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Missing Persons

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Missing Persons

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Kiki Whang

B.A. University of Pennsylvania, 2010

December, 2013

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Cucarachero

My fiancé Tree looks at brain tissue all day, samples of mouse brain under a microscope. The mice have been gassed, injected and pumped with cigarette smoke and nicotine since birth. Each day, at dawn, the older ones ready for sampling are strapped into their vices. The samples are fixed and stained before noon, and the results must all be recorded before he can come home. Brain matter is so sensitive that any deviation from this schedule alters the experiment. The younger mice, still breathing and drinking the stuff, must be kept in a room as far away as possible. Otherwise they will smell death, which also disturbs their brain chemistry. The sampled mice are decapitated afterwards. This happens in yet another room.

When Tree comes home, we go to the Indian buffet across the street, and he tells me about the damage he's seen all day. It's terrible, he says, the chemicals we feed ourselves. His voice is still hoarse in the evening because there isn't much talking in the lab.

With Tree there is no fast food, no smoking, no drugs, maybe a beer with dinner on weekdays. On weekends, he takes me jogging with his coworkers, up Kelly Drive to the Art Museum. The warmest months are still to come, but I'm already getting dark again. In winters I get as pale as Tree, almost as pale as the white girls he used to date, girls born and raised in loft apartments. But a few runs outside and I'm some Vietnamese boat peasant again. I've suggested the gym but Tree wants nature. He says if I saw what he saw every day, I'd understand where he was coming from.

He can't even stand that I have Diego, a drinker, for an ex-boyfriend. That's what I've told Tree, even though it's all ecstasy and coke, and Diego sells as much as he uses.

Tree gets up for another plate of samosas. I remind him this Indian buffet will kill us first, if we keep coming four days a week.

Oh come on, he says. We all have something we can't give up.

Diego always meets me at the grocery store, where I can get my cigarettes. He has seven different phone numbers that he rotates, but this time I get him on the first one.

Hello stranger, he answers.

Don't forget you're seeing me today.

I smoke by the green shopping carts packed in a line, and watch a woman in tennis shoes wrestle one free. Her kid skips out with a pineapple in his arms, but she yells at him to go put it back. The glass entrance slides shut. A few seconds later, I feel the cold air from inside, snaking around my ankles and my knees.

Diego finally appears: pedaling, cruising, then pedaling and cruising again up Walnut, oblivious to the freight truck honking behind him. He's lost even more weight. A ratty white t-shirt hangs on him like a cape. For him a meal is half a packet of ramen, straight from the plastic, crumbled into his mouth. He only leaves his place about once a week, but you wouldn't know it. Every inch of his skin is a warm toasted cinnamon. It's a part of his childhood I know will always be there, his first five years in Ecuador.

I just need to get some fruit, I tell him. One minute and then we can go.

You're the boss.

After I find the right honeydew, I pick up hot dogs and buns for lunch.

No way, he says. I can't eat right now. No way.

You will eat whatever I feed you. I think about pinching his side, the way he used to pinch mine, but I don't want to feel how bony he's getting.

He gives me his sloppy grin. You're the boss.

We pass by the meat section. I go extra slow so Diego can stare at all the cuts on display. This is where he likes to trip the most. He can float up and down the aisles and no one will bother him. The air conditioner never feels too cold for him, not even at this arctic temperature. The meat section is the best, he says, because every slab of meat still looks alive.

I see a wedding in my future, I tell Diego.

Says you or says white boy?

Says him, but I'm inclined to agree. But nothing's going to change, I add.

Every time I come with Tree, I'm sure we'll run into Diego. But so far that has only happened once. And that time, he was so out of it in the Health and Beauty aisle, lathering his hands with shampoo like it was soap, I couldn't have gotten his attention if I tried.

You slut, Diego starts.

This isn't about that.

He laughs. Bullshit. I'll marry you right now. I got friends who do it for a nice car. I can be like that.

Nothing is going to change.

But only for a really nice car. A Hummer.

Diego.

I'm just kidding.

We both know he wouldn't. Not even if we were together. He lives alone, someplace up in Kensington that I've never been to. It's been years since he left Upper Darby, left his aunt and

cousins and all the other Ecuadorians he came over with. He says at the end of the day, it's always somebody you know who turns you in.

He crouches down to stare at a glass jar of cherries in syrup. When I think he's going to pass out like that, he puts the jar down and looks up at me. I guess brain surgeon boy is a better deal, he finally says.

Tree is just a lab guy, one of those guys who don't even have the proper degree for real research. But I don't correct Diego. That's never what Diego wants to hear. Nothing about college, nothing about jobs, nothing about the things that he thinks it's too late for.

We go through the last aisle, Household Items and Cleaning Supplies. He helps me pick out a nice-smelling laundry detergent, and I think we're good. But as soon as I say we should check out, he flips out again. I decide to ignore him. He loses it even more. He shouts at a young couple – they can't be more than sixteen – who stopped to watch us from the end of the aisle.

You're really losing it, I tell him.

He kicks the cart over and kicks at everything inside. You're a slut and a horrible mean person predator to me. I hope you two die together in a bomb raid.

We will, I say. But first I'm going home.

He looks at me with his old dog eyes. I'm just kidding. He chases after the honeydew, which had rolled away, and puts it back in the cart with everything else.

Look, I tell him. I'm just being honest with you.

At the checkout, I grab some Mars Bars and Almond Joys. The cashier, a girl with eight piercings in one ear and 'Teddy' tattooed on her neck, holds each candy bar up to the sensor.

Fucking idiot, Diego says under his breath. But with all the beeping, she can't hear him.

Outside he goes silent. We walk up Chestnut, since there's always a couple of police cars parked on Sansom. There aren't any Victorian row houses to look at, with the pretty burnt red bricks. But it's a straight shot across the bridge and into Center City, the blue skyscrapers shimmering like ice. Diego just keeps his eyes on the pavement and walks his bike between us. When we get to my apartment he hides his bike behind the trash bin and carries all the groceries up the four flights of stairs.

Such a gentleman, I call up to him. My Hercules. I try not to notice how much he struggles to lift and balance each leg. Thankfully he only has to stop once, and only to pull up the waist of his jeans. I remind myself to knife some more notches in his belt when we get inside.

Every time he's here, he walks around the apartment, picking things up and putting them back down. I let him touch whatever he wants, except for the picture of me with Tree's family, which I've buried under a stack of histopathology journals. Diego's better off never knowing any of their faces.

I wouldn't give money for a stupid breadbasket, he says, knocking it over. And I wouldn't buy that stupid shower curtain. Does white boy let you pick out anything? Diego finds the cigarettes in my purse and lights up by the kitchen window.

Don't smoke in here.

I'll do whatever I want in here, he says.

Sometimes it's that easy to make him happy. Just a few smokes at a window, his elbows on the sill. I get the feeling he could stare at the parking lot below for hours.

You should buy that window, I tell him. You like that window more than me.

Tree, Diego says. Like a tree tree?

Yeah.

Crazy.

He really liked trees as a kid. He still talks about them sometimes.

That's a lot of love for trees.

I tell him it's not that crazy. I point to the trees lining the block, and at the few brown leaves drifting to the ground. You see them falling, I say, well they're not falling. It's the branch cutting them off. I tell him about the scissor cells in the branch that push the leaf stem, farther and farther, until it finally snaps in the wind. Isn't that interesting.

Who doesn't know interesting shit, Diego replies. There's about five interesting things in this world for every boring asshole.

What interesting shit do you know?

In between drags, our smoke curls up into a graying sky.

Tree's mother calls, asking if the painting has arrived yet. Oh, honey, you're wrong, she says, when I tell her it hasn't. Honey, I sent them three weeks ago.

Is it possible the address was written incorrectly? I look at Diego to make sure he knows I will kill him if he makes a sound.

He wiggles his ass and turns back to the parking lot outside.

Oh honey, she continues, frustration caught in her throat. I checked a hundred times.

Of course.

More than a hundred.

I'm sorry about that. I'll look again. I tell her not to worry, that we'll get the painting eventually. I remind her I've been dropping by the post office every single day. It's what I've been telling her, even on days like today when I forget to look, or days like yesterday when I

didn't feel like it. But for the first time, I can hear it in her voice that she doesn't really believe me anymore.

Diego watches me as we say good-bye and hang up. She likes your Chinese ass?

Yeah, I reply. She likes me okay.

Of course. She doesn't know you're a slut.

I'm cooking now, I say, so be nice to me.

But he turns back around and doesn't respond.

Cucarachero, Diego says when the water starts to boil. That's the bird. The one singing right now, that pio pio. He tries to imitate the trills and laughs at himself. You should put out some water. A big bowl, and they'll come right here to take a bath. He taps the windowsill with his free hand. They'll come to you, I swear.

I believe you.

No, it's interesting. You should say, Oh wow, Diego, you're so interesting.

I split and toast the bread until the edges turn black and squeeze a mountain of ketchup next to the hot dog, the way he likes it, but he refuses to move from the window.

I can't eat. He rubs his hands over his head. I told you.

Take your time.

I join him for a smoke and put the plate on the sill. Diego slides his hot dog through the lake of ketchup and takes a bite. I tell him I can go make another one right now, but he shakes his head.

Soon we're good again. By the time we have our clothes off, I can tell he doesn't really feel like it anymore. He goes for it anyway, but he's too skinny now, and it hurts his bones. We stop everything and just take a shower together. I lather the kiwifruit bristles on his head, then

we turn around and he washes my hair. I leave first, to strip the sheets off the bed and start the washing machine.

While he dries off, I open all the windows in the apartment. I spray some cleaner on the kitchen walls by the window. It's invisible right now, but a couple of years and the yellow nicotine fumes sink into walls. I look out the window when I'm done. There's the back of the Indian buffet, with black trash bags stacked for pick-up in the morning. I think about the rats in Tree's lab, the ones they use just to see what happens. Tree will be home in a few hours, and he'll want to talk about it all again, all of it over the same rubbery palak paneer.

Diego sets down his plate in the sink and says he has to get rolling. He thanks me for the hot dog, but on his way out he goes back into the bathroom and throws everything up.

After three or four pauses and flushes, he comes out. The heat from the shower is still settling around him. I told you I can't eat, he says with a hand over his mouth, but I can see his lips are blue. He turns on the tap in the kitchen and waits for the water to get warm. He pours himself a glass and rinses his mouth. I try to tell him I'm sorry, but he doesn't let me finish. I should get rolling, he says again. I'm starting to really feel like shit.

He wipes his face and nods to the window. Get a bowl of water, just put it out there. And you'll thank me when you see them.

I'll thank you with a Hummer.

Fuck that, Diego says. This isn't a joke.

Be nice.

He swings a hand against the wall and cries out from the impact. I don't feel like joking right now.

Just go, I tell him. You need to learn how to bow out gracefully.

It's a good thing I'm done with you.

Go find one of your friends, Diego. I'll call you later.

He sways in the doorway, banging his wrists on his head. Okay, he says to himself, okay, and he drops his arms to his sides. Okay, now I'm really rolling.

He stumbles out, and I wash all the dishes. There's all this food still lying around, the hot dogs and buns and the candy bars. And then I remember his belt, the extra notches I could have made for him. But it's better that he's gone, that we ended today before it got out of control. In twenty minutes, he'll have everything he needs to calm down. And in a few days he'll forget and want to see me again.

I start the dryer cycle for the bed sheets and take out the picture, the one with Tree's family. It's from earlier this summer, at his younger brother's college graduation, and we're huddled next to one of the oldest libraries in America. I'm with his mother, and she has an arm wrapped around my brown body. I still can't read her face – there's just the glare of the sun, bouncing off the beach resort sunglasses where her eyes should be.

After I'm sure everything is in place, I put all the food and cigarettes in a bag. I take them downstairs to throw them out on the street before Tree gets back.

Diego's bike is still here, propped up behind the trash bin. I look for him on the street and in the parking lot, just in case he crawled under one of the parked cars. And then I call him, all seven numbers. This time I only get him on the very last one.

Hello stranger, he answers, sounding good again.

You better be done freaking out, I say. Because you left your bike here. And tomorrow you're gonna wish you still had it.

He tells me he's on his way and asks me to hold onto it till then. He says the bike will get stolen if it's left out overnight. So I sit on the steps of the entrance, waiting for him or Tree, whoever turns the corner first. I watch the night spread like ink in water. There's no way Diego will make it in time.

The evenings are getting cold, but I'm glad I left the windows open upstairs to clear the last of the smoke. Cars glide by, their headlights catching dandelion weeds and soda cans. Soon it's just me and some newspaper rolls dotting the other stoops on the block, glowing in their plastic sleeves. Then Tree turns the corner, unmistakable in his green scrubs. He sees me and picks up the pace with a wave. I wave back.

This is the kind of day that makes me hate Diego, for not getting any better or any worse, for always being the same. It's time he got smarter about it all. If he stopped using so much, he could make enough money that's worth the trouble. But lately I'm thinking I could also live with it if he just went and got worse, if he joined the Dominicans or got taken in by the big-timers in Kensington. Swam right into their nets and disappeared.

The restaurant is darker than usual. I look up and see half the lights have been cut, and then I notice half of the tables aren't even set up anymore. The same tired waitress leads us to our table, the one closest to the food stations. Tree starts with a plate of wilted lettuce and dry cucumber before moving onto the butter lamb. It's Friday, which means all the decapitated mice from this week have been collected, to be incinerated over the weekend.

Tree puts his spoon down and starts playing with the hair on his temples, a habit that comforts him when he's nervous or upset. His eyes are bloodshot from the harsh lights at the lab.

Can I be honest with you? he asks.

I put my spoon down as well, to let him know I'm listening.

He pulls at his hair some more. I can't be sure, he says. I can't be sure that it's fine.

What's fine?

To torture the mice like that, and then kill them.

I nod. It's not the best feeling in the world, I say.

I just can't be sure that they're dead, he says. He explains that the mice aren't supposed to feel any of the procedures, but he can't be sure.

It's not like I believe in souls, he begins, but then he stops. He looks down at his plate where the oil has separated into a yellow ring around the curry.

I tell him it's a good thing that he feels that kind of sympathy.

What about me? He looks up. I'm the one killing them. Who feels sympathy for me?

By the time we pay and leave, Diego's bike is gone. The parking lot's been cleared out, but the lamps are bright. The fluorescent bulbs tick and buzz loud enough to burst. I hold Tree's hand and tell him I feel for him, but who knows if I really do? I know I don't want to. I know I'd rather not. It's too much to ask for: to look inside someone else and see exactly what it is you share. All you would find is something far too small, maybe as big as a sesame seed, swallowed up into the rest of what you are.

The Queen

He does not like where Girl lives. He describes the architecture as Eastern Bloc Mental Asylum. He does not like her neighbor, the Cantonese girl in the next apartment who fights with her boyfriend in the middle of the night. He asks Girl if she understands what they are saying. She tells him she cannot. Sometimes it seems the exasperated boyfriend will kill the crying girl, but sometimes it sounds as if she will kill him first.

Girl asks him to go out and stop the fight.

No, he says, I don't want to humiliate the young man. But in the morning he asks her again, why do you live here? You're in America now, he adds, you don't have to listen to people like that.

During the week they rarely see each other. He works long hours at the lab, getting there early in the morning to set up the yeast colony arrays for the day. He does not trust the other researchers to be meticulous enough.

Girl does not like his condo either, but that is where they spend their weekends together. That is, they sleep and read together, but they take turns showering and talk one at a time. He does not own a TV and he only likes music when it stays in the background. He lets her play anything she wants, as long as it stays under volume level five. She stops sampling his CD collection when she finds out all the discs were left behind by his wife. They continue sharing weekends, but without background noise.

Their bodies sleep well together. At night their legs are stacked on top of each other's, crisscrossing like latticework. She needs something pressing down on her thighs to fall asleep, and he needs something between his knees to ease his lower back.

This physical compatibility is very important to him; after all, he owes his career to his gut instincts. He became a yeast genetics expert only because intuition had pulled him into the field, long before anyone else understood its chromosomal importance. She listens in bed as he takes off his watch and retells his destiny.

She knows he has switched sides, now sleeping on the side of the bed where his wife used to lie. She knows because, out of habit, he still puts his watch and keys on the wrong dresser, the one by her head.

