

The Half-Word

EMI SASAGAWA

DECE. THIS SOUND, THIS HALF-WORD LINGERS IN MY EAR, as I search my mind for its end. Deceitful. Decerebrate. Decentred. I resist my urge to complete it, to continue the hunt for its missing half. Instead, I watch the fragment, suspended in the air, its jagged ends pointed at me. I look in the direction of my partner's throat and imagine its pair might be lodged in there, stuck between tracheal cartilages, unable to escape. The thought makes me feel woozy, and I grip the back of a chair for support.

Finally, our eyes meet, and I realize she's been trying to decipher my facial contortions. This is the first time she's abbreviated a word since we started dating eighteen months ago, and my body is revolting against it. I weigh the transgression, measure it against other possible offences and decide I can erase it from memory, as long as it doesn't repeat itself. But over the next few days, it resurfaces, once, twice, until it comes to me by text.

What would propel one to abbreviate? What kind of person would find joy in breaking things in half? Teenagers abbreviate all the time. Could it be a coolness factor? Could it be time—time lost, time gained? I estimate the moments saved by the omission of the missing letters. Three-tenths of a second, I conclude. It's possible she's in a hurry, overburdened with floor plans, meetings with difficult clients and misunderstanding engineers.

But as I try to draw my attention back to my work, I can't help but feel this is not what I signed up for. When we met last spring, she spoke in full words, full sentences. We seemed to share a respect for rules. Now she has no problem cutting words in half, butchering her own language, making unintelligible sounds at me.

My mind deliberates. If she's capable of this, what else might she be willing to do? How else might she change? Will she alter the way she walks now, her feet perfectly parallel, her pace timed to the rhythm of the keys that dangle from her carabiner? Will she stop taking four fingers to her mouth whenever she forgets what she's about to say? I wish I could preserve the way she is today, hold on to the familiar ways I've known her. But this much I know—you can't control someone's vernacular.



My therapist says I am not very good with change, transition. I guess listing every way in which the room is different at the start of every session is not what one would call normal or even healthy. *You moved the cactus three inches to the left. The bulb in the lamp near your desk is a shade brighter. The couch pillows were washed with a different detergent.* In these instances, it's not so much that I need things back the way they were. I just want him to acknowledge they're no longer the same, that in the three weeks since I last saw him, they have shifted, morphed.

These are changes I can deal with—they're changes of minimal exposure. What if I can't live with a half-word? What if I've fallen in love with a static version of this person? I lie awake beside her, searching for clues of what this might all mean: a slip-up, a transformation, a reveal. Is this who she's been all along? Or is it new, an imitation of a sound she heard elsewhere? It's hard to say, and I don't quite know how to ask, so instead I worry in silence, that I am inflexible, unyielding, while she sways in freedom.



There is an acronym I use, a phrase even I've learned to shorten. It started four years ago when I met a woman who enjoyed using *like, you know, and I mean* as discourse markers. With years of competitive debating under my belt, I'd always policed myself not to fill silence with meaningless utterances. But she didn't much care for succinctness or frugality. Instead, she believed in filling every gap, expending every word.

Our relationship was a tumultuous one. Scorned ex-boyfriend, jealous younger sister, homophobic parents. Speech wasn't the only thing that pushed us apart, but it was the only compromise we ever reached. I agreed to adopt one acronym, one cipher of her choosing. *LOL*, she demanded, knowing it was my least favourite of them all. *Wouldn't haha do it?* I tried to negotiate. *That wasn't the point*, she contested. I conceded.

More than two years have passed since the end, and still, the acronym remains part of my vocabulary. I've tried to suppress it, erase it, but when I least expect it,

it resurfaces again. That's the danger of being vulnerable, of making concessions. You never know when one allowance will stick, become embedded in you. Of all the things I learned in that relationship, I never thought this would be the lesson to linger.



Following the LOL breakup, I re-evaluated my screening method. My next partner would have to be out and single. No more uncertainty about their family's take on me being a woman. No more being shoved back into the closet. No more grey zones. I was done being the introductory course to queer life.

We would also have to agree on a few basic values. Respect, honesty, loyalty. I'd learned my lesson about trust. How relationships that begin with cheating can seldom escape doom. How they are filled with doubt and disbelief. How they can eat away at your self-confidence and make you feel insane.

Then, there was language. It would be a key element of the triage. No acronyms. No abbreviations. No fillers.

The truth is, I didn't expect to fall in love so soon. This was always meant as a preliminary list. I thought I would have time to perfect my improved methods. Then came Tinder. Her profile was sparse. Photos that expertly hid her face. A description that only read "burrito." She messaged me first, asked me for movie recommendations. We texted in perfectly punctuated paragraphs for a month before finally agreeing to meet in person.



I suspect my appreciation for rules comes from my father, who taught me basic addition and subtraction by the age of four, multiplication and division by six, and imaginary numbers by ten.

My parents, my mom Brazilian, my dad Japanese, met while my dad was on a language exchange in Brazil through his university in Tokyo. For the first six months, communication was, for the most part, unidirectional, with my mom talking at him for hours. He carried around a notebook and wrote down everything she said. Later, at home, he looked up words he didn't know in the dictionary, made grammar notes on the edges of the page, decoded her ramblings.

By the time I was in preschool, my dad had become the resident grammar enforcer, Portuguese dictionary in hand, making sure we abided by every rule.



I watch my partner read the newspaper on a Saturday morning as I sip on a cup of Earl Grey tea, and wonder if I can complete the half-word, add the missing letters, but that feels like an imposition. Maybe I can nudge her there, though that feels like manipulation. Is she even aware of this transgression?

