before january
I can’t believe you, Juliet. I can’t believe the way you’ve just appeared and now I’m different.

And we rehearse four times a week now, three afternoons and all day Sunday, and suddenly there’s nothing else.

And I remember when I first saw you and I know I’ll never forget it. When the door opened and I looked up from my script and your father was there with his hand on your shoulder. And the drama teacher said, *Everyone, this is Mr Koh’s daughter Juliet. She’ll be playing the part of Caroline.*

Juliet. And you stood there and you smiled and said *Hi* and we shouldn’t have stared but we probably did. All of us suddenly feeling like drama nerds. And we rehearsed
right away while your father sat in the staff room marking my maths exam. You with your skin the colour of honey and your long black hair that shines like the feathers of a black bird and your dark eyes. Next to me, sitting next to me as we read through, standing next to me as we blocked out the scenes. Saying to the drama teacher, *And then we kiss, right?* And turning to me mechanically, holding out stiff arms because it’s in the script, turning away and reading your next line.

And you sat making notes with a pencil, your school hat on the desk beside you. Your legs tucked under your chair and crossed at the ankles, your fingers in your gleaming hair, slipping through it without thinking. And you brushed your hair and your hands made plaits while your lips made the words. You said your lines at a whisper and your face worked as though I was in front of you when I was just beside you watching and learning my own lines, or at least running through them hoping something would stick.

I watched you walk to your father’s car, your hat in your hand, your bag on your back. The way your calves tapered to your ankles so perfectly in your dark winter uniform stockings. And I’ll tell no one this, ever.

I think about you all the way home on the train. I sit back with my feet on the seat opposite and my script open in front of me and I look out at the late August afternoon. Ahead there is rain and the city buildings are only grey outlines as we travel towards them. The first of the rain flicks across the window in fine beaded lines and then it’s pouring and my view is gone.
And this script isn’t good. I don’t like my character, or yours, and I can see no point in the kiss. Why do they kiss? Do they feel anything for each other? In the context of the play it means almost nothing.

I step out onto a wet, windy platform and I know the rain’s set in. I run and the drops swipe across my blazer in dark blotches, fill my hair and my eyes and run cold under my collar. And I’m running almost blind up the long hill home and I don’t care.

At rehearsal we talk about our characters and how they might interact. I try to make you laugh and sometimes you do. But you seem so old already, already beyond me, unreachable. And in my room I think of things to say that might impress you, conversations we might have. Your voice that I won’t forget, that I keep in my head. And I’m counting down. Thirteen rehearsals before we perform for just one night. And I don’t want this to end.

I can’t stand the time we waste in this cold empty hall, the slow steps we take across this wide wooden stage, our scripts in our hands. Walking through scenes, working on the detail.

And you turn to me with those mechanical arms that don’t touch me and your script in one hand with a circle in pencil around the words They kiss.

If you could be closer please, the drama teacher says. And don’t be afraid to touch. Remember this all has to be comfortable before an audience sees it.

So you drop your script and it slaps to the stage and I drop mine and you say Okay in a very practical way.
And you reach your arms to me as though we might dance, but just because we have to. So we touch carefully, your hands on my chest, my arm around you. Your hands warm through my shirt under my open blazer, even if you try to pretend you haven’t just dropped them there.

*I can’t see my lines*, you say and the drama teacher tells you *lines should be down now*.

We pick up our scripts and go on.

And we get used to this dance, this formal holding that must eventually be comfortable. And we can talk when we’re this close and no one can hear us. I talk into your ear, just at a whisper, and make you smile. It’s as though we’re alone.

And I think of these parts of the rehearsal on the train. These few moments that make the rest of this bad play as irrelevant as the day. And I imagine us standing there, just the two of us, because it’s what we want to do and not because it’s in the play. But we’re not in the hall, we’re somewhere else far from this winter, far from school. But still close, just like this. On the top of a mountain with only mountains around us, deep in a rainforest where a waterfall crashes into a clear cold pool and the parakeets shriek crazily. But on this stage, in this uniform, in this body that’s all limbs and ears and a nose my mother tells me I’ll grow into, I feel so gawky, so far from cool, so unlikely to be wanted. And I can’t see how my luck could change now, how this won’t be over in a week and a half. Six more rehearsals.

And you still kill me with your cleverness and your
bright eyes when they look at me. And I churn when you look at me and you’re so close and I don’t know how your hands can’t feel it. How they can’t feel every part of me tipping over and over.

We talk on the red brick steps outside the hall in breaks and you wear big baggy jumpers on weekends and pull your hair back and it gives your face a stark kind of beauty that you break in pieces when you laugh. You tell me about your friends and you only mention girls, and you talk about movies and books and parties. You tell it so well I can see you there, feeling so normal about it all, your brother’s uni friends bringing you drinks. And I can imagine you anywhere fitting right in, or not caring if you didn’t.

And then we’re back inside. On stage moving through conversations and punchlines and improbable disasters. But that’s this farce, this hopeless farce that we’re wrapped up in, that we expect people to laugh at next week. And I can feel you breathing when the holding part comes again, and the rest doesn’t matter. I can hardly hear it. And then the kiss.