He copies a set of keys for her so that they aren't seen together when they leave and enter the building. He explains it would be devastating to his wife, and that she is too young to understand the pride of a 50-year-old woman.

Lana, the wife, moved out months ago, maybe over a year ago. Girl is not sure because she does not want to ask. The first and last time she asked for information, she was told that Lana still lived in the same building, in the other condo still under their name.

So you're just separated, she had said.

Not by enough, he'd said to reassure her.

Still, Lana packs a lunchbox for him. She leaves it outside his door every morning. He confesses he had asked Lana to continue making him lunch. He is a terrible cook.

Girl offers to make him lunch instead.

No, he says, if I stop now, she'll know.

Yes, Girl replies, she will know that you are no longer terrible.

He tells her it is not funny, that he must keep his new life separate from his old. She thinks there is not much that is new about his new life, just herself.

She settles for dinner. His kitchen is a duplicate of a magazine spread. She gets to use every gadget in his cabinets and he is willing to try everything on his plate, except for raw fish. There are enough pots and plates for three dinner parties. She begins to take Fridays off, in order to salt or brine meat before roasting. She buys cookbooks, hardcover classics that come without pictures.

Anything she breaks, she replaces immediately.

While the food cooks in the oven, she steps just outside the building to watch the streets at rush hour. She thinks that at one point, she must have brushed shoulders with Lana. She wonders what she would say to her.

1. You married a terrible cook.

Two inner city boys on skateboards always come out at this time, weaving in and out of traffic to scare the grownups in their cars. Sometimes Justin the doorman comes out to smoke his break-time cigarette. He takes off his gloves before lighting up and Girl watches him stretch his fingers and palms. Sometimes, the boys decide to scare her too. They pull their tricks running at her and they steer away at the last second, hoping to see her flinch. They get so close that she can see her shadow passing over their piercings. She likes that the boys are always there. She likes that the police never come to stop them.

Ideally Girl will have three translating jobs going on at the same time. When she gets bored she can switch among the books and articles. She gets bored and switches every hour or so. Still, she

is better and faster than anyone else her employers might hire. For her fluency, she is compensated with twenty dollars a page.

By the hour, he says, you might make more money than me.

She hopes it is true.

2. I make more money than your husband.

Her latest job is a book on the history of nuclear warfare. The author uses ancient Chinese characters that schools in her home country had stopped teaching long ago. When she cannot find them in her dictionaries, she calls her mother for help.

Her mother, an over-educated, over-worked flight attendant, is rarely ever home. When the house phone rings until the end, the girl calls her mother on her cell phone with International Roam. The girl saves up her questions, making these expensive calls when she has a list of ten unidentified characters or more.

Her mother rushes through the explanations to get to more urgent matters such as Zheng, the fortune-teller. Zheng has been coming to the house every week for years, a presence that has lasted longer than any of her mother's boyfriends. Her mother had always been indecisive. But now, she is paralyzed without Zheng's predictions to soothe and coax her along. It bothers the girl, even though she considers how difficult it might be to find comfort in old age. Girl reminds herself it was Zheng who had convinced her mother to let her come to America in the first place. Let the girl go, he had said, she will bring back treasures.

Her mother reminds her to brush her teeth well and to sleep twelve hours a day. Take care of your body and make it look good, she says, being smart will only get you half as far.

But you smoke two packs a day, Girl replies.

While the girl is walking around the city, or taking the bus to his part of town, she keeps her languages fresh by naming things that catch her eye. Steeple, dentist, cotton. It is how children learn, and still the best method that she knows of.

Sometimes on her walks, she uses her keys to make secret visits to his apartment. She looks through his belongings while he is at work. There are no photo albums, journals or pills behind the bathroom mirror. Not even a lab book with scribbles for her to dissect. All his work is kept at the lab. Everything he finds or thinks between Monday and Friday belongs to the company. His contract, in a drawer, explicitly says so.

She does, however, find porn on his computer. She is hurt that it wasn't hidden very well. She learns she is not his type. She imagines becoming like one of the girls on his websites, someone with arms like toothpicks and breasts like marshmallow puffs. But even as a girl, Girl cannot imagine what marshmallow breasts would feel like.

The two of them cannot eat her kitchen creations fast enough. Tupperware containers of leftovers crowd the fridge, and he jokes that their fridge is starting to smell like his lab. She resorts to throwing out bags of untouched food and soaking the Tupperware in bleach solution to minimize tomato stains.

But sometimes, she catches glimpses of progress. He allows her to wash her clothes in the same cycle with his. He invites her to the wedding of one of his lab technicians. She agrees to attend, and agrees to the stipulation that she will only be known as a family friend. She spends too much money on a lavender dress.

At the reception he introduces her as a polyglot. And, he adds, she could explain what that means in four languages. He thinks this is clever.

At the salad station she feels a hand on her back. It slips under her hair. She turns around to find the hand belongs to Cory, the best man, also in Epigenetics. She notices that he has no manners, but he has a Vespa. He pulls her around the back of the church to show her where it's parked.

He asks her if she knows how much younger she is.

She plays dumb.

Date me instead, he says, we're closer in age. And in everything else.

She plays dumb again.

Ever been to Miami, he splutters. She is drunk herself, and cannot remember if she had two or three fuzzy navels. She tells him she hasn't.

Well by this time tomorrow, he says, you'll know someone who has. He leaves his empty cup next to his helmet in the grass. He tells her he could take her to places she has never been. He shoots at her with his finger guns. She watches him and the round mudguards of his vehicle disappear over the horizon.

Back at the condo, the man takes off his socks and puts down his watch, still on the wrong dresser.

When he undresses her, he saves her bra for last. He turns off the light as she waits, lying on her stomach. She feels her breasts press and push up against the gel sacs tucked into each cup. She feels the sweat trapped between their membrane and her skin. He comes to the edge of the bed and wedges a finger between the two cups, wiggles it slowly to move her flesh like Jell-O. She is never sure which finger he's using.

Jugs, Girl thinks to herself. Airbags. Sweater meat. Winnebagos. She thinks of the characters she used to hear before America, meow meow and steamed buns and big tofu.

Have you ever been to Miami? she asks later.

You wouldn't like it, he tells her. It's a provincial place.

Girl doesn't tell him she is already in a provincial place. He is provincial too, with his refusal to cut ties with Lana or eat sashimi. His uncouth, provincial desire for silicone breasts. She finds herself missing the bullet trains back home, the towering glass buildings, how she could go entire months without touching another body or looking up at the sky.

I like provincial, is all Girl says.

She spends her free days internally debating the ethical dilemmas of her job. Is it her duty to correct bad writing, to clean up sentences and reorganize paragraphs? Sometimes she feels entire chapters could be taken out from books. With each translation, she is often sure the book will be a failure in the American market.

The girl calls her mother with her next set of unidentified characters. She learns how to say and read words she will never use. Containment, disarmament, proliferation.

In the end, she always sides with the purists. She stays true to the author's hand. That is all they expect. Even the queen ant, as he would say, is just an egg factory, force-fed by her colony.

She finishes all three books, with every problem intact, in all twelve-hundred-and-fifty pages.

Some mornings, as the coffee maker bubbles, he tells her a story about Lana. Usually the story takes too long and he has to finish up while shaving and pushing his feet into his shoes. But

she can guess how it ends so she stops listening and wonders what chain of events made Lana so unpleasant.

3. You are so unpleasant.

She vows to never be unpleasant. She will not be Lana Continued. She will never make him miss a Parkinson's disease convention.

When he bends down to tie his laces, she notices his hair has been arranged differently, into a comb over. He had never tried to comb over his bald spot before. She feels for him, enough to wait with him in the hall for the elevator. She hopes she makes him feel younger, not older. She barely feels upset when he leaves with Lana's neoprene lunchbox, the grenade left outside the door every morning.

She checks her bank balance everyday until the twenty-five thousand dollars appear. She goes to real estate agencies and walks around the city tearing off phone numbers from message boards in the nicer neighborhoods. It would be nice to take walks and get to know the owners of the corner shops. She could even get a provincial dog for the dog park.

He tells her he knows a doctor, a man who comes highly recommended for his light touch. We've known each other for a long time, he explains. You'll be taken care of. He tells her it would drive him crazy to wear chicken cutlets on his chest all the time. She should try harder to make things easier for herself. She should know by now that she deserves to feel comfortable. Twenty-five thousand, he points out, is more than enough. She would have enough left over for a Mediterranean cruise.

Girl does not show up at the café near his lab to meet him for coffee. She ignores his calls.

You fucking bitch, he screams in a voicemail.

My little lizard, he says in another, I need you in my arms.

Twenty-five thousand, Girl finds out, is enough to slow down time. She wakes up convinced she's slept through the night, only to hear the same argument from the couple next door. She opens the fridge expecting to be greeted with rot, but the lettuce she inspects is as crisp and light as ever. She waits through 45-minute washing cycles that take all day.

Girl spends days, weeks, on the bus line that loops. She keeps her languages fresh: petroleum, mittens, pie crust. She pictures his slumped shoulders and hairy knuckles and wishes she knew people her age. She wishes she had spent more time learning how to put on make-up, how to take tequila shots.

On the afternoon of his 50th birthday, he is waiting outside her building, distraught. Girl recognizes his suit as the one she had picked out for him while shopping together. He does not ask for an explanation. He kneels and wraps his arms around her legs so that she can't walk or loop anymore. He presses his ear to her stomach. He tells her he cannot live without her. She lets him in and smiles at him until he has fallen asleep.

The word, her mother says, is actually two words put together. She is explaining the compound word for contradiction; antinomy; conflict. The first character is sword and the second character is shield. In between lighter flicks and long exhales, her mother explains the origin of this word

through a story about a street peddler at an ancient marketplace. This sword, the peddler cries, will cut through any shield. Then: this shield, he cries, will block any sword.

The girl listens as she reorganizes the contents of his pantry. She hopes she will never need a sword or a shield in her life.

When he calls from work she tells him she will be translating all day. In truth, she will visit a breast augmentation clinic by the music academy downtown. She surprises herself with these dangerous impulses.

During consultation, Girl watches an orchestra climb onto their tour bus parked below. Each member has two suitcases in addition to an instrument case. If the orchestra were to look up, they would tell her it was all a bad idea. If they were to look up, she would wave and ask to join them on the road. But they do not look up, so instead she leaves with a Thursday morning appointment and writes down the name of the personal injury lawyer across the street, just in case.

He can tell that Girl has been somewhere else. She sees him smelling the new smell on her, one that is not just chicken and rice and laundry. His fear is confirmed at the dinner table, when he comments on a hair that has been cooked into his rice.

I'm sorry, he goes, did I order the special? In the past, it would have sent her running to the bathroom in tears. Tonight she stays in her seat.

I love you, he says and eats his rice.

It is almost grant proposal time, which means he will be giving as many talks as possible to test the interest in his new project. He plans to team up with a fruit fly lab also studying Lou Gehrig's

disease. She helps him put the slides together and sits through his practice talks. For the London talk he has replaced the picture of Lou Gehrig with one of Stephen Hawking; for Beijing, he will use Chairman Mao. He hopes it will make them care.

She is surprised to find out how much sense it makes to work with yeast, fruit flies, zebrafish. Yeast and humans, he says, share a quarter of their genome. I bet you didn't know that, I bet you didn't even think that was possible.

My mother smokes on planes, she replies. Never been caught. I bet you didn't think that was possible.

Girl is in charge of the apartment while he is gone on his grant proposal trips. She begins to appreciate the motherly touches Lana put into the place, little plants on top of bookshelves and glass jars of potpourri in the bathrooms. If they ever meet, that is the first thing she will say.

1. You know what livable means.

On Thursday she is on time, with her hair braided beforehand, away from her chest, as the surgeon had suggested. She will not be able to raise her arms or bathe for two weeks. Any sudden force could cause shifts, or even ruptures and leaks. A nurse sits with her afterwards and pulls out a thin folder. This is about your recovery, she says, read it with your companion.

She finds out she is not allowed to leave without a companion. She thinks about calling the personal injury lawyer across the street for a ride. She thinks he will help without asking questions, but his receptionist refuses to connect her until she can say what her case concerns.

She calls her mother, hoping the conversation will last until other things distract the nurse. But her mother is busy talking with Zheng. Her mother tells her Zheng had come by the house to tell her that her daughter was seeing a man.

Are you with someone, her mother asks. Before she can answer, her mother tells her to stop. Listen to me, she says, Zheng came to tell me it will only end in embarrassment.

Which one is it? The girl asks her mother. Treasures or embarrassment?

The nurse gives her a funny look. She hangs up on her mother mid-sentence and calls the lab, the one number he had asked her never to reach him at. A bright hello answers her call, and she recognizes the voice as Cory's, the best man. She can tell he does not remember her name.

I need a ride, she says.

I'm at work, he replies. Sober Cory is not fun and games.

You sound just like your boss, she says.

Yeah, well. You sound nothing like his wife.

The girl keeps the receiver glued to her face. She goes through all of her words for the right one. Disarmament. Cory, she says. You're the only person I know.

He tells her he will come.

The Vespa is slow but she feels pain over every bump. At their first red light, she is pulled forward and her bandaged chest slams into his back. A low ripping sound, a nectarine splitting open. She blinks away fat, sudden tears.

How was Miami, she asks.

He does not hear. He drops her off and vrooms away without looking back.

The girl lies down on the empty living room floor. She thinks about calling her mother, but in the dark, she can't remember where she put down her phone. So instead she imagines they are together, back in the house that she can barely recall. The air is unbreathable from all the cigarettes but her mother still looks lovely in her uniform skirt. The girl remembers when her mother taught her the in-flight smoking trick: lighting up in the lavatory, crouching over the

waterless toilet, and coordinating each exhale with a push of the flush button. Virtually all the smoke would get sucked through the siphon and past the valve.

This was how her mother sometimes smoked, even at home. Girl can recall inexplicable moments, opening the bathroom door to find her mother blowing cigarette smoke into the toilet bowl. She wonders if it is possible for her mother to miss being on a plane.

People complain about sitting for thousands of miles, her mother used to say. Just remember, I'm the one walking for thousands of miles.

She wonders if her mother prefers walking thousands of miles to being at home.

Girl listens to her breasts gurgle and settle in the dark. Occasionally, she lifts herself on her elbows to scratch where the bandages dig in. She supposes there could be worse obstacles for two people living together. Still, she worries about his reaction when he returns. She thinks of what he might say. Stupid girl, perhaps, or does it hurt my little lizard. But she knows he will wash her hair and help make her bandages fit better.

He calls from the airport as he waits for his bags. I missed you, he says, and she knows it is true.

She makes tiramisu to celebrate his return, the traditional way that takes up six hours from whisking to dusting. She has broken the rules by carrying groceries and operating heavy cookware so soon, but augmented breasts can always be re-augmented.

One morning she looks in Lana's lunchbox. She finds a large sandwich and some grapes, and wonders why she expected other things.

When Girl goes to her own apartment now, she sees what he sees. The stiff brown carpet, the narrow hallways, the unremarkable view of a parking garage. She doesn't bother to get the

sink fixed and waits for Thursday. She ignores the Cantonese couple next door, even when she thinks she can understand what they are demanding from each other.

Strangers talk to her on the bus. They are all likely married, like he is. They have learned to skip the prettiest girls for the ones that will not throw down ultimatums. They introduce themselves and look over her airbags and fingernails. She introduces herself as a polyglot.

Ginkgoes in the Republic of Korea

Rami and I were born in the same hospital, in the same month, in the middle of nowhere. From one end of our hometown, a gas station, you could see all the way to the other end of town, an old-timey photo studio that hadn't changed its window display portraits in five years. You couldn't order Western noodles or Japanese sushi anywhere in Inju. Our restaurants only served bowls of marrow stew or bean stew or mudfish stew.

Rami's father enjoyed scooping live, squirming mudfish straight into a pot of boiling broth. He also enjoyed obliterating himself with rice liquor, which meant that some nights he wouldn't make it all the way home. I remember looking out my window one humid summer night, a night too hot for shoes, to see Rami on his bike, barefoot, peering into alleys to find the strange animal that was his only family. You couldn't live in that town without dragging that sorry lump home once or twice yourself.

Girls from Inju got taken in busloads to work in Samsung factories. One of them, Yuna, wrote me letters when she got a free moment in the worker dorms. That's how I learned about the other side, how I would one day also be cocooned for years in white astronaut jumpsuits, assigned to one sterilized chamber and then another, constantly rotated in and out of groups to prevent formations of kinship or dissent.

