

Old School Sensibilities

Short Story by Christina Tang-Bernas



Like almost every kid these days, Carrie had her first brain stem port, or beesp, installed at the base of her neck on her twelfth birthday. A simple outpatient procedure paid for by her proud parents. Carrie had chosen a pale-blue finish for the port opening, the color of the skies in the early afternoons when she and Shalin would watch the neighborhood ravens winging through the clouds on lazy Saturdays. Our little girl all grown up, Dad had said when she'd woken up, broad hand heavy atop her fine blonde hair. Mom had smiled at his words, leaning over to kiss Dad's cheek.

The next day, Carrie had run all the way to Shalin's house to show him. "Just wait until you get one," she'd said. His fingertips had grazed over the small opening and a shiver had run the length of her spine. She'd pulled away, rubbing her hands against the goose bumps along her arms. "Your house is kind of chilly." "Sorry," he'd said, shoving a thick sweater over her head. And even though she started sweating as soon as the cloth enveloped her, she still wore it all the way home.

Shalin, with his super-conservative parents, had to contend with the glacial-slow speeds of doing everything the manual way until he was sixteen, when installation of the beesp was mandated by law. And even then, he'd received the most basic government-issued model.

By that time, Carrie had upgraded her beesp to the latest lightning-fast quantum-computing model, implanted a chip in her left eye capable of viewing both ultraviolet and infrared frequencies, and acquired an all-over skin graft that could display any color, pattern, or picture she wanted.

Shalin liked designing intricate tattoos that draped over her shoulders and wrapped around her calves, his fingers a blur over his keyboard as he programmed them into corresponding digital pixels she would later upload into herself. How much could Shalin accomplish if he could think his creations into being without any physical limitations? Carrie couldn't wait to find out.

The day Shalin received his beesp, she went over to his house with a package of his favorite sugar cookies. He refused to see her.

His parents said he'd had a bad reaction to the operation and was recovering, to please come back at a later unknown time. She waited all day and night in a state of panic, before receiving a short staticky burst of message which flashed like lightning in her skull, "I'm fine. You ate all my cookies, didn't you?"

She had, but she'd gone out and bought him another package right after. "No," she sent back. Carrie curled up around the latest cookies and contemplated eating them also.

Even when Shalin started coming to school again, a week after the installation, he didn't say much about what had happened. When Carrie offered to connect their two beesps together so she could send him a copy of the new Token Molerats album, he'd recoiled.

He must've seen the look on her face because he reached out a hand in her direction, though Carrie noticed his fingers hovered an inch above her currently-ombre-blue skin and never settled. "It's just—" Shalin started. He stopped, then cleared his throat. "I'm still getting used to everything, you know?"

Stuffing down the hurt, Carrie nodded. "Sure. Whatever. I'll send it to your home computer, yeah?"

As far as she knew, Shalin never used his beesp except when required. Some days, Carrie wondered if he ever felt lonely, the way he cut himself off from the invisible web connecting everyone else. If it did bother him, he didn't let it show. She took to making hard copy downloads of everything that came her way. Just in case.

Two days after her seventeenth birthday, Carrie's skin went on the fritz.

"Wow," Shalin said, when he first saw her in class. "I haven't seen you with your own skin color in a long time. I'd forgotten how you looked." His long legs stretched out before him, crossed at the ankles and tucked underneath the seat in front.

Carrie blushed, cursing her inability to hide the red she could feel burning high on her cheekbones. "My stupid skin's malfunctioning. I don't know what happened, but my dad's going to take me to get it fixed this weekend." Shalin smiled, teeth a bare white, skin the same dusky brown it'd always been. "Well, I think you look pretty like this too."

"That's because you're an old man stuck in a skinny kid's body," Carrie replied.

He hummed under his breath. She could almost feel his gaze trace over her features, down her neck, and along the length of her arm. His eyes shifted away, back to his tablet. Carrie tried to peek over his shoulder, to see if he was drawing her. He did so at times, the point of his stylus tracing her outline in shades of gray. She'd look up to see him sketching away, eyes flicking in her direction, tongue caught in the corner of his lips. He never showed her the finished portraits though. She wished she knew how she looked in his eyes.

Even after the repairs, Carrie reverted back to her original skin color every so often. "It's trendy, you know," she told Shalin one day. "The retro look." She watched him program another tattoo design, now for an after-school job instead of for her, and pretended not to notice his wide smile.

He pushed a paper flyer over to her. Who even used paper anymore? Carrie smoothed it out before scanning and committing it to her 'Shalin' files. "An art show?"

