.

That was kind of the rule with this thing. You didn't have to offer it up if you didn't want to—though some couldn't help it. There was a girl always chewing at shiny white fibers, spitting wads into a can.

She only wore clothes spun from her own cobwebs, and you could see her dark areolae through the sticky silk. One man had weird brown patches on his head that rearranged their shapes every time we saw him. Took me forever to realize they weren't hair but actually tiny *moths* holding very still.

People talk about wearing your heart on your sleeve—well, those were the ones who had no choice in the matter. There were a bunch of the other kind too, people like Eugene and me, who could keep their secrets. I'd sit there squinting into the dim light, trying to guess people's tricks. Some of them you'd never figure out, no matter how creative you got.

One guy *digested metal*—paperclips, wristwatch links, springs of ballpoint pens—and shat them out in pieces of sterling silver. Said he got the most awful cramps before going to the bathroom. He told us, Maybe wouldn't mind if what came out was platinum or twenty-four carat gold, but no way was it worth that kinda pain for sterling fuckin' silver.

I could never remember his name, and too much time had passed to ask, but Sterling Silver Guy and I sometimes stayed for drinks after everyone left.

So you and Eugene, eh? he said one night, grinning over his pale ale.

Yeah, I said shyly.

You guys have talked? Like *really* talked?

My cheeks grew hot; I knew what he meant.

No, I said. But he's told me about himself. I can tell he wants me to reciprocate.

Sterling Silver Guy nodded me on.

What if he doesn't like what I say? Who wants to hear something so awful?

He tilted his head, looked me in the eye and said, Wouldn't you prefer honesty?

I'm not so sure.

He leaned in close. You still get your ... urges?

Why did he have to say it like it was ... sexual or something? It was disgusting. It was morbid. My *urges*. I'd told him about my trick in a fit of drunken solidarity, and immediately regretted it.

I don't think they'll ever go away, I said. Even now—
I tried not to look at his chest.

* * *

I waited for Eugene to ask about my trick, but soon months had churned by and we didn't even mention rehab anymore. We'd stopped going to meetings around the time I moved into his place.

Then, one day after we'd been living together eight months:

I think it's time for us to talk seriously about stuff, he said, grabbing a tea bag and pouring hot water into my mug.

What do you mean? I said.

I waited for the *T* word to come out. What would I say?

Do you feel— he began. He cleared his throat. I want us to be perfectly honest with each other.

Okay, I said, preparing every muscle in my body for the lie I might have to tell.

I don't ... want to scare you with this. I know some people might think it's too early, but.

I clenched and unclenched my fists. But what?

I don't think I'll ever feel this way about anyone else, you know? So I just wanted to know.

Know what? I said.

Eugene leaned forward and scooted the mug toward me. Thick little clouds swirled inside.

Like blowing out candles, he said.

I puffed out a breath of air. The clouds disappeared. At the mug's bottom was a bright ring: a diamond between two rubies shining like blood.

Eugene fished it out for me.

I was stunned and silent. His eyes pooled with fear.

Then I kissed him, and it began snowing right in the living room.

Eugene's hands found the edge of my shirt. Guilt struck me; I'd forgotten to turn up the heat and now his lips were strangely icy. But

he didn't seem to care. His body pressed to mine, tilted me back. We forgot about gravity and went horizontal.

* * *

We had our wedding on a cruise boat. We only had four hours out on the Hudson, but Eugene made sure the sky was warm and bright, the water smooth.

For the briefest of moments, while the dress was being laced up my back, I let sadness flood the space between my ribs. I missed my family.

That was the problem with tricks. It was never your choice; you were born that way. And the day your family discovered it—when they found you crouching over that red slime of flesh, not quite understanding yourself how the still-beating heart of your best friend had gotten into the jar, and didn't hearts need oxygen? and what was it *pumping?*—was the same day they disowned you. And you swear to God you didn't do it, you seriously have no idea how it happened, Mom!

But they'll never look at you the same.

So you'd rather they never looked at you again.

Eugene and I had foreseen the stickiness of these emotions, of course, so we invited the rehab group. It felt right. Plus, it was thanks to them that we'd found each other in the first place.

We did our vows fast. Eugene drew clouds around the boat, conjured up a donut-shaped storm. The air crackled with static. We stayed dry in the center hole.

I looked out at our guests. There was the same thirst in everyone's eyes. They'd all come for the same reason: to witness proof that cursed, misfortunate souls still got happy endings.

When it was my turn to speak, Eugene's face scrunched up. Tears streamed down his cheeks and an involuntary shower of salty rain came dumping down on everyone.