My parents looked forward to the day they could brag about their daughter working for that hi-tech global conglomerate, that sovereign purveyor of skyscrapers, ocean carriers, memory processors and television sets. They didn't care much what I really thought, or what I did with my time, as long as I showed up clean for mealtimes and kept up adequate grades in school. I

didn't have to be a genius to work for Samsung. I just needed to stay obedient and healthy. For my father, who had devoted himself to the Inju county administrative office for three decades, there was nothing more satisfying than the dignity of obedience and health.

The government takes care of us, he said. The government provides us with everything we could ever need. And guess who owns the government?

Samsung.

That's right.

I kept Yuna's letters to remind me he was wrong. Then her letters stopped coming altogether, and mine went unanswered. I wanted to find out why, and it scared me to think I might never see her again.

But Rami liked to remind me there was no such thing as a mystery. Look, he said, some girls are just born to dip semi-conductor chips into vats of unknowable chemicals for eighteen hours a day. That's all. Some girls are just born to do that and nothing more.

I'd rather do nothing, I said. I'd rather be in a coma with my organs turning to sludge in my bed.

Rami nodded. You were born to do more.

I thought about his mother who, until a few years ago, had belonged to the same factory as Yuna.

But I knew better than to bring her up. I'd tried so many times before. I'd asked for the details of her rapid debility, the intravenous solutions they'd administered. She had left some mysteries, if Rami was willing to consider them. But each time Rami cut me off.

My mother never had any luck, was how he put it. Do you know why we have so many ginkgo trees in the Republic of Korea? he asked.

I said, because they're from here.

No, he said. Because they can grow in bad soil. And tolerate this much pollution. Just soak it all in. That's why we've planted them everywhere. And that's why they're gray.

He was convinced I deserved better prospects, mostly because he was convinced he deserved better prospects. When we entered high school, Rami promoted himself from petty shoplifting in Inju to stealing computers in Seoul. At first he worked alone, breaking into daycare centers and hair salons to pawn two, maybe three monitor bundles in a weekend.

Then he met some boys in the city who let him join them in their van, boys who, in his stories, seemed to think and talk exactly like him. Together these boys cruised through motel parking lots to simply lift and carry entire motorcycles into the back. Once the bikes were loaded in the van, they became invisible. The boys could make as many rounds as they needed throughout the night without worrying about being seen with stolen vehicles.

You could really hurt yourself, I told Rami.

He shook his head. They don't make these bikes like they used to, he said. It's all cheap scrap metal. You won't believe how light they are.

What if you get caught?

Then I do a little time. And then they let me out.

And then?

And then I know how to not get caught.

Rami left and returned on the Village Bus line, in a blue puttering piece of junk that miraculously survived the whole three hours from Seoul. He liked to wear new clothes when he

came back: a button-down shirt with metallic threads throughout, a leather belt with a lion head buckle. These adornments signaled the triumphant returns in his backpack, which, aside from money, contained cigarettes and energy drinks.

Sometimes he'd come back with more than money: a swollen bruise on his jaw, a thick scrape running the entire side of his leg. But nothing could tarnish the glow of how rich people lived in Seoul. Colombian coffee every morning. Shopping for leather jackets and fur coats in July.

He was convinced we were alike, two kids rising and floating like balloons towards Seoul, temporarily tangled up in this shit-eating town. He wanted me to count the cash for him, to be his accountant, his accomplice. There was no reason why he wouldn't make it, and no such thing as a bad decision.

I wasn't convinced. I understood that Rami was the one born under the fire element, the willpower, and I was the one born under the earth element, the logic. I was the one others could tread upon for steady footing.

But I went along with Rami the best I could. I still listened to him talk about various plans for economic development that Inju kept voting and re-voting on. An outlet mall. A golf resort. Rami didn't really care what would stand in place. We passed by the familiar cracked concrete buildings and he told me he looked forward to the day they would all be gone, razed to the ground for something new and clean. He wanted a complete demolition of our past, the dusty school, the karaoke bars and the hospital that had spat us out. By the time it happened, Rami said, we would be long gone and unreachable in Seoul.

Rami spent whole weekends in the city, working, as he called it.

Where do you sleep? I asked.

Anywhere I want, he said. A café, a McDonalds, a public restroom at the train station. It's all free. He explained to me that he didn't keep normal hours while working. Sometimes he napped in the van, but he absolutely needed to be awake while everyone else was asleep. That was when things got stolen, after all.

When Rami was gone, I went by his house to check on his father. Most times he was already passed out by late afternoon, his big nose red and oily from drinking. All I had to do was check the rice cooker for rice, boil up some soup, pull his socks off his feet, wedge a pillow under his head, and turn off the ceiling light. But sometimes he'd be conscious, or something like it, rolling this way and that on the floor, looking for someone to talk back to him.

Ya, he shouted one day, when I spread his blanket out on the floor.

I ignored him. We all did.

Ya, he hollered again. Scream in my ear. This one. Just grab it and scream into it. I think it might be deaf. I think I'm losing this ear. Ya. Ya nuh. You there, stop.

His eyes shone a pale barley brown. Maybe they always had, and I'd never noticed. They seemed to trap all the light in the room when he looked at me, so I looked away. I skipped the removal of his socks and just nudged his pillow closer to his head before ducking back out into the tiny kitchen. I could still hear all his words.

You don't believe me? You think I'm lying? You think I want to go deaf. I'm going to die as fast as I can. Just flip over and die as fast as I can.

I fixed his rice and left. Rami lived near the top of a hill, with a slope so steep that, as a child, I used to hold my breath whenever I saw a car turning onto the road. Their house was considered ancient, even in a town like ours, because they still used bricks of coal to heat up their floor stones. They had one small kitchen and one small room for everything else: sleeping,

eating, living. Their toilet was set up outside, near the plumbing, with a curtain that drew along a flimsy wire. Baths took place in the basement, right by the furnace that heated up their floor stones and their water.

In winter, the coal man delivered to Rami's house every week on Wednesday afternoons. I made sure I was always there to watch. He strained just to get coal truck about halfway up the hill. From there he carried the heavy bricks up in his arms, pair after pair, until the front of his uniform was covered in black soot and all the bricks had been delivered to Rami's basement furnace.

Rami's father used to take the coal man out for rice liquor once in a while in return for the trouble. That was when we were little. Then he just got drunk alone, and couldn't walk up the steep hill to make it back home at night. Rami and I used to find his father on our way to school in the mornings, passed out with his arms wrapped around a traffic cone or an evergreen shrub. We forced ourselves to step over him, just like everyone else.

While Rami worked in Seoul, I spent most of my time volunteering at the Love Light Orphanage. Time passed faster at the orphanage: I constantly cleaned after the children, most of them boys, all at varying stages of understanding their alienation from society. The job of the orphanage, besides providing basic necessities, was to protect the orphans from seeing themselves as orphans. Young ladies worked there, young and made-up, Seoul college grads who needed to fulfill a year-long internship before they could move onto nursing or psychology or social work.

They announced every activity with pink smiles and big, frantic gestures of excitement. The quiz show is coming on in fifteen minutes, they'd sing, herding everyone to the TV room.

Do you know why we have so many quiz shows in the Republic of Korea? Rami had asked me one day.

I said, because we're curious. We like to know things.

Because it's dirt cheap, he corrected me. Quiz shows average the lowest production budget of all shows.

The children gathered dutifully to watch. The little ones crowded the front. The oldest children sat far away. Ten years old, maybe twelve, but their bodies stayed small and thin. They spoke in voices much wiser than their appearance, voices that made me uneasy. They never watched any quiz shows. They weren't interested in mimicking a family. Instead, they chose this time to talk to me, to drag me to the outside hall.

Teacher Kim didn't come home last night, they'd whisper. Teacher Sohn lost it completely and hit some of the little ones when she got mad.

I nodded, diplomatically poker-faced. The teachers were sophisticated college women from Seoul. Their standard Korean accent was crisp and fresh, and their education meant they would never know anything about factory work. All of this made them beautiful in my eyes. So what if they enjoyed themselves once in a while, lost control once in a while? They still did more for these kids than anyone else I knew. They taught them how to say their night and morning prayers, how to mop and sweep, how to prepare meals and get dressed, how to talk properly and end conversations politely. Without their teachers, these children would have remained animals.

Oftentimes the orphans came into a little money of their own. Pity money, the older ones called it. Foreigners who felt guilty for not wanting an older child would take their hand and

make a fist around a few ten-thousand-won bills. The kids stashed their money away and then showed me in private, when their teachers weren't watching.

Look, sister.

I'd let myself get pulled into a bedroom where books and drawers opened up, revealing tight rolls of green and purple bills.

Among them, Min was the smartest with his money. A quiet child, but his hands and brains moved faster than any of the other kids. Min had sewn a secret pocket in the lining of his winter coat, where he kept all his bills and coins. The secret pocket closed up with three mismatched buttons. Unlike other children, Min didn't spend his wealth on frivolous gets like candy or toys. He was waiting for something big, something that would change his life.

As soon as I'm old enough, he whispered to me, I'm running away.

You can't just run away, I said.

Most of the kids talked to me about running away. It was their way of setting themselves apart from the herd, of appearing more intelligent than the rest. Even with me, their volunteer sister, they couldn't help but try and sell themselves.

Your family needs you here, I added. It was what we were instructed to say in these situations.

My family's dead, he replied. I'm out of here as soon as I'm old enough.

Old enough for what?

To get married.

You have to find a girl first.

I'll find a girl and marry her.

She has to love you first.

I'll make her love me.

Min stood there with his winter coat on his arm, looking calm, almost proud. At the time, I didn't understand why he would tell me his plan. I was a kid myself, worried about the doors that might never open up for me. But I got the sense he was seeking my permission in some way, for me to open this door for him.

Of course you will, I said. You'll have lots of girls to choose from.

Before I headed back to the TV room, Min stopped me with a mumble. He took out a ten-thousand-won bill from his coat and held it out to me.

For coffee, he said. That's what we would go out to drink, right?

In the end, I took his money, but I didn't spend it on coffee. I wanted to, at first, I thought about surprising Min next weekend with a contraband mug while everyone watched TV. But the best coffee I could find was sold in a box at the grocery store, sitting in years of dust, and it cost too much for what it was worth. I would have been better off taking twenty paper cups of five-hundred-won coffee from the automatic dispenser in the lobby of the bank.

The real problem was that I couldn't spend Min's pity money at all. I imagined the wife — it was always the wife — who had given this money to Min, the kind of person who wanted a baby so badly she would take the easiest baby, a foreign baby, only to crack open and discard the baby's original name like a peanut shell, who gave money to orphans at an orphanage, money that said I'm sorry this home is not your home, who wanted the money to be spent and gone as quickly as their time here. And I didn't want the money to be gone.

After standing in the grocery store, turning boxes of coffee in the shelves, I left with nothing. I headed for Rami's house instead, to make sure his father was okay.

* * *

Sometimes Rami came back early. This was the worst thing that could happen, worse than if he'd never come back at all. An early return signaled an unexpected event, a near-capture or a severe injury. He never came to find me, so I would hear about his early arrival from someone else, the fruit lady who saw him trudging past her stand or the pharmacist who sold him antibiotic ointment for his wounds.

I preferred to see Rami physically hurt. It didn't require much explanation for me to understand what happened. Maybe he'd run from a security guard or the bike owner. Maybe he'd gotten into a fight with the other boys he worked with. Maybe I still had some questions. But I was still the safest bet in his life, the one who did all his homework for him and ironed his brand new dress shirts for him.

When he came home with bruises on his shins, road burns on his elbows, I felt we were finally equals. Inside the hard husk he was as weak as me, after all.

Even when he started spending entire weeks in Seoul, I just learned to wait for longer. I busied myself at Love Light. I taught the boys how to fold paper planes and I taught the girls how to braid each other's hair. Every evening, I stopped by Rami's house to stock his kitchen, check the floor stones, and occasionally cleaned his toilet.

I cooked for his father in his favorite copper pot, the radio tuned to an oldies station. On one occasion, his father was pleasantly lucid, probably from sleeping all day. He just hadn't found the time to get hammered yet. He hummed along to every song. He changed the words to all the songs, that's how familiar he was with them. Or maybe he really was going deaf, and he

just couldn't tell what verse was playing. I sliced some green chili into the bean stew at the last minute, and the spice was just right.

While his father ate, I pretended to clean the cabinet spaces in their bedroom, as Rami asked me to do. I was to get on the footstool, dust the top shelves, and while I was up there, make sure his savings was still intact. He kept all of his money in one envelope, tucked into an old music textbook from primary school. His father hummed along to the radio and I dusted.

Do you like trash? He asked me, cutting off his own tune.

I ignored him.

If you keep liking trash, he said, trash will keep sticking to you.

Then he groaned and lifted himself up to get his bottles of rice liquor from the kitchen. He cradled the green bottles in his arms so he could carry more in one trip. He didn't even bother with glasses, just poured the liquor straight into his mouth. I finished dusting and cleared his tray from the table.

Rami came home early that day. I was still at his house, ironing his New Expensive Shirts of the Week.

You shouldn't be here, was all he said to me. Then he plopped down on the floor, near the back of the room. Far away from the warm floor stones, where his father sat drinking. I couldn't see any scars or bruises on his face. His breathing was calm, in and out like a metronome.

Are you okay? I asked.

You shouldn't be here, he repeated.

I can finish these shirts and go. I'm almost done.

You should leave now. This is my house, isn't it?

Rami's father interrupted him. Where did you learn to talk like trash? I didn't teach you to talk like that.

Then he waved me off, telling me to go home. Don't do anything nice for my son ever again, he said. He needs to work on his gratitude.

Rami yelled and flung his backpack across the room. It slid right into the table, shaking the bottles until they toppled like bowling pins. You want medicine, he said, I get you medicine. He stood up and went over to kick his backpack across the room. The cracked bottles rolled around him. You want ear exams, he continued, I get you ear exams.

Then his bag hit his father, and I thought it was an accident, but then Rami went over and started kicking his father. After one kick in the chest his father went down. He aimed for the stomach. You want a cell phone, I get it for you. Even I don't have a cell phone. Do you know how much I want a cell phone?

His father just lied there, curled up into himself. I'm going to die as fast as I can, he said. I'm leaving you as fast as I can.

Rami grabbed me by the shoulders and led me out to the gate. From up close, he reeked of cigarettes and sweat. He shoved me out into the alley and slammed the gate so hard it popped right back out. He slammed it once more and the latch clicked into place.

It's okay, I said from the other side. I won't tell anyone. He'll be okay.

Rami didn't say anything.

I won't tell anyone, I repeated.

But he was done talking to me. I could tell. He stood there, though, with the gate between us, and I understood he just wanted to hear me leave.

I'm going, I said. I took my first few steps down the alley, almost to his neighbor's house. I'm really going.

After that day, I stopped ironing his clothes and filling in his worksheets. But I still went to his house while he was gone. I still fed his father and pulled off his socks for him when he fell asleep after a meal.

And I still waited at the bus stop for Rami to come back. Ginkgoes shaded the sidewalk in the afternoon, the trees Rami found so repulsive. But I still admired their delicate leaves that fanned out into skirts. When autumn came, they turned color almost overnight. Bright yellow leaves rained so easy and fast, I could hear them hit the ground with my eyes closed. Ginkgo seeds ripened too, and if I stepped on a fallen seed by mistake, the smell of rotting milk followed me for days. But I still loved them on my shoes and, when my mother remembered to buy them at the store, I had them in my rice and my vegetables. Once the rotting smell cooked out completely, the seeds grew soft and tasted like nothing else I knew, bitter and fragrant at the same time.

But in the winter, all that stood were the skinny trunks and snake-like branches. I ripped off countless chunks of gray bark. I rubbed them into ground to make a fine powder. By the time Rami came back, I'd collected enough powder to make a small mound. Rami got off the bus and joined me, crouching on the sidewalk. The wind had picked up. He watched me sweep and pat the mound back into shape after each gust. When he was finished with his cigarette, he put it out in the center, and he dug it in until the butt stood in place like a tombstone. We watched the wisps of smoke get thinner and thinner.

You don't seem hurt this time, I said.

