

## You've Got the Power

by Lowry Pei

I'm sitting here watching the school buses roll down the road like a yellow train, trying to write this. There comes a time for just saying it, and I think I've reached that point. I don't have all the time in the world.

The school buses have come out of their parking lot, like cows leaving their pasture to go back to the barn, and all of them, nose to tail, are ambling down this road on their way to the highway, where they'll fan out to all the schools in the district to pick up the kids at the end of the school day. It happens at the same time every afternoon. I love to watch the

Skip it, Sarah, all you're doing here is avoiding the subject. Putting off the hard part. Get going.

A writing teacher I had in college said you always have to know who you're writing to, or it won't work. You know what? He was wrong. I don't care who you are, I just need you to read this. I'll take care of the me part, and you take care of you. If you're not interested, you're not reading - what more do I need to know? And besides, if I knew exactly who you were, how could I not try to put some kind of spin on this, especially for you, that would turn it into bullshit?

So start, for God's sake. Stop procrastinating.

I don't even know what I'm writing.

Oh shut up Sarah, of course you do.

Where am I supposed to start?

Here: Timmy is my sweetheart. My sweet sweet sweetheart. I will always love Timmy exactly this way, even when I'm old and gray. Never mind if he outgrows me, he'll always remember us being this way. He can marry somebody else if he wants, and

have children, and do all that stuff, but he won't share with her what he shared with me. So there.

Did I really sound like that once, or am I making this up?

I was there first. I have a place in his heart that he'll never be able to give to anyone else, because there's only room for one there. And it's the same for me. Too bad that one, for me, wasn't Timmy, too bad it wasn't someone sweet. Something heavy and dark filled my heart, the ceiling came pressing down and down – Look! A metaphor! I majored in English! (sorry, this is just writing, that's all it can be) – it weighed on me so hard, it pinned my small body to the bed and in the dark something happened that can't be taken back. Was that weight love, did it love my small-boned self, or did it just want to press and press until there was nothing left of me? But I tricked it; I survived. I'm stronger than I look, by a lot. By a whole lot. And I'm heavier than the weight that I weigh. I could have ironed Timmy out flat, like Wile E. Coyote in the cartoon getting run over by a steam roller and coming out flat as a paper doll. Then springing back into magical 3-D life. But I had no desire to do that to him, and Timmy was delicate. Not like me. You have to be gentle with boys like Timmy; they're easily broken. Oh it was such a lot of trouble to constantly be aware of that, to hold back because I knew I might wring him dry, I might twist and twist until – pop! his neck would snap, his eyes sproing out of their sockets, waving foolishly at the ends of little cartoon springs. Blood would gush out – but no – there's no blood in this cartoon. Except what came out of me and embarrassed Timmy to death when he saw a thin trickle make its way down the inside of my leg. What's a girl to do? Remember to have a tampon with her, that's what.

Am I truly this badass I'm making myself out to be? I definitely wasn't at the time. This is all tangled and half-wrong. Not lies, but true stuff from different parts of life jammed together, a mash-up, make of it what you will, I have to keep going.

I didn't know that you can get pregnant when you have your period, but that was what Timmy said. Timmy was very careful, very concerned about taking care of me; for some reason, he didn't see that I could take care of myself. Probably he wanted to be one big strong manlyman, heap big protector, strong like Tarzan, ugh. Not my cup of tea, I thought, which just shows how much I knew about myself then.

Here I was at seventeen, face down in the back seat of a very hot van, my head turned to the side, lying there half-sleeping after we had a swim, and the zipper of my bathing suit is pulled nearly all the way down the back, and I hear Timmy open the door. But I keep my eyes closed. He sits down next to my legs and runs his finger down my spine so so gently and gives me a shiver and a burn. And he keeps doing that. Nothing else, until I turn over. Ooh, I see what's making a tent pole in his trunks. He's eating me up with his eyes, like he wants to stare my suit out of existence, make it vanish by the intensity of his looking. "So," I say. I decide to help him; I pull the top of my suit down to my waist. He has never seen my breasts in the daylight.

"Now it's your turn," I say.

