

SORE LOSER

By Rachel Evangeline Chiong

My heart beat threatened to overwhelm the waves of chatter, combat cacophony, and cheers that echoed in the cavernous convention hall of this year's *Winter Tournament*. I fidgeted on the uncomfortable folding chair, hoping my opponent next to me didn't notice the sheen of sweat on my hands. We were waiting for a volunteer to let us know when we could start our match.

I wrestled my nerves for a deep breath and squeezed my palms against the familiar curves of my controller.

Since I was old enough to hold a controller, I was obsessed with video games. Like an IV, the wire from the device would snake from my small hands, down the couch, across the carpet, and into the family Gamecube. I drained afternoons playing *Super Smash Bros.*, where flagship characters from Nintendo franchises would fight head-to-head. I swore allegiance to the beefy, spandex-clad Captain Falcon, because I liked his golden-crested helmet.

But video games were my mom's least favorite thing about me. So the moment I was old enough to fill out the necessary forms she outsourced me to volunteer at the nursing home down the block from my family's sinking bungalow. While the rest of my classmates collected key chains and Pokémon cards, I collected plastic plates of jelly and boiled chicken from the lunchroom and stuck Dollarama stickers on my volunteer ID.

The staff and residents were very nice to me, but always in a distant adult way. With my games abandoned at home and no children my age around I felt anxious and alien. One day when I was still reeling from an argument I had with my mom that morning, I stole away to the upper floor and found an empty resident's room. The lights were still off, as I wandered into the room and curled up in a corner next to a space heater, trying to stifle my sniffles against my knees.

My thoughts stirred and roiled in my head so thunderously that I didn't notice a resident had entered the room until she was standing above me. She asked, "What are you doing here all alone, my dear?"

Bleary-eyed, I blinked up at her oversized pink cardigan that draped over the both of us. "I don't know..." I began before choking on my words as they fought to leave my throat all at once. "M-my mom wouldn't let me g-g-go join my friends' t-t-tournament because I got a 'D' in m-my m-a-a-th test even when I told her I couldn't und-d-derstand the word problems and n-n-now all my friends are playing *Smash* without me even though I trained for w-e-e-eks." I dissolved into a pitiful heap of sobs. But the resident gathered her skirt and sat next to me, nodding without uttering a single word, as I babbled on and on until I felt completely wrung out like a sponge.

Her name was May. I had never met her before, since she rarely joined the socials downstairs and preferred to stay in her room. But after that day, she would wander into the lounge while I returned DVDs into their cases. She would grin and wave from the doorway, her coconut lotion wafting from where she stood before shooting a creaky, cheesy finger gun at me, and scurrying back upstairs to her room.

Eventually, as the weather grew colder, and May began to wear sweaters underneath her cardigan, the staff stopped asking me about middle school and started asking me about high school, and someone donated a gaming console to the home: the Nintendo Wii. I would skulk around the lounge, waiting for the moment the residents finished their Wii bowling match, until I could saunter over and gingerly slide in my copy of the newest *Smash Bros.* game that I had convinced my mom I threw out.

Like clockwork, May would apparate on the couch behind me and begin pointing at the screen asking “What’s that?” and “Who’s that?” over and over until I threw up my hands, fished in my backpack for my friend’s extra controller, and asked her if she wanted to play. She only wanted to play Kirby, despite the character’s flighty movements. She liked how its pink, squishy body was the same color as her cardigan. After I taught her the basic controls, she would tilt the joystick recklessly and mash the buttons with abandon while she asked me about school, my classmates, my mom.

I told her about my tests, my friends, and how I was the best *Smash* player among them and was lauded to be the future *Winter Tournament* champion.

“Wassat?” May asked, as she led Kirby to waddle off the stage to its demise.

“The biggest tournament in the city! Heaps of players every year from around the country come to play to find out who’s best. Once I get past the qualifiers I can participate, but I haven’t thought of a cool player name yet.”

“How about ‘Captain Falcon’?”

“No, May,” I rolled my eyes. “It has to be *unique*.”

May shook her head, setting the controller down on the side table. “Hmmm...” She pressed her lips together for a while before smiling back at me. “How about ‘Kirby?’”

“Nevermind.” I sighed and leaned forward to set up the next match.

We spent every evening after my shift like this. The teenage volunteer and cardigan-clad resident, bickering at the screen. But once my mom enrolled me in Kumon, I had to take later shifts at the nursing home. Thus they put me on floor duty, where I saved May’s room for last. I would fold her blankets while she used my old stickers to decorate the second-hand controller I had given her. And I’d listen while she would prattle about her family who lived across the country in beautiful British Columbia where they had mountain views and delicious sushi.

