

ABSTRACT

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This collection of fictionalized work (long short stories, novellas, novel excerpts) represents my thematic interests as a writer: challenging traditional notions of race, class, history, and culture in American identity, via the fictionalized lenses of history, school, and family life. Most of my work tends to involve a wry look at the orthodox views of “truth” and culture, and ranges from sassy cultural musings to wallowing in tragic hybrid space.

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By

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Advisory Committee:
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Preface

These works are fictional, of course.

Dedication

To my people. You know who you are.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Maryland MFA program for showing me new ways to find art in words. Thanks to Maud Casey, Howard Norman, and Merrill Feitell for their honesty, attention to craft, and their time: in workshop, but especially outside of it. Thank you to Hank Lewis for understanding my voice and where I was coming from, for all of his careful reading and honest talk, for the detailed and thoughtful recommendations that guided this work to higher places. Thank you to Randy Ontiveros for sharing an enlightening and refreshing love of literature.

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1: Agni

It was March. Hot and dry. To Mira, the only seasons in Delhi were hot and dry, or hot and rainy, although the natives claimed that winter existed. She was still adjusting to it, even after two years. The frustrating stop-and-go traffic made today's sun felt even more intense through the windows of her Honda. She'd moved only three kilometers in fifteen minutes, finally removing her arm from the window sill to protect it from the burning rays.

She pulled into the clusterfuck that passed for the parking lot of the Karol Bagh market: that in any other country would just be considered an ordinary curb. Here, like everywhere in Delhi, parking must always be done in crowds and heat, controlled by a man whose primary function was to guide cars into impossible spaces. The parking-wallah waved her in with his fingers, beckoning; her car within inches of hitting the others cluttered at the curb on either side of her. He stared at her, probably wondering why she was driving around by herself. Females driving themselves were still an uncommon sight in most of northern India, even in cosmopolitan Delhi, even in the twenty-first century. Women traveled in familial packs, or went around with a trusted companion: a husband, an auntie-ji, a sister, a maid. The outside world was not a place to contend with, alone.

Mira lingered in the car a moment, letting the AC stream onto her face, mentally preparing for the oven blast when she opened the door. This was her third time going to Anil's Sari Palace for the same outfit. The first trip was to buy the sari and get measured for the blouse; the second time was her return on the following

Thursday to pick up the blouse that was supposed to be ready the previous Monday (which a phone call on Monday revealed that she should come for it on Wednesday, so to play it safe she went on Thursday); on that Thursday it was ready, but the fitting revealed that the stitching needed some more work, some refinement, a little more taking in of the sleeves; now she was picking up the blouse on the Tuesday following the Sunday it was supposed to have been finished, which hopefully meant it was ready because Amita's wedding was tonight. At least, the wedding ceremony that Mira and Brian would attend was tonight, the actual name of it escaping Mira. There were too many ceremonies involved in an Indian wedding for Mira to remember, and she knew that Amita's family already started the initial ceremonies several days ago. Amita worked with both Brian and Mira in the consular division of the US Embassy, her fiancée, Sunil, was the son of prominent jeweler. The embassy folk all planned on going to tonight's ceremony; this was the one with the banquet and dancing, sort of like an American reception. They'd stand outside waiting for the groom's family to arrive on horses, brass bands parading with them, announcing their arrival. The families would greet one another and begin a series of prayers, offerings, and feasts, followed by dancing. Tonight's festivities would be lavish and long. Mira was looking forward to it, even though it was a Tuesday night. Weddings were planned to according to auspicious days, not to workday schedules, something that rankled most of their colleagues, including Brian, who had already complained more than once that it should be on a Friday or a Saturday night so they could enjoy themselves.

Mira wished they had attended one of last night's ceremonies, the one in which Amita and Sunil followed one another around a pit of fire, sealing the

marriage. It sounded romantic. Sitting around the fire with family and friends, the flames marking the presence of Agni, the fire god, who bore witness to the marriage. The two of them would have been tied together, to lead each other around the flames, encircling them seven times, first Amita leading, and then Sunil. This made the marriage exist. It sounded so much more meaningful to Mira than saying “I do,” kissing and trading jewelry. Not a series of solo pledges, but an act of solidarity. But it had been a Monday night, and Brian hadn’t felt like going, and while Mira felt comfortable going to the market by herself, she wasn’t confident enough to show up to a wedding alone. They would go tonight.

The parking-wallah banged on her window, saying something in Hindi. She caught the word *tikhe*. He was asking if she was OK. She got out of the car, took the pink parking ticket he handed her and shoved into her pocket. Still, he stared. Her body prickled with resentment. This didn’t happen much to her, because she was good at blending, expecting the outside world to let her belong. A simple illusion for her in Delhi, with her dark complexion and black hair. Large sparkly jewelry and a neatly pressed salwar kameez did nearly the rest to give her the appearance of an Indian woman. The final piece of mastery was the ability to disregard humanity and appear uninterested in the life of the market; the ultimate test was whether the life of the market ignored her in return. Once she was regularly passed over by touts, beggars, and street kids; once the staring stopped, Mira knew she appeared to be a real *Dilliwalla*. At least until someone asked her something in Hindi outside of the few phrases she knew, or heard her American-accented English. Mira glared back at the parking wallah until he looked away.

Being in the market was an assault on the senses, one that many expats avoided as much as possible by bringing favored vendors straight to the embassy compound itself, or by limited their shopping excursions to the glitziest new malls and five-star hotels. The sidewalks were crooked, broken; Mira had to watch every step, lest she fall into a hole, which would often contain the day's food litter, someone's morning feces, dead leaves, empty cups, the red spittle of chewed-up *paan*. It took some time for Mira to negotiate her way to the sari store. Avoiding road refuse and precarious walkways was only the first part. Pushing through the throngs of humanity that made up this country was the second. Groups of fat, chatting women blocked the way, taking up the uneven sidewalks with bulging stomachs that poured out of saris, snapping at the entourages of coolies behind them ferrying their purchases in baskets atop their heads. Deodorant was a toiletry for the upper-classes, so every passing person smelled like Mira's sweaty gym clothes. She had actually gotten used to this, and what bothered her more was the refraction of heat that bounced off of every person she passed, collected every possible speck of dust in the air, and came to stick onto her body. Her forehead was its epicenter, it now streaked and dripping with dusty sweat. She stopped to buy a cold coffee. *Ten rupees only madam*, which was less than twenty-five cents. The amount she just refused to give a man with fingers missing on one hand, a leper most likely banned from his village, one that she stepped around to get to the coffee counter, one who would probably lose his limbs as the disease progressed. She had seen it before. The longer she lived here, the more that felt okay—or at least—normal.

Inside Anil's Sari Palace she pulled out the carbon copy of the invoice and gave it to the shop boy, though she was quite sure that by now he should be able to identify who she was and what piece she was coming to collect. The shop boy handed the invoice to the cashier, who handed it to the manager, who called the tailor to come right away with madam's sari blouse. The tailor looked at the invoice and gave it back to the manager, and told the cashier to bring a chair for madam; the cashier looked to the shop boy to do it, so the shop boy dragged over the chair from the corner of the room. Mira sat. When he saw that Mira was settle, the tailor told the shop boy to go to the back and get the blouse and a chai for madam. The cashier then thought to ask Mira, "You want chai, madam?" Mira said no thank you, so the manager told the cashier to bring Mira a Coke, this time not asking her if she wanted one or not. Mira responded by saying it was okay, she just had a cold coffee, she didn't need a Coke, and the cashier told her, "It's okay madam, it's just coming." Mira wasn't sure if he persisted on giving her a Coke out of hospitality or stubbornness. The shop boy returned with her sari blouse on a hanger wrapped in plastic. Mira tried to smile at the shop boy, but he would not look her in the eye. The manager took the blouse from him and held it up in front of Mira and waited for her approval. Mira nodded and the manager gave it to the tailor so he could gently unwrap it. The cashier reminded the shop boy to bring the Coke for madam, she is waiting, Mira started to protest, and then decided to be quiet. He would bring a Coke regardless of what she said, because this is how they do things here. Just play along and blend. The manager praised her choice of a Benares sari, a classic for a wedding. Fuchsia pink and aqua blue silk, gold threads interwoven into the brocade edges. The

blouse piece carried over the same gold brocade pattern in purple fabric, the latest modernization of the Benares sari: the differently-colored blouse piece. Doubtless she would also get many compliments on it at the wedding.

Mira took it into the stuffy fitting room to try it on, turning on the little fan inside, not because it was that hot (although she was completely sticky with sweat) but to push away the little mosquitoes hovering around the hanging light. There was always something to fight away in Delhi. She slid her arms into it and zipped up the front. The sleeves were fine, it fit well, it was ready. If only it were so easy to put on the rest of the sari outfit. She had asked Sheila, her maid, to stay late tonight to help her get dressed. She didn't usually ask Sheila to stay beyond 5pm, even though most of the maids on the compound worked until past dinner, waiting for madam and sir to finish eating so that they could do the dishes and go home. To Mira, that was an intrusion. She'd rather think of her servants as phantoms who took care of business while she was gone. Having Sheila hover around them, serving their food, watching them eat, clearing their plates, made her uneasy. She liked to do things herself; she didn't feel comfortable having people whose only job was to do her bidding, even though she didn't mind a life free of household chores. But tonight, she needed Sheila's help. Mira had tried and practiced, and was still unable to make the folds of her sari lay down smooth. It was such a skillful art. She imagined her sari falling down in the middle of the wedding. She didn't know how Indian women did it everyday. The other Americans usually did what Mira was doing: they were dressed by their maids, like wealthy children going to a party. Mira felt badly asking Sheila to stay, as if she was inconveniencing her. But of course Sheila said she would stay.

Brian reminded Mira that if they asked her to stay overnight and sleep on the floor, she would have to do it. That was her job, and this is how things were done here.

“How is it fitting madam-ji?” called the manager.

“Fine, thank you. I think it’s finished now. I will take it.” She changed and came out.

The boy brought her the Coke. She waited for him to open it and pour it for her. She thought about saying “thanks,” but it wasn’t expected, and she reminded herself that she was blending. The boy slunk away to the corner to await his next orders.

“Very well, madam. Where from madam?” The manager stared at her face. *Oh no. Here it comes.* Mira didn’t want to answer, anticipating the twenty questions that were to follow. But she hadn’t yet become that rude. He had heard her talk, probably noticed her discomfort with the bossing of the shop boy, and realized that there was no husband nor auntie-ji nor mother in tow with her. Mira no longer blended.

“The US.” She always said this instead of “America” to make the political point that she wasn’t an imperializing the name of two continents to describe her country of origin. Nobody ever got that point.

“America?” he clarified. Well, that was to be expected, she thought.

“Yes,” she relented.

“No, but where are you *from*, madam?” he asked again, as if Mira was confused during the first round of questioning. She sighed. She wasn’t blonde and white; of course that meant to many abroad that she wasn’t really an American. She

looked nothing like the Americans on TV, the tourists, nor most of the expat locals. And Mira felt like she didn't belong with them anyway, not just in appearance, but in attitude. She liked distancing herself from the insensitive foreign women who didn't care if they left the compound with their knees showing, the arrogant men who never stopped talking and acted like they were experts on Delhi, India, or all of South Asia because they had lived within the embassy walls for a year. After her first few weeks in Delhi, she was already tired of the weekends spent going to champagne brunches followed by spa pampering. It's not she didn't enjoy those things, or that the embassy folk were bad people. They just weren't Mira's kind of people. Neither would have been in each others' social spheres back in the States. These folks were mainly the kind who had grown up with servants and trips to Paris, made sport of shopping for fineries, and had no qualms about taking their place near the top of the caste system in a new country. That's why a lot of them had requested to be here to begin with. The lifestyle. It wasn't unlike what they had at home; it was just in a much cruder form with a cheaper abundance of house help. But here, all Americans were all lumped together by passport and job title into the compound. Mira found it ironic that right now, she was asserting her place to belong to a citizenry that she felt estranged from, even while as she lived within its gates and worked as one of its diplomats.

“Really, I'm from America.”

“No, but your parents?”

“They're American. They were born there.”

He studied her eyes. Clearly, he was still making his own judgments. The most confident person in the world was a fat, wealthy, educated Indian man. “Your

parents are from Japan,” he pronounced, so proud of himself for figuring it out, that he unconsciously patted his belly.

“Yes,” answered Mira, just to be done with it, even though her parents were Peruvian-Americans. It was easier to allow him to believe he was right, and move on. Peru was hard to explain.

“Very good, madam. You know, you look Indian. From the north. Or Nepal.”

“Thank you.” Mira took it as a compliment, temporarily forgave him for being a righteous boor.

“You know how to wear a sari?”

“Sir, I have to be going. Can I just take the blouse now?” Mira didn’t have time for the next bit, the how-to-tie-a-sari lesson. She wasn’t going to give him that much leeway. Sheila would dress her. She didn’t want the shop boy called over to hold up a sari for her so she could practice.

“You going to a wedding? Indian wedding?” Her answering his question with a question, was only prompting more questions, which would continue until his curiosity was satisfied.

“Yes. A friend’s wedding.” She stood up and put her empty Coke can on the counter.

“Indian weddings much longer than American weddings. Very different. You had an American wedding? Or a Japanese wedding?” Of course he assumed she was married. This was everyone’s assumption in India for any adult in their twenties or older, at all times.

“An American wedding. A very small one.” She and Brian had married three years ago, right before they left, so they could be posted together, both have benefits, share housing. It had just been the two of them at city hall. We don’t need all of that stuff, they told each other. All we need is us, the judge, the rings. They splurged on a honeymoon to Italy: two weeks in Rome, Florence, and Venice. The rest of their money went into joint mutual funds and CDs for future down payments. It was very practical.

“Very good madam. You know how a Hindu wedding goes?”

“Yes, I know. I’m just going now.” Mira went to the cashier to pay before the manager started describing the entire Hindu wedding ceremony to her. Even though she was curious to hear what he would have to say about Agni and the fire ceremony. Mira’s noticed the colors of the wedding saris on display in the shop. A few baby pinks, but mostly reds and golds, some hints of saffron, maybe a little white. The colors of fire. The men’s outfits, too. Everything fiery. Why? She would ask Sheila later.

“As you like, madam.”

Mira looked at the time. If she rushed she could get home before Brian’s softball game was over and she’d have a moment to decompress from her trip, from Delhi, from the heat, in the apartment, alone. Maybe even take a bubble bath. She liked to think of their place as a sanctuary. The compound certainly felt that way. India ceased to exist as soon as she entered the compound gates. There were townhouses with private fences and tall, green trees. Large swaths of lawn and a community playing field for Little Leagues and morning soccer practice and the

occasional let's-try-to-play-cricket match, kept watered everyday for their pleasure in a city with an acute water shortage. Right across the way they had a chlorinated swimming pool full of azure water and blonde children hitting each other with foam noodles, mothers laying out in one-piece swimsuits, fathers at the poolside bar with Sam Adams on tap. They could even drink the water straight from the faucet. The only hints of India within the compound walls were the ever-present sun and dust, and the considerable population of brown employees serving the drinks, watching the children, raking the leaves. Some of the expats got so comfortable, they rarely left it to go out into India. Everything they needed was there. The commissary, a barber, a bowling alley, a playground, a medical center, the Bank of America, a small bookstore with a newsstand containing US Today and the New York Times, pizza and burgers at the little restaurant inside, a Baskin-Robbins, video rentals the Armed Forces Network on TV. All these things could be found without the intensely-felt inconvenience of leaving the oasis.

Mira made her way through the fracas to get back to her car, and now she leaned on her horn, weaving the Honda into the turn lane, around stopped cars that were waiting for a cow, three dogs, a bullock cart, and a bunch of street kids to move. If only driving home from the market could be done without a circus, she'd be home in ten minutes. But that was never the case. From here, the five kilometers would take about twenty-five minutes. At each red traffic light, scrawny, raggedy street urchins flooded the lanes, pounding on the car windows. At least they would ignore her today, since Brian wasn't there. When they saw his white face, they'd swarm the car, pound at the window, leave grimy fist prints on the windshield, demanding school

pens or chocolates or dollars. This would be reenacted at every intersection, except the ones near the compound, where the kids recognized them. They soon learned which foreigners were local and which were tourists, and that they'd have better luck with the cars that ferried fat Germans, hippie American tourists, pasty-looking Brits, anxious Korean ladies.

Twenty minutes of this went on, until Mira finally saw the compound gates up ahead at the next block. Two small, barefooted girls with unkempt hair carried wilted chrysanthemums from car to car. Mira wouldn't look at them. A team of boys wearing tattered men's shirts walked up and down the rows, throwing plastic-wrapped magazines on top of car windows. She gave them the preemptive, dismissive wave she had perfected when they got close enough. They skipped her. *Easy as that when he's not around.* Too bad Brian would never be able to witness these little triumphs. It was something that divided them, so she didn't even feel like she should tell him about it. He would think she was bragging. He seemed exasperated by everything about India lately, except for the things that made his life more luxurious. The exploring, the challenges weren't fun to him anymore. Not like their first year in Delhi, when it had been like they were dating again: all the new excitement in discovering the city together, date nights with other couples, no arguing over whose turn it was to do chores or make dinner because Sheila, and Peter, their cook (plus a small contingent of part-time employees), took care of all of that for them.

Now, well, she wasn't sure how to describe things. Everything was in place. There was their daily life, there was India, and Brian seemed to enjoy some of the occasional intersection between the two, like having cases of Kingfisher beers and

bags of kabobs delivered to their apartment. He was frustrated by the rest of it. He didn't want to eat out, because it would make him sick. Vacations were spent in Europe or East Asia—somewhere “clean”—so they could “get away” from Delhi, even though Mira felt like every time they were home on the compound, they were away from Delhi. Their orientation materials two years ago had explained all of this. They would go through a honeymoon period where everything about the new country would be fascinating and wonderful, and then they would loathe the place. Enter culture shock. In the end, they would come to a nice balance, perceiving their life in Delhi, with realistic, tolerant, and appreciative eyes. Sounded a lot like marriage, thought Mira. She flexed her hand and looked at her ring. Rings, metal rings, rings that could melt in fire.

Mira's thoughts were interrupted by a cartwheeling boy, rounding himself past her car, loop after loop, in front of the white SUV full of tourists behind her. It was a grand prize, a superb mark. This boy she had seen before. He had a drawn-on mustache made him look an anorexic lothario. She recognized that ridiculous, drawn-on, kohl mustache, with curlicues that swept out to his cheeks. He lived in the *jhugghi* across the street from the compound, and was one of the kids who asked Brian for a photo the other day. Mira had been surprised at the boy's keen eye, that he had noticed the camera Brian was carrying under his arm to the car. *Photo?* he had asked Brian. Brian had shaken his head no. Mira understood why. If he had taken one of this boy, they would be stuck in the parking lot for the next fifteen minutes, every child in the *jhugghi* rushing over for a picture, every single one reaching up to see it in the viewfinder. Brian would have to yell at them not to muck up the LCD screen,

not hiding his disgust of their grubby little hands. This city is hard on people, she reminded herself. They both had become much harder.

The boy looked to be about eight years old, which meant that he was probably twelve or thirteen. He had the attention of the entire SUV as he curved himself backwards, reaching for the burning hot concrete road behind him. Pressing his hands into the ground, he flipped his feet over head, then bobbed his head back and forth like a dancing snake, and bowed to the tourists. It was hilarious and tragic. Mira watched him approach the SUV, knocking on their window, *one rupee only, madam, sir*. The tourists cracked the window and handed him an open bag of M&Ms. King-sized. They must have brought it with them from home. They didn't sell bags of candy that big here. The boy peered inside of it. Surely it was the first time he had ever been given such a large quantity of chocolates. Or maybe he had never seen M&Ms before and didn't realize what they were. The boy shrugged and thrust the bag into his pants pocket, and persisted in his knocking. *One rupee only, madam, sir*.

The tourists turned away from the window, hoping he would walk away, thinking they already gave him something, *he should be going away shouldn't he*, not realizing that they actually had just encouraged him even more. The boy continued to knock. *Indians, we are very persistent people*, once said Shoba, Mira's secretary at the embassy. He glued his face and hands to their window, peering into the SUV. The tourists were speaking to the driver, probably confirming that it was okay not to give the boy anything else. After all, the Lonely Planet said not to give these children any money. The driver shook his head. Official reassurance from the middle-class local to ease their consciences. She and Brian had gone through that. *Should have given him*

your shoes instead, thought Mira, noting the old tire tread stapled to the soles of his flip flops.

The light turned green, the world was right again. Mira gave the car gas, still glancing in the rearview mirror for the cartwheel boy, as she pulled into the gates of the compound. The security officer stopped her car and did the prerequisite check, using a mirror on a stick to look underneath her car for bombs. Mira peeked behind her while she waited. She wanted to see him eat those M&Ms.

It seemed as if no one was home when Mira opened her apartment door. Where was Sheila? If it were a normal day, one in which she hadn't asked her to stay late, Mira would have pronounced everything to be as it should. Three to four servants had come and gone in the past ten hours: Sheila and Peter, plus one or two of the part-time help—the laundryman who came twice a week, the gardener who watered their plants every other day, the rug beater who did exactly that every Saturday, the newspaper boy who sometimes carried up the mail, the servant boy from across the street who Brian paid to wash his bicycle, though he rarely rode it through the precarious streets after he was clipped by a wayward auto-rickshaw. The table was set with tall white candles and a silk-blend tablecloth. The sofa pillows were plump and full from today's fluffing. The cleaning of the useless trinkets had happened, Mira noted, as she put her keys into the shiny, polished silver bowl that only this morning was layered in filmy Delhi dust.

"Hello?" Mira called, as she walked back into the bathroom to refresh herself with cool water. No answer. Maybe Sheila was at the market or taking a chai break

with a neighbor's maid. Her work was done, after all. The house looked fine. It was an oasis. Mira let the water run over her wrists before splashing it over her face. It had been a long drive home. A drink was in order, she thought, as she walked to the kitchen. Peter had left some of the kitchen cupboards open. That was weird. Or maybe Brian had been in a rush before his game, looking for a sweet. Mira shut them as she opened the fridge to peek at dinner and find her afternoon snacks.

Peter had left her a glass of freshly-squeezed orange juice and bowl full of cut-up mango. She dug into it (there was nothing quite like a freshly-cut cold mango), as she reviewed the contents of the containers full of tonight's dinner, cooked according to the very specific instructions she gave Peter that morning. Tandoori chicken with a side of shahi paneer simmered with only half the usual amount of ghee for her; baked chicken and rice for Brian. A refreshing cucumber-yogurt salad for her; a separate plate of plain, sliced cucumbers without yogurt for Brian. Mashed potatoes for both of them, spiced the Indian way for her, nothing but butter for Brian. Mira didn't know what had spurred on Brian's current refusal to eat Indian food. He hadn't gotten sick. He explained two weeks ago: "I'm just sick of all these spices, it makes everything taste like curry." He left it in her hands to explain to Peter why he kept ordering Domino's when Peter had made a nice dinner.

"Madam, shall I make pizza tonight?" Peter finally asked, after a week of seeing pizza boxes in the trash and only half-eaten dinners.

Mira didn't know what to say, except, "Sir does not want Indian dinner tonight, Peter, please make American versions for him." She tried not to roll her eyes when she said it. She didn't want Peter to think that she didn't respect her husband's

wishes. Peter was very traditional. She felt like she had to add, “Sir’s stomach has been bothering him. So many new foods and spices. He will be okay soon.” Mira thought maybe she should find those orientation papers to see how long his I-hate-India phase would last. It felt a bit decadent, even wasteful, to have Peter make two different dinners every night, especially in a country where she could look outside the window into the eyes of the starving. Even some of their other employees—like the *mali* who watered their plants with long, bony arms—looked as if they could use an extra meal a day. But Mira didn’t want to insult Peter by saying that they both would only eat American food, as it would be a dual rejection of his India, his country, his cooking. No, not so, this was only temporary, just for sir, a special case.

She took her bowl of mango to the sofa, and found herself staring at their wedding photo. Smiles, all smiles. Dressed in black and white. Sealed with a kiss. Brian had been the one to suggest platinum rings. She had liked gold. White gold.

“No, let’s do platinum, honey,” Brian had said at the jewelers.

“But it’s so much more expensive, just for a little ring. White gold is cheaper,” said Mira.

“Platinum looks the same, but it’s stronger. It lasts. No bending like gold. And better than silver. No corrosion, no polishing.” He bit the metal lightly to make a point, and they laughed. Their rings were made to last from one of the strongest metals on earth, without any work, no tending necessary. Not like fire.

The AC was finally just right and Mira closed her eyes. *Oh where’s that drink*, she remembered. Back to the kitchen for her orange juice. It was sweet; a nice orange. She drank half of it to make room for some booze. Decompressing with a cocktail

would be the perfect treat, taking the edge off of the tussles of the market, putting her in better mood for the wedding. Mira started to reach into the high-up cabinet to find her “special occasion” vodka: the Grey Goose from the Singapore duty-free store that was nearly impossible to find in Delhi for less than four thousand rupees—about one hundred dollars—and then she heard keys jangling at the door. Must be Sheila, back from her break. Mira put her hand down, as if she were a teenager getting caught in the liquor cabinet by her mother. It was instinctual. Sheila shouldn’t see her drinking. Ordinary Indian women didn’t drink.

But it wasn’t Sheila. Brian came in and plopped down his softball stuff down on the floor. His face was bright red from the heat, all the way through to the tips of his ears. Or maybe he got sunburned at the game. He never remembered to put on sunscreen. He took off his cleats and tossed them in the corner, because he knew Sheila would pick them up later. This was not the type of thing he used to do. This was one of his new things, except it was the opposite of the cooking. The problem wasn’t the inability to adjust—it was his complete adoption of his new role as Sahib-of-the-house that bothered her. “We pay them to clean up after us, Mira. It’s their job. Don’t feel bad,” he had said, after their dinner party last Sunday, the day off for all of their servants, when they left all the dishes piled up in the sink and every available counter space. She had said something about not needing to make things harder, and he said something about her needing to let go. The dishes glared at Mira until the next when someone took care of them long before she came home from work.

“Hey,” he said, walking past her, grabbing for the TV remote. “You’re home,” he said, slumping down into the sofa. “I thought you were at the market.”

ESPN basketball came on. The time-delayed showing of the Lakers-Mavericks game blared into their Delhi living room. Cheerleaders and announcers appeared. There were inflatable-plastic noise making contraptions. And cowbells. “Oh good,” he said. “It’s still on.” He stuck his arms out, away from his body, cooling himself in the AC.

“I did go to the market. I got the rest of my outfit for the wedding. I’m done.” She stood next to the TV to see if he would ask her for a kiss. He sat on the couch and waited to see if she was going to sit next to him to give him one. They didn’t kiss. They didn’t look at each other at all. Instead, they both stared at Kobe Bryant and Dirk Nowitzki, until Brian finally leaned over and pecked her on the lips. She smiled and put her hand in his.

“How was your game?” she remembered to ask.

“Fine. We won. Beth and Liz were there. You should have gone. You would’ve had people to talk to.”

“Oh, really?” It hadn’t occurred to Mira that the other wives were going to the games. Or that Brian would be disappointed that she didn’t.

“Yeah, all the other wives were there. They had a little table off to the side. They were having beers, pizza. Looked like they were having fun.”

Sitting around dishing about the servants and gossiping about who was sleeping with what Marine and comparing jewelry purchases is lots of fun, thought Mira. Still, his words gave her the impression that she had let him down somehow, and now it was public that she was the kind of wife who let down her husband. Is that what I’ve become, she wondered.

“How about next game? Next Saturday, same time? I’m pretty sure I don’t have...” Mira stopped, trying to think of her schedule next week.

“Yeah. That would be great if you...”

“Oh! Shoot. I told Robert that I’d go into the office and help him with the overload in visa paperwork. It’s audit time, I said I’d help him out for half the day.”

“It’s no big deal.” He said that, but he didn’t mean it. He wouldn’t look up from the TV.

“Maybe I can get out of it. I’ll talk to Robert.”

“Whatever. It’s okay.” He picked up the remote.

“It was really hot out today. I got my sari blouse,” she repeated. “Bunch of mosquitoes at the market, too.” Mira wasn’t sure why she said that, as if this excused her non-presence at the game. Why hadn’t she wanted to go? Was it that hot out? Could she have left the house earlier to get her blouse, come home and made it to the game? Yes, probably. It hadn’t even occurred to her.

“Did you eat all that mango?” Brian asked, his eyes turning from the televised box scores to the nearly-empty bowl on the coffee table. There were orange traces of mango pulp stuck on its side.

“Yeah. Sorry. I didn’t think you’d be home so early. I would have saved you some. He only cut one mango.”

“You always only have him cut one mango.” He put down the remote and stared at her. “How come you never ask Peter to cut enough mango for me?” His face surprised her. He picked up the remote again and fiddled with its soft, grey buttons.

“I don’t know. Mango season just started.” Mira felt defensive. “You hate Indian food lately. You have your apples and bananas.” That slipped out with more of a judgmental sneer than she intended.

“Well you never asked.” He tossed the remote on the table. She couldn’t tell if it was out of annoyance or anger. The batteries clattered out, rattling all over the coffee table, rolling onto the floor. “I like mango. I just get sick of Indian food.”

Mira knew she should just say, “I’m sorry, I’ll ask Peter to cut more in the morning.” But Brian irritated her with his helplessness, his immaturity. *Why doesn’t he ask Peter himself? Why does he always count on me to deal with the servants? Why is he throwing the remote around like a little kid? Why is he accusing me of being selfish, when he’s the one who wants special dinners made just for him?* She got up without saying anything, to resume her interrupted task of pouring vodka into her orange juice. Brian waited to pick up the batteries until after she disappeared into the kitchen.

“What are you drinking?” he called from the living room, listening to her glass clinking against the counter. Mira knew that he knew she was drinking orange juice that she had had Peter squeeze for her. This is what she did every afternoon. But she was not going to engage in another “mango” discussion.

“Orange juice. Want some? There’s some left.” There wasn’t really, only that half a glass. It was a peace offering.

Brian just sighed. “Nah, I’ll just drink a Coke.” She couldn’t tell if he was being sardonic. He appeared in the kitchen behind her, pulled open the fridge, and hung his face in the cool refrigerator air. His face had returned to its normal color,

except for his ears, which remained beet red. Softball hat on without sunscreen, Mira determined, but decided not to nag him about it.

“We’ve got a lot of food,” he observed.

“Yeah. All the leftovers from last night and the night before. And he made two more dinners tonight so we can eat before the wedding. Dinner’s not supposed to start until nine—but you know how it is.”

“Yeah. Indians. I bet it won’t be ‘til eleven, maybe even midnight before we get dinner. I don’t know how anything in this country ever gets done,” he said with disdain. Mira didn’t like it. He reminded her of the more jaded embassy wives who had been around for years, like Beth and Liz, grumbling about the way their floors were scrubbed. Is that what we’re both becoming, and maybe Brian’s just gotten there first? Mira really needed that drink now. She leaned on the counter so she could reach higher into the liquor cabinet, but she didn’t see the vodka. She dragged a chair into the kitchen so she could stand up and see all the way into the back of the cupboard. Still couldn’t see it.

“What are you looking for?” he asked.

“The Grey Goose. I don’t see it. Did you finish it? Maybe you took it to poker night?” She turned around to see Brian with a spoon dipped deep into his mashed potatoes, eating them out of the container.

“Nah. Let me look. I’m taller than you. I can see better.” That was like the old Brian. Thoughtful, helpful, considerate.

He stood up on the chair and frowned. “Not there,” he confirmed. “One of the servants probably stole it,” he said, only half-joking. “You’ve heard all those stories.”

“Just because we can’t find something doesn’t mean one of them stole it. That’s always the first thing out of your mouth when you lose something nowadays. Like your softball glove last weekend. Remember that? What would any of them do with it, they don’t even know what it is. And it was in your gym bag the whole time.”

“I’m just saying. The vodka didn’t just walk away. If you didn’t move it, and I didn’t move it, then one of them moved it. Or took it.”

Mira wracked her brain. She had had some left, hadn’t she? She could have imagined the bottle being up there. *Maybe we drank it all last Sunday.* “How could any of the servants have stolen it? You know how the guards search them when they leave. They wouldn’t have a way to hide and carry out such a long bottle.”

“That pizza guy stole Jack’s running shoes last week. He hid them in the warmer sack. The guards almost missed it. These are poor people, Mira. You can only trust them until they find an opening.”

“The pizza guy isn’t Sheila. Or Peter. We know them. They’ve never even asked us for money.”

“Eh. That’s just a matter of time.” He put the bowl back in the fridge and tossed his spoon in the sink. “You want me to grab you the gin instead?”

“The imperialists’ drink? Yuck. You know I hate gin. Aren’t you going to rinse that?” Mira found herself staring at his spoon.

“Gin and juice? It’s classic. You should try it. Your palate might have changed.” He ignored her spoon question.

“It’s not what it tastes like. It’s the image. I picture these old Brits trying to relive the days of the Raj. I never drink the gin.” *Only you do*, she thought.

He shrugged. He didn't rinse his spoon. "You might like it. Didn't you ask Sheila to come back tonight? Where is she, anyway?"

She noticed he ignored her spoon question, and it seemed like he was hinting that Sheila could take care of it. She didn't want to get into it with him. She had envisioned them going to the wedding, dressed up, having fun, dancing all night until they were the good kind of tired, coming home and crawling into bed and living out the romance of the wedding night; instead of another instance of peaceful coexistence tainted by lingering irritation from the earlier day, falling asleep with backs turned.

"I don't know. She's taking a break, I think. I should start getting ready. You excited to go to the wedding?" She should ask him to jump in the shower with her. That would put both of them in a better mood. She tried to ignore the spoon.

"I guess. They're all the same. Noisy, too many people. Stay up all night. Gonna be tired tomorrow morning, still gotta work."

"You're romantic." Showering alone now seemed more appealing. Mira picked up his spoon and started rinsing it. He took it out of her hands and put it back.

"Mira, you don't have to clean up. We pay people to do that."

"I know. It just bothers me."

"Well, it bothers me to watch you do it. Stop trying to make me feel bad."

"I'm not doing anything to you. It just bothers me."

"Sheila's a maid, Mira. Cleaning up our dishes is her job."

"Tonight her job is to help me get dressed." He was right, it was all very logical. But it didn't feel right.

“I’ll help you get dressed.” He put his arms around her and kissed her slowly, on the neck. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to enjoy the tickles his kisses sent up and down her spine, until opened her eyes and saw the spoon. *Let it go*. She needed that drink. They could both use a drink. She kissed him back and said, “There was some rum up there. Would you grab it? We should have a toast.”

“To what?” He handed her the rum and kissed her on the cheek. The Indian one they liked. Old Monk. It was dark, sweet, flavorful, good with anything.

“To us, and having fun tonight.” She poured some in a new glass with ice, then dumped half her orange juice in it. She used the rest of the juice to make another.

“To us,” Brian said, looking into her eyes.

“*Ching-ching*,” she replied, making eye contact with him, like they learned to do on their honeymoon in Rome. She searched his eyes, wondering how two years had turned him into a man who would only eat plain mashed potatoes and left his shoes around for brown people to pick up. And how had two years turned her into a person who was bothered by that. Would it matter if he never ate Indian food again for the rest of his life, or if he believed a maid should clean up his things? Forget about it. *Blend*, she told herself.

They clinked their glasses together and drank; but then immediately put their glasses down. Something was wrong. Mira flicked out her tongue, as if she had just swallowed a foul-tasting medicine. Brian squinched his nose. The taste buds weren’t prepared for what they got. The drink was “off.”

“Did that...”

“Taste weird? Yeah.” Mira finished his sentence.

“What was it? Did the juice go bad?”

“It wasn’t the orange juice. I had some earlier before I mixed anything in it. It was fine.”

“Was the ice funny?” Brian took the tray out of the freezer and sniffed it.

“It wouldn’t have had time to melt.” Mira took a cube out of her glass and sucked on it. “It’s fine. Tastes like water.” It should. They boiled and then filtered all of their water first, or actually Peter did, an extra failsafe against the embassy’s water filtration system.

“Then the rum?” Brian opened it and sniffed. “Smells fruity. Like apple juice,” he frowned. They sipped it and nodded. It was sweet, watered down, Indian apple juice. Brian began opening the other bottles, sniffing and tasting. He took the lid off the Jameson and smelled it and passed it to her. The sharp tones of whiskey did not come back to her. Watered down. The Peach Schnapps hadn’t had that much left in it to begin with; they discovered that the couple of inches at the bottom actually *were* water. And of course, Mira’s Grey Goose was still missing.

Brian’s whole face went red again, matching his ears. “Holy fuck, Mira. You know what this means?”

“That bottle had been half full.” Mira tried to figure out how long it had been watered down. At least a week.

“Peter’s the only one in this kitchen all day. That thieving bastard, I can’t believe it. He’s gone. So gone.” He slammed his glass down on the counter. Mira was surprised it withstood the force.

“He couldn’t have drunk all that rum by himself. He couldn’t have...” she repeated, as she re-tasted it to make sure. She felt violated. She wanted to cry. Not for the loss of alcohol, but for having been deceived, the loss of trust. “There has to be an explanation.” She didn’t know what that would be. Her excitement for the wedding, for Brian, for being in Delhi, was dampened. Peter came to make meals, put them in the fridge. Every day he was there. He was in charge of the kitchen. He took care of them, fed them. Mira hoped Brian wouldn’t say, “I told you so.”

“Well, you know what we need to do. We can’t trust him. We need to fire him. I’m calling him right now. Where’s his phone number?” Brian began looking through the list they kept on the fridge. Mira was flustered. Brian taking charge of the servants. Brian angry, moving too fast.

“Wait. He doesn’t have a phone. Remember? Last time he was sick, his wife called us from the STD booth.” They had lived in Delhi long enough that Brian didn’t even chuckle at the term anymore, which they now knew meant “Subscriber Trunk Dialing”—the kind of phone call made without an operator. The poor all over India placed calls from booths painted “STD” boldly on their rooftops. There was no way to call them back unless they were sitting in the booth.

“Fuck.” Brian slammed the cupboard door.

“Besides, we can’t just call him and fire him. That’s as bad as doing it over an email. We should talk to him first. Maybe something’s happened to him. He’s worked for us for two years. He’s never asked for anything. He didn’t seem like he had a drinking problem.”

“Maybe ‘cause he hadn’t found the booze yet.”

