

## Imaginary Rooms

By Grace Li

This first year, all our patients are pretend. I see them twice a week, shrugging into my white coat between the imaginary divide between *us* and *them*, knocking on imaginary doors. Eventually, the faces become familiar. Fatigue becomes a persistent cough becomes headaches, and each time I shake the same hand, give the same introduction, feel like I am playing pretend too. Here are the number of ways I can say, *Tell me what brought you in today*.

This is how the afternoon goes. Sunlight slants golden through the windows. Winter in California means it gets dark earlier now, that in these hours the sun may set. My first patient—my only patient—says *I've been having trouble sleeping* and I say *I'm sorry to hear that*, both of us playing our parts. When I ask her to tell me more she does, and I take notes I will later throw away.

I don't mean to minimize this. Each time I knock on the table and pretend it's a door my heart is in my throat, and despite several months of anatomy I swear I can feel it there, that anatomical variation might account for the sound of my pulse in my ears. I am nervous every time. But when it's over it's over and taking off my coat feels like taking a bow. This year nothing is real, not yet, and for that I am thankful.

I ask her more questions. There is a sequence to follow, acronyms that once felt like an unfamiliar country. PMI, HPI, FH, SH, and though I know it's pretend there are moments when it doesn't feel that way. *Tell me about your day-to-day life*, I say. And then, moments later, *Tell me about your relationship*. A raised brow, a look like a question, and because this is pretend I can answer it as if it is easy.

*I ask*, I say, *because difficult relationships can affect your health. I ask because I ask all my patients this*. I ask because today the topic is intimate partner violence, and though I know what's coming I wish I didn't. The sun is setting, and the mountains that cut into the horizon are limned in red and gold and the dark blue of the coming night.

When she pauses, the space between us is heavy with meaning. We are taught not to use the word violence because that word carries a weight. It is a blow in itself. I want to say something—to soften, to qualify—but I don't. Instead, I think of the first time I saw California from the air, how the mountains held the sky like two hands cupped together, how blue spilled through like water. It feels like pretend until it isn't, until it's a story I have heard or I have told, until she is speaking and I am drowning. Here are the number of ways I can say, *I am sorry*.

Remind me: this is not real. And yet I can feel the cuffs of my white coat against my wrists, I can see her face turned up to the sun. There is nothing pretend about her voice when it wavers; there is nothing pretend about what I say of bravery. Still, when the timer goes off, when I stand up to leave the room of our imaginations, I do not ask for truth. Instead I say, *It was so nice meeting you.* I say, *I will be back soon.* Next week I will see her once more. She will have a different name. It will be chest pain or cramps or anything else in a long list of possibilities, and we will start again.

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**Grace Li is a graduate of Duke University, where she studied biology and creative writing, and is currently in medical school at Stanford. Her short fiction has been recognized by The Saturday Evening Post Great American Fiction Contest and Stanford's Paul Kalanithi Writing Award, and has been published in Hyphen Magazine. To learn more about her work, visit [gracedli.com](http://gracedli.com).**

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