

# **Idle Hands**

**Julie C. Day**

## **Sylvia: 1971**

God or no God, Sylvia Vieira's special day was all wrong. No mother helped Sylvia fasten her dress for her First Communion. No little sister burst into her bedroom, upending her collection of pressed flowers and carefully preserved damselfly wings, then looking falsely outraged when Sylvia complained.

Grandma Vovó couldn't make it all right, no matter how many fresh flowers she wove into Sylvia's hair.

"They're so stupid. I hate them both." Sylvia's tone was fierce.

"Shh, Sylvia. You need to stop."

Over the last few weeks Sylvia had heard Vovó's explanation so often she could recite the words herself. It was Sylvia's choice to stay behind on Flores Island, just as it was her sister Olivia's and their mother's choice to leave. But Sylvia knew Vovó was lying. Mother and Olivia hadn't just left behind their home in the Azores. They'd left Sylvia, as well.

"You'll see them soon enough." Vovó fastened the last flower, an Azorean bellflower, in place. "That man, the one with the long gray hair?" She attempted a smile as she adjusted the collar of Sylvia's white dress. "You're a Vieira. He'll find you when the time is right."

"You didn't travel with him. And now you're really old."

"Old enough for him to leave me alone," Vovó agreed.

Olivia and Mother were selfish. That was the real truth.

"Trying out my wings," Sylvia's mother used to laugh whenever someone asked why the three of them, Mother, Sylvia, and little Olivia, had moved from Flores Island across the archipelago to the city of Ponta Delgada. Most Azoreans either stayed put or flew west to the Americas. For her first journey, Sylvia's mother had traveled just three hundred miles east on the Atlânticoline ferry with baby Olivia and four-year-old Sylvia firmly in tow.

Years later Sylvia still remembered fragments of the journey. The brilliant blue of the sky. The breeze that pushed against her hair. And the heated messages that leaked through her eyelids as she tilted her face up toward the sun.

Sylvia remembered the gray-haired man as well, the one Mother talked to while Sylvia practiced sun-speaking and baby Olivia slept in her pram.

“Beautiful day,” he said, or perhaps, “Beautiful woman.”

“Como?” Mother’s voice sounded uncertain, but in that way she had. Even with her eyes closed, Sylvia could sense her mother’s smile.

“Beautiful,” the man said again, or perhaps, “Beautiful world.”

“One of many,” her mother replied.

Sylvia felt her body begin to melt, puddly and soft, as the sunlight found its way beneath her skin. Why was Mother even talking to this person? The talking made it hard for Sylvia to hear the sunshine’s words.

“A good luck charm for you,” the man continued, interrupting the sunshine yet again. “From one traveler to another.”

“Obrigada.”

“Obrigado, Miss Vieira.”

How did he know Mother’s name? Sylvia opened her eyes, curious, but the man was already walking away. Even from the back, she could tell he didn’t fit. He was tall, too tall, his long gray hair tied in a knot at the base of his neck, and even though it was summer, he wore a high-collared shirt.

“O que um homem estranho,” Mother said. What an odd man. But she smiled as she looked down at the metal pendant in her hand, an insect with two sets of wings. One of Vovó’s special damselflies.

Sometimes men were friendly in the wrong sort of way; that’s what Vovó had explained before four-year-old Sylvia got on the ferry. No talking to strangers. And yet here was Mother accepting presents.

“No fair,” Sylvia cried, reaching for the pendant.

“Sylvia, no!”

As she finished fastening the buckles on her First Communion shoes, Sylvia remembered Mother holding her hand and the metal damselfly just out of reach, wearing her usual Mother frown. Sylvia felt the anger rising up. That’s what had made Mother look so wrong. Her mother’s happiness while she talked to that man.

“No and no again,” Sylvia had said when Mother suggested the flight to America, as though any parent would accept their nine-year-old daughter’s decision to stay behind. But both Mother and Vovó took her at her word. Vovó and Sylvia had accompanied the travelers to the airport, no suitcases in hand.

“Goodbye, sweetheart,” Mother said. She bent down to kiss Sylvia’s cheek. “Try and talk to the man, hmm? We Vieiras are meant to travel.”

“Talk to a stranger?” Mother’s face was only inches from Sylvia. Despite the carefully placed scarf, Sylvia could see the green marks pressing out from the base of her neck. To Sylvia they looked like the first ugly shoot of a sprouting plant.

“The man’s name is José, Joseph,” Mother said. “So now he’s not a stranger, yes?”

“Yes.” Sylvia replied. She could feel herself scowling.

“Final boarding call for flight 486 to Boston,” a voice declared over the airport’s intercom.

Olivia was the one who Sylvia felt sorry for. She look so sad as she clutched her Raggedy Anne doll.

“Stay with me,” Sylvia whispered as she wrapped her arms around her little sister, “You can share my room and Vovó’s damselfly collection.”

Olivia cried, but she walked onto the plane. Of course she did. At five, Livvy was still a baby. Sylvia watched the airplane launch itself into the sky, and then she and Vovó caught the ferry back to Flores Island and Vovó’s little house. For most of the trip, the two remaining Vieira women stood on the ferry’s top deck, ignoring the

pounding wind and the incoming storm. Sylvia didn't meet a single gray-haired man trying to offer her presents. For this one moment, the man with the gray hair had enough sense to keep away.

**Vovó's cottage had red, tiled floors and thick stone walls. It sat** halfway up the hill with a view of both Lajes das Flores harbor and the old whale-processing factory. One of Flores Island's eight sister islands, Corvo Island, was visible from the harbor, smaller even than Flores itself.

Sylvia started confirmation lessons with Father Corvas. She attended services at the parish church. And twice a day Sylvia shared a bench on the school bus with Lucia Almedia, the only other nine year old in the village.

By the second month of school, Lucia and Sylvia were tired of the same old topics, and of each other.

"You must have met your father," Lucia pressed. "Or at least know his name?"

"No."