* * *

After our guests had gone, Eugene and I lingered in the harbor, my dress blowing everywhere. He filled the sky with webs of lightning. Thunder exploded like applause.

I took his face in my hands and noticed his bloodshot eyes. Veins bulged out from his skin. He was trembling.

What's the matter? I said.

Eugene smiled. Nothing. Just an occasional side effect.

What do you mean?

Don't worry about it, he said, and pressed into me for a wet kiss.

* * *

We moved into a little house upstate where there was nothing but trees and sky, and unpacked our new lives in a weekend.

A severe weather alert popped up just as we'd made plans to go for an epic hike. Eugene chased the dark sky away.

Rain check on that storm, he said with a smirk.

The local news replayed the footage of spinning clouds blown apart by a new, unexplained wind; we laughed at their attempts to diagram what had happened in the sky.

Under a fat sun we raced, threading our way through nearby woods. Snowflakes trailed us everywhere. We got lost in the trees and found our way back to the house sometime predawn. Drenched and sticky and not ready to sleep, we rolled our bodies together, grinned into each other's necks.

Eugene made it snow above our pillows: delicate little flakes that tasted almondy. When I turned to face him I noticed the thick frost over his cheeks. It cracked apart where his smile made dimples.

Are you okay? Is this normal? I traced his cold jaw with a finger.

Oh, this? He flicked away a few pieces of white. It's nothing. Happens sometimes from the weather stuff.

Ice flakes fell between us as he moved to kiss me. His lips were so cold I wondered if my tongue might get stuck.

Beams of morning sun curled around the edges of our curtains but we ignored them. When Eugene was asleep, I propped myself up on an elbow to better see his smooth cheeks, the hint of teeth between his lips, the occasional flutter of his lashes.

There was a lurch in my chest. Hunger—that's what it was, aching in my muscles, in my gut. I couldn't be close enough to Eugene, couldn't love him more. This thought brought a nervy wriggling, a

sharp twist of pain that made me gasp. Eugene shifted in his sleep.

It occurred to me to tug the blankets down and look at his chest, and that was when I saw. The skin was discolored and uneven, tinged purple, accommodating a weird bulge. I watched it twitch. And twitch again. And again.

I tucked the blankets back around him and got up for some water. I could hear the beat against his ribs even from across the room. The sound and knowledge of it wouldn't go away. As I pressed the cool glass against my temple, I could feel my thumb pulsing in time to his heart.

* * *

The first of his symptoms came a few days later. Eugene hadn't noticed his heart trying to squeeze its way out, but he couldn't stop complaining about an earache. Again and again he jammed his pinky into his right ear.

Otitis media, the doctor reported, and prescribed antibiotics.

A couple weeks later, everything seemed right as rain again. We went for a picnic. Eugene played with the weather to make me laugh. It hailed around us in a circle, a curtain of white beads.

Eugene sent up a delicate thread of lightning. A single thunderclap fell. I laughed as a family across the grass jumped out from under their tree to look up. The sky was a picture of sun. We were in our own little snow globe with our own little storm.

He echoed my laugh. I tried to ignore the trembling of his fingers as he brushed water from his forehead.

* * *

It became clear that Eugene was addicted. If he left the house for even a moment, he wanted to play with the sky. Getting the mail took him twenty minutes. Turning on our lawn sprinklers took half an hour. After every meal he claimed to need fresh air.

What must the neighbors think, with you out there holding your arms up like some lunatic praising the sun? I said one day.

He looked wounded. No one ever sees me, he said.

I frowned. What's so great about the weather anyway?

His eyes went somewhere far away as he considered the question.

The feeling of ... discovery. It's different every time. Every breath of air tastes new. The winds never come from the same direction. Each flake has a unique shape. Every raindrop, a different composition. It's incredible.

I shook my head. But it's just. It's just weather.

It's like ... He snapped his fingers. I know! Like the moment I met you. I knew immediately—I wanted to be with you forever. My heart *stopped*. Literally. It was like you'd put a big suction cup to my chest and tugged everything out of place. And I knew I'd never get it back again.

His grin was wide and sweet.

Every time I call up a patch of weather it's like meeting you all over again. Heart skips a beat and everything. Makes me remember that feeling of falling in love. I can actually feel it *in my chest*. You know what I mean?

I knew exactly. I knew better than he did. My fists clenched and my ribs ached and everything he said terrified me. I pulled out the most convincing smile I had. Then I bolted into the kitchen and gripped the edge of the sink and tried not to lose my breakfast.

My palms itched to hold something warm and beating.