Mira considered this. Peter wasn't alone in the apartment very often. Sheila or another servant was usually there. Actually he was alone in the morning, when he came early to bake and make their lunches, before Sheila got there. From about 8:30 to 10:00 a.m. "You think he'd drink that early in the morning? Haven't you come home for lunch a few times this week? He seemed okay, didn't he?"

"Well, yeah. But if he's an alcoholic, he'd have a drink in the morning. He could sober up by the time Sheila came, or if one of us came home in for lunch."

"I guess." Mira kept thinking. The servants both knew that Mira or Brian could come home at anytime, working across the street—but they only did occasionally, and usually they called first, to ask Peter to make lunch or to check to see if they were there to bring them their salaries at the end of each month. Peter was alone in the apartment in the mornings, Sheila was in the apartment alone in the afternoons. Peter would finish making dinner around 3 p.m. Sheila left around 5 p.m. It had to be Peter. Indian women didn't drink. Mira was pretty sure that even at her own wedding tonight, Amita would not be toasting with champagne. What Brian said made sense, but Mira still wanted some time.

"Who do we know who's had this happen recently? Stealing, I mean?" asked Brian. "One of those wives you talk to. Like Beth. The embassy might have some kind of protocol or something." This was a good sign. Brian was calming down, thinking more rationally, rather than just reacting. Mira decided to encourage that, even if it meant her calling Beth.

"Yeah, she'd know what to do. I'll call her and find out." Mira had no doubt that Beth would just tell her to fire Peter, but it would give her time to think, give

Brian some more space. Maybe she could make up some sort of protocol that would give them until the morning to think about it.

Brian sniffed his watery orange juice glass with a face of disgust, and put it in the sink. Mira walked to the phone in their bedroom, trying not to be bothered by the fact that Brian left the glass there without rinsing it.

“*Hallo*. Snider residence.” Beth’s houseboy, Hussein, answered. Only here would a fifty year-old servant be called a “houseboy.”

“Hello, Hussein. I would like to speak with madam, please.”

“Yes, madam. *Ek minut*.”

“Hello?” said Beth to Mira, and “Hang up Hussein!” she yelled. “Sorry,” she apologized to Mira. “We still don’t have cordless phones, I’m on the back room extension. I keep forgetting to bring back a set with me from the States. The things we have to put up with in this country. How can they make a nuclear bomb but not cordless phones? Anyway, I didn’t see you at the game today. You should come out next time.”

“I was in Karol Bagh picking up my sari blouse for Amita’s wedding.”

“You’re going to wear a sari! How fabulous. You should come over here and have drinks and get dressed with us. My maid’s going to dress me and some of the other girls. I didn’t know you were attempting a sari too, or I would have invited you. We planned it last-minute at the game today.”

“That’s OK. I’ve already asked my maid to stay, too. But thanks.”

“Oh, c’mon! Just bring her over with you. And then she can take all of your stuff back to your apartment, and you guys can go with us. Tell Brian he can meet the boys at the pool bar while we get ready. I have a driver, and we can ride together so you don’t have to worry about not drinking. I don’t know why you two still don’t have a driver. You’re so American!” Beth laughed.

Mira thought it was nice of her to invite them, but the thought of spending the whole night with the Sniders and listening to Beth boss around her maid, her driver, and her husband was thoroughly unappealing. “I don’t think that’s going to work out for us,” *and besides, Sheila isn’t my pack mule*, thought Mira. “We’ve had sort of a situation over here tonight with one of our servants. That’s what I was calling about. Thought we’d get your advice on what to do. You got a minute?” Mira replayed the scenario for Beth, leaving out the parts about her and Brian’s different thoughts on servitude, the mango, the spoon, the glass. She knew what Beth would do with her spoon.

“Oh, well, that’s easy. I don’t mean it’ll be easy on you, but there is a protocol. Tell security at the gate that you’re firing Peter. The chowkidars will just take away his key and his ID when he shows up tomorrow. You won’t even have to see him, deal with him. You shouldn’t call him, or tell him anything. Don’t even ask to see him tomorrow. You have to be extra strict with these people, you know,” said Beth.

“What do you mean, ‘these people?’” questioned Mira.

“You know I don’t mean that in a racist way. It’s a class thing. Or I guess here, I mean a caste thing.” *Oh, that makes it OK*, thought Mira. Beth explained.

“Your job is to be his boss, his job is to do his job and not steal. He’s crossed that line, and if you give him any chances after that, he’ll know he doesn’t have to respect you. No you can’t let him have any chances. If you let him up to the apartment tomorrow, he’ll have all kinds of explanations and excuses, and he’ll wear you down with them, and all of a sudden—he’s the boss. They think they can do that to us because we’re foreigners and we don’t know any better and we’ll feel sorry for them. It’s us against them. That’s how it is.”

“They’re not all like that. We’ve never had problems before. This makes me feel so uncomfortable,” Mira said. “And he worked almost this whole month already. What’s his family going to do? Shouldn’t we pay him for the time he worked this month?”

“See what I mean? You just told me that he stole your alcohol. You don’t owe him anything. You’re the employer, and he stole from you. You could call the police on him if you wanted. Really, you’re doing him a favor by only firing him and not taking it past that.”

“It’s just so weird that he would do this just now, after two years. It feels like we know him better, like he’s part of the family. Something must be going on, some traumatic slip-up. What about due process and the American way?” Mira laughed as if she was making a joke, but she wasn’t.

“Mira. I’ve seen you, when we’ve driven together. You don’t even give food to the street kids knocking at the window. And they’re skinny. You want to give him a chance to explain everything away? Someone who has your house key, is alone in your place everyday, has the audacity to use your things and steal them? You’re not

being cruel. You're enacting consequences. Cause and effect. Just think about it," said Beth.

Mira thought of the cartwheel boy, the leper, the chrysanthemum girls, the magazine vendors, the shop boy, the countless others who had breezed through her orbit this morning. She intentionally chose to not help any of them and quite easily went about her life. It hadn't been difficult. At least, it wasn't anymore. Brian wasn't the only one who had changed over the past two years.

"Mira, when I came here five years ago, I felt like you. I had this maid, and I wasn't very strict. She started a few minutes coming late, leaving a few minutes early. I started making excuses for her. Like, oh her work was all done anyway, or I reminded myself of all the buses she had to take to go back and forth. A few minutes here and there became twenty, thirty minutes. Then an hour. I assumed I didn't need to tell her how to take care of the house, that I shouldn't be too demanding, mostly because it made me feel like a prick, running my finger over furniture and showing her the dust, complaining that the shower curtain had mold on the edges. Did I really care, I asked myself. I never worried about spots on the shower curtain before. I made excuses for her. Then she started getting more lax. Not dusting, not scrubbing the floors well enough. Getting complacent. It never got better. Only worse.

"Then she started asking me for money. 'To save her brother,' she said. It's always something like that. An operation they can't afford for someone. Tuition for their kids to go to a good school. Money for the water truck. How could I deny someone money for something I can just turn the faucet on to get?"

“And what happened?” Mira shifted in her seat, feeling the full confrontation of what it meant to be a “have.” She remembered the guilt she felt when she bought the sari two weeks ago and calculated that it cost more than what she and Brian paid all of her servants—all of them—for three, maybe four months.

“I gave her the money. She had all kinds of official looking bills. Stomach cancer, said the diagnosis. I paid for medicines, doctors for six months. Until one day I read some story in the newspaper about how these doctors treat the patients so horribly in the government hospitals, which is where he was. Safdarjung Hospital, down the street. So I called to consult with the doctor and check on her brother.”

“Let me guess. No brother there.” Mira felt sick to her stomach, hating the fact that Beth—the kind of American who spent weekends looking for fake Coach bags and demanded that brown men bring her chai while they manicured her nails—was going to be right about this.

“Right. Turns out in the end that she had a cousin working at the hospital who stole blank invoices and forms. She filled them out herself. I felt so stupid. I had trusted her, given her so many chances, and it just led to her seeing that she could take advantage. I was glad that the guards took care of the firing so I didn’t have to see her. She made me sick.

“You be careful,” Beth warned Mira. “They might seem like family, like they care, but they’re just testing you, waiting. Something like this only leads to something worse.”

Mira got in the shower after the phone call, without coming out to report to Brian, without inviting him to come in and join her. She didn't feel like going out there, having to repeat Beth's advice. She didn't want to fire Peter, even though she had to admit that Beth's words made as much sense as Brian's. He was watching the game anyway; the sound of Bill Walton's voice blared into their living room from halfway across the planet. The queasy sensation in her stomach made her dizzy, so she showered and quietly shut the bedroom door, lay down, and closed her eyes. The lingering rays of the sun weren't strong enough to penetrate through their thick curtains, and the room grew cool from the AC and the setting sun. Like all the rooms, there were no windows on the east or west sides of the room, shielding its inhabitants from the solar intensity of Delhi. She napped and didn't wake until the sun was gone and she pulled the blanket over herself to replace it.

The time. It was already eight. Had Sheila returned, she wondered? Mira opened the door and called to Brian.

"Hey Brian, is Sheila back? I fell asleep on the bed."

His eyes were glazed over on the TV. He was still in his softball clothes. "I was wondering what happened to you back there. Nah, she didn't come in. Weird, huh? First Peter drinks all our booze, now Sheila's disappeared. Next thing you know, the *dhobi* is gonna steal our laundry." He laughed.

"I wish I could think that was funny. She must have forgotten and went home. She's never stayed late before."

"I know you reminded her, too. We should just fire all of them and start over. Little bastards."

“Oh, Brian, stop. Anyway, we should start getting ready. We can’t do anything about it until tomorrow morning. Life goes on, right? What are you going to wear, a suit? You have that one Indian outfit. You should wear that and match me. It’ll be fun.” She tried to recapture her earlier enthusiasm.

“I feel stupid wearing that thing. It’s so long, it’s like a dress. Wearing it’s only fun if all the guys do, like last time.” At Mr. Lal’s son’s wedding about a year ago, about ten of them bought pink turbans and the curly-toed shoes, the long tunics, and the glittery gold man-scarves. Most of them wore them with western pants underneath. Khakis. They thought they were hilarious, the drunker they got, bumping turbans, pretending they were snake charmers. Back, then, Mira thought they were funny too. Well, she would still wear her sari, except she realized that she had forgotten to put her sari out for Sheila to iron this morning.

“Oh, shit. Shit. Ack.” Mira cursed her forgetfulness.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing, I just forget to get my sari ironed. It’s all wrinkled from sitting in that bag for two weeks while I had the blouse made. It’s nine meters of silk. It’s going to take awhile. If I start now, we’ll still be able to leave on time.”

“Yeah, looks like Sheila’s not coming back to help. You gonna deal with that one tomorrow, too?”

“I guess.” Mira sighed. She’d rather be the one to take care of it, otherwise Brian would probably fire her, too. Mira thought about what Beth had said, and wondered what she would say to Sheila. She would have to be very stern, whatever it was. Mira shook her head to herself and walked towards the back room closet, where

they kept things that the servants used, that they rarely touched, like the ironing board. *Is that where we keep it?* She hadn't used it in months. That happened to her sometimes in the kitchen on Peter's day off, those Sundays when she felt like cooking. She'd find herself opening and shutting all the drawers, questioning why Peter kept measuring cups and mixing spoons in places that made no sense to her. Having to guess how someone else organized it, made her ashamed of not knowing her way around her own kitchen

The back room was kept shut for guests who never came (*We don't like foreign countries*, Brian's parents had explained; and Mira's couldn't afford to visit), and for household supplies that they didn't worry about. The room was sheathed in dark and quiet. She opened the door and waited for her eyes to adjust. As they focused, Mira thought she saw something move. Yes, something stirred on the floor. What was that? A slow movement. It was an arm. It moaned. Mira screamed in response. The arm reached out and touched her leg. Mira jumped away, and screamed again, turning to bolt out the door. Until she heard familiarity in its voice. A woman's voice.

"Madam," cried the moan in the dark. Mira flipped on the light switch. Sheila was laying on the floor, sari pulled up, a bottle by her head, in the middle of their Persian rug. Clearly she had been there for some time. All afternoon, at least. She looked completely dazed. Knocked out.

"Sheila? Sheila! Are you OK? What happened?" Mira bent down to help Sheila up. But Sheila didn't want to sit up. Mira tried to pull her arm, but Sheila kept herself planted, as dead weight.

“No, madam. Want to stay on floor.” Sheila lay there, looking at the ceiling. She held her head and covered her eyes from the light.

Brian came in, the remote still in his hand. “Oh my god. She’s been here the whole time? Sheila, are you all right?”

“Are you sick? Did you faint?” Mira rethought her words. Did Sheila know the word *faint*? “Did you fall? Does your head hurt?”

Sheila just moaned. Her sari was bunched up around her thighs. Mira had never seen her legs before. Actually she had never seen any Indian woman’s legs before. They always kept their legs covered. Even the hipster girls—the young rich ones who wore jeans and tight T-shirts and drank mojitos—would never wear something that exposed bare legs. Mira had seen plenty of Indian woman-flesh. Pouchy stomachs and flabby backs, the tops of arms and shoulders popping out of sari blouses. But legs, no. Too taboo. Sheila’s legs were hairy. And full of purple and green bruises. Big ones, mostly on her thighs. It was hard to tell which were old and which were new, where some of the big ones ended and the others began. They all blended together. How long had she had these bruises?

“Madam, sir. My head is paining.” Sheila hadn’t noticed that her legs were showing, or surely she would have pulled her sari down in front of a man who was not her husband. Her hair had come loose from its hairpins and covered the carpet in a wiry black shock. Her eyes were red and puffy. She rolled her head back and forth on the floor.

“Are you sick? Sheila, let us call the doctor for you. We’ll take care of it.”

Mira cried, saying this exactly as she began to take in the rest of the room. And then she knew exactly what had happened.

Next to Sheila was an empty bottle of Grey Goose. Her Grey Goose. *Oh my god.* Sheila was young, but not a girl. Mid-twenties, very traditional, nice family, went all the way through secondary school, just married last year. Sheila had come so highly recommended from another American whose posting was up right when Mira and Brian came to the compound. Sheila’s recommendation letter was three pages long and praised her English, her cleaning, her sense of responsibility. She’d worked as a domestic since she was sixteen. Lots of experience. She could even fill in for the cook if the cook was ever out sick, the letter said. So versatile. Mira brought Sheila presents every time she came back from a trip. Some chocolates from France. A cheap necklace from Beijing. Sheila had never asked for any money. She was rarely sick. She made a big deal about doing her poojas and *madam I am fasting today* for some religious something or other, it seemed like every other week, Mira always giving her time off whenever she asked, which was rare. The wave of nausea returned. *It wasn’t Peter.* Sheila stole. It was her. Mira felt betrayed. She never even asked Sheila to stay late, paying her the same as the other maids on the compound even though she worked 3-4 hours less a day than them. I don’t boss her, I’m a good person, I treat her like a human. And here she is, passed out drunk on our \$1000 carpet. *Bitch.*

Sheila spoke up. “Very sorry, madam, sir. I make trouble. So sorry. I go now, madam. Husband waiting, mother-in-law waiting.” She tried to push herself up using

the edge of the couch. She wobbled. She couldn't manage it. She lay back down, head thumping the floor. And then Mira was awash with guilt. *My god, how pathetic.* What drove Sheila to this point? To risk her job, her welfare, risk another beating when she got home late and drunk? Mira at that moment felt there was no way she would ever understand an inkling of what it was like to be Sheila.

“Sheila. Just stay there. Lay down. Brian and I will figure out what to do. I'll bring you water.” Mira looked at Brian quizzically. What were they going to do? A twenty-something year-old woman, with bruises, who was their employee, had drunk herself to the point of passing out for what three, four hours in their house? A woman who spent her days caring for Mira and Brian instead of her own family. Washing their dishes. Scrubbing their floor. Straightening their bedsheets so they were crisp and smooth. Stacking and organizing Mira's shoes in order of color and type. Staying late to help Mira dress. Drinking all of their alcohol. Hiding in their back room. Passing out on the carpet. What would have happened tomorrow? Would Sheila have let Peter take the blame? Let him get fired and not have said anything? Would she have come to work tomorrow as if everything were normal? That's what she'd been doing for the past month or so at least, apparently.

They closed the door and went to the kitchen. “We can't let go home without saying anything to her. We need to take care of this now and fire her,” said Brian.

“I know. She needs to go. It'll set a bad precedent. That's what Beth said. When we thought it was Peter.” Mira tried to sound decisive. But she wasn't. “Brian. This situation—it's so wrong. I want to fire her, but she needs help.”

“Mira, I know it’s hard. But it’s okay for us to fire a thief. She stole. She’s deceived us, for weeks, with nearly the entire liquor cabinet. That was premeditated; intentional. She was supposed to help you tonight and instead she’s passed out on our floor. We’re paying her to be drunk on our carpet right now. That’s ridiculous.” Brian was right.

“But, her bruises....”

“What bruises? I didn’t even notice. I was in shock just dealing with her being there.”

“On her legs. She’s been beaten, for awhile, it looks like. By her husband, or maybe her mother-in-law. It happens all the time here. We don’t know how her husband treats her. I don’t even remember his name.”

“Lots of people’s husbands beat them. Lots of people have problems in this country. They don’t all steal. We give them good jobs here. If they want to keep them, they don’t steal. Don’t let her personal problems make the decision. She’s our employee and we can’t trust her now.”

Mira’s thoughts lingered on the bruises. She wished she could bring herself to just say it and agree to fire Sheila. But she wasn’t ready yet. “Did you notice anything odd about her recently? Has she acted any differently around you?”

“I don’t know, Mira. I usually don’t get home early enough to see her, since we don’t have her stay. Does it matter? I don’t mean to sound so cold. This is hard for me too. She’s a nice person. But think about what she’s done and what that means.” He came over and rubbed her shoulders. “Look. I’ll take care of it. I’ll call security. They’ll come and take her key and her ID and they’ll send her home. That’s it.”

“Send her home to what? What’ll happen when whoever beats her finds out that she lost her job?” She looked at Brian, reminding herself that he was just being practical. Just like Beth advised.

“Mira. You were okay with firing Peter.”

“Sort of. Not really. I was thinking about it. I still felt bad about it.”

“This isn’t any different.”

“She has those bruises.” Mira was frustrated. He didn’t see her point. Why didn’t he care about the bruises? No one was the person Mira thought they should be. She wanted to cry. “I want to talk to her first.”

“What, to hear excuses? There’s no point. It’s just going to make it harder.”

“Maybe. But she’s been with us for two years. I want an explanation. It’s important. Plus she can’t go home yet. We can’t send her in a taxi, drunk like that. Something could happen to her.” Mira stood up to go back to the guest room. She filled a metal cup with water. The cups for the servants. The only kind Sheila drank out of. As far as they knew.

“Well, I’m calling security in ten minutes,” Brian decided. Mira wished he hadn’t said that. It confronted her with the reality that their honeymoon period had long been over.

Mira returned to the back room. Sheila was still on the floor, but sitting up.

“Madam. I am feeling very badly. I go now.”

“Sheila. Wait. Tell me at least why you did this. Tell me what happened. You stole from us,” she accused. “The drinks, all gone. You put juice inside. And water.

That was you, right?” Mira waited for Sheila to admit it, and then waited to hear the sad story that would follow. Something about her husband gambling away their life savings, or her mother needing an operation, so much problems and no money. Needing to drink. Just a little taste that turned into more and more. Maybe a sad story about being married to a bad man, a bad family, beating her for not having any children, or not giving his family a big enough dowry. The pressure of it all led her to drink. Right?

But instead, Sheila said, “Madam. I shouldn’t be drinking your alcohol. Before, my other madam, she locked it away. You are too trusting.” She sounded like she was scolding her. Mira was taken aback. “Sheila. Don’t blame this on *me*. You did it. And I saw your legs,” she said, almost accusingly. “Tell me about your legs.”

Sheila looked embarrassed. “Madam?”

“Bruises, Sheila. I saw them. Your husband, does he hit you?”

“Madam. Everything okay with husband.”

“Then who beats you? Someone hits you there because they don’t think anyone will see it. I know what’s going on, Sheila.”

“I am just falling sometimes, madam. I fell down.” Did that lie perpetuate in every society? Whether bound together by rings or fire? Saving face, for better or worse?

“Sheila. No one falls that much. Falls wouldn’t make so many bruises. That’s ridiculous.” Did she know that word? “That’s crazy. Why didn’t you tell us? We could’ve helped you. Now you’ve made it hard for anyone to help. What about your family? Can you go back to them? Women do that now, right?” There were more and

more stories about Indian women getting bold enough to leave bad husbands, going back to live with parents not as shameful as it once was before.

“My family very traditional. Better to stay. It is okay, madam. Everything okay with husband,” she repeated, like a mantra.

“How is *that* okay, Sheila?” Mira pointed at her now-covered legs.

Sheila didn't answer. She just did that thing where she bobbed her head from side to side as an answer. Sometimes it meant yes, sometimes it meant I don't know, sometimes it meant she was thinking. She stood up slowly and looked at Mira. They stared at each other. Mira looked at the bottle. Firewater, she thought. That's how fire keeps a marriage together.

Brian came into the room. “Sheila. I don't know what you've been telling Mira. But you need to realize that this is very hard on us. We trusted you very much. But you stole, even if it was drinking and not taking anything from the house. Alcohol is very valuable. Hundreds of dollars. It's like you stole hundreds of dollars. We have to fire you.” Mira glared at him. She had wanted to finish talking to her first. He didn't look at Mira. “I called security, Sheila. They're going to come up here to walk you out. You can't come back. But I wanted to say goodbye.” Mira found herself feeling angrier with him than with Sheila. Or maybe it was disappointment, sorrow. She rubbed her wedding ring with her thumb.

“Thank you, sir.” Sheila picked up the bottle and the metal cup, and then seemed to rethink her actions. She wasn't working for them now, but out of habit and obligation, she couldn't just leave them on the floor. She stood up slowly and put them on top of the desk.

“You’re lucky we aren’t calling the police.”

“Yes, sir, thank you, sir.”

The doorbell rang. “They’re here,” announced Brian, walking to answer the door and let them inside.

Mira grabbed Sheila’s hand and whispered to her. “Sheila. Tomorrow, you come back to meet me. In the morning. 9 a.m.”

“Madam,” said Sheila. “You should tell me now. I cannot come back tomorrow.”

“I want to finish talking to you. Go to the gate and tell them to call me. I will come outside. You must come.” Mira said this, even though she wasn’t sure what else she was going to say to her.

The tall Punjabis and petite Nepalese who made up security came into the room. They stripped Sheila of her embassy ID card and her house key. They handed both items to Brian. No one looked at Mira. They took Sheila by each arm to escort her off the compound. Sheila did not look back, or say goodbye. She walked steadily, her hair askew, her gait slightly crooked. Maybe that was the bruises. It was late for her to take the bus home alone, which was surely now crammed full of Indian men. Mira thought maybe they should have given her taxi money. Or offered to drive her home. And then she realized she had no idea where Sheila lived.

“Jesus, Sheila,” Mira muttered under her breath, as Sheila disappeared under guard.

The next morning, Mira got up before Brian and made coffee, like always. They had not attended the wedding. Instead, she and Brian went downstairs to the compound food court and had Baskin Robbins and talked not about Sheila, but how they would cope without her. Brian thought they should borrow Liz's maid for the next couple weeks, paying her overtime to come after she was done at their place. They had done that once before, last summer, when they had given Sheila a week off to go home to her village. Brian asked Mira if she would call Beth in the morning and ask her to put the word out they were looking for a new maid. There was always an expat leaving who wanted to ensure that their househelp was taken care of, not abandoned after years of service. Either Beth would know someone looking to place their servants, or she would pass around the word that Mira and Brian were looking. When they got into bed, Brian put his hand on Mira's. She patted it, then rolled over to go to sleep. "It's been a rough day," she said. "I'm tired." She assumed he went to sleep when she did.

He came out to the kitchen, ready for work.

"I'm going in late today. You go on ahead," she said to Brian.

"Really? You haven't done that in awhile."

"I know. I thought I'd need to deal with reports and talk to Peter about Sheila, all of that kind of stuff. I emailed Robert about it this morning, and he texted me and said it would be okay for today, given the circumstances," she lied.

"All right." They ate banana bread, baked by Peter two days ago. Peter, who they were going to fire this morning without even talking to him. They ate them on plates that Sheila had washed, dried and put away. Plates on which they ate more

calories for breakfast than some people in Delhi would have for the rest of the day. The uneasiness returned to Mira's stomach. The banana bread suddenly tasted dry and flat.

Brian gathered his things to go. "Well, have a good day. And don't forget to tell Peter about a mango and juice for me."

"Right, honey. Sure thing." she said. Neither of them said "I love you" before Brian closed the door.

Mira wondered how long they'd been leaving to go work, just like that.

Mira packed one suitcase. Just one. A little of everything. She didn't bother counting pairs of pants and underwear, nor did she know whether she had a nice balance of coordinating separates. She didn't know where she was going, but she figured she could buy whatever else she needed.

She opened up her dresser and felt to the very the back of her sock drawer, where she kept things like ripped-out shoulder pads and nylon stockings with one run in them, things that were not of interest to domestic help or nosy husbands. She took out a locked box. She opened it and removed what was, until she married Brian, her life savings. Only about two thousand dollars. Money that her mom advised her to always keep for herself, just enough to put a deposit on rent somewhere, first and last. Mira had cashed out the account when they moved to India, to have some emergency cash on hand, thinking it wouldn't do to be married and have secret accounts anymore. Married people don't have secrets. They should know everything about

each other. She put all the money in an envelope. And put the envelope in her purse, with her passport and her wallet. Then she made a phone call.

The last thing that Mira did before she left the apartment was leave a note for Peter on the kitchen counter that said: *Peter, Sheila not coming today. Please cut a mango for sir and orange juice for him as well. Thank you, Madam.*

Mira waited at the compound gate for Sheila's arrival and the taxi she had just called. The heat was already overwhelming. Lazy flies tickled her around the eyes. She pinched the front of her shirt, and fanning it back and forth, letting the air flow up and down her chest. She batted the flies away, watching the bus that had stopped down the block. She wondered how many buses Sheila had to take to get here, what time she had had to start to get here by 9 a.m. She had never asked—thinking it better not to get sucked into that sort of conversation, which would end in a raise because Mira would feel badly about her transportation costs and hours-long hassle. Sheila got off the bus and walked towards the compound. The chowkidar buzzed Mira out of the security booth. They never inspected her going out. Just in. She pulled the suitcase behind her.

“Sheila. How are you? How is your head?” She was full of questions that she couldn't ask. Like what had happened after she got home last night. Did she tell her husband what had happened? Was he angry? How did her bruises feel? He didn't hit her again, did he? But they didn't have that kind of relationship. No matter how Mira tried to blend, there would always be that divide. Sheila would always be the servant. Mira would always be the madam.

“Fine, madam. Yes, madam, I’m glad you wanted to see me again, so I could say that I am very sorry, madam.”

“Then tell me why you did it. Why now? What’s happening to you?”

“Madam, nothing happening.”

They stood uncomfortably on the sidewalk, heat rising from the street. The rickshaw drivers slowed down as they passed them, hoping for business. The chowkidar watched them, trying to figure out what they were talking about, probably already knowing the gossip about Sheila getting fired. The compound was a small world. Mira sat on the edge of her suitcase. She watched Sheila shift her weight back and forth. Sheila’s shoes were black and worn. *At least she has shoes.*

“Tell me one thing then.”

“Madam?”

“When you got married? *Agni*? He was there?”

“Madam? Yes, madam, it was a proper marriage, madam. We had a fire, madam.” Sheila’s skin was so dark that Mira could not see that her face had just flushed; but Mira knew she had just offended her. Of course there was a fire, that’s what made it a marriage.

“I didn’t mean it like that, Sheila. I just wanted to ask you something about it. I want to know, when you walked around the fire with your husband. Did it feel like *Agni* was there, watching over?”

“Madam. Fire watches over marriage, family watches over marriage. Everyone is making marriage together. Everyone prays for good life together.”

“Sheila, your marriage is not good. I saw your legs. You can’t tell me that he doesn’t hit you. Don’t be embarrassed. It’s not your fault. What keeps you with a man who hits you, Sheila? Agni’s not protecting anything.”

“Madam. My husband fights me because I fight with him. I am not good wife.”

“You are a good wife, Sheila. You work hard. There’s no reason for him to beat you. Nothing you do makes that okay.”

“Madam, I am not doing my work at home. I am not good with mother-in-law. I am not listening to husband. Even if he becomes a rock, a plant, he is still my husband. We say this here. I don’t know to say in English. We don’t leave when there is problem. Wife must be patient.” Sheila looked at Mira’s suitcase.

Mira hadn’t said anything about what she was doing to Sheila. She didn’t even know what she was doing herself. Why was she so upset with Brian? What had he done, besides make rational sense about thieving servants, experience some culture shock, behave the way that everyone in this country expected him to behave? Mira hadn’t called anyone, made any reservations. Her only friends here were in the compound too. And they weren’t really friends. Just people who she talked to.

“I’m just taking a break.” Mira wondered why she was explaining herself to Sheila. She was the madam, after all. “Sheila, I want you to take this.” Mira took out the envelope and pushed it into Sheila’s rough and scaled hands. “I have to go somewhere. But I wanted to give this to you.”

“Oh.” Sheila didn’t look inside the envelope, to Mira’s disappointment. She just put it in her sari blouse, quickly. Her face revealed nothing. No surprise,

judgment, shock. Nothing registered. “Very sorry, madam. Very sorry for everything. You are good employers. You and sir. Very nice people. Nice couple.” she said. Mira wanted to tell her *look at the envelope, look what’s inside, you can start all over. This is your protection, your fire.* But her cab pulled up, and the chowkidar came out of his booth to open the door for Mira, and it was better if they didn’t see what Sheila had. Where would she go? What would Sheila do with the money? Maybe she should have kept it. Mira heard the voices of Beth and Brian. *Just a waste of money, you know. She’ll just go back to him. She’ll give him the money. She’s not going to run away. Not like you.*

“Bye, Sheila. I’m going now. Be good to yourself.”

“Yes, madam.”

They held each others hands as they said goodbye, and they both felt very sorry. It was the only action that ever so briefly erased the gulf between their worlds.

The driver put Mira’s suitcase into the trunk.

“Where to, madam?” He pulled away slowly from the compound. Mira looked up and was surprised to notice the mustached boy standing in front of his family’s hovel, one of those corrugated-cardboard-and-tin affairs. The boy watched the taxi. Other children from the *jhugghi* ran up and down the street, or played cricket, or carried babies, or slapped stray dogs with branches. The boy just watched, following the car with his eyes, arms crossed.

Mira had no answer for the driver. She flipped through her wallet, fingering her passport and what was left of the emergency cash, now just a few hundred dollars.

She had lots of loose rupee change, mostly ones. What was one rupee to her? They were nearly worthless. “Just a minute, sir. I am thinking. Drive slowly, please.” She unrolled the window and opened up her wallet, dumping out all of the rupees.

“Oh no, madam,” said the driver. He put his foot on the gas as a swarm of street kids ran after the taxi, picking over the coins bouncing this way and that, the errant sprinting of coins and kids going every which direction. The ones who missed the coins started chasing after the car.

The mustache boy was still looking at her. He hadn’t moved. Mira gestured at him. *Catch*. She twisted her ring off of her finger and threw it to him. His reaction was delayed, slow, unsure. It missed his hand and rolled onto the sidewalk nearby, circling around until he finally pursued it. It wobbled and fell. He picked it up unnoticed by the other kids, assuming it was just another coin. He looked back at her. Mira pointed at her ring finger, and then at his. Instead, it went into his pocket.

“Madam! Your ring!” The taxi driver put on the brakes. He started to open his car door to retrieve the ring for madam.

“Sir, no it’s OK. It’s not real. Not silver. Just metal. It’s OK.” She wasn’t being melodramatic. Rings were pretty, but they were trinkets. Whatever was going to happen, rings would not be the thing that could keep her and Brian together. The boy would benefit more from a little band of metal more than she would. It was a practical decision, but Mira wasn’t sure who would agree with her. Besides Agni.

The housing compound shrank behind her, Mira pictured her apartment in the morning, the sunlight missing all of the windows in their thoughtfully, well-constructed apartment. Peter would be finding that note about now. Peter who they

almost fired. What would he have told his wife? His family? Mira didn't even know how many kids he had. What a horrible person she was here. She wondered if she left Delhi what she would be like. What Brian would be like. She turned off her cell phone.

The boy patted his pocket. He scampered on, down the street. The chowkidar watched the boy stop to check his mustache in a car mirror. Some of the kohl streaked down the laugh lines of his face from the heat. He smeared away the stray marks. Satisfied at his reflection, he shrugged off the thought of being hungry and tired. He walked back out the blistering, dusty street, ready to work his cartwheels.

2: The Unhelpfulness of Cranes

Karen heard her mother, Noriko, in the back room, muttering to herself. She drew closer to the cracked-open door and picked up the sounds of rustling paper, the light taps of her mother's fingers on the calculator, the peeling away of perforated checks from the checkbook. Then a pen being thrown across the room, hitting the wall. Light sobbing. Karen backed away from the door, trying not to let the floorboards creak. The holidays had come, the money spent, the mortgage due. Past due, actually. This was a typical activity for Mother over the past three years since their dad left, especially in the winter. Winters no longer meant "Santa" presents for her and her younger brother, Fidel. No more holiday lights, no presentation of meat. Winters meant one present each, spaghetti dinners, no extra lights outside to waste electricity. No heater. "Keep it off and put a sweater on instead," Mother would say. On the coldest nights, winter meant they'd all sit together, covered in blankets in front of the TV: the way to be together using only one set of lights. The TV had no cable. Which would not have been a big deal to Karen, as she usually just sat in front of the TV reading a book anyway, except for the fact that all of her friends were always talking about *have you seen that new video on MTV* or *did you see that special on HBO*, and Karen could never be part of those conversations because she hadn't seen them.

For the past three years, Mother fought asking for help and solved their debt problems by shifting it around, finding ways to stretch her wages from the winery, mostly by opening new credit cards, *robbing Peter to pay Paul* she would say. Going

outside of their sphere, exposing their problems to others, applying for welfare was something Mother never did—not when Father decided to “take a break” back to the Dominican Republic—or now. Of course at first Father didn’t leave to disappear: his mother was sick, he needed to spend time with the family over there and “work things out.” That was the year when there were still letters and money and an unmet promise to be home in time for Christmas. The second year, the letters and money came only on birthdays and Christmas. Then this year, nothing. Fidel’s birthday passed in May with an empty mailbox, Mother blaming corrupt mailmen in third-world countries and post-9/11 regulations and the unreliability of boats, but Fidel and Karen were old enough to know better. When Karen’s birthday followed in September, Mother made no excuses, just the rare treat of ice cream sundaes out at the Red Robin. The neighbors stopped asking *when is Federico coming back* and Mother started ranting about men being pieces of you-know-what, although only when Fidel was out of earshot. Still Mother kept her head up and reminded Karen and Fidel in the grocery store checkout, “Our family doesn’t need help. We have pride. We aren’t like those losers on food stamps,” criticizing the fat Mexican ladies in front of them with rows of green stamps to purchase orange juice and baby formula. Even this Thanksgiving, Mother took an angry stand against outside help when it showed up on their doorstep.

“Hey Mom, it’s some blonde lady,” announced Fidel, peeking through the window to see who was at the door. Mother paused at the hallway mirror to smooth down her clothes before opening.

“Hi,” said the blonde lady. “I’m Genevieve. From the PTA.” She pronounced her name the foreign way, as in *John-veee-ef*, not *Jen-a-veev*, with a small,

unconscious tilt to her head. Mother said nothing, looking instead at the basket dangling from Genevieve's left hand. From the window, Karen and Fidel could see the hump of a large turkey inside of it. "From the school. Cleveland Elementary. Your son's school, down the street," she added, to clear up any confusion; confusion which must be the reason that Mother was not responding. "Yes, well, we at the PTA thought that your family might need a little help this year." Genevieve shifted her feet and held out the basket with two hands, offering it to Mother.

"What is that?" said Mother, as if the item presented to her had no connection to the words that had just come out of the blonde lady's mouth.

Genevieve thought of what else she could say that hadn't already been said.

"A basket. For your family. For Thanksgiving."

"We don't need any help." Mother repeated the word "help" with soft scorn in her voice, as if she were saying it to herself. "Who decided this?"

"Well, I'm not at liberty to say," explained Genevieve, shifting the weight of the basket back and forth between hands. "The school district identified several families at each school..."

"You people sit around looking at my kids, judging our family? My kids aren't starving. What is it? Their clothes?" snapped Mother, defensive. "Their clothes are clean. Some are homemade and patched up. But their clothes are fine." Her face was taut with fury.

Karen felt sorry for Genevieve for coming on a Sunday, when Mother was home. Then she started feeling sorry for herself. She owned only two pairs of pants, both of which were patched at the knee, which encouraged all assortment of

comments from Randy Raycomb in her first period class, and Emma Alastair in second period, and so on. Mother tried to make a lesson out of it, *Karen you're a ninth-grader now and you know better, be strong, your real friends will look past your pants*. Which was true, but Mother's talk couldn't change anything about high school, as if now she could show up every day not caring a whit about her pants. She envied Fidel for being in fifth grade, where no one cared—except, apparently, the PTA. She stared at turkey, wishing that instead, Genevieve had brought them new clothes.

Genevieve was not sure what to do. She had picked everything out herself, thinking the whole time at the grocery store of what she would like to have if her family was in need, how she knew that the meat was going to be the most expensive part of the meal, and that a Butterball Turkey full of injected hormones just wouldn't do, because she wouldn't feed that to her own family. She bought a farm-raised, organic turkey with the PTA funds, using the remaining space in the basket to stuff in a tin of ham, dried corn for the table, a bag of fresh cranberries, and a can of pumpkin puree.

“Well, how about if I just leave it here? It's already bought and everything...” Genevieve rested the basket on the porch, not sure how to respond to Mother's resentment.

Karen and Fidel disappeared to their rooms when they heard the loud thump of Mother's foot kicking the basket off the porch, right as Genevieve pulled her “goddamned minivan” out of the driveway, slamming the door on the fancy turkey that was now rolling all the way down Springbrook Drive.

