

Standby Stand-In

By Editha Rosario-Moore

Characters

Noymie Latine woman, mid-40s

May Chinese-American woman, mid-40s

Time

December 24, 2022.

Latenight in River North, Chicago.

Living room of Noymie's home.

A beautiful, modern living room.

NOYMIE sits on her couch, bent over, reading a file in a manilla folder, waiting.

She looks at her Apple Watch, sips whiskey, stares off.

The bell rings. A moment. She answers door.

MAY

Noy!

NOYMIE

May.

They embrace. It is stiff, awkward, and longer than it should be.

Come in, come in. It's cold. Do you have a coat? *Grabs MAY's carry-on bag.*

MAY

Thank God I do. We do wear coats in San Francisco, you know. *She laughs.* It's coooooold.

NOYMIE

Yeah. I remember when you said you'd never live here.

MAY

When?

NOYMIE

Freshman Formal. You took some jagoff named Matt, he said that California was the greatest place in the world, and Chicago was only good for layovers. You both died laughing.

MAY

That's a really specific memory. *Chuckles.*

NOYMIE

She does not laugh.

MAY

Hanging up her coat.

Uh, I was in New York for work. Thanks for responding.

It's been so long...but you look the same.

You look exactly the same.

NOYMIE

Plus 25 years.

MAY

Nope.

NOYMIE

Well. I think we look the same to people at the time we made an...impression.

MAY

Forever 21. *They both chuckle.*

All the hotels were booked. All the flights canceled. And I couldn't remember if I still knew anyone in Chicago, but then. I do.

NOYMIE

It's all good. My husband's working tonight, so it's nice to have...Christmas Eve company.

MAY

No kids?

NOYMIE

No kids.

He's a doctor.

MAY

Nice!

NOYMIE

An ER doctor.

MAY

Oh, that's sweet.

NOYMIE

Sure.

And I'm doing some work tonight, too. I'm a public defender.

MAY

Wow, that's—really weird.

Awkward.

NOYMIE

How's that?

MAY

I was a prosecutor.

Funny, huh?

NOYMIE

Makes total sense to me.

Awkward.

Why'd you stop doing it?

MAY

Ugh, too stressful.

I went back to freelance journalism.

NOYMIE

Ah. So you're your own boss.

MAY

I just. Like it better.

NOYMIE

You're lucky you can do it.

MAY

Yep. I work hard at it.

NOYMIE

And you have the money.

To deal with the in-between time. When you're not making money.

MAY

Sure.

Awkward.

NOYMIE

Please, sit down. Water?

MAY

Sits. No, thank you.

NOYMIE

Gets water anyway. My mom always says, get people a glass of water when they come over. No matter what they say. They need it. Whether they know it or not.

MAY

I have my own. *Takes out her water bottle.*

NOYMIE

Hands the glass out to her. It's filtered, even though it's from the tap. It's one of those, uh. I can't remember the name. But very expensive and under-the-sink.

MAY

Takes it.

Ok.

Why is she saying this?

NOYMIE

Was I the only one to respond to you?

MAY

No. No, I reached out to you, specifically.

But I *was* surprised you still check Facebook. *Chuckles.*

NOYMIE

So you didn't expect me to respond.

MAY

No, I just. I hoped.

I just haven't been on social media in forever.

NOYMIE

I bet the airport was hell.

MAY

Putting her feet up on the couch.

Pure hell.

A Delta worker was singing Christmas carols. People were trying to sleep on the floor. Loud phone calls, the food was stale. Too many sneezes and coughs—do you want me to wear a mask?

NOYMIE

No. I live with an ER doctor, so. I'm fine.

Different times now.

I don't know if I ever want to get on a plane again.

MAY

That's too extreme—

NOYMIE

So where's your family?

MAY

Sips her water. San Francisco.

NOYMIE

Ah. You went back home.

And you named your daughter after your mom.

I saw on Facebook. So beautiful.

MAY

Thank you.

After she passed in college...it was fated.

Silence.

How's your mom?

NOYMIE

Good. Happy, old. *Smiles.* I told her you were coming.

MAY

You called her this late?

NOYMIE

Night owl.
She says hello and asked me to hug you.

MAY

Tell her hello. *Smiling, remembering.*
She was always so nice to me.
I was trying to remember the last time I saw you. I'm not sure.

NOYMIE

Quickly.
My apartment, junior year. The morning after you slept with Ronny's cousin. Drew. In my living room.

MAY

I think I remember that. *They chuckle.*
I was about to go on a month-long trip through South America with Jamie and Ellen.

NOYMIE

One last hurrah in the slums.

MAY

What?

NOYMIE

That trip must've been amazing. I've never been anywhere south of Mexico.
Awkward.
Did you ever get my voice message?

MAY

I don't know. What'd you say?

NOYMIE

That I wanted to keep in touch.
And Drew. He wanted me to ask you for the face to his car radio.

MAY

Huh?

NOYMIE

Those 90s car radios with the removable faces? You had his in your purse.
He basically didn't have a car radio anymore.

MAY

Well. Oops.

NOYMIE

They were expensive.

MAY

Silence.

I've thought about you.

NOYMIE

That's nice.

MAY

Honestly, I didn't think you wanted to keep in touch.

NOYMIE

How's that?

MAY

Well. We were so close freshman year, and when I left for a year and my mom died. And I came back. Maybe expecting the same...friendship. And you were. Not really there.

