

Yellow

People who are alright never get asked,
“Are you alright?”

By KATHY PHAM Illustrations by BYRON EGGENSCHWILER

THREE SENIORS today: Jennifer Chen, Megan Levitt and Shelby Roe. I hear Jennifer before she rounds the corner. “And then he sent me this!”

Megan squeals.

Shelby quips, “Is it supposed to be that red?” They turn the corner in matching outfits, athletic leggings and coordinated sweaters: pink, teal, yellow. Jennifer shoves her phone into her bra when she spots me. “Oh, Tran!”

Jennifer asks me if I brought the stuff. I tell her to stop being so fucking weird. She pouts while I pull the makeup bag out of my backpack. Fat tubes clatter against each other in the ziplock, lipsticks and glosses and liners. I grab three: Velvet Bordeaux, Rich Girl Red and Baby’s All Right.

Jennifer takes Velvet Bordeaux out of my hands, then starts digging through the bag. Megan claims the red and pairs it with a fuchsia that doesn’t match her undertones. Shelby commits to three pinks as dull as her personality. When they pay, they’re short three dollars and they stare at Megan digging through her purse. I should tell them their foundation sits on their skin wrong. They look too old to be seventeen.

On the way home I press through

a coterie of Asian grandmothers and working women on the train platform. Someone’s sleeping on a bench inside. I tug off the newspaper covering his face. Bloated red cheeks and a reek like the garbage dump my father drove me to when I was six years old.

The nail polish goes up my bulky jacket sleeve. I bend over and slip the rest into my boot.

When I get home my mom’s watching her shows. Her makeup’s still on, cracking foundation, purple eyeshadow and wine-blushed cheeks.

We both look at the screen when we talk. She asks me if I ate. A man in a suit chases the crying female lead down the street in the night. I say yes. The dining table is covered in plastic shopping bags stuffed with As Seen on TV garbage. A purse organizer, bra enhancers, a corner cutting board, plastic knives in crayon colours. They all promise to make life a little more sufferable.

I dig through my dresser until I find the jar. I add today’s take to the cache and tuck it away. Have to restock soon; Valentines is coming up. Odds and ends from the drugstore, easiest to grab and

move; lipsticks for a dollar, people eat them up. The average woman consumes a pound of carnauba wax, lanolin and red-pink-purple pigment annually. My phone buzzes.

8:17: u still have refined ruby and unending kiss? I want to see ur stock.

I text them back, when and where? In 10 minutes I’m out the door again, my backpack shaking with colour. The streets are dimmed by snow flurries and a new moon.

8:52: Where r u>

8:53: Where you wanted me to be. Grey sweater.

8:57: Sry i thought u were a girl. Be rite out

I FEEL MR. MCCARTHY’S EYES ON me as I write through the quadratic equation. I was late. I’m using a highlighter to do math.

“Time’s up, bring ‘em here.”

As I hand him my test, he asks me to stick around for a minute. I nod, wait for everyone else to filter out into the hallway while the bell rings.

McCarthy shuffles the test papers in his hands. He’s a human sweater vest with a fluffy beard and decades-deep eye bags. “You haven’t been around lately. Are you alright?”

My face reflects off his oblong glasses. I wonder how many faces have reflected

off them before.

I tell him I was sick.

His wrinkles furrow. “You were doing well, Tran. You can still work toward a scholarship.”

I mumble an apology and walk away. I push into the crowds in the hallway, down the stairs, past the atrium, through the front doors and onto the sidewalk and into the bus that will take me downtown, elsewhere.

The girl who greets me when I walk into the pharmacy has a name tag over her breast. Samantha. She smiles hello with a gap tooth. I brush past her to the beauty aisle, grab nail polish from a display glazed in hearts. The Girls Are Out. High Spender. Bottle Service. Lipsticks are offered up by a cardboard cutout in the shape of a model, blond hair, blue eyes and a symmetrical cupid’s bow. I make my way to the tampon aisle and pretend to look at the boxes there. The polish goes up my bulky jacket sleeve. I bend over and slip the rest into my boot. I straighten up, look around, walk away.

Have a nice day, woman pulling her bag off the checkout counter. She’s the kind who wears high heels in the winter, her footsteps click-clack on stained linoleum. Bet she writes briefs in one of the new office towers.