"But how can you be sure you weren't born from an unconfessed mortal sin?" Lucia glanced around the bus before whispering the last three words: unconfessed mortal sin. For whatever reason, Father Corvas spent most confirmation classes focused on the three mortal sins: adultery, idolatry, and sorcery. "How can you not have a single photograph of him or your *grandfather*."

There was a something about the way Lucia emphasized the word grandfather that Sylvia didn't like. "Shut up, Lucia. Vovó's name is Mrs. Vieira. Misses. Of course she was married," Sylvia said, ignoring the strangeness of her mother's name also being Mrs. Vieira.

"There's no need to be so mean, Sylvia Vieira. Your whole family's going to be denied entrance into God's kingdom. That's what my mother says. She says you Vieras aren't fooling anyone."

Sylvia looked out the window. At the far end of a field, a woman stood in a cottage doorway. A few meters from the bus, a man,

gray-haired, walked alongside the road. He glanced up in Sylvia's direction. There was something familiar about his face. All that long hair and that funny smile, like he was laughing at her. Then the bus moved ahead, leaving behind the man and his unsettling lips.

Neither Lucia nor Sylvia spoke for the rest of the twenty minute bus ride to school. And for the first time, they didn't sit together on the bus ride home.

### **"Vovó, what's my father's name?"**

"Hmm. I'm not exactly sure." Vovó didn't sound embarrassed. She almost seemed to be holding in a small smile.

"Vovó, it's not funny. Father Corvas—mortal sin."

"Ah," Vovó paused. "Sylvia, you are island born. One day you'll fly away—just like your mamãe and sister and all your aunties and cousins. Til then, pouco libélula, try and let things be."

"You know I don't like the gray-haired man." There was something terribly wrong with that old man, leaving her grandmother to live all alone. "I'm not traveling anywhere with him."

"I pray that is true." Vovó kissed Sylvia on the forehead with a loud smack. "You can stay with me then, yes? Just as long as there are no more island babies," Vovó added, which made completely no sense.

Sylvia wasn't so sure about sticking around. The rest of the Vieira women were onto something, flying away from this tiny island and Lucia Almedia and all the stupid neighbors. But Sylvia was onto something, too. She didn't need some old man's permission to leave. She just needed money. That's how everyone else did it.

### **Sylvia Vieira's Rules of Silence by Sylvia Vieira**

1. No taking to Lucia Almedia on the bus.
2. No talking to Lucia Almedia at school (unless Mrs. Enos makes us work on a school project together).

- a. If working on a school project together, no smiling at Lucia Almedia.
3. No talking to Lucia Almedia on the walk to or from Father Corvas's rectory.
4. While in confirmation class, no smiling at Lucia.
5. While in confirmation class, no hateful thoughts about Lucia Almedia. God wouldn't like it.

**Instead of walking toward the village center when she and** Lucia got off the afternoon bus, Sylvia took to wandering in the opposite direction, down to the harbor.

The village harbor was bounded on one side by a cliff and on the other by a narrow spit of concrete and rocks. There was no marina. When the wind blew, the boats that did bother to drop anchor rocked back and forth as though there were being tossed by a blue-skied storm. Travelers. It was the perfect place to find the gray-haired man. Sylvia was going to corner that Joseph and make him fix all of it.

Sylvia knew her plan had one huge problem: her body felt weird, different, when Joseph was around. As Vovo kept explaining, Sylvia was an island-born Vieira, which really, when you thought about it, was no explanation at all.

The gray-haired man was always wandering about Flores Island, his back to Sylvia. Sometimes Sylvia caught a glimpse of him hiking inland to the old crater lakes. She could tell it was him from his long hair and that strange tingly feeling that rose up in her throat whenever he was near.

It made Sylvia furious. He'd visited with all those cousins and aunts, convincing them to fly. He'd talked to Mother not once but twice. If Sylvia didn't know better, she'd almost believe he was biding his time, convinced she would talk with him. Green-marks-and-needles talk with him.

**The day of the Divino Espirito Sãoto festival a short, gray-haired woman with one gold tooth led a nine-year-old girl in white lace up to the Nossa Senhora do Rosário Church. Child and woman were clearly related: both had the same dark brown eyes and firm chin, not that there was ever any doubt. As everyone on Flores Island knew, all Vieira women looked the same and none came with fathers.**

After First Communion at the church and all that standing in front of the altar, the crown was placed on Lucia Almedia's head. Of the four girls who took communion, Lucia was the one who sat down on the altar steps, unworried, while Father Corvas droned on for too long. Sylvia didn't care. Not one little bit. Once she'd saved enough money, she would fly away from Flores Island and head west, never to see Lucia Almedia again. Never mind Joseph and his ink-stained fingers. Somehow, she would fix it all.

### ***Olivia: 1985***

Ever since Mother disappeared, Sylvia's raged-filled phone calls from California were on the upswing.

"Brane-travel is just a fancy term for suicide, Livvy. People aren't meant to travel across parallel universes. You know that, right?"

"Viera women aren't just people, Sylvia. Joseph helps us the only way he knows how. We're meant to be travelers."

"Oh, Jesus. Let *me* help you, Livvy. You're not a little kid anymore. You need to break free of that gray-haired bastard and his Vieira groupies."

"Sylvia, just because you're afraid to face him in person, doesn't mean he's—"

"Yes, Livvy, it does. Do you think I can't feel it when he's near? At least I'm in this universe. I'm alive. Come here, Livvy. Come stay with me. Please, honey."

Livvy's sister actually sounded tired.

But in the end it wasn't her big sister's phone calls that drove nineteen-year-old Olivia out of Boston. The thing that finally caused



Olivia Vieira to flee the family apartment was a noise.

At first Olivia barely noticed it. The sound was like the ticking of the kitchen clock or the water moving through the building's pipes, constant but easily ignored. And Olivia was busy. There was work and school and nights with Joseph in the apartment Olivia used to share with her mother, Regina. Joseph had been Mother's friend for as long as Olivia could remember, at least until Mother had disappeared on that cloudless day and never returned.

"She's traveled" was how Joseph put it. And somehow Olivia could never find the courage to ask him where. Olivia, like Mother, had always loved Joseph. And she could feel the Vieira need welling up inside, demanding her attention. Like Mother, she needed to fly. Somehow, Joseph was the key.