"You have to go," he said. "I have a surprise for you." His fingers paused over the keyboard. "Besides, I won't know anyone else there except my teacher."

"What about the other kids in your class?"

Shalin hunched his shoulders, and she didn't press further.

In the dim confines of a ritzy gallery, Carrie downed her non-alcoholic champagne. She scanned the room for Shalin's black curls. Spotting them in the far corner, she pushed her way through the bustling crowd. "Nice show," she said, raising her glass towards him.

He nodded, eyes fixed on a point somewhere behind her. The exits, she supposed, knowing him.

Carrie ran her palms down her black skirt, trying to think of something to say to break the silence. "Where are your parents?" she asked.

"Oh, they're arriving soon. Papa had to work late today." He fell quiet again.

She glanced around them, at the white walls laden with paintings with Shalin's name scrawled at the bottom. "So I really like your art, as usual, though I can't claim to understand what they're supposed to mean," Carrie said. "Like this one," she pointed at one full of red-hued washes named 'Untitled No. 12'. "What does this one mean?"

Shalin slanted her a sideways glance. "They're abstract paintings. They mean whatever you want them to mean."

"How come you never exhibit any of your realistic-style paintings?" Carrie crossed her arms. "Or any with me in them. I did spend hours posing for a few of them."

“Those aren’t meant for public viewing.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want anyone to see you the way I do.”

Carrie froze. “What does that mean?”

He shrugged.

“Shalin, what does that mean?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat, and then he pushed by her, “I think my parents are here.” Carrie watched him go, not seeing his parents anywhere.

She told herself she didn’t care.

It was much later when Carrie remembered his supposed ‘surprise’. She couldn’t think what it could be, and had forgotten to ask.

“Whoa, did you see that?” the boy standing beside her said to his friend. He blinked, and again.

She squinted at Shalin’s art, examining each piece in minute detail, but still couldn’t figure out what she was missing. Carrie clenched her fists. What were these strangers seeing that she wasn’t?

“Excuse me,” she said to the boy, “what were you talking about earlier? Is there something special about these paintings?”

The boy raised an eyebrow, looking at her with an expression akin almost to pity. “Sorry, you can only see it with the right set of eyes.”

His friend nudged him. “Just because you’re a rich bastard who can afford every upgrade, doesn’t mean everyone else is so lucky.” They moved away, still arguing.

Carrie frowned at their retreating backs. What did that mean? The right set of eyes?

Oh, of course. She began filtering the room through the different frequencies of light, then let out a gasp, her hand flying up to cover her open mouth.

In the center of each of Shalin’s paintings was a raven, wings spread, depicted in spare brushstrokes of ultraviolet paint.

On a late spring afternoon, a month after her eighteenth birthday, Carrie lay side-by-side next to Shalin in the town’s tiny park, and tried not to think about how close his fingers were to hers. She could almost count the air molecules separating their knuckles.

“I’m getting a mecha heart,” Carrie said, “as a graduation gift. Synchronized to an atomic clock, calibrated to my lung capacity, and guaranteed to never skip a beat. Lifetime warranty, of course.”

Shalin leaned back on his elbows, dark eyes focused on the clumps of clouds scattered across pale-blue sky.

“That’s actually kind of sad in a way. It’s not quite the same is it, to fall in love and never have your heart show it?”

“You don’t need arrhythmia to know how love feels,” she said. A nearby raven squawked as if in agreement.

“Love is a series of hormonal and cognitive interactions. Nothing to do with the heart, like all you hopeless romantics believe.”

“We’re a dying breed,” he replied. “All passionate metaphors and outdated nonsense.”

Carrie knocked her shoulder into his. “Last of the Romantics. Sounds dashing. They should make a movie about you.”

“Please,” Shalin said, “there aren’t any actors good-looking enough to play me.”

Her heart stuttered in her chest as she watched the last wisps of dying light gild his cheekbones, and couldn't help but agree.

It would be the last time they went cloud-watching before graduation.

They sat together on Shalin's front stoop after the ceremony and the parental fuss, the sun-warmed metal door pressed against their backs. Carrie tapped her fingers against her knees, picturing the box sitting inside the bag propped against her legs.

"So, you're leaving in a week, huh?" Shalin asked.

Carrie laughed. "It's not like we can't communicate twenty-four-seven, even with your grandpa sensibilities."

"It's still not the same," Shalin said, his chin propped in his right palm.

Now or never. "Here." Carrie dug into her bag and handed over the medium-sized box, tied with glittery ribbon. "Hope you like how I went all old-school with the wrapping."

"What's this?" Shalin asked.

