

## How to Love a Rabbit

Nahida S. Nisa

There were a number of things Iynaara believed important in knowing her. The first is that she disliked being told she had an unusual name, and she was decidedly unresponsive to *Naara*. Her favorite color was scarlet. Her favorite animal was the fox. Still, if Iynaara watched a fox chase a rabbit, her heart jolted for the rabbit's escape. Phone calls were little intrusions of conversation (she preferred intrusive parentheses). Finally, Iynaara was a deeply unrelenting person. She quit her job the day she dyed her hair lavender and the optometrist wanted "a word" with her. She had been, until that moment, a quiet woman of unremarkable appearance.

"We *are* a professional office," the optometrist reminded her. "It's simply . . . unsettling. It isn't a natural color."

At the optometrist's persistence, Chardae Clarke's hair was now an *unnatural texture*, but Iynaara bit her tongue to avoid involving an unsuspecting coworker. "It's been black my entire life," Iynaara remarked instead, "so I dyed it lavender. I won't turn sixty someday to think about how I never did whatever I liked with my hair."

She was twenty-six, and had a bit of a ways to go until sixty, but she imagined herself as sixty with fresh lavender hair and attempted not to smile. Iynaara chose the color as the only light shade that wouldn't look strange with her complexion (neither would blonde, being yellow-based, but

others would certainly think it clashed according to their expectations).

“That’s fine,” said the optometrist, as though Iynaara had been excusing herself. “Just . . . don’t do it again. I expect when I walk in tomorrow it will be dyed black again. Or brown, if you prefer. One of the two.” He waved his hand, the way men do.

“No,” said Iynaara. “I think it looks lovely. I will not work in an environment with people who insist that it’s some sort of statement.”

“Your hair *is* . . .”

“I quit.”

“You *quit*?” He seemed alarmed, moving a tan hand through his own dark hair. “This isn’t worth *quitting* over!”

“Is it worth firing me over if I don’t dye it black?”

He looked at her for a long time. She shifted.

“Good evening. I won’t be in tomorrow.” She straightened her pencil skirt and walked past Chardae Clarke, who smiled at her roommate delicately through hair relaxed months ago.

At home, the magnitude of Iynaara’s decision struck her as she sat before the mirror of her dresser, carefully turning through pages of career prospects. It would have been, after all, an easy job to keep—certainly easier than finding a place to work again, with newly lavender hair. In the office she’d just left, her performance would’ve been known to transcend the scrutiny of her hair. Now she had to convince strangers, and on *this* note.

Mostly office work, research assistant for an astronomer . . . she had some legal experience. Iynaara blew a tuft of lavender hair out of her face.

If she were honest with herself, setting aside her panic, she was beginning to feel restless. If it hadn’t been the hair prompting her to leave, it would have been *something*. She felt in love with herself in a way she never had, and it compelled her to care for herself, which meant ending her work with Dr. Retrospection. She rose and called Chardae.

\*

There were a number of things that Iynaara thought unimportant in knowing her. One was that she had enjoyed her work. The day she left, Iynaara explained to Ms. Sang, who’d shuddered as though she’d just heard of a virus, that there was nothing truly wrong with her daughter’s eyes.

“The human eye isn’t always a perfect sphere, Ms. Sang. It’s astonishing that astigmatism shows up as infrequently as it does!”

Ms. Sang watched as Iynaara reached for a transparent rubber lens that was larger than the size of her hand.

“It’s not that your daughter’s eyes are weak. If anything, they’re too strong. They absorb more light than she needs to move through her environment.” She moved her fingers so that the lens bent. “Nearsightedness has its advantages. Your daughter may not be able to see as well from a distance, but up close, she actually sees better than people who have ‘perfect’ vision.” Iynaara moved her fingers in the other direction, indenting the lens vertically. “Farsightedness has its advantages as well: Objects in a distance are more developed compared to the work of the spherical eye. The problem everyone has with near- and farsightedness is that objects seen from one distance are clearer than with spherical lenses, but below average from the other. It’s not really a flaw; it’s a different way of focusing light.”

Ms. Sang began to show some relief, but clouded again with tense curiosity. “So if it isn’t a flaw, why do people wear glasses? If it isn’t broken, why does it need to be fixed?”

Iynaara thought of Chardae’s tight curls. “Prescriptions by no means fix the eye. Rather, they alter the path of light into the eye. Our community, our ecological network, is structured to necessitate the spherical lens. If it were all built differently—to favor, say, farsightedness—it would be those with spherical lenses who wore glasses. Ms. Sang,” she said, “nothing is good or bad unless you make it that way.”