Joseph worked construction. After Olivia's classes were over or, more and more often, before they were done, Olivia would track Joseph down. On his working days, she'd find him walking along some length of plywood or pushing a wheelbarrow full of broken sheetrock and bits of lumber.

Charged ions, humidity, or perhaps the concentration of carbon monoxide lingering in the city: whatever the reason, some days were non-work days for Joseph. On those days, Joseph disappeared to his other unknown universes.

Joseph, Olivia's mother liked to say, was both good and solid, just not in this particular world. He had other qualities, though. All that long gray hair and the strange mix of features that everyone, all the Vieira aunties and cousins in Fall River anyway, seemed to find so fascinating. He understood the truth about being a Vieira in this universe. He offered them a path.

"What if she comes home?" Olivia had asked that first night Mother didn't return.

"She won't." Joseph's smile had been soft, his fingers gentle as they stroked Olivia's collarbone, moved up along her neck. "Skin just like your mother's," he'd murmured, making Olivia frown.

At least someone was touching Olivia. At least someone was

holding her as she fell asleep at night. These were the truths Olivia was afraid to tell Sylvia when she called and demanded Olivia move out. How did you tell the sister you left behind about your own loneliness? About all the nights and years no one noticed if you cried at night?

You didn't.

**"Do you hear that noise?"** Despite the belt Joseph was tightening around her arm, Olivia was distracted. The sound combined the dull pressure of a heartbeat with a rasp like air escaping from a constricted windpipe. Worse, it seemed to be coming from inside her own body. Each time the hiss crescendoed, Olivia swallowed, making sure she still could.

"Joseph?"

"Shh."

Olivia and Joseph sat in the middle of her mother's double bed. Joseph was bent over Olivia's arm, busy with his kit, while Olivia stared at the blue-flowered sheets. Olivia could remember the day Mother had bought the sheets.

"They remind me of home," she'd said. Mother's smile and the thick tendrils of green rising up her neck had made her face look so damn haggard. The vines looked thicker, stiffer, darker somehow, though perhaps Olivia had just stopped noticing the change.

Her name was Regina Vieira, Olivia thought. She was a real person, not just another dead traveler. Lost traveler, Olivia tried to correct herself, but the phrase seemed wrong even in her own head. Despite the family stories of parallel worlds and Joseph-mediated travel, she'd never met a Vieira from another universe. Brane-travel went in both directions, but in this universe, it seemed brane-travel was a one-way journey for everyone except Joseph.

Some things Olivia had known for what felt like her whole life. Despite his outward appearance, Joseph wasn't human, at least not in the normal non-Vieira way. And Joseph managed to do something not even a Vieira could do. He carried himself in two universes

at once. Strung across the multiverse, Joseph was what made flight, real Vieira flight, possible.

Other brane-travel facts. Aunt Izabel said that if Joseph ever traveled all the way through, he'd break the connection and wouldn't be able to come back. More than that, she'd whispered, he'd likely break apart. And Vieira women would never again be able to step across. Aunt Izabel had acted like that would be the worst possible outcome. Vieiras, no matter what Vovó and Sylvia might say, were born to travel.

"Joseph—" Olivia turned toward the older man just as he slipped the needle into her vein. God, she hated the stab of pain and the stomach churn that followed.

As Joseph pulled out the needle, Olivia felt the noise cut against her teeth. *Thrum, hiss*. The sound burrowed into the flesh of her gums. And then the wave of H flowed out from the crook of her arm—a chemical calm that crushed all other feelings.

"Damn it, Olivia! You need to pay attention." Joseph reached over and undid the belt buckle, then patted her arm. The sensation barely registered.

The noise was following her tongue muscle, undulating down her throat, past the beating heart in her chest. A bass-driven frenzy, it shook loose all of Olivia's pain.

And then, somehow, Olivia was lying on the flower-covered sheets, while Joseph sat nearby, watching.

The Dead Kennedys. Social Distortion. Black Flag. Olivia used to play their cassettes, headphones over her ears like some enraged airline pilot. It was the nineteen eighties. The record album had disappeared, but its ghost lingered in the words it left behind, like tracks.

Tracks of all kinds kept finding their way into her head: the needles Joseph brought home; the strange green tracks traveling up Mother's neck; and now the music hissing its way through her own blood.

"Tracks?" Joseph asked. She must have said the word out loud.

Tracks also meant traveling.

“Yes, making tracks,” Joseph replied, the fingers of his left hand pinching her bare nipple. Mother had made tracks, leaving first Sylvia and then little Olivia behind.

Branes: universes piled one atop the other. Once you wandered you could never come back, unless, of course, you were Joseph. No more Mother, in this world at least. Probably not in any other. Even Joseph knew brane travel was dangerous.

“Yes,” Joseph said. “Yes, I know. But you Vieira’s don’t give me any choice.” And then his hair fell across her belly, the thick green branch at the base of his neck clearly visible. The strange green growth carrying each brane traveler, even Joseph, across.

“Fucking Vieiras.” Joseph’s lips pulled hard against Olivia’s erect nipple, cupping her breast with one calloused hand.

**Olivia avoided the apartment’s few mirrors. Dark-red scabs had** spread across her arms and toes, while the growth imbedded with the needles in Joseph’s second kit had made its way up Olivia’s neck. She looked more and more like Mother. Just another Vieira getting ready for flight.

These days the noise never stopped.

“Cell integrity,” Joseph repeated as he plunged a needle under her big toenail. He gripped Olivia’s foot with one hand while the tremors shook her arms and hands. “The trick to traveling is to maintain your cell integrity while falling through.”

And then Olivia was floating away on another hit of Liquid Sky.

The aunties had stopped coming round. Olivia’s mind stuttered over the specifics. *Hiss* went the something inside her head and then came the choking sound. Joseph might have kicked the aunties out. Might have told them to “toss it” and “leave us the hell alone.” Then again the aunties might have disappeared just like Mother.