"Open it."

"What, now?"

"Yes, now, silly," Carrie said.

With careful movements, he pulled the wrapping paper apart to lay bare a clear acrylic cube. A human heart was embedded inside, all dusky pinks and browns. The small gold plaque screwed onto the bottom read: "The Heart of Carrie Sutherland. Handle With Care."

Carrie fidgeted as Shalin examined every angle, sunlight illuminating different sections of the thick muscle. Finally, she blurted out, "Happy early birthday. I know it's not for another month, but, you know, I'm not going to be around, so..." Shalin looked up, some strange emotion shifting through his brown eyes that Carrie had never seen before.

"Carrie," he started, "is this—"

"Just a little something," she interrupted. "More like a token really. I mean, it's not super-useful or anything. A paperweight."

"Thank you," Shalin said, more breath than solid words. "This is the best present anyone has ever given me." Setting the acrylic cube down on the ground beside him, he reached out for her. His fingers curled in the air around her shoulders, hesitating, before he sucked in a deep breath and let them settle around her upper arms. Shalin leaned forward, pressing his forehead against hers. "To be fair, you've owned my metaphorical heart since the day you showed up on my doorstep the week after my twelfth birthday and said you were going to tutor me despite my physical disability."

Carrie cringed. "I was a little brat, wasn't I?"

Shalin laughed. "Oh yeah," he said, "but I'm glad that you, that essential Carrie, has never changed."

"Yeah, well, that's your old-school sensibilities talking," Carrie said. "Have I told you how much I like that about you?"

"No," Shalin said, his voice soft now, uncertain. "Tell me."

She leaned up, left a soft kiss on his cheek. "I like you, just the way you are."

"Sounds good." He pulled away. "Then, let's promise. You keep being you, and I'll keep being me, and we'll both keep liking that about each other."

"Yeah," Carrie whispered, "okay." She stood up, brushing the dirt from the seat of her pants. "I should get going. Still have a lot of packing left to do."

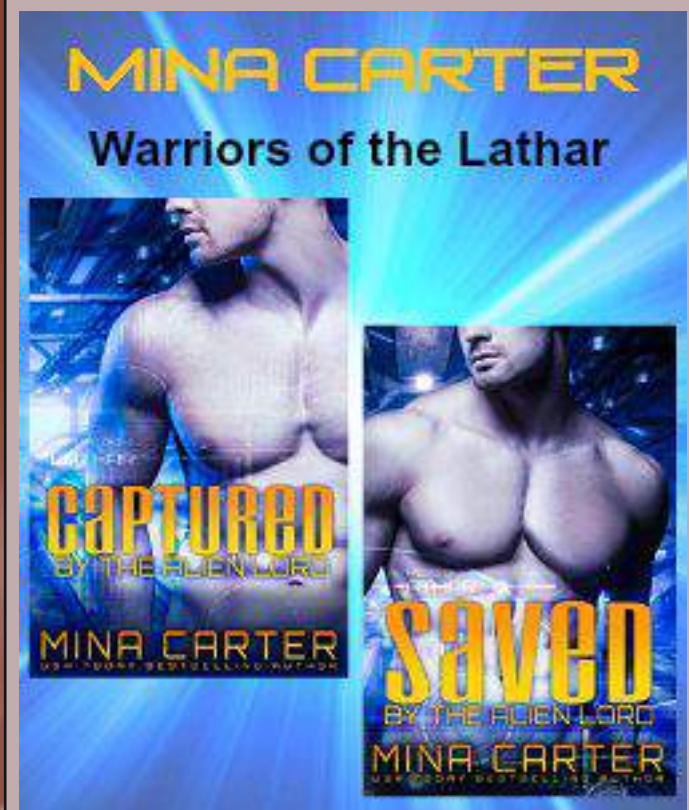
“Wait,” Shalin stood too. Then, for the first time since the day his beesp was installed, he connected both of theirs together, sending her a compressed file.

Carrie waited until she sat cross-legged in the middle of her bed before accessing it. It was a folder full of pictures, at least a hundred of them flashing by in her minds-eye, ranging from half-finished sketches to full-scale paintings. All portraits of her, each labeled with the date it had been created. The earliest was a simple grayscale drawing dated the day after her twelfth birthday. The most recent was tagged a week ago.

And she looked beautiful in every one of them.

The last picture, however, was a painting of a raven. So realistic and detailed, Carrie thought that if she reached out, she would feel the stiff glossy feathers under her fingertips. Reflected in its eye were her and him, lying on the grass, and the painting was labeled, “Always.”

Advertisement



Advertisement