He looks over his shoulder, and all around, as if someone might come any moment and catch us; but no one's around, and awkwardly he pulls down his bathing suit and shows me his hard penis. Is he proud of it? I hope so. It's very sweet. He seems like he's having a hard time admitting to himself that this could be happening, until I reach out and touch it. So beautiful, so warm, the head velvety-soft, I tickle it with my fingertips, wrap my fingers around the lovely stiffness of him, one, two, three, and he jizzes all over the seat, I get to see the pearly stuff fly. Oh, that's exciting. Exciting to see his eyes close involuntarily, to hear him groan, to see his body almost buckle under the feeling that I - I - made him have. I felt the power that was mine. Yes, now I have it, I thought. And I intend to make the most of it while I can.

Better, Sarah. You're not fighting it so much. Don't think about the movement, just cross the floor.

But what exactly did I want anyway? All I wanted was Timmy, my sweet sweet sweetheart, but no. If I could have stayed that girl, then it would have been true, but who can stay that girl for any length of time? Not me. Not yours untruly. Yours not 4ever, although some part is 4ever Timmy's girl. Timmy would be fine without me, I knew. Plenty of girls would let him get close to them. He didn't quite know that about himself, and that was exactly what made him so hard to resist. Of course he didn't know; boys are so dense and girls are so quick.

It gets late early out here, as Yogi Berra said. It got late a whole lot earlier than I expected. Imagine if Timmy saw me now with only one breast. I wasn't trying to pack as much as possible in, but then again, maybe I was and I just didn't know why. I wasn't trying to have Mack get me pregnant - and him still all married to Charlene - and to his kids - his *other* kids, they would have been, if I had carried the baby to term. And then God knows what would have happened. He could never have stayed away. He never could anyway, if I had had his baby we would have been - oh, I don't know. Even more of an outrage against decency than we already were. Lost the baby but got something else growing inside me. Not a fair trade, but there is zero point in dwelling on that. Shall I go back to me and Timmy? No, not there either.

Be careful. I have to not feel sorry for myself. No, I don't fucking have to do anything or feel anything. If you roll your eyes I'll never know it, I won't be there to get my feelings hurt, my feelings won't exist anymore. And if your feelings get hurt, that's your problem.

James Brown once did a song that said "You've got the power," and when I heard it in somebody's playlist, I thought it was a reminder aimed straight at me. But even when you've got it, that doesn't mean you know what to do with it. College . . . skip college. No, wait. Or don't. Too many things seem to matter, that's a problem I

have never been able to solve, and time's a-wasting. Don't try to say it all, Sarah, it will never work.

I knew Rob was there, and he knew I knew, when after the performance I pulled off my tights and was naked from the waist down, four steps away from him, before I put my jeans on. It was easy to do. There were others getting dressed too – we were used to all dressing together, at that time, we trusted each other – I remember a guy, looking slightly embarrassed, glancing at him (he was in the middle of tying his shoes) as if to say “Don't you think you should look somewhere else while she does that?” and he glanced at that guy in a way I could read as clearly as speech: I can't. Not while she's naked. I wondered, too, if his look said something like I have to make sure she's safe, or We're in this together. Because we were in this together, weren't we? Even then. I knew it. I don't think he did.

I could have gone somewhere a bit more private. There was no need for me to get naked right there in the middle of the room, except that I knew if I did, he would see me.

He was tactful; he didn't stare. But he didn't not look, either.

So many times I had felt his eyes on me when we were in class together. He didn't gaze at me, he would look full at me for a moment with every atom of his attention, and then he'd look away. With one gulp he would swallow me. But we never spoke. Did he truly not know I wanted him to talk to me? He must not have. That was why I pulled off my tights where he would see me.

Still he didn't make a move. What an idiot he was. Of course he probably thought I was already taken. Most people did. But really, I thought, how could I have made it any clearer than that? I actually wondered if he didn't want me after all.

Of course, I didn't speak to him that night either, so I was a fool too. We all are, at that age, right? Or maybe I just want to think so now.

I don't know. That sounds a little too nostalgic to be me. But who doesn't want to get it back? I hate the now that I'm stuck with. I'm being forced to get old without ever getting old.

I guess I never found the right work, but at this point that doesn't seem to matter a whole lot. Unlike Fiona, bless her mercenary little heart, who learned early on that she was born to sell things. Personally, I'd rather clean bathrooms than sell things. She keeps trying to tell me how easy it is, but I pay no attention. I was born to tell her what to do, not the other way around, even though I'm younger. She's pretty, in a sort of predictable way (not my way at all), and predictably it always works. She can sell most things to most men just because they want her to smile at them. At this point it's real estate. God, does she rack up the commissions. I may not be around to see it, but I'm certain she will end up a developer, retire to Asheville, and for all I know drive a

pony cart around her estate. I, on the other hand, if I live to be 102, which is apparently not on the cards, will never be doing much more than making ends meet.