“Sundays are supposed to be with the aunties,” Olivia murmured from the tangle of graying sheets. Even Sylvia hadn’t called. Olivia could hear Saint Anthony’s church bells ringing out the end of

Easter Sunday Mass. “Thirsty.”

“Your aunts talk too much.” Joseph said, offering her his cup of coffee. “Anyway Easter is overrated. The resurrection of God’s tortured son? What kind of parent plans out his own child’s suffering?”

Olivia considered sitting up and taking the cup, but decided against it. “I thought you liked the aunts.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve got you to worry about right now. And me. Carrying a traveler— How do you think I started this journey?”

**It was a non-working day. Joseph was out.**

“What do you mean you didn’t go to Tia’s for Easter?” Sylvia said. “Of course, I called, but your phone just kept ringing. I bet it was turned off.” And then as though she couldn’t help herself, “Fucking Joseph.”

“It’s so loud, Sylvia” Olivia whispered into the phone’s receiver.

“What are you—”

“The song in my head.” Olivia cut in, then started to cough. Tears streamed down her face. Her chest felt like petrified stone, refusing to let her lungs expand.

“Olivia? Livvy, get a glass of water. Now.” Sylvia didn’t sound angry anymore. She sounded scared.

Olivia pressed her lips together, holding both the cough and her last gasp of air inside. Then she followed Sylvia’s instructions: she put the phone down, stumbled to the kitchen, and drank from a half-empty glass sitting on the counter.

Air. And tremors. She needed to lie down. Olivia wandered back to the bedroom.

“Olivia? Olivia?!”

The phone lay in the middle of the sheets. Olivia picked it up, leaned back against the headboard and closed her eyes. Now that the coughing had stopped, the sound was even louder than before. *Thrum. Hiss.* A storm of snake words and drums pummeling her brain. “Sylvia, the noise. It won’t stop.” Olivia swallowed, then regretted it. Her throat felt sandpaper-raw.

“Jesus, Livvy. You need to leave. I’m coming to get you.”

“You can’t. You know you can’t. When he’s near— And if I come to California, he’ll just follow. My neck is covered in green.”

“Livvy.” Sylvia paused and seemed to hold in a whole slew of words. “Okay. How about this? How about a visit to grandma Vovó?”

“Maybe.” Then Olivia was floating away. Sylvia’s words became a blur of “infected” “useless aunts and cousins” and “Vovó.” “Olivia, do you hear me? Vovó will know what to do. She’s seen plenty of Vieiras travel.”

“What?” Vieira’s were born on Flores Island, but no one ever returned once they flew west. And no one in their family ever left Joseph once the green needles began.

“Let me book the ticket.” Sylvia’s voice sounded desperate. “Look, this is what I think: back on the island that fucking gray-haired man never talked to you, right? Just to Mother. You weren’t supposed to leave, Livvy. That’s why he has to keep all the aunties out. He knows you’re not ready to even try. Please, Livvy.”

“Okay.” Somehow, Sylvia’s anger made the danger so much easier to see. Made it easier to feel Sylvia’s love, as well. Mother had never been this bad. Mother who had surely never crossed over no matter what Joseph said. Vieiras travel came like a storm. That’s what everyone said. There hadn’t even been a breeze that day. “Just make sure the flight’s on a Friday. Joseph likes to disappear on a Friday.” In a multiverse full of Olivias and Reginas and Aunt Izabels, he had a lot of people to visit.

Joseph could promise she would make it across the void all he wanted; the cacophony in her head told her a different story. It was time to go back to the island where all Vieiras were born.

**A Friday morning in October. Olivia climbed onto a Green Line** train. At Government Center she switched to the Blue line and headed out to Logan Airport. It was as simple as that. She wasn’t even shaking. Joseph had set her up before he’d headed out for his Friday wander.

The airport was full of all sorts of people, not just older men with tanned skin and lips like ripe berries. A coffee vendor smiled at Olivia. Olivia avoided his eyes as she stepped onto the electric walkway and headed out to terminal E. Of course Joseph was nowhere near. He was hanging with all those alternate-universe Vieiras. He was fucking some girl in a brane Olivia had never seen. She was getting as paranoid as Sylvia. The gray-haired, creased-and-sloping bodies that surrounded her were just men, human men, catching the SATA direct flight to the Azores.

Someone knocked Olivia from behind, Her legs tangled together as she fell onto the walkway's ribbed metal.

"Excuse me," one of the Not-Josephs said, before speeding ahead. Or perhaps he said "Eu sou pesaroso." I'm sorry. Either way, he didn't help her up.

The crush of people felt suffocating. Shoes and boots on both sides of her. Suitcases and her own backpack hemming her in. Olivia yearned for her bed's graying sheets, for the coffee Joseph brought her each afternoon. *Thrum, hiss*, went the sound, followed by the choking gasp. Surrounded by all the airport travelers, Olivia almost couldn't find enough air.

Eventually, Olivia stood. Eventually, she reached the departure gate. A gray-haired steward smiled as he handed Olivia her boarding pass. He didn't remind Olivia of Joseph, not one little bit.

**Olivia stepped through the airport doors and into the mid-day** glare of Ponta Delgada, clutching a Raggedy Anne doll. The doll contained a carefully sealed package of powder while the contents of Olivia's backpack included a lighter and a small roll of tinfoil. Chasing the dragon, people called it. She might not use needles, but if she was lucky, Olivia would be able to maintain her "cell integrity." No shakes until her "Joseph problem" as Sylvia termed it, was solved. That was the goal.

"Taxi?" a man asked, reaching for her elbow. He wore a windbreaker and aviator sunglasses. His short gray hair was nothing

like Joseph's. But his hands. The curve of his nails. Joseph's hands were the most honest part of his body; the nicked and wrinkled skin revealed exactly how long he'd been traveling.

"Sim. Yes, to the Ponta Delgada harbor," Olivia replied.

The Not-Joseph held the cab door open for her. "You need a boat?" he asked as he climbed into the driver's seat and started the car.

"I'm catching the ferry to Flores Island."

"Flores is beautiful, but so quiet. Pretty girl like yourself. You must be visiting family. Yes?"