I'm getting smarter. I told you.

We counted the money, right there on the sidewalk with our backs turned to the wind. His cut was six hundred thousand won, which seemed like a lot, but if we took out food and heating and transportation and booze for his father, the net profit was barely worth it.

Rami lit another cigarette and we walked home. He tried to hide his disappointment, but when we reached the hill he stopped and told me he would see me tomorrow. I'd never learned how to deal with Rami when he was disappointed. He built his hopes so high that his falls could be nothing but solitary and treacherous.

How about I cook for you? I said. All I could make was fried rice, but it was better than anything Rami would feed himself.

He shook his head. I'll boil some ramen.

I'll swirl an egg in there for you, I said.

If ramen needed eggs, they'd put it in the packet.

I'll chop up some garlic. And spring onions. It takes away the packaged taste.

I just want the packaged taste.

I gave him a long head start up the road, until I could barely make out the color of his backpack in the dimming afternoon light. Then I went up slowly, keeping the right distance so that if he were to turn around, I would also be lost in the half-darkness. I stuck close to the side, grazing my coat sleeve on fruit stands and videotape displays.

Rami had closed the front gate all the way and latched the lock. I went around the house to the back, where the steps led down to the basement furnace. I counted the bricks of used coal Rami had put out for collection. Seven. Still enough to last him until the coal man came.

Near the steps, if I crouched down, I could look into their basement kitchen. In full sunlight, the layer of dust on the windows reflected all the light right back into my eyes and made it impossible to see anything beyond. But in the gray light of evening, the dust was just a thin veneer, and I could see Rami cooking something inside.

Noodles. I recognized the smell, the steam, the copper pot Rami's father liked to eat out of, the pot that was only big enough for one portion. Two days ago, I had bought some eggs and arranged them neatly in the egg compartment of Rami's fridge. I psychically ordered Rami to open the door and see it, to crack one open and stir it into the broth, but he didn't listen.

Time for dinner, he shouted over his shoulder. He stepped out of sight into the living room, balancing the copper pot carefully by the handles. I waited for Rami to come back and cook his portion, but he didn't appear again. Not even to clean up or turn off the light.

On my walk home, I was reminded of his mother. She had only come home from the factory a few times each year, for four days at a time, which was all the company allowed. But during those short four days she made sure Rami got everything he needed. In my few memories of her, she comes down the steep slope to meet him halfway, to take his backpack off his shoulders and to put a pear or a soft persimmon in his hand.

As soon as the memory came to me, I also realized I was forgetting her, that I couldn't feel her presence as vividly as I used to. There were just too many mothers out there. Even in our small town we had the forgettable ones, like mine, forgettable even when they were alive.

In the end, I lost track of the coffee money that Min had given me. I could no longer tell it apart from the other bills in my wallet, and I couldn't be sure that I hadn't spent it already by mistake.

Soon after that I found out Rami had left Inju for good. Min was the last thing on my mind. I couldn't believe Rami had gone. But when I went over to his house to check his shelves for the music textbook, that was gone as well.

I spent my last few years in Inju cleaning up after Rami's father and digging through his mail for any clues of Rami's new address. When I felt bold I even looked through all their papers to look for hospital records, coroner records, occupation records, any documentation of his mother's illness. I couldn't find anything. The mysteries kept growing everywhere like mold.

Until Rami's father died, from all the immediate and secondary causes that ensnare alcoholics. In that moment all I felt was relief, the exact opposite of mystery.

The business liaison committee of Inju eventually passed the development contract for an outlet mall. I went back for my four days shortly before the grand opening, before housewives from Seoul could clog up the freeways. But even then, I saw new restaurants popping up, with wide parking lots cleared out in anticipation. A new subway station was under construction, one that would connect us to the heart of Seoul in thirty minutes with bullet trains.

It used to be, you had to take the Village Bus line to get anywhere. In three hours you could be in Seoul, but first you passed the stop where the orphanage was, then three stops to the town where the orphans went to school, then another two hours of rice fields that turned into warehouses.

Or, you could go in the other direction, two stops to Vocational where most of the boys ended up, then another seven or eight plus a line change to reach the factories. After some more rice fields, the road slimmed down into a single lane. The narrowest stretch of road in all of human history. Raised so high that I could see irrigation canals snake into the horizon and never end. I always feared our driver would swing our bus off the road and send us tumbling into the

fields, or that we'd collide with another car on the road. It was perfectly plausible that we would meet another car on that road someday, someone going the other way. I held my breath on the bus, the way I held my breath when I watched the coal truck make its way up the hill to Rami's house, so anxious to see it go up that I didn't care how it came down.

It's 1999 in post-communist Hungary and I'm splitting all my pills in half to roll with Marika. Split a pill, smoke. Split a pill, sleep. Split another, suck on ice cubes, smoke some more and burn the tips of her hair, just a little. We had a total solar eclipse a few months back, and Marika's kept the special polymer glasses for looking into the sun. She wears them all the time now because too much sunlight makes her sick and she can't tell how much is too much. Her blue eyes stay hidden under those black lenses, two neat rectangles on her face. I can't remember the last time she took them off.

Sometimes she tells me about her father. But each story drops off into silence halfway through, which is exactly how he died. Her mother has been taking pills of her own, pink ones, now that she's having sex again with her new boyfriend Pontus. Marika steals them when she can, just to fuck with them. When she's done fucking around she just smokes a bowl and lets the news channel lull her to sleep. I keep the TV on, to follow air strikes and earthquakes, rigged elections, blind football referees, and the bad weather soon to come.

When I feel brave, we hit up the one 24-hour McDonalds in the one mall. Skinheads line the way, showing off their swastika tattoos and baseball bats with names of Auschwitz doctors scribbled over the sweet spot. Most nights we say fuck it and stay in her bed, but every now and then I just need some nuggets dipped in a pod of sweet and sour sauce. The skinheads wait outside while we order. Then they follow us, down the steep, winding slopes of Rózsadomb and back up again to her condo. I catch most of their words, but never the important ones, the ones they never repeat on the nightly news.

What were they saying? I sometimes ask her. Only when we're back in her bed, safe, and I'm rolling so hard I have to remind myself to swallow my spit.

The usual, Marika says. I'm a whore and you've got a small Chinese dick.

Tell them you like my small dick, I say. Tell them you can't get enough of my small dick. Will you say that next time?

She doesn't laugh. She's concentrating on pushing the straw through the lid of her strawberry milkshake. She checks the dry ends of her freshly bleached hair. Then she opens the box of nuggets and splits each greasy piece in half like a pill.

The empty box goes on top of Marika's dresser, which is covered with all her things for school, even though she quit months ago. I play with her uniform pin, her velvet pens, a loose roll of volleyball finger tape. We get some more ice cubes from the kitchen and run them down the inside of our arms. I tap on the end of the bed until I can't feel the feet in my shoes.

We need better drugs, is all she says. Don't you think we need better drugs?

Chinese and Vietnamese kids pop up around town, with whiskers for a mustache just like me. We keep our heads down. We divide and conquer ourselves before someone else comes to do it for us. I let them pass through me like ghosts. I know what their life is: they belong to their chinky parents, their parents belong to the marijuana plantations in the countryside, and the plantation owners belong to the cops they bribe for each harvest. In a few years, they will squeeze into an illegal van headed further west through Austria, stomachs stuffed with all the cocaine baggies they can swallow, only to get locked and abandoned by their driver at the border. To suffocate and draw one last breath under old plastic sheets.

The news channels like to show the latest arrests, brown bodies in a neat procession to the station, their hands cuffed together. The reporters give different numbers every time: 87% chance of deportation, 45% chance of safe passage, one out of four illegals caught by infrared cameras at the border, 25% of newspaper boys found to be illegals, 61% of illegals sent to detention centers, 90% of illegals undetected and at large.

I watch it all anyway. In a few years, if the cops haven't grabbed them yet, my parents will be in that van. This is the only way I'll ever let myself see them again, dead or alive. From Marika's queen size bed, on the screen of her portable TV.

But for now I have Marika to look at, her tall stilettos and pink pushup bras. All the time, every day. She's some mix of Hungarian and French, or Swiss, or Russian. She's not sure what her father was, but she thinks in French like a proper French girl. She speaks Magyar like a Hungarian girl, but only if she has to, at home. Never in public.

Even when the cops sniff me out and come to look at my papers, she just straightens her back and shows them everything she's got, bumbling on in her pouty French, until they let me go and wave us by.

When she feels like driving, she borrows a silver Mercedes from Pontus. We survey Budapest from the heated leather seats. Buildings scarred from bullets. Shaky overpasses and unlit tunnels. A bastardized land, too much war and Gypsy blood mixed in everywhere, and Marika says it will never join the EU.

We pass through District Five, past Oktogon and the Opera House. This, she tells me with a new cigarette in her mouth, is where the other white girls prefer to hang, with their white boys, in the timelessness of Old World cobblestone alleys and outdoor cafes, to smoke and talk over a cocktail until curfew. When she comes in the evening, Marika hears the orchestra echoing

out from the Opera House. She likes to watch the fat oligarchs escort their pearly wives and mistresses up the front steps.

So you come here a lot? I ask.

It's a popular meeting place.

To meet without me. I calculate the hours in her days. When? When do you find time without me?

Marika throws her burning stub in my lap. When you take my money, asshole, she says. When you say you're getting us better drugs and then get yourself jumped like a little bitch.

Then why do you keep me around?

She says nothing. She rests her wrists on the steering wheel. Rubbing her fingers together usually brings the feeling back. Sometimes it doesn't come back soon enough, and she loses her grip on the wheel or the gas pedal or both. Right in the middle of the street. So far, though, the only thing she's hit is a telephone booth.

Marika slips onto the exit for Árpád Bridge. We cross the river towards an abandoned soccer stadium. I keep you around, she finally says, because you recognize you need me.

Need you for what?

You need me. I save your ass every day.

Not when I get jumped.

You're not with me when you get jumped. An impatient sigh. Look at us and tell me who needs who.

The first time, I'd tried to take a baseball bat from a skinhead. I managed to bite down on his arm, and the fucker screamed and got on his knees. But all of his friends came up with their bats and I knew I wasn't going to win. In the end I lost the hundred thousand forints Marika had

given me. The second and third times were the same. After that I just went down sooner. I remembered to cover my face. Once you give up on getting a good look at any of them, it's easy to keep your eyes closed.

The bridge cuts over Óbuda Island, which Pepsi has taken over for some millennium party. Advertisements multiply every day: British electronica, German rap-metal, Portuguese power-metal, Finnish love-metal. Down the stretch of the island, Pepsi stages shoot up like bamboo.

Better music means better drugs, Marika says. How are they going to have a party without both? They move together, I promise you. She rubs all the way down her palms and wrists.

Budapest delivers on Marika's promise. If not better, there's at least more, pills in neon tube canisters and rocks in plastic packets labeled in all kinds of languages. And the music, too, blaring from the one radio station that can afford to pay licensing fees for foreign bands. Tarps cover the Pepsi stages to protect them from the snow that piles up so high, so fast, I have to push Marika's car to help her get it back onto salted roads. Sunset creeps up on us earlier every week, at five and then at four and then at three in the afternoon.

We meet the new Turkish dealer near the new shopping mall still waiting for its grand opening. Construction's done, at least on the outside. When it opens, Budapest will be home to the largest mall in Eastern Europe. The diagrams propped up outside promise indoor courtyards with a skating rink and mermaid fountains. But those plans have been put on hold until enough tenants come along, and they haven't bothered to remove the scaffolding. We look across the

bridge to downtown, where orange holiday lights soften the flaws of bullet holes and crumbling limestone.

This could pass for Prague, Marika says, shivering. Maybe even Vienna or Berlin.

Those glasses are making you blind.

Her white breath rises up between us. We suck on our candies. Whenever we get a bag of assorted, Marika takes all the blue and I take the green, the ones that taste like sugar and mold. Mostly mold. She's never understood why I tolerate it. But every time Marika reaches in to pick them out and throw them away, I save them and put every last one in my mouth. Marika says I've fried off my taste receptors.

I don't tell her how much the flavor reminds me of my parents, hunched over all day to wrap up wet cannabis branches under heat lamps. The way they'd stink up our cot when we crowded our heads on the same pillow at night. I'd wake up in the dark to listen to my father cracking the bones in my mother's back, popping and ironing out her spine that kept trying to curl her up into a shrimp.

The Turk pulls up late, in a soviet Lada old enough to have been driven by Stalin himself. He has nothing but a rag bandana to hide his receding hairline. His beard has been shaved in patches. Of all the drug dealers I've seen, this is the only one I wouldn't trade lives with.

Let's just find someone else, I say. He looks wrong.

Marika laughs, her nose flushed pink under the bridge of her black glasses. It's not like we're choosing a heart surgeon.

I walk up to the driver's side window. Marika shouts from behind, reminding me we're going for powder this time. I notice a pair of pliers tucked in his shirt pocket, the rusted head peeking out.

This is something special, he says. His broken Hungarian is even more busted than mine.

How about you give us what we ordered.

This is all I have.

This is unprofessional.

It's the twin sister of Ecstasy, the sexier twin. For the new year.

He leaves his turn signal clicking, daring me to say no. His headlights catch chunks of ice sliding off some scaffolding.

I give up and reach out my hand. For the new year.

A handshake and he's off.

Marika can't even wait to get to the car to inspect our purchase. She pops open the vial and says it looks okay. But after a short line her hands go numb immediately. I rub her knuckles and pinch her fingernails.

She loses patience and hits the gas. We jerk onto a side street still frozen over. After some lucky turns like that, she swerves and lands us on a mound of neatly shoveled snow. Marika steps on the gas over and over again. It doesn't work. We're halfway off the ground on a mound of old brittle snow, with no pavement for the tires to grip onto.

She slams her hands down on the wheel. My reflection trembles in the windshield. Motherfucker. She tries to make fists. What do yours feel like?

Fine.

Good, she says. Then you go out and push.

In the red taillight I see some skinheads at the corner, squinting into the wind. Or maybe they're just some regular guys from the neighborhood. Maybe they're here to watch Marika, to enjoy the normal spectacle of a pretty girl stuck on a frozen street. Maybe they don't have any

baseball bats. Either way, I don't want to find out. I don't want them or anyone to see me.

Tonight is just another night in Marika's adventures of slumming it with the chinaman. And I'm just another piece of shit getting high in her passenger seat.

I turn the radio up. You want to go, I say to Marika. Then you get out and push. I'm fine staying here.

Say goodbye then. She's still trying to make fists, over and over again. Say goodbye to the only person who keeps you out of your pathetic shit.

I tell her I'm fine with that too.

Your pathetic shit of a life.

Well. I pick up her eclipse glasses, which have fallen off her face and landed at my feet. I guess I couldn't keep you forever.

I play with the glasses, the temple tips that she's chewed down into twists. I put them on to stare into darkness. In the end, neither of us has to move. It takes a while, but eventually the heat of the car melts off enough frost underneath. We slide off the snow onto the curb, then off the curb and onto the street.

Back in her bedroom, Marika smokes a bowl and falls asleep. I get up from the bed when I hear Pontus in the other room. I sneak out onto the balcony, sliding the door just wide enough for me to slip through. Pontus is on top, as always. A wallet and a seashell make shadows on the nightstand. When he's finished, he goes to the bathroom. He runs the tap loud enough for me to hear from outside. Marika's mother is still in her dinner clothes, and she turns to expose the back of her new blow-dry, which has already gone flat from the pillow.

I wait for her to turn back again this way, to show me what she looks like when she's alone. All I get is a thread of light from underneath the bathroom door.

* * *

Marika never came out for the eclipse. Pontus had bought the glasses for her, but I was the one who followed him out to the balcony.

I always thought an eclipse would be a smooth, perfect circle. But the black moon I saw was rimmed with bumps and teeth all over. I had never thought much about the irregularity of its surface, the craters and ridges from a million different pictures. In real life, Pontus said, those are valleys and lakes and mountain ranges. Big enough to kill you.

I keep the moon lecture to myself. Marika has no interest in geology, or astronomy, or anything Pontus has to say.

Marika takes a line off her hand mirror. Then she lies back and peers into the mirror to examine her hair. My mother has no standards. Her roots are growing out as dark as soy sauce. First mother let tragedy take over. Then she let some new asshole take over. She's everything that's wrong with Hungarian women.