_Let’s have it this time_, the drama teacher says.

And the touching suddenly stops being easy, becomes mechanical again. And your eyes look away as we move closer and I know your hand can feel my heart. Our lips bump briefly. Your soft lips on mine and then away, without a sound.

_Okay. That’s fine. That’ll work. Now keep it moving._

So we go on, to the end. And then home, the train
again. Me in an empty carriage on the way into town, filling up at central with commuters. And I try to remember the kiss but it’s almost gone.

And my friends ask how the play’s going and I say fine. And they talk about you as Koh’s daughter and I tell them nothing other than you’re pretty good for Koh’s daughter. Surprisingly good for Koh’s daughter, with his ugly head.

And I think of your body close to me, our conversations. Those few seconds of my life entirely different from the rest.

And I keep this to myself. I have one friend, and I don’t tell you about this, one friend who boiled and re-used a condom three times when we were in year eight. When he was about to put it on again it fell apart in his hands and he had to steal another one from his brother’s wallet. This friend is known to exaggerate, probably to lie, but I can’t compete with that. I can’t tell him, you wouldn’t believe Juliet. The only thing that matters about the play is talking to her, standing near her, hoping that it’s not nearly over. I can’t tell him I can’t get you out of my head and nothing’s happened. He’d tell me what I should be doing.

And we do make-up for the dress rehearsal and you tell me I have no idea about lips and you say, Watch me. And you take out the scarlet lipstick since it’s that kind of play and you turn to face me on your stool and you open your mouth a little, draw your lips against your teeth and you slide the stick along, slower than you need to. And I see your tongue curled up against your white teeth in your half-open mouth.
And we rehearse and in costume you’re distinctly older, and you were already more than old enough. And I feel a fake in the suit I’m wearing. It feels like a costume and you look real. And remarkably desirable. You laugh and it’s a sound like someone pouring a sophisticated drink. I don’t know anyone who laughs that way, or walks that way. My friends will talk, I know they’ll talk.

But I can’t. I can’t find too many words in the breaks when you’re standing in front of me, talking to me as though you don’t know you’re in that dress with those raging red lips. Making the words easily with those impossible lips that you’ve turned into something else.

And we’re back on stage, powering towards the end and you come up to me for the kiss. And your body fits in against mine, your fingers with their blood-red nails spread open across my chest. My arms are around you, around your waist and this time when our eyes meet you don’t look away. You move your hands up around my neck and for a moment I think there’s a smile at the edge of the intimidating lips.

Okay, you say softly.

And you tilt your head up and we kiss and this time we hold it a while and your whole body is up against mine, your fingers in my hair. And when we separate the kiss makes the right noise and you laugh and wipe your lipstick from my mouth with your fingers.

Let’s not start introducing anything new now, the drama teacher says.

And your mother is there to take you home straight
after the rehearsal and she puts a coat around your shoulders to stop the cold and I see you walking off with her, high on your heels and breathing steam in the cold air.

And my mother finds me too and tells me I was good and the play wasn’t as bad as I’d said. And in the car she asks me why I hadn’t told her anything about Mr Koh’s daughter.

*I told you ages ago she was in the play,* I say to her, and we leave it at that.

I can’t believe we’ve only one more night of this. I don’t sleep well. I don’t want to sleep at all. And even if nothing happens tomorrow this won’t be over for me. Even if you just walk off with your coat around your shoulders. And you probably haven’t even noticed me and none of this makes sense. But I can feel your fingers in my hair, your nails on the back of my neck.

I arrive early on the night of the performance and you arrive just in time. The hall is full. I can hear all the voices and I hadn’t given this much thought. We’re on.

Tonight there is laughter at the bad jokes, applause. I thought they’d be smarter than this, but they seem to be liking it.

And you walk over to me, this time slowly. This time with a lingering walk that steals all the attention and not just mine. And you move in against me right away and you keep looking into my eyes. And your arms are around my neck again, drawing me closer, your red lips open a little when they meet mine. And I feel your tongue in my mouth, feel you breathing heavily against me, your fingers now
bunching my hair, twisting it, tugging at it. And I feel the muscles of your back working under my hands, fitting us even closer together till there’s nothing between us.

And then it’s over, and the look on your face gives nothing away. Around us people are saying their lines over the cheers of the audience and the predictable animal noises of my friends. You step away from me and your eyes are the last part of you to leave. My mouth tastes like wax from all the lipstick. But not just like wax. The play goes on.

After the bows I’m the first to the dressing room but I hear your heels on the concrete floor behind me and I turn.

*I’m sorry*, you say with your smudged mouth. *That was very unprofessional of me.*

And your parents appear behind you smiling and congratulating you and giving you flowers and chocolates. And your father shakes my hand and says well done. *We’ve got a dance at school*, you say as the drama teacher interrupts to tell your father how good you were. *Saturday week.*

And then you’re gone.

My mother hands me a tissue to clean the mess around my mouth.