"Yes." Help, thought Olivia as she stared out the taxi window at the passing city streets. Help, help, help.

**Olivia set the doll and her backpack by her feet and knocked on the wooden door.**

The door was attached to a single-story cottage with a red-tiled roof. It rested halfway up the curving road that led to the village square and the twin domes of Nossa Senhora do Rosário church.

Lajes das Flores should have been a fairytale town, a subtropical Brigadoon, frozen in time. That's what Olivia had expected. Not the overhead streetlights and the trash truck. Men in overalls and gloves were busy picking up the yellow and green plastic garbage cans waiting by the side of the road. One of the men glanced back at Olivia and then quickly looked away.

*Scared hue mans. Hue. Hew. Hiss.*

Olivia knocked a second time on Vovó's door, and then slipped her foot against the doll, trying to still the tremors. She could feel the hard-packed stuffing of the Raggedy Anne.

From inside the cottage came shuffling footsteps and then the click of a latch. A wrinkled hand with long fingers and paper-thin skin slipped into view. A head followed, peering around the half-open door.

"Olá?" the old woman said.

"Cómo está, Vovó?" Olivia said. She pressed her right foot down onto her left, holding it still.



The older woman tilted her head to one side. “Your name?” she prompted.

Despite her grandmother’s confusion, her expression was welcoming. Olivia had the same features and long, dark hair as all Vieira women.

“Olivia, Vovó.”

“Ah.” She pushed the door open all the way. “The last time—” Vovó held one hand below chest level and smiled, revealing whitish, uneven teeth along with a single gold one.

“Yes, I was much smaller,” Olivia smiled back.

The older woman guided Olivia off the step and into a house filled lace doilies, dark wood furniture, and photographs: baby Vieira women, middle aged Vieira women, angry and laughing and irritated Vieira women. A room full of faces just like Olivia’s stared back from the walls.

“You are all right, yes?” Vovó reached up with one frail hand and stroked Olivia’s cheek.

“Sim, I’m fine.” Olivia could feel her lips beginning to tremble. “Sylvia sent me.” *Thrum, hiss, thrum, hiss* went the tide inside her mind, and then came the choking, death rattle.

“Sylvia was wrong to leave, but I was wrong too. Not enough babies in this world.” Vovó patted Olivia’s shoulder. “It is good you should stay here for a tiny while.”

At twenty-two Olivia certainly didn’t feel like a baby, but she nodded all the same. *Hiss*, went the voice in her head. *Hiss*.

**After two weeks of wandering, the island no longer felt quite** so easy to quantify. Cattle shared the roadways with buses and cars. Away from the harbor, moss-covered walls and hidden, stone water spigots were everywhere. Almost daily Olivia came across mist roiling through yet another tiny valley.

The noise had changed, as well. Like late-night static on the radio, it was easily ignored. Most nights, as she lay in her sister Sylvia’s old bed, Olivia tumbled straight into sleep and dreamed: Not-Joseph

the sailor wandered up from the harbor in a yellow slicker and boots. Not-Joseph stood next to a windmill, one foot on a low stone wall, older this time with sparse white hair. For some reason, the actual Joseph, with his own vine-like tracks and long braid, never once visited her dreams. Olivia didn't need that Joseph, not as long as she had her Raggedy Anne. Managing the tremors just involved a bit of cooking with foil packets and a bubbling, warm brownish liquid.

Every morning before breakfast Olivia hiked just past the edge of town to the cliff-side park. Once the lighter had done its work, Olivia sucked up the vapor with a thin roll of tinfoil and then leaned against one of the park's tree. From her perch at the top of the cliff, she could see old men sitting on the benches down in Lajes harbor. Sometimes, one of them glanced her way. In the other direction, she often caught sight of a hiker in a cloth cap heading inland across the rolling hills. All of these men had gray hair.

Joseph, Olivia thought, or perhaps said out loud. She closed her eyes, letting Joseph's roughened hands stroke the nape of her neck. Soon his hands moved lower, finding their way between her thighs, and Olivia forgot about the sky, the nearby Not-men, and the look in Vovó's eyes as they sat together at night.

*Come home, Joseph, her Joseph, murmured in Olivia's ear.*

Olivia shivered against the heat of his breath as his voice replaced the thrum-hiss and the death rattle that always followed. And then a horn from one of the fishing boats called out. And just like that, Joseph was gone, jolted back across the ocean.

**After two weeks of morning walks the Raggedy Anne stash**  
was almost gone.

"The gray-haired man, Vovó." Olivia paused, trying to keep the frustration out of her voice. "Sylvia said I needed to talk to him."

"Sylvia thinks in straight lines," Vovó said, "hiding or not hiding. As though those are the only choices."

It was dark. Olivia and Vovó sat at the table next to the wood-burning stove. An oversized wooden hutch loomed from the stone-

and-plaster wall surrounded by all those Vieira faces.

“Tomorrow you try a new trail.” Vovó handed Olivia a piece of paper with a hand-drawn map of the southern half of Flores. A wavy line led from the village inland to the north and west. On the path walked a little stick-person. Stick-Olivia was heading toward two small ponds. Waiting little stick-insects with double wings were inked along the water’s edge.

“Maybe,” Olivia said, irritated by Vovó’s refusal to help her with Joseph. “Obrigada.”

Vovó grabbed Olivia’s hand, removed the map, and spread it flat on the table. Her index finger tapped the smaller of the two blue circles. “Caldeira Rasa. You go, yes?”

“Ummm.”

“You go,” Vovó said her index finger still tap, tap, tapping against the small blue circle.

“Sure. Okay, I’ll go.” Olivia took another sip of her coffee.

*Tap, tap* went Vovó’s index finger. *Tap. Tap. Tap.*

And then Olivia’s foot moved—*tap, tap, tap*—as grandmother and granddaughter stared at the lake outlined on the coffee-stained piece of paper.

### **Olivia’s Only Question**

1. In a family without men, where do babies come from?

**“No men,” Vovó had said the night before, pointing to the damselfly sketches on her map, “just like us.”**

“What?”