If she wasn’t too tired after my shift, I would hook up the monitor in May’s room to my Switch, Nintendo’s descendant to the Wii. We played from her sinking mattress, craning our

necks towards the monitor, the wires from our controllers snaking down her bedside, running parallel like highways next to her IV, until it diverted into the Gamecube adapter. When the sun set, we forgot to turn on the lights and the room would grow dark. Neither of us got up, and we remained shrouded in the flickering glow of the TV, while behind us the buttons of May's many monitoring machines flickered like small stars.

One evening, at the tapered end of my shift, I flung my bag into the corner of May's room. It landed unceremoniously on the floor, a sack full of unread university brochures my mother had dog-eared along with a failed chemistry test I had crumpled up. I didn't feel like going home that night.

May's controller mottled with my old, garish dinosaur stickers sat unused on her lap. She didn't play too long with me these days, since it hurt her thumbs. But she was content to watch me practice. I ran a couple solo rounds, but the tightness in my neck from hunching over in class started to blossom and my moves stopped connecting. Inevitably, my computer-controlled opponent gripped Captain Falcon by the collar and tossed him off the screen and the match ended.

I kissed my teeth loudly, jerking my controller.

May stifled a yawn. "What are you so upset for, my dear?" she asked, smacking her lips.

"I'm such an idiot, my moves are getting so stiff for some reason."

"Well, you've been playing for so long..."

"No, May," My voice felt frigid as it sliced through the fanfare on the screen. "I'm garbage, I have to keep playing or I'll just keep losing over and over again."

"Hmmm," May pressed her lips together, slowly shifting herself up against the headboard. "Losing what? I can help you find it."

"That's not what I meant, May. Like losing, as in 'not winning'." I brought my hand up to massage my neck. "You just don't get it." I tossed my controller onto the side of the bed. It bounced off the edge and fell on the carpet with a quiet thud. "I'm so tired. My parents want me to go to university and I haven't even told them I failed my exams yet. They'll most likely ban me from going to the Winter Tournament. Can't blame them though. Their kid is such a loser, what's the point when I'm so garbage at this game and I haven't had the time to put in any practice because I've been so busy studying and then I waste time by coming here after school..."

My voice trailed away shamefully, as I realized what I had said.

But May didn't seem to mind, she just blinked sleepily at the screen. I felt a pang of guilt, worried that maybe I was in the wrong to keep her up so late. But she pointed at the corner of her room towards the faint, dusty outline of where her heater once stood. "Do you remember?" She asked. "When I found you there years ago crying your poor eyes out?"

I pulled my knees up and rested my chin on top, the memory unlocking gently with a soft click.

May turned her head to study the corner, so I couldn't see her expression as she spoke. "You know, that day I found you, I also found out I failed my cardiac test. My family came to visit me to break the news that I could get very sick if I traveled to the west coast with them. They offered to stay in Toronto, but I didn't want to hold them back, so I gave them my blessing to go." May paused and said the rest slowly. "But when they left...I felt so lonely. So I came here to be by myself, and instead found a little child feeling the same way I did."

She glanced at me, her eyes wet, and reached over to give my hand a squeeze with her sunken, splotchy fingers. "Thank you for keeping me company, my dear. I hope you find what you're looking for."

"It's okay, May." I cleared my throat, a knot forming in my chest, as I squeezed my palms against the familiar curves of her hand. "I won't leave your side, I promise."

I picked up my controller from the floor, restarted the match, and played until she fell asleep, her fingers clutching her controller like a child grasping a teddy bear.

I kept my promise when I lingered by the caddy outside of May's room, folding the blankets as slowly as possible while her doctor's appointments grew longer than my shifts.

I kept my promise when I chatted with the lunch staff in the cafeteria, as I tossed used Bingo sheets and rejection letters from McMaster, York University, and UofT into the recycling.

I kept my promise when I swiped my fob at the front entrance and handed a stranger a plastic bag full of my games and consoles in exchange for a wad of cash.

I kept my promise when I ignored my phone ringing in my sweatpants' pocket, as I rolled May on her new wheelchair to her window, so we could watch the sun set against the Toronto skyline together.

I kept my promise when I wiped clean the dusty corner of May's empty room, while the staff bustled around me making it ready for the new resident who would move in.

I kept my promise as I took a deep breath, the ocean of multiple *Smash Bros.* matches in the convention hall rushing into my ears, the bright lights from the impossibly high ceiling blinding me as a tournament volunteer came over to our table.

"*Mayhem?*" He pointed at my player tag. "You ready to start?"

I nodded at him then at my opponent next to me, noticing how the cables from our hands weaved and then separated under the folding table and met again in the console. I straightened up, brushing my thumbs against the stickers on my hand-me-down controller. "Yeah, I'm ready."