That was Thanksgiving, when they were struggling, but doing okay. Right after Christmas, layoffs swept through the winery, a consequence of these “hard economic times.” Now it was January. Mother had been home for a whole month, working on her resume for good jobs, filling out applications for other ones, and turned them in everywhere she could: malls, restaurants, offices. On the worst days, they came home from school to see torn papers ripped and left in crumpled balls all over the floor, Mother crying at the kitchen table. Things were changing quickly. The January “Welcome Back” Dance came up for Karen, and a boy had actually asked her, had seen right past her pants and said *do you want to go to the dance with me*, and Karen said yes, because Eric was in her third period Spanish class, and she had had a crush on him for the past five months. She didn’t tell Mother for three days. She spent those three days sulking around the house, trying to decide what to do. She knew they didn’t have money for a dress.

Mother finally asked Karen *what’s eating you*, as they sat in front of the TV, because of course she had noticed that Karen hardly talked to her for the past few days and that she was even snappy with Fidel when he asked if he could change the channel. Karen said, *Someone asked me to the dance, and I want to go, but I don’t have anything to wear*, and the levees burst forth with three days of dammed-up tears. Mother stayed calm, because she couldn’t let herself cry in front of her daughter when they should be celebrating this little milestone in her life: *she’s a young woman now, but what are we going to do?* So Mother asked for clarification, just to make sure: *did you invite him or did he invite you?* Karen emphasized that he invited her,

because they both knew what the other was thinking, that at least they didn't have to worry about paying for the ticket. Mother thought. After a minute, she told Karen *you could borrow a dress from Maria. Her mom was just telling me that she had outgrown some nice things.* Maria was their neighbor and only a few years older than Karen, and very stylish, which is why she was always getting rid of clothes, because she changed them with the seasons. Maria's mother had asked before if Karen would like Maria's supposedly-outdated clothes—in fact just a couple weeks ago—to which Mother gave the expected, “no, thanks.” But this time, for once, Mother said nothing about the shame of wearing someone else's clothes because she wanted her daughter to have what everyone else had and be able to go to the dance. Karen kissed her and dried her tears, and this made Mother's heart full again. Still it was very hard for her to watch Karen come back with a grin on her face that was put there by a sack of cast-off clothing.

February brought a turned-off phone, which scared them all more than anything else that had happened thus far. Mother worried about being able to call 9-1-1, Karen worried about how she would explain to her friends that they had no home phone in addition to the already awkward situation of having no cell phone, Fidel worried because the women in the house walked around with hollow eyes and pinched lips and tight shoulders that never relaxed. And then things got worse. Five days later, they woke up, and the lights did not come on. They tried all of them, then flipped the breakers, checked the fuses, just to be sure. Mother went into her room and stayed there with the door shut, smoking many cigarettes, not coming out to say goodbye to Fidel and Karen when they left for school. Neither child could concentrate

the entire day, thinking of things both big and small, like *how will I do my homework by candlelight* and *they wouldn't turn off our water too, would they?* When they came back home, Mother's car was gone, but she'd left candles on the kitchen table and a note: *went to fix it, be back tonight, keep the fridge closed if it's not back on, these are just in case.* Yet they didn't need the candles, because when they tried the switch in the kitchen, it worked. Karen and Fidel ran through the house turning on all the lights and cheering, until they remembered that this cost money and they'd better turn them back off now. Karen picked up the phone, but it was still dead.

Mother didn't explain anything when she came home. She just said, "Oh good, they said it would be today." Then, "Your Grandma is coming over tomorrow." Which answered their questions, but also created more. Questions that Mother avoided by closing the door, back to her room and the quiet contemplation of smoke. They heard from Grandma regularly through the mail—cards, sweaters, little treats like a box of cookies—but they only saw her on special occasions, holidays. She lived one town over and this was "normal," as long as Karen could remember. When she was there, Grandma complimented them, kissed them, put all of her warmth in their bodies with her hugs; while she and Mother seemed to behave as if they were comfortable acquaintances, old colleagues with a formal, but static relationship, the kind of relationship that presents the problem of how to say goodbye: whether to lean-in for a peck on the cheek, or smile and wave, or make for a polite one-armed hug. It was something Karen and Fidel didn't understand, because all Mother ever said about whatever had happened in the old days was "I don't want you to have bad thoughts about your grandma," and leave it at that, their imaginations running wild,

because besides being a little particular about the way she liked her tea or what cookies she would eat, Grandma was never grumpy, never cross around them. The idea that Grandma had paid their electricity bill, and was coming over on a school-night spoke of changes that Karen hoped would improve their lives; although it was clear from Mother's somber, drawn face that these changes would not be immediately celebrated.

Grandma brought groceries right after school and put Karen and Fidel to work, chopping, peeling, setting the table, cleaning up. It was odd to have her in their house in charge of things, telling them to do things, instead of sitting on the sofa drinking tea and watching them open presents. *Wipe the table like this*, she would command, showing them how they weren't getting all the crumbs off the table. *Rub the ugly dirt off the tops of the mushrooms, you missed one there*, she noticed. It took longer to do things her way, with her old-fashioned, meticulous specifications. But it was fun to be with her in the kitchen, everything was done by the time Mother got home from the day's job-hunt. Her pride couldn't balk at the smell of steamed rice in little bowls, fresh fish in the wok, everything ready to sit down and eat. When they finished, Grandma yawned and asked the kids to clean up, excusing herself to go home to feed the dog. That Friday, Grandma came again. And then the Friday after that. When Mother found a day job answering phones and a weekend job waiting tables, Grandma started coming over every night. Still, Karen noted their reserve, their talking without really talking, keeping their conversations to how-was-work-today and what-did-you-put-on-those-vegetables, both of them sipping their water and then directing questions at her and Fidel, not each other.

Until the night when Mother offered to make *genmai* tea after dinner, which meant Grandma should stay awhile and chat. They talked over tea for a long, long time; Karen knew that Grandma was still there when she and Fidel went to sleep. Karen imagined it was a chat that made Grandma and Mother cry and rub their eyes and then nod off in their chairs, because when she asked Mother about what she and Grandma stayed up and talked about all night, Mother got a funny little chortle in her throat and said “Grown-up talk. Old business between us. I’ll tell you someday.” Grandma started coming to the house all the time, sometimes twice a day: in the morning to help them get off to school, and at night to help make dinner. They saw her so much it made up for the years that they only saw her through sweaters in the mail. Dinner conversations changed. For the first time, they all laughed together as Fidel took too many hot *soba* noodles into his mouth and spit them back out onto his plate like a fire-breathing dragon, sticking out his tongue to exhale the heat away. Karen wondered if Mother had decided that Grandma was no longer an outsider because she wanted to mend their relationship, or if it were because they needed the money. Either way, though, it felt good to have Grandma there.

The recurring winter mortgage quandary soon carried over through the spring, Mother fretting even more than usual and talking to Grandma not just at dinner in the house, but afterwards on the phone. Karen and Fidel crept outside her bedroom door to eavesdrop, the only way they could find out what wasn’t being said in front of them at dinner. They caught small but shocking revelations: first something about it being late two months, then about a final notice, and one day, the biggest surprise of them all—the impending arrival of someone coming to help. “You want him to come

here?” they heard Mother’s muffled voice ask. There were lots of “whys?” and a “but you know what he said,” and a “How do you think he’ll be around the kids?”

“Who do you think ‘he’ is?” asked Fidel. “Do you think it’s our Dad? Do you think a final notice really means it?” His ten-year old eyes were so naive. Karen thought of how to let him down without deepening the hurt of that absence.

“If it were Father, I don’t think that’s what she’d ask Grandma. If Grandma talked to him, we would know.” She let Fidel think about it. She avoided the “final notice” question.

Mother had many cigarettes that night, more than her usual pack a day. When Karen washed them in the morning, she had to use her fingernails to scrub out the ground-in, sticky residue from the force of Mother’s neurotic smashing, the sulfurous smell hard to wash away. Karen wondered if Mother’s stress stemmed just from the mortgage, or was more connected with the mystery visitor. She couldn’t guess who it could be. Mother had no brothers. Father’s relatives were all in the Dominican. As far as they knew, there had been no contact between any of them.

That Sunday, Mother told them who was coming. Grandma came over to teach them how to bake granola bars. Mother stirred up oatmeal and honey together in a bowl, Karen shaped it into little logs, and Fidel put them in the oven and set the timer. Grandma gave commands from the pantry, while she arranged the spices into straight rows with the labels facing out. Their baking looked nothing like Karen’s friends’ industrially square granola bars that were imbedded with miniature chocolate chips. Fidel knelt in front of the oven, his hands on the glass, watching the granola turn brown and crisp. “Nice and warm,” he said, smiling.

Mother stopped stirring and turned to her kids. “We’re going to have a visitor next weekend. Your Uncle Satoshi, all the way from Wisconsin.”

“He’s my brother. I invited him,” Grandma added.

Karen hadn’t ever met him, like most of her relatives on both sides of her family—a feature that had become so normalized that she didn’t question the oddity of it. All she knew about Uncle Satoshi were the stories that Grandma recounted for them during her visits, none of which were very memorable. Grandma would laugh when she talked about Auntie Fumiye and how they got into trouble for wearing lipstick when they were girls; or smile when she remembered the time that Uncle Masahiro ran naked past a beehive on a dare, and she got a little teary-eyed when she told them how she and Uncle Takashi saved a puppy from drowning in their pond. About Uncle Satoshi, she’d start a story about something he did, like the time he tattled on her for skipping school, or the time she’d saved him an extra helping of apple pie, but then she cut all the stories short, simply saying: “He was always such a pill.” Karen wasn’t sure what that meant, but figured it was polite old-people speak for being a jackass.

There were some old pictures of him around the house, family collages up and down the hall, a litany of names and pasts that Karen only knew second-hand. There were a few black and white ones of Grandma and her siblings from when they were little. Six small Japanese children standing in front of an old Ford truck that Grandma said was from the 1930s. They had no mother by then, and Grandma was in charge while their father took care of the farm. There weren’t many recent pictures, except for a few from different funerals, which seemed to be the last time they had gotten

together. These pictures were from the seventies and eighties, the siblings numbering only four or five instead of six, sometimes with their spouses, sometimes not, depending on whether it was Uncle Masahiro's funeral, Uncle Takashi's funeral, or their Grandpa Hiro, all of whom had passed before Karen and Fidel were born. The surviving siblings dressed in shades of dark purple, brown, maroon; none wore black because that was too depressing, but they were all too Americanized to feel comfortable wearing the bright white of Japanese mourning, Grandma had explained once. Uncle Satoshi was not smiling, but then none of them ever did, except for Auntie Fumiye. In the picture that looked most recent, Uncle Satoshi wore a yellow shirt with brown suspenders and a brown bow tie. He didn't look directly into the camera in any of the pictures, so it was hard to tell what was in his eyes. A family of no mother, dead brothers, tattered photographs. What a sad lot, thought Karen, the last time she lingered over the photos in the hall. *I hope the rest of them don't come to visit.*

"Why did you ask him to come if you always say he's such a pill?" asked Fidel. Grandma tried not to smile.

"He's not always that bad," said Grandma. She smiled. "He's my brother and he'll be here on Saturday, for a week. You kids have Spring Break, so you'll have plenty of time to get to know him." Karen noticed she didn't answer Fidel's question. So did Fidel.

"Why'd you invite him, then?" he persisted. Based on the conversations she had overheard, Mother's crying and smoking in the back room, she thought she and Fidel could both piece it together, but they both wanted to hear someone say it: that

they were giving up being on their own. Someone had to admit it. Mother pressed some more oats together. The gloppy mixture wasn't sticky enough to hold together, so she squeezed the honey bear a little harder. They awaited her response. After a few seconds, it was clear she wasn't going to answer.

“He might help your mother,” Grandma said, finally. “If we're good to him, he might help out with the mortgage. Your uncle never had kids. He doesn't have extra responsibilities. He's done well for himself. He's got some extra money hanging around.” She made it sound so casual, as if he was just going to come over and they would smile and offer him granola bar pastries and he'd leave them a big fat check that would solve all of their problems. It wouldn't be a week of awkward encounters, trying to entertain an outsider they didn't know. Karen felt like she should be ashamed for needing outside help, but there was a hope there that she hadn't felt before. If the mortgage was paid, maybe Mother would not have to work two jobs and come home tired and frustrated. If that bill was taken care of, maybe they would have money for little things. Maybe Mother could buy Karen a new pair of pants, she could have some sweaters besides ones Grandma made her. Maybe there would be an end to the nights of quiet, helpless eavesdropping outside of Mother's door, knowing that having two kids plus a house and not enough to go around was what kept Mother trapped in cigarettes and sorrow. Maybe they could be happy.

“He is a pill, but we are all going to be nice to him. I'll tell you more later,” Mother sighed.

Fidel opened the oven and turned over the little logs. The kitchen warmed for a minute, then the heat dissipated. Mother went silent again, meaning they shouldn't

ask her anything else until they were done; or if she were still not talking, maybe not until after a few more days had gone by, because by then Mother would know what to tell her children about the relative she had once banished from their house and now had to welcome back and make nice with. In the meantime, Karen and Fidel were instructed to screen all phone calls or else otherwise to tell anyone on the phone whose voices they didn't recognize that they had the wrong number. Because the bank was calling.

As Uncle Satoshi's arrival day loomed ahead, their house dripped with anxiety that trickled down from Grandma to Mother to Karen to Fidel. Any hope that had been there earlier that week was now accompanied by growing paranoia. Grandma and Mother frantic with preparations, Karen and Fidel worried about how to act around a man that it didn't seem like anyone wanted there and whose presence was dreaded. And while they discussed instructions about appropriate behavior, conversation, and how things should be readied for his visit, Karen wondered if they ever planned on sharing the secret of why the three of them had stopped talking in the first place: Uncle Satoshi and Mother, Mother and Grandma.

But very little was directly addressed, except for continued cultural immersion by Grandma, who seemed to stay over with them for days at a time. When she left to go home and feed her dog, they had forgotten that she didn't live with them. Her mouth did not stop talking about Uncle Satoshi and what she deemed they needed to know about him. It was a crash course in how to survive around a taciturn, Japanese

elder. "Uncle Satoshi is not used to children. You need to be quiet. Seen and not heard. He's lived alone for a long time." They found out that he likes bowling, golf, and eating nuts. Old people stuff that neither Fidel nor Karen knew how to talk about. He hardly ever used the phone for long-distance so that's why Grandma had been writing him, and that sometimes he replied on postcards because a postcard stamp is cheaper than a regular one. He was always grouchy when he was a kid, unless they were in the fields. Somehow he enjoyed farmwork more than the rest of them; he was always the fastest in his row. He liked to do quiet things at home by himself, like read, paint, go for walks by himself. Even when he was a little boy, Fidel's age, he was always to himself, remembered Grandma.

Most of the lessons seemed especially directed at Karen. Karen, this is how to pour the tea: keep one hand on the pot, and one on the handle. Karen, keep his cup full at dinner all the time, and fill his cup before you fill your own. Make sure that Uncle gets the biggest and best cut of meat; take the smallest and least perfect one for yourself. Offer him more when you see he is almost finished. Karen, talk to him about school and what you are studying. What books you like to read.

"Why do *I* have to do all this," asked Karen finally.

"Because you are the girl, and he is a Japanese man," groaned Mother. "Your grandma and he are the elders and Fidel is a boy, so it has to be one of us, and if I have to wait on that man, I'm gonna shoot somebody and spoil everything." Which only led to more questions that Karen knew would not be answered.

There were lots of "don'ts" as well, mostly things they already knew, but still Mother and Grandma seemed to have catalogued every possible transgression they

might make and needed to reiterate it just in case. Don't talk about money, especially not the house and the mortgage, because that's not why he thinks he's coming here, remember? Don't complain about anything, he came all the way here for a visit, he doesn't want to hear our negativity. Don't bring up your father, your uncle never liked him, we'll talk about that later. Don't fight with your brother, don't argue with your Mother, don't roll your eyes, all these things will make him think very badly of you, that you are a disrespectful girl, he needs to think highly of you, of us. Don't leave the table until Uncle gets up first, it's not polite. Karen wondered who would scrutinize their moves more—Uncle Satoshi himself, or Mother and Grandma.

Their new attention to cleaning became obsessive. Uncle Satoshi was a man who noticed things, a critical eye for imperfections and flaws, warned Grandma. A week was plenty of time to investigate and find things amiss; everything had to be just right. Dusting from top to bottom, making sure to get behind the picture frames, even the ones hanging on the wall. He might bump a picture with his shoulder, it might fall off the wall, then he would notice the filmy glass. Moving the furniture before vacuuming to get all the corners, because what if he was reading and dropped his newspaper, and then he'd see the cobwebs in the corners. Wiping down the inside of the refrigerator, so when he got the half-and-half for his coffee (which they were instructed not to touch), he wouldn't see any food residue lingering on the shelves. They took the *tsukemono* out of its store-bought jar and put it in Tupperware so that he wouldn't scold them for buying it and not making it at home. They filled the usually-empty cookie jar with pistachios and pecans, because even though she hadn't

seen him in a long time, Grandma still knew her brother and remembered all of his favorites.

The night before he came, Grandma brought pork chops to be cooked the Japanese way, fried in *panko*, served with rice, steamed vegetables, and *tonkatsu* sauce for dipping. Never applesauce. It was the finale to the end of a week that had taught them that Grandma's adherence to culture was what would fortify them and ensure survival: the preservation of their home, their family. If they had meatloaf and Wonderbread and potatoes right now, their world might just fall apart. Fidel washed the vegetables and set the table. Grandma cut up what needed to be cut up, while Mother cooked. Karen cleaned up along the way.

"We need to talk about tomorrow," said Mother, turning over a pork chop with the wooden tongs. Karen waited for another rule to file away into her what-to-do-while-Uncle-Satoshi-is-here mental rolodex, until she noticed that Grandma did not look up from the chopping, but she nodded her head yes, as if to encourage Mother. *Finally, the secret*, thought Karen.

"Karen. We've thought about something else we should do while Uncle Satoshi is here. Starting tomorrow we are all going to call you by your middle name." Karen put down the bowl she was washing and looked at Mother. "Sachiko?" she asked. No truths to be revealed. Just more secrets.

"Yes, Sachiko. We are all going to call you that. All of the time he's here." She turned to Fidel. "Can you remember to call your sister that?"

"Okay, but...why?" Fidel asked. Unlike the other requests that seemed like instructional reminders, cultural lessons, there was something about this that felt

dirty. Deceptive. Wrong. Karen's stomach grew a squeamish flurry from the mounting pressure that weighed down her shoulders.

Grandma stopped chopping and said, "It would help if we did everything the Japanese way, the old way. Every little thing will count." Karen looked to Mother.

"I'm not allowed to be Karen? Not myself at all?" She waited for Mother's answer. Mother closed her eyes. She said she had something important to tell them, something about their family that they need to know. Karen and Fidel became silent, noting the weight and the promise of Mother's words: a rare truth was about to emerge.

"When your father and I got married, all of the Japanese relatives were against the wedding. They were all upset. I never told you that." Karen noticed the way that her mother had emphasized the word all. *All of the Japanese relatives were against the wedding.* She repeated it in her head, mulling it over, and forced herself not to stare at Grandma. The red radish in Grandma's hands rolled off the cutting board. She rinsed it and scrubbed it and started chopping again. "All of them," repeated Mother, more to the air than to Karen, pretending that she didn't notice the radish, Grandma's silence. "They said I shamed the family by marrying a *kurombo*."

"A black man?" asked Karen. She knew that word because she'd heard Grandma say it under her breath if they walked by a loud black woman on the sidewalk, or when they drove by the homeless man who sat at the bus stop. *Dirty kurombo* she'd mutter. Somehow those words seemed slightly excusable, were more easily brushed off, if Karen could say that Grandma was old, set in her ways, talking about someone they didn't know. Now she pictured all of the relatives on the wall

saying this about her father, Fidel, herself. *Even my grandma thought this?*

Resentment began to burn inside of her.

“Daddy wasn’t black. He always said ‘I’m Dominican, I’m not black,’” said Fidel reflexively, an echo of one of the few things he remembered her father saying. Karen was surprised he remembered that at all. He had only been seven when he left.

Mother rolled her eyes. “He *was* black. He was mixed, like all those Dominicans are; but here, he was still black. Anyway, it shouldn’t have mattered. Who were they to judge who I married? You would think that people who’d been thrown into prison because of *their* race would be more open-minded. But no, all of them—hypocrites—stuck in the old ways.” Mother lectured. Grandma looked around for something else to chop, but there was nothing. Karen heard her voice at the bus station, criticizing, judging. Grandma took the dish sponge and started wiping down the counters. She felt incredibly unlucky in the fate of her relations. Half a family in another country who she had never met: disappeared, absent, foreign. The other half *racists*? How could she be related to people who hated her other half, the half that she didn’t even know? What did they know that could make them hate it? She felt like she had just started learning how to be Japanese. She didn’t know what it meant to be Dominican at all. There were no lessons in being Dominican because there was no one to teach them. There were a few Spanish expressions of Father’s, a handful of pictures Mother kept in a box for them, the smells of the foods he used to cook that she tried to conjure up when she was feeling his absence. Nothing worthy of hate.

Mother continued. “When you were born, Karen, they all came by to see you to see how you turned out.”

“What does that mean? Turned out?” Fidel stared at his sister, trying to see how she turned out.

“They wanted to know what you looked like. Who you would take after, what your eyes would look like, how dark you would be. I don’t know, maybe they thought you would come out cross-eyed with horns. Would you look like me or like your Grandma? Like your father or like no one, some sort of hybrid? I always thought you turned out like Grandma, but with bigger eyes and a tan.”

Karen compared herself to her grandmother. Grandma was fair-skinned with a flat, pancake Japanese face; slanty eyes that Randy Roscomb made fun of when he saw Grandma drop her off at school. Karen’s eyes were almond-shaped: a blend between her mom’s genes and her father’s. Karen’s hair was black and wavy and long. Her skin, a smooth café au lait. Her nose broader than her mom’s, but she didn’t have the wide pug of her Grandma. Karen’s eyelids opened wide, but still had a fold, like the girls in the anime cartoons. Her body was delicate in frame. I do look like a Japanese girl with a tan, she thought.

“They came to see, putting big smiles on their faces when they looked at you, but when they left they talked about how I had shamed the family.” She paused, considering her words. She sat up straight and pinched her lips together. “I hardly heard from them until a few years later,” said Mother, “They came again, and I had words with Uncle Satoshi and the other relatives. Then I told them never to come back here. That was what, about eight years ago? He hasn’t been here since.”

“I don’t remember him,” said Fidel.

“You were a baby. You were too young to remember.”

“It was after Fidel was born, wasn’t it?” asked Karen. It popped out of her mouth before she realized that maybe it would have been better to have said that when Fidel wasn’t standing there. Glancing from the corner of her eye, she took note of exactly how wiry his hair was. The many shades darker he was compared to her. How the insides of his palms were markedly whiter than the backs of his hands.

“They whispered that he was *black*,” spat Mother. “How could I go and have such a black baby,” they said. ‘Why did he have to be so black,’ as if I chose his skin color just to piss them off. Then they asked ‘why did you give him a Spanish name, weren’t we thinking about his future?’ As if that side of your heritage wasn’t important.” Karen sometimes forgot that Fidel’s name was Spanish, they were so used to it. Just like their dad, Federico. When he came up nowadays, Mother had her own names for him, which weren’t Spanish and weren’t very nice. The Japanese relatives didn’t like black people, they didn’t like Spanish names, they frowned and scowled, and the most taciturn one was coming here. She couldn’t decide what would be worse: being homeless or pandering to a crabby, Japanese bigot. Karen’s initial feelings of hope had been squashed; replaced by indignation towards Mother and Grandma for even considering the idea of asking for Uncle Satoshi’s help.

Mother said that she and Father decided to give them the relatives another chance—they’d hoped that they’d get over it, get past race. Times were changing. Fidel was such a sweet baby. They had a big first birthday party for him and invited everyone. And Mother heard their whispers still, saying things about her *kurombo* baby. They whispered them in Japanese under their breath, as if she couldn’t guess what they were talking about. She heard the words in English, *little kurombo, looks*

just like his father, how did Noriko get herself into this mess and now she's got two kids with him. Mother stopped transferring pork chops from the skillet to the plate layered with paper towels, and furrowed her eyebrows in disgust.

“I told them all to get the fuck out of my house and don't come back again. And that's why you haven't seen any of them for years.” Karen and Fidel dropped what they were doing to get hugs from Mother, who seemed to need it more than they did. Grandma put down the sponge as if she were going to join in, but then muttered something about the bathroom, disappearing until the moment had passed. Karen had to remind herself that Mother had already forgiven her grandma.

Dinner was quiet. Fidel pushed around his *tonkatsu*, not eating with his usual enthusiasm. Maybe he was wondering how black he was, and what that meant to the man who was coming to stay with them. Karen focused on remembering that her name was Sachiko, refusing to talk, inwardly protesting. She wondered about a man who thought people should only marry their own kind. Did he still think this? Would he look at them funny? Karen caught herself staring at her brother, pondering what Grandma had said to Mother to earn her forgiveness that night over tea, and whether Uncle Satoshi would do the same thing. And if he didn't, were they still to cater to his ways? Karen was unsure whether she could trust herself to do so. Grandma did a lot of throat clearing at the table. The only other noise was the sound of Mother scraping her fork and knife on her plate, cutting up her pork chop with a violent determination, an unnecessary action, since Grandma had already sliced the pork into thin strips for picking them up with the chopsticks. Mother's chopsticks sat next to her plate,

unused. Grandma put them back in the drawer when they cleaned up, and said she'd be back in the morning.

They did not have tea.

Grandma got there early and told Karen to come with her and help her with the shopping. They were going to buy the rest of the things for tonight's dinner so it would be fresh and perfect for Uncle Satoshi. She called her Sachiko. "You might as well get used to it," she said.

Grandma drove slower than usual. On the freeway, she couldn't have been going more than fifty. She let Karen fiddle with the radio buttons, without protesting.

"Sachiko." Karen didn't say anything. She had decided she would listen to Grandma out of respect, but that she didn't have to talk to her. Grandma continued. "You know, Uncle Satoshi is coming because I asked him to. I wrote him a letter a few weeks ago." Karen figured it was one of those letters Grandma had mentioned before, plans made without calling.

"He likes things done the old way. And part of that means he will always listen to me, respect me. You know why? I'm the *onessan*," she said with pride. "Just like you." Grandma occupied the most important ranking in their birth order. She was the first one, the respected oldest sister. "He's coming because I told him to come patch things up before it's too late. We're not getting younger you know. Me and him are old people. His coming is his way of saying sorry to your mother and respecting

me. He will never say that, but you should know. You mustn't hold the past against him. This is his way of trying."

This didn't make it better to Karen. She didn't see how this scenario wasn't about trying to make nice to a jerk for money, pretending that eight years ago he didn't insult her baby brother, all so that they could get a big fat check.

"Sachiko. Things are complicated. One day you will understand. For now, please just go along with it. Think of the situation outside of your feelings. Think about the house, your family, what would happen."

But Karen felt like she had done nothing but think about the situation already. She was tired of worrying about losing the house, how they would save the house, where they would end up if they lost the house. She knew there was not enough room in Grandma's little place, only two bedrooms and a dog. All of Grandma's old lady clutter: piles of magazines all over the house, dog hair all over the carpets, dusty corners full of Coke bottles from throughout the ages and other such junk that "might be worth something" someday. Would they all share a room? What would she tell everyone at school when they asked why she was moving? She would have to make up a story. How would her friends come to visit? Would their parents drive them all the way across town? Would she want them to see where she lived? She would have to start all over at a school and get made fun of by new people until she found one or two new friends. She would eat lunch alone, hiding in the library until that happened. And in the meantime, there were all the complications involved in trying to understand the ways of a culture that required her to defer to a man she had never

met. She turned the dial to Hot 97.7, the Top-40 station. Madonna sang something, badly.

“Your mother needs help. She needs that money.”

Karen changed the radio station again so Grandma would know that she was not interested in her one-way conversation anymore.

“You’re the only one who can help her with this. You’re the one,” she repeated.

Karen gave up and turned off the radio. The expectations were crushing her.

Grandma wasn’t giving up. “You need to be the one in charge of being nice to him, taking care of him. Your mother is going to have a tough time with it. She’ll get frustrated with him. She won’t have patience with him, even if he’s here to make up with her, in his own way. But he’s not that bad, you know. He can be a generous man. Thoughtful, in his own way. You’re mother won’t see that. You heard her last night. She’s still angry. You need to be the one to keep him occupied, interact with him, keep them from being alone.”

Her hands tightened on the wheel as she continued. “Sachiko, I know this is hard. We are asking you to endure a lot. But think of what your Mother has endured. This house is the last thing she has left, besides you kids. You must win him over.” Those last words were pronounced like an ancient command, a royal proclamation. If Karen wasn’t so worried, she might have laughed at the melodrama of them. Instead, they finally got her talking.

“I don’t even know him. I don’t know what to say to him, what to do. He doesn’t know me. He probably won’t even like me. Of course I want to help Mom,

but I can't control her mouth. She says what she likes, when she likes." Karen remembered back to the Genevieve episode, and Mother's recounting of what she had said to the Japanese relatives.

"Of course he's going to like you. He's going to *love* you. You're helpful, respectful. You're smart, pretty, well-mannered. What's not to love?" The compliments flowed off her tongue as if she had rehearsed a pep talk. "Plus there is something special about you to him, that you don't know." Grandma had her intrigued. She wondered if she was being sincere.

"When Uncle Satoshi came to see you, when you were a baby, something happened."

"What?"

"He held you, for a really long time. He said he had never held a baby before."

"So?"

"You don't understand. I know my brother as well as you know Fidel. There are things you know about your brother, things that you can sense, without him saying anything, right? I saw him cradle you like you were the most wonderful thing he had ever laid eyes on. When we were kids, he wouldn't even hold your Auntie Fumiye after she was born. He said he was worried he might break her. Your uncle is not a sentimental man. He keeps things inside. Doesn't show any emotion on his face. Keeps his hugs polite and not strong. Except for when he held you. Do you know what he said?"

Karen shook her head, no. Her grandma had captured her attention so fully that she was answering questions that she knew were rhetorical ones.

“I saw him snuggle you. And then he said that you were a perfect Japanese baby. He said this even though...” Grandma’s voice trailed off.

“Even though...I’m not? Even though I’m not full Japanese?”

“I’ve never seen him do it again. Not hold a baby, not say that, to anyone. That means something, Sachiko.” There was something in that phrase that was always just beyond Karen’s comprehension, maybe because she was never raised in thoroughly Japanese world, but something in between. She knew that it was intended as a compliment, even if it negated the rest of her heritage. She’d heard Grandma say this about other babies. “Oh, what a cute Japanese baby! He’s a perfect little Japanese boy!” Now that she thought about it, they didn’t say this about mixed-race *hapa* babies. Was it just their race that made them perfect? A xenophobic fawning preserved from the old country? Karen wasn’t sure. But Grandma made it sound meaningful. Hopeful.

“This is why we’re calling you Sachiko. It’s a good name. A classic name. He’ll see that we respect the old ways, and it’ll remind him of what he said that day. Do you see? If everyone does their part, things might work out for your mother. You be a good Japanese girl. I’ll find a way to bring up the mortgage. That’s my job. It’s everyone else’s job to reinforce the idea that we have a good family. It will be so easy if he’s pleased.”

The orchestrations overwhelmed Karen and her mind retreated to the practical. “Doesn’t he already know my name is Karen?”

“If he asks, we’re going to say that a few years ago, there was another Karen in your class, so your teacher started calling you by your middle name, and you got so used to it, that you’ve gone by Sachiko ever since, and everyone calls you that now.” She had it all figured out.

“What about Fidel? What are you getting him to do?”

“He’s different,” said Grandma. “Fidel is a good boy. But the things he does, what we call him, what he says, none of that will matter. As long as he is seen and not heard.” It was unspoken why, but Karen guessed he had too much *kurombo* blood to change Uncle Satoshi’s mind about him in a week-long visit. It made her wonder if, right now, Mother was having a separate conversation with Fidel about keeping out of Uncle Satoshi’s way, maybe even shaving off his woolly head of hair. Karen half-expected to return home and find Fidel bald, told to stay in his room and never come out. Her earlier discomfort with the whole charade returned. She stopped talking again and watched the road.

The lessons weren’t over. Grandma took her all around the markets, Karen feeling as if Grandma’s goal was to weaken her resolve with her unrelenting training in all ways Japanese. They got to the fish market to pick up fresh tuna for sashimi; Grandma making Karen-Sachiko poke and smell each one until she’d identified the freshest one with the firmest flesh, the sweetest skin, the clearest eye. Then they went for fruits and vegetables at the farmer’s market, Grandma timing it just towards the end of the market day, when the farmers would be willing to sell for cheaper so they wouldn’t have to take all their leftovers back home. Karen-Sachiko learned how to press her thumb into the tomatoes to test them for ripeness; how to bargain for an

extra half-pound of pistachios; how to walk right behind Grandma with all of the shopping bags so that she was out of Grandma's way, but following closely enough to listen and make pleasant conversation with her.

Without being reminded, Karen-Sachiko lifted the bags into the trunk, remembering to tie the plastic handles together to keep everything from spilling over. She took the fish and wrapped it in the newspaper they had brought just for this purpose, and put it on the floor underneath the front seat to keep it extra cool for the ride home. Grandma's jumbled barrage of customs and traditions made her was hyperconscious of every movement, everything she said, the way she had to carry herself just right.

As they drove up to the house, they saw Fidel outside raking the yard. She walked up with the groceries and he held out another rake to her, "This one'll be waiting for you. Uncle's coming, you know." He rolled his eyes. She smiled at him. Could she be Sachiko for a week? She looked at the spot where she and her brother used to write their names on the sidewalk in chalk. She remembered the place by the pine tree where she first found a ladybug. She thought of the swing there used to be on the tree, a swing that her father once pushed her on, before he disappeared and before the swing disintegrated into two frayed strands on a branch. Karen resigned herself into saying she could, telling herself it had nothing to do with her; she was going to save her brother's home.

At 4:30 p.m., exactly thirty-four minutes after his flight landed, Uncle Satoshi stepped out on the arrivals curb, waiting for his sister, Akiye, to pick him up. He did

not know what kind of car she had, and neither of them had thought to include that information in their exchange of letters. He scolded himself for not thinking of it. We're getting old, he thought. After five minutes, he saw her head poking up from behind the steering wheel of a brown Oldsmobile, her body too short to sit tall even with the seat pulled up all the way. She got out, unlocking the door. They greeted each other with stiff hugs and smiles, glad to see one another, but not knowing exactly what to say, besides "how was the flight?" and "fine, how was the drive?" and "fine, are you hungry?" and "yes," and "good, I am making a nice dinner, all of your favorites," and "how nice." Then, a little more personal. "You look the same, but more wrinkly." Answered by, "So do you." Notations on how much the airport had expanded since he was last here. How the weather has been. There wasn't much else to say, as initial greetings should be light and not delve into the heavy business of unspoken pasts and unclear intentions. They listened to talk radio and sometimes commented on the latest news from their other siblings, and told each other which spring vegetables each they planted in their respective gardens. Grandma calculated the length of time she should wait before bringing up monetary requests, while Satoshi was patient to indulge in the chit chat of old people for the next few days, until his sister decided to tell him what was so urgent about coming to see his niece after eight years of disconnect.

Grandma's trip to the airport lasted sixty-five minutes, each of which Sachiko and Fidel spent pacing around the house, checking to make sure everything was put away, clean, ready. Mother expended her time in cigarettes, immersing herself in a

smoky mantra of calm. When they heard Grandma's car pull up on the driveway, Sachiko and Fidel ran to the window for their first peek at their uncle, walking up the steps. *He's really here*, they called. Mother ran for the Lysol to freshen the house. Despite some of the more recent pictures in the hallway, Uncle Satoshi didn't look at all how Sachiko and Fidel had imagined. They expected someone larger and more intimidating, an older man with the strength of a fierce, old samurai, someone who exuded the presence of a lethal sword and a manly beard of gruff. Instead, he was a lean man, clean-shaven, and barely taller than Grandma. He took each step up the walk one-by-one, negotiating them in the deliberate way that aged people do when they worry about hips giving out. He wore the same horn-rimmed-style glasses he had on from the picture in the 1970s, which gave him a sense of being stuck and feeble. His dress shirt and slacks were wrinkled from napping in the plane. Still, as he grew closer, Sachiko worried that this old kitten of a man still might lash out at her brother like a tiger. She put her arm around Fidel and readied him: "If he says anything mean, just ignore him. He's old."

Mother opened the door, and looked at her uncle's feet, her tongue stuck in her throat. "Hello, Uncle Satoshi," greeted the children, hoping to draw attention away from their mother's awkwardness. They had put on their best clothes, which right now meant for Sachiko, a borrowed dress from the neighbor, which was perhaps too purple and too glittery for a Saturday afternoon; and for Fidel, the pair of pants that had only one patch, with the blue button-down shirt that was serviceable but had seen one too many washings. Mother stood behind them and finally said, "Welcome,

Uncle. This is Fidel and Sachiko.” They waited for him to speak, nervous about, even dreading, his first words.

Uncle Satoshi looked at his niece, glanced at her rumpled-but-presentable children, and said nothing but, “So. Where shall I put my things?” His first words, a passive-aggressive complaint. His glare penetrated through them to the wall behind them, the curtains, the tiles in the entryway, and they reassured themselves that all fingerprints had wiped off the paint, the curtains washed and ironed, the floor had been scrubbed and polished until it was so waxy he might slip on it. The danger he presented was not physical, but in biting words and his critical eye. He was not a man of hellos, how-are-yous, nice-to-see-you-again. Sachiko saw what Grandma had meant by him being a pill, and why so much went into thinking about what he might do or say. Leave nothing for him to complain about. She scolded herself for getting off to a wrong start with him by not anticipating his question. She should have just taken his suitcase as soon as she saw him walking up with it and put it in the spare room for him. Then run back to the door to wait with a glass of water. That’s what a perfect Japanese girl would have done. She tried not to think of this sarcastically as she took his suitcase out of his hand and said, “I’ll take care of it, Uncle.” With his hands now free, Fidel wondered whether he should offer his hand to his great-uncle or give him a hug, when really he wanted to shrink away, just in case. Mother struggled to remove the grimace from her face, a grimace that revealed she desperately wanted either her or Satoshi to vanish right there on the porch. Grandma rescued them all by proclaiming, “I’m hungry. Let’s finish dinner and eat. Satoshi,

why don't you wash up and relax in front of the TV while we finish getting everything ready. You must be tired from your trip. We'll leave you alone."