\*

“I spent \$600 on my hair last month,” Chardae Clarke had told Iynaara on the phone before they made a coffee appointment for later that afternoon. Chardae laughed, implying that she was less willing to walk out than Iynaara had been. “What are you going to do now?”

Iynaara looked at Chardae’s hair across the table. The once tightly wound curls fell limply to her shoulders, a bit closer to professionally “acceptable” than the unhindered, gravity-defying afro. Iynaara was suddenly self-conscious of the troubles she’d created for herself. She swallowed a hot mouthful of tea and decided to shut up about her own dye-processed hair.

“Well, I have two months’ rent,” Iynaara assured her roommate. She had enough, at least, to give herself time before their proprietor Ms. Caraway would throw her out of their apartment on the intersection of Ohlone-Niles.

“That’s impressive. I have fifty dollars.”

“Run away with me, Chardae.”

Chardae grinned, a true smile that sharpened the green of her eyes. The woman had 20/10 vision, a characteristic that surprised childhood tormentors who thought that green eyes on a woman like Chardae must indicate either mixed genes or blindness.

There were a number of things that brought Chardae considerable discomfort. The first was

that her eyes were *hers*, but no one else thought so. The second was everyone's insistence that her niece would "stay cute forever." Chardae's niece had wanted to be an angel in the elementary school play, but was assigned *cherub*. Chardae, who had wanted to grind her teeth but was at a loss for words, watched quietly from the audience, locking her fingers. Chardae disliked cherubs, for reasons she could not fully understand: the delicate plumpness, the blonde—always blonde—curls that looked like hers but were acceptable because they were *blonde*, the immaculate crimson-blushed skin.

"She's got Down's," the nurse had announced to Chardae when Simra was born.

"But when can I *see* her?" Chardae had pressed.

Iynaara rotated her coffee cup so that the ice slid around the brim of the inside. She'd finished most of the caramel frappuccino and was evidently looking for an excuse to remain seated.

"I love caramel," remarked Chardae.

"So do I. I wish I weren't likened to it so much, though."

Chardae looked surprised, then burst into laughter. "What are you going to do?"

"I applied to quite a few places, including a non-profit law firm. It's immigration law. But there must be so many applicants, you know?"

"Use your caramel skin. People think you're using it to your advantage already." Chardae smirked, but it was more of a wince. She broke a bit off of some cranberry pastry. She was fond of the scent of berries.

There were a number of things in which Chardae found comfort. The first was the mixture of the scents of berries, iced pear, gardenia, and freesia. The second was large windows and small violins. Because her bathtub was miniscule, Chardae had taken to sneaking away for bubble baths in other people's homes, a development Iynaara found amusing. Finally, the most comforting thing of all was sinking her lips into her niece's hair—soft, downy, light, airborne, and unlike her own.

"I wanted her to go to law school," her sister had said after her daughter's birth, before she nearly passed out from exhaustion. Chardae held the child as her sister slept.

\*

The child, Simra, was now six. After she met Iynaara for coffee, Chardae walked Simra back from school.

"Sunspots have seven sides," Simra reported. "I counted them."

Chardae was impressed. She had never thought to count the sides of a sunspot. She squinted into the sun, and her eyelashes picked up the splattered rays.

"How many sides are on a circle?" asked Simra.

"Circles have no sides."

“How many sides are on a circle?” Simra asked again, stubbornly. The child, peering over the ledge from under her curls, stopped by the library window. “Everything has sides.”

Chardae tugged gently at her arm. “Let’s go.” But Simra’s attention had shifted from the window with the small robot—which she was certain the boy at school who terrorized her beyond the watchful eyes of adults would destroy—to the woman walking behind it.

“Hello!” The woman, a tall, slender brunette with long legs wearing a navy jumpsuit, opened the glass door and glanced around it. She gazed sincerely at Simra, then winked spiritedly at Chardae. Faintly, Chardae noticed the inversion of this.

“What’s your name?” asked Simra at once.

The woman’s name was Jiwon Moon, but she was too taken with Simra to disclose it just yet. “What’s yours?”

“Simra. I like sunspots. This is my auntie Chardae.”

“I’m Jiwon. I heard you say sunspots have seven sides. And that everything has a side, even a circle. I wonder what sides there are to a circle’s stories, since we never hear of their sides. And whether fractions have more sides than we permit ourselves to see, because they’re shapes that only gained more sides when they broke.”

“She’s got Down’s,” Chardae blurted suddenly, as though expecting the woman hadn’t noticed. Jiwon, who had, blinked at her. Chardae blushed for the outburst. She braced for the sympathetic smile that made her stomach churn, but Jiwon did not deliver it.