He's good to you, I remind her. Even to me.

When you're not around he calls you Kung Pao.

I remember the times Pontus and I had shared plates, forks, even chopsticks, the times we had thrown our dirty laundry together into the same wash cycle. I tell her he's okay.

I'm telling you right now, Marika insists, I'm telling you what I hear all the time. He thinks your people are repulsive shit jungle people. Why doesn't it bother you? Why don't you get it? Don't you just want to slice his tongue off?

Marika's lows get messy and hard to watch. But on her way up she's a lotus flower, wide open and weightless. Oh this is good, she says, this is good this is good this is good. She digs her palms into each other. She gets up to rub her back against the wall.

I take some and funnel the rest into the tube it came in. Marika brushes out her hair, smokes a bowl and gets her candy, but I'm still waiting for the hit. I scrape the insides of my left nostril with a fingernail and take another turn, just in case the interior buildup had obstructed proper absorption.

I take Marika's glasses and go out onto the balcony, sniffing as hard as I can. I figure I can look at the sun for a while and then at Pontus some more, or if he's gone, then Marika's mother, whatever she's doing, whatever kind of nothing she's doing today.

But Pontus is out on the balcony as well. He waves me over and offers me his parka but I tell him I'm fine. He drapes it around my shoulders anyway.

What is she taking? he asks. He has the kind of voice that makes you sit up straight. Why are you doing this to her?

I didn't do anything, I tell him. We do everything together.

Then why aren't you locked in a room throwing yourself into the wall? Why aren't you losing your shit?

I'm not a doctor.

I sit on the ground and put on the eclipse glasses and examine the sun, which, on a day like today, is just a flat coin. I wait for the absorption, for the contaminants and binders to dissolve, for my hands to go numb and the wind to get knocked out of me, or through me, to send me back into the Mediterranean and up the Suez Canal, across the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca into the South China Sea, whatever direction I came from.

Pontus crouches next to me. A motorcycle wails somewhere nearby. Look, he says. I see everything. What is she taking?

You're not a doctor either.

So we leave her like this.

She is out of your jurisdiction.

He looks me up and down for a while, taking in my torn shoes and yellowing shirt collar. Parasites, he spits. He disappears back into the condo, taking his parka with him.

Marika loses feeling in her legs. We're about halfway between the American embassy and the Museum of Fine Arts, on the most scenic boulevard in the city, the one on every postcard. She lets go of the gas pedal and the Mercedes slows. We roll to a stop. Cars swerve around us, their drivers honking. She stomps the floorboard and pounds her thighs with her fists. I can't feel my face, she says. Her candy falls out of her mouth. I can't feel it. Her fingers knock the glasses off her face. She grabs handfuls of her thighs to squeeze and coax them back to life.

That fucker. What did that Turk give us?

The same shit he always gives us. You need to pull over.

I can't pull over without my legs.

I do what I can, rubbing her fingers with mine. I reach down to pull her feet up on my lap and I rub those too, through the patent leather of her stilettos. Marika still can't move.

I look out the window at all the foreign embassies around us, their security guards who will call for backup as soon as they notice us blocking traffic. I tell her that as soon as I hear sirens, I'm out. No cops.

You're not leaving me here.

No papers equals no cops.

I can talk us out of it. I promise. The fuckers will be escorting us home.

But I know better. By the first hum of the sirens, I'm gone. I run away from the river, away from the yachts and cruise ships and tourism stations, and into the quiet hills of the city. I pass an ambulance on the way and I can just tell it's for Marika, a van with fresh paint, clean and new enough to please her. I pass our 24-hour McDonalds. I pass a flower shop and I tell myself she'll be fine. The authorities will alert her mother, Pontus will take care of the hospital bills, he will bring her better flowers than I could, tulips and some fresh pillows, he will get her clean. He will purge the host body of all parasites.

I spend most of the night working some boys from Debrecen. The boys don't have much money on them, but it's better than nothing. I bait them into an alley tagged up with bad graffiti and I watch them snort off a dirty shard of broken plastic they fished out from behind a lamp post. It seems to work for them, the way it worked for Marika, the way it never worked for me. I watch them turn into puppies, rolling on the ground, happy just to rub their backs on something. They don't even notice when I take their Velcro wallets from their pockets.

I think of Marika, who must be losing it by now. Or maybe she's finally sleeping steady with her mother by her side. After borrowing Marika's bed and her money for so long, it's hard to just give it all back and return to the same old trash. But thinking of her tucked into a clean hospital bed makes it easier. It's a Marika I've never known, but the only one that wakes up tomorrow wanting to live without the glasses, her eyes wide open.

When I get up to leave, one of the boys grabs my leg. We just needed to get away, he explains, as if I'd asked him a question. Our parents are doing fucking nothing back at the hotel.

I tell him I understand.

We should be having fun on our vacation.

Fun is good.

Do you know any girls? Girls who like to party?

I tell him I wouldn't be here if I did, and then I shake his hand off and head out of the alley. He's still talking to me when I leave him and his friends. I count eighteen blocks, running as fast as I can to stay warm. Then I throw the wallets away.

I get downtown just in time, when tourists pour out to look for espresso and chocolate cake and prostitutes and drugs. I scan the girls who are out working tonight, but it's been so long that I don't recognize any of them anymore. One of the new girls looks Chinese, and I get close to hear her talk, maybe talk to her myself, but when she sees me her whole body freezes, begging me to leave her alone. So I leave her alone and sit on the sidewalk, waiting for some tourist tripping over cobblestones, looking to roll.

The only person who comes to me is the Turk. He kicks the curb next to me and says, Hey Romeo. The same pair of pliers peeking out from the same cheap shirt.

I'll pass, I say. I'm done for the night.

Your lady was just talking about you, he says. He points towards the cafés and then brings his hands to his mouth to blow warm air.

I have no lady.

He hears something in my voice that makes him smile. He adjusts his bandana with a few tugs around his ears. I'm sure she was talking about you, he says. I just couldn't understand because she had my fat dick in her mouth.

I tell him he has a fat dick in his mouth right now.

He smiles even harder. Don't look at me like that, he says. You'll be me in twenty years. Possibly twenty-five. Look at me, I'm generous with my predictions too. He pulls out the pliers from his pocket and tosses it down at my feet. Do you know why I carry this around? Do you know what this does for me?

I don't need to know.

You'll be glad to know someday.

I don't need anything you know.

He shakes his head and picks up the pliers. He dusts them off like they're something special and slips them back into his pocket. You'll know in twenty years, he says and offers me a cigarette. When I shake my head he clears his throat and backs away.

He calls out Romeo again, and I look up.

I wouldn't get too attached to her, he says. She'll be dead in six months.

For a good hour I try to convince myself the Turk is a piece of shit who can't back up anything he says. Then I give up and get on my feet to look for Marika, just in case he really did see her. I pass white girl after white girl, veranda after veranda, until a familiar laugh grabs me by the throat. Sure enough, Marika's tapping a cigarette over an ashtray, her legs crossed to the side. When she sees me she smiles and waves from under the wide yawn of a patio umbrella. She pats the empty chair next to her and tells her white boys to move over.

Where did you go? I ask.

I didn't go anywhere. I told you we'd be fine. Her face looks fine enough, but it's hard to tell in the orange holiday lights. She smiles like a lipstick commercial.

What happened to you?

Nothing, she says.

* * *

The Acropolis of Athens is bathed in pink smoke. The London Eye winks at its reflection in the Thames. As midnight sweeps across the Atlantic, couples will line up at Vegas wedding chapels, and Hillary Clinton will address the dignitaries of Washington.

And what do we have? Marika turns off the TV. We don't even have an LED countdown.

It's a cold night but there's no snow, and no ice to crush under our tires. Marika's favorite German band is yowling on the radio, live from Pepsi Island. And I'm playing with the sharp ends of my new pair of pliers. I don't know what the Turk was talking about, and I'm certain he doesn't know either, but I'm hoping if I keep one close, I won't have to wait twenty years to find out.

Marika questions its ability to do any real damage to anyone. How would you even use it?

I remind her it's not a weapon.

Then that's your first problem.

Five minutes into the drive she turns the heater on full blast and decides she doesn't want to go to the millennium party after all. The island will be too crowded, and the stages too far away. We're not wasting good drugs on bad music, so we're on our way to Váci instead, for the regular street celebration that happens every year. She insists we have enough powder to make it special.

The sky is jammed with fireworks. I watch them twice, once out the window and again on Marika's glasses. We miss the street party but after a while the drunken parade spills out towards us. Bare teeth in our headlights. Milky handprints on our windshield. The drunks keep

coming, brandishing their paper trumpets. They strike their neighbors on the head for good luck, hit after hit, empty bells emptying each other.

Missing Persons

Eight years after you had disappeared, I saw you standing next to me, waiting to cross the street. The busiest intersection in the world, with at least three million people crossing a day. Earlier that night, I'd fallen asleep in a movie theater. No one had come to wake me up, so I rushed to the station for the last train, just like everyone else. We were all pushing to get to the fare gates, and close enough to hear the metro cards beeping. But I decided to follow you instead, back out into the street. If I had hesitated, this story would have ended right there.

When you first disappeared, and it became clear that no one was going to find you, all the mothers from school blamed your mother. That American woman, they said. They didn't like how you were allowed to stay out late every night. Ten thousand people go missing in Japan every year, and that's just the number of reported cases. Only three percent are found again. With a mother like that, they said it was only a matter of time until you succumbed to the odds.

They also never liked how she let you pierce your ears and bleach your hair. I know exactly the kind of American mother they imagined: frosted lips and long legs in jeans, maybe played by Goldie Hawn, crushing pills into her wine, and so confident in a tank top that they don't know where to look.

I couldn't tell them they were wrong about her. I didn't know, at the time, how to talk about her without talking about me. I'd have to explain how I knew her, and why I had been going over to your apartment all the time. I'd also have to explain why no one had been looking for me.

The truth is, my mother always wished I would disappear. She couldn't get rid of me, so she just locked me out of the apartment from time to time. I would come up to the fourteenth floor and press our doorbell but nothing would happen. I heard her inside, moving all our furniture around. That was what she did during these solitary spells. I'd hear her dragging the gold velvet sofa, then the TV stand, then the dining table over the hardwood floors. When she finished the new arrangement, I heard her sweep and vacuum from room to room. Just before my father came home, the door opened and I was allowed back in. My father didn't suspect a thing. He ate dinner and watched sports in his boxers until it was time for bed. I got one sentence from him every night, and if she was lucky my mother got two.

I had no choice but to wait in the hallway after school with my backpack on my lap. It was that, or go outside and risk becoming one of the ten thousand myself. I picked the dirt off my shoes and rubbed it into the carpet. I played with the pleats in my uniform skirt and listened to the elevators go up and down. After an hour in the hallway with my books, I would see your mother come home from her job at the dental clinic. She would see me too, and she always came over to take me with her. You can't just stay on the floor there, she'd say, come wait with me. And she would pull me up and carry my bag down the hall.

Even then, you were never home. It's a shame, your mother said after asking me to excuse your absence. He plays the violin and it fills the house. He's going to win every scholarship out there. You really should hear him play someday.

And that was the first thing I ever heard about you.

Your mother gave me my first glass of Kool-aid. There was so much sugar that it hurt my gums, but I knew I had to be polite and I drank it as fast as I could. She looked at me a lot that first day, but as with the men in our building, I couldn't look back at her. I sipped the glass of red

water and ice. I looked at everything else in your living room. The pictures of your life in Berkeley, framed in seashells. Your dog, also named Berkeley, bigger than any dog that could ever be raised in a Tokyo apartment. Your father, barefoot and in swim trunks on a beach. The picture frames hung crooked, maybe shaken by our small earthquakes over the years.

Your mother caught me looking and told me about your father. She told me about the letters he sent you that you wouldn't let her see. She told me she sometimes worried the two of you were conspiring to kidnap and smuggle her back to America.

I know it's hard to believe, she said, but this is where I was born. This is my first language. I always knew I'd be coming back. She asked me if I ever thought about how big our world is. Billions of light-years, she said. And that's just space. If we also consider time, that's up in the billions, too.

She showed me the bedroom. Her futon, folded up and tossed in the corner. The kind of sloppiness my mother has nightmares about. A desk, a chair, a computer, a small lamp covered in dust. The monitor crackled and woke up. When the screen came to focus, I saw the computer program for the first time, the one that finds and records all the radio signals we can pick up from outer space.

This is my life, she said.

I asked her what we were looking for.

She told me we were looking for a pattern. A series of spikes. A message of any kind from extraterrestrial beings. She told me there were four million of us on Earth, running the exact same program, sending what we found to the headquarters in California. We become one supercomputer, all looking together.

And that was how we spent those afternoons, staring at the glowing screen after she made me Kool-aid. When my glass rattled with nothing but ice, we got up and went to the bedroom, the cave. Her futon was always in that lazy pile, but I learned to not let it bother me. I learned to just sit in your mother's chair and wait. It was endless, the stream of radio spikes crossing the screen, but I felt like something would pop up any second. A song. A Christmas card. There were four million other people doing the exact same thing, but I always thought your mother and I would be the ones to make first contact.

On my way home, I would worry that my mother would see my red lips and tongue. What would happen then? What would she ask me? But she just opened the door and went off in her glossy slippers, straight back to her spot on the sofa by the window, back to her black-and-white Italian movies. Sometimes she'd look at me, and sometimes she wouldn't. It was all the same.

The first person who disappears in this story is my mother. The easy explanation I can give you is that she snapped, but I don't think that would be fair to her. She tried, for a while. Sometimes she would bake pineapple bread, or steam egg rolls, and I would watch her favorite Italian movies with her. But when I looked up at her, hoping she would look back at me, I saw her eyes were fixed on something outside the window. To her, in the end that's all it was: pineapple bread and egg rolls. So she gave up.

She announced her resignation by throwing our sofa out the window. No one could believe she had managed to raise one end all the way up the window ledge, but I knew she'd had years of practice. What I couldn't believe was how neatly the sofa had landed – upright, and

facing a row of forsythia bushes the district government had just planted. I stayed with my mother until the cops came. She stood by the window, looking down. The wind was blowing fast. It whipped her nightgown around her, in the flashing blue lights of the police cars below.

My father had her taken away. You have me now, he said to me, but I didn't really. I had the new sofa that he let me pick out from a magazine. I had a housekeeper, an old Filipino lady who came by every three days with our laundry and groceries. One of his co-workers sent his daughter every day to help me with homework. I also had my father's plans to send me to a good high school, and then a good college. He made sure I was never by myself after school. I was losing your mother and her radio signals from outer space.

I got impatient. My cram school classes were scheduled to start in a few weeks, and their long hours meant that our afternoons together would be over. The numbers had never been in our favor, but I wasn't content with just looking anymore. I wanted results. So I asked your mother why, if extraterrestrials are so intelligent, why have they not contacting us first?

Your mother smiled. What would they even want from us? We can't be that special, she added. We can't have that much to offer them. I clean teeth all day, she said. How special am I?

I thought about you, what I knew and saw of you. The hair like lightning and the many girls that kept you company. There was always a girl jumping the fence with you, bringing lunch for you, looking through cardboard boxes of hatched quails with you. You were the best at haggling with the vendors. Sometimes they gave you a pair of quails for free.

I don't know if you know this, but your mother smokes when she's upset. Right then she got up and opened a cupboard, the one where she kept the Kool-aid powder, and took out a glass ashtray and a pack of Marlboros. She lit one and tucked the pack into her white coat pocket. She tapped ash into the heavy glass, which reflected light in strange patterns on the ceiling. I had

never sat through a whole cigarette before, from beginning to end. One cigarette is actually a very long time.

I tried not to cough. Your mother blinked her pale eyes and bit her chapped lips. I had never seen my own mother look that way. My mother was always adjusting her dress or her face, flicking at smudges here and there. There was so much make-up that when the humid summers came around, her forehead would streak like a dirty window. It was a window I would never see again.

Yesterday, I met a girl with a fishhook in her thigh. She told me it was from a childhood boating trip with some reckless cousins. She barely even thought about it, because the fishhook had become a part of her leg. She said she was more afraid of losing it. The surgery would take a couple of hours, and there would be significant residual effects. She lifted the hem of her skirt to show me, right there on the train in front of everyone, the metal hook curled like an infant's finger, held in place by dead, cracked skin. The hook seemed to be headed straight for the bone.