Uncle Satoshi watched the news while everyone else was in the kitchen. They could see him in the living room, and couldn't tell if he was awake or not—he faced the TV motionless, seemingly in meditation. It made them even more afraid to interact with him, to banter with him from the kitchen, like they would with another guest. They might be interrupting. Grandma knew that he liked to be alone, but that he should know that they thought of him, that they took special notice of his presence. "Go and ask your Uncle if he wants some tea," nudged Grandma to Sachiko. Then she told Fidel, "Show him how to use the remote control." They spit the words out to him as they were told, then hurried back to the safety of the kitchen, before he had a chance to train his eye on them or bite them with cross words. Grandma made them go out again and again. They had to get used to him. "Ask if he wants a little snack," she said, and "tell him that dinner will be about thirty minutes," filling the intervals with new tasks.

At least Uncle Satoshi started feeling more comfortable, if no one else did. He put his feet up in the recliner, and asked if someone would bring him a glass of water. Mother took down a glass and made sure it had no spots, continually finding ways to keep herself busy in the kitchen so she didn't have to go out and talk to him. Sachiko noticed that he did not say "please," and wondered if that was normal for him. Satoshi caught up on the few hours of world affairs that he had missed while he traveled. He flipped through all the channels and was pleased to find that he could only watch the local news and PBS, because that meant that Noriko did not have cable TV, which he

considered a waste of money. It also impressed him that Fidel was wearing mended pants, although he did not mention any of this to the family. He had already done enough interacting and dinner would surely be full of more prattle.

Mother moved her place from the head of the table so that Uncle Satoshi could sit there, and tried not to look out of sorts from her new position from the side. The centerpiece was the platter of sashimi, placed right in front of Uncle Satoshi. Grandma had taken the best meat from behind the fish's head and sliced it paper thin, and instructed Sachiko to serve it onto his plate. There were other dishes made especially for Uncle Satoshi, Grandma relying on her memory of his preferences: miso soup, a green-leaf salad with ripe avocados and orange slices, stir-fried tofu with asparagus, steamed rice to be taken at the end of the meal, the old-fashioned way. Grandma finessed the orchestration of the meal, passing plates, making polite conversation about the coming of spring that they all half-heartedly participated in, only because no one knew what else they should say. Uncle Satoshi continued to eat sashimi and waited for Sachiko to serve him more. He inhaled all of his favorites, eating much more than they thought he would, and they worried. It would be a huge faux pas to run out of food in front of an honored guest. Noticing his avarice, Sachiko decided not to take seconds. Neither did Fidel. Still hungry, but finished eating, they fiddled with their skinny, black plastic "company" chopsticks, ones that they rarely used, and tried to fill themselves up with more tea.

When Uncle Satoshi was finished, he looked up at the children, as if noticing them for the first time. "So, what do you people do?" he asked them. There was

awkwardness to his speech, and they ignored the odd phrasing of his question, assuming he was asking how they spent their time.

“I like to read,” said Fidel, who thought he should say this instead of talking about playing football, because he worried that he and his great-uncle would not be fans of the same teams.

“What are you reading?” asked Uncle Satoshi.

“Mostly comics,” he said, thinking his great-uncle would talk to him about Batman or Superman, or some of the older ones he might have read. Maybe even *manga*. Those were Japanese, and he knew some of the titles that his friends read.

“Bah. Comics are fun. But you can’t learn anything from comics. You should be reading the classics. Like *Moby Dick*. Akiye, let’s go to the library tomorrow and find something useful for these kids to read.” he said to Grandma. Grandma gave Fidel a reassuring look, and Sachiko mouthed the word “pill” at him only when she was one-hundred percent positive that Uncle Satoshi couldn’t see.

“Fifth grade is a little young for *Moby Dick*, Uncle,” Mother objected, who hadn’t spoken much all through dinner. She noticed how both of her children had stopped eating.

“Not too hard if he’s smart enough.” He mixed some more wasabi into his *shoyu*, and dipped his sashimi in it. It was hard for them to tell if he meant that as a back-handed compliment or a challenge. Mother defended her son, just in case it was the latter, with a tinge of ire in her voice, leftover from the old days.

“He gets good grades. All ‘E’s’ last report card.”

“What the heck are ‘E’s’? Whoever heard of an ‘E?’ Whatever happened to ‘A’s’? An ‘E’ doesn’t mean anything.”

“They mean ‘Excellent,’” said Grandma, making her voice small, reproaching him with her eye, the way she used to when they were younger and she raised them all. She knew that Satoshi was criticizing the school system, not Fidel, even they didn’t realize it. But enough was enough. Uncle Satoshi followed the signals of his *onessan*, but he was done trying to take interest in their lives and make conversation. It was exhausting. The best company was at his dinners alone. He shoveled more raw fish into his mouth, and everyone was thankful for the silence while he chewed.

Grandma raised her eyebrow at Sachiko while Satoshi focused on his sashimi. Her turn. She should say something to salvage the dinner conversation. She was the only one who hadn’t jumped in yet, and who needed to say something that would be met with approval. She afraid of what to say. What would he find appropriate, intelligent, worthy of study? What would he be least likely to criticize? She thought of the most Japanese-related academic interest she had, even though it had been awhile since she had done it.

“I like to fold origami. I learned how in school. We read this book a couple of years ago called *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*. I was trying to fold a thousand cranes. I started a long time ago, but I haven’t worked on them for awhile.” And as she said it, Sachiko wondered why it hadn’t occurred to her in recent years to keep folding cranes. There were several hundred under her bed right now, almost eight hundred by her last count, cranes that had taken her a year and a half to make, all the little folded papers stuffed in old shoe boxes. She hadn’t thrown them out

because she had meant one day to finish it. And it was hard to toss away something she had worked on for eighteen months. But her optimism for the project died out after awhile. She was older now. She could only believe in wishes for so long.

“Oh? Who taught you how to do origami? Your grandma was never any good at it.” He looked at Grandma for a reaction. Grandma might have smiled at him if she wasn’t already irritated. Sachiko knew what she was thinking.

“Our teacher taught us after we read the book. Then Grandma sent me paper and an origami book, and I practiced by myself. I have a bunch in my room. They don’t look too bad.”

“Hmph. We’ll have to see about that after dinner,” he said, picking up the very last bit of tuna from the platter. There was a sense of relief in the air, disapproving-Uncle-crisis temporarily resolved. He actually sounded like he was looking forward to it, although Sachiko feared that it would be a tortuous night of lively criticism. She hoped that jet lag and age would make it an early night for him.

As soon as Satoshi finished, Grandma made a big pot of *genmai-cha* and Fidel cleared off the table. Mother brought Satoshi a dessert bowl full of pistachios. Then they all made polite excuses to be out of Uncle Satoshi’s presence. “I have to work on my homework now,” said Fidel, even though it was Spring Break. “I’m going to work on my résumé in the back, where it’s quiet,” said Mother, even though she had two jobs already. “I have to go home and feed the dog,” said Grandma, the only one whose excuse was actually true. Sachiko went to room and came back with one of the boxes of cranes, some origami paper, and her origami book. Uncle Satoshi was sitting at the table, ready.

“Fold one for me,” he commanded, someone who was accustomed to being the boss, all the time. He picked pistachios out of the bowl, one by one, as if they belonged to him, never offering any to Sachiko. She selected a piece of plain red origami paper. Nothing too flashy, like the silver metallic glitter paper that he might criticize as a waste, since she was just demonstrating. She began folding the corners of the square paper together, to make a triangle. He nodded, scrutinizing every crease in the paper while she made it. She folded the triangle in half again. Another nod. Then she began to open up the flaps of the triangles and flatten them down into squares. Sachiko felt him frown.

“Here,” he interrupted, motioning for Sachiko to give him the paper. He unfolded it and began again, pointing at each fold while he did it, for her to note what he was doing differently. “Don’t you know how to make the fold nice? See how you bent the paper away from the fold you had made the first time? Fold it on the same line. Careful with the creases, you see, or it comes out crooked. Do it again. You want it to look right, don’t you?” He was tender with the paper: patient and generous with his time in a way he hadn’t been with anyone all night. His tone shifted. His criticisms did not seem to be openly-aired dissatisfactions, but instructions in the service of art.

Sachiko nodded and took the paper back, diligently imitating his folding methods. The crane did look better. Not beautiful, but stronger, straighter. He took out another sheet of paper and waited for her to start the process again, so she could prove that she had been listening and internalized his lesson. This one showed further improvement. The folds were tighter, the joints of the paper fell into place without the

earlier clumsiness. After she finished the second one, he asked her for his own paper. They folded together, him giving her more pointers along the way, like how to pull the body taut to make it appear more full, or how to put a slight, natural curve in the wings without bending them by rolling them with a pencil. Then he decided to talk to her.

“This book you read about the thousand cranes,” he asked. “Tell me what it’s about. I never heard of it.”

“This girl in Japan gets cancer from the A-bombs. Her friend tells her if she folds one thousand paper cranes, she can make a wish that’ll come true. But she dies before she finishes. So her friends finish the cranes for her. It’s a true story. It’s supposed to be a lesson.” No lingering, no sentimental hogwash. Uncle Satoshi admired Sachiko’s nonchalance in the retelling.

“Oh?” he said. “Is that what you are doing?”

“What?”

“Folding cranes for a wish.” His question showed a layer of personal interest that Sachiko didn’t know how to answer, because she wasn’t sure herself. Sachiko could count many years of failed wishes. But yet, she kept the cranes.

She shrugged. “I’m too old to believe in wishes, Uncle. But I guess we could use some wishes around here.” She wondered if that was too much of a hint about their troubles. Perhaps it would be best if she just stopped speaking again, she thought. Being a perfect Japanese girl meant being indirect.

The two of them folded twenty-three cranes that night, slowly, mostly in silence. Their interactions involved Uncle Satoshi sipping his tea, Sachiko pouring

more to keep his cup filled, her passing him papers, and his instructions for improvements. He finished almost all the nuts, leaving one at the bottom of the bowl to show her that he didn't want any more. Sachiko remained self-conscious of her folds, working on each crane through his eye for perfectionism. His cranes stood on the table with an air of poise. Just by looking, she could tell which were his and which were hers, even though they were mixed together and some were the same color. His wings were solid and lofty, the lines somehow more graceful.

And this is how it went on for the next night as well. And the night after that. The evenings of origami were tense but productive. Already they had completed seventy or eighty more cranes. The rest of his time with them fell into routine as well. There would be the small, awkward conversations at the dinner table, sometimes Mother starting them, sometimes Uncle, sometimes Grandma. They all became a little more comfortable and they began to reminisce about old times, like when Mother was a girl, *remember when she won the Nikkei princess pageant*, or even older times from the black and white childhood, *remember when we moved to the place with all of the pumpkins?* But never any memories involving Federico, nor people who had passed away, never camp. Those things were too dark for a short visit intended to make-up for eight years of stubborn silence.

Sachiko and Fidel spoke when spoken to, which for Fidel meant Uncle asking him how many pages he had managed to read in *Moby Dick* so far, or asking Sachiko what she planned on studying in college. Sachiko knew that the only acceptable fields were scientific or electronic, so she pretended to like biology, *what was the harm in more pretending*, which satisfied Satoshi with the thought that she was on her way to

becoming a surgeon, or at worst, a pediatrician, and would not waste her promise like Noriko had.

Their days were much like the nights, but busier: full of flurry and judgment. Fidel and Sachiko had instructions to clean the house, while Grandma would drop Uncle Satoshi off for the driving range, taking advantage of the balmy March weather of southern California. Once or twice they went to visit old friends, like Tad who had grown up on the farms around them; or he'd do the marketing with Grandma, beginning to enjoy the idea of having someone to cook for him more than he thought he would, excited to choose what he wanted to eat that night for dinner, although he would never let on to anyone that this pleased him. Grandma kept up her smile and pleasantries, complimenting what a wise deal he had made with the fishmonger, what nice squash he selected at the market, and waited for everyone else to echo her proclamations at dinner, which they did, and when Sachiko and Fidel felt a little sickened by "buttering him up" they reminded themselves that he deserved to be deceived, considering what he had done before. It was for a good cause.

While Mother and Grandma occupied themselves with cooking his fine selections, Satoshi had his news programs, his snacks, his water, his recliner. But after a few days, he turned off the TV and started walking around the house instead. Maybe he was bored, thought Sachiko, or maybe it was his way to interact with them. Whatever it was, they all wished for the return of his afternoons of solitary confinement, because Satoshi did what came natural to him, which was to take note of every flaw in the house and its pockets of disrepair, to the consternation of Mother. "Gee whiz," he'd say. "Don't you people ever clean these blinds?" Or it was the rust

inside the medicine cabinet. The oil grease on the driveway. The gutters in the roof needed scraping or it could flood their roof the next time it rained. Fidel and Sachiko would receive specific instructions on how to best remedy the situation the next day while Grandma and Satoshi were out and Mother was at work. Mother's face grew stern now that he spent afternoons in the kitchen with reports on what needed fixing. Sachiko heard her whisper to Grandma that she was going to blow a gasket if he comes in here again to complain about the house she was trying to save, that was sheltering his stay. He's only trying to help, said Grandma to Mother, it's just his way. At least he cares, and it's only a few more days, she reminded Mother. Sachiko was certain that Grandma kept herself from calling him a pill.

Sachiko and Fidel went to work on the gutters the following afternoon. Uncle Satoshi and Grandma came home early from the market, and once again, he decided not to retire inside for the MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour. Instead, he got out of Grandma's car and stayed out in the front, watching Sachiko holding the ladder while Fidel stood at the top and scraped his hand along the bottom of the gutter, throwing the leaves onto the ground. She felt his stare on them, the same one he had when they folded cranes. Corrections would start. She was used to it. She hoped Fidel would be okay. She hadn't prepared him, thinking that since he didn't fold origami, he would be spared the painstaking observations that accompanied any task performed in front of his uncle.

"Go get a trowel for your brother," he told Sachiko. "You people have gardening tools, right?" Sachiko hurried into the garage to find one, locating it as he

commanded further, “and bring a bucket.” She handed him the items, and he gave them all to Fidel.

“Scoop out all of the dirt and leaves with the trowel. Put it in the bucket. Don’t use your hands. You’re making a mess.” It didn’t take long for Fidel to fill it. He was a fast worker. Sachiko caught his eye and gave him a small, encouraging smile.

Then Uncle Satoshi said to both of them, “Take all that mulch and mix it up with the dirt around your mom’s plants. See, we can use it again. You were just tossing it around, wasting it.” Soon, the rose bushes, the trees, and the geraniums all had nice piles of soft, leafy dirt from the gutter nourishing them, Uncle Satoshi directing where they had missed a spot, or not distributed it evenly.

The jingle of an ice cream truck started making its way up the street. Uncle Satoshi began to speak less harshly as he noticed his grandniece and nephew ignored it and kept working, and did not insist on joining the other children who now ran in the street: the older ones who looked about Sachiko’s age standing in a circle, gossiping; the younger ones, Fidel’s age, riding bikes and laughing and playing. He knew that they must hear them.

“Any of those kids your friends?” asked Uncle Satoshi.

“Nah,” said Fidel. “We don’t know most of the kids around here.”

“Why not?”

“They go to a different school. A private school. We don’t see them around.”

Sachiko added, “Plus we’re not supposed to go outside until Mother gets home from work. She works ‘til late. And if Grandma’s here, then we’re usually

inside doing something with her anyway.” Neither child seemed angry or resentful. Just matter-of-fact. They continued working.

His voice softened a little. “When I was your age, we didn’t play much either. Farmwork. Always something to do.” Uncle Satoshi thought back to those days, when the six of them moved from farm to farm, wherever his father could get work; them having to “earn their keep” his father would say, as they picked whatever was in season alongside with him, their joys the small pleasures, like sneaking fresh strawberries during the picking, when his father’s watchful eye was turned. Akiye was always the best at it, and when she was at the head of the row, she would pretend not to notice when her younger siblings helped themselves to one or two. Sometimes she even drew father’s attention away from the berry basket with a question or a false sighting of a rabbit, so that Satoshi could pop a few more into his mouth, even at the sacrifice of staying a little longer in the field to make the quota. Akiye was a clever one. Was she always sweetly up to something? Like today, when she mentioned the first of the month coming up, aloud making a mental list of the bills she had to pay.

“That reminds me,” she continued. “You should let Sachiko go to bed early these next couple nights. Don’t keep her up all night folding cranes. Her mother will probably want her help before she goes to bed.” Akiye knew he wouldn’t respond, so she continued. “Sachiko is such a good helper. Noriko gets overwhelmed by all the bills, can’t organize them straight without Sachiko there to help her keep track of everything.”

“Yes, she’s a good girl,” agreed Satoshi.

“I don’t know how Noriko is going to do it. Don’t tell her I told you, but I heard her on the phone the other day. Something about the mortgage being late. Two, maybe three months late. She has so much pride. She would never say anything to anyone about it, you know.”

She kept going, as if it were an offhand story about the weather. “You know, I didn’t mean to snoop, but when I made that *saba* last night, I saw the bill. Noriko left it underneath the pile of recycled papers I was taking out. It said past due, it was seven thousand dollars. I didn’t tell her I saw it. It would upset her if she thought I knew.”

Satoshi noticed that she said *I knew* when really she meant *we knew*. Because why else would she tell him this story? She wanted him to know. His sister was asking for a favor, without really asking. Her first letter about Noriko had said she wanted him to visit because they were getting old, and it would mean a lot if he came: “Come see me and Noriko, before it’s too late,” she wrote. He thought it was her way of getting them to patch things up before she died—at least, that’s what she had hinted at then. Her words took on new meaning now; the echo, surely intentional. Before the mortgage is too late and they lose the house? His curiosity had been peaked as to why Akiye had suggested he stay at Noriko’s house instead of hers, her letter claiming that her place was too small, and this way he would get to know the children. This was probably her way of foisting the children upon him, getting him to see that they were good kids. He could do this much for his *onessan*. But give them money, seven thousand dollars? He didn’t feel much like going to the driving range after her chatter. He told Akiye to drive them home.

He watched the two children in the yard as they finished mulching, admiring their diligence in what might prove to be a futile exercise: preventing rot on a roof that might not cover their heads in a month, tending to plants they would not see grow. They were drenched in quiet sweat. He kept them working until he felt hungry. “Let’s go inside and get cleaned up for dinner,” he said.

That night, no one spoke much. Since Uncle Satoshi was already reticent to make small talk, that meant he said nothing at all. Mother worried that he had said something that hurt her children’s feelings, but since they didn’t look traumatized, she then began worrying if they had said something to spoil his mood. Grandma took his silence as a hopeful sign that he was thinking about the money. After dinner, when Sachiko went to her room to get the origami materials, Grandma followed her.

“What happened outside today?”

“What do you mean? With Uncle Satoshi? Nothing. He told us how to clean the gutters.”

“Did he say anything to you about the mortgage? Or money? There was eagerness and worry in her tone. Sachiko saw the tense scrunch of muscles in her forehead.

“No. He just watched us and told us what to do. Why, did you ask him for it? No wonder he was so quiet at dinner.”

Grandma sighed. “I said something about it today, just to get him thinking about it. He will only be here two more nights. Don’t bring it up. But think about how you might get his mind into a generous mood, a helping mood.”

Sachiko contemplated the verbal and mental wrestling she had endured the past few days, and now tears of frustration brimmed at her eyelids. She tried to remember that Grandma was only trying to help.

“What can I say Grandma? We hardly talk about anything but cranes, and mostly he says nothing at all now. It’s probably better if I just fold cranes and don’t say anything.”

“Sachiko. Have you thought about what he might think he is doing when he doesn’t say anything?” No, Sachiko hadn’t. “When your Uncle first starts talking, what does he do? He starts complaining, right?” Yes, of course Grandma was right. “Then, how did that change?”

Sachiko thought about it. The complaints became corrections. Then instructions. Then, nothing.

“You said he doesn’t say anything to you now. What do you think that means?” If he said nothing, then he had nothing to complain about. And he would know, because he was always watching.

“It means I’ve done something right.” Sachiko felt light.

“See? Don’t give up. His quiet shows how well you’re doing. You keep this up, only two more nights, and maybe your mom will get the help she needs. Maybe you’ll keep the house. That’s a good girl. A perfect Japanese girl,” said Grandma, hugging her. “Go wash your face so he won’t know that you were crying.”

Sachiko went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face, until it wasn’t red anymore. She picked up the boxes and went out to the kitchen, feet leaden with duty, hoping she appeared perfect enough.

Sachiko and Uncle Satoshi had to be in the nine hundreds with their cranes by now, two more nights to make it one thousand. Not that Sachiko knew if he was trying to get there. But she had made it a sentimental goal, to empower her routine with meaning, semi-tangible possibility. Maybe if they got there, she could wish on the house, and maybe it would come true. And if it didn't, well, she didn't believe in wishes anyway, right? She thought about what she could ask him that might lead to talking about help, when Uncle Satoshi started a conversation. He hadn't done that since their first night folding. What does this mean, she wanted to ask Grandma.

"Your brother is a good boy." Sachiko considered how to respond. He was thinking of her brother. Paying him a compliment. A compliment paid to her brother to make up for past judgments, to let Sachiko know he was okay with her brother? Why? *He must know that I know what happened when Fidel was a baby.*

"Fidel is always a good boy. Everybody likes him. His teachers always give him the good citizen award. They say he's sweet and helpful." Which was mostly true: he won the award once, a couple of years ago. He was respected by his teachers and his friends—he got along with most everybody. She hoped her last comment would segue into thoughts about helpfulness, things that helped, like money. But instead, Uncle Satoshi brought his thoughts deeper into the past.

"I never liked your father. He wasn't a good man. Your brother isn't like him."

Sachiko did not know what to say. She resisted the urge to question why, maybe because she was afraid of what she would hear. She preferred to notice her

father's absence, rather than be enlightened on his failures. It was difficult to tell if he meant this as a compliment towards her brother, or if it was a gouge directed at her mother and her father. It was probably both.

"You have to be careful who you marry. Your mother wasn't thinking," continued Uncle Satoshi. "He was never good enough for her. That whole family never knew what work was. We tried to tell her it would turn out like this."

Sachiko wondered now what he wanted her to know. His comment could either confirm or deny that he was a racist. Either he was saying in his indirect way that her father's family was a bunch of losers and it had nothing to do with his race; or he was holding them up to the worst stereotype of them all: they were black and lazy. And "turn out like this?" What did that mean? The money? No husband, no father? No house? She didn't know Uncle Satoshi as well as Grandma to figure this out, and she felt the part of her that was her mother start to feel enraged. Warm blood rushed to her chest that would soon come to her face and mouth. She hoped that Mother and Fidel weren't eavesdropping. She'd better change the subject before someone got angry, and he followed up with something worse.

"Uncle Satoshi? You were married before, weren't you?" A related topic, not judgmental, could move on to ideas of family or obligation; topics that had nothing to do with absent fathers or lazy Dominicans.

He took his time in considering his answer. "I married once. A long time ago."

"What was she like? I've never seen a picture of her. Did Grandma know her? I don't know any stories about her."

“Your grandma didn’t know her. We met in camp. Your grandma and I were in separate camps.”

“What was her name? Was she from California too?”

Uncle Satoshi removed his glasses. “Her name was Reiko. Her family was from Sacramento. We got married in camp. She died there after she had a baby. Those were the old days.” He hesitated, as if to say something else, then reconsidered. He put down his origami paper for a second, and then resumed folding.

He had stopped his paper-folding. He bit his lip and Sachiko hoped it wasn’t out of anger with her for bringing up a painful memory. She decided to not ask any more about it, because a man who said “a baby” instead of “our baby” or “my baby” about his own baby needed special consideration. Maybe he was a pill because he was old. Maybe he never learned how to act in a family. Or maybe his heart was still broken. He never married again. No kids.

They kept folding. She filled his teacup and his pistachio bowl to remind him that she was thinking of him.

“I bet we have nearly a thousand now,” said Sachiko, bringing the conversation back to their shared task, breaking the awkward silence. “Let’s count.” She went to her room and returned with all of the boxes of cranes. She wanted to dump them on the table, make a sprawling mess of color, before they counted them and put them back, but she had a sense of his preference for order. She allowed him to direct the enterprise, thinking that’s what the perfect Japanese girl would do. They counted them by opening one box at a time, her doing the initial count, him double checking it, then writing the total on each box. Then they added all the totals together.

Despite her earlier proclamation that she had outgrown wishes, Sachiko could barely repress the excitement in her face as she saw the total grow.

“Nine hundred and seventy-two,” he announced. She refused to let herself grin. But emotion escaped nonetheless.

“Do you think we both get wishes if we get a thousand? I know what I’m going to wish for,” burst Sachiko. *Oh no*. That was not subtle at all. She could salvage it by hoping he would ask what it would be, and then she could say something that would get him thinking about the house, their financial situation. Like “I’d wish for Mother to be happy.” But he didn’t ask.

“Bah. We’re both too old to believe in that kind of thing,” he decided. “Better not to get your head in the clouds with silly ideas.” He awaited confirmation.

Sachiko questioned why he bothered helping her make them at all, if that’s really what he thought. Grandma would say that he wanted to spend time with her and get to know her, but that seemed less likely than the fact that he had nothing else to do and she was the only one expected to tolerate his presence at night, and the only thing they shared was an ability to create cultural art. She had hoped that he secretly believed in wishes, and just wouldn’t admit it. They had worked so hard on them. So many. For nothing? She gathered the boxes together, said goodnight to him, and stacked them neatly by her bed. She would finish without him, just to show him her stubbornness, that she was persistent, that people in her father’s family do know how to work, and in the end, one thousand was not an arbitrary number and she would get there by herself. It was the only acceptable form of rebellion. She went to her room and folded cranes into the night, until her fingers were too heavy to crease them

nicely, her eyes were too heavy to notice, her brain too tired to register their imperfections. But she knew she had one thousand.

Their final dinner together should have been melancholy, since they hadn't had any word about the money: both the bill and unspoken past wrongs still tainting the atmosphere. But nothing could drag any of them down that night. Grandma and Satoshi had outdone themselves in the marketplace that day, buying all the ingredients for a special Mexican dinner, because there was no decent Mexican food out in Madison, he claimed, and their kitchen was warm with the smell of rice that was a warm tomato-saffron instead of a cold, pale white; the kitchen full of the strength of beans rather than reeking of fish parts; the broth of the boiling chicken for enchilada fillings lent a restorative quality to their lungs. Mother hummed while she cooked until Grandma eyeballed her to stop, lest Uncle Satoshi think she was celebrating his upcoming departure.

At dinner, Uncle Satoshi even attempted to talk to Fidel about something besides his lamentable progress in *Moby Dick*. He asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, Fidel savvy enough to reply a computer programmer, even though they had no computer and he didn't know anything about software. They ate heartily, feeling comfortable, feeling relief, oddly feeling like a family, allowing their minds to fill with food, a purposeful refusal to worry about the unanswered question of money. Before everyone besides Sachiko excused themselves from the table, they said goodnight to Uncle Satoshi, promising to get up early before his flight to send him off

with hugs in the morning. Because doing that tonight might spoil what had gone so well thus far, and maybe in the morning their problems would be solved.

When they were alone after she had gathered all of her cranes together and put the boxes on the table, Sachiko brought Uncle Satoshi his tea, and held out her hand to him.

“I want you to have this.” Sachiko handed him a silver crane. “It’s the prettiest one. I made it last night. You can take it with you if you want.” She held it out and waited for him to say something. Make a criticism, observe the lilt to the wings. But he didn’t. He took the crane and set it on the table in front of him.

“It is number one thousand,” she finally said. “I finished them.” She nodded towards the boxes.

He picked it up by the head and looked it over, around and around. Did he look nervous, Sachiko questioned, or was it just her?

“The wing is bent,” he said. “It turns up too far on the left.”

“The paper is nice. The glittery part distracts from it,” Sachiko responded, daring to contradict him on this point. She had already thought of what to say, how she would match him, knowing that even her most-perfect crane might never stand up to his closest examination. And she was right. The silver reflected the light and cast shiny spots on the side of his face. His face remained a blank, which Sachiko took to be a silent assent. This emboldened her to continue her plan of settling things.

“Uncle Satoshi?”

“Yes.”

“Did you have a good visit? Did you like staying here with us?”

“It was nice to see the family. I hadn’t seen you since you were a baby.” He said nothing else.

“What I was like when I was a baby? I don’t remember anything.” Sachiko smiled. She tried to look charming, like a perfect Japanese baby, to remind him of how precious she once was to him, for a small moment, a long time ago.

“You cried a lot.” That is what he said aloud. But he remembered what it was like to hold her to him, taking in her sweet baby smell, imagining what it would have been like to have brought home a daughter, instead of burying one at camp.

“If we lived with Grandma next year, would you still come and visit?” It was as close to asking about the money as she felt she could ask. She felt her forehead grow moist with sweat. She hoped it would evaporate before he noticed, because there was no way for her to wipe it away without drawing attention to her nervousness.

Uncle Satoshi got the same feeling he had around Akiye yesterday. Being crafty like her grandma, he thought. This is why he preferred his solitary existence. Away from the loudness of a family’s emotions, expectations of sisters and their families, the emptiness of remembering brothers now gone, the wonder of what it would have been like to have had a mother, the absence of fathers working or otherwise. He had made an exception for Reiko, and that had been a once in a lifetime arrangement. That was the one time, and that wouldn’t come again.

“You people ask for too much.” His frown was firm and tight. But it was unconscious and was not meant for Sachiko. Sachiko didn’t know that.

“I didn’t ask for anything.” Sachiko said defensively. Had he just accused her of something? He was definitely cross with her. She worried she had just spoiled everything, the good feeling from dinner tonight, the possibility of the money. She had been too bold, and was being reprimanded. Her forehead grew hot and sticky. She swallowed so that her voice would steady and so she wouldn’t cry as she fretted that they might not get a check now, and it was definitely her fault.

He took his glasses off and laid them on the table. He picked up the crane and examined it again, bringing it close to his face. Then he looked at Sachiko. “Be a good girl, and maybe one day you will get your wish.” He put the crane down next to his glasses.

Sachiko had brought all the cranes down to show him and count them together, but now she just looked at the boxes and didn’t move. She was weary of reading into his actions. Instead, she said, “I’m tired, Uncle. School starts again tomorrow. I think I’ll go to bed early.” She had treaded for too long in this transient space, and she wanted out. What she wanted most was to put this whole charade behind her, go back to her room, cry into her pillow, and be Karen again. And she wasn’t allowed do that around him.

Satoshi questioned whether her reprieve was more manipulation. Had Akiye told her of their previous conversation, cued Sachiko to excuse herself early, to remind him about Noriko with the bills? Maybe. But the girl seemed genuinely exhausted. He saw it in her downcast eyes that rarely flickered with the vivacity of the teenagers he saw in the stores, speaking brightly and loudly; he saw it in her shoulders that hunched with burdens that were beyond her years.

She walked over to him to hug him goodnight, because she felt like she should, to show that she wasn't going to hold a grudge against him for being annoyed with her. Nothing was wrong, because none of them were supposed to acknowledge that they knew anything. And maybe a small part of her wanted to pretend that they were relatives who understood one another more than the others. He put his hands on her back as she hugged him, with a very light touch so as not to reject her affection, but not to accept it either. It reminded her of Grandma and Mother in the old days, barely connecting over their severed bond, the gap too large to be bridged by warm, extended arms.

The silver crane caught his eye as they let go of one another. He stared at it for awhile as Sachiko took her shoeboxes full of cranes back to her room and he finished his tea.

Sachiko opened up each one of the ten boxes containing the other nine hundred and ninety-nine cranes and dumped them on the floor to count them one last time, by herself. She thought of what she was going to tell Mother and Grandma. In the morning, she would throw all the cranes into the trash, covering them up with the remnants of the past week's meals. She could tell from his hug that he had never believed in the magic of wishes.

Satoshi began packing. He would be ready to go right when his sister came to pick him up, first thing for his eight o'clock flight, and he wouldn't say anything about the money. And he knew neither would she. He didn't have much to pack, because he hadn't brought much and he had never truly unpacked, neatly replacing all

of his outfits in their organized compartments each night. Before he went to bed, he took out the pictures he'd brought with him, pictures to help him remember and compare. His favorite picture of Akiye, from her college graduation. It was one of the few old photos he managed to keep, before they had to get rid of everything for internment camp. Her eyes smiled even though her mouth did not, and this is what he liked about it. He preferred to remember her this way, decorated in academic regalia, full of hope. Now she looked gray, she looked her years. He flipped to Noriko's photo next, one of her dressed in a kimono, dancing in the *obon odori*, maybe twenty, thirty years ago? He wasn't sure. Her jet-black hair glinted in the sun, her wrist flicked a silk fan through the air, the bold one standing tall in the circle of festival dancers. His niece always lacked the demure quality of the other dancers, but still, she beguiled. The last photo he looked at was the most recent Christmas picture postcard of Noriko with her kids, the three of them smiling widely, wearing red sweaters that Akiye must have knit for them, because that was what she did. The kids' hair had grown longer since then, but they looked the same. The picture contained no husband. Satoshi could not decide whether this was a good or bad thing for Noriko's family.

He took out his wallet to see one last picture: the photograph he always kept there. The one of Reiko. He had thought about sharing it with Sachiko when she had asked about her. He tried to recall what it had been like that year they were married, having a family in the desert, them always getting dust in their ears, but not caring about things like that. That's what happened when you get swept up in emotion, he thought. You stop noticing things. Had it been worth it, for the one year? He wanted to say yes, or at least he would have while it was happening. While he was still a

husband and almost a father, it had been worth it. But not afterwards. Nobody knew how it felt to be all alone in his Wyoming prison, left without any family at all. Nobody could ever understand what it was like to watch his daughter be born, then watch his wife die first, wishing that her bleeding would stop, wishing for camp doctor to save her, and then hearing Dr. Morimoto say *we've tried everything we could*. Nobody knew what it felt like to snatch his premature daughter from Dr. Morimoto's arms, watching the light slowly leave his wife's eyes. Nobody knew that when Dr. Morimoto told him that his wife was gone, Satoshi laid down with his new baby next to Reiko, cuddling them both as tight as he could, the baby partially on her chest, his leg wrapped around Reiko's leg, so he and his daughter could feel the last of her warmth as it left her body. What nobody knew was that before his wife took her last breath, he named the baby.

"Our Sachiko." He thought to himself. *Child of happiness*. The baby's name would be one of hope. But no one had ever heard him speak the name aloud. When the child was buried, the camp marker simply said "Baby Girl Murakami," because he had left no name on record. He had always marveled at the cruel coincidences of life that gave him a grandniece named "Sachiko," having to reassure himself for years that there was no way Noriko could have known.

He remembered watching his daughter's little chest barely moving up and down, the breathing laborious. Her fingertips quickly taking on tinges of blue. She didn't whimper as the doctor took her away from him to examine her and tried to prod her into breathing steadily. Satoshi sat there, helpless to do anything but make more silent wishes. And then, her breathing stopped. Dr. Morimoto began mouth-to-

mouth on her, the whole of his mouth fitting over baby Sachiko's little face, his index finger pumping gently on her heart, useless in its efforts. Those were the few minutes that he had had a family. Those were enough.

Satoshi had never heard of this story about the cranes, but he decided that it was better for Noriko and her Sachiko to learn what he had learned. If they had ever spoken aloud about the money, he would have told them never to count on outsiders, or wishes. This was the best lesson he could teach them. What's the use in holding on to sentiment about a house, a life, waiting around for help? A house is just a place that can be taken away. Sometimes help can't help. Resilience would serve them better than dependence. This is what he had learned, these were the old-fashioned ways.

This is what Satoshi thought about as he decided not to give his niece a check for the mortgage. He told himself that just by coming, he had made his peace with this family, and this was the good of his visit. He did not need another family, another Sachiko, more obligations that only promised more taxing ones to follow. What was to become of them was in motion before he got there, and would continue after he left. Their lives would turn out fine in the end. One parent was gone, and they were fine, just like he was. They would survive without a house, just like he had after camp. They could still have their picture postcards in their Christmas sweaters and this would make them luckier than he had been, because they still had each other. They didn't need seven thousand dollars.

On the kitchen table, he thought it was good of him to make a golden crane for Sachiko. A perfect one. Not for a wish. As a memento, a present, a reminder of

how to take a critical eye to something until it is flawless, to not be satisfied with a life of just “okay.” That’s what had gone wrong with Noriko. There was still hope for Sachiko, and even her brother. It took him several minutes of careful folding, because he wanted it to stand out from the others. He captured the air in its wings, gave it a regal sense that the others did not have. He laid it next to Sachiko’s silver one, with a note that said, simply, “Here’s one more.” He thought for another moment and added, “Be a good girl.” He closed and locked his suitcase for the flight and went to bed, reassuring himself that it was the right thing to do. He knew that Sachiko would agree with him one day, when she achieved on her own whatever life it was that she worked for. This Sachiko would be fine. She was already a girl whose persistence could make one thousand paper cranes.

3: The Education of Heriberto Martinez*

Introduction

My name is Heriberto. That would be pronounced *Airy-bearrrrr-toe*, if you care to say it right, or if you are a bit worldly and aren't intimidated by the Spanish. It's not *Hairy-Bert-O*, which is how everyone else says it, even if they're from California and took Spanish for four years in high school and act like they know that Taco Bell isn't really Mexican food. I came to the US in sixth grade. Mamá told me when we got here, "*Mijo*, all you need to do here is go to school and learn English and be a good boy and make your mother proud. And I will work hard so you can do that." And I told her, "Mamá, I will, don't you worry. I'm gonna go to school and make it all the way and take care of you."

Already some of you are bored and thinking, *oh great, another immigrant story, tell me how you survived to achieve the American fucking dream all over again, why don't you*. But I'm not trying to tell you how sometimes America is racist and cold and it sucks to be new here. I know you saw the Gangs of New York, and Leo DiCaprio taught you this already. I ain't trying to tell you about the *pinche migra*, or that wall the militia's building in Arizona, the US still trying to keep Mexicans out of what used to be Mexico. Whatever. That's life, right? The Mexicans stole it from the Spanish who stole it from the Native Americans who stole it from the woolly

* This segment is a series of novel excerpts, through page 164

mammoths or something, right? Someone stronger is always taking something good from someone weaker. The meek won't inherit shit.

I feel bad telling my immigration story at all. We didn't trek through the desert with no water for three days, hiding in sewage pipes from the helicopters. There weren't ten of us crammed into the sawed-out bottom of a big rig. My family drove here in a Chevy and I was already a US citizen. You don't believe me. You're thinking, *well someone in your family was a wetback, I know it*. OK, sort of. My mom and her brother, my Tio Juan, were illegal the first time they came, in the '80s. They got all the way to San Jose, California when there were still farms there. This is before they grew Apple all over the fields. My family stopped, and they worked, and they met other Mexicans in the fields. My mom got pregnant and had me in the US "so I could have a future," but after that she moved back to my abuela's house in Sinaloa because the *puto* who knocked her up wouldn't marry her. I never met him, never even seen a picture. All I know is that I have his last name and his curly hair. Martinez is now the eleventh most popular surname in the US and I currently shave my head. Fuck him. My Tio Juan is like my real dad. He stayed in the US when my mom left, so he could "make it." Got amnesty later because of some Clinton law in the '90s, so he's legal now. He sells janitorial supplies. He's not the janitor, he reminds us, as if society thinks the people who sell the urinal cakes are on a higher social plane than the ones who plop them into place in the john and then wipe down the sinks. To him, he's made it.

We came back a long time before September 11th, when it was a lot easier to get into US with brown faces. Around the time I was finishing elementary school,

Mom got restless. She was worrying about my future, missing her brother. Nothing special. She was just like the 500 bajillion Mexicans who dream of *El Norte* every year. Well it finally happened when I was eleven. Tio Juan saved enough money to buy a car that could survive the 12-hour drive from the Bay Area to Tijuana without falling apart. This new car was the Chevy that all Mexicans dreamed of: it had all of its windows and didn't need any duct tape. He picked us up outside of some cockroach hotel and we didn't bring anything with us but real vanilla, a suitcase of clothes to get started, and a bunch of pictures of our family. *La migra* stopped us anyway.

“Citizenship, please.” The border patrol did not smile.

“American,” my Tio said in perfect, unaccented English. We all smiled. The car had California plates. It was old enough to look like a well-worn American family car, but not so old and junky that it looked like it belonged to a bunch of poor Mexicans who pitched in a few hundred bucks to fix up a car together. I had my birth certificate. Tio Juan had papers. My mom didn't have anything, but I think because we all looked confident and fearless, like we knew we belonged, they didn't even ask for them, they just waved us on through.

We moved into Tio Juan's little house in Hayward, which is halfway between San Jose and Oakland, both in distance and in atmosphere. It's not as ghetto as Oakland, and it tries to be all sparkly Silicon Valley like San Jose. It's a little of both. Imagine a city with soccer moms at the shiny new Targets and Starbucks on one corner, with sprinklings of crackheads and meth labs on the other. Tio Juan's house

matches the neighborhood. A little rundown, a little paint peeling—the kind of place that could be decent if we had time and money to fix it up.

Me and my mom and my uncle, we were lucky. We weren't like these poor fuckers you see standing outside Home Depot, getting into a van with anyone who wants a brown man to pick his weeds or fix his roof. Coming here was a happy time. It didn't matter that we lived all cramped up in my tio's house, sleeping on the floor 'til we could afford a mattress, because we were starting anew. It was exciting.

Mamá got a job taking care of some kids in the hills really quick, because all those rich fuckers in the Oakland hills have money leaking out of their asses and are out to prove to everyone else how open-minded they are by hiring a bilingual nanny for their kids. After all these years, my mom still cleans their houses and talks to their kids about *Los Teletubbies* and *El Plaza Sesamo*. She's gone all day and on the weekends, except for Sundays and every other Wednesday. They give her those days off for Jesus because she says she's Catholic. She is, but she don't go to church—none of us do—but what do they know. This is America, they have to respect her religious shit, even if it's bullshit.

So my story: I came here and didn't speak English, and now I go to college. A big time college. *You're thinking again, big fucking deal, I saw Stand and Deliver. I believe that poor little Mexicans can learn calculus. Fuck you and your story, Heriberto.* Well I have something different to tell you. I want to tell you what the movies don't show. Like how an immigrant really gets educated. It's not all inspirational teachers and scholarships and *ganas*. It's not lesbian poets and angry feminism and here's the story of how my mama's hair smells like bread and how my

uncle wears clown suits and it makes me sad. I ain't no Sandra Cisneros. And there's no ghosts of my people, no spirit of the Aztecs. Magical realism is not involved. Getting educated in the US and making it is like getting fucked in the ass real hard and still being able to pinch it tight, everything still shiny and new between the cheeks. It's a fucking miracle. It's so miraculous that when I'm done, I plan on walking on water. That's the only thing that's different I can tell you than what's been said already.

Prologue to an American Education

Not that this will ever happen to you, but here's a word of advice if you ever become an eleven year-old boy who arrives in America and gets stuck in a special ESL class: try to stay there forever. Or at least until the end of middle school. You'll survive longer. Because everyone in ESL class is nice, and they act like how you think the real Americans are gonna act towards you. You feel all optimistic about America and your new life. No one was ever a dick to me in sheltered class. We had special food parties and books with lots of pictures. School was easy and good. I should've enjoyed it while it lasted. I learned English fast so I could do well and be a real American. After one year, I tested out of ESL. Worst mistake ever. It was all downhill after that.

When you get to the US, you think everything will be nice and like on TV. In TV-world, the school is always near the beach, and there's nice hallways with working lockers, blonde people everywhere, and the teachers always walk around being concerned about things like your future and student elections. My first day at Millard Fillmore Middle School, I walked up and down those smelly-ass halls and none of the American kids talked to me—they didn't even look at me. None of them were like the kids on TV. They were all the wrong colors. It was like the goddamn United Nations. I thought I was in the wrong place. Where'd all these *chinos* come from? What the fuck's an Eritrean? I must be at some temporary holding station. I wasn't the only newcomer who thought this. My friend Marco and I talked about the first day he came to school from Mexico, he had asked the janitor where are all the

white kids? Were there still separate schools for them? Yes, said the janitor, there were.

Most of sixth grade is a blank. Meaning that there weren't that many days that stood out; I was pretty confused most of the time. I didn't know hardly any English, I only went to three different places on campus: my ESL classroom, the cafeteria, and the boys' locker room. Me and the other immigrants in ESL didn't do anything else that the other kids did. The same teacher taught us all the subjects, except for PE. So that first year, all my friends were all different races, like Punjabis and Bosnians and Fijians and stuff. In ESL, that was OK, and no one made you feel like you should only stick to your own kind. We got a lot of English practice with each other because we didn't know each other's languages. Our conversations didn't sound very good. They sounded like this:

Me: "You like play the basketball?"

Some Indian kid with a doily thing around the top of his head: "Yes. I have the basketball. Very much to play I like."

My friend Marco, for once not playing *fútbol*: "You play to me lunchtime the basketball?"

Some Vietnamese kid: "Yes, we us play together, okay? Make a teams, okay?"

Me: "Okay."

Our teacher was Mrs. Smith. I could never remember her real name, and even just now, I had to look it up in the yearbook. In Mexico, we weren't supposed to call teachers by their names, just *maestra*, and it was a hard habit to break. It felt wrong.

So I just called her teacher. Marco did it, too. She didn't mind. She was a real good lady. If I could talk more English back then, I would have told her thank you for making my first year in America so nice. Here's the kind of thing I remember doing in her class:

1. Teacher would hold up a banana.
2. She'd say stuff like "This is a 'banana' boys and girls. Can you say banana?"
3. We'd get to eat the banana.

If we acted like we didn't get it, she'd repeat 1-3. So we'd act that way if it was a food, so we could keep eating it. I think she knew what we were doing. When it wasn't a food, we'd get the lesson on the first try.

This is why you should stay in ESL class forever. You won't ever be in an American classroom where everyone was nice and the teacher feeds you, ever again.

Marco and the Vans

As nice as ESL was, it wasn't enough to have helped my friend Marco. He was the only one who ran as fast as me in soccer. We both played forward. That's how we met, even before school started. Mamá made me walk to the 7-11 to pickup some milk. She was always into milk, *no soda, only milk, you're a growing boy*. But I drank it faster than she could restock it. *Go to 7-11 and get some more milk, mijito, be back in ten minutes*. She'd give me exactly enough change so I couldn't buy any junk food and set the timer to make sure I didn't get kidnapped. That day I walked home through the park, 'cause it was early and walking through the park at night isn't something I was allowed to do, but in the day, I could and it was full of *fútbol*. *Fútbol* as in soccer. Remember, I was still *puro mexicano* back then, I hardly spoke any English, I hadn't gone through puberty yet, so I loved soccer more than anything, more than milk, more than girls.

The ball went out of bounds and was coming right at me. I stopped it with the inside of my knee, let it fall down towards my foot, and kicked it right to the kid who was running after it before it had time to hit the ground. This is with milk in my hand, you know.

“Qué suave, carnal. ¿Como te llamas?”

“Heriberto. ¿Y tú?”

“Soy Marco. Juega con nosotros en nuestro equipo. Necesitamos otro jugador.”

I didn't know that many other kids, since school hadn't started yet, and I hardly got to do anything but help Tio Juan fix up the house that summer. He would tell me stuff like "It's good to have another man around the house," and that meant I was a man when it was time to help him rake the leaves, but according to Mamá, I wasn't man enough to go to the park alone or be out on the street by myself while they were at work. Pretty much I stayed in the house and watched TV and played videogames and did the chores. But I couldn't stay with Marco and play soccer: I had that milk and there was my mom at home, counting down with three minutes left. If I came home late, she'd call the police. It had happened before, my first week in the States, when I got bored of being in the house and I went for a little walk. She'd come home early and thought I was missing. She worried like that a lot, telling me I was all that she had, and I'd better not go missing.

So I had to tell Marco, "*Tengo que irme a casa, carnal,*" and I took off before he could ask me why, me embarrassed to tell him that I had to go home because my mom was waiting or else she'd call *la poli* on me. The next few times I got to go to 7-11 in the day, I'd walk through the park to look for him. There were kids who looked like him, who were fast like him, but they didn't talk to me and they weren't him.

When we started school a few weeks later, we saw each other and shook hands, teaching each other our special handshakes. Marco was in ESL class, too. We sat next to each other, ate lunch together, we played soccer almost everyday. I picked up English faster than he did, and he always made sure I was first on his team and got to play forward. We helped each other out those first few months of school. Marco could have survived that whole school year, but then this thing happened with these

vans at school. And he ran away. So here's an example of how immigrants get fucked in the ass by America. Happens all the time. It happened to Marco just because he didn't know some dumb shit that you probably grew up taking for granted: that you don't need to be afraid of strange white vans at school.

We got to school one morning and there were these big white vans without any writing on them in the parking lot. Not mom-vans, but those really long vans with no windows that churches and rock bands use. The same kind the government uses to spy on people and kidnap revolutionaries and things like that. Teacher said to everyone, "OK, line up, we're going to blah blah blah." Sometimes we missed Teacher's words. If she would have told us we were going to line up and eat bananas and sharpen our pencils, we would have understood everything.

"Heriberto," hissed Marco in Spanish, "what did Teacher say?"

"I dunno. Something about lining up."

"Why do we need to line up?"

"I don't know, I wasn't listening." I was embarrassed to tell him I didn't know all the words she said. I was the one who was supposed to know these things. I was the American.

"Dumbass."

"Fuck you, *cabrón*." He grinned back at me, but his face got tight and his eyebrows furrowed together.

I didn't know what was going on, which wasn't unusual that first year. It was okay, because I trusted Teacher. Mamá raised me to always do what the teacher says. Back then I respected the teachers enough to do it. That lasted until (1) I learned

English better; and (2) I got smarter. That morning, Teacher said “line up,” and of course, I lined up. I didn’t need to know what was going on since we were in a line. She’d lead and we’d follow, she’d correct us if we did the wrong thing, because that’s what her job was and this is what she did it for us everyday.

But Marco’s dad had raised him to do something different. That’s because Marco and his dad didn’t have papers, and he told him to be very careful all the time, even at school. Because even though we were at school, and ESL class was a warm, happy place; school was still part of the government, and anyone from the government could come anytime to take you away and chuck you back over that wall. I would say that he was being paranoid, but we had all heard the stories, we all knew about someone who had disappeared in a raid.

Marco and I got in line, and he was looking around all nervous.

“What’s happening?” he asked me again.

“I dunno, just wait in line, *carnal*. It’ll be OK. What’s the matter? Need to use the bathroom? She’ll let you go if you ask.”

“Naw. I’m OK, man.” He stopped fidgeting and stood up straight in front of me.

We all went outside with Teacher leading us in single-file line.

“Can you tell where we’re going?” he asked. I noticed he had his backpack on. No one else had brought their backpacks.

“I dunno, genius. We’re outside, who cares? Why’d you bring your backpack?”

“Just ‘cause. Case I need it.”

“For what?”

And teacher heard us talking, so she shushed us with a finger to her lips. We were next to the front gates, where the main office was. This was the only way in and out of the school. For security reasons. We’d never gone outside the gates before. We’d passed the cafeteria and the library. Either she was taking us all to office because we were in big trouble, or else we were leaving to go somewhere. I didn’t think we were going on a field trip. We never went on field trips at this school. But I had heard of such things, seen them on TV. Marco tensed up as we walked past the office. I hesitated a bit, to see if we were going to stop. We didn’t. We kept going.

We came to the front gates and we saw the vans. Marco sucked in his breath real fast. He slowed down, stepped out of line, and pretended to tie his shoe.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

“Shhh...” he said, “I’m thinking.” He kept tying his shoe until the rest of the class had passed him. Then he joined the back of the line. I kept walking, but I glanced around behind me to see what he was doing. His eyes darted back and forth, from the vans, to the office, to the Teacher, to me. I shrugged my shoulders at him, and mouthed “what?” Teacher seemed like she was acting normal. She wouldn’t hurt us, would she?

Teacher said something I couldn’t hear, and then the first two kids in line, Farhad and Xuan Mai, went inside the first van. Here’s where Marco really started freaking out. I could see him looking at those vans like they were going to bite him. Thinking back, he must have been worried that he couldn’t see the kids coming out the other side of the vans, standing in their shadows, waiting. He just saw the first

couple kids go in, one at a time, and no one came out. It was one of those times when five minutes lasted forever. I looked at Marco and tried to smile at him. I don't think he saw me. His eyes kept shifting between the vans, the main office, and the gate.

Teacher started walking up and down the line. When she passed by, I asked her, "Teacher, what are we doing?"

I don't know exactly what she said, 'cause all I understood was "We are getting our blah blah blah blah tested." I looked at her with an empty face to show that I didn't understand. She pointed to her eyes, and then her ears. Then she took my hand and pulled me to peek inside the door. I saw Farhad with some giant orange earphones on and a man pressing some buttons. When the man pressed the buttons, Farhad would lift his left or his right finger. And Xuan Mai was standing in front of a big chart, holding a rice paddle covering one eye. The chart had a bunch of "E's" on it, some of them turned around backward, or upside down, some of them looked like "M's." A woman wearing a nurse's uniform watched Xuan Mai move her hand around to look like the E's. They finished and switched places. Then they went out the other door and waited. The next two kids went in. I exhaled, relieved. I got back into line and waited for my turn.

You see, for some reason, the school district that never had enough money for computer labs somehow had enough money to make all the students get their eyes and hearing tested in these vans. These vans went driving around from school to school. The school didn't care if the man in the van was going to tell you that you need glasses and your parents can't afford them: it's only important that they told you that you needed glasses. Which you had probably already figured out by that point

anyway, because you couldn't see the fucking chalkboard in the classroom. And they definitely didn't care if you'd never seen these vans before and your family doesn't have any papers and you think the government is going to kidnap you in the van and send you back to Mexico. They just want you to get in the van without any questions and turn your hands and fingers around. Now you know what me and Marco didn't know. The vans are supposed to help. They won't hurt you.

Teacher turned around and told the rest of the class to be patient; it would be a few minutes for each person. After I was done checking things out and walked back to my spot in line, I turned around to look for Marco. But he was gone. If he would've waited for just a minute more, I could have told him it would be okay. He could have watched me take the test first. I know Teacher would have let him watch at the door, like I did. But he didn't. He ran away with his backpack. He must have run all the way home, called his dad, and booked the fuck out of there. His house was all the way by the freeway. I hate to imagine him running under the bridge all by himself, the cars whizzing past his head, not knowing what to do, not knowing anything.

I didn't tell Teacher when I noticed that he was gone. I wasn't sure what to do when he didn't return. I didn't want him to get in trouble. First I thought that maybe he just went to the bathroom. But he was still missing, even after we came back to class. Teacher noticed the empty desk and said "where's Marco?" Nobody knew. She looked at me. She knew we were friends. I said in my broken English, "He went bathroom. Maybe feeling bad stomach? Maybe go home?" Teacher thanked me and started math. I saw her look out the window and then at her watch, and once we were

doing problems by ourselves, she walked over to the phone and called the main office. I don't know what the office did. Probably they sent a security guard to check the bathroom. And then maybe someone called his house. But the school probably didn't know that Marco's family didn't have their own phone. They shared the number with their next-door neighbor. Lots of immigrants do that. No one thinks about how expensive it is to get your own phone in the US.

As soon as I got home from school that day, I called Marco. The neighbor answered.

"Bueno."

"¿Sí, está Marco en casa, señora?"

"No, no está. ¡Ya se fueron! Toda la familia."

Marco didn't come to school again. The whole family had left. They didn't say a word to anyone. His neighbor said she saw them driving off in their pickup, the back full of their stuff. After a couple of days, and Marco still didn't show up, Teacher asked me, "Heriberto, do you know anything about Marco?" I told her that they moved. I didn't tell her why. She might think it was her fault. I didn't want her to feel bad. She was a nice lady.

I hope one day Marco found out that he was just going to put on little earphones and hear beeps, and then look at crazy Es and move his hand around. Otherwise, he'd be running from school for many more years; if he was even in the States anymore. We could've been lifelong buddies, me and Marco. We could've gone through the shit together and come out it all right. We could both be walking on water right now, maybe. Somedays when it's sunny out, I'll walk by a pickup soccer

game, to look and see if he's there. There's a lot of guys who look like they could be him. Short, dark, wearing a Real Madrid soccer jersey, fast on the feet, arguing between calls.

It's never him.

A Universal Truth: High School Sucks

Mrs. Seiffert's class blows. She stands there in her 1980s pantsuits and changes the overheads with notes already on them that are all old and faded. I bet you money she's been re-using the same ones for the past fifteen years. She reads every word out loud. Damn. This is what we do every class. She's killin' me.

I should listen to the lecture, copy the notes on the overhead like a good little monkey, *un alumno muy listo* like my mother keeps telling me. *Be a good boy, Heriberto. Make me proud.* But my mom forgets that our people weren't made for this bullshit. I should be eating burritos somewhere sunny and drinking beer from a coconut. I should be polishing my lowrider and working five manual labor jobs for minimum wage, like my Tio Juan. I should be like Comandante Marcos and be taking up arms in the jungle to fight The Man. But instead, I am in room 116 in Walt Whitman High School, listening Mrs. S read off her notes about The Corrupt Bargain of 1824. She doesn't even have anything good on the walls to look at when you're bored. Just some ugly-ass poster about using semicolons.

Pablo's on my right, Alejandra's across from him, Manveet's across from me. Usually I'm not so bored because we joke around, pass notes to each other, laugh at what Mrs. Seiffert is wearing. Or at least that's what I do with Pablo and Alejandra, because Manveet says she is a good Punjabi girl and needs to pay attention in class so she can get an A and be a doctor otherwise her dad says she will shame her family, so can we please leave her alone? Really, she is a grade grubbing kiss-ass who doesn't wear deodorant. And Pablo and Alejandra pretty much ignore me now, since they

started going out a couple weeks ago. They still say hi when they sit down, but as soon as Mrs. S starts one of her lectures, they're busy doing stuff like playing footsie under the table while they hold hands and make eyes at each other.

Yes, right now, right next to me, Pablo probably has his big toe all up in Alejandra's coochie. I almost got with her once, couple years ago, sophomore year, at this party. She was all into me until she said *I can only get with you if you have a car. Do you have a car?* Dumb ho. 'Course I don't have a car, I live in South Hayward, my mom's a fucking domestic, I have to bum rides from my cousin Chuy who's living on our couch 'til he can find something better. I sniff the air so I can get a whiff of Manveet's smelly pits because maybe that will make my boner go down.

"And when John Quincy Adams became president..." Mrs. S pushes her glasses up her nose. The light from the overhead projector makes her head get sweaty. Alejandra moans. I'm serious. It wasn't loud, just an itty bitty one, but dang, why they gotta get all nasty up in the middle of class? Pablo is smiling like the goddamn Cheshire cat. Manveet looks oblivious and is raising her hand. She's going to ask some question that she already knows the answer to so that Mrs. S thinks she's smart. She probably has no clue what Alejandra and Pablo are doing because all class she's been focusing on all of Mrs. S's pauses, waiting for the right moment to raise her hand and say something smart.

"Yes, Manveet?" Mrs. S puts down her pen and smiles. Manveet's questions don't make her work.

"Um, isn't it true that Andrew Jackson called Henry Clay 'the Judas of the West' after this election?"

“Um, yes, Manveet. I think you’re right.” Mrs. S. has got that blank “uh-huh” face on. She has no fucking idea who called who what. It’s not in her notes. Manveet does that. She’s pretty smart. Or else she probably looked all this shit up on Wikipedia before class. Either way, Manveet’s right. Mrs. S turns back to the overhead projector. She’s going back to her notes. Pablo is still smiling and Alejandra has her eyes closed. I can’t stand it anymore.

“Hey Mrs. S?” I half-raise my hand and start standing up.

“What now, Heriberto? Do you have to go to the bathroom?” She peers down and me from her stool. She only looks tall because she is sitting on that stool and we are all sitting at little tables with little chairs. But she’s not. I stood right next to her on the second day of school, when I walked up to the front to get an extra copy of something. She’s a tiny mouse of a woman. But damn, we’ve only been in class for two months and already she knows my game. She knows I have no questions about the lecture. I just want to get up. It’s her own fault.

“I need to sharpen my pencil.”

“Hairy-*bear*-toe,” is how she emphasizes my name, slowly, when she’s annoyed. “You’re interrupting. Unless you have an intelligent question about John Quincy Adams and the election of 1824, I suggest you borrow a pencil from someone at your table. I have to finish this. We have special guests coming.” The rest of the class stirs. The change in her tone of voice is waking them up.

I clear my throat. “Yes, I do have a question, ma’am. Is this important to know for life?”

Mrs. Seiffert sighs. “Yes. Of course it is. It’s on the test.”

“Why is this test important for my life? I don’t need a test. Can you teach us something not boring? When do we get to learn about Mexicans?” Now I got her. When your teachers are old and were from the 1960s, like Mrs. Seiffert, they feel guilty about brown people. I’m pretty sure that learning about John Quincy Adams instead of the Aztecs constitutes a violation of my civil rights in California. If she’s not careful, all the Mexicans and the black kids will back me up and get pissed off at her. Already, Jamel stopped doodling and is looking at her.

“Hairy-bear-toe. This is part of the pre-approved district curriculum. Mexican-Americans, such as Cesar Chavez, are also an important part of the curriculum. That is another unit of study for later in the semester. We are going in chronological order.”

That was a good answer. She’s had to answer that before, I think. I don’t have an answer back. I don’t know when the first Mexicans came to America. We were here first, weren’t we? If I was friends with Manveet, I could ask her to Google it for me. Damn.

“OK, Heriberto? I need you to sit down now and listen to the end of my lecture, please.”

She said please. She doesn’t want to offend me. I win. I sit down slowly, so she knows I’m listening, but I’m still going to do it my way, my timing. Alejandra and Pablo have stopped messing around. Alejandra smiles at me when I get back to the table. “Nice job,” she says. “Um, yeah, whatever, no biggie,” I say, because it’s sounds good, like I’m chill. Really, I don’t have anything better to say. I wish I did.

Mrs. S is almost done with her notes, nearly at the last line, when the classroom door swings open. In march the Marines. Really, it's like pomp and circumstance in our classroom. 2 p.m. sharp. I'm waiting for revelry. This means it's Friday, because every Friday, Mrs. S has special guests or a movie. We get thirty minutes of notes, and then special guests or a History Channel video take over the class, alternating every week, so Mrs. S can peace out for that last hour. Last week it was the Hitler childhood special. Before that, the associate director of admissions from the local branch of the California Culinary Academy. *The B-52 Bomber Exposé*. DeVry Technical Institute. *The True Story of Mary Todd Lincoln*. The Hayward Beauty School. Some Fridays I get the same special guests in my English and math class too. But in English class, Mr. Gardner shows us episodes of *Def Poetry Jam*, and in Math, Mr. Valdez gives us the *Standard Deviants*. After what Mrs. S just said to me about curriculum, I don't get how her special guests and the History Channel rentals lead us up to a chronological examination of the presidential election of 1824. It's a fair question. I'm about to ask her about it, when Mrs. S goes to sit down at her desk and starts doing her crossword puzzle.

These two Marines pushed the overhead cart out of the way, and are standing front and center. One is black, but light-skinned. The other is Latino. The special guests are almost always the right colors to match our school. From the looks of him, I'd say that the Latino might even be bilingual and speak in Spanglish to us, to prove he's down with the homies. That's what these cats are there to do.

"What do you want to do after high school, son?" The black Marine says it to Jamel. That's another trick they've got. Talk to the same color first. Pablo and

Alejandra are passing notes back and forth to each other. Manveet is highlighting Mrs. S's notes and stacking them neatly into her binder.

"I dunno. Go to college, I guess."

"Excellent answer, son. And did you know that the Marines will help you get there?"

"Uh. No?" Jamel doesn't know much about anything. I bet he couldn't even get into beauty school if he wanted to, and they probably have an affirmative action program for any guy who's not a faggot who wants to go. He told me last week he's failing this class, which seems impossible since we don't do anything but copy notes and then we use them for open-notes quizzes. *Pendejo.*

"Let me tell you how it works..." The black one goes into this big ole speech about the GI Bill. The Latino looks like he just got his buzzcut yesterday and hasn't really said much at all. He must be new. He's in training. He's just supposed to listen and learn. There's always one talker and one back-up. Alejandra passes me a note. *I bet you're smarter than him, too! Just like with Mrs. S, LOL.* Pablo saw the whole thing and is pretending that he doesn't care, he's secure. He puts his arm around Alejandra. She's looking at the Marines.

"Excuse me. Sir, yes, sir. I have a question." I raise my hand.

"Yes, son," the black one says. Son, like he's that much older than me. He looks like he just graduated from high school two years ago.

"Did you go to college?" Mrs. S looks up from her crossword and glares at me.

“Um. No, son. But the opportunity is there if I want to go. I *can* go, that’s the point.”

“So how can you stand there and tell us to join the Marines so we can go to college when you don’t even go? If the GI Bill is such a terrific reason to join the Marines, why haven’t you used it?” The class goes, “Oooooooo.” In this school, we clown like that. Gotta be quick with the comments and the comebacks.

“Heriberto, let them finish before you start with questions,” says Mrs. S.

I ignore her. “So if it’s so great because it helps us pay for college, why do we need the Marines to get there? We could get our own scholarships. Look at us. We’re all poor and brown. Colleges will love us. Hayward Beauty School just told us the same crap three weeks ago.” There’s a chorus of “yeahs” and “that’s what I heard” and laughter behind me.

The Latin one lifts his chin to me, the way my cousin Chuy does to say *wassup*. He’s trying to connect with me, as if the familiar gesture should command instant respect. But I know my rights.

“Don’t you guys feel bad telling more brown people to go out there and die so maybe they could go to college one day? George Bush didn’t let his twins go to no war. I want to know how you feel about that.”

“*Cálmate, cabrón,*” pipes in *Señor Marinero*.

“Son, just be quiet first, and listen and learn. Maybe you’ll learn something about honor, strength, and dignity,” says the black one. *Ooooooh* echoes the class. All eyes are on me now.

The next thing I said, I didn't really mean; but I had to defend myself. All those years of back-and-forth with the guys made it no big deal.

“Do your moms know they raised a couple of oreo, coconut, muthafuckin’ sell-outs? That’s your honor, to come up here to our classroom, settin’ up your own people to get killed? Fuck the Marines. I’d rather live.” A loud, collective, *DAMNNNNnnnnnn* echoed in the classroom. I win.

Mrs. S stood up and threw her crossword down on the desk so she could point to the door. “Hairy-bear-toe Martinez. Get out of my class *right now*.”

The Marines didn't look frazzled at all. Neither did I. Probably we all were, on the inside. But we'd had enough training to hide it.

Outside it's bright. The sun beats down on my shoulders while I sit on the bench in the quad. The quad is empty. There's no one around to commiserate with, to pout with, to take me away. Even Moe is missing, the security guard, who's supposed to walk around and make sure kids are in class. Fuckin' Mrs. S. That stupid bitch wastes my time for ninety minutes a day. That's four hundred and fifty minutes a week. In a month that's gotta be like umpteen hours of my life where I've learn nothing good, except what Alejandra sounds like when Pablo hits the right spot.

I'm supposed to walk to the office and wait for processing. Instead, my feet take me off campus. It doesn't matter. If it's like last time, Mrs. S will forget to call the office and I'd just end up sitting there for an hour before anyone knows why I'm there.

It's Friday and that was my last class. Fuck it. I'm walkin' home.

Why I Need To Leave Hayward

My feet always know the way home, without even thinking. Through the teacher parking lot into the back gate of the school, and through the field that has no houses, just a bunch of weeds and trash that blows in from the street. Around the fence that protects the garbage in the 7-11 parking lot, the 7-11 without the Citgo gas station but that has the old man who stands outside and sells *atole* when it's cold outside. Past the apartments that always smell like curry. Down my block into the neighborhood that the news says is scary but really, not much happens on my street. The Asian lady across the street grows purple shit in her yard and tells people to stay off her sidewalk. There's the old black guy up the street who calls his porch a "stoop" and tells us to call him Smiley even though that's not his real name. He watches the neighborhood. All up and down the street, sometimes on the sidewalk or the lawn, there's lots of cars that people fix up and talk about how they rescued it, where they found the part that saved it, how long they've had it.

Our house is okay-looking. Me and my cousin Chuy are supposed to keep the yard up, but mostly it's just me doing it 'cause he's always working, or he's fried, or he's working on being fried. My uncle and me painted it yellow like four years ago and my mom puts little things in the yard that we pretend not to be embarrassed of, like a statue of Pancho Villa, and an ugly ass, brown ceramic rabbit. I want to tell her why can't we just have flowers like that Chinese lady? But she works hard to buy this ugly shit and it makes her happy.

No one's car is in the driveway but I know Chuy's home rolling j's and getting stoned because the dank smoke hits my nose before I even open the door. He's sitting there on the couch with the Court TV on, but not really watching it. He's looking a little rough. He's making a face when I open the door, like his inhale hurt his lungs or something. Probably he laced his shit with something. Tio Juan and mom won't be home 'til after dark. I look at the clock. It's only 2:30. I bet Chuy just woke up. Or else he's been just been lying around in his shorts all day. Either one is a possibility. His black hair is sticking out all wild. He looks like that picture of Saddam when they pulled him out of that hole, if Saddam was young and Mexican.

"Dude. You're home early. What'd you do, cut your last class?" He lights it and takes a hit. "Damn, that was the last match. Can't find my lighter. Want some?" He holds out the joint.

"Man, bitch kicked me outta class." I wave his offer away with my hand. *Don't wanna end up all strung out like you.* Chuy put all kinds of powders in his joints. When money was good, it was coke. A little tighter cash flow meant angel dust. In hard times, some shit like embalming powders, tricks like that he learned from his white-trash tweaker friends. Since he was currently living on our sofa, I'd say it was hard times. Thanks but no thanks.

"What'd you do?"

"Nothing. This Marine came to class, talkin' all this shit. I said something to him, got busted by my teacher. I left."

"Shouldn't have done that, *pendejo*. You seen my lighter?" Chuy could never find his shit because he left it all over the place. Wherever he walked he left a deposit.

Jeans in the bathroom, razor on the porch, dirty plates on top of the TV. The only thing he kept good track of was his weed. Tio Juan knows that Chuy's selling *mota* but he doesn't say anything because at least this time, Chuy's not selling it from the house, and he's trying to be responsible and not eat all the groceries. He even bought a chicken last week.

"What you got against the Marines?" He pats his pockets, feels under the couch cushions. Pulls out some used Kleenex. A pen. Finally, his lighter.

"I don't know. Nothing, really. Just fucking around. I was bored."

"I used to be like that in school. Always fucking with my teachers. You should know better. You're smarter than me. Use your head *carnal*." The tip of his joint turns to ash as soon as he inhales. He doesn't notice it fall onto the couch.

"You're gonna burn our muthafuckin' house down, ashin' all over the couch."

Chuy ignores me and lights up some more. He holds the smoke in for a long time before he blows it out in little ringed puffs. He's starting to feel it. His eyes get droopy. "Hey, you know what you should do?" He says it all excited, like he's just found out how to make a million dollars by taking a shit every morning. "You should join up with them Marines. 'Member my buddy Paco?"

"Yeah, Paco. Fat one, always working on his car, always getting fired?"

Chuy laughs and snorts in. "Yeah, him. He went in after we graduated. Got that GI bill. Now he's got a real job, wears suits. Bought a Beemer last year. Cash. Not the dealer-looking kind. The yuppie kind." That GI Bill again. Fuck the GI Bill. He takes another hit, 'til the paper burns to his fingers. He starts feeling around the

coffee table underneath all his *Playboys*. He's looking for his roach clip. "Dude, where your mom keep her tweezers at?"

"You can't have her tweezers. You'll lose them and she'll get pissed."

"Damn. You're harsh. You need to get laid son." Chuy closes his eyes.

"Fuck you, I laid 'em down last night while you were here with One Eyed Willie and Mary Jane."

This makes him laugh again and he can't stop. Laughs come out of him like burps when he's high. And then I know what's next, until he falls asleep. He gets ideas. Big ideas that he thinks are fucking brilliant, and he'll keep talking about them, keep excited over nothing, 'til he passes out. His big idea last time was to call all of his ex-girlfriends to find out if any of them were rich and single. He tried to sweet talk the ones that sounded like they were doing well, to get back with them. My job was to listen on the other phone line and take notes on each one, because he knew he'd be too high to remember who he talked to and what each one had said. I think each conversation only lasted about one minute, 'cause he started off by saying, "Hey. It's Chuy. What you doing now? Got a job? Car? Maybe I could come live over there with you. We were good together, 'member?"

"Hey!" he looks at me with big eyes. Here it was, today's genius idea. "I've got an idea."

"What?"

"Go get the phone book."

"We don't have one."

“Yes you do. I saw it in the kitchen. Your mom puts it under that side table ‘cause I broke the leg off that night I kicked it.” That happened about a year ago. Chuy was high, of course. On what, I don’t know, but something that he doesn’t do anymore, ‘cause he hasn’t acted that crazy in a long time.

When I give it to him, he flips through it like he knows what he’s looking for. “The Marines aren’t under ‘M,’” he says.

“They won’t be under ‘M,’ dumbass. Probably they’re in the government pages in the front.”

“See how smart you are? What are you doing stuck in this fucking hell-hole? Fuck Hayward. We need to get you out of here, get you a career, a future, my boy. Listen to me, I know better.” A laugh erupts as he finds what he’s looking for. “Gimme the phone.”

“No way. Lie down and sleep it off.”

“Nah, man. This is best idea I’ve had all day. I’m planning your future, *carnal*. You should be thanking me.” And I think he meant it. He looked so proud of himself. He was even sitting up straight on the couch, and smoothed his hair out with his hands. He was serious. Even though he kept laughing. “Bring me the phone, jackass.” He kicks me, boxes my ears to remind me that he’s bigger than me and that he can.

I bring him the phone. He dials. He gets up and walks into the bathroom and locks the door.

“C’mon, man,” I say, but he doesn’t listen to me. I knock on the door ‘til I hear him talking to someone, then I stop so I can listen. He’s telling them about me,

giving them my name, my birthday, what school I go to—all while he's taking a piss. He comes back out and holds the phone out. "They want to talk to you."

"I'm not talking to them."

Chuy grabs my arm and gets his face into mine. "Yes you are, man. I took all the trouble to set up a nice conversation." He giggles but tightens his grip on my arm. Then he punches my chest with the phone. "Talk."

"Dude. You better wash those nasty hands. You just touched the phone with it, *cochino*." Chuy giggles again.

"Hello," I say. The clock says it's 3 p.m. I don't think that those two guys from my school haven't had a chance to get back to the recruiting office, which is good. I can talk to this guy. He doesn't know me.

"Is this Heriberto Martinez?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm Corporal Garza. Your cousin's got some great ideas about your future. We should meet up and talk about how the Marines can fit up into your plans. He said that you and he will come by the office tomorrow. 10 a.m. Sound good?"

"Um, well. You see, I don't really think I'm meant to be in military. My cousin is just a little excited."

"Excuse me, son." There they go with that "son" stuff, again. "All we're gonna do is talk. Just come in and talk. Talk about the possibilities. We won't make you sign your life away. You're a smart kid, I hear. Smart folks like you need to be in charge, go to officer's training. You can do it in college, we pay for your books, you

come out of college, and you're on top already. This is just one of the possibilities. For smart kids like you."

"Um, yeah." I don't know what else to say.

"So you'll come in with your cousin tomorrow. See you at ten. Just to talk."

"I guess." It's not like I was doing anything tomorrow morning. Plus, there's no way that Chuy would be awake and ready to go anywhere before the afternoon. He wouldn't remember, we'd probably miss the appointment, I just won't answer the phone if they call tomorrow. Everything would be fine.

"You won't regret this, son."

What a crock of shit. Even if I didn't show up, I felt a little nervous knowing that they had my name down. My birthday. Felt a little weird. The *pinche* government knows my info, Chuy just gave it to them. They were probably running all these weird checks on me already. Chuy wasn't even listening anymore. He was face down on the couch, drooling on the cushion. Fuckin' Chuy.