Chardae glanced at the books Jiwon was holding, mostly biographies. She remembered that Iynaara had asked her to pick up a few titles on immigration law.

“Are you a librarian?” asked Simra. Jiwon was so knowledgeable that Simra could not imagine otherwise.

“An architect. I design sleek buildings that optimize surface area for solar energy. It’s more exciting than it sounds.” She laughed for the child. “I’m just here for some inspiration. And, because my dogs found a litter of rabbits, and I wanted to hang some flyers. Would you like a rabbit?” She shifted her gaze from Simra to Chardae. “I have them just across the street from here.”

Simra pulled on Chardae’s flare skirt. “Can I see them?”

Chardae pursed her lips.

“Please?” said Simra, and Chardae nodded.

Jiwon shook her hair loose, and the highlights fell onto her shoulders. She offered Simra her hand, and Chardae followed on the other side as the three of them walked toward Jiwon’s apartment. “It’s only the second floor,” Jiwon mentioned breezily to Chardae, noting that the

woman looked exhausted. “Come in.”

The apartment was small but spacious, with lots of greenery, most of it succulents. A Korean brand of lipstick rested atop strewn papers, including an article from *The Mercury News* titled “Japan to Withhold Compensation Until S. Korea Removes ‘Comfort Women’ Statue” scribbled over with angry red notes. On the wall above a chair, a painting hung of the moon in various phases, beginning dark, turning full, and ending dark again.

“Jiwon . . . Moon,” said Simra. Chardae thought she heard wind chimes, but could see none.

Jiwon offered seaweed snacks and water, then disappeared into a room and reemerged with a grassy basket of four small rabbits.

“Bunny,” said Simra, lifting the smallest with her two hands.

Chardae was reluctant, but seeing the rays of sunlight passing on Simra’s face reminded her of spring. “How much are they?” she asked. She had learned to ask prior to accepting anything, to save herself the struggle of masking a shocked expression after the sudden disclosure of a price.

“They’re free!”

“Something is wrong with her tail.” Simra lifted the smallest rabbit to examine the tail. It wasn’t fluffy, a cotton ball, like the others’—instead, it ran smooth and sleek, in wisps that drooped. “But I like it.”

“I took her for an examination, and she’s perfectly healthy. I guess it’s a genetic mutation.”

“What’s her name?”

Jiwon stared at the rabbit. “Xingjuan,” she suggested. “The name of one of my good friends—” She smiled “—for my favorite rabbit. She is cute like her, see?”

“My best friend’s name is Natsumi,” Simra supplied.

“You can call her that if you want.” Jiwon dropped to her knees to meet Simra’s eyes.

“Listen. There is something very important you should know about taking care of a rabbit. They’re not like dogs: They don’t express love as . . . enthusiastically.” As though on cue, one of Jiwon’s dogs barked in the next room. “To love a rabbit, you must learn how to give without receiving. To love without expecting love. Do you understand?”

Simra nodded.

“You have beautiful eyes,” was the last thing Jiwon said to Simra.

Jiwon turned to Chardae at the door and said softly, “I’ve always let them run around. That’s how she’s accustomed to living—admittedly, a rather short life so far. Please don’t cage the rabbit.”

“Bye, Jiwon Moon!” Simra waved.

\*

“You got the job?” Chardae gasped as Iynaara grabbed her hands. It had only been two weeks.

Iynaara squeezed. “It wasn’t what I was expecting.”

“You’re more accomplished than you think—”

“No, I mean, the people I meet, our clientele. Most of them don’t have papers. It’s so heartbreaking, trying to find ways they can stay so they’re not forced back to the conditions they escaped—that *we* created. I can’t disclose too much about the work but”—she returned to a normal tone and opened a bottle of lemonade—“I might have guests over sometimes so that they can adjust in a more comfortable environment. I actually have a client coming over tonight.”

“I have a date tonight.”

Iynaara smiled. “Excellent. How is Simra? And your sister, and their new rabbit?” Now with different careers, she and Chardae rarely ever had a moment to talk.

“My sister isn’t thrilled about the pet. The rabbit’s begun molting. But Simra takes such good care of her there’s no legitimate complaint, other than that every other word is about Xingjuan. She’s taking her to school in a few weeks.”

As Chardae was leaving, the clients from Iynaara’s firm arrived: an elderly woman with a wide friendly face, accompanied by a younger man whose dark curls fell over his forehead.

“Salaam,” Iynaara greeted the mother and son.

Chardae smiled and nodded politely over the language barrier as she buttoned her scarlet coat. She thought fleetingly that the man was attractive before taking off to dinner.