* * *

Eugene was unwell. The color fled his face. His eyes sank into dark pockets.

A combination of coughing and fever and chest pain brought him back to the doctor. I had to carry him, and even pressed close I could barely feel his breaths: too shallow, small as a bird's.

Pleural effusion, the doctor guessed. But when they drained his lungs there was no blood or pus or anything—just water.

You can't spend so much time out there, I said. It's hurting you.

I'm fine, he protested.

But he wasn't fine. *We* weren't fine. His obsession with the sky was crushing us, a monster truck tearing up our road.

He kept forgetting to kiss me when I left the house. I missed the warmth of his arms and the deep sound of his belly laughs. When had he last looked in my eyes?

I tried to remind him that here was his wife, and once he'd loved her more than he loved the weather. In the kitchen I situated my chair close to his so that we might bump knuckles as we ate. Sorry, he said, when I brushed against him to reach for a napkin. He slid his chair away.

Some nights it seemed he remembered something important. He'd shrug himself close and slide his hands under my nightgown. But his body had changed.

The exertion pushed drops of frigid sweat out of his skin like condensation, left me drenched as though I'd been standing in a torrential downpour. His gasps swept past my ear like wind. That icy embrace was unpleasant; I found myself cringing. Afterwards he'd head to the backyard while I stared at his pillow.

Those were the nights when it got the worst, when my pulse felt weak and my blood ran thin. I wondered if this was what withdrawal felt like.

The next part to go was Eugene's legs. His ankles swelled bigger than tennis balls. The doctor asked about his diet, his sodium consumption. The doctor stuck him with a needle, drew tubes of dark blood. Every test came back inconclusive. The doctor asked how it felt to walk or stretch or sleep.

He didn't ask about Eugene's heart.

* * *

It was too hard to resist. I turned to the only thing I knew.

My moments alone turned from punishment to relief, so I stopped interfering with Eugene's backyard time. When he went out to reach for the sky, I ducked into the side yard and stood very still, waiting for an opportunity.

I always returned to the house shaking, sticky red congealing between my knuckles, mud and fur trapped beneath my fingernails. There was a collection in the basement under a pile of comforters. Eugene didn't know.

At the very least, I was calmer. While he was busy calling down the rain, I'd stand directly above the basement, slowing my breaths and squeezing my eyes shut to hear the faint rhythm of my sanity.

With all this came new dreams:

Sometimes I stood in a chamber—always the same one: dark archways and stone columns, endless ebony shelves lined with glass jars winking in the candlelight, waiting for me.

Sometimes I looked down at my hands to see little broken ribcages in each of my palms, shining with blood, the hearts thumping in time to my own.

The metallic smell. That raw, slippery texture between shards of bone. Ventricles opening and closing.

The recurring dreams were my very own fairy tale. A love story of hearts full and beating.

In the mornings Eugene was out before the sun. The shifting on his side of the mattress usually woke me. I'd feign sleep and count to forty before heading to the bathroom. All I wanted was to press my face against the window and watch him waving out the clouds, the way he used to do just for me.

* * *

A month since the last doctor's visit, and Eugene's knees and ankles were bigger, softer. They jiggled when poked. He wouldn't go to another appointment.

The medicine made me feel wrong, he told me. I don't want more pills.

How do you expect to get better? I argued. It was our first conversation in weeks.

He shrugged. I'll get a wheelchair. Stay off my feet.

Eugene wanted a wooden plank from the back door down to the yard so he could roll in and out. I refused until he nearly broke his arm trying install it himself.

Even after the plank was in place he seemed to think the wheelchair was an excuse to stay out as long as he wanted. Now our backyard was Eugene's private snow globe. I was caught on the wrong side of the glass.

Each evening I cooked dinner for two, then ate my portion alone under the flickering kitchen light. I watched him through the window: eyes closed, arms raised toward the sky.

Nobody ate the leftovers. Eugene seemed to keep himself full and functioning on buckets of water.

* * *

Sterling Silver Guy tipped the dark bottle back, draining the last of his beer.

This isn't the way this works, he said.

What do you mean?

Rehab. Therapy. Friendship. They're like ... keeping a faith. The way one shouldn't pray to God only in desperate times—prayer should happen on a regular basis.

I'm not sure I believe in God.

Point is, you can't quit rehab and ignore your friends—he pointed to himself—and then suddenly come back hoping to fix everything. Ain't gonna work. Your problems piled up gradually—it's gotta take time to break them down again.

This goddamn curse wasn't gradual, I said. It came out of nowhere. Like happy thirteenth birthday, you've hit puberty so now you get to be a freak.

Okay, he said, I get that you're upset.

Of course I'm upset!

My head was spinning. I'd consumed nothing in almost three days. My wild collection in the basement made the blood pump through me fast and uneven.

Ya gotta talk to him, said Sterling Silver Guy.

* * *

So I cornered Eugene. Told him this weather thing was getting out of hand, was hurting us. Said we needed to communicate better.

It took about two seconds to spin into a full-blown shouting match.

Why are you being so *controlling*? he said. Thunder clapped in my ear.

Don't test me, I said, eyeing the gray clouds pressed against our ceiling. You are *not* bringing rain in here.

This is exactly your problem, he began.

My problem. Anger surged up inside me and things flashed behind my eyelids: fingers drawing his heart out through his ribs, the tang of his blood on my tongue. The thoughts left me shaking.

The *problem*, I spat, is *you* and your goddamn *weather*.

See, that right there. You don't respect my relationship with the weather. You don't respect me.

I'm sorry, I didn't realize that *relationship* was more important than ours.

Stop it. Just *stop it*. Then he let out a sudden, sharp gasp. He clutched at his chest, rocking back in his chair.

What's the matter? I said, alarm trumping my fury.

Nothing, he replied, still gasping. Just—a spasm in my chest.

A spasm, I repeated.

I've been getting them more these days.

Eugene— I began to say.

No. We're done talking. He pivoted on his wheels and it only took twenty seconds for him to make it out, for the door to slam. Then there was nothing but me and the house and the chorus in the basement beating louder than ever.

I pushed buttons on the TV remote for a distraction and landed on some talk show. I found myself staring straight at Sterling Silver Guy.

On the stage was a glass box with an ebony toilet seat built into its top. Two assistants held a curtain for modesty. Sterling Silver Guy pulled down his pants and sat. Comfy, he said. The crowd hooted. He pointed a finger straight into the camera and said: Kids, don't try this at home.

He grabbed a fistful of paperclips from a bowl and began to crunch on them. They squeaked between his teeth like popcorn.

Cut to commercials. When the episode resumed the bowl was empty and he was grunting. I sat stiffly against the couch, listening to his noisy efforts, watching his face go purple as his cheeks puffed and his eyes crossed. And then: a sound like change clattering to the bottom of the glass. One piece, then another. Clink-clink-clink. Soon it was hailing metal on that stage, in that boxy toilet, and everyone

in the audience was laughing and clapping and all I could feel was sick.

Sick and aching. I thought of the jars in the basement and something lurched inside me.

This has to stop, I said aloud.

* * *

Weeks passed, full of insomnia and nightmares. Sometimes I had okay dreams, but even those were full of hearts, fat and bloody and contracting. I found them beneath my feet, on the walls, hanging from the ceilings in sticky red chandeliers.

Suddenly there was a night of peace: smooth black oblivion that left me stretching myself awake when morning was already gone. I peeled back the covers and sat up, my bones feeling new.

It was too quiet, with only the sound of the faulty kitchen tap dripping.

No wheelchair creaking. Nothing shifted. Not one exhalation of air.

I checked the window. The sky was empty, smoothed out in a hopeful blue. The trees were still.

If the weather was clear, then Eugene hadn't gone outside.

If Eugene wasn't in the yard, then he was in the house.

But if Eugene wasn't in—

Unless he was. He *was* in the house, just not where he would normally be.

But how would he have gotten down there, with his legs? With his wheelchair?

I tore out of the bedroom and down the hall, and there was the empty chair, overturned beside the basement's open door.

The steps were cold and wet, soaking through my socks as I ran.

A single bulb washed the basement with a pale glow. My pile of comforters was shoved aside. Eugene sat on the floor staring at the jars, at the bits of slime twitching inside each one.

My stomach churned with lust.

His eyes found mine and his face contorted into something awful, as though he could see straight through my skull to the memories of

my fingers trapping the squirrels, the gopher, the mice, the baby rabbit.

Eugene shuddered like he knew the dart of my hands, faster than the lightning he called, the snap of little bones between my knuckles. I tried not to think of the way I'd peeled each creature open to reach the one important, still beating organ.

My trick is hearts, I admitted. I tried to swallow but my throat was cotton-dry.

Hearts, he repeated faintly. Show me.

My lungs stopped working; my mouth went slack.

I need to see. Show me your trick.

Alright, I said hoarsely. I tugged my shirt off slowly, trying to delay that irreversible moment when he would realize he felt nothing but hate.

He'd seen me naked a thousand times, but standing there in my bra and pajama bottoms I had never felt more exposed.