She reminds me of my afternoons with your mother. I thought I could be like that fishhook, always digging into your home until I became a part of it.

But then you disappeared. The police were in and out of your apartment for a couple of days. They turned your room inside out, carrying your belongings out in Ziploc bags to the evidence collectors from the station. But that came late, after the requisite number of days had passed for an official report to be filed. And it didn't go anywhere. For a while you were the only thing your classmates talked about, until exams came around.

My cram school classes were keeping me up so late that I would see the moon set on my walk back home. I saw crows picking at garbage bags together, taking their time with no one to shoo them away, helping each other tear open the plastic. I saw your mother's posters, stapled over each other every week to keep your picture crisp and clean. You should know that she kept up with it for months – her posters outlasted the failing forsythias. But then she stopped, and I knew that any opening I had made in your home was closing up.

But this is how I still see her: at the kitchen table, tired and thirsty, with one of her cigarettes. She takes from it occasionally, but mostly she just watches it in her hand, from beginning to end, and it calms her.

If you think I'm trying to tell you to go back to your mother, then you're wrong. I left too, and it was easy. I told my father I found a job filing papers for a lawyer. I told him I'd also found a cheap, clean place across town in Setagaya. I had the crazy idea that we still might see each other often, that it was only a half-hour train ride between us. Father just nodded and patted my arm when I delivered the news. He turned away from me, back to the boxing match on TV. And if you think there was anything else he could have done, then you're wrong again.

Once we got out of that intersection, I followed you some more. You paused to look at some of the shops. A pair of men's shoes on display, maybe a new jacket for fall. You stopped when some drunk girls called out to you. I was surprised that you stopped for them, since they're the kind of girls who will yell things at anyone to kill time until the trains start again. They called out and writhed in mini skirts held in place with string.

I was afraid you might feel attracted to one of them, and try to take that one somewhere for another drink, and then what would I do? But you kept walking, only turning back to tell them you wished you had more time.

I think about the few times I saw you at the baseball park near school. It was barely a baseball field, really. Just the four bases on top of a hill, and a public phone booth by the bleachers. The grass was so tough and clumpy that I wished someone would run a brush through it. No one played baseball anymore, but that was where you boys always went with your girls to hang out on the bleachers. Sometimes, when I didn't want to go home, I stepped into the phone booth and stood there with the receiver in my hand, pretending to be on a call. A stray baseball had smashed one of the window panel months ago, and no one had come to fix it. That was where I learned what high school would be like, listening to you boys talk to your girls.

This one day I'm thinking about, you were with Aki. I remember her because she was your girlfriend for longer than any of the others. She even bleached her hair to be just like you.

She asked you why you weren't happier. Everyone wants to know who you are, she said, or something like that. Do you want to go back to America?

You told her that wasn't the point. You kept repeating you couldn't see each other again.

I remember how surprised I felt. I thought Aki was perfect, the way her uniform swished against the back of her thighs. She had those bangs that curve like a leaf over one eye to make you notice how big and pretty the other eye is.

You got angry and asked her what she wanted from you. I'm just going to deliver pizza all my life, you said. And I'm going to get drunk at the pool hall every night. And if I win anything, I'm just going to spend it on myself.

Aki cried after you walked away. I stayed in the phone booth and hoped she wouldn't see me watching. I waited for her to leave so that I could go home too, but she cried on the bleachers for a long time. My feet started to hurt from standing in there for so long. I don't know if you know this, but all pay phones have a coin release code. You press a series of numbers, hit 'return change' and hang up, and then all the coins just pour out from inside. I would try to guess the code for these pay phones while I was hiding and eavesdropping on conversations. Back then it was only seven digits, so I felt like it was possible.

I couldn't break it, of course. I must have tried over a hundred combinations by the time Aki stopped crying. She saw that you had left your backpack on the bleachers, and she leaned over to pick it up. But then she changed her mind and dropped it. She powdered her face and left.

When I was sure that she was gone, I walked over to your backpack and picked it up. It was light with barely anything inside, but I still unzipped it just enough to see. I saw your stolen comic books and reached in to move them, though there was nothing underneath. I told myself there had to be more.

A few days later, you and Aki were together again. Everyone said you two were inseparable, after all. But I knew that wasn't true.

I followed you as far as the street went, where it hits the Ward Office and disappears. You walked into the Wendy's, stepping over a drunk man passed out on the steps. You sat down with a styrofoam cup of coffee in the non-smoking section, grabbing a handful of red stir-sticks on the way. No bleached hair, no piercings. And that's where I leave you, at the two-seater by yourself, snapping the stir sticks in half. That's where I turn to go catch another movie to pass the time. The boy in the box office wakes up. He slides my ticket out to me and goes, hey, it's you again.

Misgivings

I'm going to be the reckoning of Eric Rothmann-Foss, the piece of shit who won't stop cheating on me.

I took Eric's custom Lexus Hybrid, a birthday present from his family, altered and fashioned in Japan, an exact replica of the ride in some dystopian science fiction movie featuring Tom Cruise. I took the car and lent it to my friend Betsy, Bacardi Betsy, Benzo Betsy, knowing she'd do something stupid with it. And she did. She really pulled through for me on her way back from Atlantic City.

The hospital says Betsy will be fine if she keeps her back brace on for a few months. The dealership says no specialist in North America will know how to fix his car. Eric doesn't know what to do with it. He doesn't want to get into trouble with his family, either. For now the car is just sitting in my unused parking space, in the lot behind my apartment, rusting away behind barrier gates.

Another round for justice. I go to Vango to celebrate.

I text Betsy to meet me at the club. After the crash and her troubles, I owe the chica some drinks, the only other Korean girl I know in Philadelphia. The only other Korean girl I know who's living on her own, moving back and forth over the Pacific, deeply offended by her outdated prospects in the motherland but equally unimpressed here in Le Superpower. There used to be more of us caught in-between, never still. Back and forth like elephants corralled in the zoo. But the others have fallen away, on either side of the ocean, and now it's just me and Betsy left in our tribe.

Betsy texts back to say she has an Intro to Income Taxation exam coming up. She's also feeling loose from the pills and can't be bothered to get it together.

So I call Eric. I put on the voice to sound sloppy, purry, enticingly in need. While I wait, I pass gummy bears back and forth with an underage film student in a tuxedo T-shirt, pushing the nubs of sugar into his wet mouth with mine. Then Eric glides in as handsome as ever, with a thick scarf coiled around his neck to selectively release the verdant bouquet of his cologne. Tuxedo Boy sees him coming towards us. Tuxedo Boy is nervous, unprepared.

The heartrending denouement from all this is that Eric doesn't go apeshit, doesn't get mad or protective like I hoped he would. He doesn't even help me balance on the cobblestones outside.

Now we're waiting for a train that should have taken us back to 58th Street an hour ago. It's almost midnight, the SEPTA station smells of urine, and a homeless man crouches by the stairwell, droning on about how we've invaded his boudoir.

You look well, I say. Is that a tennis tan?

This isn't normal, Eric says. You can't keep calling me.

Are you sorry? I ask him. Are you sorry for everything?

Everything I did to you is my fault. But there are things you do to yourself. There's a lot of that too.

I remind him I don't have anyone else, that only one of us has a hundred budding friendships on OkCupid and Adult FriendFinder. I remind him I am free to subject myself to whatever conditions I wish, that he is also free to get up and go, to leave me in a SEPTA station in the middle of the night. I remind him what a fairytale 58th Street becomes after dark. The

symphony of gun-point muggings and stabbings, the fifteen-year-old prostitutes lining up for Chinese take-out in front of a bulletproof window.

Eric shakes his head. After a while he gets up to move one seat over, away from me. He puts his jacket on the seat between us and looks down at his shoes, shaking his head the whole time.

A low rumble rises in the tunnel. The train sounds far away.

Eric repeats himself. Babe, this isn't normal. I never know where I'm going to wake up with you.

Where would you like to wake up?

He ignores me.

I tell him his scarf looks ridiculous. I ask him if it's also an heirloom of the Rothman-Foss Empire.

You're hurting yourself, is all he says. You're doing all this to yourself.

I'm Korean, I say. We're crazy bitches. We're war-torn nomads from the steppes with nothing better to do than boiling up some dogs. That's all I've got in my family.

Stop talking.

I keep it real, son.

Stop talking.

On the ride back I see a milky patch of someone else's forehead grease on the fiberglass. Sucia. I close my eyes and lean my head on the window anyway.

Everything on 58th Street is closed, except for the 7-Eleven down the next block, the narrow parking lot littered with newspaper, drifting copies of the free weekly. I convince Eric I

need to get some bottled water and half and half for the morning. He walks in first, and I swipe a pack of condoms into my purse. The old cashier watches me. He doesn't say anything. But later on, he rings up my water and cream without taking his cloudy eyes off me.

Long day, I say. Long night.

Don't come back here.

He puts everything in a plastic bag and pushes it off the counter.

At the steps to my apartment I put on the voice again. I tell Eric it was wrong of me to send mixed signals, to call constantly and freak out when he didn't call me right back, to try and beat a dead horse back to life. I tell him I want us to give loving each other another shot.

Eric sighs and turns around to face the dark road, rotating his shoulders in contemplation. I don't think I've even been that shitty to you, he says. It's just how ambitious people treat other ambitious people. If you're smart you keep your options open.

Right, I say. And it doesn't mean you don't care about me.

Exactly.

He wraps his arms around me and I bury my face in his ridiculous scarf. A car slinks by on the road with its headlights cut. The entire way up the staircase to my apartment, I'm convinced he's going to change his mind and bounce. But he follows me up and even pinches my nose like I'm cute when I present the condoms.

In the end I'm never sure if he wants me because he's recovering his sense of right and wrong, or because he's losing it completely. Whenever I take a long shower he busies himself on my computer, checking emails and chatting up friends. Afterwards, while he's asleep, I pull up my admin program to read the log of his passwords, listed chronologically in one neat txt file. I

dive into his virtual life, I step into his virtual shoes. A whole warehouse of shoes: invitations to fundraisers, Youtube videos linked from his frat brothers, naked girls blowing kisses at the screen, membership bills to clubs he's never stepped foot in, a family history of divorces piled on top of divorces like diner pancakes.

With enough messages and emails, I can piece together his life without me, the trajectory from each girl to the next. There are the expected girls, the private massage therapists with flat-ironed hair and sculpted abs. These are the ones I examine first, the ones who require minimum taste for maximum enjoyment. After them, it's the girls I've seen Eric with before, the girls I'd been introduced to as great family friends. Grace Kelly shoulders and Natalie Wood smiles. Their messages are just a string of inside jokes, an historic code I will never learn to crack.

I save myself for last. Everyone deserves a proper post-mortem. I want to see what's there, besides my apartment that smells of boiled noodles and my objectionable pedigree. I click through all the messages I sent him over the months. I click all the way back to the beginning when we were just getting to know each other, I want to know what he saw in me in the first place.

Here's one habit of highly effective people they don't tell you about: littering. It's hard not to litter, when you become so effective that you employ lawyers, accountants, chambermaids, all kinds of cleaning folk. Note every tabloid headline. Note Paris Hilton on David Letterman, graciously accepting a gift from her host and then stuffing it between couch cushions four minutes later, discarding goodwill in the face of every camera rolling.

Note Eric's scarf by my door, which will join the various other items in my apartment he has yet to want returned. Note the glass of diet coke he leaves on my floor and kicks over absently, the pool of sweet carcinogens spreading out.

In the morning Eric dresses to leave without a shower. I heat up some soup, a single serving in a single bowl, to show him I don't care. After the door closes I walk over to the window that looks down on the back parking lot. I watch Eric come out and vault over the rusted gate. He inspects his custom Lexus, kicking the tires to check for air. He wipes off some of the fallen leaves with his bare hands. He stops when he sees the dust gathering on his palms.

Eric and I met at the Adams Institute. He stopped by one day to drop off a check on behalf of the Rothmann Foundation. Then he asked me what the rooftop of the museum looked like, if I'd ever been up there.

Looking for a cigarette? I'd asked.

Helipad, actually, was his reply. I'm told the one at HUP is out of service.

Looking back, maybe that should have deterred me.

Once the most prestigious center of scientific inquiry in America, the Adams Institute is has become a Walmart for all your science field trip needs. The most iconic display, The Giant Heart, is just a papier-mâché tunnel that smells like old sweat and dirty hands. My office is in the basement, past the Foucault Pendulum no one knows about, through the double doors into the jumble of cubicles known as R&D.

Any lull in the paperwork, and I bolt upstairs. It's not my job to yell at the college interns who abuse their Segways, zipping around and crashing into each other, but it feels good to yell at

them once in a while. Then I listen to CDs of various animal heartbeats, the rapid flutter of the hummingbird and the somber dirge of the whale. On my best days I can even tolerate the manic delight of children riding bikes over a tightrope.

I take my lunch breaks around the back of the Adams, where the catering trucks park to load and unload.

Once upon a time, Danny from Design had joined me every day, bringing me lavish boxed salads from the Whole Foods around the corner. Danny the stylish geek, with the best exhibits on the floor, with the rolled sleeves that hugged his surprisingly brawny forearms.

Then he went and proposed to his ex-girlfriend. I was told she owned property in the Bay Area, the mecca for stylish geeks with brawny forearms.

I confronted him for an explanation. What about me? I asked.

You're beautiful, he said. You know that. Every time you look at a guy, it's like Christmas lights.

And?

Danny took his glasses off and wiped them on the cuffs of his sleeves. I think it's a problem, he said slowly, when that starts to mean less and less.

You're saying I've peaked.

He still refused to look at me. No, he said. You're just as beautiful. But it means less to me every day and I think that's a problem.

When I hooked up with a Rothmann-Foss, Danny was the first person I told. I made sure he heard about everything: the cocktail hours at the Pyramid Club, the karaoke nights with Chef Morimoto, the chartered limos to New York on weekends, the limo drivers who could never make change for a hundred.

I don't think I ever quite sold it to him. But it didn't matter if Danny never believed me. I was still transmitting an important truth: I was as done with him as he was with me. Maybe even slightly more.

I buy my own salads now. I sit on a cement block that warms up nicely by noon. For dessert I take a nibble or two from a bottle of Valium, courtesy of Betsy. On the way I knock over some pins on the Foucault Pendulum, just because I can.

Danny follows me to my cubicle. Put it back, he says.

Que pasa?

I saw you kill the pendulum.

I tell him the reports of its death have been greatly exaggerated. I tell him the janitors will do a great job cleaning it up.

I'm not listening, he says. Just put it back. He walks away to get his lunch from the beeping microwave.

My basement cubicle is directly underneath the Baldwin 60000 Steam Locomotive, a permanent exhibit here, the demonstration of which runs in twenty-minute intervals. The whole floor shakes each time. The rattling drives everyone else crazy. For me it's a reminder to get back to work, that I've been creeping through Eric's Gmail or Facebook or Match.com account for far too long.

But today all my passwords get denied. I try each one carefully, again, over and over, until Gmail locks the account and Facebook tells me a text alert has been sent to the account holder as a precautionary measure. Sure enough, Eric forwards me the warning text.

You disgust me, he adds.

Ay caramba, I text back.

That's a misdemeanor. I'm getting you fucking deported.

I remind him I answer to a higher law. I tell him what he told me, that sometimes there are things you do to yourself.

I'm calling my lawyers. I can't believe this is happening.

Sacrebleu, I say. I've betrayed our hallowed pact.

For the rest of the day, I'm waiting for Eric to text back. Every time my desk rattles from the train upstairs, I look at my phone. Then the exhibits close. The rattling stops. The hallways fill up with the echoes of screaming children, pouring out to board their buses parked outside.

One by one, coworkers pop their heads over my cubicle divider to say good night. I stick around, waiting for Danny, who is usually the last one to go.

This used to be my favorite time of day, when we could be alone together and make out undisturbed. I would fantasize about us breaking into one of the prototype rooms, throwing ourselves on top of tangled wires and light bulbs. He'd told me about an archive room hidden somewhere, storing Nikola Tesla's old telegraphs and a hundred different busts of Benjamin Franklin. I always thought he would take me there to see.

While I wait, I make a note of all the things I will have to take care of, in case Eric decides to sic his lawyers on me.