When the alarm goes off at the door, she halts but I don’t. Stickers on the nail polish, ones I could have edged off but didn’t. Nobody ever yells stop. Nothing ever happens.

They tried to scare us straight. Girls with names like Talia sneak lipstick into the bags of girls named Bridget, and Bridget’s parents have to drive down to the mall’s security office to pay for it, but they believe her in the end, even though they warned her that “Talia was no good!” The episode ends in a family group hug and we never see Talia again.

4:34 - can you meet up today

4:36 - Yes. NE or downtown.

4:45 - macs on 11th and 5th @ 6pm

They call this spot the Crack Macs. The stores have more signs than customers. Cashier has no more than \$150 in the till. You are on camera. The trains roar past mostly on time, red and blue lines intersecting on 8th.



He’s punctual. I can tell he’s the buyer from the twin lines of contour carving out his cheeks and the grey contact lenses, better in pictures than in life. He smiles at me, slightly crooked teeth rimmed by lipstick drawn sharp around the cupid’s bow. I tell him I like the berry shade against his brown skin. His eyebrows twitch as he smiles and thanks me.

“Thanks. I’m saving up to go to beauty school.”

He picks through the bags for a long time, ooh-ing and grunting over the multitudes. He ends up with contrasting shadows, bold blushes, multidimensional lip glosses. He asks me if he can swatch some items and ends up with stripes of colour going up his wrist. When he’s done, he hands me his money in crumpled-up fives.

I tell him I always get more stock, in case he needs anything. He gives me that nervous nod people do when they’re worried about being Talia. I want to say that nobody is watching people like us.

He takes his purchases and walks toward the alleyways of downtown, instead of the train platforms that would carry him to the suburbs.

When do they realize what they’re doing? Is it when they see me for the first time, pulling ziplock bags out of my backpack? As they fumble for a receipt on their way home to remember what they bought? When they slide their purchases into their makeup drawers, do they notice their fingerprints side-along with mine?

Like my mother, they would prefer to shop in a well-lit store filled with white-

toothed displays, stocked by workers of a particular hue and well-printed name tags. Instead they get their shoes covered in parking lot slush, they get me standing on the street outside their vinyl-sided townhouses, they get third-floor meetups where nobody meets eyes.

The lights are off when I get back, but incense smoke rises sharp in my nostrils. The rods burn quiet in our plastic altar, itself sitting on a shelf beside the TV. Portraits of grandma and grandpa watch me from behind the haze. I check the fridge for food; all I find is expired milk and cilantro.

I check the messages on the house phone. A pre-recorded voice tells me, “A student named...” a pause, then the receptionist with the smoker’s cough enunciates “Tran Na-Goo-En”; then the recording starts again, “has been absent for one or more periods today.”

It’s already been read but I delete it anyway.

A nightlight in the hallway illuminates the hole I kicked in the bathroom door.

“Why are you so lazy?”

I’d told her I was still working.

She said, “I wish I had given birth to a quail egg instead of you. At least I would have been able to eat it.”

Still, she tried to drag me out of bed. Her acrylic nails bit into my wrists. There had been times I let her, or when I clung to the sheets. That day, I shoved her. We both fell into the hallway. I turned and I kicked at the closest thing I could. The door crunched under my heel to reveal the hollow inside.

She said, “Did you learn that from your father?”

All I could do was stare at her across the expanse of tobacco-soaked carpet. Eventually my mother picked herself up and left.

She no longer bangs on the thin sheets of wood pretending to separate us. She no longer bursts into this room to tear the blankets off and interrogate me. Sometimes I listen for when she comes home late at night. Her heels clunk against the floor, her jacket rustles as she walks down the hallway, her bedroom door opens and shuts with a click.

I pull the nightlight out and toss it under my bed.

I STARE AT MYSELF IN the bathroom mirror. Jaw too broad, cheeks too rough. I take a breath to stop my hands from shaking as I smear kohl pencil across the sliver of skin between my lid and lashes. I blink away the rush of tears but smudges of black still gather in the corner of my eye.

My hands shake when I apply the lipstick. The pink I choose flashes too icy for my warm, olive, yellow skin. I overdraw one side, so I try to compensate on the other. My aim slips and a smudge skews the corner of my mouth. I drag my palm across my face and run the water until all the pigments bleed into the sink.