“The women damselflies. They make their babies without the men,” Vovó had said, smiling.

Of course there were Vieira men, fathers. They just didn’t stick around, Olivia thought, though she didn’t say it out loud.

Olivia had followed Vovó’s map west along ER1-2, before veering north and west: away from the road, through farmland, and up

toward the two lakes Vovó had marked on the map. She didn't see a single person. After less than an hour, Olivia reached the crater lake. Up close Caldeira Rasa seemed like a drop of inlaid blue sky covered by a single cloud. A dark swarm swirled and banked above the pond, a mass of circling damselflies.

One damselfly slipped from the mass and settled on a blade of grass next to Olivia. It look just like the ones in Vovó's collection. It held its double-set of wings upright above its body as though waiting for the next command.

A gust of wind rippled across the water. Olivia heard the rustle of nearby grasses. But it was another sound that held her attention: a lone bass note pushed inward against her body. Somehow, without making any conscious decision, she contracted the muscles deep in her abdomen, let go, then repeated the movement. Above the lake, the cloud of damselflies banked and swerved in a frenzied mass.

The nearby forktail launched itself from the blade of grass and out across the lake. Follow me, it cried. Follow me.

Olivia took a step forward.

The damselfly cloud had shifted, drawing stuttering figure eights above the volcanic basin.

Meanwhile, with each step toward the water, Olivia's pelvis tightened and released. Tightened and released. Sex with Joseph had been such a passive affair. Naked and stretched out on the bed seemed to be enough.

Up close Olivia could see that the Citrine Forktails weren't quite identical. Some were yellow and green, others orange. But all had the same dark eyes.

"Time to fly without Joseph," Olivia murmured. She kicked off her shoes and shrugged quickly out of her clothes. Standing naked next to a volcanic lake on the westernmost tip of Europe felt good. Standing naked alone with those dark, insectile eyes felt even better. Olivia's pelvis tightened, as though trying to pull the air or the water or the thrum-hiss sound back inside.

And then she let her body sink into the water.

Why had no one told her? Her lips parted. Her nipples hardened. The sex between her legs dripped.

Nearby, two female damselflies settled on a half-submerged reed. One arched into a C-shape as though in the throes of extreme pleasure or pain. The second damselfly hovered above, holding the breeding female's neck. Shiny, translucent spheres slipped from lower female's abdomen. Olivia watched as the eggs floated for a moment before sinking beneath the lake.

No males.

The sun's one burning eye forced its way beneath Olivia's skin. The forktails no longer spiraled in figure eights. A haze of wings and twig-like bodies surrounded her. Legs settled on Olivia's hair and ears, along the narrow ledge of her shoulders.

Sun, Olivia thought. *Sun. Son, Song. Thrum. Hisssssss*. Only her head remained above the water, while a swarm of forktails clung to her body, making sure she sank no further.

The water flowed upward. Olivia's pelvic muscles contracted. Her teeth came down against her lips. She bit hard. Gasping. And then it was done.

Olivia heard a noise from the nearby grasses. She turned, but the man was already walking away, his long, gray hair flowing behind him. Damselflies flew above the lake, far less of them than before. Meanwhile, the sky was filling with gray-weather clouds. It was time to get out.

Inside Olivia felt different. No thrum. No hiss. For this one moment all was beautiful silence. Only her heartbeat remained.

Vovó should have given Sylvia a map instead of letting her run off to California to try and fail. No one deserved how lonely this fucked-up world could make you feel.

**Olivia sprinted down the road, shivering despite the rising heat** in her pelvis. The noise, a hard electric snapping, had started somewhere west of Caldeira Rasa. Now it speeded south, and despite Olivia's running feet, it was getting louder. Joseph's choking traveler

static wanted back in.

“Just try it!” Olivia screamed, gasping, and then, unexpectedly, laughing, as well. It was glorious. No thrum. No hiss. Just burning lungs pushing too hard as she tried to outrun the storm.

Heel. Toe. Gasping breath. A Vieira baby was growing inside her, formed in the same way as all Vieira girls. Her baby had sent all those damselflies out across the brane into an entirely different universe. Her baby had stopped the hissing call. And Joseph hadn’t done a thing.

From somewhere behind came a new sound: *skreet*. And then the wind started in earnest, whip-edge sharp against her skin. Whatever power charged through Flores Island’s volcanic lakes and insect eyes, whatever charged through a multiverse of Flores Islands, it was way too close.

Olivia could see the village up ahead: the church with its two rounded domes and the smaller, plaster-white houses.

Push forward. Heel. Toe. Heel. Run.

*Skreet*.

A gust of wind struck Olivia to the ground. Grit stung her eyes. And still that steady, molten heat pressed up from deep inside. Babies without the men, Vovó had said.

Plastic garbage cans tumbled down the hill. A handful of tiles flew off a nearby roof and shattered on the street.

Olivia’s feet no longer needed instructions. They ran.

Olivia hands left bloody tracks on the doorknob when she finally tumbled into her grandmother’s cottage.

Vovó sat next to the stove. Despite the battering wind, her expression was calm.

“Vovó—the lake.”

“Filhinha.” The older woman stood and placed a frail hand over Olivia’s own bloodied fingers, then pressed her hand against Olivia’s midriff. “So it is time for you to leave.” She smiled a tight, little smile. “The man will get over his anger. Babies are good.”

The rattling wind quieted. There was a knock at the door.

“Ah,” Vovó said, looking past Olivia to the window next to the front door. “Two of them, even.”

There was a second knock on the door, sharper this time. Impatient.

Olivia felt a strange jolt along her spine. The vines on her neck bit into her flesh like a chemical burn. The worst part: just like the warmth between her legs, it felt good. She turned and looked through the window. Two men stood outside: the hiker from the lake and a short-haired man, the taxi driver from Ponta Delgada. Not-Josephs

“Babies are welcome by everyone,” Vovó repeated, patting Olivia’s hand. “I will miss seeing her born. Still,” she continued in a no-nonsense voice, “time for you to go. The Josés will get you back to Ponta Delgada and the airport. I want no more babies born here.” For a moment, Vovó’s dark eyes held Olivia’s gaze. “Don’t forget, meu amorzinho: a Vieira is more than some José’s plaything.”