I turned off the phone, threw it on the coffee table, and took a hit off the last bit of Chuy's roach. Then I got up. What the fuck. I threw his fucking roach in the toilet and flushed it, watched it swirl around because the stupid shit was too light to sink, and sat on the toilet and wondered why I'm such a fucking dumbass. I sat there like this on the fucking john, wondering what I should tell Mama about what happened at school in case Mrs. S decided to call her, and should I tell her about the military, and I wondered what I did want to do with my life besides live in this shithole town, besides live clean so maybe one day I could work my way up to being

assistant manager at KFC or Target, no benefits. Maybe Chuy did have the right idea for me.

I don't know how long I sat there, but all of a sudden I noticed it was getting dark, and the porcelain on toilet was making my ass cold. In fact, it made my ass fall asleep, so I stumbled a little when I got up 'cause I heard Mama come in and slam the door and tell Chuy, *Hey flojero, get up and do something and help me make the dinner* and Chuy didn't do nothing but moan. I threw a bunch of toilet paper on the roach so it would sink down when I flushed it, and went out to give Mama a kiss.

Economic Anthropology 101

My roommate Jackson is a mystery to me. Well, actually, white people in general are a mystery to me—a new species, to be observed and studied. I don't mean that to be racial. I just never knew too many. There's hardly any in my neighborhood. My first days in college, I remember thinking *this is the most white people I had ever seen in real life*. I kept wondering if they were walking around, looking at me, thinking the same thing backwards, like “This is the first time I've seen a Mexican walk next to me without stopping to pick up my trash. How interesting.” And now I live with Jackson. Every white person in my dorm lives with a non-white person. They matched all of us up that way. It's our multicultural education, to make us socially interact and feel insecure about our own identities. Oh, Stanford.

Living with Jackson has added a new kind of white person to my anthropological studies. One whose existence had previously been mythical; that I had always doubted lived outside of TV: White Person Type Four. It's a nice, well-meaning type that can be a little insensitive, especially when it comes to money. You see, growing up hardly knowing any white people made it necessary to categorize them in order to understand them. Then, when I encountered one, I would know how to react. So before I went to college, I knew about three types:

Type One: White people who train brown people to do shit. Their mission, should they choose to accept it, involves showing inner-city kids how to be “academic” and win team sports. These are the kind of white people who

write books about their year in the hood, so you have to be careful what you say around them because you'll become a character in their novel. If they have to fight other white people to accomplish this mission, their story becomes a movie.

Type Two: White people who leave brown people alone as long as they don't cause them trouble: police, landlords, politicians, bosses. In good times, they leave you alone as long as you turn your money in on time, or look down at your feet while you talk to them—unless they tell you to look them in the eye. In bad times: watch out.

Type Three: White people who hate being white: like Eminem. They ride BMX bikes that are too small for them and talk like they're black and wear wifebeaters and have goatees. If they become your friend, you kind of forget that they're white, which I think is the point. You don't have to worry too much about this kind, unless they have a drug problem. 'Cause then you just gotta make sure they don't know you have anything nice at home like a plasma TV or they'll come over and jack it.

The new kind of white person, the Type Four, I am still figuring out. I'm not sure how to act around them yet. They're like the kind from TV, the ones I looked for in middle school, when I first got here. Apparently, they are real and don't really come into contact with brown people until they go to college or buy a condo. They're

skinny, wear collared shirts, go tanning, have moms who wear sweaters around their shoulders and dads who golf. They talk about taking years off to “find themselves.” At all ages. Some of them do it before college, some of them do it in the middle of college, or right afterwards, or when they change jobs, or when they have no jobs, or when they turn forty, or whenever. They want you to know that they are thoughtful and not racist, even though in class they’ll say things like “I think that the black people think _____ about Langston Hughes,” and don’t see why that’s a problem.

I am pretty sure that they put us into categories, too. I must be Jackson’s Hispanic Type Four. I say “Hispanic” because I don’t think he’s learned that in California we prefer Latino/a, because Hispanic’s okay to say in New York, where he’s from. His Type One is probably his menial-labor Hispanic. The maid, the McDonalds workers, the janitors. Type Two would be criminals, and to him, this includes illegal immigrants. Type Three would be the artistic, sexy types, like Salma Hayek, Ricky Martin, and Shakira. Hispanics who shake their bodies a lot. Type Four would be me and the one other Mexican in my dorm: the window-dressing Latin Horatio Algers, who validate the American dream so everyone can feel better, and make it okay for them to start sentences with phrases like, “one of my best friends is Hispanic, and he says....”

When I first met Jackson, our room door was already open, and I see this big-ass white boy in there. I was like, *damnnnnn* he’s tall. He’s about 6’3.” They don’t make white boys like him back home in Hayward, which is full of those Eminem types: small, scrawny, wiry little fuckers. Must be when you’re poor white trash and eating welfare cheese instead of steaks you don’t get enough nutrition. So this White

Person Type Four, they all dress like Jackson: khakis, polo shirts, stupid-ass Zach Efron haircut, with straightened bangs hanging down in his eyes. This is why I think I've never seen this type before. This type would have been driven to extinction in my neighborhood. He would've gotten his ass kicked everyday just for that faggoty ass haircut.

“Hey, I'm Heriberto. Heriberto Martinez.” I said. I gave him the intermediate-level Spanish pronunciation, rolling my Rs a little bit, but not too hard. I kept the silent H, but softened the T, 'cause I didn't want his head to spin from too much ethnicity at once. He still probably laughed on the inside, since I knew that to him, I probably sounded like one of those guys from the Spanish station who yell *Gooooooooooooo!!!!!!!* during the soccer games. “My name's Jackson. Jackson, err, Carnegie,” he adds, and we shake hands the regular way—none of those hand twists that me and my homies know by heart.

His parents aren't there and neither are mine. Judging from what I saw walking down the hall to my room, we're the only ones on our floor who don't have moms transferring a bunch of crap from suitcases into plastic organizers from Target. I guess Jackson must be one of these kids whose parents like to send them away to get a fine quality education—about three thousand miles away. But I don't ask him where his parents are because then he'll ask where mine are, and I don't want to have to make up some lie because I'm not ready to tell a stranger that my mom can't take off Saturdays because that's the day that Mr. and Mrs. L have their tennis doubles date and she needs to be at their place to clean their house and watch their twins and I have no real dad and this is the way it has been for the past nine years.

“I took this bed by the window. That all right?” he says, and I nod and start unpacking.

“Where are you from?”

“I’m from New York.”

“New York City?”

“No, upstate.” I don’t know what that refers to, so I have nothing else to say.

“You?”

“I’m from around here. Town called Hayward. It’s like thirty minutes across the bridge.”

“Must be nice to be near home.” I guess. I don’t tell him that I have no car and neither does my mom, so I have no reliable way of getting home unless I plan a few days ahead of time to have my Tio come and pick me up one day late after work, so being close doesn’t mean I get to go home and do laundry and get a nice home-cooked meal whenever I want. This would be too complicated for a first day conversation.

Ensnare the awkward pauses, followed by more predictable questions and more awkward pauses. We end up having the exact same conversation that I have with a hundred other people in our dorm that weekend. *Where did you go to high school? Where else did you get in to college? How were the parties in high school? Aren’t the parties here fucking amazing? I am so trashed right now. I got so fucking trashed in high school. I got five on AP this-or-that so I don’t have to take this or that class here. Yay for me. What classes are you taking? What’s your major? Who’s your roommate? What room are you in? Oh yeah, I remember seeing that on your*

Facebook. I don't even remember what Jackson had to say about all the rest of those things, but I do remember noticing that almost all his clothes were Abercrombie and he was the first white person my age I'd seen who didn't own any wifebeaters, and the first guy I knew that didn't bother with hair gels or creams, and that he brought more ties than a normal person our age should have. For those first couple of weeks, we got along pretty well, probably because we mostly talked about nothing, like what we ate for lunch, or which party we should hit up on Saturday, or how much studying we needed to do. We didn't talk about our families, our backgrounds, our differences. We didn't talk about money. Once that started happening, all the problems came out.

Probably I should explain that Jackson is the richest, whitest white boy ever. I'm not just saying that because my family was poor as fuck and so I think he's rich just because he has more than me. It's not a matter of comparative wealth. The boy is rich as fuck. Remember I told you? He's Jackson *Carnegie*. I didn't know his last name meant anything when I met him. Back home if someone's last name is Jefferson or Washington, that don't mean shit. The crackhead on my block who shits his pants and wears the same gray T-shirt with grease stains says his name is Bill Gates. My friend Javier, from down the hall, clued me in to Jackson's heritage after I'd already been living with him for a whole week. It was the day before classes, and I hadn't picked up my loans and paid my bill. I got some nasty email from the registrar telling me to take care of business.

I asked him, "Hey Jackson, where are we supposed to go to sign all those promissory notes and stuff for student loans? I just got this email saying I gotta go pay my bill. Did you do yours yet?"

“What loans?” He looked up from some printouts of the course catalog, a little puzzled.

“You know, like loans for school. To pay the bill.”

“Loans. Oh. Loans. Well, I’m not sure about that. Yeah, well, my dad has this guy, you know the finances, he takes care of all of that.” He went to his desk and started fumbling with some papers.

“Oh, okay. Well, I just thought everybody had to...” My voice trailed off as it hit me that maybe at this school, there were people who had so much money coming out their asses that their dads could write checks for thirty-five thousand dollars a year. And maybe I was living with one of them. No fucking way. Nine months of living in this room with me, eating crappy dorm food, and falling asleep in lectures, costing more than what my mom gets paid for a whole year of work: a year that she folds other people’s laundry with weary hands, chases artificially-inseminated twins on old legs, mops genuine hardwood floors on tired feet. What with my triple-threat status as a first-generation, poor, Latino college student, my bill wasn’t no thirty-five grand ‘cause I got a bunch of scholarships and grants that knocked down that total—but I still had to pay a couple thousand each semester for books, food plan, the health insurance, the extra computer fees—all those things that financial aid, plus the salary of my mother the domestic, and my uncle the janitorial sales clerk, doesn’t cover. Which meant loans and a work-study job in the library for me—where, even in sensitive California, no one thinks it’s offensive to refer to me as the “work-study kid.” It occurred to me that Jackson didn’t have a job at all, besides studying.

I walked down the hall, shaking my head when I knew he couldn't see me anymore, wondering who I could ask. Obviously, I needed to find someone like me: brown and poor. Brown, not black or yellow or red. Someone I could trust not to get weird and judgmental. Some black kid I didn't know would get all offended at my assumptions, coming at me with something like *what just 'cause I'm black you think I'm poor*. The Chinese kids all drove Beemers and Lexuses. They didn't strike me as the getting-loans type. There were hardly any red kids around, and shit, they're so rare I'm pretty sure they didn't have to pay a dime for anything, if they managed to get off the reservation. It's the least the government could do.

Javier was the only other Latino on my floor. There was a good chance he would know. He kind of reminded me of Marco, the way he came up to me the first day he saw me and asked me my name, the soccer posters he had on his walls, the way he was a little raw with manners. Javier was my age, but he already had a craggy face, a little pot belly, he dressed in weird shit like the science kids and old professors. Today he had on a Stanford sweatshirt with some dress pants and blue flip flops. If he wasn't the only other Mexican around, I would have made fun of him before I got to know him. Or maybe I never would have seen him; he's the kind of kid who's in the library a lot. But things were different here; there were just two of us. *Raza* had to stick together.

His door was open, so I could hear his *tejano* music blasting all the way down from the other end of the hall, that stupid shit with all the oom-pah tuba sounds. Dumbass. He was going to make everyone on our floor hate Mexicans.

“Turn that shit down, *puto*.”

He turned around and smiled. “What the fuck, *carnal*. Are you hatin’ on the music of our people? You sell-out coconut.”

“Tejanos aren’t my people. Fuck Texans.” We shook hands, blended our complicated exchange of shakes, punches, and grasping twists. It lasted several seconds.

Of course Javier knew where to pick up the loans and what to do, he’s poor, plus he’s physics major so he’s all scientific and organized and keeps a planner and shit. I told him about how Jackson acted all clueless. He didn’t seem surprised.

“Well, what do you expect, he’s a Carnegie.”

“So what. I’m a Martinez. You’re a Garcia.”

“So, you know, like from history class *pendejo*. Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, Carnegie? Didn’t you take AP, loser? How’d you get into this school anyway? Your moms had a special private meeting with the provost, didn’t she?”

“Fuck you. I left your mom at his house after I finished with her last night. That’s why he let your dumb Tejano ass stay up in this place. What do you mean, ‘he’s a Carnegie?’ You mean like a Carnegie-Mellon Foundation, Carnegie?”

“Like He’s-Fuckin’-Loaded Foundation Carnegie.”

“No way. *No mames, buey.*”

“*Órale, buey.* I don’t lie.”

When I got back to my room, Jackson wasn’t there, so I took a new eye to his stuff. Dirty towels and used books like everyone else. It didn’t look like rich-boy shit. If someone I knew from back home came into some cash, they would have gotten

their shit all blinged out, rolling up in the dorm room with silk sheets and gold toothbrushes. Educational note to self: Type Four does not bling.

Google verified the status of Jackson Carnegie. Jackson Carnegie, the great-great grandson of Andrew Carnegie, the first of the new generation of Carnegies to readopt the Carnegie last name, which had died out four generations ago when his only child, a daughter, married Roswell Miller. Bunch of links to robber barons, US Steel, Homestead Strike, Carnegie Hall, libraries and endowments. Jackson must be worth millions. Or billions. I couldn't believe that he doesn't have a bodyguard. In Mexico his ass would have been kidnapped and held for ransom already. With that thought, I stopped Googling him. In case he doesn't have a bodyguard because he's under surveillance. Which means: I'm under surveillance. *Back away from the computer son, real slow-like. We don't want any brown people to get hurt.*

When I see Jackson later, I don't say anything to him, mostly because I don't know what to say. Which seems to be the way he wants it. Like I said, he won't even talk cash with me, he just writes about it on the white board. The one we hung on our door for quick little messages to each other. Everyone in our dorm has one on their door. Call it primitive Facebook. At first he only wrote normal notes. Stuff like "Friday, beers, after class," or "Your mom called at 10 p.m.," or "Hey puto, wassup," 'cause he picked up some Spanish cuss words somewhere, and he thinks it's funny to try them out sometimes. Then one day we had talked about buying a microwave, and since he has a car, he went to Target and got it, and he left a note saying how much it was so we could split it. Then we had this little party in our room and he bought this bottle of tequila and left me a note to pay him half. That was all cool. But then he

started with this nickel-and-dime shit. I drank one of his Cokes last week, and he charged me for it. All right, I thought, I see how he is. That wasn't cool, but I guess it made sense. But today I came home from class, and this is what was on the door:

H—
59¢ Kleenex.
—J

He's not in the room, which means he's either in class or playing the guitar in the fucking hallway. He thinks that's the way to get pussy from those girls who go tanning and have straightened hair and giggle at everything he says. I would tell him that girls don't wanna get with him because he plays the guitar in the stairwell—they wanna get with him because he's a Carnegie. But I think he knows that shit anyway and I was raised better than that. There's a new box of Kleenex on his desk, and it's already open. I think I used two sheets of the last one. The week I had allergies. He acted all cool about it too. He had the windows open and I started sneezing, and then he closed them and asked me if I wanted some Kleenex.

I don't know enough white people to know if this is normal. To help a brother out, and then charge him for it. Maybe he assumed that I kept helping myself to it after that and didn't realize that he had used the other four hundred and ninety-eight sheets by himself. All I know is that I don't see notes like this on anyone else's white board. Maybe it's not a white thing, it's a rich thing. Maybe I need to ask Javier to

help me devise a scientific experiment on Type Four white people, versus rich people in general. What is the dependent variable for his behavior? Whiteness or richness?

- White + rich = someone who asks for fifty-nine cents for two pieces of shared Kleenex
- White + poor = doesn't use Kleenex, probably uses toilet paper from the bathroom
- Non-white + rich = orders specially-scented Coolwater Cologne Puffs and keeps them in a gold case with a chain that hangs out their Rocawear pants.
- Non-white + poor = borrows two sheets of Kleenex and then owes money to the white and rich.

Well, I'm thinking that my scientific analysis is already leading me towards the following conclusion: Fuck Jackson and his fifty-nine cents.

“¿*Qué tal, puto?* Wassup?” Javier pops into the room, grinning. We stop by each other's room at some point everyday now. It's nice to know someone who understands me around here.

“I'm looking at this goddamn box of Kleenex.” I'm shaking my head. Man, this is pathetic.

“Ha ha, I saw the note. What the fuck? It's a joke, right? He's kidding, right?”

“I don't know man, he's getting weirder and weirder about this stuff. I don't charge him for using my shit. Your roommate do that?”

Javier picks up Jackson's iPod and starts circling through it. "Nah, my roommate don't use Kleenex. We both just grab toilet paper from the bathroom. What is this shit music he listens to?"

"I dunno. Bunch of bands I never heard of. They got names like the Flying Ass Monkeys. Put it down, he'll think you're trying to steal it."

"Maybe I should steal it. He'll just charge you for it." Javier chuckles and rifles through my snack stash. He starts eating one of my Pop-tarts out of the package.

"That Poptart will cost you seventy-five cents, *puto*."

"I'll trade you for one of my Snickers bars later. Hey, why don't you charge him back for using your shit? You just said he uses your stuff. What you got on him?"
Javier's fucking brilliant. That's a pretty hilarious idea.

"*Órale*. I don't know why I didn't think of that. Let's see. I gave him a couple of quarters last week to finish his laundry." I had to show him how to use the machine too. I was surprised he wanted to do it himself. The other rich boys just sent their laundry out and got it delivered back. I was impressed. But that was last week.

"See! If you charge him back, you just owe him nine more cents. *Simon, ese*. I need a beer for this Poptart." He starts rooting around Jackson's fridge. "Which ones are yours?"

"Those cheap-ass Natural Lights. The Sam Adams are his. Dude, don't you have class later?"

"Yeah, but it's easy. O-chem. I took the AP last year. I only got a four so they told me here it wouldn't count for credit, can you believe that shit. Only taking fives

here. Whatever. I already know all that shit. I get the highest scores on all the problem sets.”

That’s what’s crazy about this college. People like Javier take classes that kick my ass, but he can show up with a beer buzz and still ace it. He pops open the Natural Light. “What else can you hit him up for?”

“On Monday he ate my Doritos.”

“How much of the bag did he eat? What size bag was it? Let’s be mathematical about this shit, *ese*.”

“Like a third of one of those ninety-nine cent bags from 7-11. I had already eaten a bunch and he finished it.” I grab a beer, too. Fuck it. I just have a history lecture. I won’t have to think, just listen and take notes with four hundred other people, half of whom will be falling asleep.

“So ninety-nine cents and he ate a third: he owes you thirty-three cents. With the quarters, that’s eighty-three cents he owes you. Subtract that fifty-nine cents. That *gabacho* still owes you money! Twenty-four cents! Ha! Let’s chug this shit. *Salud!*” says Javier, clinking his beer can with mine. We laugh and I erase Jackson’s note on the white board and leave him a new one.

J—

59¢ your Kleenex
-50 fm laundry quarters
-33 fm 1 bag Doritos

U owe me 24¢

—H

But as I'm writing it, my drink gets caught in my throat a little bit. The words are there for everyone to see. I'm a dick. But he started it—so he deserves it—right? I chug but I don't finish. I tell Javier that I have to finish some reading before class starts, so I can be alone. Jackson's not that bad, except for these little notes. Fuck.

"All right, I'll catch you later *carnal*." Javier tosses his beer can in the trash and yells, "Come by later and get your Snickers. I'll give you two. Don't be leaving Poptart and beer bills on my white board!" as he walks out.

I lay on my bed with a book out and the door open. The white board is harder to see that way. I think about erasing it, but my eyes are hazy from the beer and it's making me a little bolder. I'm not used to it in the middle of the day on an empty stomach. In a few minutes I'm closing my eyes for a nap and I don't care who the fuck sees the white board. Why should I back down? He's gotta learn, and if I don't take a stand against this shit now, he won't stop with it. I feel bold until I hear voices close to the door. They stop. I sit up and pretend to be very engrossed in my book. Jackson's back and he pushes open the door with his elbow, the guitar in one hand, some girl in the other. If I wasn't annoyed at him, I'd be impressed. He pauses at the white board and looks at me. Probably 'cause of the note, but maybe also 'cause I'm still holding a beer can with my book out in the middle of the afternoon.

"Dude. You're funny," he says finally. He drops the girl's hand, and I watch him flop what must be at least a four hundred dollar guitar onto his dirty, rumpled bed. The neck of it almost grazes the wall. This is the guy who wants fifty-nice cents for two sheets of Kleenex. What the fuck.

“Yeah? Well, I think we’re both funny.” Stellar comeback. I finish the beer for courage.

“Not too early for that?”

“Nah, man, I can hold my own. I’ve been drinking Coronas since I was six.”

Which is sort of true. My uncle let me taste his beer when I was six, but I didn’t really starting drinking ‘til the end of eighth grade, at a party, ‘cause everyone else was. Then I think *great, I just gave Jackson the idea that my family is nothing but a just a bunch of drunk-ass Mexicans.* Which they sort of are, but that doesn’t mean that’s what I want him thinking, sorting my family into Hispanics Type Twos. We don’t know anything about each other’s families, now that I think about it.

“Really? That’s cool,” he says with what almost sounds like a little bit of envy. The tone of his voice softens my attitude a little.

The girl doesn’t come in; she’s stepped back into the hall to avoid our awkward confrontation. Or maybe she thought she and Jackson were about to hook up and I spoiled it by being home and now she’s embarrassed. Whatever. She lingers by the door and studies my math problem intently.

“Hey Anja, come in.” Jackson calls.

“Oh hi, I’m Anja,” and she stands there in supertight jeans that must have taken all morning for her to pull on, and won’t be that easy for Jackson to get off. She’s one of his usual: skinny, straight hair, big tits that are tastefully covered with lots of pink, fluffy things going around her sweater. Type Fours stick together.

“Hey. I’m Heriberto.” I say it with the full-on accent. Jackson gives me the eye. He knows by now that I usually only do that with other Spanish speakers. He’s

wondering what it means that I introduced myself this way. I am too. I change gears. It's not her fault we're dicks. "How do you guys know each other?"

"I live next door." She means the dorm next door. "I saw Jackson playing the other day and thought I'd join him. James Taylor rocks my world." Okay, I thought I could be nice to her until she said that. James Taylor, Neil Young, Paul Simon. Flat, whiny music I never heard of 'til I came here and everyone plays it really loud out of their room to show each other they all know the same songs. Fuck old white music.

And then...Anja sneezes. Perhaps out of nervousness. Or it could be the trees and their pollen shit flying around through the open window. They got so many green plants and flowers and stuff outside, the gardening bill must be paid by Jackson's tuition. Actually, it's probably costs a lot more than that, and Anja probably sneezed because of the ridiculous fake fur shit on her sweater.

"Bless you," we both say to her.

"Want a Kleenex?" offers Jackson.

If I hadn't had the beer, if I hadn't already been a little irritated by the money and the James Taylor and maybe even a little jealous that Jackson gets all these girls to come back to the room just by sitting around in the hall being a douche bag, I might not have said what I said next. I might have let it slide and let the white board exchanges go on for weeks, paying fifty cents and not caring, remembering that he was a pretty cool roommate otherwise, especially for a white guy. But all those things already did happen. So I didn't let it slide. I give myself permission to embrace my inner prick. Instead, I said, "Anja, wait. Do you have thirty cents?"

"What?"

“Thirty cents. That’s how much one piece of Kleenex costs from Jackson Carnegie.”

“Oh, like on the board?” She chuckled. I laughed too. She probably thought it was an inside joke between us guys, and now she was a part of it. I was making her feel comfortable, letting her in on it. How considerate. Jackson did not appreciate it. He wouldn’t look at me and his face turned red. I laughed harder and pointed at him to make sure he knew I was laughing at him. He put the box down to look at me, just as she was reaching for one. “We’ll talk about this later,” he said, his voice low.

“No, *puto*. Let’s talk about this now. I’m not coming back here later to see more notes on that white board about ten cents. That shit’s just wrong.” I put my book down and stood up, crumpled my beer can with one hand, and then tossed it into the trash can, hard, for emphasis. It missed. I didn’t pick it up.

“Dude. Calm down. Forget about it. Anja, let’s go to your room instead.” Anja was already walking out. Rushing out. He followed her. She would probably go and tell all her roommates how she went to Jackson’s room and his Hispanic roommate was all drunk and got loud with poor Jackson, and all he did was offer her a Kleenex.

I yelled after him. “I ain’t calming down until you get real. Charging me for Kleenex? What, I’m supposed to forget about it when you owe me money, but not when I owe you? Some roommate. Must be how all you people are.” But I don’t know if Jackson heard what I said, because as soon as I started yelling, he slammed the door behind him. I heard the white board fall off the door and land with a thud in the hall. Good. The fucking thing can stay there. And every nosy ass fucker in this dorm can talk about it.

Our first roommate fight. Other people have had little ones, and gotten over them. I made another anthropological note to myself: Type Number Four avoids confrontation, especially if there's yelling involved. On a normal day, I guess would too. I picked up the beer can. I wondered if it was a bold move or a big mistake to have a fight with a Carnegie over fifty-nine cents. Lying on my bed, I thought about my family and missed the kind of people who don't nickel and dime people for little shit: you just owe each other because everyone's just supposed to help each other out. But maybe that's why we never have any fucking money, and why no one in my family has ever been a Carnegie.

I skipped my fucking history lecture, staying home to watch the sun make shadows through the slats of my blinds. I rooted around in my fridge to find my last Natural Light. It took many hours for the shadows to move across the floor. That's about all I needed to learn for the rest of the day.

4: Submerged

Today, the kingfishers and the herons dove for shrimp, calling each other to breakfast on the Khao Lak shore. So this morning, the boy awoke to the squawking caws of sea birds. Some mornings it was things in the house that woke him, like Mother's humming or the baby crying. If he slept late, it would be the tourists shouting loud words to each other on their mopeds. On the most peaceful days, if it were very early and all else still, it could be the waves lapping at the shore, in and out, in and out. But today it was the birds. This meant a good day for fishing for Bot and Lek, judging from the birds' success. Bot nudged his brother, nuzzled next to him in the hammock, the ropes swaying from Bot's movements.

—Get up, lazybones. Father's getting ready to take the tourists out.

—I'm tired.

—Last night he said we could go fishing.

Lek did not answer, but he opened his eyes and blinked them slowly, stretching his eyebrows. He tried but could not blink the sleep away.

—OK, lazybones. Don't complain that I didn't invite you.

Bot leaned over to let himself out of the hammock without disturbing Lek. He shuffled over to the door, peering through the curtain that divided his family's space from the front of the dive shop. Father was already out there, talking to the shop owner, Khun Jenkins. Or Mr. Jenkins, to say it the English way, the way they learned to say it to the tourists. His whole life, the boy had never seen Khun Jenkins without a sunburned face or an unbuttoned shirt. He always called the boy by his full name,

Sasithorn, instead of his nickname, Bot. “Sound like a ro-Bot!” he would say, none of his family knowing the subtleties of English to get the joke, but understanding that they were supposed to laugh because Father’s employer was laughing. Khun Jenkins let them live in the back of the shop after he bought himself a place up the hill behind Khao Lak beach. Now they didn’t have to ride in on Father’s moped all the way from the village. That made them luckier than the rest of their relatives, who crammed themselves into trucks or four or five onto a moped, grocery sacks dangling on arms the whole way, hanging on for thirty minutes there, thirty minutes back. Bot never liked riding like that, wondering if they would all tip over when Father rounded the corners. Mother no longer worried about the cost of cooking gas, because Khun Jenkins kept it on for them. Father stopped worrying about paying a landlord. Father was happy with the agreement that he and Khun Jenkins had struck: *I deal with the tourists, you drive them, right old chap?* Father had paid off nearly his whole boat loan by doing this.

Bot liked Khun Jenkins. He always had a smile and a joke, sometimes a lesson. But usually the smiles and lessons were directed at Bot with jokes, and it was too early in the morning for his teasing. He’d ask Father where they were going later, once the driver brought the tourists from their hotels and Khun Jenkins was dealing with them. The boy walked out the back door to find Mother. He was hungry.

—Put on your flip flops.

— Yes, Mother.

Bot always thought this was funny, her worrying about his feet. In the old days, he only wore his shoes to school, never outside. He had to make them last.

Now, Mother thought of his feet all the time, every time he left the wooden deck of the shop, checking to see if they were covered. His baby sister bounced in the sarong strapped on Mother's back, while Mother stirred up the fried rice in two different woks, a giant round spatula in hand, switching between them, throwing spoonfuls of fish sauce into both, adding fresh chicken and strips of pork and chunks of vegetables into the one for the tourists; a few little bits of last night's leftover roasted chicken and dried shrimps into theirs. The greasy aroma would linger in her hair later, and Bot would enjoy smelling it there. She had cut open a papaya, a sweet one. Pieces arranged in rows on the counter. Bot helped himself to one.

—Coconut pudding?

Bot smiled and took the little bowl. The last bit from the night before. Mother had made it for Christmas. They were not Christians, but Khun Jenkins was, most of the tourists were, so they all got into the spirit. Thai people love all holidays. What was not to like about celebrations? With Christmas, there were lights, songs, the funny fat Santa Claus. Yesterday, Khun Jenkins gave them each a bright red hat to wear on the dive boat, even though he complained it was the wrong color for Father Christmas. They didn't know what he was talking about, but they liked them so much they wore them all day, even though it made the sweat rain down his forehead. It's not exactly like what we do in Jolly Old England, but it's still nice to do, Khun Jenkins explained a long time ago. He remembered a lot about the ways of Jolly Old England, even though he never went back there. It was his idea to roast a chicken last night, since there were no geese in Phang Nga Province. What's a Christmas goose, Bot had asked him. Exactly, said Khun Jenkins, laughing. This was his usual way of

answering Bot's questions. Mother and Father explained that foreigners enjoyed complications.

Bot finished his pudding.

—Father said I could fish with him today.

—Don't tell your brother. I want him to stay here and help me today.

Bot didn't mention that he had already told his brother. Because then Mother would make him be the one to tell Lek that he couldn't go, and he hated to disappoint his little brother. There was the chance that Lek was still asleep and it wouldn't matter anyway.

She started packing the lunches for the dive boat into Styrofoam containers. There were six. She recounted them, then added one more. One for Bot. He washed his bowl, his belly happy. The grind of the shop's pickup truck echoed out front. Khun Jenkins went to greet the tourists. Soon, Femke, the divemaster came in all jangly: jangly with her ankle chain, jangly with the beads in her funny hair, jangling her piercings, her voice jangly with her Dutch accent as she talked to the tourists in English, helping them to gear up. Bot tiptoed towards the front of the shop to join his father, being extra careful not to awake Lek. It didn't work. He was already up.

—Where are we going fishing, Bot?

—I'm not supposed to tell you. You're supposed to stay here, with Mother.

—Aw. C'mon.

Fishing would be more fun with Lek. The brothers connived to get themselves both on the boat. It would involve convincing Mother that they both must go together; it might mean getting the whole family to go. They chattered with excitement. They

liked to be with the tourists. The tourists came to the island to have fun, they were always happy. Or at least they were like Khun Jenkins, pretending to be happy. Bot thought about the jokes he would make with them and smiled. He hummed, thinking of how proud his family would be to eat the big fish he would catch for supper.

Outside, their father hoisted dive tanks into the shop's wheelbarrow and began hauling them to the dock. Femke nodded to the boys as she collected the packed lunches and followed the captain. Khun Jenkins settled into his hammock on the shop's porch and chatted about fish identification with the tourists. He started in on his first gin and tonic, or his "morning coffee" as he liked to say. On the beach outside, wrinkled Russian matrons and Italian *signorinas* began loosening the strings around their bikini tops; the local fisherman netted the shore and peered at the loose white flesh from the corners of their eyes. The sun rays dabbled the water's edge in oranges and pinks.

Like everyday on in Phang Nga province, it was a good day to dive. And fish, thought Bot, as he and Lek scurried around, gathering their fishing gear.

Melissa steadied herself on the weathered wooden railing as she walked down the side of the dive boat, reminding herself that (1) she was on vacation, (2) she was lucky enough to be gazing at the Andaman Sea, and (3) after the dive she was going to have the most lovely hour-long massage in the comfort of their air-conditioned hotel suite. She didn't know how many miles offshore they were, but it had taken about an hour to get out here in this old boat. The island of Khao Lak had taken thirty

minutes to disappear behind them, even though it would have only have been ten, maybe fifteen minutes in a speedboat. Melissa picked this dive company after seeing the boat dock on their first afternoon on the island. She liked the older boats; they were charming, they were sturdy. She enjoyed the slower ride out, sunning on the deck, having time to read, the bumps in the sea less precarious, less frenetic. Their boat could hold twenty, maybe thirty divers the way these companies figured out how to cram people onboard, but there were only four other divers on the boat today. And this was the busy season. Maybe because it was the day after Christmas. Families were already spreading out on the beach that morning, staking out a good spot to while away the day.

She inhaled, concentrating on the enjoyable, taking in the morning. The sun emerged from the clouds. Cerulean waters twinkled from blues into greens and grays as the ocean horizon became more endless, from all directions of the boat. She admired the elegant dance of the sea birds flitting from the island. The warm, blanket of humid air pressed against her skin. The crisp salt of the sea dried on her lips with the wind. She rubbed her belly, still full of hotel breakfast. Banana crepes. Juicy pineapple spears. Thick rice noodles fried up with fish and Thai ginger. Strong coffee sweetened with a dollop of condensed milk.

The whirr of speed boat motors interrupted her daydreamy view of the horizon. The leading boat flew a German flag underneath its Thai one. The other, a Swedish dive boat. Both were loaded with dive gear and tourists, so fast and heavy they left wakes behind them that took several minutes to fan out and blend back into the regular churn of the ocean. Her spirit tried to fan out with it, become more

generous. Melissa waved at the other divers. Red and pink Germans and Swedes, their entire bodies wearing the effects of days without sunscreen. Overweight Americans in Santa hats, bellies pushing at wetsuit zippers. Determined Japanese documenting every stage of today's dive journey with expensive, silver handheld devices. They all waved back. Melissa was tickled; her mood, improved. There was nothing to worry about today. A day to put the past behind her.

Charlie's voice called to her from the other end of the boat. She didn't answer. He walked towards her. So far, he had spent the ride up on the sun deck, most likely avoiding her, given her short fuse with him in the hotel room this morning. She tried to let go of the anger, but as the boat moved closer to the dive site, she found her anxiety mounting, a worry about a repeat of yesterday's events, another failure by Charlie to meet her expectations as her dive buddy, as her husband. She plopped herself down on the deck and pulled her sarong tighter around her legs. Live for today, they told her in yoga. Be positive, said her mother. Think from the perspectives of others, said Dr. Brown, their marriage counselor. But it was hard. Yes, she was neurotic and slightly paranoid, but Charlie was not mindful of her continued needs after the incident. For the past three months, she mentally divided her life into two time periods: before the incident happened, and after it. Charlie's disappearance yesterday did not help. That's exactly how "it" had happened in the first place, even though Dr. Brown reminded her that it happened because attackers are opportunistic sociopaths, not because Charlie assumed she was fine without him for a second. Dr. Brown wanted her to work on perspective, to understand that Charlie still viewed her the way she used to view herself: strong and secure. And Charlie was working on

being reliable, realizing that his actions had to match his words. This was the whole problem: they were both still working on it. She didn't want to work on anything. She wanted Charlie just to be there for her without processing, reminders, worry. He sat down next to her and kissed her on the cheek.

“I've been looking for you.”

“I've been here the whole time.” *Where else would I be, we're on a boat.* She heard Dr. Brown telling her to think before speaking when she was upset.

Rather than snap back as he might have, Charlie refused to engage her attempt to undermine his positivity. Dr. Brown was present in both of their minds this morning.

“Hey. I just wanted to show you something. If you want to use my GPS underwater, it might work. Look what I did. I put the GPS into this dry bag and then a Ziploc. I bet the satellite can track it if we're shallow....” Melissa tried to be patient and listen, reminding herself of what they discussed in the last session: that sometimes talking about nothing was Charlie's way to connect with her. But since jumping into the dive shop's truck that morning, Dan and Charlie had done little else besides discuss today's plans for keeping electronics dry one hundred feet below the surface. Sometimes his idle tech chatter was not, as analyzed in last week's session, “a coping mechanism that provides their relationship a semblance of normalcy”; sometimes it was just plain annoying. His earlier apology did little to reassure her that he would not repeat yesterday's abandonment of her as a diver, or a spouse. She wished he would put his arm around her and make everything okay, reassure her that he would be at her side the entire dive, nothing was going to happen on his watch.

There was no meaningful way for her to communicate this to him. If she told him what she wanted him to say, it would not be organic; he'd just be saying it because she'd told him to. And if he did say it only because she asked him to—but then he failed to follow through—that might mean that she expected him to be someone that he could never be. Or never was.

She tried to be hopeful. But he went on and on about his gadgets. The ocean splattered her leg through the boat's wooden railing, making it itchy. Nothing was alleviated by scratching her leg. He started saying something about the digital camera and asked her opinion about where he might loop it on his BCD during their dive. Then back to the GPS again. She grew irritated. *Why can't he just tell me what I want to hear instead of talking about his toys?*

“Can you program the GPS to help me find you when you disappear?”

Charlie stopped talking.

“Melissa. Don't start. I'm sorry. I really am. But I didn't leave you. I was just taking a picture. I came right back to you. You saw me the whole time. You could have followed me,” he said, sucking the air out of the Ziploc so the plastic around the GPS come up flush against the screen. *Look, I hermetically sealed it*, he would have proudly proclaimed, in the “before” days: the days before the incident, in which Melissa would not be fighting with him before a dive. They would have woken up wrapped in each other's legs, hands gliding under sheets, lips soft, mouths giving, bodies impatient—then lazed around in bed until breakfast. On a normal dive trip, Melissa would be laughing at Charlie's nerdy tech savvy, wondering how it would add to their underwater adventure, reviewing yesterday's dive photos and talking

about the fish they saw. Instead, when they were alone, they argued about something, anything; when others were around, Melissa brooded, trying to determine whether the solution to their problems lay in modifying her expectations, or accepting Charlie's apparent inability to live up to them. The incident had changed everything.