NOYMIE

I remember I asked you to room with me again. And you said you didn't wanna live in that "industrial area."

MAY

No, I just wanted to live on campus, like we did before.

NOYMIE

Well I couldn't afford it anymore. And then I invited you to my birthday party, in that "industrial area," and you couldn't make it.

MAY

I. I'm not sure why.

NOYMIE

You had a party that same night. A secret. At least, from me.

MAY

Silence.

Our birthdays were a day apart. It was the only time—

NOYMIE

You shoulda told me.
All of our friends went to yours.

MAY

Because it was on campus.
Silence.

Noy, I'm sorry.
I just figured you didn't wanna be friends anymore.

NOYMIE

So did I.
Not with an industrial-area girl.

MAY

Why do you keep insinuating?

NOYMIE

I'm just surprised you wanted to see me.

MAY

Pulls out a letter.
When I was at the airport, I was reading this. I read it every year around this time.
She hands it to NOYMIE.

NOYMIE

It's to you, from your mom.

MAY

Please, read it.

NOYMIE reads it, carefully.

NOYMIE

It's really touching.
Thank you. For letting me read it.

MAY

She always, always said I was lucky to have a friend who looked out for me like you did.
So it's nice that she memorialized it, like that.

NOYMIE

I'm really touched. And I'm glad she appreciated it, really.
But that was just college-freshman-roomie stuff.
Making sure you didn't pass out alone at a frat party. And I never left you alone at bar.
Made sure you don't leave your drink unattended.

MAY

It was really nice. Thank you.
I always thought. You and your family were really loving.

NOYMIE

We are.

MAY

I think that's why. Why you became a public defender.

NOYMIE.

Shrugs. I don't know.

I read that choosing to be a public defender is a trauma response.
Oof.

MAY

I wasn't trying to say...

NOYMIE

I know.

But. I don't think you know how...uncomfortable I was. Being poor, in college.

MAY

We were all poor students.

NOYMIE

No. No.

You were torn up because your dad bought a Mac for you instead of a PC.
I had a broken word processor.

MAY

That's not my fault.

NOYMIE

That's it.

That's it.

You had no empathy.

One day. I came home from my work-study job, and I was crying because I was exhausted,
and I said, it's not fair, I shouldn't have to work and go to school full time. And you had this
look on your face. *She does the face.*

You said. Well, *I* have to pay full tuition.

It's different when you *pay for it.*

Silence.

I didn't even understand what you *meant* by that last line.

But it wasn't helpful.

MAY

I'm sorry.
Silence.
But I was a kid.
Silence.

So why did you want to keep in touch with me?

I remember when I came back junior year, you seemed...bitter.
And, you were wearing the same brand of makeup as me
The same perfume.
You even got a tattoo in the same place as me!
It was uncomfortable.

NOYMIE

That is...fucking embarrassing to hear.

I just wanted to fit in.

MAY

Silence.
I get it, Noy.
I get it.
I was just explaining.
And I'm happy for you.
You landed nicely.

NOYMIE

Silence.
Can I give you something?

MAY

Sure.

NOYMIE leaves the room and returns with a small figurine of Rosa Parks. She hands it to MAY, who looks confused.

NOYMIE

It's from the Rosa Parks Museum.
Silence.
It's her.

MAY

Oh.
Why?

NOYMIE

I thought you'd like it, because of your mom's story.

MAY

My mom?

NOYMIE

Yeah, the story about the bus seat?

MAY

MAY shakes her head no.
I don't think I know it.

NOYMIE

She told me a story about sitting on a bus during segregation. And how it changed her.

MAY

When did she tell you?

NOYMIE

When I visited you. For spring break? You went for coffee with a friend. So she took me for a coffee with her.
She said that when she was a teenager in the '50s, some upper-class Chinese-Americans were considered white.
At the time.

And one time, she got on the bus, and the driver told an old Black man to give her his seat.
She said no.
The bus driver said, YES.
The old man looked scared.
So, he got up and walked to the back.
And she stood there.
And the bus driver wouldn't drive until she sat down.
So she did.
Silence.

But she kept her head bowed, in embarrassment, and shame.
She said it was her Low Point.
And she promised she would never do anything like that again.

MAY

She never told *me* that.
Silence.

NOYMIE

I'm sorry.

Do you want a drink?

MAY

Why didn't she tell me?

NOYMIE

I don't know.

I think she told me, maybe, because she wanted to make me feel comfortable. With her.

I was poor, May.

And visiting your family's fucking mansion.

I didn't know how to act.

I remember. She served artichokes at dinner and asked me if I liked butter with mine, and

I said yes, like a lyin' fool.

Then she gave me drawn butter and quietly said, like this.

She showed me how to pull the leaves, dip them.

And the last night I was there, we went to her favorite restaurant.

She ordered skate wing and lobster ravioli for me.

It was amazing.

MAY

Holds the figurine close. Thank you, for this.

NOYMIE

I'm so sorry you lost her so young, May.

MAY

Just too soon.

Silence.

Looks at her watch. My flight leaves so early.

Flying standby.

Fingers crossed.

NOYMIE

No problem.

The guest room is yours. *Gestures.*

You just leave when you need.

And let me know if you need anything.

MAY

I'm sorry I didn't hold on to you.

Lessons from the grave.

NOYMIE

I'm just glad we met, yeah?

MAY

Yeah.

They hug again. It's the last time, and they know it.

END