Vovó, it suddenly occurred to Olivia, had lived alone on Flores Island all these years with just her damselflies and her Not-Josephs. And now Vovó would be alone again.

Joseph had a lot to answer for. And, one day, someone would force him to pay.

A baby.

Better than Mother, that would be Olivia’s mantra. Far, far better than Mother.

Olivia might have already fallen with her the thickening tendrils on her neck, that vibration of Joseph flesh calling Vieira flesh that she felt even now, but her baby would be different. Not island born. Not Joseph thrall. Her baby girl would decide in which direction she would fly.

### ***Laurinda: 2005***

#### **Laurinda Vieira’s Relationship Requirements**

1. No drugs. no heroin, no X, no meth, nothing you can only purchase

with cash.

2. I like coffee.

3. And sleep.

4. Sex isn't a question. It's a necessity.

5. I get to play with needles, too.

**Laurinda closed her eyes, soaking in the scraps of sunlight as** the chill of the concrete stoop seeped through her jeans. Brainerd Road always felt like a wind tunnel, something about the air currents in this part of Boston.

"Help her," Evie had shrieked two days ago as the two of them stood at the ER's intake counter, cousin Evie trying to hold Laurinda upright.

The ER doctors had run CAT scans and MRIs. They'd pricked her flesh with needles. Finally after two days, they'd let her go. Psychosomatic, they suggested. Perhaps stress or grief? "Perhaps bullshit," Laurinda had snapped before she had a chance to rein in her words. What the fuck did she care what these doctors thought? She didn't. Not really.

The emergency room visit hadn't changed a thing. Laurinda's body still stuttered and trembled its way through their second floor apartment. Garbled words still kept Laurinda awake. Night and day, Joseph's expectant eyes followed her from room to room.

Only person Laurinda really wanted was her mother. But in spite of her clear-and-present love, green-veined Olivia had eventually gone the way of all island-born Vieiras. And now Laurinda was stuck with Evie and Joseph: one island-born cousin not-so-secretly swooning over one gray-haired asshole of a man.

Laurinda heard the building's front door creak open, followed by the metallic click of Joseph's lighter and a quick intake of breath.



“Soon,” Joseph murmured, settling next to her on the concrete step. His callused fingers slipped the freshly light cigarette between Laurinda’s lips.

“Sssoon,” Laurinda repeated, her eyes resolutely closed. All she needed was one single push through. Mother had loved Laurinda so much. She would never have left Laurinda behind, not if she’d had any choice.

If universes were soap-bubble-shaped membranes stacked one atop the other, Laurinda had never ventured beyond her own fragile film. Joseph assumed he knew exactly what all Vieras wanted: to move with him between worlds, extruding across the multiverse forever and ever, amen. Fucker couldn’t be more wrong. This Vieira just wanted her mother back. Not that Joseph gave a damn.

“Laurinda, you need anything?” A voice called from the apartment window above.

“E E Evie should go home,” Laurinda stuttered. Her tongue felt too heavy, as though the many Laurinda tongues from all those many Laurinda worlds were condensing together.

“Not yet, baby doll. We need the help. At least for a little while longer.”

Laurinda could feel Joseph’s denim-clad thigh pressing against her own trembling flesh. “Nnnot trying to fuck her too, are you?” Laurinda asked, already knowing the answer. He really was a shitty old man. One even she was not entirely immune to. Vieira blood would tell.

No heroin, Laurinda had proclaimed, that first night. No powders or smoke. As though words could shield her from the feel of his dick inside her and the heat after his needle sliced down into her neck. All so good.

Just like Mainland-born Vieira’s, universe-traveling devils played by their own rules.

Fucking her, Joseph said her first night back from the hospital, was like wrapping his flesh inside a barely covered skeleton. Each time he pressed, he could feel the bones a little more. Didn’t seem

to bother him. He'd even smiled as he came. Afterward, they'd each had a turn with his needles and vials, coloring each other's necks with thick vines of Azorean, damselfly green.

Out on the stoop, Laurinda tried to push away the memory of her mother stretched out on this same step, jaundiced and skinny. Joseph's needles were supposed to help with cell integrity, Mother and Joseph had explained one too many times.

And retaining your cell integrity was crucial if you were going to attempt inter-brane travel. Laurinda wasn't opening a connection to the Azores. She wasn't creating a path west to Sacramento and Tia Sylvia. Laurinda was smashing a hole in this universe and through to the next. Or, like Mother, she was dying in the attempt.

Despite the woody stalks twining up her mother's neck, it had been a blue-sky day when Olivia Vieira finally disappeared. Not a damselfly in sight.

"Laurinda?" Cousin Evie called down again.

"She's fine," Joseph replied. "I'm keeping an eye out."

"Course you are." No matter what Laurinda said, cousin Evie remained in her Aunt's old bedroom, terrified but resolute. She'd promised Aunt Olivia. Evie wasn't about to let her cousin wander away with "Mr. Neither-Here-Nor-There." *Island. Illness. Illicit. E E Evie.*

Laurinda opened her eyes and took a deep drag from her Newport Menthol Gold. The smoke's warmth scratched against the back of her throat, pushing down all those hissing voices. She held in the smoke for as long as her faltering body would allow.

"Used to be people hardly ever smoked," Joseph said as Laurinda eventually exhaled. "Shamans and priestesses wrapped ghee or dried snake skins round incense cones, smoking up their temples. That's about as far as it went."

"Huh." Laurinda took another careful drag. Her fingers were having trouble finding her lips. "Bbbet they hadn't th th th of menthol," Even with the shakes, her voice had that gravelly, Vieira quality that Joseph loved. Last night he'd grabbed her hair as they'd

fucked, tracing the thick green vines that ran in a sinewy line from her collarbone up along her neck.

“The throat is a sacred object,” he said now as he stroked her exposed neck.