I haven't addressed the half-word yet, mostly because I am not sure what I want to say about it, only that I want it gone—and that alone isn't a good enough reason to bring it up. In the meantime, my anxieties slowly build up at its every mention. Ambiguity is the enemy of the obsessive-compulsive. I consider other possibilities. Decelerate. Decertify. Deceased.

I stare for too long. If only I could see what lies inside her head. She looks up from the paper, cocking her head to one side. Is now the right time? I try to resist, but the impulse is too strong, and before I know it, I've asked, what's the meaning of abbreviating words?



I learned English from an Argentinian man at the age of thirteen. Until then, the extent of my vocabulary was restricted to a shortlist of household objects, how to say my name, and the customary pleasantries one must know, like good morning or hello.

In 2003, my whole world changed when my family was given a two-month notice to move to Panama. My dad's transfer came out of the blue. We were yanked away from everything we knew—home, family, friends. It suddenly dawned on my parents how unprepared my sister and I were for this transition, any transition. We spoke neither English nor Spanish. We'd never been briefed on the art of adaptation. Not to mention, we couldn't exactly be taught how to make new friends.

Santiago was tall with a large build. His hair, often parted in the middle, was long, black, and often greasy, though that didn't dissuade our maid from swooning every time she saw him. Every morning, he rode his large motorcycle through Sao Paulo to get to our house before school. We sat for an hour, maybe two, completing lesson after lesson from a grammar book.

That's how English came to me, structured, measured, by the book.



Panama was the break. Before then, I thought our lives were perfect. Perfect kids. Perfect parents. Perfect family. But the move showed a different side of us. Panama took away things. My sister lost her circle, her friends. My dad lost his peace of mind. My mom lost her purpose, her calling. And I lost predictability.

In the aftermath of the move, my mom became a different person. The first signs that she was depressed came in the first six months after we left. There were weeks when she would hardly say much, days when she would stay in bed, times when we knew not to bother her.

My dad, overcome with guilt, responded in the only language he knew how—silence. So, I became the interlocutor, the moderator in their conversations. I learned to distinguish between spaces, commas, periods. I learned the meaning of em-dashes, ellipses, pilcrow. I learned the difference between French and English spacing. But perhaps more importantly, I learned that in conversations between partners, one should never abbreviate.



I've learned to deal with uncertainty by creating the illusion of structure. Routines, timelines, charts—they're a control freak's best friend, fostering safety within pre-established limits. But these coping mechanisms only work when you can control the number of variables. Start adding y^3 or z^{-1} , and there's nothing linear about the equation you'll come up with.

My therapist props his left foot on his right knee. I notice he has a new pair of brown desert boots on. He leans forward and asks about the last three weeks. I do my best to ignore the upgraded footwear. Controlling one's impulse is the first step, a former psychologist once told me. Instead, I talk about my family, a slew of incoming projects at work, and eventually the half-word.

He is the first to hear of my troubles. *Would anyone else even try to understand?* I pose question after question, while he notes them down on a legal pad on his lap.

What does this all mean? Could I live with the uncertainty of a half-word? Am I signing up for a lifetime of unintelligible sounds? Is this the right person for me? He doesn't interrupt me.

Before the session ends, he tells me I suffer from a fear of the unknown.



The year before I left for college, on New Year's Eve, I locked my parents inside a room in a chalet we'd rented in the French Alps. I told them I wasn't going to be around the following year to translate between them, mediate their arguments. I told them they would have to learn how to communicate without me as a crutch.

Sitting on the floor as I guarded the door, I retold myself the story of how they met. Two people from two completely different cultures, who at seventeen and twenty-one were willing to navigate complexities they couldn't have foreseen. Two people who had stood up to their families, not once but twice, to be together.

Since I can recall, that has always been my favourite story—the only story I ever asked my dad to tell again and again. And even then, on the night I forced my parents to work things out on their own, this was the story I chose to remember.

Not the fighting. Not the silence. Not the guilt.

I, too, had chosen to abbreviate.



A diagnosis calls for a cure, or at the very least a relief from your symptoms, but my therapist provided neither. For the weeks to come, I toy with that phrase. Fear of the unknown. What don't I know? How can I find out?

On a Saturday morning, my partner and I lie in bed. We take turns being the little spoon while we talk about nothing and everything—our plans for the weekend, an upcoming trip to visit her parents, a growing list of movies we want to watch. Between each new topic, we debate breakfast. Should we go out, or do we have enough ingredients in the fridge for a Japanese omelet? When we finally get up, it's 9:30 a.m., though we've been awake for over an hour.

There was a time when the thought of idleness would send me into a panic attack. Productivity was the standard I lived by. Every act needed a purpose. Every goal needed a measurable outcome. To be unproductive was to waste one's life away.

I peer into the kitchen and watch my partner move about, surveying the fridge, putting out the oddest combination of ingredients. Crimini mushrooms, kimchi, leftover pasta salad. "I think we can make something," she says, holding up a carton of eggs. I smile, taking them from her hands.

Uncertainty only matters to those focused on the future. "What do you want in your eggs?" I ask, cracking a couple into a bowl.

She looks up from her newspaper, smirks, and says, "Surprise me."



Dece. This half-word, this sound still visits me. But now, when I think of it, I don't see a beginning with an uncertain, unknown end. I see an opportunity filled with potential. Idleness, half-words, new culinary inventions. Who knows what imaginary numbers she will add to my (complex) equation?