I reached for a jar, keeping my face blank as a rock. The gopher's—that seemed the least disgusting option. Hunger and anticipation surged in my midsection.

The organ was smaller than my thumb and cold like jelly. My knuckles longed to curl and squeeze, but I resisted.

It's simple, I said softly, bringing the heart to my bare skin, pressing it into my chest.

There was a sharp twinge. My sternum shifted. My bones spread to make space. The telltale ache came, and I held my breath.

In the space of a blink the gopher's heart was gone. Consumed.

I shivered with pleasure. My pulse drummed heavier, having been fed. All that remained was the smear of pink and brown on my skin.

Eugene— I began.

He shook his head. Get out.

What?

Leave me alone.

You shouldn't be down here in your condition, I said, noticing how his legs pouched under his body.

He grabbed a jar and raised it as a threat: he could so easily smash it.

The breath stopped in my throat. I needed that. I needed all of them. They filled the cavity in my center. They were all that slowed the rot.

How will you get back upstairs? I whispered.

Go, he said, his voice faltering.

I swallowed. My body moved automatically. I was upstairs, I was outside, I was racing away from the chorus of pulses. Little pebbles stuck into me, poking through my wet socks.

When I stopped to catch my breath I could still hear the hearts beating back at the house.

Plus a new one, louder than them all, pumping slower and steadier and filling me with a new ache. Eugene's.

* * *

When I got home he was outside in his chair, facing the woods. The sky was flat and still, an ugly brown.

Inside the house I looked for stains of blood and slime, maybe crushed by wheels, smeared into the carpet. There was nothing.

I stood very still in the bathroom.

He'd left the hearts. They were still there. Still pumping.

That night I lay in my jeans on my side of the bed, hands in fists. Eugene remained outside, gazing at the world with his back turned on our house.

Years seemed to pass before the sun rose. I went to the window. The sky was bluer now. Eugene was slumped over the side of his chair. Dew glistened in his hair and he'd shed his clothes. Something about his shape was wrong.

I stepped outside quietly. As I approached I saw that his shoulders were too loose, his stomach sinking between his legs. He woke at the sound of his name and struggled to get upright.

I knew everything was wrong when he smiled at me.

My eyes traveled to his chest. Just left of the sternum the bulging skin was almost black. Veins popped on the surface, spidering out in

crooked spokes of green. I could see the beat as clearly as I could hear it: the bulge contracting with each pump of blood.

Eugene, I said urgently. When my fingers closed over his I felt no bones. His skin was a sack of liquid. I dropped his hand and reached for his jaw. His face melted under my touch.

Water, he croaked, his voice gargly. His eyes rolled back and he coughed, spewing out gray liquid.

I rushed to the kitchen, came back with a filled glass. He took it between water balloon hands and upended it over his head. He gasped with relief and looked up meaningfully. He wanted more.

I brought out pitchers, but quickly realized they wouldn't be enough. I ran across the street—there'd been an inflatable paddling pool in the Watsons' yard. By the time it filled with water from the garden hose, Eugene had flopped down onto the grass.

He'd gotten abnormally heavy. I spilled half the water dragging him in by his legs. He sighed with relief and I left the hose running to top off the pool.

Is the temperature okay? I said.

He opened his mouth but no sound came out, just bubbles of air.

I sat down and Eugene closed his eyes. It was hard not to look at the dark spot on his chest.

At some point I woke up because it was raining. I didn't even know that I'd fallen asleep. The sun was in a late afternoon kind of place. Beside me the pool was overflowing. Eugene floated just beneath the surface. He was smiling, his eyes still closed.

His body had lost the color of flesh. It was wrinkled and soft, translucent like a thin grocery bag. The muscles and bones inside were watercolor pale.

And that heart. It was the last bit of red, now pale and shrinking.

Take it, he said, his voice a whisper of wind. It was always yours. His eyes had opened and caught me staring at that one remaining spot of color.

Those words made something flutter in my gut.

I shook my head.

It began raining harder. The droplets fell in time to the beating in my ribs. Little waves formed on the surface of the pool and stretched at Eugene's skin. I reached down to touch his face but my fingers pulled him apart. He was no more than a fragile film. He was dissolving.

The heart had turned pink, translucent like a jellyfish. Instead of blood, it pushed murky rainwater out in weak waves.

* * *

These days I find myself outside whenever gray crowds the sky and rain spills down. I let the water catch on my face, slide into my blouse. I try to read every flash of lightning, listen closely to every gust of wind.

It's Eugene in a different form.

Eugene, who gave himself over to the weather.

Eugene, who knew no other way to let me have his heart.