Fiona only ever did one thing I told her absolutely not to, and that was marrying Charlie. Why would my sister, of all people, marry a bore? She asked for it. But she did get a couple of pretty delightful kids out of the deal, which is a hell of a lot more than I can say.

I've sat behind lots of desks and hated every single one. I never lasted a whole year in an office. I'm not made to spend my life sitting around; I have a body, for God's sake. I've always wanted to use it as many ways as I could. I've put in a lot of time in restaurants. The dumbest manager knows that you put the prettiest thing you've got up front by the door. Voilà, Sarah the hostess, being nice to you even though you should know better than to bring your five-year-old to a place like this, even though you walk in with a party of eight and somehow expect me to conjure a table. When was the last time you gave the hostess a tip? Cheapskate. Being a server is a lot more my speed. I'm stronger than I look, or anyway I was, and after all the dance classes I've taken, I'm a pro at weaving my way past the arm-waving hotshots standing around the bar.

Careers are for other people. I've always just needed a job, and I've always managed to get one. Chain restaurants are kind of a drag but the one I worked for offers health insurance, and now I'm the one everybody else's premiums will go to pay for. You need a whole bunch of healthy ones to foot the bill for one of me.

I could have put a stop to the whole thing between Fiona and the bore before it started, by letting him think he had a chance with me. But I'm no good at pretending I want someone when I don't. And no good at pretending I don't want what I want, either. God knows I couldn't with Mack. His wife saw us together and how could she not know in an instant? We were in his truck, in the drive-thru line at Sonic, and guess who pulled into the parking lot just when we got to the takeout window. In another two minutes we would have been gone. I don't think anybody could look at us then and not see what was going on between us, but especially not Charlene. I was hoping she'd leave him once she knew, but she's made of stronger stuff than that. Not really a surprise; he married her, after all. If I'd been there first he would have married me. Except when he married her I was fifteen, so I guess marrying me instead would not have been a plan. But if he had been married to me and then met her, would he have had the affair of his life with her? Probably yes. I never expected him to leave her, it sounds strange to say this but he's intensely loyal. To her, and to me. She won't miss having me in their life. But there will still be his memory of me, and that may be worse.

I thought I was going to write about the first time Mack and I had sex, but it turns out I can't. I don't trust my memory of it. I've remembered it too many times, I've worn the memory out, it's just the memory of a memory, or maybe it's a wish. Or it would be writing. There's the problem: it would just be writing, and writing is not even in the same universe as the moment when the man I was born to be with first came into

me. Nothing is. It was the same for him, I know that. I don't think it or hope it, I know it, why, because his soul and my soul became one thing, and if you don't believe that's possible, too bad for you. There's more to life than you realize.

Rob, at last, made his move: he left a note in the box on my door, where usually all I got were flyers or notices from the Registrar. It was written in his rotten handwriting you can barely read, on a piece of paper that had been torn off a larger piece. I could picture him suddenly resolving to do it and knowing that if he didn't do it at once, he'd lose his nerve, so he used what he had at that moment. Why so cautious? He must have already felt what was going to happen.

Rob and I were together the last year of college at San Jose State, and a year after that, and I never told him about Mack. I didn't tell him I transferred there because it was as far away as I could get, and because my family forced me to do it, to get me away from Mack so I wouldn't do something, in my mother's words, even more regrettable. That was the last time anyone ever forced me to do anything. I should fucking hope I did something regrettable, it shows I was actually alive. But I didn't want to hurt Rob by telling him I had left my real life 2000 miles away, and besides, I did love him. Right? Try to tell the truth, Sarah. Whatever he and I had was also real, or as real as it could get anyway, whatever that means, I'll never know. I didn't know what would come after, it wasn't a nasty trick I played on him. Did I matter too much to him? That question doesn't even mean anything. I didn't come with any guarantees. His life is his life; he made his own choices. He thought we'd always be together, and I may have thought that at some point, too. I don't know, I can't remember being the person who would have thought that, that version of Sarah is buried under everything that's happened since.