I'd have to wipe out my hard drive, for one, maybe throw away my computer altogether, maybe even this one in my office. But first I'll throw all of Eric's belongings away, and ship all of mine to my cousin's house in Korea, and if I want my security deposit back I'll have to scrub off the diet coke that Eric spilled on my floor, which I kept telling myself I'd do, but for now the

diet coke has congealed into a plastic film over the hardwood. Maybe I can give the deposit to Betsy and help her out with the hospital fees.

Danny finally gets up to leave. He makes his rounds, checking all the meeting rooms and cubicles to turn off any forgotten lights. He doesn't come by to say good night.

On my way out, I notice that Danny has put the pendulum pins back in place. I wait for the janitor down the hall to turn his vacuum cleaner on full blast, and then I knock the pins down again.

From the station I call Betsy. I consider telling her about Eric, but I know what she'll tell me. That's why I don't fuck with white boys, that's what she'll say. I don't fuck with white boys because white boys fuck with you.

Instead I suggest we meet at Tria, to possibly finish the night at Vango.

Can't, she says. Trademarks exam. Also. Unsightly torture device. Still attached.

You can rock the brace, I tell her. The trick is to not let it wear you.

Kill me.

Sucia.

Blame the fucktards who made this thing, she says. I've got welts everywhere from scratching myself.

I tell her to blame Eric and his shitty little car. Lexus is just a white word for Toyota.

Betsy doesn't laugh.

Just when she's about to hang up I tell her I'm sorry. Technically, I say, this is all my fault.

Betsy pauses. It's okay, she says. Her voice suddenly reminds me of how much older she is, how much longer she's been living in America by herself.

I got to meet another doctor with a private stash, she adds, sounding considerably brighter. It was all meant to be.

When I turn the corner at Market, Eric's there, sitting on the stoop of my building, looking straight at me. The 21 bus passes by and the driver, mistaking Eric for someone else, gives him a honk and a wave. Eric doesn't notice.

Where's your lawyer? I ask. Looking at his hair, I can tell he's been waiting here for a while. His scarf, one I don't recognize, is folded up in his lap into a bright blue square.

I'm here to apologize, he says. I'm here to convey my deepest regrets.

The 42 bus passes. I make sure the driver catches me waving.

It's how I am, Eric says. I always expect understanding and expect forgiveness even though I never really learned how to ask for them.

To the detriment and suffering of others, I add.

He nods. I can say it's hereditary, he says, but that only helps me feel better, it doesn't help you. I'm here to try and help you feel better.

He shifts his weight to pull his wallet out of his back pocket. From his wallet he pulls out a single check, folded in half. After playing with the corners a little, he hands it to me.

This is a start, he says.

A start to what?

Reparations.

Mon dieu. From the Rothmann-Foss Tribunal. Here to reparate moi.

I examine the check, hoping to be unimpressed, hoping to be nauseated by the low estimation of my worth. But Eric always knows how to flatter.

Babe, he says. You should take what you can get from me. That's the smart thing to do. That's what I advise. He wraps his scarf around his neck, laying down the loose ends in studied carelessness.

Then Eric gets up with his phone pressed to his ear, on hold for a cab operator. The cab operator says hello and Eric tells her he'll wait on the corner of Market.

He shakes my hand. He turns around and points to the parking lot.

We'll get a tow truck here tomorrow, he shouts. We'll get that out of your way.

58th Street isn't so bad in the daytime. The basketball courts get mobbed after school, by pick-up players and adoring spectators alike. Some kids from the community college meet about every other day to work on new murals for our block. They leave sunny streaks of paint that bleed down the bricks and onto the sidewalk.

But at night there isn't much. I sit on the stoop and listen to the leaves skating over the concrete. Even an ambulance siren would be comforting. Anything to mark time.

I crawl under the gate into the parking lot. Eric's car doesn't look as bad in the dark. You can't see the dust or the flat tires, and the cold metal feels nice on your palms. The whole hull looks lighter, more like paper than metal, more like the shedded exoskeleton of a faraway slug.

I call Danny and put on the voice. I tell him I was wrong to end things so poorly between us, to not respect his friendship and honesty. I tell him I have a hard time asking for understanding or forgiveness. I tell him we need to talk.

Can it wait? he asks.

No, I say. I have a quarter million dollar car to give away.

Danny agrees to bike over.

I head to the 7-Eleven for some beer, maybe even some tacky boxed wine in case Danny's into that sort of thing.

The parking lot has been cleared of newspaper, and a new banner stands to the side, promoting their new premium coffee. I check to make sure it's a different cashier on shift this time. I recognize this one, a young kid, the one still in high school who keeps a textbook open on the back counter. The red uniform swallows his skinny body. But as soon as I walk in, the kid waves me away. We're out, he says.

I'm just getting some water.

Ma'am. He holds out his hand like a traffic cop. We're out.

I step closer. I tell him he's seen me a hundred times.

Ma'am. He keeps his hand up. I have to do what I'm told.

I head back out to the parking lot, with the cashier watching me the whole way. I move to the side, away from the window, with my back on the wall. From his view, it's just four empty parking spaces. I wait for him to get curious and come out looking for where I've gone. But he doesn't.

So I take all of the copies of the free weekly from the stand and lay them out in the lot. The copies are only enough to cover one parking space. I fan them out like the brochures at our museum, magazine style, starting at the bumper. Then I run across the street to watch the wind do its work.

I see Danny long before he sees me, biking uphill into the wind. He bikes with one hand on his head to keep his beanie on.

You look fine, he says as he chains his bike to a tree. I got a little worried.

I tell him he's not dressed warm enough.

Biking warms you up. Once you get going.

And you got going a long way.

Yeah, well.

I ask him how things are going with his fiancée. He sits down on the stoop next to me and says he doesn't know, still a little out of breath. He pulls his beanie off and rolls it up in his hands.

She likes to smoke, he says. She likes to listen to music. We live well together. She's designing my tattoo right now. That's about it. He asks me how things are going with Eric.

Great, I say. We're flying down to Miami this weekend. There's a Warhol we're thinking of bidding on.

Danny doesn't buy this one either. But he nods anyway, and tells me to have fun. He looks up at my building, and then he peers down the street.

Why don't you move in with Eric? he asks. You'd be a lot safer.

He tucks his beanie under his arm and lights up a joint. We walk around to the parking lot entrance. I crawl under the gate and he jumps over, singing whoop whoop. When I point out the car he laughs.

That's not a quarter million.

You can take all the parts.

I tell him he should open up the car and take whatever he can and sell it on eBay, that if he doesn't take it by tomorrow, someone else will come and tow it away. I point out the rims. You should definitely take those, I say, they're worth at least a few grand each.

He smears off a hunk of grime from a window, revealing the cracks running across the pane. He cups his hands to look inside. Dios mio, he says, what happened?

I want to tell him his fiancée was a bad idea, that people are like matchsticks and some of them never light up. Instead I ask him to go to the 7-Eleven with me and buy me some bottled water. I don't fuck with 7-Eleven, I say, because 7-Eleven fucks with you.

He gives me the last drag of his joint and we cross the street, towards the mess of newspapers and the white fluorescent lights. I stand outside, away from the window, so the cashier can't see me. When Danny comes back out, he holds up the water, going whoop whoop and wanting me to do the same. Whoop whoop, and we stand there drinking the whole thing, crushing up the bottle before we even leave the lot.

One in Ten Fish Are Afraid of Water

1.

Keiko finds you in the swimming pool, chest-deep in HELLO TODAY THE TEMPERATURE IS 26.5 DEGREES. This is how you get through swimming lessons: clutching onto the edge, bicycle-kicking your legs. Water flows past you, into skimmer drains. Bite down on your aching knuckles. Watch the clock.

Keiko is unmistakable, even across an Olympic-regulation distance. For about a year now, acne has erupted into bright lesions across her jawline. You've heard other girls describe her scars as burning, bubbling plastic. Soon she'll be close to you, and her goggles will come off. Look into her famous right eye. Keiko turns to the side to keep it far from you, but you will still see the eye twitch and tremble under a fluttering lid. Altogether it's a face that makes you feel grateful, even for your slitty eyes and moon cake cheeks.

She swims up to check the time on the clock. Touch her feet with yours. When she breathes, you smell hot air coming out of her mouth, so unlike sterile chlorine fumes. You like the sourness, the smell of something living.

"They tell me it's disappearing," she says, as if you two were in the middle of a conversation. A rough scratch runs down along her voice.

"What is?" you ask.

"My blemishes and discolorations." Keiko dunks her head underwater and up again. Her hair clumps around her face like seaweed. She tells you diluted chlorine helps combat her outbreaks.

“What do you think?” she asks. “Do you think it’s working?” She tilts her head left and right to give you a complete view.

What you assumed to be her scars in plain sight were actually several coats of make-up. What you see in the fluorescent light, with all the powder washed away, is much worse.

Keiko looks at you. “I’m just kidding,” she says finally. “I don’t need to know what you think. I’m not blind.”

2.

Your school stands on a hill, overlooking downtown Tokyo. Purchased for one American dollar by four nuns back in 1908, now your school is one of the most valuable slices of real estate in the world. Out back, the cathedral alone is worth ten billion yen. Every morning you bow hello to nuns in gray habits as they tend a garden. The ancient gates at the bottom of the hill are flanked by pungent camphor trees.

In 1944, the old school structure burned down when America firebombed Tokyo. The new structure, like the rest of this city, is prefabricated and fireproof and gray. From your biology lab you see Tokyo Tower and the red light district of Roppongi and an old neon sign for Midori. In class you imagine how the sign looks lit up, a radioactive green. Imagine cold Midori sliding down your throat.

This is where all hapa girls come for their education. Most of them have Japanese mothers and white European fathers. This is the most ideal arrangement. From early on these girls dabble in modeling. High school brings contracts and record deals, thanks to round, neotenous eyes and European last names. If these girls aren’t practicing dance moves or

promoting albums on radio shows, they are sitting in the back of class, mouths covered, yawning at formulas and equations they will never need to know. Look around. Lose your thoughts in the rows of symmetrical faces and sparrow brown hair. Here they are, the prized pooches of Eurasian breeding.

Your hapa blood is all wrong. You have your father's Japanese last name, Japanese black eyes and Japanese crooked teeth. Your legs fit regular Japanese jeans. Your white blood has sunk too far from the surface and can't get you anywhere. Without any contracts or record deals, you will have to learn grammar, vocabulary and the scientific method.

Keiko, like you, is also the wrong mixture. After swimming lessons she often invites you over to her place. Her father is a famous composer often written up as the Brahms of this generation. When he moved away, Keiko kept his tank of tropical fish in the drawing room. "I used to think he'd come back for them," she explains, "but now I'm pretty sure they're mine." When you first walk into her apartment, it's that blue aquarium glow that greets you from down the hall.

Keiko has two different men come in to take care of her fish. One in charge of feeding, and another for cleaning and maintaining water levels. The tank is as wide as a road, and it makes you dizzy. Observe from a distance. Different fish occupy different depths, and once they reach one end of the tank they swish around and swim up the way they came before. Obedient little souls.

"Actually, some of them are monsters," Keiko says, as if she's read your mind. "Look closer." She points out missing chunks of fins and tails, the injured specimens flicking their bodies in irregular, asymmetrical rhythms. "I had a piranha for a while."

“Why did you get a piranha?” you ask, still at a distance, not fogging up the glass with your breath the way Keiko likes to.

“I wanted to see a live feeding. Can you imagine? It would have made quite a spectacle.”

“But then what?”

She shrugs. “It didn’t do much. Bite marks, that was fun to watch. But piranhas are mostly just timid and frantic. Not as deadly as you hope.” Blue tank light washes over her. You imagine the fish swimming around her neck, down her uniform collar, and disappearing into mossy shadows.

3.

You and Keiko will meet the same fate of all minor hapa: an expensive education, followed by an expensive university, to book a quiet, expensive wedding in a hotel ballroom. No billboards at Shibuya Crossing, no famous boyfriends, no rock and roll. But you are still part white. You could have just as easily been part black, or part Indian, or part disfigured. The corporate uses for you and your languages are endless. There are many ways to have your existence appreciated.

When you can’t go over to Keiko’s apartment, spend your evenings with textbook problem sets. Take breaks with American movies. It’s better than talking to your mother, who has given up on learning Japanese, or talking to your father who has given up on your mother.

Smooth highways continue forever on flat Nevada deserts. Young insomniacs lock eyes and smile at the grocery checkout. COLLIDE WITH DESTINY. An apocalyptic bomb ticks down in New York. Mouth the names of important faces — Richard Gere, Keanu Reeves, Cameron Diaz — and watch as they act out lives of nameless, faceless strangers.

That is the America to plan for. You will be of use there as well, where universities seek you out for your contribution to ADVANCING THE FRONTIERS OF KNOWLEDGE WITH A GLOBAL SPIRIT. The land of excessive biodiversity, for fruit and cereal brands as well as people. COLLIDE with all kinds of climate, terrain, architecture. Stop wondering why beauty only comes to the same girls over and over again. Stop wondering why you look the way you do, how the same genetic recipe yielded such a different meal.

4.

America will prove you wrong. There, you will fall in love with a white boy who asks you to speak Japanese in bed, dirty phonemes you string into sentences with no concern for making sense. A Japanese boy who asks you to bleach your vagina into a petal pink. A black girl who, before you undress her, asks you to turn out the lights.

“It’s nothing I haven’t seen before,” you’ll say to persuade her otherwise, digging your fingers into her hair. “It’s nothing I don’t already enjoy.”

She will squint against the light and gather her arms over her chest into a pretzel twist. “What about my enjoyment?”

You won’t remember which one of you loses contact first. But by then you will have absorbed this trait of hers, and you will only touch another body in total darkness.

5.

Your plan gets you by. You learn to bargain with yourself.

For every hundred English words you memorize, you earn one year in America.

For every exam you ace, you earn two.

If you swim from one end of the pool to the other, you earn a lifetime.

You never make it from one end of the pool to the other. Just paddle to the edge, cough it out, try to unswallow the water you just swallowed. You check back to see how far you made it each time, but it's never even close.

Keiko dismisses your plan for escape. "So many girls leave," she points out, "and then they can't help but come back."

It's true. Shiina, who left for England to please her grandparents, returned one summer with half of her face paralyzed. Jemma, who left for Sydney to find more drugs, came back just in time to die in her sister's bed. Sachiko, who used to be the wildest one of all, lives in a suburb of Yokohama with her plastic surgeon husband and gets unintelligible at alumni cocktail parties.

"What if I make it?" you ask Keiko one day as she smokes behind the cathedral at school. She has only recently picked up smoking, along with punk rock and combat boots, but the new Keiko suits her. Like her skin, the rest of her also looks better covered up, in layers of ripped shirts and studded leather.

You tell her if you left, you would never come back. "Maybe that's why we don't hear about the ones that get away, because they get away so clean."

"How does that work?" She stubs out her cigarette, stained black on one end by her lipstick. She throws it over the fence into the garden for nuns to find tomorrow. "You have to make sure everyone sees you do it. Make sure they talk about it. Otherwise you might as well be dead."

That summer, one of the J-pop girls in your class comes out with a song you can't get out of your head. No one can. It's in a Honda commercial that plays twice every hour, and it fills every subway train. Only Keiko remains unaffected. Immunized by The Clash, headphones as big as dinner rolls shielding her ears.

6.

Final exams are coming up. National elections are coming up. You study harder than ever, and the fascist party protest louder than ever outside your school gates from eight in the morning. Climb out of your subway stop and onto the street, where the World War Two songs greet you from loudspeakers. In between songs, the fascists shout bullhorn lectures on the glory of imperial Japan and the war crimes committed by the Allied forces. Cloaked in wartime military flags, they explain to you that Asia will always belong to Japan and there is only one Dharma, only one true, pure Empire. Your mother is a whore, your father has betrayed his ancestors and in a perfect world, you would not exist.

Then the music starts up again. *We are cherry blossoms*, the singer warbles, *we go in and out of bloom together in the garden*.

Your headmistress orders everyone to stay home until final exams. Take the time to master chemistry. Picture molecular structures that you cannot see. Tear pages of the textbook and eat them, an ancient method you'd dismissed as a joke until now. Hold each crumpled ball of paper in your mouth. You have nothing to lose. Your saliva softens the ball into a cookie. Imagine all the exam answers seeping into your gastric juices, your pancreas, your bloodstream, your brain. For what this method promises, it doesn't taste so bad.

