

## ***Stronger Than Hate***

by Rachel Pei

“Diet Coke, please, not Pepsi – I can’t *stand* Pepsi.”

He’s peculiar like that.

Smiling and nodding, the blonde waitress turns towards me. “And how about yourself, Mrs. Brooks?” she asks cheerily. “What will you be having today?”

My attention strays from the waitress to the man across from me, and I understand him well enough to know what he’s thinking. *Mrs. Brooks... So she kept the name.* Suddenly, I can’t bring myself to meet his searching gaze. *Why?*

My words fall out almost inaudibly as I reply, “Water will be just fine, thanks.”

After a few futile attempts at conversation, the waitress leaves the table in a huff, probably deciding that Mrs. Brooks and her companion are her most unsociable customers by far. I study his face. Five years have aged him beyond what I could ever have foreseen, and yet, the distinct features I remember are still there. The same curved brow, hooked nose, and proud forehead are all framed by wavy hair, now streaked with silver. His beard is rather unkempt and so is his hair. He glances over at me, seeming to grow more nervous with every breath. I’m aware of how his eyes travel over my own dark brown curls and tightly pressed lips.

For a moment that seems to stretch into eternity, neither one of us says a word; instead we sit motionless at the table. Chatter rises from all sides as folks trickle in, about to begin their Saturday brunch. We don’t pay any attention to them, though – just continue staring silently at each other.

At last, he summons up all of his courage to ask about the kids.

“They’re fine,” I reply hesitantly. *Is this it? Has he called me here just to take my babies away from me? At once, a mixture of anger and regret fills my heart. Regret for what? That he hasn’t changed like I had hoped?*

His eyes wander aimlessly before he swears and smashes his fist against the table. As prepared as I was for any scenario, I flinch as if he had hit me instead of the hard surface in front of us. That’s when he chooses to blurt, “I’m sorry, okay? Sorry for everything. And I’m gonna keep saying I’m sorry until you actually see that I mean it!”

Already, customers are turning around in their seats and glaring at him. I can’t blame them. Nevertheless, flushed with embarrassment, I study the hardwood floor. These are all people I recognize, as this town is small and everyone practically knows everyone else. Since my parents lived here, moving to town with the kids seemed like the most reasonable option for me five years ago.

Now, he takes a deep breath, calms down, and looks at me, seemingly determined to do something. Out of his jeans pocket he pulls a wad of bills. It’s a collection of tens, fifties, and hundreds, all wound up together with a rubber band.

“Here,” he says, a serious look on his face. “Take it. It’s all I’ve got left. I’m going to be a better man now, save stuff in the bank again and work. I promise – for you and the kids.”

It seems too good to be true. For the first time in several months, my world feels lighter at the prospect of some kind of hope. Hope for us as a family. Hope for a brighter future, possibly with a father for my children. But still, there are too many ‘maybes,’ and I quickly reproach myself for my naïve optimism. How can someone like him have a change of heart? It’s almost impossible. It *must* be impossible. And yet...

He looks intently at me, trying to guess what I make of his promises. At once, he knows. He knows the struggle inside me because it’s right there in front of him, showing plainly in my eyes despite myself. I see that the shock, the realization of my unspoken feelings, fills his awestruck expression. It’s the final resolution. Immediately, he knows he isn’t worthy and never was.

It is love – love despite hardship, despite betrayal, despite abuse. It is love which binds me to this man who was once the light of my life. Now, it is love that causes me to cry as I’ve never cried before.

“Dalia, oh Dalia...” he murmurs softly and takes my hands in his. Then he too begins to sob.

Rays of soft sunlight, seeping in from the window, illuminate the tears on our faces. Outside, bright-coloured petunias seem to bloom and blossom as never before.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rachel Pei  
Grade 10  
Our Lady of the Wayside Catholic School