I show up for biology, forged excuse note in hand. Over lunch Mrs. Laghari, limbs soft as her blowout, reads pulpy romances while I draw gene expression matrices. The phone on the wall rings. She picks it up, says “Yes, Tran is here.”

I give her my test. She returns a thin smile before telling me I have to go down to the office now. At least they didn’t call in class where I’d be able to feel everyone’s eyes as they watched me leave. Laghari doesn’t even shift in her seat.

I wait on a mint-coloured leather chair until the smoky-voiced receptionist tells me that Cathy Burrowitz will see me now. Her office is just past the tacky potted plants at the end of a short hallway. The door is already open. The woman within watches me from behind her desk.

I take a seat. A photo of her family, two sons and a nondescript husband, in a boat on some lake, sits on her desk, displayed beside the ancient monitor. The houses on the shore form a row of beige coffins.

Cathy Burrowitz extends her hand to me along with some nice-to-meet-yous. I stare at the uneven slant of her wheat-toned hair. She probably cut it herself while staring at the bathroom mirror, that can-I-speak-to-your-manager bob.

When she realizes I am not going to shake her hand, she shuffles around the papers on her desk. Charts, graphs and reports, all data and no solution. The

flakes of foundation on her forehead shift when she creases her brow.

“You’ve missed 34 periods this semester.” A pause and an expectation: fill the silence. I don’t. Cathy Burrowitz raises her eyebrows just so. I study her dry cuticles.

Finally, “Can you tell me why?”

Well, I might begin, the once-white linoleum floors make me want to vomit. I hate that everyone furrows their brow at me. I feel the stares, and they’re different than the ones Jennifer and Megan and Shelby get. I do what’s asked of me. Isn’t that enough?

Instead I tell her I’m tired. She taps her desk. Squared nails.

“Tran,” she sighs, confused by the shape of my name on her tongue. “Everyone gets tired. But we all show up to work. Do you work?”

He gives me that nervous nod people do. I want to say that nobody is watching people like us.

Would she even believe me if I told her? I tell her I work.

“What do you think your boss would do if you didn’t come to work for 34 days?”

Well, I suppose I’d get fired. She smiles. “Exactly. So, how do you think you should conduct yourself at school?”

I remind her that she can’t fire a student. Her eyes narrow, the tapping intensifies. “We can assign a supervisor, take away spare periods, deny your ceremony. Do you want that?”

These are threats and she knows it. The bell rings. Students drift back to class. Their laughter peaks as they herd past the office on their way to chemistry, home economics, social studies.

“I just want to remind you that there are consequences.”

I look past her. Outside I can see students still trudging in, takeout boxes in hand. Fries for fourth period.

“What would your parents think?”

Cathy Burrowitz has no clue. I tell her I wouldn’t know.

Her questions take on a rhythm. Is anything else going on? How are things at home? Do you feel like you need extra help? My standard answer is no, as in negative, as in just shut up.

She neatens her papers. She has given up, and I ask if we are done here. She frowns. I have a lipstick that wouldn’t accentuate her fine lines as much.

“I don’t want to have to call for you again. Just come to school. You’re almost finished.”

I leave my backpack and jacket in my locker. The front doors are right there, so I walk from the school to downtown. Half an hour is how long it takes to get down the street, across the bridge, and through Chinatown. Here, the office towers block out the mountain range. I am surrounded by windows above and railroad tracks below. I end up in Samantha’s pharmacy.

Nobody greets me this time. I go to the beauty aisle and shove pigments, pans and tubes into my sweater pocket. Glass and plastic click together, some fall on the floor, but they don’t split open in glitter and powder as I expect them to. They just bounce. No one stops me. The churning of the air conditioner fills the silence.

I walk straight through the metal detectors. They beep no more or less loudly than before, no more or less urgently than they ever will. But this time I stop. Someone pushes open the till door, it swings on rusted hinges.

She says, “Excuse me,” and I turn and she takes a step back, ergonomic loafers squeaking against the linoleum. “Are you alright? You’re crying.”

I pull the makeup out of my pockets and let it hit the mud-soaked mat on the floor. She stops for a second and calls her manager.

I don’t know what it means to be alright, but people who are alright never get asked “Are you alright?”

I tell Samantha I don’t remember choosing to be anything. ■

Kathy Pham is the winner of AV’s 2020 fiction contest. Originally from Calgary, she is currently based in Vietnam.