

Grace.

That's the first thing I think of when I open my eyes. I blink and my eyes refocus onto my surroundings.

I'm in the room again. The room with the ugly mustard yellow curtains and an unbearable antiseptic scent. I look around, searching for her.

"Good Morning," a sing-songy voice calls out.

I reach out for her warmth, finding her still and cool arm instead. I take her arm gratefully anyway.

Grace is my dearest friend. She is the most beautiful being I know. With short dark hair that cuts off unnaturally straight at her jaw, her face has sharp edges like you could prick your finger on. Her eyes are dark and intense, so unwavering and unblinking that I have to look away from her sometimes. But, she has the kindest soul and the warmest heart of any person I have met. Grace takes care of me like a mother and talks to me like a best friend. I can't remember when I met her, I just remember her being with me all the time.

She wakes me up in the morning and feeds me breakfast. Grace helps me peel the oranges carefully since my hands cannot anymore. We peel two for my daughter to eat when she gets home from school too. She leads me to the bathroom mirror and helps me brush my teeth and reminds me to screw on the top to the toothpaste. After we eat, Grace brushes my hair and braids it into two plaits like I am a little schoolgirl again.

We go on walks together and when I feel the sun against my weathered face I feel very much alive. When no one is looking, we escape to the stream behind the gray building and Grace holds onto me as I lower my feet into the running water.

Chill to the touch.

However, sometimes we get caught. The man with the white hair tells me to stay in my room and Grace and I try not to laugh at the bulging vein in his forehead. We nod like little kids in trouble and I have to pinch myself to keep from smiling.

On other days, we walk to the bus stops and watch the little kids pile out in lines. Loud and always chattering. They flock around, looking for their parents and something aches in my heart but I can't seem to put a finger on it. Like there is a missing puzzle piece in my life that's right in front of me.

"Selene must have come home with her father. We will see them when they get home"

Grace nods and hums and agrees. We walk back to our home slowly and quietly with Grace holding me up.

I do not know what I would do without Grace. She reminds me to take my medicine. Blue, red and brown before breakfast. Yellow and green before I sleep. Grace says she has to run a few tests to make sure I am healthy and well. When I need to get shots, I look the other way as the sharp needle pierces through my skin. Grace is always efficient and fast and she covers it up with a bandaid before I even turn back with a smile on her face. When I do not feel like talking to the other ladies in the rooms next to me, I sit on my bed with Grace and we sit in a bubble we created away from everyone else.

Yet, sometimes I feel terribly lonely. When my daughter and husband are away, I only have Grace to talk to. We've been friends all these years but she has never told me anything about her life. Grace has off days sometimes when she is mechanical and closed off even if I try

to talk to her. When I try to persuade her to sneak out to the stream after we were told off, she shut it down immediately. Her eyes sometimes seem so lifeless, they used to scare me.

She comes to life at night though. It is almost like she is a different person altogether. She smiles at my stories and laughs at my daughter's antics. When I told her about the time Selene almost broke her leg on the hoverboard, Grace had to take a break because she was laughing too hard.

Tonight, she curls up on the suede chair next to my bed and holds my hand as she watches me sleep. I know why she holds onto me, I may be old but I am not foolish. I can't feel her pulse under all her layers though yet I hold on anyway.

She squeezes my hand three times and I freeze.

I. Love. You.

"Selene?" My voice comes out as a rough noise.

Grace stills and slowly looks at me.

"Hold onto my hand."

And I fall into something deeper than sleep.

It started a few years ago. Car keys were forgotten at the store. Forgetting the names of her nieces. Getting lost on the way back home. The signs were small enough to be brushed over. When they found out, it was already too late. Acknowledging the scary title "dementia" broke Selene. It had been a year since she was back home with her mother, yet there was nothing she could do thousands of miles away at her new job.

At least that is what the doctor told her. When Selene virtually toured the new hospital home from her home in Tokyo, she kept seeing these young vivacious workers. Soon she realized they were a little too perfect with straight smiles that never reached the eyes and conversations that never stilled.

"Cutting-edge technology," the director with the strikingly white hair said.

"We call them Carebots. Brains smarter than us with AI. They look just like us with lab-grown artificial human skin. Most of the patients cannot even tell the difference. They are so much more efficient and affordable than regular nurses. Each patient is assigned one when they join and even give them names. Would you like to customize one for your mother?"

At first, Selene hated the way she could not be there for her mother. She couldn't hold her hand and be with her when she was needed the most. All she used to get were vague updates, medical test results, and photos until one day the revelation hit her suddenly. Selene's code for the Carebots was imperfect but it was all she needed to be with her mother. She would be able to control her mother's Carebot from her home miles away through teleoperation. Every movement of Selene's was mimicked. Even if it is just for an hour a day, the hour was treasured by Selene who only ever wanted more time. The hospital agreed on the condition that Selene couldn't reveal the truth behind her mother's "favorite nurse".

"It just might be too much for her to handle at this stage."

Like every night, Selene logs in tonight. She places the headset over her tired eyes and she is transported to the bedside of her mother at the hospital. Her mother looks into her eyes, and she tells her the same stories she's heard a million times. She tells Grace all about Selene

as a child including their secret handshake. Selene can't believe her mother still remembers the three pumps but not the fact that Selene isn't twelve anymore. Selene patiently listens to her when her mother stumbles over her words and talks about family members that are not alive anymore. Sometimes her mother squints and pulls her closer like she can actually see her. Selene's heart skips a beat every single time. Her mother releases her grip and apologizes to Grace profusely. As her mother drifts off to sleep, Selene holds on to her mother's hand and feels her rhythmic pulse, mindlessly counting the beats.

Look through the windows, you can see her behind the dining table. The blue light in her room reflects off the headset she wears. She walks around the room in a trance, picking up things that do not exist. Muttering words to someone that isn't there.

She kneels on the ground with her two hands clutching onto something you and I can't see. You see her panic and reach two fingers forward as if she was feeling someone's pulse. Her body shakes with racking sobs. Tears run down her masked face with nowhere to go but she never lets go of this invisible hand.