As the door closed behind Chardae, Iynaara caught a glimpse of Ms. Caraway, who’d been walking past with a peculiar expression Iynaara did not take the time to register. She reduced the volume of Shakira’s “Hips Don’t Lie.”

\*

Xingjuan had grown fluffier in the past weeks. Her new coat was glossy. When Simra turned seven and the rabbit wasn’t so tiny, Xingjuan was finally permitted to accompany Simra to school.

“Jiwon *did* say not to cage the rabbit,” Chardae had remarked with a light warmth.

“She wasn’t talking about the bunny. But that, too.”

Chardae gazed deeply at her niece. “You?” she asked quietly.

“No, you.”

Outside the school, Simra checked carefully around for the boy, then slid beside Natsumi, who had been sketching the bunny while leaning on a rock.

“That’s lovely,” Simra remarked.

“The Japanese say there is a rabbit in the moon.”

“It looks almost like a real bunny, exactly like Xingjuan, even the tail.” Simra hugged the rabbit close, and it nibbled on her shirt. “Can you help me write down my speech to the class?”

Natsumi looked reluctant, but agreed.

“My Bunny, by Simra Clarke. Today, I am seven years. Xingjuan is a third.” After meeting Jiwon Moon, Simra had developed a fondness for fractions, which were poetic, broken things.

“Xingjuan likes sunlight, grass, and soft jazz music.”

Natsumi ran her pencil over the page several times and squinted. Simra waited patiently for her friend to finish. When it seemed a considerable amount of time had passed, she chirped, “What’s taking so long? Let me see.”

“No!” Natsumi leapt away, but it was too late. Simra slid the journal into her own hands. It looked like someone scribbled over it, attempting to copy letters, like writer didn’t know how to hold a pen. “What are you doing? Another drawing?”

Simra’s voice trailed off, and she looked at Natsumi, who was shrinking away in terrified embarrassment. Her eyelashes glistened. “It’s dysgraphia.” Angrily, she grabbed the notepad from Simra’s hand and jumped atop the rock.

“It’s okay, Natsumi.” Simra smiled, tugging the journal gently back into her own hands to admire the page. “And besides—” she was interrupted by the look on Natsumi’s face. From her new vantage point, the girl was looking over Simra’s head with widened eyes. The boy, in a white shirt and blue jeans, ran toward them.

“He’s coming.”

The boy, four years older than Simra and faster, grabbed her shoulder and whipped her around before she had a chance to react. Natsumi yelled, but the boy’s eyes, a cold crystal blue that gave Simra shivers, were already on her and the bunny.

“What d’you have there?” Crystal Eyes grinned. He reached out to yank Simra’s wild curls, but she dodged him before he grabbed the usual fistful. He grinned wider, ran his fingers through his own neatly cut blond hair, and pointed at the rabbit’s tail.

Simra’s shoulder pained. She squeezed the bunny to her neck in both arms. “I—I have to go.”

“Give me the rabbit. What’s wrong with its tail?”

“No. I have to go. Bye.”

“GIVE ME THE RABBIT!” He spat a word, then, that Chardae had once screamed at a woman for using when she and Simra had gone ice skating.

Simra took off running. She could hear that the boy was running after her. Her vision was blurred, and so were her surroundings.

“Give me the rabbit, you little freak! I’m just going to fix it!”

“Simra! He’s got a knife!” Natsumi yelled from far away. But Simra could hear him close behind and did not look back to see the silver glisten on his coat. She passed the library and the apartment of Jiwon Moon. She ran until she reached the door at the corner of Ohlone and Niles and fell against it.

“Chardae! Chardae! Chardae!” Simra banged loudly, but there was no answer. “Chardae!” Simra screamed once more.

Crystal Eyes was turning the corner, and so were two others, but Simra did not look. She jumped clumsily over a ledge and slid beneath the nearest car. There, she hid until the boy approached, but he had seen her. His shoes edged closer, and then his face and arm. He slashed at her with the knife, and Simra slid out the other side. The boy leapt onto the car and over. The other two, pale with snarls, rounded the car to meet her.

“Give me the rabbit. I’m going to fix its tail.”

“No, it’s okay. She’s not broken.” Simra tried hard not to cry, but the tears were gathering.

“Give it to him!” One of the boys shoved her. Simra broke forward into a short run to stay on her feet. She slid back under the car from behind it. “Give it and he’ll leave you alone.”

“Give me the rabbit or I’ll slash these tires,” said Crystal Eyes, wielding the knife. He kicked, and Simra slid in deeper.

“Just set fire to the car,” laughed one of the boys.

“Last chance.” He ran the knife along the car, leaving a wide scratch.