I broke his heart, it's not something I'm proud of but a person has to take responsibility. I never communicated with Mack but I knew he was still half of my heart, and I was almost certain I was still half of his. I couldn't go back and I couldn't promise to have a life with Rob, so I did what I could; I got a different lover. Isn't that how you always move on? You would have done the same, don't bother trying to deny it. Very exciting for a while, then I got another one. Then I moved in with Wesley, what the hell was I thinking, I can't remember that either, and why not go back to Rob instead? Because he was only too willing to belong to me, once and for all, for good. And then Wesley and I were having sex less and less until pretty soon it looked like we'd never have sex again, and I wasn't even thirty yet, and why the fuck was all this happening? Because I still loved Mack. I had run halfway across the country in obedience to my family, I had given it my best shot and they had stolen more of my twenties than they had any right to and I left Wesley's house and ran back. On the way I stopped to see Rob, because he loved me and in point of fact, I do think I loved him but there's love and then there's the thing he could never compete with. No one could. Rob and I had lovely sex for one more night and day. I had been starving for it for a long time, and plus, I wanted to give him what I could. He didn't hold any of it against

me; he's a fatalist and a romantic, which is a recipe for getting your heart broken but somehow he's proud of being that way.

When I saw Mack for the first time in eight years I almost fell down. I was in, of all places, Wal-Mart (because I didn't have any money), I was indifferently turning over T-shirts, and I looked up and about twenty feet away, Mack was going by with his two kids, a girl about eight and a boy who must have been five. It hit me so hard I couldn't believe he didn't feel it too, but he didn't turn and see me, he passed by intent on going somewhere that it appeared his daughter was leading him to, and his son was holding onto his hand and chattering away and Mack was not really paying attention. I didn't want us to meet again in Wal-Mart, in front of his kids for God's sake, after eight years apart; I wanted to dive under the table of T-shirts but I couldn't move and I couldn't take my eyes off him. The life I'll never have was right in front of my eyes. Then he disappeared up an aisle with his kids, and I had to hold onto the edge of the table because I felt my knees giving out under me. My heart was racing and I couldn't get my breath. I had forgotten how it felt to be alive. But some part of me must have remembered all that time, must have held on to what it knew was true despite everything, and dragged me out of my pretend-life by force.

I hadn't told him I was coming back, or that I was back. For that matter, I wouldn't have known how to. Men like Mack don't do Facebook. Somebody keeps up a Facebook page for his company, but I wasn't going to leave a message on that. Mack started off as pretty much just Man With Truck, and then when I first met him he was Man with Bobcat and Backhoe, and it just kept growing. Now he owns a sand and gravel business, and on the retail side of the yard you can buy flagstones and wallstones and granite blocks and pavers, and he can send a crew over to the suburban lot that my sister sold you and excavate for the basement and foundation of the house you're going to build. His guys can put in a septic system; they can lay a patio and reconstruct a driveway. He makes enough money to never shop at Wal-Mart again, but it's like Mack to do that. I sound like his wife, don't I, which is a dark little bad joke at this point.

He's a deeply practical guy who has the most impractical personal life imaginable. For how much longer? If the chemo doesn't work, then radiation; if the radiation doesn't work, then . . . actually I don't believe it's "if" anymore. And what if I had had the baby after all? If she (I was sure it would be a girl) had been born, then leaving this world would have been a hundred times worse even than it is now. And who would have brought her up? Not Charlene, not Mack, so who then? It would have been unbearable to die knowing I was leaving her behind forever. Knowing she'd never even remember me. Knowing somebody else would always be her mother, the only one, as far as she knew, that she'd ever had. No, it's better that . . . come on, Sarah, don't lie, there is no better, only worse. Of course I would have given anything to have the baby, even if I only had her for six months.

Mack was wild to see me when I was pregnant. And he still is now, but in a different way. I don't know how he's going to handle it. I'm sick of being strong, and

eventually I won't be, and I don't know how anybody is going to act then. They don't have any practice with that. Fiona won't be able to go on pretending that everything's going to be all right, and my mother – I don't know what she'll do. Whenever I see her she talks nonstop, the entire time, until either she leaves or I do; I think she's terrified I might tell her how it feels to be me. I don't even know if I'd try. Will she try to talk Death to death? That's what happened when Daddy died. Fiona is really going to have her hands full, dealing with her solo for the rest of her life.