Laurinda allowed herself a small smile. Her own vines lined Joseph’s neck, as well. “Viera rule number seven, remember?” she’d said all those months ago as she’d reached for his kit. And Joseph had laughed and acquiesced, as though indulging a lisping child. Careless old man.

“Done,” Joseph had whispered last night as he zipped closed his kit. “Just one final step,” he’d added, touching her trembling limbs.

Joseph’s own quotient of vines, just a few lines shy of complete, hadn’t even come up. After all Joseph’s limbs weren’t shaking.

Joseph pushed himself up from the stoop and smiled down at Laurinda. “Time for me to head back to work.”

Laurinda knew exactly what he was thinking: tonight, he would finish his latest Vieira transformation. And there was little Evie Vieira already waiting in the bedroom next door.

### **Joseph and Laurinda lay sprawled across the bed.**

“My turn.” Laurinda reached for Joseph’s inoculation kit sitting on the bedside table, knocked it to the floor, and then spent long minutes aiming and re-aiming her hands until they were able to pick it back up. The noise inside her head felt like a countdown clock: a cycling rhythm of *thrum*, *hissssss* followed by that asthmatic choking sound.

“At least let me do it,” Joseph grumbled. “All that shaking. You could end up stabbing my face.”

As though the shaking was Laurinda’s fault. As though he would actually turn her down with her ripened and traveler-ready body. Stupid fucker.

“Don’t hhhave to draw straight.” Laurinda’s hands shook, but she managed to dip the needle tip into the vial. The thick liquid inside the glass container was an iridescent yellowish green. Joseph’s

own cultured bit of damselfly. Laurinda leaned toward Joseph, using both hands to try and control the tremors as he lay on his side facing her.

“I don’t think this is—” Joseph started, but Laurinda cut across his words.

“Rrru.” She might not be able to get the “ule” sound out, but her shaking head emphasized her meaning.

“Right. Rule number seven.”

*Thrum. Hissss.*

Laurinda’s eyes didn’t stray from the vine trailing up the living trellis of Joseph’s neck. Mother must have trembled in this exact same way on her last night. So many Vieras lost. And yet here Joseph lay with his old-man paunch and weathered flesh. No worry lines though. As far as Joseph was concerned, Viera-traveler was just another word for fool, all those women helping him remain the conduit between worlds. Mr. Neither-Here-Nor-There.

Perhaps some even made it through.

“I. I. I. knowwww you,” Laurinda said as she formed the final tendril. Joseph’s neck was fully inoculated with a mixed of iridescent green and his own red blood. For the first time, the vine reached along the entire length of Joseph’s neck, then curved around his ear. His head was tilted back slightly, so that he could watch her hands and her trembling lips. Such greedy eyes, waiting to hear that choking sound. Fuck him. Breathe. Finish the damn vine.

And then his smile was gone. “Hey!” Joseph reached for her waist as though considering pushing her away.

Laurinda continued to hold the needle aloft with both hands. “Joseph? You all right?” She saw what might be a tremor travel along his grasping arms. Her own *thrum hiss* made it hard to separate need from fact.

“Fine,” Joseph grunted, a look of confusion on his face that was quickly replace by a smile. Laurinda had started to cough.

*Thrum, hisssss.* Her throat squeezed against the noise, blocking out the air. Laurinda was gasping, flop sweat rising up across her

body. She swayed for a moment as a chill of goosebumps rose along her skin. Then a trickle of air, sucked in despite the barrage. Mother had gone through this. Mother who had loved Laurinda more than anything and yet still couldn't stay.

Joseph meanwhile was still lying on his side, the bedsheet tangled around his waist. But it was the expression on his face that gave Laurinda hope. He was staring down at his hands, his trembling damselfly-infected hands.

Not even bothering to aim, Laurinda plunged the needle down into the tender flesh at the base of Joseph's neck. There was no time left. Laurinda's peripheral vision was nothing but darkness. The bedroom was filled with the scent of ozone, and beyond the walls, Laurinda could hear the rumble of thunder.

"My mother is dead, old man. Dead," Laurinda whispered near Joseph's vine-encircled ear. Her hands shook, but differently than before. Rage. Such rage. Like nothing she'd felt before. Not even when she was fifteen and Mother and Joseph closed their bedroom door, Mother's laughter and Joseph's chuckle echoing through the thin apartment walls. Laurinda hadn't been nearly angry enough back then.

This morning Evie's gaze had followed Joseph's movements about the apartment, as though unable to keep away. Her expression reminded Laurinda of her own just before Mother disappeared: already half-enraptured.

And Laurinda had loved her mother. Hell, Evie loved Laurinda.

Laurinda lifted the needle with both shaking hands and plunged it once again into Joseph's neck, ignoring the choking sound of her own breath. More than Joseph's hands that were trembling. His entire body seemed to shimmer and pulse.

"Stop L. L. L. Laurindaaaa. Stop!"

One moment Joseph's left hand was pressing against her hip as her hand worked the needle, the next Laurinda was screaming, her head thrown back. Burning, acid-hot pain. The first tear had appeared in the universe's membrane. The pathway had its own needs. Energy,

Joseph and Vieira energy. So much pressure. Any moment now it would combust her into particulate matter. Laurinda raised the needle again. After all her careful planning she was slow. Too slow.

And then over the *thrum hiss* and Joseph's cry of "Llllaurinda," Laurinda heard another sound. *Skrreet*. Followed by a plasma-hot storm that shook the windows, tore against the walls. She could no longer feel Joseph's hands on her waist.

"Lllaurinda," Joseph repeated, followed by, "Ppplea—" and then nothing.

The mattress shifted along with the sheets. Only one body remained.

Joseph.

Laurinda felt a burning, savage grin rising across her face. It was Joseph who had traveled. Laurinda and the damselfly vine had done their job. Joseph, Joseph not Laurinda, had fallen through that hungry tear. She had managed to push him all the way through.

The storm seemed to be calming. There was a crashing sound like giant, rootless trees, and then silence. The tear had closed.

Traveler lost.

Laurinda took a long, slow breath and found only the scent of ozone and her tears remained.

For at least one Vieira family in one universe, the devil had disappeared and he was never coming back.