She didn't even know how to refer to the incident properly. "The incident" sounded too melodramatic; calling it a "near-mugging" somehow flattened out the experience; an "assault" was too journalistic, too clinical. So to herself, she usually just called it, "it." "It" best translated as the time that she and Charlie took the alley short cut on the way to dinner and she stopped to tie her shoe; the time he said "I'll be right back, let me just check the line" and he walked around the corner for less than sixty seconds to put his name in at the crowded restaurant; the time neither of them noticed the two men who brushed passed Charlie and stared at Melissa's big purse that sat on the ground while she tied her shoe and one of them snatched it, running; the time Melissa chased down a thief in the alley and got her purse back because that's the kind of woman she was back then, her rage making her forget about the other man as she wrenched her purse away; the time she couldn't whirl out of the grip of a man who decided that if they couldn't have the purse, he was going to teach this bitch a lesson; the first and only time a man squared her body in front of him with his gripping, smashing hands that bruised her shoulders, so that he could pummel her face with his fists; the time that she came to in an alley to the voices of strangers first, then Charlie, not being able to see him through her puffy, bloody eyes.

Everyone told her how lucky she was afterwards, and physically, she knew she was. But while her physical scars healed within two weeks, the effects on their

marriage carried over into months. *Where had you been*, she'd screeched at him. *Why didn't you do anything? Didn't you see those guys coming?* She no longer trusted herself, or Charlie, and their interactions were tainted by a neediness she had never had before. She expected doting, constant companionship, checking in at all times. He had managed it well enough for the first month or so following the incident. But he soon fell back into the ways of before. They had been a couple who had cherished their individual space, appreciated their moments of separation that allowed them to be independent but also celebrate coming back together. That's was part of the reason she had fallen in love with him. Finally a man who didn't want to rein her in, keep tabs on her—and who wanted the same in return. Melissa hated her new insecurity, and the fact that it forced her to consider whether Charlie would ever be able to be a person who could meet those needs. Her doubt led to many nights of their vacation ending in aching dissatisfaction for both of them, falling asleep to rolling ocean waves, wondering why the wife again refused the hands of her husband. Be patient, said Dr. Brown. She will open up to you when she trusts you again. Melissa did not appreciate the visual irony of his commentary.

“What's so difficult about remembering to stay next to me?”

“Sweetie, I knew where you were the whole time. Maybe you didn't see me for just a minute, like when I got that shot of that grouper. You saw it, right? It was the biggest one we've seen. I swam right back to you afterwards.”

“You know I'm not just talking about the dive.”

Charlie seemed to cringe under the fire of those words. She was blaming him again. He would probably bring this up in therapy next week, when they got back.

“Melissa, let’s just start today fresh.” He felt as if he had failed to nurse her back to health, and feared he would never measure up to her standards. Would he spend the rest of his life trying to make up for an unintentional failure? He was frustrated to think how long she would blame him for the incident. He beat himself up about it every day, and the best thing for both of them would be to get back to normal.

“That’s easy for you to say. I’m always paying attention to where you are. You don’t have to worry. Either stay with me or be dive buddies with someone else. Be Dan’s buddy. You guys would have more fun together anyway. I want to know that someone will be there for me if something happens.”

“Melissa. I will always be there for you.” Charlie hugged her to him, not knowing how else to say that without using the same tired expression, words, face, movements.

“You should always be thinking about those ‘what ifs.’ That’s what being there for me would mean. Being mindful. Paying attention. Seeing what could go wrong.” Her frustration made her face flush hotter than it already was, which she didn’t think was possible in ninety degrees of heat and humidity in the Thai tropics. Charlie’s arms fell back onto his lap. He fumbled with the buttons on his dive watch.

“Any dive could be just like that day that ‘it’ happened. Everything normal, until something happens. My tank could leak and my gauge could break and I could run out of air. My mask could come off and I’d be blind in the ocean. Or what if something happened to you? Will you stop playing with your watch and look at me?”

“I *am* looking at you. I don’t know what else to tell you. I’m sorry.”

Melissa knew he was sincere in his apology, that his words were not lies. But she also knew her husband's limits. No one but Melissa felt the weight of how "it" had changed her. Charlie was right—there wasn't really much else he could tell her. He would just have to show her.

In the background, Dan called Charlie, holding up his dive basket and gesturing at something. He and that other diver, that French guy, and the divemaster were already coming down from the boat's small sundeck to gear up. "I'll be right there," yelled back Charlie. Be positive, she told herself again. She analyzed the situation. He's not trying to get away from you and avoid conversation. He's responding to his friend. Give each other the benefit of the doubt, she heard Dr. Brown saying, mostly to her.

Melissa waved at Dan. He lifted his chin to acknowledge Melissa. "Hey Charlie, come here," he called again.

"I guess you'd better go see what he wants," she said, trying to be magnanimous, without sounding obnoxious. "I'll be right there." That sounded like the old Melissa. Charlie's heart grew hopeful.

"Thanks, babe," said Charlie, kissing her on the cheek.

The boat dipped up and down, the saline splashes staining Melissa's sarong before they trickled down the black plastic grip mat. She wanted to cool down for a second by herself, before going back over there. She needed time to work up a happy face, to remind herself that she and Charlie had once been more than a constant exercise in disappointment. If she didn't take the time to do this, she'd snap at Charlie in front of everyone as soon as she heard him and Dan resume their inevitable

comparison of underwater camera cases, instead of saying what she wanted to hear. They bought them together at the Sony store in Bangkok three days before, and like everything else they bought, kept comparing them to one other's to make sure they had made the right decision for themselves. Arguing in front of others would make it worse, even in front of Dan who undoubtedly sensed their tension, or the strangers on the boat, who she knew they would never see again. She breathed in and out, calming herself. The air felt cooler, washing relief over her face. Splashes tickled her ankles. The splashes that made her realize she didn't have her wetsuit on. She'd better get back to the group and get her gear together.

The damp edges of her sarong clung to her ankles as she walked past the captain's little hut in the center of the boat. Melissa saw the whole Thai family from the dive shop inside—two boys, and his wife holding a baby. The boys were readying their fishing gear. The older boy looked about ten, maybe eleven years old. He had random missing teeth; he smiled at her with canines missing. He was doing something to his bamboo fishing pole involving the wire, some kind of measurements, some kind of knots, Melissa not knowing enough about fishing to determine his task.

“You like look fish or eat fish?” he said, his broken English bringing a smile to her lips. He didn't wait for Melissa to answer before he laughed at his own joke. He repeated it in his language to his younger brother so he could laugh too. He thought he was funny, teasing her like Khun Jenkins.

“I like to do both. I dive to look at them, then I go back and eat one for lunch.”
Melissa answered.

The boy laughed again and turned to his brother to translate. The mom took the baby's arm and made it wave hello at Melissa. *Was this what a fulfilling life looked like?* Must be easy to living in paradise, floating on the water all day, fishing for dinner, playing with your kids. A life with no worries, she decided.

“You need to gear up now.” The divemaster's funny accent came up behind her. She was a Dutch girl whose name escaped Melissa, because she had nicknamed her “Dreadlocks” yesterday, after the girl's apparent failure to wash her hair over the past few months. The gnarly plaits on her head still looked wet from yesterday's dive. Dreadlocks would surely live in Thailand until the day her visa expired or she ran out of money to buy hash. Since Melissa spent all day on the boat and in the ocean with her yesterday, it was too late to ask Dreadlocks her real name—again. Melissa was hoping to hear someone call her by her name today, but that hadn't happened yet. She might ask Charlie later, if she could rid her voice of its impatient irritation.

“Hey. So you'll buddy up with your husband again today?” Dreadlocks asked Melissa.

“I guess so.”

“Tell him to stay together with you today, yah?”

“I know. He just likes to take pictures.” Melissa twinged. She wanted to run up to Charlie, pulling Dreadlocks behind her, saying “See. I didn't just imagine it! You took off! She saw the whole thing!” But she held it back, and congratulated herself on her self-control, her growing maturity, not needing the validation, remembering that really, Charlie had just gone over to take a picture. She walked over to Dan and Charlie, nodding at the Frenchman at the other end of the bench as she

looked at Charlie, who was now placing bets with Dan about whether the ziplocked GPS would continue to work underwater. “Ha! It’s working right now!” He leaned over the railing with the GPS under the surface of the water. “It’s not getting wet!”

“Killer.” Dan could only muster one word responses this morning, semi-recovered from partying with Dreadlocks the night before. This morning at breakfast, all he could say was “Dutch girls,” and shake his head. Dan had spent nearly the entire boat ride on the sundeck, eyes closed, telling the boat to stop rocking back and forth. At least he had lost that greenish tinge to his face. Last winter in Cozumel, he was so hungover on the dive that the motion of the current prompted him to throw up inside his BCD. The only positive of that dive was discovery that the breathing apparatus could still work, sixty feet under water, clogged with vomit. She was grateful for Dan, even if annoyed by the brand of conversation between him and Charlie. His presence covered up the awkwardness. They could fill up the silence between them with tech talk and Dan. It was better than looking at how they both had changed and filtering through the layers of disappointment.

“You almost ready?” Charlie asked Dan.

“Yep. All set.”

“How about you, Melis?” Charlie had noticed her.

“Almost. I think I have everything. I need to check.”

She zipped up her wetsuit, found her weight belt and fins under the bench, and then couldn’t find her snorkel and mask. She must have left them up on the sundeck. She went up to grab them, again noting the ocean, the gray clouds, the rolling waves, and reminded herself that she was lucky. Here she was, alive and able to go for a

dive, with the money to afford the luxury of a vacation, great company, great food, beautiful day. She came back down and the older Thai boy was standing with his fishing pole where Charlie and Dan had just been. She couldn't believe it. She had only been gone for a minute, maybe less. It was just like before. In a few seconds, he didn't wait. In a few seconds, he was gone. Had she just imagined their earlier conversation about staying together?

“Haha, he jump in, like fish! You want me catch him?” The boy giggled and pointed and called to Charlie. “Swim fish!” From the boat, Melissa watched the top of his and Dan's heads bob up and down, the outlines of their fins in front of them, poking up from the water below. Charlie waved at her. “The GPS fell in!” he called. “I had to get it! We'll wait right here!”

“Your buddy, he's in the water already?” asked Dreadlocks, who was reading Melissa's air tank for her, strapping on the BCD onto it and then lugging it out of the tank holder.

“Yeah, he's just excited. And he dropped something. See, they're waiting for us by the buoy,” Melissa was glad she was able to reassure herself with this explanation. Still, she wished he had gone in after it and then came back up on deck to help her finish getting ready.

“OK, well, how about we let him be buddies with his friend, since they are already together. You do the buddy-check with Jean-Pierre,” she gestured with her head towards the man Melissa labeled yesterday as the French Banker from Bangkok. They were the only ones left on the boat besides the captain's family. She was thankful that Dreadlocks had said his name aloud. Dreadlocks called to Charlie and

Dan, “You two, wait for everyone, do your buddy check out there!” Then she handed Melissa’s tank to Jean-Pierre. Melissa felt a bit awkward, since she hadn’t spoken to him at all during the whole boat ride, today or yesterday. Jean-Pierre took the tank and smiled at Melissa.

“Hello again. Your name, it is Melissa, I think?”

“Yeah, hey. Thanks for grabbing my tank.”

Melissa was grateful that Jean-Pierre didn’t ask why Charlie, her buddy, wasn’t there, nor why Dan, his buddy, hadn’t waited for him, either. She was tired of answering for everybody else. Well, at least he looks somewhat normal, she thought. The kind of guy who doesn’t shave everyday, but keeps his nailbeds clean. He was older than Melissa, maybe early forties. Taller than Charlie, more fit than other men his age. His wetsuit fit tautly around the bulges of his biceps; it lay smooth and straight around his torso. No love handles. He struck her as the kind of diver who ran laps on the beach to offset his beers that night.

“Yes, it’s just you and me. You have a lot of dives?” He was still smiling at her, as he finished putting on his fins. She liked his accent, although it made her smirk on the inside.

“About seventy. Mostly around here. You?”

“About the same. All over. Are you ready for the tank?”

“Mmmm, thanks.” Melissa tried not to giggle at the way he said “zee tanque?” and was surprised to find herself taking note of how the wet, sticky air made the ends of his brown hair curl up. Jean-Pierre didn’t need to bend his knees to hoist it up, gripping it underneath the nozzle with his right hand, and using his left hand to hold

open one of the flaps of her BCD, as if he were helping her put on an evening coat. Oh, he's one of those polite Frenchmen, she decided. The flirtatious, charming, suave kind. Melissa tossed out her earlier assessment of him as the Aloof and Rude Frenchman, which she had based mostly on the fact that he had spent most of the morning reading the *Economist* instead of talking to the other divers.

“Let me help you with your mask.” Jean-Pierre took it from her hand, leaned over the edge of the boat, and cleaned it in the salty water. Then he waited for her to put it on. He sat there and watched. She felt as if she moved in slow-motion as she used the tips of her fingers to brush away the drops inside the mask, then slicked her hair back to dry her hands. His eyes remained on her, attentive. It caught her off-guard, the intense way he minded his buddy tasks. But it was reassuring, relieving. She pulled her hair away from the mask's silicone edges, so it would form a seal around her face. “You missed some,” he said. The backs of his fingers stroked her cheek, brushed by her ear, then her forehead, as he cleared the remaining loose strands away. She didn't need to close her eyes, and yet she realized that she did. She snapped them open, her stomach suddenly full of guilty unease, as if she had allowed Jean-Pierre to transgress an invisible barrier. Had Charlie seen? Her eyes moved towards the ocean. But no, he and Dan were gazing through the viewfinders of their cameras, proudly protected from the damaging water by underwater cases. Melissa knew what they were doing. *I'm making a video of you making a video of me!* They didn't tire of that one. They would watch it later on their laptops, long after Melissa had gone to bed, over and over, in the hotel room, on the airplane, at their respective

offices next week, after posting it on YouTube. Jean-Pierre was taking care of her, while Charlie played with his friend. It hurt.

“Mask, fins, weight belt, BCD, second stage, all working?” Jean-Pierre fiddled with the straps on her jacket. Her body felt the intimacy of their locations, something that she was more aware of with a stranger, someone not her husband. There was one around her waist. And two that ran up and down her chest. He took one black strap in his hand, and grabbed hold of her shoulder so he could cinch it taut. She flinched as he yanked it. He noticed. “Feeling OK? Sorry, pulling too hard?” Melissa nodded but didn’t breathe, her shoulder uncomfortable from the strength of the hand that braced it. Hands on her shoulders. He drew the next one more slowly, pulling it tight but not jerking, securing the equipment to her body, his muscles doing a better job of it than she would have done on herself. Forceful hands. Strange hands. They were not Charlie’s, not hers, not the man from the alley. These hands were protective. Her discomfort faded, and he lowered his hands towards her waist. He grabbed the last strap that extended around her back to her hips to the flat of her stomach, laying the Velcro straps on top on each other, his hand pressing against her navel. She inhaled. He clicked the plastic connectors together, pushing them closed. Then he took her regulator and held it out near her mouth. Melissa bit down on the mouthpiece and inhaled the compressed air. She ran her tongue around inside her mouth, feeling the dry places.

“You are ready to go, my dear.”

She exhaled and closed her eyes once more. She pictured herself stepping off the boat into the aquamarine depths. She could trust that she was prepared. She could trust her buddy. She was ready to submerge.

Jean-Pierre stood, waiting. She had forgotten her role in the buddy check. “Sorry. Do you have everything?” Melissa scanned him from head to toe. It was a rhetorical question. He had been nearly finished when Dreadlocks paired them up, and she could see that his fins were already on, his BCD connected to his tank, his weight belt secure, his mask looped around his head. Still, there had to be something she could do, some way to continue their interaction. “I’ll check your air.” She depressed the buttons of his regulator. Briny air shot out of each mouthpiece. He bumped her hand when he took the spare mouthpiece to tuck it into his BCD. She didn’t retract her hand right away. “You’re all set.”

He motioned for her to get in the water first, holding out his hand so she could steady herself, as she moved to the jumping-off point. She took it, looking for Charlie’s snorkel poking up at the surface. As Melissa held her mask and pinched her nose to step into the ocean, Charlie called, “We’re waiting for you!” *Was he watching?* Melissa let go of Jean-Pierre and plunged into the sea. She surfaced nearly face-to-face with Charlie, who had swum over to her. “Hey. I found it!” He was showing her the GPS. He didn’t say anything about Jean-Pierre. *Well why should he? You haven’t done anything wrong.*

“Just a sec.” Melissa watched Jean-Pierre make his way to the edge of the deck. Next to him, the captain’s boys had arranged themselves and their fishing gear at the edge of the railing. “You a fishy too!” The older boy called to them and jumped

up and down, fishing rod gripped in his hand, ready to cast, as soon as all the divers were far enough below. She liked his enthusiasm, his smile. Melissa waved back at the boy. Jean-Pierre thought she was waving at him. He waved at her. She kept her eyes on Jean-Pierre as he stepped into the blue. Charlie was still saying something.

“Hey. Why’d you take off up there? Look at this. Underneath. It’s working. The GPS.” Melissa watched Jean-Pierre take his mask off and clear it out with his fingers. She turned her attention to Charlie.

“What are you talking about? I didn’t take off. You did.”

“No way. We were all set to go and you just disappeared.”

“I disappeared? I told you I was going to grab my mask.”

“You didn’t say anything. I would’ve remembered.”

Maybe I didn’t, thought Melissa. The waves had turned gray with the clouds, but they were calm. Something to focus on, so she could think of how Dr. Brown, her perceptions.

“I dropped the GPS over the railing and it was floating away. I’ve been waiting for you. I’m sorry I didn’t come back to the boat to help you get ready, but that guy was there, and it didn’t make sense for me to take off all the equipment and get back on the boat. Okay?”

Charlie was right. She wouldn’t have expected him to let a four hundred dollar piece of equipment float away. This wasn’t a life or death situation. It wasn’t like “it” at all. *Stop being bitter.*

Dreadlocks was in the water now, calling the divers over to the buoy.

“You’re right. It’s not a big deal. Sorry.” Charlie’s eyes softened.

“Let’s just start over. Let’s have a nice dive,” he said. Dreadlocks was still waiting to go over the reminders. They interlaced their fingers underwater and swam over to listen. She briefed them on the dive. Lots of boulders, small rocks, make sure to look underneath them. There’s a small gorge, you can choose to penetrate it, but it’s narrow, if you’re feeling nervous then just swim above it. There’s a current but it’s usually not very strong, it will pull us along nicely so we don’t have to swim too hard. Then she confirmed the buddy pairs.

“We stay all together, yah? You and you?” she said, pointing at Dan and Charlie. “And you and you?” She put her fingers together to motion for Jean-Pierre and Melissa to move next to each other.

“No, wait, we’re buddies. I said I’d go with her.” objected Charlie. Melissa said nothing, even though there was a part of her that had hoped to dive with Jean-Pierre. It would be easier with someone else, someone she had no expectations for, but seemed to have more of an innate sense of attentiveness. And Charlie and Dan were already having fun with their new cameras. It would have been good to give each other a break.

“You’ll stay together with her? No taking pictures and forgetting your buddy? Yah?” Dreadlocks peered at Charlie closely, through her mask.

“What? No way, I’ll stick with her through thick or thin.” He gave Melissa an affectionate bump with his shoulder. Maybe he would mean it this time, literally, not just figuratively.

“That’s OK with everyone? Everyone back to their old buddies from yesterday? You two, buddies, then?” Dreadlocks pointed at Dan and Jean-Pierre.

“That’s fine,” said Jean-Pierre, giving a guy-nod to Dan, who answered with a guy-nod back. Melissa gave Jean-Pierre a sheepish smile with her eyes, even though her mask obscured it. She didn’t mean to. She was glad that no one noticed.

“All right, then, let’s dive!” Dreadlocks held out her arm with her thumbs down to them and put in her mouthpiece. Divers’ sign language: *Descend*. They let the air out of their BCDs and sank feet first, the salt water covering their ears, flowing over the tops of their heads.

“Bye bye, have good fish-seeing!” yelled the boy from the boat. He had a net in his hand and used it to wave, as if it were a natural extension of his arm.

As they submerged, Melissa looked up towards the bottom of the boat. She couldn’t hear his voice anymore, but she could see his arms waving through the clear water.

This was dive seventy-three for Melissa, so descending was not difficult, but she always found herself dreading it, especially since after the incident. The transition was a disturbing reminder of the possible dangers ahead, the constant diving “what ifs?” *What if I can’t stay in control? What if the equipment fails? What if my air runs out?* She’d come from a place of sun and warmth, where the ocean was a flat, blank slate dotted by waves, to be thrust into water that pressed sharp chills into her face as they sank further. She’d shiver, the frigid water would creep into her wetsuit, and it would stay this way for the next few minutes, until the water trapped inside circulated and warmed from her body heat. A little bit of salt water trickled into her mask and stung her eyes, where she and Jean-Pierre must have missed a hair. She felt around her forehead to free it from the seal, before too much water seeped in and flooded her

mask. Her mouth became parched from the dry air mixture in the tank. She thought of a juicy hamburger to make her salivary glands get to work and keep her mouth wet. This uncomfortable feeling would last the entire time. She pinched her nose and forced the air out of her ears continuously, knowing that if she couldn't relieve the piercing pressure mounting on her sinuses, she'd have to resurface and end the dive.

The depth gauge on her BCD showed that they had sunk about twenty meters. The visibility was about that, too. Incredible. This is why they had taken three flights and over a period of twenty hours to travel all the way to Thailand. Melissa could still see all the way to the white bottom of the boat, and she thought she could even see the small outline of the boy's fishing buoy. The divers waited near some rocks, resting on their knees in the sand, and began to point at the creatures around them, the sea so transparent they imagined they could see the hint of great pelagics in the far-off distance. Close-by, they marveled at the elegant, silvery trevallies whose scales shimmered in the bits of sunlight that managed to reach the ocean floor from above; yellow and white corals that looked like oversized, bleached brains; vermilion squirrelfish darting around rust-colored whip corals planted in the rocks' crevices. The sea world was at peace, everything going on exactly as it had before they had entered it, seeing how it would continue after they left. Fish swimming, eating, mating. Corals waving in the current. The sand—resettling, grain by grain. Melissa began to relax, and breathed in deeper, longer, trying to inhale the serenity of the ocean, hoping it would enter her by osmosis.

The group circled around Dreadlocks, awaiting her instructions. She made eye contact with each diver and the OK sign. *You OK?* Then she put her index finger and

middle finger together, pointed at one pair of buddies, and then the other. *You two are buddies, and you two are buddies.* She pointed at herself and rippled her fingers, the undulations, her last command: *I lead. Follow me, swimming now.* The divers responded, *OK.* They turned to their buddies. *OK.* Charlie looked Melissa in the eyes, and undulated his fingers the same way Dreadlocks had. *Let's swim.* She responded, *OK.* The divers were off. A school of jacks parted themselves into two as they swam through them. Pink and white anemones waved goodbye as the divers motored along the bottom, kicking in short strokes, their arms wrapped around their torsos, trying to move in the way that would least disturb the sand and protect their hands from being stung by errant corals. The water created swaths of blue space between them.

Charlie and Melissa swam together. She waved her finger to show him the colorful nudibranchs, the little slug-like creatures she had a talent for spotting. He discovered a hole that contained a moray eel; he captured a photo of the irate animal barring his teeth at them in warning. They carried on this way for about ten minutes, dipping up and down, in and out, keeping Dreadlocks in sight some ways in front of them. Ten minutes, until Charlie veered away, distracted. *He's coming back, right?* Melissa stopped swimming, missing him at her side. She scanned the water above her and turned in all directions. There he was, following a large blue parrotfish with his camera, about fifteen meters away. Melissa burst into a swim to catch up to him, and pulled at his fin. He jerked around and pointed at the parrotfish and then his camera. She shrugged. *So what? You left me.* He removed the regulator from his mouth so he could smile at her. *Everything's fine. I got the photo. I was coming right back.* She was supposed to return the gesture, congratulating him on getting a picture of that

parrotfish. It was their own dive language, language from the old days. *This is fun, I'm having fun, I love you.* Melissa refused. Instead she pointed at him with the finger on her left hand, pointed at herself with the finger on her right hand, and then pulled her two forefingers together, to the center of her chest. *Stay with me.*

OK, he answered, putting the regulator back in his mouth. He tried to think of it from her perspective, remembering Dr. Brown and their talk about Melissa's needs. But how would they ever move forward if he couldn't move five meters away to take a picture for thirty seconds. She was always angry, disappointed, critical. He was tired of everything he did being wrong. Every minute of their vacation, every action that happened outside of an arm's length away was subject to examination. *She's gone through a traumatic experience, and once she feels secure, this will end,* said Dr. Brown. But it had been months, and nothing had changed, neither of them was allowed to be their old selves. He took her hand in his and squeezed it. She didn't squeeze it back, but he noticed she kicked harder so they could swim side-by-side to catch up with the others.

He saw Dan and Jean-Pierre ahead of them, Dreadlocks in front, leading the way. Dan and Jean-Pierre weren't really swimming together, but they were clearly in each other's orbit. Charlie dropped her hand, and she watched him swim over to take a picture of a spiny lobster, fuzzy like a lionfish, antennae of purple and white and green. She was impressed that Charlie had seen it hiding underneath a large, black coral. It was a magnificent specimen, but Melissa could not help thinking, *here we go again.* Charlie had just chosen a crustacean over her. Dan swam over to him to check on what Charlie was doing. Jean-Pierre paused at a rock and looked around it while

he waited for Dan. Dreadlocks turned around, making sure she could still see everyone. They were nearing the gorge; everyone should be together before they went in. Melissa waved at her and gave her the OK sign.

Bot and Lek sat on the side of the boat together, feet dangling over the railing. They pressed their rice into little balls in their hands and popped them in their mouths. They were hungry, even if the fish weren't. Not even after Bot had dumped a bucket half-full of chum into the water. Just enough to attract a few of the larger fish nearby, maybe some jacks or a grouper. He shook the fishing pole that Khun Jenkins had given him. He had only used it a few times, but usually it caught nice fish, big ocean fish. Bot had more success with the pole than with a spear, like Father preferred. Nets were too easy for both of them. Only for a last resort.

—Father. What is wrong with the fish today?

—Maybe they had too much fun at Christmas. They are sleeping in. Too early for them.

—Maybe they went back with Santa to the North Pole, said Lek. Bot laughed at his brother.

Father had driven to this dive site every other day for the past two weeks. He took them here, and then would drive to one more site while the tourists had their lunch, and then they'd dive again. This place was special, a new site, one that Khun Jenkins had scoped out himself. Khao Lak was not yet like overdeveloped Phuket with cruising dive boats that could take on forty divers. Here, they could still explore

the reef, discover new places, dive in isolation. Khun Jenkins hadn't even named this spot yet. He just called it "the one out there." That wouldn't last long. Maybe another week before one of the other Khao Lak dive boats spotted them. Until then, this kept Khun Jenkins' divers happy. They got tired of running into the other people from their same countries who had come to see the same fish. This made it a good fishing spot, too. Lots of rocks, not a lot of divers to spook the fish. Bot wished he could see what was going on down there.

—Mother, can I jump in and swim?

—Just for a second.

—Me too?

—Lek, hold on to the ladder. You can't swim as well as Bot. He's a big boy.

The current looks a little faster now.

His mother bounced the baby with the rhythm of the waves. Lek waited for him at ladder's edge. Bot jumped in feet first, not too hard, so he wouldn't go down too far. He opened his eyes to the sting, which went away after a moment. He saw a few fish, some smelt, some sardines, about ten meters away. Nothing big. Nothing to catch and take home. Maybe later. He looked for the divers. Sometimes he saw their black wetsuits in a circle, their bubbles making little balloons that came up to pop on the surface. But they had already moved too far away. He flapped his arms to push himself, propelling his body next to the ladder. Lek was right there.

—Did you see anything good?

Bot shook his head and scanned the ocean's surface for the divers. He found them. The waves moved in a smooth lull, interrupted in the distance where the divers

moved together, their bubbles revealing their snaky trail, and then stopping. Snaky trail, and then stopping. Sometimes he wondered what it would be like to be a tourist. Staying in a hotel, lying on beaches and buying jewelry, taking pictures of himself next to buildings and the water. He wasn't sure where he would go, because even though he liked most of the tourists, there were always one or two bad ones from each country, ones that would make Father curse a little bit and send him back to the shop wearing a frown, ones that would make Bot never want to go to that country. Most of the tourists came for a good time on the beach, nice drinks, nice food. But some were rude and talked loud to Father like he was stupid, and looked at Bot with narrow eyes. Others brought their sadness with them and looked the wrong way at Mother in the dive shop. Khun Jenkins laughed at him last week when Bot told Khun Jenkins that's why he never wanted to go to Jolly Old England.

—It's people like that man from today, the one bothering Mother. What if I see him there?

Khun Jenkins gave him a gentle, but serious laugh. The strange Englishman who had followed Mother from the vegetable market, who had come into their space behind the shop to asked Mother if she had any younger sisters. When she ignored him, the man asked about daughters. Khun Jenkins shook his head.

—People in England don't like those men either, Bot. No one likes those men. Not even themselves.

Maybe he would travel one day, maybe even to Bangkok to see his cousins. Lek started kicking in the water, sprinkling Bot's face with droplets. The ones that missed his face made scattered rings that disappeared quickly in the roll of the waves.

—C'mon. Let's try the pole again, and then the net, said Bot. That must be why the fish aren't biting. They like Thai nets better than the Englishman's poles, he said laughing at his joke.

—Yeah. Father can help us, said Lek.

The boys went up the ladder, Mother feeding their leftover rice to the baby, Father already fixing up the fishing net.

The divers were at the base of the open gorge. The narrow walls went up about ten meters, the very top of it halfway to the surface. Here Dreadlocks motioned for the divers to decide: *either swim through and follow me, or swim above and trail us*. They all decided to go in. Dreadlocks first, then Dan, then Jean-Pierre, then Charlie, then Melissa.

Something about the walls was fascinatingly claustrophobic. Seeing them rise up around her gave a secure presence to the sensation she normally had while diving, like she was floating in outer space. Here, it felt as if she were touring through a gully on a long, wet hike. But the walls blocked off visibility. Sometimes they widened out to about three meters, other times Melissa felt compressed as she wriggled her body through a meter-wide passage. The walls darkened the water. Any sand disturbed by the divers in front of her made it difficult for her to see the path ahead; already she could no longer see the rest of the divers, except for Charlie, who was six or seven meters in front of her.

The creatures inside the gorge were spectacular; this site pristine enough that they had been left undisturbed by both divers and fishermen. At a spot where it widened out slightly, the divers all took turns, one-by-one to peer inside a giant barrel sponge, then continued on down the passage. When it was her turn, Melissa inverted herself so she could see all the way down into the sponge, hair floating upwards, keeping Charlie in her peripheral vision. There were little shrimp in it. She wanted a better look. It would only take a second. *What am I always so worried about*, she chided herself. *I might as well enjoy this. I've been ridiculous*. She kicked her legs above her until she was completely vertical, holding her air gauge with one hand so that it wouldn't rub against the inside the sponge. At the bottom, two orange and purple shrimp, cleaning their antennae.

She backed out of the sponge. *Where was Charlie? Did he get a photo of this?* She wanted to see. She thought she saw his yellow and black wetsuit through the haze of the water ahead, his back to her. She lengthened her kicks and pushed her arms out to propel herself forward. After a minute of continuing through the gorge alone, she came to another widening and still didn't see the others. Had she been looking at the shrimp that long? And why hadn't Charlie waited for her? Melissa reminded herself that he knew she was looking at the shrimp, just like they all had, and they were in a confined, one-way space—he knew where she was and she couldn't get lost. Melissa didn't panic. *You're not in danger, you've been in gorges before, you know what to do*. Dreadlocks had just reminded them. She needed to ascend to the ridge of the gorge and swim over it, catch up to where she saw the others' bubbles, get their attention, and keep following them overhead until they were finished. Trying to catch

up to the group within the walls gorge could lead to too much disturbance of the life within as she rushed through to find them; finding them and then descending down into it again presented a decompression danger.

Their bubbles weren't hard to find from overhead, and the group wasn't too far away—only about fifteen meters off. As she got closer to them, she wished she could go back down. They had all stopped to examine the most spectacular anemones Melissa had ever seen. They were billowy puffs of translucent violet, their tentacles thin white strands of fur, they somehow appeared to glow. Jean-Pierre looked up and saw her waving. He tugged at Dreadlocks and Charlie and pointed. They both asked Melissa if she was okay. Yes, she was fine. Dreadlocks motioned for her to keep following them, keep swimming above. She saw Charlie look up a few times to make sure she was still there.

OK.

Melissa swam along, but soon got bored of being above them. Where the visibility decreased, there was nothing to see but the tops of the walls. She decided to descend just a tiny bit, enough so she was swimming along the rim, knowing she hadn't gone down far enough to put herself in danger for decompression sickness, maybe just two or three meters. That was better. She felt like she were part of the dive, and there were even a few creatures at the rim of the gorge. A few small sponges hanging from the ridge, some old fishing nets caught on the arms of corals, maybe cut by locals caught poaching fish, or maybe torn by the rocks from a Chinese trawler. From her vantage point saw the gorge's end, and decided to swim a little bit ahead. She took an eager kick to pass them overhead, Jean-Pierre noticing her and

waving. She waved back and surged ahead for the last few meters. At least she thought she was surging ahead. Her kick moved with the flow of the current, fooling her into the illusion of making progress. But she was not moving forward. The group was moving further away while she was stuck overhead, even as she kicked harder. Melissa twisted her neck around until she could see the problem. One of those discarded nets had floated out and was caught around the top of her tank and her regulator hoses, the frayed edges of its ropes swaying back and forth in a trail behind her. She remembered feeling something brush near her head when she moved between the walls, but she had dismissed it as a rushing wave of current, or a drifting tangle of seaweed. She was surprised it had managed to catch her, thinking she had given it a wide enough of a berth to miss its tentacles.

Great, she thought, not yet panicking, troubleshooting her options. She could take off her BCD and tank, hold tight to them so they wouldn't float away, and try to untwist herself from the ropes. It wasn't that dangerous of a maneuver, but being alone made her rethink the logic of separating herself from her breathing apparatus, when according to her gauge, she was thirteen meters underwater. Had anyone seen her? She couldn't count on it. She stretched her hands behind her, feeling for a way to untangle the fibers from her tank. She couldn't reach them. Her heart started racing. She concentrated on her breathing. *Slowly. Don't panic. Don't waste the air. You can fix it.* She tried again. And again. Anger soon replaced anxiety as she felt herself begin to cry tears of frustration inside her mask. It grew foggy inside. *Where the fuck is Charlie?* She ignored the omens she saw stuck in the net with her: two anemones

with trapped arms, making futile reaches through the net's square holes; dead fish stuck in the squares, eyes eaten out, bodies blanched of blood.

Slow down, give it another try. She rolled her right shoulder as far back as she could. Then she leaned back, extending and swinging her right arm back, like she was doing a slow and deliberate back stroke. She stretched and lengthened every single muscle from her shoulder to her fingertips, grasping for the edges of the rope. Fringes, there were fringes teasing her, tickling her fingers, then flitting out of reach. Her arm could not sustain the strain. Her muscles demanded release. More tears welled up and blocked her vision. A surge of anxiety washed over her body, filling her up with nausea. *What if I can't free myself?*

She took a deep breath and let the panic take over. Her arms and legs, flailed to get free, the power of her thrashing not making any progress, not dislodging the net, her body falling into a tumult of exhaustion. She stopped and rested. Then she thrashed again, hoping the frenzy would fling the net away.

In the swirl, someone tapped her shoulder. It jolted her into stillness. Someone was behind her pushing her tank up, moving hoses around, untangling her equipment. *Yes, this is really happening.* She put her hand on theirs in acknowledgment, and the hand patted back. Not Charlie's hands. Jean-Pierre? She refrained from twisting around, not wanting to interfere with being freed. Her tank banged softly against her lower back as the rope was wrenched from her BCD. Her buoyancy returned. Release. Her body began to float gently upwards. It was Jean-Pierre. He swam in front of her, peering through his mask, concerned. He still had her hand. He used his other hand to ask: *Are you OK?*

Melissa let go of his fingers. She focused on breathing, bringing her heart rate back to normal. She was grateful he had come to her rescue, but was disappointed he wasn't Charlie. *Had he noticed?* Her face flushed. She did a little swim away from him to cool off, and make sure she was confident enough to continue the dive.

He was still watching her. He made the thumbs up sign. *Do you want to surface?*

Her breathing had returned to normal. The danger was over. There was no danger. She gave him thumbs down and the OK again. *No let's stay down here. Why can't Charlie be more like you?*

He tapped his air gauge. *Do you have enough air?*

Melissa's gauge read 110 bar. About 30 minutes worth of air left. She was surprised she hadn't used up more in her struggle. She showed him. *Everything is fine.*

OK, he said. He pointed to her and then him, and then kicked his fingers up and down like little legs, moving them across the water. *I'll stay with you.*

OK.

They swam a few meters and looked ahead towards the end of the gorge. She caught the faint outline of the other divers' bubbles rising up. She couldn't tell which were Charlie's. Melissa slowed down a little more. She had no need to rush back to him. She was fine here with Jean-Pierre, who kept slow as they moved above the gorge, barely swishing his fins like windshield wipers. He poked her arm one more time to check in: *OK?*

Yes, I'm here with you.

Melissa descended a few meters into the gorge again, feeling slightly ashamed that she was doing some purposeful malingering with Jean-Pierre. He stopped using his fins so he could match her pace, dropping to join her. The current picked up as they came closer to the wide opening of the sea where the gorge ended, no longer hemmed in by walls. He poked her arm to point out a school of angelfish coming up on their left. Fifteen of them, then maybe thirty, then more and more, their chartreuse, aqua, fan-like bodies creating a dizzying swirl of color around them. More fish rushed through the current, riding along, eyeballing the divers, keeping their distance, staying on their underwater path. Black and white banner fish, their yellow headdresses trailing behind them. A couple of medium-sized brown grouper, wallowing around the rock. Little sand-colored gobies popped up underneath them. Four or five curious batfish, the only ones brave enough to swim right up to them to say hello. Jean-Pierre and Melissa followed the batfish, watching them swim away over a bed of corals. Then he tugged at her arm, leading her over to a rose-colored anemone full of clownfish, three of them coming out of the stinging blossom to defend their home. They watched them together, sometimes looking back towards the current to see the newest fish come in. Melissa forgot the rest of the dive group.