Why does it matter so much who falls in love with whom? Why is it such the earth-shattering issue? All nature wants is for the species to reproduce, people are always going to have sex and it's bound to work. Why is there so much more riding on it? Why, as soon as I feel halfway decent after a chemo infusion, do I so much want Mack to come and make love to me? We'll never reproduce, but while I'm still able, I can't stop wanting him. The sovereign remedy. The body never believes it's dying, or maybe only at the very end, I don't know. Why did I turn my life inside out for him – but it was for me, just as much. Why all this drama, God knows what must have gone down between him and Charlene, probably even more than he ever told me, and God knows what his kids must feel about all this. There's no way they don't know, whether anybody sat them down and told them or not. Why be flung across the country by a snarling pack of relatives, why then leave a man I did, after all, love – I think – to come back so Mack and I could fuck up various lives still more than we already had? What is the answer -- "Because I love him, because he loves me"? Does that justify anything and everything we do?

But the hell with justify. I'm selfish, I know, but I'm not sure that's a bad thing to be. When you get what you want, forgive yourself. It takes courage to get what you want; it takes courage to feel like you deserve to keep it. The truth is, we don't get to keep much of anything. Certainly not the things that matter. If you can't accept that, it's better not to go through all this in the first place.

Rob came to visit me last week. He stayed at my mother's place, which can't have been much fun, but I knew Mack couldn't stand it if he slept at my place. We talked about how violent and ruthless love is, which is something both of us should know by now. At one point I showed him my one breast and he said, "I'll always want you," which I know to be true and I thank him for it. If Mack had known I did that, he'd have wanted to kill him. Rob didn't show his sadness too much, so I could bear to have him around. Mack, who is never threatened by anyone, was threatened by him and couldn't wait for him to go home. He could have picked Rob up, twirled him around like a propeller, and thrown him across the room, but of course that wasn't the point. And anyway he could never harm a friend of mine. Rob knew all that, too. And he knew that in my life there never really had been room for him. When he left, we held each other for a long time and then he walked away. He's going to stay alive. That is one hell of an advantage he has. Or it would be if he understands he doesn't have forever.



The school buses are long gone, and already one has come back. Done with its day, the kids safely delivered home. I don't think much of this writing, but whatever, it was probably never going to be good enough, and what is good enough, anyway?

Yesterday I was looking at my bulletin board, and buried among all the photos and phone numbers and takeout menus and ticket stubs from concerts, I noticed some lines I copied from an old, obscure, sort of mystical book, a New Agey thing before there was such a term. I've had this piece of paper forever; it followed me here when I came back. "As you think, you travel," it began; "and as you love, you attract. You are today where your thoughts have brought you."

Really, I thought, today? This fucking disaster that is today? "You will realize the vision (not the idle wish) of your heart, for you will always gravitate towards that which you, secretly, most love." Mack, of course, and our child who was never born; that much was completely true. "Into your hands will be placed the exact results of your thoughts." I pulled the paper off the bulletin board, sending a push-pin flying, crumpled it in my hand and threw it in the trash. When did I copy those words? It must have been while I was still in California, before I had any idea how cruel they would turn out to be. When I had a future that was unknown, when some part of me, still underground, was getting up its nerve to come back here, to see Mack again, to fling myself at life and say Do your worst, I accept it all. Now it doesn't matter what I say, and my thoughts cause almost nothing; I don't got the power, life has the upper hand.

When I was a kid I read a book called *I Capture the Castle*, a very odd book that seemed to go nowhere, basically a girl spends the whole book wandering around this big drafty old house looking for something to do, or trying to make everything mean more than it means. Anyway, that's all I can remember getting out of it. It wasn't even interesting, or maybe it was and I didn't get it, but for some reason it stuck with me. Maybe the whole attraction of it lay in the title, which is totally misleading. You keep thinking that this thing called capturing the castle will eventually happen, but there is no castle and she never captures anything, everything kind of slips through her fingers and only in her mind does she live a life where, maybe, once in a thousand years, a girl captures a castle.

Whatever that even means. And it's not as though I wanted a castle, of all things. Maybe Fiona would, but not me. It makes no sense, but I keep thinking of those words: I capture the castle, until they mean nothing, or whatever I want them to mean.

Maybe I'll write more tomorrow. Or maybe it doesn't matter because what I want to write is impossible to say.