When Simra heard a match lit, she rolled out from under the other side of the car almost too slowly. A strand of her hair, on fire, was put out only by her own weight under the swiftness of the roll. Flames consumed the car. They burst and flickered and molted the metal. With the rabbit shifting in her arms, Simra ran down the block, behind the houses, flecks of fire stinging her cheeks.

\*

“I saw your boys light my car on fire.” Ms. Caraway was standing outside Iynaara’s home. Police cars had gathered around the house. The fire department had arrived quickly enough so that the flames had transferred to only a portion of the house. An entire side of the wall had blackened, but the house was erect. “I was just coming up the street, and I saw them.”

“*What* are you talking about?” Iynaara said, exhausted. She had rushed from work upon receiving the call.

“Those illegals you’re always bringing onto *my* property. I saw four of them light fire to my car. I’m evicting the two of you. Month’s notice.”

Iynaara felt thirsty, but the building hadn’t completed inspection and she could not enter for water. “I don’t understand what you’re saying. It couldn’t have possibly been them.”

“You calling me a liar, Naara? I saw them. They looked dark, Arab or African or something. And I’m suing. I’m going to see the whole operation is shut down. They’ll be arrested and deported. Tell that to your lawyers.”

“It’s Iynaara.” She walked away from the steps. She would lose her job again, certainly, if she were responsible in a lawsuit against the firm.

The Oakland afternoon was, thankfully, pleasantly cool. Iynaara was lost in thought and did not notice Simra approaching her until the girl was a few feet in front of her.

“Simra? What are you doing out of school?” Iynaara cupped her arm around the young girl’s waist and pulled her to her side. In the shadow of the building contrasting sharply with the sun, her adjusting eyes could not decipher the bruises or strands of burnt hair, but she sensed a strange energy. “What’s wrong?” There was a presence of some trauma that Iynaara brushed aside until she realized the girl would not speak.

There were a number of things that shaped who Simra was. The most important of them was that she knew how to love a rabbit. She knew how to give and not receive, to love without expecting love in return. What mattered to her was the evidence of this, alive in her arms.

A few minutes later, Chardae arrived. “Why aren’t you in school?”

“I think something happened to her. She won’t talk to me, Chardae. Look at her. Something’s changed the look in her eyes.” Iynaara ran her fingers through her lavender hair. Her roots were returning. “Listen, Chardae, Caraway’s going to sue me, and the firm; she’s convinced she saw our clients set fire to her car. They’re going to be arrested for arson.” She swallowed. “And then deported. And she’s going to evict us.”

Chardae ran both her hands through her niece’s tight curls. “Simra? What’s wrong? Her hair is burned. Let me take you home.” She turned to Iynaara shakily. “We’re going to figure out what happened here. I don’t care what it takes.” Chardae looked as though she were disconnected from her body for a moment. “Who did this to her? It couldn’t have been your clients; I’ve seen them. They didn’t seem—” She pulled her fingers again through a section of the previously soft cherub-curved hair that had kept the child from playing an angel. “Iynaara, look, her hair is—she was here during the fire. She was in the fire.”

“Chardae—”

“I don’t know what I’ll do, Iynaara.” For a moment, Chardae looked as though she would cry, but the tears were dammed by determination. She met Simra’s eyes. “Talk to me.” Simra stared at her blankly.

Chardae began again, this time to impart reason, or invoke the power of empathy. “If you speak now, Simra, you might—” She stopped herself, realizing that burdening her small niece with saving the innocent was sacrificing one victim to preserve the others. “No, it’s okay,” she said softly. She attempted to take the rabbit from her niece, to lessen at least the physical burden, but Simra would not give it. Chardae took the journal instead, and recognized it was different.

“This isn’t yours,” Chardae noticed. She turned the journal over to its cover and flipped through the pages. The writing was illegible, but her eyes flickered over the fresh drawing of Xingjuan. “You did go to school this morning. You didn’t come here first.” She handed the journal to Iynaara. “What do you think? Is this anything?”

Iynaara took the journal and studied the first few pages. “There’s a name . . . but I can’t read it. The drawings in here are pristine, though. Let’s see...” She concentrated on the writing, “Nats...”

“Natsumi,” Chardae supplied at once.

Iynaara closed the journal and handed it back to Chardae with a nod.

A low, forgiving breeze fluttered through Chardae’s skirt and the unburnt sections of Simra’s hair. Chardae and Iynaara had frozen in thought. There was another child who knew what happened. A density settled in the air. Simra’s eyes were translucent.

Iynaara gazed at the child. “Let’s take you home.”

Slowly, the three of them walked under the moon, faint in the afternoon sun.