

UVic Diversity Writing Contest 2014, Second-Place Fiction Winner
By Holly Lam
Knocking Over the Vanilla

Sean calls it mixology. Georgia calls it squeezing a lemon into some club soda, with a flourish. Tiny bubbles spit at the top of the glass as he hands it to her.

“Thank you,” says Georgia. “Cheers.”

Sean puts the leftover peach preserves back in Georgia’s fridge. He had thought baking the pie would be fun for the kids, but the kids had abandoned ship for the backyard.

“Shouldn’t they be wearing coats?” says Georgia.

“They’ll come inside if they’re cold.”

When Georgia phoned him that morning, he agreed to come if she baked him a pie. He has a blood test next week. “Pie has everything I might be allergic to,” he said.

“Great.”

“How’s Nate?” Sean asks.

Georgia takes a sip of her soda.

Sean nods. She’s like this sometimes. He usually lets it go.

“Did Dad tell you about Brianna’s wedding?”

“I haven’t talked to Dad in a while,” says Georgia. She looks out the window at Ruby, her niece, half hidden in the rhododendron.

Sean flips through the cookbook, even though the pie recipe is only one page. “You haven’t?”

“No,” says Georgia.

“Did you remember the cinnamon?” says Sean.

“I put in twice the amount listed.”

“Classic.” They high five. A good one, with a good slap.

Georgia’s drink fizzes. If only it could quiet down enough for her to think. She can feel her cheeks radiate heat and her heart beating out of her sweater. Sean is waiting for her to explain why she asked him here.

The phone rings. Thank goodness. Georgia heads to the living room to answer, pressing

her palms against her hot cheeks. Nate's number flashes across the screen. Not so thank goodness. She hovers above the receiver for two more rings. He doesn't leave a message.

She joins Sean in the kitchen again. Her sleeve catches the top of a bottle and vanilla spills all over the counter. "Why was that open?" She grabs the hand-knit white dishcloth knit to soak it up.

"Was that a wrong number?"

"It was Nate," Georgia says. "I broke off the engagement?"

"Finally," says Sean.

"What?"

"You pushed it back so many times," he says.

Georgia wrings out the dishcloth. She knows the stain won't come out in the wash.

"You want to tell me why?"

To Georgia, the pause lasts forever. She could do it, or she could decide not to. She sets the cloth down.

She does it.

"Because I told Nate and Dad. That I'm gay?" It comes easily once she starts—one contingency of the many she has practiced. "And I broke off the engagement." An early afternoon shadow creeps into the backyard. Georgia studies the line it makes on the grass. Dark and light. "Obviously that broke off the engagement. That's why I haven't talked to Dad for a few weeks? We had a bit of an argument? And obviously I've known for a while? Not obviously, obviously, or I would've—but I told Nate." Ruby isn't in the rhododendron anymore. She's moved on.

"What made you—?" Sean pops a chunk of leftover dough in his mouth to be casual. He doesn't want to knock anything over. "Why now?"

Georgia looks at him. "Because I met someone?"

Sean nods, chewing. It's better than he thought.

"Two months ago," says Georgia. "Seven weeks and four days."

"Oh."

"She just moved here? Because her job wasn't working out." Georgia powers through. "I

don't know if it'll work? But maybe it will?"

"I have a big confession coming up with Dad, too," says Sean.

"Yeah?"

"This whole blood test allergies thing is going to throw him for a loop at Christmas dinner. Gluten-free is not traditional."

Georgia smiles. He always breaks her. "Thanks, Sean."

Ruby runs inside, out of breath, tracking grass from her rain boots through Georgia's clean, childless hall. She grabs a hoodie and heads back out. "Hi Dad, hi Aunt Georgie."

"See?" says Sean. "Self-sufficient."

They do the dishes. When the counter is clear of bowls and measuring spoons, Georgia takes off her rubber gloves, and Sean leaves a tower of dishes in the rack.

"I'd do anything for those kids," says Sean. "Give Dad a chance to come around."

"Yeah."

Sean offers Georgia the crumpled tea towel from the fridge handle. She snorts, using it to dab her eyes. He gives her one firm pat on the arm, like a football coach.

"Thank you," she says.

The oven timer counts down from 60 minutes.

"You want to tell me about her?" says Sean.

Georgia tips her glass back, lets the last of her soda trickle onto her lip.

Sean says, "Give me *something* to post on Facebook."

Georgia throws the towel in his face. "She's the only person who can beat me at pool," she says.

"No way. I can beat you at pool."

"No way." She knew he would say that.