They continued towards the end, now seeing the other divers below, waiting for them. Dreadlocks spotted them first. *OK?* She was nearly in Charlie's visual now, although his outline was muddled. The water was murky in this space. Visibility decreased about five meters. Maybe from the strength of the current. Fish were moving faster out in the open, riding on waves of brown silt. Melissa hoped it would clear soon. She thought she saw Charlie wave at her, but she wasn't sure. It made her

feel guilty. *He's been waiting for me and I've been enjoying swimming with Jean-Pierre. More than with my husband.* But wait—why should she feel badly at all? He probably didn't even know that anything had gone wrong, that she could have been in serious danger. Jean-Pierre saw it first.

Dreadlocks stopped and waited for the group to swim to her to check on everyone's air levels. They had another twenty minutes or so left in the dive. Melissa and Jean-Pierre swam up towards Dreadlocks, and waited for the others to gather. As they waited, Melissa saw the water darken, changing from a bright aqua to a royal blue, as if a cloud had covered the sun. Yet the increasing fuzziness seemed to come from the water itself. She rubbed the plate of her mask as if she were clearing fogged-up eyeglasses. It wasn't fog. The current came in brown swirls now, fanning out through the blue water at its slower spots, the colors hastily mixed together. Bits of rubbish began to flow in with the undulations of the current—plastic grocery bags, coconut shells, the stringy tentacles of a bikini top? What was happening? Melissa backed away from its spidery ties. She imagined a champagne brunch party barge somewhere up above, the remnants of their fun tossed overboard with hedonistic chutzpah. Thailand was as bad as Cancun. Maybe worse. Although that wouldn't explain the silt. Charlie and Dan came closer now, Melissa able to see their eyes through their masks. Dreadlocks tried to catch the trash while they waited, snatching the plastic bags, the bits of paper into the pockets of her BCD.

Charlie greeted Melissa with their old signal again, removing his regulator with a smile. Melissa made eye contact with him and wagged her finger. *I didn't even think that was funny the first time.* Charlie turned his palms up and shrugged his

shoulders. *What did I do?* Melissa shook her head. He didn't even know. They both dreaded surfacing. A candy bar wrapper, silver and red foil with squiggly Thai printing, floated between them. *We should just stay down here.*

Dreadlocks motioned for the divers to check their air gauges. They used their fingers to tell her how much air they had left. 80 bar, 50 bar, 70 bar, 70 bar. Enough for fifteen or twenty minutes more. But the prospect of continuing the dive no longer seemed appealing. There seemed to be fewer fish, and more trash. The drastic difference in the water was alarming. Melissa wondered if a garbage barge had sunk nearby. The water took on the light brown haze of a smoggy valley. The rubbish continued in a steady stream. When a blue souvenir cup smacked her cheek, followed by empty cartons, cans of coconut milk, medium-sized palm fronds, plastic sunglasses, Melissa asked Dreadlocks if they could surface, ending the dive here.. They waved the water in front of them to brush away the things that flowed in: suntan lotion, an uneaten banana, torn Styrofoam containers. The current pushed their legs behind them, so that soon the divers fought to keep themselves from floating away in space, actively paddling against it. It was hard to believe that just five, maybe ten minutes ago, the ocean had been still and calm, clear and blue.

It was Dreadlocks' job to decide whether to end the dive. She assessed the situation. Visibility was down, the current abnormal, the objects a threat. There was one hungover diver, and one low on air. She made eye contact with each of the divers and gave them the thumbs up sign. She flattened her hand with her palm facing down, and sliced the water in front of her horizontally, side-to-side, and then twirled it up into a stop sign. *Ascend. Level out. Still going to do the safety stop. We all stay put.*

They had been out too long and too deep to risk surfacing without it. The plan was to remain five meters below the surface for three minutes. No one wanted to get “the bends.” Melissa hoped the current wouldn’t get stronger, as swimming in place was difficult without the anchor line to hang on to. The captain had already dropped it in a spot about fifty meters away, where he would normally pick up the divers.

Their free-floating bodies forced them to fight their own buoyancy, which increased as their bodies and wetsuits released trapped nitrogen bubbles. Their lungs and organs expanded, their empty tanks pulled them upwards. Melissa concentrated on her depth gauge, trying to keep the reading at five meters. Her body rose despite her will to sink. She pressed the valve on her regulator to release some of the air trapped in her BCD.

Struggling against the current became a workout, more than most of them were used to. They moved their bodies in erratic bursts, trying to match the current. The divers kicked downwards and tried to expel the air from their lungs. They still had two more minutes to go. Cardboard boxes, soda bottles, whipped around in the current, sank below them. A waterlogged novel in some other language brushed past Melissa’s nose, as she wriggled her body downwards. The bottom half of her body continued rising, alarming her further. Her panic returned as she stretched her arms down to the group, pleading for someone to grab her and pull her down. Jean-Pierre and Charlie both attended to her: Jean-Pierre catching her arm and one fin, Charlie getting the other arm and holding a strap on her BCD. She wished she had been able to manage it on her own, the way that she used to. As they brought her back down to them, Dreadlocks swam closer, and adjusted Melissa’s BCD, forced air out of the

hose that Melissa hadn't managed to release. She took off one of her own weights and put it in Melissa's pocket. Melissa's heart stopped racing as her body settled and leveled out. She no longer needed either man. As trash swirled around them, she let go of them both.

Above the divers, the boy had set his pole up to lean against the rail, holding it gently between his legs. He had nodded off, dreaming of airplanes. Lek, where had he gone? Must be inside with Mother. He heard Father fussing with the radio. Voices faded in and out, unclear which language they listening to. The ocean had become strange, a strange soup, unlike anything he had ever seen. The surface of the water was broken up by floating mounds. Here was a bunch of floating plastic bottles. Here were some coconut shells. Here were plastic flags of Thailand and a Santa hat. And so quickly? How long had he napped? The divers weren't on board, so it couldn't have been longer than fifteen, maybe twenty minutes. Was he still dreaming? Bot rubbed his eyes to clear them and opened them up again. This couldn't be right. He called his father, but Father wasn't listening. The divers' bubbles were breaking the surface all in one spot, far from where they were supposed to come up.

—Father look at the divers. Father, the water. Mother, come look!

No one was listening. Father was still turning the radio dials up and down, pressing the call button on and off. Bot started reeling in his line. It was stuck. The boat's radio continued to crackle, Father listening intently. Coast Guard voices, giving commands. Father turned it up. Mother and Lek came out.

—Father, my line is stuck! And the divers are coming up, over there, look!

Father shushed Bot. The radio's words were scratchy. *Waves. Reports of damage. Warning. Earthquake. Aceh. Tsunami.* The last two words were unfamiliar to Bot, but they made their terror felt through his father's face. Bot saw Father's eyes open wide, his forehead etched in lines that were deeply grooved with worry.

The divers underneath swatted away the most random objects, as they fought to maintain their buoyancy for one more minute. They were things that Charlie tried to ignore; they worried him. Each item he saw brought with it a situation, a story. A stolen hotel towel, taken despite signs on the bathroom sink that said *please do not use for beach*. The keys to unlock the security chains outside of the family's convenience store. Some sunscreen and a bottle of water and a tabloid bought for too much money at the airport. The grocery list, the cell phone, the empty liter bottle to get petrol for the moped. A little bit of money, enough for a foot massage and then lunch. Whatever change was on the table to buy dinner from the fisherman. Sheaths and strings of polyester, ones that never quite dried out all the way from the night before. Starched and ironed pastel-colored shirts with official embroidered insignias and the good shoes for work. How had the water seized all of these things? Charlie kept his eyes transfixed on Femke's hands, waiting for her thumbs up signal. The pulse in his forehead pounded against his mask, the pulsation becoming painful.

Of course Charlie did not know, none of the divers knew, that the ocean sucked itself back into a vacuum. It went back so far the Khao Lak beachcombers ran out to play in the tidepools, pick up shells, poke at crabs, look at the flopping fish and the corals. Then it came back, not as a wave, but a wall of waves, one that fortified

itself beyond where they could see, gathering strength as it got closer. Everything it was close enough to touch and take went inside the Andaman Sea, or came out floating on top of it, bumping against each other, coming apart, not returning to shore. Everything went out towards the divers.

Femke gave the signal, the divers relieved to finally ascend, hoping that up above it was less chaotic than what they had seen below. Charlie yanked off his mask right as his body burst through the surface, a plastic water bottle flowing through the current smacking him on the forehead. He spit out his regulator while he rubbed his head, swelling his lungs with a refreshing draught of sweet, moist air. The above-water world continued to bubble over on his face, stinging his eyes with salty trash water, trickling foul splashes into his mouth. He put his equipment back on. The water bottle floated next to a magazine that said something in Swedish about Britney Spears. Charlie snorted the water out of his nose so he could talk. “What the hell is going on here?” He looked around for Melissa, relaxing when he saw the top of her head. He swam to her. He was so proud of her for managing by herself along the gorge, catching up to them on her own. But she came up and wouldn’t look at him. *Not again.*

Femke inflated a three-foot long florescent orange marker with her BCD so the boat could find them. The bright color helped the marker stand out, especially important now that the entire ocean surface had been invaded by foreign objects, overflowing with them. Femke blew on her safety whistle, waiting for someone on the boat to acknowledge their signal. The current pulled the divers away from the direction of the boat, even as it blasted the horn and began chugging towards them.

“Everyone link arms,” she said. “Don’t let anyone drift away.” They saw the boy wave and run around the boat, lifting up ropes, calling out to them, stopping to listen to his father. Femke was worried. She got back to Charlie’s question.

“I don’t know. Maybe a boat sank.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” said Charlie, pointing out a long piece of wood. A log, with some branches on it. A tree. “What would a tree be doing out here?” he wondered aloud. A shipwreck involving leafy trees, would they be rubbish on a garbage barge in a third world country? Or anywhere? This made the least sense of all. None of them had an answer. None of them knew about shipwrecks. None of them had seen anything like this before. Seeing the tree was strange, but Charlie’s mind kept going back to the keys, the workshirts, Britney Spears. Separately, maybe he could think that someone had lost them overboard. But together? So many personal effects, ones that had either been in hands, or on the side of a bed table, or in pockets? Were these all the things of a few people, or many? How had the objects gotten close enough to the water to have been swept away in it?

The dive boat had nearly reached them, when it stopped. The boy had been leaning over the edge of the railing, navigating the boat through the trash, and now he was jumping, yelling. They couldn’t hear him—he was too far away—not that they’d understand his Thai anyway. He pointed to something on the other side of the boat that they couldn’t see. He gestured wildly, his mother rushing out of the boat’s small cabin. The boat went into reverse. The boy shouted again, then turned to his mother. He buried his head in her chest. His younger brother came out, holding the baby. His parents both shouted at him, and he took the baby back inside.

“I’ve got an idea. Maybe I can zoom in the camera and see what’s going on,” said Charlie.

Dan turned his on, too. They aimed them towards the boat’s wake. For once, Melissa was glad they discovered a meaningful use for their technology, even proud of Charlie for his quick thinking. *Why couldn’t he be like that all the time?* They couldn’t get a good look at first. The boat drifted too much in the way. Dan and Charlie both squirmed, trying to reposition themselves without making the whole group swim, since they were still connected through their arms. When the current took the boat to the side a little bit, they could finally see. Melissa knew they saw what the boy had seen when Charlie dropped his camera. Dan dropped his almost at the same time. They would have lost them if they weren’t strapped to their equipment. They turned around and faced the group. Their faces had gone ashen. Melissa heard Charlie gasp for a breath. Dan looked like he had stopped breathing. *Look* was all Charlie managed to say, followed by *get out of the water*.

Right here, for the divers, the tsunami started here, as they came up from the dive, and what Charlie and Dan saw in the cameras began to float closer to them. First there was just one body, a female. Naked. Not Thai. Her brown hair tangled with seaweed, her lips bloodless. That’s when Dan stopped talking. The first body floated away, so another filled up its place. A Thai man, brown eyes open, wearing a Le Meridian workshirt, shoeless, pant-less. The Le Meridian. The resort near the shore. The broken light bulbs, the bags of gummibears, the car parts, the shower curtain liners, the plastic bathroom organizing buckets and crates, the sofa cushions.

As the captain tossed the line out and they each held onto it while he pulled them in as fast as he could, them kicking to make even quicker work of it, there was more. More bodies, and not just bodies, but parts of bodies. Severances. Limbs. Lifeless detachments, devoid of owners, mangled things that had been torn away.

The divers tumbled over each other, over the ladder and out of the water, not waiting for the captain to finish pulling them with the life preserver line. They spilled onto the deck, they stripped off all the equipment, they had clean towels but no way to wash their bodies off, *no we save must fresh water, emergency water*, said the captain, *this is an emergency*, cried the divers, *sorry sorry no water, it will be ok, you're ok, we're all ok*, they told each other, everybody hurrying and moving, *where's the towel I need my towel*, then stopping, sitting, nobody speaking, just rubbing with the towels. The captain went on the radio again while the tourists wiped themselves, scratching their skin with the rough towels because here towels must be thin to dry well outside in the humidity and no one uses fabric softener so the tourists made their skin so pink with towel scratches because if they rubbed hard enough with their towel that would mean that their skin was clean and no longer contained the taint of bodies.

The captain came to them, trying to explain what he knew, but he didn't know how to do it in English. He said tsunami, he said wave. He made his arm into a giant snake, swooping his hand all the way up high, then bending down from his knees so he could drag his hand along the floor, then he brought it up again and stood on his very tippy-toes to show how high the waves went up, stretching his arm as high as he could. "No answer radio. Khao Lak no answer." He pointed at the radio.

They only heard static. “Coast guard busy, only one time talking. They say come back, help, waves finished. These things, things all from Khao Lak, Phang Nga, Phi Phi, Phuket. Many boats are not answering. Family not answering.” He put his hand over his eyes and returned to driving the boat. He was the captain. The *farang* should not see him cry.

Charlie sat next to Melissa. They sat next to each other, not talking. He thought it was the shock of the bodies. It was, but not like he thought. He put his hand on hers.

She gripped it for a second and then shrugged it away. “Leave me alone,” she said.

He didn’t think she meant it. So he stayed, but didn’t touch her.

I could be dead, too. Just like that girl. Would you have noticed? Would you have saved me? She thought about saying this. But she didn’t. She was angry and wanting to burst with it, but it seemed so petty. Because she wasn’t dead. She was here. She was lucky, once again. She was fine, mostly, comparatively. They weren’t fine. Not before the dive, and not now. *What will happen when we get back*, she wondered. Melissa felt crushed by the hands of past, overcome by the shock of the present, estranged from the man who was supposed to be her future. *Why can’t things just be like before?* She tucked her hands underneath her armpits and cried silently, turning her head away from him so he wouldn’t see.

Charlie put his arm around her and hugged her into him. *Everything’s going to be all right, Melissa. Everything’s going to be fine.* He assumed that she knew he was saying this with the tightness of his embrace. She didn’t.

They were too drained to be in each other's perspective. It was enough to sit there together, crumpled in each other's arms. Not looking at each other, they watched the floating tires. Bits of furniture bobbed up: a cheap laminate tabletop. Schools of lacerated fish. The clouds moved lazily above, as the boat steered its way closer to Khao Lak. Soon, a dark bump appeared at the end of the horizon. It was the island. Charlie and Melissa looked at it. They could not see the shore. They were not sure they wanted to.

The boat slowed. The things from Khao Lak kept coming. A few of the smaller things came up on the boat deck and rolled off the side. A few minutes after that, Melissa tossed Charlie's hand away, not because she didn't want it, but to see if she could feel okay without it. She assumed he knew this.

Like many boys in his country, Bot had touched death many times. The boy told himself that because of this, he was strong. He could slit the flesh of a fish, tear out its innards, and rub the salt water mist from his eyes, without bothering to clean his bloody hands first. Just last night, he held the chicken they would roast for Khun Jenkins while Uncle Oak broke its neck. It was he who felt it expire in his hands. The boy had heard of dead bodies found in Khao Lak, seen their photos in the newspaper, murdered by gangsters who would never stop warring over the money brought by girls and boys and drugs until the tourists stopped coming. Mother said those deaths were different. Deaths of animals helped them survive and grow. Deaths of bad people was the way she reminded him that he should be a good boy, listen to his

parents, never be like those people who have forgotten the right way. Death was not a person in the sea, face frozen, blue skin, head bumping up against the boat.

He thought about this and held to his mother for a long time, until finally he felt too wet in the nook of her arm and needed the space of air in between them. He loosened himself from her protective hold, but didn't move away, sitting still with her, breathing in the idea that it wasn't the fault of the sea if sometimes it were stronger than people. And then he got up.

—Bot?

He did not answer his mother, but slowly pushed himself up, and walked to the door with his eyes closed, arms out in space to feel for the edges of the doorway. His mother's eyes followed him, waiting to see if he was going to step out or come back to her.

When he got there, he waited. He sniffed the air to detect if there were anything in the water besides fish and salt. It smelled a little bit dank, like a basement bathroom. He did not feel the sun on his face. The voice of the French man reached his ears, then that of Femke, the divemaster. The boy hadn't spoken to the French man the whole trip. His parents told him not to talk to the single men, that some of them came to the island for the wrong idea about boys. He did not ask, but now that he was getting older, he knew what she meant. Femke's voice was soft but quick. She was keeping her voice low, but speaking urgently to the French man, layering more intensity on top of the feeling on the boat. The intensity only continued to grow.

He should open his eyes. But he wanted to go sit back with Mother. He was a big boy now, a young man, his father felt. Old enough to go and help with the divers,

Khun Jenkins had said, just a few months ago. Bot inhaled and thought about opening his eyes to face the ocean. He should show Lek that he could open his eyes. Then his mother would know that he was okay. Father would see he was a man. He didn't want to. But after some time, he did anyway.

He kept his eyes to the sky first, gluing them to the brahmany kites circling overhead, away from the ocean horizon. The kites dove up and down. He closed his eyes again. Femke was saying something to him. He didn't always understand her English, but he always caught the important words. "Bot...inside...you all right?" He turned towards the direction of her voice and nodded his head. *Yes. I'm okay.* He let his eyes move, settling just at the spot above the blue line where sky met ocean. There was the island now, looming ahead, much more than a far-off speck, but still just a green and brown blob. Too far away to make out.

He heard Father turn up the radio. Between the crackles and the engine, Bot heard the radio continue to command. Disaster. Help. All surviving boats back to shore. The last waves finished, come rescue stranded families, tourists. He heard Lek ask Mother, *can I stand outside with Bot?* Mother said no.

— Bot?

Mother again.

The stability of the door frame gave Bot confidence. He held onto it and finally let his eyes skim the water's surface. The birds swooped down to peck at the waves, the fish came up to nibble. Bot's eyes returned to the sky, not wanting to see what they were eating.

—Bot?

It was Lek. His voice was close. Then, Femke telling him to go back inside.
—Bot. Stay with your mother...bad things coming.

Then that American woman, the tourist he liked, she and her husband were talking now. He hadn't heard their voices for a long time. The woman's eyes were red. Something very serious, something besides today. Their faces were tired from a long time sadness, and had been that way since they got on the boat yesterday, even when they both smiled. The woman said something to the husband out of the corner of her mouth. The husband looked away. The American woman got up and moved to the other side of the boat. The husband called, "I love you" and then some other words Bot didn't know, and then the word, "sorry." The woman just said, "I know." The husband got up and followed her, and they folded into each other. Seeing this gave Bot a feeling of hope. Courage.

Quickly, he thought. I can look at the water quickly. Don't think about it, just look.

He let his eyes track the birds, and then finally fixed them on the sea. The birds swooped in, scooped up water, filling their beaks, flying up and down. What was in the water did not seem to matter to them as they scavenged. Some floating dead fish. Jacks, maybe.

Then the flesh was no longer just fish. There was a head. Just one. One head. A human head. A neck white with bone, an empty head, bobbing, no owner. Bot closed his eyes again, nausea rushing up from his stomach to his throat, from his throat to his mouth, from his mouth to the ocean. Dizziness followed. He fell. He reached out to grip the railing, but the boat lurched and he landed on the black mat on

the deck. Father turned to miss another log, right at the same time that the boat tipped up on a surging wave. The boat tilted.

The log went off the port bow, as Bot rolled off the starboard deck, not hearing his brother call after him.

Charlie saw Bot go. And that is all he saw. He did not see a severed head. He did not see Melissa run to the railing and scream for Bot. He did not see Femke rush around the back to strap on her tank and mask. He did not hear Dan telling Jean-Pierre get the life preserver and the both of them on a frantic search for the one that the captain had used to pull them in earlier. He did not hear the boy's brother call for his mother, his mother crying to the captain to get her boy, then crying to herself because she couldn't swim and knew that she had to live for her two babies still on the boat. Charlie did not feel the captain stop the boat so he could jump in the water, not pausing to drop the anchor. He did not notice Femke rushing around, gear already strapped on, noticing that the captain had not dropped the anchor, Jean-Pierre helping her do it.

All Charlie saw was Bot go. He jumped to his feet, took the deepest breath he had ever taken, and he dove. He dove through the floating debris where Bot had fallen in, landing in the water behind Bot. He went in without a ripple, perfectly avoiding the swaths of debris and another floating log, puncturing the water in the only clear spot right off the deck. Here was the danger, here was the action to solve it. It was Charlie's perfect moment of seeing.

A tremor flashed through Melissa's heart, as Charlie raced to the edge of the boat faster than she could turn her head to see what he was doing. She yelled to Charlie, to anyone: *Where's Charlie! No! Wait!* Her heart lost its lingering resentment, questioning—but not hope—not yet. *Oh God, please, no.* She ran to the spot where they had gone over. Charlie had nothing. No mask. No fins. No BCD. No wetsuit. *Oh God Charlie.* She stared into the water, unable to locate him, her screams unable to help, Dan holding her back.

No!

“Stay here!” said Dan, up and talking.

No!

“They'll get him. The captain went. Femke's going. They'll get him! Not you too!”

Right then was Melissa's perfect moment of seeing. Charlie, her hero. Melissa began to cry.

The thick sludge didn't keep Charlie from finding Bot. It was thick, but not swampy. The cold, the pain, the salt stung his eyes; the adrenaline pushed it away. He saw Bot. The boy had only sunk a few meters, his light weight and the salinity of the ocean kept him from hurtling to the depths below. Instead, his body drifted slowly like a fizzling balloon; weaving back and forth, air behind him in a shaky line. Charlie fought the sea with a fury, fighting the drag to reach Bot, expelling all the air from his lungs to sink faster, until finally he grabbed the boy, yanked his limp arm, used the momentum to pull Bot's body over his head, pushed him towards the light

above. They both moved up. He continued to push and kick, the exertion and lack of oxygen causing Charlie's body to protest. He began to see spots.

The captain was a man who dove for fish, using the old ways, since the time he was a young boy, younger than Lek. His lungs were used to the depths with no tank, swimming fast and with force. He caught up with Charlie and wrenched his son from him, desperate for his child to live. As the captain rose up with Bot, he tried to grab Charlie's arm. He missed him. *Bot not breathing.* Floating on top together, holding his son's head to him, blowing air into his son's lungs, slapping his cheeks, *come back Bot.* Resuscitation can happen for a child. He had heard stories about this. His son had to breathe again.

Charlie, where's Charlie, screamed Melissa.

"Watch, he'll come!" said Dan.

Charlie tried to follow the swish of bubbles under the captain's treading feet. But the spots enlarged, blurring the bubbles. His throat grew heavy. The weight spread, infecting his body, making it too heavy to move. He yearned to breathe. His lungs stretched to open. But Charlie's mind was still working. He would not inhale. Charlie willed his lungs closed, his kick fading in intensity, his lungs growing in their determination to burst.

Femke jumped into the ocean and checked on the captain and the boy.

Where's the American? Not waiting for an answer, Femke descended for Charlie.

Charlie's muscles weren't listening. He willed the last of his oxygen out to them. It wasn't working. His brain was getting fuzzy. *I must go up.* He pushed himself, flapping his feet, feeling his arms rising with the last burst of strength he

could manage, he rose. Something dark came down in the waves. *Ow fuck ow*. It was the log, the one he dove around, the log in the sea, in the festering waves. The waves churned, the churning waves popped the end of the log up into the air; the log came down. *Plop*. That was Charlie's head. *Plop*. The log thumped Charlie again.

Charlie sank. He sank fast because his body became dead weight because Charlie was concussed. His lungs opened with relief. The relieved lungs told his bumped head that they were happy, just relax. The water came inside his lungs and for one moment they asked *what's this? What's this? Not air*. Femke did not descend fast enough to see Charlie choking, sinking. Melissa and Dan jumped in, gear on, *Jean-Pierre hold the line. Okay*, said Jean-Pierre and he warned them *watch out for that log*. Melissa looked down into the deep, looking for Charlie.

They didn't see him sink.

Near the bottom there were batfish. They went past the safety depth. Past forty meters with Charlie. Batfish talking *What's this? What's this?* Nudging Charlie, bumping his not-moving fingers. They went into the abyss together.

Bot coughed. The divers dove. Bot spit out water and some of his breakfast, opened his eyes and looked at his father. The family on board cried in celebration. The divers sifted through the ocean garbage for Charlie. They scanned the deep until they shivered in their wetsuits, until Bot was dry up above and his mother was holding him again. They dove until their air ran out. They dove until the captain said he couldn't do any more dives.

They came back up and did not talk. Melissa went to Bot's mother. She scrunched her body as close to her as she could. She hid herself in the nook of her arm. Bot was there, too.

From under the ocean, west of Indonesia, the earth shook. The whole ocean floor shook. Did the whales feel it shake, Lek would wonder later. No, said Lek's new teacher, a university girl from Pattaya who volunteered to replace the teacher now gone, the whales did not notice, because at that depth the ocean didn't move, or well, maybe only just a little. What was that like? asked Lek, because he felt like he should know more of these things because he had been there, but he did not, and he was not to talk about it with the family or Bot or the teachers at the school who were still there from before and felt very badly about surviving. He had been in the boat hut. He had been a little boy. It was only two years ago. What did he remember? Nothing.

Well, Lek, it's like there was a mama who folding the sheets and at the edge of those sheets, she pulled each corner tight in her hands and she shook that sheet to crisp it up, nice and fresh before she put it away; the sheet part in her hand hardly moved, the part in the middle had some rolling waves but they passed easy, but the other end of the sheet snapped up and down in the air, catching all the sunshine, catching all the wind, the other end went higher and higher, this mama she shook that sheet so hard that everyone heard it snap and no more wrinkles ever touched that sheet again. Except that the sheet was not a sheet, it was the ocean. And the wrinkles were not just wrinkles but anything that was close to the edge of the ocean, or at the

shore, all the way to India. And the mama, well, maybe she was the earth's mama. And that snap was thirty meters tall and it moved as fast as a car. So you could imagine if your mama could make that blanket snap up in the air that many meters, that fast, what it would mean. This part the teacher did not continue. That part no one talked about. Lek remembered that part anyway. That was the part when Khun Jenkins did not answer his mobile phone. That part when they came back and the shore was missing. That time there was no dock, nor the things that had been near the dock. There was wood. Pieces of wood. Broken plastic dishes. Dead fish. The hotels that had been far behind the dock now poked out from the sea. Lek remembered the water being gentle and then not so gentle, and the water carrying more out to sea. What Lek remembered is what they all remembered. They all remembered the same things.

The boat chugged closer. The beach was gone.

There was no beach.

The beach was gone.

Where the beach was, there was a mess. A mish-mash of land and sea. Egrets perched on crumbling, soggy drywall, reshaped sand dunes, wrecked fishing boats bumping topsy-turvy into one another, a blue female clinging tight to a foam bed pillow. The wind beat the waves, the waves ferried the dead, the dead drowned from the rooftops, the rooftops were in the water. The water touched everything but the hill that still had its trees.

They remembered the captain searching for a spot to anchor. To get as close to the shore without bumping into more things, debris, bodies. Somewhere between

concrete shells of buildings, but not near the playful wave that tossed around an orange plastic sand bucket like the one he bought Lek last week. He didn't see the thatched bamboo roof of The Marley Bar, where the red, green, and yellow Rastafarian colors once made it easy for him to spot his cousin Oak. If it was a slow day and Oak was looking out towards the sea, Oak would jump up on the bar and wave. Oak would have worked today, this morning. The captain anchored. He shut off the engine, he turned off the radio, he went to his wife. They wrapped themselves around each other and their children. Right now, for a little while, they would stay like this.

Melissa and Dan saw how the water crept all the way up to the second floor of the Sofitel Hotel where they had been staying, which had been about one hundred meters back from the shoreline. Everything that Charlie and Melissa had had in their room that morning was now underwater. Except Melissa.

The foreigners on the boat remembered making a decision. Even though they decided nothing and it only seemed like they made a decision. Because their decision was inevitable. *We need to get off the boat, we need to go home.* Now, or in awhile? Wait for help or not? What if we are the help? Should we stay here and help? The ironic ease of their decision to get off the boat now or later, leave Khao Lak now or later, would hit them when they were all home and they read the stories.

Like the story of how the ocean swept Petra Nemcova and Simon Atlee out of their Thai vacation house, the Czech supermodel left alone to fight the water as the sea snatched away her fiancé, and she decided to cling to a palm tree. She was

thrashed and beaten by waves and sun, and did this for eight hours. That was a real decision. She decided not to let go.

Or the decisions made by the local Thais, the people who would be trapped by the tsunami, always. The captain's wife didn't decide anything until much later, when she would decide that they had been very lucky, because if she didn't believe that, then she would have to believe that they were cursed. After hours and days and weeks of checking the boards, the hospitals, after describing all of her family members and combing through the walls and walls of pictures and refugee stations, after the water not draining, diseases, news cameras, after moving back to the village and the five of them again on the moped to the resorts and back, many years when they did not have celebrations or weddings only memorials, her children reminded her that they were lucky. Because if Bot had not decided to ask his father if he could fish when he took the tourists out diving, had Lek not woken up and decided to fuss about going too, had she not decided she'd better come along with these boys and that meant the baby had to come too; then they all would have been washed away—just like her father and one of her two brothers and her only sister and half of her cousins because they worked in tourism and it was high season and the best jobs were the places right on the water where the foreigners wanted to be and their mother had raised them to be good workers, responsible workers. Almost everyone she had ever loved. After searching and searching, she finally decided that they were gone, like Khun Jenkins and his dive shop and their home, and they were alone. But they were lucky.

Melissa had a decision to make, right now. This was her only decision. All decisions led back to this one. *Would she follow the others?* The others had already

decided for themselves that life would be better somewhere else. Someone helped decide that for her. Someone put her gear together. Someone was her buddy. Someone strapped her into her BCD, attached hoses, put them in her mouth. Someone called her name. It was Dan. Dan wasn't going to let her decide. Dan said, "Melissa, stay with me." She entered the shallows with them, following Femke, Dan, and Jean-Pierre, the waves of debris making it hard to see ahead. The captain watched them enter, and then went back in with his family. No one else would come out. Melissa looked back and saw the older boy peek his head out. They looked each other in the eye. They did not need to wave.

Femke led them towards the highest inlet of rooftops, as they closed in to what was now the shore. They kicked harder than they would out in the open ocean, because there was no smooth, guiding current. They parsed their bodies through the white foamy waves, avoiding what their peripheral vision feared might be another red Russian or a local Thai or a flaxen-haired Swede. They swam around things that could be dangerous in a sudden toss of the waves, catch a tank, drag them down. Jagged metal car parts. Mangled mopeds. Waterlogged souvenir blankets. It was easy for the divers to pretend it would be better when they got out. Melissa wasn't fooled.

Melissa's emptiness made her light in the water. She stopped kicking, letting the backtow and her buoyancy send her back with a returning wave. She stopped breathing so she could hear the whooshing water. Its rhythms lightened her some more. *What had I wanted before?* She released her arms in front of her and let herself float with the waves. Back. Front. Up. Side. The water tickled. She saw only the water. *Why go back?*

She floated above her body and saw it not swimming. Who are you that doesn't swim anymore, she asked herself. The limbs did not move, but the body still breathed. *How do I swim?* She couldn't remember. Dan and Jean-Pierre saw her slide behind. They paddled back to catch her, taking her hands. She did not grasp them. They pulled her along by her wrists, following Femke. Melissa did not protest, she didn't struggle. The new shoreline grew closer to them, but they tried not to look at it. Melissa saw it only out of the corner of her eye, like at home when she was busy doing something important, but still trying to watch TV. She was busy not remembering. If she saw something, she might remember it. She didn't want to see and remember anything. There was the boat, the trash, and Charlie. For now, that was enough to remember.

She floated along, and maybe after awhile, she swam. Maybe Dan and Jean-Pierre let go of her and she swam. She didn't remember. Maybe there were bodies on shore, when they came up. This she wouldn't remember. She tried to remember the Thai taxi driver from the other side of the island, coming just to drive foreigners to the airport. But she didn't. She wouldn't remember saying goodbye to Femke and Jean-Pierre, who said they were going to stay few days, going to volunteer, do something, help. She didn't remember searching and searching and then finding the American consulate staff in the VIP lounge enjoying sodas out of cans with straws, but maybe that is because she was just following Dan and hadn't been looking for them in the first place. She would not remember sitting on the airport floor, thinking she was lucky to have a wetsuit and dive booties, which was more than the Americans who had only their swimsuits and scratches and shivering. The one thing she

unfortunately would remember was the name *Sofitel Magic Lagoon*. She remembered it when the rebuilt hotel sent a mass email announcing special holiday rates, causing her to faint right on top of her keyboard, and wake up in a cold sweat nightmare unable to breathe.

After time and distance, after Melissa spent many days on the couch not moving, she remembered that she wanted to start moving again. Then one day she went to the pool to sit there and look at the water, and she remembered that she used to love the water. And swimming. And fish. Later, after everyone she knew well enough thought they had left her alone for just the right amount of time and they felt like they could ask questions, Melissa began to remember more. She remembered that she and Charlie had just been going through a low point, that they would have worked things out, that they were great partners, it was going to be hard to find someone who could measure up to who he was, and by that she didn't just mean at the end, but what she knew about him all along. She would forget the marital counseling, the frustration, the GPS, struggling in the net, the charms of Jean-Pierre. Mostly she remembered that she and Charlie made up just in time; him ready to start over and be there for her, her heart open and trusting with forgiveness, and that is what she had lost in the tsunami, she'd tell them when they asked.

The captain's family would remember Melissa. And Charlie. Melissa would receive a handwritten letter from them once a year, expressing the utmost gratitude for her husband's heroic actions, and the deepest sorrows for her loss, the scrawl on the letters becoming straighter and more confident as the years went on, Melissa sending the money from Charlie's social security to the boy, the boy going to a better

school, the English improving, the boy off to college, the pen more educated, the boy traveled to Hong Kong and Malaysia and Burma. The boy never came to America.

The boy sent a picture postcard sometimes, instead of a letter. But Melissa always just sent the money. What could she say to match it? The letters, she started, but couldn't finish. She didn't know how to send a letter that said I am also sorry for your loss, I lost a husband but you lost your family, your jobs, your home, your island, that very same day; that same day that I can't remember anything else, you lost everything. The day that my husband saw you and saved you, I remembered that I could be proud of him, but if he didn't he would still be alive and maybe we would be happy. Or maybe I would still question him, but we were going to start over, we were getting help, I found myself, I was OK, and he going to be my hero and we were going to be OK, we would have been a family, and I would not live here alone with wine and cats, just wine and cats. The letters would collect inside her nightstand drawer, both the ones from the boy and the ones she started, until there was such a pile that they had to be pressed down with one hand so she could shut the drawer all the way closed.

Once a year the boy's letters led Melissa to replay Charlie's camera videos with a glass of wine, thinking it's probably not a good idea to sit here and watch these alone, a bottle of wine making it better. Charlie and Dan laughing. Charlie with his GPS. Charlie in the ocean. Wine, more wine, it will help think of what to write the boy. She would never note the irony in Charlie's melancholy laugh. She would call Dan those first few years, until she wouldn't do it anymore because Dan's voice sounded willingly disconnected. The wine and being alone watching videos would

make her sleepy. She'd start to think she smelled the ocean, that briny smell, the waves, his voice, there goes the wine, that smell, tell the boy sorry, I'm getting sleepy, falling into an I-don't-want-to-fall-asleep-on-the-couch sleep, stupid-cat-get-off-my-feet sleep, I-know-what-to-tell-the-boy-now-don't-let-me-forget sleep. Unfiltered sleep. A sleep that allowed the unfurling of the details. His voice. That smell. Being pulled to shore. My body skimming in the water. My body in the water, the warm water, the tepid ocean water, dead water, want to stay in the water, getting out of the water. *Come back, come down here with Charlie, where's Charlie,* Charlie's water running off the backs of my hands, still there, false warmth, beckoning warmth, *swim Melissa, swim, you can do it, start swimming,*, water running down hands still wet, *wake up and start over Melissa, you have to wake up,* I don't want to, *wake up now, wake up, and wash away that sea salt sticking to your palms.*

Afterword

Mistakes were made

global usage of butter-flavored Crisco proliferated in the era that continents became ethnicities
ancients reeled when the *American Gothic* wife claimed no actually I was his pinched-face *daughter*
the scribes shall dignify the narrative of La Malinche and Cortes as a vibrant account of jungle fever
educators continue the resurrection of Manx, although lacking reliable empirical studies on Hindus, Jesus
after failing the gold standard, the silver slippers soiled themselves with rubies and Oprah's magic powers
flinging aside the layers of coagulated texmex cheese, her casserole hearkened of semi-homemade goodness
Farrakhan orbited the earth the same year the Masons became subject to federal affirmative action provisions
withered husks of the corn people outlasted their pictures, history channel documentary notwithstanding
You don't remember where you were on 9/11 because you were asleep. No fair.
scientific research on our problematized interest in the White Stripes faded for their lack of actual incest
early Elvis thanked the fine black people for not visiting Graceland so long as he could keep their greatest hits
a Spanish flu forgot to epidemic itself into the textbooks, but we did manage to infest ourselves with wars
Siamese Buddhist-Muslim near-unity, the King disengaging hand-food-mouth contact via tableware
Russian patriarchs yanking beards at warm assimilated loaves, the wafting wheat tendrils still not rye
finally the day came when both the buffalo and the Indian graced the lesser coins, no longer in circulation
elapsed genuflections upon arrival at the gilded ports. Reagan. Dulles. John Wayne.
One time, maybe more, there was a woman whose tall eyebrow questioned what her small mouth did not.