Finish the year at the top of your class.

“All those nights studying with Keiko are paying off,” you say, and your mother is too pleased to question your absence.

On some nights, nightclub bouncers let you in without checking your IDs, as long as you are huddled with the white hapa girls. But most nights they don't. When this happens, stay in Roppongi anyway with Keiko, smoking on the street outside a dirty bakery. She promises you the right group of boys will come along. They hook their fingers into the rips of her Ramones shirt and ask her for her name. Watch her follow their lead up an emergency stairwell. Wait on the sidewalk with a greasy kebab from a TURKISH DONER KEBAB 100% BEEF truck, and keep a tally of all the years of escape you've earned for yourself.

7.

Keiko's mother doesn't mind having you around their apartment all the time. She opens the door in silk slippers, gives you three cheek kisses and says *you look stunning*. She leads you in with sedated steps, and then goes back to supping on wine and arranging flowers in a glass vase. Her words are always slurred, but her chignon on her nape has every strand swept into place. When Keiko makes plans for the two of you to stay out late, her mother calls your mother and concoct another sleepover as your cover.

“What does your mother think you do when we go out?” you ask Keiko one night.

“What do you say to her?”

“I tell her the truth.”

“She's okay with that?”

“She has to be.” She shrugs and rubs black eyeliner under her eyes into thick smudges.

“It’s the least she can do after what she did to my dad.”

“What did she do?”

Keiko’s reflection looks at you. Her right eye is moving again, and her gaze doesn’t line up right. “It’s a complicated history,” she says, and then tells you to never ask about it. “But I’m glad she’s messed up from it now. I’m glad she feels bad.”

More often than not, you are at Keiko’s place when her fish handlers come by. The feeder comes every day, and stays long enough to make sure food hasn’t sunk to the bottom to rot. The tank cleaner only comes twice a week. He is the one you like to see. Wrinkles are forming around his mouth, but you like his Kawasaki motorcycle helmet. He bows before coming inside and leaves his helmet on the floor next to his shoes. You and Keiko watch for any reaction from her fish as he siphons in a fresh bucket of dechlorinated water.

“Can you get me another piranha?” Keiko asks him one day.

“Why would I do that?” He sounds amused. “To get myself in trouble with your mother?”

“No.” Keiko watches his face. “To satisfy my curiosity.”

He smiles but doesn’t say anything. He touches the surface of the water with three fingertips. He explains that humans can detect up to a quarter of a degree difference in water temperature, then brings his wet fingertips to his mouth and licks them.

“What does that do?” Keiko asks.

“Satisfies my curiosity.”

You look away. Keiko does not. Instead, she reaches out to dab some water on her hand as well. “Is that why you chose this line of work?” she asks him. To embarrass you further, she flicks droplets of water on your face.

“This isn’t my line of work,” he replies.

That weekend, Keiko goes downtown to meet the tank cleaner at his real job. He manages a small S&M club in Shibuya. Pause the movie you’re watching, and listen to her babble and laugh about his establishment. It’s a place you’ve never heard of, even though she explains it’s not far from other clubs you know, the ones where other girls from your school get VIP tables every weekend. Keiko’s definitely going back, and she wants you to come with her.

“It’s a complete joke,” she shouts. “He thinks it’s crazy crazy S&M but it’s not. His floors are cleaner than my house. Pathetic. They even have chandeliers.”

Stare at your TV screen, where Julia Roberts and Mel Gibson are just about to open a refrigerator.

“Did he lie about your age?” you ask.

“Seriously?” You can tell she’s smiling, maybe even happy. “Of all the things, that’s what you want to know?”

8.

In America, you will wander through a street market fair and follow a fortune-teller into her tent. She won’t take your name or scribble down characters to analyze your stellar alignments, like the fortune-tellers back in Japan. She won’t even take your birthday. Instead, she’ll ask for something that belongs to you, an object you have kept with you for many years.

Look through your wallet until you find Keiko's nipple ring, the one she threw away when her left piercing got infected.

The fortune-teller will take the ring in one hand and wrap her other hand around that hand. She will whisper incantations into the dark cave of her hands. Try to ignore an orange price tag sticker on her crystal ball next to you. She'll ask you to close your eyes and transport yourself back to the time when you first found this object, so that's what you do:

Sometime between The Clash and The Dead Kennedys, Keiko asks you to pierce her nipples for her. Get a safety pin and a bottle of alcohol solution. Get close and turn her naked shoulders towards the light. A Ziploc bag of ice melts on a marble vanity top. Hold one of her brown buds between your fingers. "Don't get scared," Keiko coaches you, "it's just like an earlobe."

But her nipple feels nothing like an earlobe. It's even softer, like sponge cake, with the uneven cracks of elephant skin. Tell yourself you can always stop if it hurts her. But in practice, you can't even start.

Keiko loses her patience and pierces it herself. She slides the safety pin through and then pulls it right back out to secure her new hole with a ring. You hear The Dead Kennedys through her headphones wrapped around her neck. She repeats the procedure on the other side. Afterwards the two of you sit in a Starbucks to kill more time. She keeps telling you that you have no idea how good it feels. A salaryman in the smoking section looks up.

The fortune teller will tell you the ring carries great pain. You will not be impressed by her visions.

She will instruct you on some rituals to cleanse yourself of this pain: which crystals to wear around your neck, which direction to lay your head when you sleep, how to properly dispose of the ring without angering its spirit.

Give her the thirty dollars she wants. Keep the ring with you.

9.

The tank cleaner offers Keiko a job at his club as a cocktail waitress. She finds it funny, and decides to accept. By the following month, she has completed his training program to work as a performer.

“Training program,” she says. “Like I’m a pastry chef.”

“Isn’t some of that stuff dangerous?” Her mother asks.

“Maybe there’s a way,” you think out loud, “to make it less dangerous. Like a magic trick.”

Keiko tells you you’re missing the point.

Her mother listens calmly, only making encouraging sounds. “It’s nice to see you happy,” she says, and combs her daughter’s hair with her fingers, careful not to rub any strands over her face and irritate her skin.

This is Keiko’s new work schedule: the tank cleaner picks her up from school and takes her downtown, where she works an early shift and makes it home before the subway lines stop running. Her bag grows every day with more and more things she needs for performing: PVC leather straps, chains, make-up, fake eyelashes, a shower kit, and a change of clothes.

The tank cleaner arrives at your school entrance on his motorcycle at three thirty sharp. You worry he will piss off the fascists in their trucks, since his bike drowns out their propaganda tapes. But the young boys are in awe of his Kawasaki. Whenever you and Keiko make your way down the hill, he's handing out some glossy black and pink promotional postcards for his club to the boys, showing them free drink coupons attached to the back.

Keiko takes her time saying good-bye to you. Her uneven eyes stare over your shoulder, towards the other girls passing under camphor trees. She makes sure they see her climb on the oil-black Kawasaki and wrap her arms around the tank cleaner's stomach. Once she puts on her helmet she will be anonymous, so she takes her time with that too. She sticks her hands into his jacket pockets, and they circle away.

10.

Deena. You remember Deena one day, the girl who ran away to Iowa with her US Marine boyfriend when she was halfway through her eighth grade year. For a while, she was all anyone could talk about.

"What about her?" you ask Keiko. "She never came back."

"Deena got pregnant and fat and boring and poor," Keiko reminds you. "That doesn't count."

You're standing at the crossing in Shibuya, waiting for a green light. Keiko and the tank cleaner have been arguing a lot lately, and she's asked you to be her escort to work and back instead. Most of her customers are sensible people, but alcohol changes everyone.

The light turns. Cross together, arm in arm. Even with all this noise around you, you can still hear the chains and buckles Keiko has strapped on under her coat. They brush against each other and clink with every step.

11.

For every hundred English words you memorize, you earn one year in America.

For every exam you ace, you earn two.

12.

Neon wigs are the best way to stand out at work. It's easy for customers to remember Keiko and request her again when they return. Keiko's electric red bob unsettles you, as it does most people who stand close to her in trains. But you're more shocked by the men and women who don't flinch, who only give her a steady smile.

"It's working," she whispers when they pass. "They recognize me." She tells you everything she recalls about these men and women: who enjoys getting whipped on stage, who prefers to be quietly handcuffed in the back corner, who leaves their personal email addresses hoping to receive close-up photos of her uneven eyes. Listen. Don't be fooled by how normal they look in their business-casual blazers and conservative office shoes.

"Do you ever get anyone we know?" you ask. "Anybody's parents? What about our teachers?"

Keiko turns slightly, from the one angle where her eyes line up dead square into yours. “I get everyone,” she says. “I have a pretty good reputation.”

You finally visit her club. You are surprised by the décor. You’d expected a lot of transparent plexiglass and metal, a place obsessed with the future like the rest of Tokyo. Instead, you see a wide ring of private booths, each with a thick wood slab serving as a tabletop. This could be a TGI Friday’s.

You discover her reputation has been rightfully earned. Most nights she is so popular and behind schedule that she doesn’t have time to talk. She struts from booth to booth, swinging her whip to the beat of each song. In the dark, with enough make-up on, her skin looks all right. The boots stop just a few centimeters below her crotch, plump and tight in leather shorts.

When Keiko is busy, she puts you in a booth with the newest hire, Suzume, who wears a neon blue wig. With only one week of experience, Suzume doesn’t have any regulars yet and she spends most of her time gossiping with you about other performers.

“Do you see the lady with green hair?” she shouts in your ear. “She masturbated too much as a kid and now she needs incredible amounts of pain.”

You study Suzume’s face and the small bones of her shoulders. She looks even younger than you and Keiko, maybe not even fifteen. “What’s an incredible amount?”

“She always carries this special needle and thread,” she explains. “You can pay to sew up and down her arms and legs. And Keiko-san,” she shouts when Keiko passes by. “She’s the craziest.”

“How so?” you can’t help asking.

Suzume turns even further. She shouts less into your ear and more at the wall behind you. “She really likes the smell of urine and feces. She just rubs it all over herself.”

The song ends and mixes into another one. Think of something to say.

“That must bring in more money than anything else, right?” Look at the floor, which is just as clean as Keiko had said it would be. “More loyal customers?”

Suzume clasps her hands between her knees. “I don’t know if I should tell you this.” She pauses. “But Keiko-san doesn’t need money. I think everyone can see that’s not what she’s doing it for. It’s just for fun. Maybe that’s why they like her.”

Don’t tell her she’s mistaken. Suzume is too young to properly argue with. Accept that whatever Keiko does is her freedom to do so. As long as her mother doesn’t know, Keiko can’t be ashamed. As long as the tank cleaner does his job right, she can’t be harmed. As long as you don’t say anything, there is no one to say anything.

13.

Keep her mother company when Keiko is at work. Sit together in the dining room and answer all her questions about school that Keiko doesn’t have time for. Sometimes there’s silverware to polish, or a movie she’d like to see. Don’t worry about the problem sets from school in your bag. Halfway through her second bottle, she will fall asleep. Finish your homework early and spend your leftover hours looking into the aquarium. Cratered rocks decorate the bottom of the tank. They remind you of Keiko’s scarred face.

Look for signs of Deena online. She hasn’t logged into her MySpace since last year, but all of her pictures are publicly visible. Create an account to grant yourself access.

She hasn’t aged well — the white half, you think. Her husband is so white he turns red in the sun, and he only wears shirts that show off his military tattoos. You can tell their child will

not learn a word of Japanese. Click through Deena's pictures some more, until it's time to call a taxi and pick up Keiko again.

The driver drops you off at Shibuya Crossing. With fewer people pushing into you at this hour, you look up at the buildings instead of down at your feet. Just as you cross, a new music video starts on a billboard screen. The singer, another classmate of yours, is one of the whitest hapas you've seen with naturally green eyes. It's as bad as any J-pop music video, orbs of light floating through senseless dream sequences, but you watch it until the end anyway.

14.

Graduation takes place in the cathedral, with a stained-glass Mary and Jesus casting their colors on the audience. Keiko skipped out. Sit in your designated seat. Don't turn to anyone. In one month, you will be in America.

Some famous girls in your class have invited their pop star boyfriends, who spend the three-hour ceremony posing for photos in the pews. They cheer for their girlfriends, their friends' girlfriends, and their girlfriends' friends, but no one else. No cheers for you, just some polite golf claps. Teachers play with their cell phones, anxious to get done and hit their expat pubs. In one month minus three hours, you will be in America.

For your going-away present, Keiko plans a special night for you at her club. "I don't know how much longer I'll be doing this," she says. "I might as well show off all my tricks." She instructs you to arrive at one in the morning, when the curious drunks have left and only familiar regulars are around.

Keiko greets you at the door and blindfolds you. Don't tense up. Give her your hands so she can lead you to a booth and sit you down. A wood post presses on your spine. When your blindfolds are removed, examine how tightly your hands have been cuffed to the post, over your head.

"I don't like this," you tell her, tugging at your cuffs.

"It's okay," she reassures you. "No one's born liking this."

When she gets close to breathe on you, don't worry you'll smell urine or worse on her breath, her wig. Think of her mother's perfume. Relax and enjoy her company, even when the cold metal cuffs make it hard for you to breathe. Don't squirm and plead until sweat rolls down your back. Keiko will do nothing. It's Suzume, walking by, who panics and snaps you free.

Run outside. Have a greasy 100% BEEF kebab. Have a smoke and take a stroll through the deserted back streets of Shibuya. You will feel calm enough to make a big circle back to her club and wait for her shift to end. She eventually pushes through the metal doors, half of an electric red bob dangling out from her purse. She smiles at your punctuality. She walks towards you, scratching away at her scalp like a crazy person.

For every drunk backpacker she whips

For every CEO she puts out cigarettes on

For every cup of human waste she consumes

You never finish these thoughts. Before you can decide on anything, she's made it down the alley back to you, and she reaches out to link arms. Her hair is wet as always from her end-

of-shift shower. Still you breathe in deep, searching for any unpleasant smells that might tell you the truth.

15.

The month you get to America, your father is hospitalized for an obscure liver condition. Your mother phones you every detail, mostly to convince herself there's still hope. Even though you don't need your five years of etymology drills to know *liver* must come from *lifer*.

When you talk to your father, only nod and answer with *hai* and *wakannai*. His voice grows so unrecognizable and small that you have to press your burning cell phone to your ear to catch his words, but don't ever promise to go back.

16.

"I'll treat you big before I move," you say to Keiko. "Maybe we can go on a trip somewhere before then."

But Keiko is too busy, planning her final days at the club. She is done with that lifestyle which, she now realizes, held her back from finding likable qualities in other people. "But it was funny for a while," she says, "I guess that's something."

She agrees to move in with her new boyfriend, one of the Nigerian bouncers from the club next door to hers. She says nothing about the tank cleaner, who hasn't come by the house in a while, maybe weeks. A green film of algae now coats the aquarium glass.

You recall a joke you once heard your Biology teacher say to your English teacher. Something about rich Japanese girls rebelling against their families in a predictable sequence of actions. Fucking black guys is the final phase, the dangling head-first over the cliff, just before they crawl back home to settle down with a law student.

Do not repeat this joke to her. Watch her stuff all her PVC straps and gags into a separate suitcase, to be dropped off at her club for Suzume. Help her pack her own suitcases and line them up by the elevator. Keiko's mother sends her off with three cheek kisses. You offer to go with Keiko to her new place and help unpack them all, but she declines.

"Don't bother. This will be better." She holds up one hand as the elevator doors close, whether to wave good-bye or to say *stand back*, you can't be sure.

Keiko's mother stands next to you with a glass of wine as the elevator takes her daughter downstairs. She invites you over for lunch the next day, and you don't know what to do but accept and say thank you, although this will be the last time you see either of them.

Leave Japan. The eggplant tastes like cucumber, and the cucumber tastes like eggplant. Household items come in unfamiliar shapes. Develop new habits of eating and talking and sleeping, and wait for Japan to leave you.

Vita

The author was born in Seoul, South Korea. She lived in Seoul, Singapore, Beijing, Budapest, and Tokyo before moving to the United States at age eighteen. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in History and Sociology of Science, with a concentration in biomedical ethics, from the University of Pennsylvania in 2010. She joined the University of New Orleans to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing.