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In The Middle

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In The Middle

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
Creative Writing
Non-Fiction Genre

by

Nicole L. Pugh

B.A., University of California- San Diego, 1997

December, 2010

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For Grandma Su (Li Shur), 1929-2000. Thank you for your stories. They are what
I travel by.

Special thanks to Zachary Pugh, Art and Cathy Pugh, Kym Grant and Patricia Carlson for supporting and clarifying as I have worked on this project over the last year. A special thank you also goes to Robert “Rio” Hahn, my partner in adventuring and exploring. Your patience and support is what a cosmic friend is made of.

Note: Some names have been changed for respect of privacy.

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Abstract

A woman just getting settled in New Orleans with her fiancé is uprooted by Hurricane Katrina. She spends the two months after the hurricane in various parts of Louisiana trying to pick up the pieces of her uprooted reality. Along the way, she encounters ordinary people who act as inspirations and is also reminded of her deceased Chinese grandmother, whom she was caregiver to before she died and whose stories about life in China and the US parallel the woman's own life during the post-Katrina months of vulnerability and change.

Memoir, Chinese-Americans, Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, Louisiana, San Diego, China, World War II, Cancer, Cajun culture, Creative Nonfiction

Introduction

When I was a child growing up in Southern California, my make-believe world was infused with the stories my maternal grandmother would tell me about growing up in China in the 1930s and 40s. These little vignettes were like silver-foiled candies handed down to me throughout my life. My mother's mother, Su Carlson, was born *Li Shur* in *Tianjin*, China around the year 1929 (the exact date will forever remain a mystery). She came to America when she was sixteen to marry my grandfather, an American marine officer, age 45. I remember the sound of her laughter and yet at the same time, she carried a sadness that clung to her like a subtle aroma. Grandma was burdened with heartache for her homeland and especially for her mother, a stern-looking woman (from the one photograph Grandma kept of her) who, according to family legend, was a unique force of intelligence, leadership and bravado.

Over a decade after her death, what still links my grandmother to myself are my memories of the stories she told and those we created together while she was alive. In her grace, kindness and subtle humor, Grandma taught me to be gentle, to use my hands, to work hard and to laugh every day. Grandma used to laugh at the smallest things — a bee in her hair, a misplaced word, a joke on the television. And Grandma talked story like she laughed. She would throw her head back, crinkle her eyes, open her mouth and something surprising would inevitably come out. Sometimes tears would form when she laughed or when she spoke. They would trickle like tiny petals down her broad cheeks. I saw Grandma cry a lot, but I never saw her cry in anger or despair. The way she was in life would later become my inspiration even after her death.

Grandma was hard-working, but she was also a dreamer and an artist. She liked to

draw, write and sew. Her gardens were works of art and she was a gifted storyteller. She was not grandiose when she spoke about her life in China. On the contrary, it was as if each story inside her begged to be set free and she had no choice but to let them go. She was soft-spoken, timid and almost apologetic as she spun her stories. Because of this, they were always believable.

Sitting at the old linoleum table, Grandma would look out the large kitchen window of the house on Winder Street. She would stare out at the boats in San Diego Harbor or at the planes coming in and going out of Lindberg Field. Then she would sigh. I always wondered what went through her head in those moments. Was she remembering her own arrival in San Diego way back when or was she daydreaming about the day when she would return home? Perhaps she longed to travel someplace neither here nor there, a faraway destination that she had always longed to see.

I never found the answers to these questions. What I did discover over the years, however, was that when Grandma looked out the wide, eating-room window of the house on Winder Street, it inevitably meant a story was coming. I first remember hearing one of Grandma's stories when I was about six years old. No matter how many people were there to listen, the stories she told me that day and from that day forward were directed at me whenever I was around. As the youngest member of the Carlson clan, maybe Grandma thought that I was the safest person to speak to about matters of history and memory. I would not judge her nor correct her English (after all, I was just beginning to learn English myself) and somehow I understood Grandma's broken speech, mostly devoid of past and future, with perfect clarity.

"Nikki, did Grandma tell you about time when floods come?" Grandma said, looking

past the five or so other family members piled into the sweating eating room that Sunday afternoon and down at six-year-old me.

Our eyes locked and she started to speak.

So it began...

I was an observant child and I loved to watch Grandma when she was in story-telling mode. I was also a pretty serious kid, and so it was with a serious sense of responsibility that I would hang on to every word she said about life in *Tianjin*, in the resort town of *Bei Tai Ho*, on the farm to the north, and in countless other places. Even when I was too young to write her stories down, I would do so in my head, trying to remember what came next in the endless recycling of tales that I never grew tired of.

In the summer of 1999, when I was twenty-nine years old and she seventy-five, Grandma Su was diagnosed with lung cancer that had spread to her brain. By June of that year, in order to help take care of her, I moved from North County San Diego into a little basement apartment next door to the house on Winder Street. As “First Granddaughter,” I was still “First Witness” to her stories, but as neighbor and partial care-giver, I was now also witness to the ups and downs of her day-to-day life as she went through radiation and steroid therapy and struggled to come to terms with her pending death. I accompanied her to all her treatments, helped my aunt and uncle, who lived with her, prepare the meals and was in on all of her medical consultations.

According to her oncologist, within six months Grandma would not be able to speak. She was given not much more time than that to live. By fall 2000, Grandma was weak from radiation therapy, but she was still had energy enough to tell good story. Perhaps caused by a growing sense that she was running out of time, during the last six months of her life,

Grandma's stories began to change. Gone were the cute little tales she told throughout my childhood. In their place were once-buried images of Japanese occupation, mysterious relatives from the north, magical encounters with psychics, and details of war and natural disaster. These memories brought up more questions in my mind than answers. Were these stories true and everything up to that point a fabrication or were these new renditions the result of a brain taxed by tumor and disease? During the course of those last six months, as Grandma's ability to speak lessened, I decided to cast off all doubt and simply believe that what she said was true. This was her reality and part of her journey of life and into death was to tell about it. I am honored that I was able to be a part of whatever healing my Grandmother needed to do by telling these stories in the way she told them before she passed on.

Grandma Su died in January, 2002. Shortly after, I moved away from San Diego to New Orleans with my then-fiancé, Jeremy, and his eclectic, bohemian family. The constant stream of celebrations and festivals that our new home offered, along with the effort required in settling down in a new city in general, distracted me from thoughts about Grandma. For a while, I forgot all about her stories and about the painful yet precious time I spent with her during the fall and winter of 2001/2002.

In August, 2005, after living in New Orleans for a little more than three years, natural disaster came to the south. Like thousands of others, suddenly everything in my life was turned on its head. As I struggled to put my feet on solid, albeit soggy, ground in the tumultuous months that followed Hurricane Katrina, memories of Grandma began to bubble to the surface of my mind. Her stories took on a new relevance for me and gave me both strength and insight into my own situation.

Thus, it is in honor of my Grandmother and the wisdom of her stories that I write this

book. It has as its backdrop my own personal experiences during a three-month period after Hurricane Katrina. Sandwiched between these events are segments dedicated to Grandma, her stories of China and challenges with regards to the cancer as well as our interactions throughout my life. After many years, finally a written record of Grandma's life is complete, told through the perceptive lens of one person who knew and loved her.

My grandma's life in China and the US over fifty years ago may seem like a world away from the circumstances of today's modern realities. Yet, it is amazing how history repeats itself from one generation to the next, often times in ways unseen on the surface. Especially during those tumultuous and life-changing months post-Katrina, I felt the subtle thread of common experience between Grandma and I deepen. Music, movement, love, family, crossings across large bodies of water — sometimes it seems as if she and I differ only in terms of points in history.

Lyn-Li Torres Pugh (aka Nicole L. Pugh, aka "Nikki")
Taos, NM
November, 2010

Prologue

High above the blue-green swells of the Pacific Ocean, the little plane flies across a pale orange sky. Below, the white tops of waves travel east like I do. They, like I, journey away from the mainland, away from traffic jams and levy brakes, FEMA lines and blue tarps on tattered roofs and out across the never-ending expanse of blue. I stare down at them and I want to be like them — graceful, fluid and always changing. From the aisle behind me, I can hear a young woman speak in thick pidgin. The lilting words sound strange to my mainland ears.

“Before, all I wants to do is to get away, you know?” the woman says. “All 'dem cousins and uncles and aunties, they was in my business all da time. But now I ready to go back and see 'em. Too much time I was away.”

The woman laughs and the sound of it reverberates throughout the plane. Even though I don't know her, I feel connected to this woman. Her homesickness, her contrary needs to be free and to be close to family and especially her infectious laugh are all familiar.

It is a short flight from Oahu to the Big Island, but there is still time for one more look before the plane lands. I reach into my green leather backpack and pull out a piece of gridded, legal-sized paper. On its worn surface, lines shoot off here and there with rectangles attached to them like vertebrae on a spinal column. The map of Ainaloa Estates looks like a used crossword puzzle. Each little plot is a square where a house could be built. I trace the rows marked in black ink until I come to Aloha Street, #84. The plot of island land that my Aunt Patty bought in my grandmother's name is so tiny that on the map my little finger covers it over completely.

Tucked deep inside my backpack are the four sapota seeds Aunt Patty gave me right before I left. I take those out as well and roll them around between my fingers. They are dried now, and the inner seeds make a knocking sound as I shuffle them.

“Plant these in Hawaii,” the note from Patty said when I received them in the mail. “You know they were her favorite.”

I know. In the backyard of the house on Winder Street, Grandma grew an enormous sapota tree. That monstrosity had started from a tiny seed like the ones I now carry with me. Grandma took great care in pruning the tree’s wide leaves and corkscrew branches. A line of the super-sweet fruit (which tastes like a cross between a pear and a banana) perpetually rested along the kitchen window whenever it was in season.

I put the map and the seeds away and tuck my backpack under my chair for the final leg of the flight. Then I lean back and close my eyes, letting my thoughts drift.

For a long time, I did not accept the finality of the changes that were occurring in my life during the months after the hurricane. I saw my former life as suspended in time. Getting back to “normal” was just a matter of coming back and picking up where I had left off.

I open my eyes and look out the window. White clouds obscure the view of the sea. I see the island coming into view, though — the snow-capped peak of Mauna Loa, the waterfalls and jagged cliffs of the Hamakua coast, and, like a tiny swab of dirty cotton in the distance, a puff of ash from the volcanic vents between Pahoia and Kau, at the exact point where glowing lava meets the Pacific.

One of Grandma’s dreams was to visit the islands of Hawaii. She got close enough to touch them, but she was never able to land.

I feel wheels scratch against the Hilo runway as the plane comes down. I grab my bag, map and seeds tucked neatly inside, and make my way out into the humid air.

Chapter 1: Ebb

“All you can do when you in the middle of all that water, Nikki, is get out of way and go with current.”
-Grandma Su

August 26, 2005

There is a knot in my throat and a sinking in my stomach. I look outside and see the light from the lamp on Dauphine Street cast a pale orange shadow, like a false August moon, over the garden on the other side of our bedroom window. Then I look at the alarm clock on the dresser. It blinks the time, four a.m., in blocky neon green. Something does not feel right.

If this were an early beginning of a day only one week prior, I may have gone outside to stand by the fountain. I may have listened to the water as it gurgled out of the spout on the second level of our two-tiered pond. The spout is in the shape of a lion’s head — the water flows out of the lion’s mouth, down a miniature waterfall and eventually into a little pond brimming with lily pads and smooth, plump goldfish.

If this were, say, August 16th and not August 26th, I may have knelt down under the palms and ginger bushes and placed a finger in the swirling water. The coolness of the liquid and the darkness of that blurry hour would have felt strange to my skin. But I don’t think I would have minded. On the contrary, I think I would have delighted in the adventure of being outside in the garden at such an odd hour. And I know I wouldn’t have been afraid, nestled as I would be in the cocooning warmth of our newly-acquired French Quarter apartment.

But this is neither one week nor one day prior. This is *the* day. On this day, I don’t go out into the courtyard. Instead, I turn on the TV at the foot of the bed.

The newscaster on Channel 5 is one of those rare television personalities who is inherently approachable, like a favorite aunt. She tells the facts straight without a lot of fluff and, in kind, we welcome her into our homes night after night. This morning, however, she

looks out of sorts in her blue dress that is wrinkled at the hem. She points with a shaky finger to something on the radar that is taking up the entire right hand portion of the screen. It is a swirl of white with patches of blue that appear here and there around its bulbous frame. I can barely make out that there is a body of water below the whirlpool of wind and liquid. The newscaster is flushed as she speaks and there are bags under her eyes that some studio intern has attempted to cover up with too much makeup. What's more, there is a false upbeat quality in her voice that makes me suddenly not trust a word she is saying.

Shortly before the hurricane hit, I began to have dreams about floods. In one of them, I saw hands holding on to a wire fence while water gushed all around them. The hands climbed up the chain link as remnants of once-important items floated by.

In one dream, Grandma was with me. She wore a light nightgown, like the ones she often wore when I was a child and would spend nights tucked inside her big bed at the house on Winder Street.

Grandma and I swam together. Our fragile bodies could barely hold their own against the elements. The cool water splashed up to our waists. Pieces of houses went by. They were fragments, paint-splattered and splintered. They were pieces of driftwood floating down a colossal body of liquid bound for the sea.

In another dream, Grandma directed my attention to a little side street that was once part of a neighborhood but had been flooded by a torrent of debris — bleach bottles, gas pumps, hair dryers, guitars, vacuum cleaners, diapers. I saw cows and oxen, rats and babies, dogs and cats and whole trees rushing downstream. Then the muddy river that before flowed in one direction suddenly took a U-turn. It became a vortex, a whirlpool of swishing water and

it was folding in on itself with increasing velocity.

“I can’t hold on,” I called out to Grandma. I saw her head bobbing and her long black hair in a high bun just above the surface of the water. As she floated towards the epicenter of the vortex, I knew as one knows things in dreams that the whirlpool was taking her away from me. And I knew that soon that whirlpool would deposit her on the banks of the Yellow River, back to *Tianjin* and back to her home.

Up ahead on the freeway, a decisive light beckons. It filters through the thick clouds and creeps in to the windowpanes of our rented van. Follow me, it says. And we do, desperately despite our longing to stay. With each mile that we creep down St. Claude Avenue towards the Bywater and Interstate I-10, I feel a piece of myself blow away — an arm down Elysian Fields, a leg down Claiborne, an eye or an ear as we pass Louisa. I resist the urge to jump out of the car and head back to the Quarter. I imagine myself calling out apologies to my soon-to-be husband and his family as I run along the static line of idling cars, away from the Interstate and back towards home. *I’m sorry!* I call over my shoulder, *but how can I abandon the city who never once abandoned me?*

Abandoning the city is exactly what I feel I am doing by leaving, however.

There are five of us in the van, six if you count the dog. Jeremy and his father Michael, his sister Cambria as well as Cambria’s son, D’mitri, age ten, all have looks of tension on their faces. Even little Chalaya, Cambria’s three-year-old daughter, glares pensively out the window at the rows of shotgun houses boarded up by thin pieces of plywood.

Jeremy and I, along with Jeremy’s entire family, migrated to New Orleans three years prior. During this time, our rag-tag clan has gone through Mardi Gras and muggings, made

friends, found jobs, discovered loves, struggled to make ends meet and partied like never before. We have buried our dead here and celebrated the birth of yet another family member and the adoption of several others. The Loves, Jeremy's family and now mine, are a group of people mostly related by common experience and world view, not blood. They are artists, poets, musicians, teachers, dreamers, tarot-readers and visionaries that come from New Zealand, Australia, Europe and all over the US. New Orleans seemed like the perfect place to make our rag-tag bunch a new home. Mostly, though, the family came to New Orleans because of Aysha, Jeremy's "spiritual" mother and the clan's matriarchal leader. Until her death in 2004, Aysha was the rock to which everyone clung to.

Aysha was also a psychic and visionary whose work with children in the field of emotional intelligence was legendary in some circles. She and Michael first migrated to the south in 2001 because of a "sense" Aysha had that her unconventional way of helping children would find a place within the dilapidated schoolhouses of the city.

"I was told that I should go to the place with the lowest literacy rate and the highest crime rate in the country. That place would be where I would start to teach again," Aysha said one evening just days after Jeremy and I had arrived. We sat on the iron chairs of their courtyard, drinking lemon tea with shots of sweet rum. When Aysha said that to us, we didn't know how to respond. We just sat there, blinking like sleeping cats. Aysha understood. We were still recovering from the Cajun food we couldn't stop eating and the Hurricane punch drinks we couldn't stop drinking. New Orleans was beginning to get under our skin. She just smiled and looked up at the southern stars that made an open air roof above the high walls of the courtyard. Aysha and Michael's courtyard just off Jackson Square was where Tennessee Williams once got married in, according to their landlord, back when he was still young and

hadn't come out of the closet yet. Sitting amongst the vines and short palm trees, I could almost picture the group of characters that must have hung around after the ceremony – drinking martinis, waving cigarettes and being as loud as they were profound in their conversations. That evening with Aysha and us was quiet, however. We could hear the cicadas harmonizing in the magnolia trees two blocks away.

A few months after Aysha and Michael arrived, Cambria, Capricho and Magenta, Jeremy's adopted brothers and sisters, soon followed and about six months later, Jeremy and I decided we would go too. For Jeremy, the reason for going was obvious. His quirky family meant the world to him. And for me: *Why not?* I thought. With Grandma gone, the Winder Street house and the basement apartment I rented next door felt cold and empty. My parents and aunts and uncles as well as my only brother all lived in San Diego, but since Grandma had been gone, things had been different. I was ready for a change. Besides, as a teacher myself, I was curious about Aysha's curriculum and the powerful activities that she created that seemed to help children open up to their creative selves.

When the announcement was made in August of 2005 that another hurricane was approaching, everybody in the family, including me, ignored it. We felt proud of our decision to stay in the city. Finally, we were becoming "hard-core," a family of gritty New Orleanians dedicated to the city's unique funkiness. Jeremy's brother, true to form, bought fifty bucks worth of booze in preparation for a traditional hurricane party. Cambria kept the doctor's appointments for the kids the following week. Jeremy bought new work boots on the Friday before the storm was supposed to touch down. I continued to work and write like normal. After all, we had panicked the previous year during Hurricane Ivan and it barely rained. The predicted seventy-five mile an hour winds turned into a light breeze that paraded leaves from

the oak trees down Frenchman Street and we spent the afternoon riding bikes around the French Market and playing in the park.

Yet today, here we are — five adults and a dog named Milkshake — squished together like a bag of cotton buds into a rented van, heading towards the last open entrance to the freeway out of town.

Grandma once told me about how, when she was a little girl, she had been swept away by a wall of water. She and Great Grandmother had been living on a farm in Northern China with a Russian family and her mother's second husband, a retired officer in the Chinese military. One season, during a time of heavy rains, the valley where the farm was settled in began to flood. Grandma told me she saw cows floating in the current. Whole trees. And rats, lots and lots of rats.

"So many little things, Nikki- they live just under the surface!" she said. "They all come out of hiding that day and are swept away with the rest of us."

Grandma told me that when the flood came, her mother wrapped her tightly in a white bed sheet and placed her on a piece of board. On that little makeshift raft, she floated, with her mother beside her, who was up to her chest in muddy water. Mother and daughter floated like driftwood until they reached a place where they could rest.

There is a buzz around me that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Positive ions come in right before a big one. My friend Harry told me this just last week while we were sharing a drink at a dark bar downtown. He said that if he hadn't fallen in love with music when he was a kid, he would have been a meteorologist. Harry has a knack for predicting the big ones. Even when everyone was calling him a liar, he would just smile at

them and wait.

What is Harry doing now? I don't know. I didn't have time to call him before we left.

Outside, the city moves slowly by but I don't see it. Instead, I look down at my shoes resting on the floorboard of the van. One lace is untied. The dust of Chartres Street coats the tops. A sticker of Cinderella is pasted on the side of the left one, a present from Chalaya on the last day I spent as her nanny at the house on Dauphine Street.

I know what I will see. It is almost four p.m. and according to local officials, after four, nobody comes in to the city and nobody gets out. Cars inch towards the freeway entrance. There is no one on the streets. The city has been emptied like a bucket.

Today before we left, I took one final walk through Jackson Square, where the gathering wind was creating mini dust-devils around the entrance of St. Louis Cathedral. A splattering of individuals — locals who normally sold their wares on the Square, the occasional panicked tourist, musicians, myself — wandered randomly across the wide plaza, our hands covering our eyes to avoid the dust. Despite the discomfort, we looked up whenever we came in close contact with each other. We were perfect stranger now thrust together like family members in a common drama. We exchanged glances that were really cries for help. 'What will happen to me now?' we said although no words were spoken. Many of the people in the Square would not be leaving the Quarter, some because they chose not to, many because they had no means with which to leave.

With great effort, I lift my head and look out the window of the rented van. The sight of a single woman walking along St. Claude Avenue smoking a cigarette reminds me of the cigarette and coffee I shared with Anaka, a poet and astrologer, last month near Canal Street. The woman has the same dark brown skin and the same short curled hair and large brown

eyes. I had met with Anaka that day to interview her about the poetry scene in New Orleans for a story I was doing for a local magazine. Poetry in New Orleans is a big deal, only there it's called "slam" and the local venues where this rap-like verse is performed are usually packed with mostly African-Americans. For this interview, I assumed we were going to talk about the importance of slams for the black community in New Orleans. Instead the conversation turned to the city herself.

"What do you think?" I asked after a while. "Will New Orleans' voodoo magic eventually run out? Will she just be a swamp again someday?"

Anaka's response, and the seriousness in which she offered it, surprised me.

"It's inevitable," she said, nodding and smoking, the silver ash from her cigarette falling in a tiny pile just outside the ashtray. "Eventually her seas will come back to find her."

I nodded too and looked out towards the Mississippi from the waterfront café where we sat. What she said made sense. Rome. Athens. Machu Pichu. Atlantis. These places were metropolises at one time, thriving population centers that that, for one reason or another, eventually became mere shadows of their former selves — or disappeared altogether. In all things in life, there ebb and flow. I wondered back then as I wonder now just how long New Orleans' flow will last.

Our van approaches a freeway entrance near a crooked sign that says "Welcome to the Bywater." D'mitri has his eyes closed and his head rests on the back of his seat. Michael rubs his forehead with his fingers. Chalaya stares out at the cops who line the boulevard. Her brow is furrowed, as if willing them to let us pass. A policeman watches our van loaded with people and animals, clothes and food. His look is stern and commanding, as if he knows that he is playing God. He motions for us to pass with a wave of his hand.

Jeremy is in the seat in front of me. He slouches a bit as we slide into a lane. He is trying to play it cool, but after almost a decade together, I know my fiancé well. There is tension in the way he holds his head, cocked a little to one side. Tiny veins pop in and out of his neck. Chalaya begins to whimper in her car seat. I reach over to give her a pat and she rubs her face against my arm, smearing it with kid love and snot.

Once on the freeway, there is nowhere for us to go. All lanes are gridlocked, despite the contra-flow. Eventually, we carve out a little sliver of asphalt for ourselves and nestle in.

The doctor at the VA medical center near Balboa Park stood in his office, next to the lighted window where the X-rays were hung. Two images of the inside of Grandma's skull were lit up in pale yellow. Each showed a hemisphere of her brain, looking like a tomato sliced down the middle. The doctor pointed to a smudge on a corner of one of the images. "There's the mass. Do you see it?" The doctor said, looking at my mother, Grandma and I in turn. My mother's face was pale. She leaned against the side of the drab wall and stared at the X-ray in silence.

I leaned in for a closer look. The growing blob of cancer cells inside Grandma's brain was deceptively small. I saw tiny veins protruding out from all sides. Each tendril was a possible trajectory that could affect Grandma's mental and physical functioning in different ways.

Mom had decided it was time to take Grandma to the doctor to get checked out one evening about a week ago. They were getting ready to drive down the wide hill from St. Mary Magdalene Church in the hills above Mission Bay. St. Mary's was one of Grandma's favorite bingo haunts.

“My purse! Where is it?” Grandma said, just as they were getting ready to leave.

Mom turned off the car and headed back to the church to look. As she turned to go, she caught sight of something on the car’s roof.

“It’s here, ma,” my mother said.

Later, I heard Mom and Aunt Patty whispering in the living room of the Winder Street house.

“She never forgets her purse. I have a strange feeling...” Mom said.

“What should we do?” Aunt Patty asked.

“What can we do?” Mom said. “Take her in to get looked at and pray for a miracle.”

In the doctor’s office, Grandma stared at the image on the screen too, but her response was one of subtle amusement instead of dread, as if she did not know what all the fuss was about. She nodded and smiled when the doctor pointed to the cancer mass on the screen. Mom looked at me and then at Grandma.

“Grandma,” I said, catching the hint, “I need to go out to the car to get something. Do you want to come with me?”

Grandma and I walked out to the car, leaving my mother and the doctor alone to discuss the details of Grandma’s X-ray. It was late morning and the day was turning balmy, with a fresh breeze coming inland from the sea. Grandma wore a dark brown suit, a white shirt and sensible shoes. Her hair was pulled back in a neat bun and her small pearl earrings sparkled in the Southern California sunlight.

Rarely did the time I spent with Grandma not include some kind of chit chat. Today, however, we walked in silence, both involved in our own thoughts. I stole glances every once in a while in Grandma’s direction as we strolled down the walkway. As a child, Grandma

seemed larger than life to me. Her large hands were strong and her lap was sturdy as I sat on it while she read to me in the living room of the Winder Street house. I was not a child anymore, however. On this day, Grandma was the one who looked small, fragile and completely vulnerable. She hummed a little tune as she walked in the sunlight, her large, “Jackie O” sunglasses covering her eyes and half of her cheeks. I wondered if she knew what was going on inside the doors of the doctor’s office.

I wondered what that doctor was telling my mother as well. He was probably saying the obvious, that there is a lot about the situation that he does not know. The mass inside Grandma’s brain could get bigger or it could shrink. It could spread or it could disappear completely, keeping all other cells out of harm’s way. It could change course. It could infect another area of her body. Or not.

Sometimes a change in trajectory on the minutest level, measured in millimeters, inches or single miles, is all it takes to change a life completely.

August 27, 2005

The fact that the rented van has not come to a complete stop like the dozens of other vehicles stranded along the side of this Mississippi highway is unexplainable. It’s as mysterious a phenomenon as how we were able to pull loads of cash out of our thin bank accounts just before we left town — four hundred dollars at a time, three turns each for Cambria, Jeremy and I— until our cards became mysteriously unreadable. For a moment, holding all that

money in my shaky hands, I felt as if we had won the lottery. It was a lot more than any of us had seen in a while. Sometimes miracles happen on their own accord in times of chaos and trauma. At that moment, we didn't ask why one was happening to us and we don't count the miles now either. Instead, we look straight ahead as the van drives past wind gusts alongside the freeway that blow the tops of trees perpendicular to the ground. Eventually, we reach Hattiesburg and a freeway entrance that is open. Our headlights shine on a wall of dark green vegetation as we veer towards an off-ramp. To our right is a row of fast food restaurants and gas stations: McDonalds, KFC, Taco Bell, a Pizza Hut, Shell, Chevron, Conoco. Two of the stations have run out of gas. The one that is open has a line of cars waiting that stretches back to the freeway. We do a U-turn and get in line. Once there, Cambria and the kids get out to stretch their legs and Jeremy and I head toward the station up ahead.

As we walk, I reach for Jeremy's hand and give it a squeeze. I feel the sturdiness of his hand as it covers mine, the rough calluses on the palm, the thick flesh in between the fingers. Jeremy's hands are working man's hands, accustomed to holding a spackler, a skill saw or a piece of plywood in their strong grip. They hold me in the same way. Jeremy's sturdiness is what attracted me to him from the beginning. It is a welcome contrast to the way I feel most of the time, like I am on the verge of floating away. I wonder what he is thinking as we walk in silence past the headlights and idling cars. Jeremy is a sweet man, noble and kind-hearted, but sometimes his heart is impossible to find.

"About four hundred more miles to Chattanooga," Jeremy says. He looks down at his shoes as we walk and kicks a stone that is in our path out of the way. "We should be there by sunrise."

I glance ahead at a mass of people and cars around us. A gathering of folks has

assembled outside one of the fast food restaurants. Others stand on the sidewalk or lean up against their cars, waiting. What are they waiting for? Gas maybe. Or a ride to pick them up. Figures mysteriously come and go from the bushes. The darkness makes every corner a bathroom.

"You doin' okay?" I ask him. He looks down at me and sighs.

"Cambria is really stressing out," he says. "She's worried about the kids."

"I know," I say. Members of Jeremy's family are often the topic of conversation between us. When any of them is in ill sorts, Jeremy feels responsible. Jeremy and I have been together for close to a decade. It has been a tumultuous relationship yet somehow we have stuck it out, linked together by a shared yearning for "normalcy," even in the middle of our very not normal lives.

"How about you?" he asks. I see the reflection of tail lights in his round glasses as he pushes them further up on to his nose. He looks is strained, worn out.

"Hanging in there," I say, smiling back. In reality, however, I want to scream as the sense of foreboding I have felt since we left New Orleans amplifies with the chaos all around us.

The line to use the restroom at the Conoco station hugs the sidewalk. I stand at the end of it as Jeremy continues on to the station to check on fuel. A conversation erupts from somewhere ahead of me in line.

"Fuck Mississippi!" A man's voice is full and loud. It's too dark to see his face but he sounds like a *Y'at*, someone who hails from St. Bernard Parish just east of New Orleans.

"Damn freeway entrances closed from the border on up."

"I was supposed to get off at the 90," a woman's high voice responds. "Now what am I

gonna do?"

Bodies ahead of me begin to shuffle in line. Strong language, like strong coffee, wakes us up a bit and becomes the catalyst for more conversation. People talk in low tones.

Anyone got a cell signal? Is it still a Force Five? Is the power out yet in Metairie?

Questions roll out of people's mouths and are swept away in the wind that is getting stronger as we wait. There is no rain yet in Hattiesburg, but the air is thick with the coming of water.

A woman pushing a stroller walks by. The little girl who is asleep inside wears a purple sweatshirt with a blue dolphin on the front. The shirt reminds me of Dauphine Street. Dauphine is French for dolphin.

Lately, I have begun to have fantasies of children. Fat-faced, toe-headed little girls in summer dresses looking through picture books at the downtown library or dark-skinned boys holding their mothers hands at the A & P grocery store beckon me with their doe-eyes. I can't stop staring at them. Sometimes I have the wild impulse to scoop them up from where they sit or stand with some parental unit or another and run away with them. I imagine the little one that would be in my arms not crying in horror. Instead, in my fantasies, they say "Mama!" And we both know right then and there that that other family they were with was just a stand-in. I am their real mother mom now.

These crazy images affect me in my sleep as well. On more than one occasion, I have woken up in the early morning surrounded by the aroma of babies — the tops of their heads, their elbows, their clean and even their dirty diapers. When this happens, I wait until Jeremy has gone to work and then I slip out of bed and stand before the sliding glass doors that separate the bedroom from the lush courtyard on the other side of the glass. I take a deep

breath, lift up my shirt and look at my reflection. With my bare stomach exposed and protruding, I try to imagine what it would feel like to have more than just air in there.

Suddenly, there is a tap on my shoulder. Back at the Hattiesburg gas station, it is almost my turn to use the john. I move up a bit to make room for an arm that is reaching for a bag of potato chips on a rack next to me. It's a middle-aged woman with a big hairdo. She smiles as her armpit passes by my line of vision.

"Never thought I'd be so overjoyed at the thought of taking a piss," she says as she gets back in line, opens the bag and begins to munch. Greasy bits of potato chip fall to the ground as she eats and talks at the same time. She says she is from Lakeview, near the harbor.

"I was just there the other day," I say. "My fiancé and I were chatting with a guy about renting a slip for this boat we just got. It's a yacht and it was damaged in Ivan. We got it for a deal."

I have no idea why I am telling the woman this nor why she would even care, but she seems to. Maybe my jabbering helps keep her mind off her bladder.

The woman says that her family used to own a boat too when she was young. They kept it at the Yacht Club as well. She would spend summers at the dock, helping her father clean out the hull and mend the rigging, flirting with boys and drinking pop. I tell her I live in the French Quarter, in a sweet little place on Dauphine Street.

"Costs a pretty penny to live at that address," she says, looking me up and down.

"We got a deal on that too," I say.

"Sounds like you've been lucky lately," the woman says. Before I have a chance to respond, the door to the bathroom opens. The woman stuffs the empty potato chip bag behinds a row of engine oil and makes a beeline for it.

I guess we *have* been lucky lately. Our place on Dauphine Street was a real find. It sits on the bottom floor of an old slave quarters built at the beginning of the 19th century. The front house was where the rich Southern owner of the property and his family use to reside long ago. A single gentleman lives in the big house now, a computer programmer who never looks anyone in the face. Upstairs is a writer and his girlfriend, both university students with more piercings than a metal detector would allow. In the back lives Allen. Allen is a landscape architect and a decent human being in every way — respectful, clean, talented, intelligent, sober. These are rare qualities in the Quarter where everyone is always up to something fishy that usually involved a fifth of liquor and a bad attitude. I have learned to really appreciate Allan. In fact, I would have already fallen in love with the guy except for the fact that he is quite openly and comfortably gay. Oh well. We are still friends and connect whenever we can over the impatiens, bougainvillea and blooming ginger bushes that grow in the hazy southern sun. Allan keeps our garden patio trimmed and well-watered and has done so for years. All that overflowing greenery, oozing life like a jungle scene, was what made me fall in love with the apartment in the first place.

Jeremy and I found the place on Dauphine Street on a lark one evening the previous April. We saw it hiding along an alleyway between shotgun houses, teasing us with brilliant oranges and hot pinks barely visible beyond the tattered, slat-wood fence that separated it from the rest of the busy Quarter.

“Can you just imagine us here?” I said, putting my plastic cup filled with raspberry martini on the high sidewalk. We were walking back from Bourbon Street to the stark and dreary place we shared on St. Louis Street with Jeremy’s brother Capricho. I picked up the FOR RENT sign that had fallen to the ground just outside the gate and held it to my chest like a

prize.

"Yeah," Jeremy said, raising his eyebrows and peering through the openings in the gate.

"Maybe we can..."

"And can you imagine the parties we could have!" I exclaimed.

"Finally!" he said, throwing up his hands in mock excitement as he squinted to try and get a better look.

"But can we afford it?" I asked, pacing. The FOR RENT sign said \$750 a month. Of course we couldn't afford it. Even with our combined income, we were just scraping by at Capricho's dive of a place (the roof leaks like a sieve in New Orleans' torrential rains). There our rent was only \$300 a month. New Orleans is a city of extremes, and that goes for income levels as well. No one had to tell me which side of that bracket we were precariously balanced on. Never the less, I found myself playing the naïve female, looking longingly at my sturdy boyfriend and hoping he would tell me something different than what I already knew.

Jeremy was thoughtful for a moment. Like most men, Jeremy prided himself on what he could provide for his family, and I knew that included me as well. Of the small amount he earned as a drywaller for a local construction company, he gave most of it to his sister Cambria to help her pay bills and for the kids' education in a private school in the Quarter. How much of his earnings he gave away to his family had become a real issue between us as of late. At this rate, how can we ever get ahead and have a family of our own?

Standing on the sidewalk at 925 Dauphine Street next to the little crooked gate that possibly led to our future, I could see his mind working the calculations needed to answer my question. I also knew that he was working through the conflicting obligations he felt towards all the people he felt he was so responsible for.

“Yes,” he said finally, albeit a little shakily. “I think we can.”

He stood on his tippy-toes, leaning into the thin wood to get a better look.

“We can?” I asked. I was expecting him to start talking about the car repairs the truck needed or how Cambria was short on groceries this week. His answer really threw me for a loop.

“Yes, with a little rearranging, I think we can,” he said, wiping the dust off of his already-dusty work pants.

“We can!” I said, consumed by images of domestic bliss.

Just then, the woman with the bouffant comes out of the restroom and gives me a nod.

“Your turn at the helm,” she says. “Just to let you know, there’s no T.P., so you’ll have to drip dry.”

One of my favorite photos of Grandma was tucked into a thick, fabric-covered photo albums kept in the front room of the Winder Street house. In it, she is pregnant with her first child, my uncle Victor. She is wearing a thick wool coat and has climbed halfway up a tree. She looks like she is trying to smile, but the look comes across as more of a squint, as if she is trying her best to be photogenic and at the same time, trying not to tumble to the ground from where she is perched. Around her neck is a thin, patterned scarf and the winter wind (I can see snow on the tops of cars in the background) is blowing against her long jacket, exposing her pregnant belly.

Most of the picture albums at Winder Street, about six of them, had been sitting on the table since that morning. By afternoon, with the summer sun streaming through the thin glass window, Aunt Patty, mom, Grandma and I had those pictures strewn across the yellow

linoleum table. We wiped beads of sweat from our brows and made small commentaries as we went through them. There was a quiet mood in the air that day. Grandma had just gone through day number three of radiation therapy. Although she was smiling, we could tell that the procedure was beginning to wear her down.

I picked up the photo of pregnant Grandma climbing the tree and held it in my hands while Grandma peered over my shoulder, spying it as well.

“Grandma remembers how it is to be pregnant first time. Uncomfortable...and wonderful...and difficult.” She looked hard at the photo, as if she was seeing it for the first time.

Before Grandma began to show, she was still a child herself in the eyes of all around her. Once Uncle Vic began to grow inside of her, however, and especially after he was born, she became a woman overnight. She also became an outcast. Relationships between Chinese girls and American soldiers were frowned upon in her neighborhood and, I imagine, all of China during World War II. The Americans were to be tolerated and were to be thanked for their intervention against the torturous acts of the Japanese. At the same time, the typical Chinese person bid their time until the last of those barbaric foreigners made his way out of their country and back to the wilds of the primitive and savage west where they belonged.

And what of those relationships between American men and Chinese women that resulted in pregnancy? For some, pregnancy was the ultimate threat against the state and against Chinese identity. From the moment her little belly began to show, Grandma became a traitor and just like a *guǐlǎo* or “foreign ghost.”

” It is the little apartment where we live in *Tianjin* where Victor is born. All those diapers hang on the line! I never know a kid who poop so much!”

At that, Grandma let out a wallop and squinted her eyes, not unlike the photo that sat on the table next to her. Mom and Kitty joined in.

“Yeah,” Kitty, who had three children, said between giggles, “I think all kids do the first year is eat and crap.”

“Kind of like they do when they’re teenagers!” Mom chimed in.

“Wait a minute,” I said, not wanting to be left out, “That sounds like most of my boyfriends. Now I see why I can’t keep a relationship. They spend too much time in the john...”

More laughter filled the room. Grandma grabbed a tissue to dab her eyes, giggling all the while. Then she continued with her recollections:

“The first time I need to change him, I do not want to do it. Pee yew! Mother show me how to do it quick. She scoop Vic up and flip him like pancake! Poor Vic not know what hit him!”

The image of Great Grandma flipping fat baby Victor in the air like pizza dough sent us into peels of laughter all over again. Grandma, suddenly full of energy, stood up and pantomimed her mother flipping the baby.

“Just like a pancake!” Aunt Kitty said.

“Or a crepe!” I said.

“Or a Frisbee!” Mom said.

“Or a watermelon,” Aunt Patty said, at which point all laughter stopped.

“What?” my mom said.

“You know,” Patty stammered, “A watermelon. Sometimes you throw it up in the air and....”

Grandma was disturbed, as she often was at Patty's comments.

"Pat," she said, her brow furrowed, "I never see a watermelon flip."

At that, the laughter reached a new height. Kitty doubled over on the floor next to Gigi the dog, who rolled over next to her in submission. Now it was Mom's turn to wipe tears away. Grandma handed her the tissue box. My Aunt Patty, meanwhile, did not laugh. She simply flipped through her magazine, her lips pursed and a smug look on her face.

After a while, the laughter subsided and Gigi rolled back on to her stomach, apparently noticing a return to calm in the humans around her. She toddled over to Grandma and lay back down in her normal position at her feet. Grandma bent down and gave the gentle Doberman a strong scratch behind the ear. Gigi's eyebrows twitched in response. In the happy silence that followed, Grandma became thoughtful.

"I was so sad that I leave *Tianjin*," she said. "When I get on ship from *Shanghai* to U.S., I feel like I going to die. I miss Mother so much! Never are we apart for more than one day! But also I glad I come. I love Grandpa and want better life. Mom say it is right thing to do. And yes, it is. Here I have wonderful family, wonderful life. And also I don't know what happen if Vic and I stay in China."

"What do you think would have happened, Mom?" Patty asked. Kitty shot her sister a stern look. Patty, however, was oblivious.

"Well, already, even before I am pregnant," Grandma begins, looking out the big eating room window at the airport a few miles away, "when Grandpa buy me things, the people in the neighborhood destroy them. Grandpa bought me shiny, new bike. I ride it everywhere. Then one day it is gone. Maybe they do the same with baby. I don't like to think of it!"

“Yeah, Mom,” said Kitty as she gave Patty a slap on the arm. “Don’t think about it. You are here and we love you!”

We have gone from New Orleans to Casey’s house in Chattanooga in a little over fifteen hours. Casey use to live in New Orleans before she moved back home. She managed a tea shop in the lower part of Royal Street. Tarot readers and psychics met with clients in the back of the store. That’s how she got to know Aysha, who was a card reader herself. It wasn’t long before Casey became another member of the Love clan.

The last time we saw Casey was on the day of Aysha’s second line, one week after her death. Casey was pregnant then. She wobbled along Chartres Street good-naturedly in her glittering purple Mardi Gras beads, taking up the rear as our small group of family, friends and random party-goers followed the brass band we hired for the occasion. Folks in New Orleans are use to “second lines,” those often-raucous, music-playing parades that happen either sporadically or, in the case of someone famous, after much planning, whenever someone in the city dies. New Orleans is a city of over a million people. On any given day, there is at least a half dozen second lines happening in various parts of the city, mostly in those “wards” or neighborhoods where crime and murder happen the most. Some second lines close down main thoroughfares with their brass bands and mass of wailing mourners. Other second lines are more quiet affairs. Aysha’s second line was small, yet joyful. As we paraded through the Quarter throwing beads, dancing and blowing through kazoos, a small crowd of tourists and locals joined in, dancing and marching with us as we headed back up to the Chartres Street house, where Jeremy and I lived when we first arrived in New Orleans and where Cambria lived at the time of Aysha’s death. At the wake in the backyard afterwards, tearful speeches

were given and bottles of Abita Amber beer were raised. Then everyone took turns placing their hands on Casey's enlarged belly, trying to feel the baby kick.

The fog is thick as we pull into Casey's narrow driveway in a suburb in Chattanooga's south side. Even though it is not yet seven in the morning, Casey comes out of the house to greet us. The baby that was not born back then is now in Casey's arms. As we peel ourselves out of the cocoon of the van and gather our things to come inside, Casey directs us to the places where we can sleep. Casey is only twenty-four years old, but she is a mom now and it shows in how she mothers us, telling us to come in, come in and have we got enough blankets? In response, we converge on her place with the force of a troupe of waterlogged elephants. Our host is gracious and welcoming nevertheless and for that, we are very grateful.

Within a half an hour of arriving, we are spread out on the floor in the living room and upstairs in the hall. Within minutes, the sound of snoring permeates the house.

We arise again a few hours later and eat breakfast in Casey's compact kitchen — eggs and toast, some kind of dark, local jam. There is no T.V. in Casey's apartment since she has just moved in. She has only a tiny monitor with a tape player attached to it. Soon Casey's mother arrives with videos of the news recorded the night before, however. Cambria, Michael, Jeremy and I huddle together on the floor in front of the video plays as Casey puts the first tape in. D'mitri leans against a doorway, playing it cool, while Chalaya plops herself down on her mom's lap.

We see the wind hitting a lamp post along Canal Street.

We see downed power lines and broken windows.

We see a single sheet of plywood being ripped off the side of a building and hear the moans the wood makes as it is projected into the street. The news camera follows it's

trajectory until it stops at the foot of another building and plasters itself against an open archway where the glass doors of a hotel use to be.

We expect to see these things so they don't surprise us. Then, slipped in between bits of conversation, comes the unexpected.

"This morning they were saying something about a crack in one of the levies," Casey's mom says in her thick Tennessee drawl. She is standing in the doorway of her daughter's living room wearing jeans and a long-sleeve shirt, her hair styled conservatively in short layers. Her face looks pained as all eyes turn toward her. She shrugs her shoulders.

"That's all I know. I didn't have time to record it."

The older woman picks her granddaughter up from inside the cradle and draws the baby near. She puts her face close to the baby's head and breathes in deep.

By the time we finish breakfast, it is afternoon. We pile into the van again and head into town, looking for a thrift store where we can buy more clothes. Once at the store, we stack things into the cart that don't make sense — a summer dress for Chalaya even though it is almost fall and a toy for D'mitri, even though he is almost too old for it. I buy a gaudy black shirt with purple sequins patterns that I know I will never wear. I don't bother to try it on.

After a couple of hours, we head across town to watch the news on Casey's parents' flat screen T.V. We sit on their leather couch and stare at the tickertape of words running by in a red digital ribbon along the bottom of the screen. We see Anderson Cooper looking somber and urgent while images of gushing water flash by in the background. We watch until Chalaya begins to get restless and we have had enough of the images that bring up question after question of which we have no answers to.

It is late when we get back to Casey's but none of us are tired. We begin to make

survival plans. Everyone talks at once. There is a brother and sister — Capricho and Magenta — who are still in the city. Cell phones from the area are still not working, but Jeremy and Cambria decide to make an attempt to contact them. Together they go out onto the front porch for better reception. Michael sits on the floor in the living room, coloring with Chalaya.

Blue swirls, red swirls.

Chalaya yawns and sprawls out on the floor. Michael continues to draw.

Orange swirls. Yellow swirls.

D'mitri is lying on the couch looking up at the ceiling while I sit on the stairs and watch Jeremy and Cambria through a small window by the front door. Cambria is making the call on her cell phone. Jeremy is looking out at the street. The curls of his cigarette rise through the orange hue of the porch light.

As I watch him, I have a sudden urge to go out onto the porch and rub up against him like a cat, to feel the strength and security of his manly frame. Instead, I sigh and stay where I am. He is with family now, totally and completely. And whenever he is with family, they are his focus. Watching him from inside the house, it seems as if he is a continent away.

I think of Grandma then, for the first time in many, many months. Suddenly, I feel as if I *am* Grandma, just a traveler on a cargo ship looking through a lonely porthole at nothing but the swells of the blue-grey ocean.

For years, everyone in my family thought that Grandma had already turned eighteen by the time she came to the U.S. One typical story-telling Sunday, however, she finally spilled the beans about her age.

“Grandma only sixteen when she came on board that big ship. Everyone asking me how old I am and I got scared that I am too young. So I say eighteen and they believe. They let me go on ship. Otherwise, if I tell truth, maybe they not let me go.”

Grandma was just a girl when she met my grandfather, who was thirty years her senior, and she was still a girl when she boarded the USS General Meiggs with my uncle, baby Victor, carried snugly in her small arms. Grandma never said much about the particulars of that long and tedious ocean voyage from China to Angel Island in San Francisco. She did speak, however, of the one stop the Meiggs made along the way. Hawaii was significant to the passengers on board, many of who were immigrating to America from various parts of Asia. The islands, for them, represented the midway point between the old world and the new.

“I want so bad to get off the ship. I want so bad to *see*,” Grandma said as we sat together in the eating room. She had just finished three weeks of radiation therapy and she stood next to the back door wearing a pink knitted beanie cap that hid her thinning hair.

“I am so close I can smell the plumeria!” she said, adjusting the cap that had fallen over her eyes. “I can see the beach! It is so beautiful. But they say that if I get off, I cannot get back on.”

For some reason, it could have been her age or because she had a small child with her, Grandma was not allowed to disembark with the others when the ship made its scheduled stop in the Pacific. In my mind’s eye, I see Grandma peering out at the open gangplank, her tiny face haloed by the porthole of her bottom-level room. She watches from her perch as friends that she has just met — a couple from the Philippines bound

for Sacramento, the military officer that helped her with her visa, dozens of others — walk off the ship and into the fragrant island air. They laugh as they carry their cameras and shopping bags for a day's leave in Honolulu. Eight hours later, they will return with those bags full of clothing, hats and knick-knacks as well as stories to tell young Su about their adventures along the beaches of Waikiki. As they talk, I see Grandma's face. It is a mixture wonder and disappointment.

"I always want to go back there," Grandma said, sitting down on the couch next to me, "Grandpa and I talk about it. We will save money and we will go. But in long run, no. Too busy with kids and now, too old." Grandma frowned. Rarely did Grandma seem as sad as she did that day.

When Grandma got up from the couch to take a half-frozen roast out of the frig for dinner, I stayed on the couch. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine.

On a whim, I see young Su take out her suitcase from a narrow closet. She throws it with a thud on the bed next to her. Then she opens it up and looks inside at its blank emptiness. She knows that it will not take long to fill that suitcase up again with the few belongings her mother packed for her back in Tianjin before they made their way to *Shanghai*.

Su recalls how during the last few years that the Japanese had occupied *Tianjin*, she had learned the skill of becoming invisible. She had gotten so good at walking quietly and inconspicuously that she could slip right past the Japanese soldiers that leaned against their vehicles smoking cigarettes and shining their guns on the side of the road. Su imagines how she could slip past the American guard, quiet as the early morning snow, and how once on shore, it would be easy to blend in with the other Asian faces on

the streets of Honolulu and Waikiki. She could go into Chinatown and ask about a job in a curio store or in a factory. Chinatown was not far from the dock, she had been told.

From the bedside table, young Su takes out a picture of George, the American officer who is the father of her child. When she arrives in Angel Island in three weeks or so, he will be there waiting for her. He will take her to his house and introduce her to his mother and his sister. He showed her pictures of these women once. They were pale and their eyes were big and round. They wore straw hats to protect themselves against the southern California sun. George told her that it was always sunny where he lives. He told her that he was making a big patio where they can have barbeques. She was not exactly sure what a barbeque was, but George had made it sound as if it was best thing in the world.

Standing there looking at the empty suitcase, Su images that she will have more babies with George. Her mother said that it will be expected and that she will have to change their diapers, feed them and tell them stories to put them to sleep. She will have to mind her husband. Her mother had said that too, but with a sly smile, adding, "But don't mind him too much!" Su had blushed when her mother said that and they both laughed. Su knew from experience that her mother did not always mind her husbands and it often cost her. Su's mother had a mind of her own and she had taught Su to have one as well, as well as the art of hiding her intelligence if the situation warranted it. Thinking these thoughts of her mother and their last conversations together, Su felt a stab in her chest. Already she missed her so much.

Su's thoughts then turn to America and the life that she will lead when she arrives there. She has a feeling that she will like George's mother, Henrietta. He had said that

she likes to write poetry and that she likes to garden. Su thinks that she would like to tell Henrietta about her own mother (there is that pang again, so hard that she cannot breathe). However, she has no idea how she will do this since she only knows a few words of English. In fact, the English language scares her with its guttural inflections that sound like hard shoes scraping against a gravel road. Some people in her neighborhood have said that to speak English is the same as saying curses out loud. She knows that she will have to learn it in, though, in order to survive in America. The thought fills her with dread.

In his house is where she will stay for the rest of her life. She has seen pictures of his house. It is big and white with wide windows and lots of property around it. The land looks like the pictures of the desert areas south of the Gobi, where her grandfather lives. There is scrub brush and dirt and no trees in sight, although George had said, in his broken Mandarin, that he has already begun planting pepper trees and oaks and a few fruit-bearing varieties as well.

Su smiles at the thought of George and is surprised at how much she suddenly misses him. She does not miss him as much as she misses her mother but there is that stabbing in her chest again, this time at the thought of how long she and George have been apart. There is also a pressing in her chest that feels like someone is pushing her forward. This, to her, feels like hope.

She thinks about how when George smiles, she sees a small boy, not a grown man of over twice her age. And she remembers how his arm wrapped protectively around her as they entered the hall the first time they went to a dance together at the American Officers' Club. She had felt the hot pressure of a hundred pairs of eyes baring down. As

they walked to their table, he had smiled down at her and she had locked her eyes on his so that he was the only thing she saw. That had made all the difference.

After a while, Su comes out her daydreams and back into the small space of her little room again. The ship is quiet and she remembers that everyone has left for the day. I imagine that she frowns as she sits down next to the empty suitcase and that worry wrinkles form on her otherwise smooth, young forehead.

Could she really just disappear into the open arms of Honolulu? Does she really want to? From the black, vinyl couch in Grandma's living room, I try to imagine the scene as if I were in her shoes. Did she think about how the decision she was about to make would affect the course of not just her life, but the dozens of potential lives to be born through her? On the other hand, maybe Grandma was not thinking about that at all. After all, she was only sixteen when she crossed the ocean, all rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed and gullible. Maybe instead she just senses that soon she will be a part of something larger than herself and she feels this as something physical and indescribable, like a rush of heat up her spine that makes her cheeks flush.

Then maybe in the midst of all this thinking, feeling and contemplating, she stands on her tippy toes and again looks out the porthole and at the thick metal slip that connects the ship to the dock. The gangplank seems now like something untouchable, a bed of hot coals only gurus and educated girls can walk upon.

At some point, of course, the baby would have to whimper because we all now that babies never stay still for long. This distraction would be enough. I see Su putting the suitcase back in the closet and the photo back on the nightstand. I see her rock the baby

in her arms until he falls asleep again. After a while, she sleeps as well— fitfully, awakening each time the tides lap too loudly against the metal hull of the ship. The rocking of the ship does not soothe her, but time eventually will. Soon the thoughts she had had about escape into the alleyways of Honolulu will reside into the deep crevices of her subconscious. They will be buried deep inside her, under layers of every day chores, mending clothes, making dinners, packing lunches, cleaning diapers and wiping noses, not to resurface again until sixty years later.

Jeremy puts his cigarette out with the heel of his shoe and dials numbers on his cell phone. Then he holds up his fingers, motioning to Cambria. I hear muffled words through the thin front door.

“My truck. We parked it there...on the eighth floor of Canal Street. The mall parking lot, remember? Can you get to it?” Jeremy cups the phone in his hands. “I said, *do you think you can get there?* The keys are at the Chartres Street house.”

After the call, Jeremy and Cambria come back inside flushed with excitement. They have spoken with Magenta, the other sister, who was at her apartment on St. Louis Street. They got through to her on her land line. There is a group of them, mostly Tarot readers from the Square, Magenta’s boyfriend Matt, others. They were able to get food and supplies from the Winn-Dixie on Rampart Street. The store was open, the hinges on the front doors were broken off, and folks were pulling things off the shelves. They got water and canned vegetables and tuna fish. Jeremy told her about his green truck and where he parked it before we left. Over the phone, they made a plan. The group of them would head for the truck with the first light of morning and then attempt to leave the city across the Metairie Bridge. In

order to do all this, however, they first have to walk the ten blocks to the house on Chartres Street to get the keys to Jeremy's truck and then another twelve blocks back through the Quarter to Canal.

After Jeremy explains this to us in the living room of Casey's sparsely-furnished apartment, we are silent. According to Magenta, there are guns in the city – on top of buildings and in the hands of people walking the streets. Today, the streets of New Orleans are not reverberating with the sounds of the second lines and the clanking of Mardi Gras beads against the old cobblestones. Instead, those streets are contracted like a cramped muscle, with the prospect of violence, sudden and nonsensical, awaiting on every corner.

I believe that there are mirrors inside each of us and each of these mirrors holds an image of a scene. The scenes are memories of the past or visions of the future. In one of these mirrors inside of me, there is the scene of Grandma.

A month into radiation therapy, Grandma told me about the Japanese and what really happened in her hometown of *Tianjin* during the beginning of World War II. On that day, she frowned as she held the newspaper in her hands. On the front page was a photo of two tall buildings bursting into flames. The creases on her forehead expanded and her eyes regressed into thin slits. She began to tell me the story.

She told me that once she saw an old man carrying two buckets filled with water.

The buckets were too heavy for the old man to carry.

The water spilled over the rims of the buckets and on to the ground.

And the water spilled all over a Japanese soldier's shoes.

It was an accident.

But the soldier was angry, insulted, humiliated.

So the soldier slit the old man's throat.

The old man fell at the base of a tiny bridge. His bright red blood pooled all around him. The blood dripped into a little stream which ran through the center of town.

Grandma was a child then. She saw the old man and the water spill on the soldier's shoes. She saw the soldier slit the man's throat and she saw the old man fall to the ground at the foot of the bridge like a sack of sand.

The soldier turned to look at her with greedy eyes, with blood on his shirt. When the soldier's eyes met hers, Grandma started to run. She ran back to town without looking back, to the tiny flat she shared with Great Grandmother.

Then she forgot about the whole thing for many, many years — until the tumors pushed the memory of the old man and the soldier to the surface like a flood. Grandma's memories were like water that poured out of her.

The date was September 12, 2001. Grandma held the front page of the San Diego Union Tribune up for me to see.

"Why do they do this, Nikki?"

She was asking me because, as the only person in the family who had graduated from college, I was supposed to have the answers to questions like these.

I was silent. In response, Grandma sat down in the yellow and chrome kitchen chair next to the big window that faced the airport. She put the newspaper down on a pile of other newspapers destined for the lining of the birdcage and began to tell me about the soldier and the old man and the blood that ran into the little stream that went through the middle of town. Grandma said that for a long time after that, she could not look at that stream without

thinking it was full of blood.

I believe that Grandma gave up on living that day. She didn't understand politics. Or war. Or natural disasters- why they happen and how they happen. She just knew these things because they had been with her her whole life. They were the mirrors she carried inside of her.

And now those mirrors are inside of me.

September 1, 2005

Cambria, Michael and Jeremy have decided that they must be closer to the city as they await news from Capricho and Magenta. I don't argue. I want to be closer too but, admittedly, not because of Capricho and Magenta. My reason is selfish. I want to be near Dauphine Street, our cute little French Quarter apartment and the life we, Jeremy and I, were starting to live when we were there. For all of these reasons, it is to Eunice, Louisiana, we have come, about one hundred and fifty miles northwest of New Orleans, to the family home of Micah, another adopted Love family member.

Micah is a writer. He met the family like Casey did, through Aysha. He was just a guy in a restaurant, the Croissant D'or, near Esplanade. The D'or is the Love family's Sunday breakfast place. They sell cheap homemade quiche and creamy latte's and have a cute, little backyard patio painted powder blue where wild birds pick at crumbs underneath plastic, vinyl-covered tables. Aysha saw Micah sitting alone in the back patio one Sunday, scribbling in a shabby journal as the little sparrows pecked at his feet and steam rose from his *café au lait*. She said

later that what compelled her about him most was his hat, a large black bowler hat like the one Groucho Marx used to wear. Aysha grew up in Los Angeles, amongst the starlettes and macho men of Hollywood circa 1950's. She said that that black hat stood on Micah's rather large head like a punctuation mark at the end of a sentence.

"That hat invited more investigation," Aysha had said with a wink and so, being the action-oriented person that she was, Aysha decided to investigate. Ever since then, Micah has become a part of Jeremy's family just like Casey.

Micah's parents live in St. Landry Parish. This is farm country, Cajun country. St. Landry farmers grow grain in the spring and flood the land in the summer for crawfish and rice. They grow corn sometimes and hay for cattle. They play baccarat on the weekends and drink Miller, Coors and sometimes the local brew, Abita, with their boiled crabs and crawfish.

There is a college in Eunice, a branch of LSU that a lot of the local young folks attend. Some of the Cajun boys, if they don't become soldiers, will grow up to be farmers like their fathers. They will marry Cajun girls and they will learn about the wheat, the corn, the rice and the crawfish. They will learn how to rotate crops and the best times and ways to raise each one. They will learn about bugs that weren't around when their grandfathers or even their fathers worked the land. They will learn about the newest pesticides they can use to eliminate them. They will learn about high-tech farm equipment, how to apply for loans and how to simply survive at the tail end of a dying era. And they will struggle with guilt and the sense of obligation that comes from being *from* a place and knowing that someday you may have to leave it.

There are many things that are different nowadays for young folks in Eunice. There are many unexpected challenges that have cropped up in this otherwise sleepy Cajun town.

Like pesticides. Or the strange sight of those transplanted, water-logged New Orleanians on their quiet streets, individuals who look as foreign in their town as those who come across the borders and across the ocean to work in their fields and in the back kitchens of local restaurants.

It's not hard to pick us new refugees out, however. There is a hardness in our eyes that comes from being from a city like New Orleans and from having to leave it when that was the last thing in the world we wanted to do. Many of us look like we have just been duped. And at the same time, we are clumsy, disoriented and just plain tired as we bump into light posts in the middle of town.

Jeremy, Michael and I walk to the college campus the morning after we arrive. We want to talk to someone in charge. Truth is, we want to talk to anyone who can look us in the eye, anyone that isn't a voice on the telephone or a talking head on a TV screen.

We walk along the vast expanse of green lawn in the center of the campus and go into the Student Center, wandering around aimlessly until finally we see someone that might tell us something. We talk to the dean of the college in his big office with the high dark bookshelves. He listens and is sympathetic but knows little more than we do about what is going on south of here. He says we can eat in the cafeteria for free if we want.

We thank him for the offer. Then we say our goodbyes, walk out of his office through the double doors of the campus administration building and out into the stuffy summer air. We walk again across the lawn, each of us lost in our own thoughts. I take off my shoes and feel the sharp blades of grass tickle my feet as I walk. Everything is so manicured and in order here at LSU-Eunice, I wonder if any of it is real at all. I squat down to touch the green vegetation and from my crouched position, I see Jeremy and Michael walking up ahead. Steam

rises from the ground in transparent waves between them, giving the impression that they are floating just above the ground like a couple of messiahs.

This seems appropriate. After all, we are all floating now — all of us who have decided to flee the city. Those who stayed in New Orleans struggle with matters of survival — water, food, shelter. At this moment, for example, Jeremy’s sister Magenta could be heading past the sounds of broken glass and car alarms in the Central Business District. She could be slipping the key into the lock of the green truck and opening its sticky driver’s side door with a shaky hand, turning on the ignition and backing up quickly from the parking spot at Canal Place. For her, the plan is simple: find the truck, start it up, don’t stop for anyone, get out alive.

Maybe she will make it. We are hoping that she will. But once out, then what?

Then, she will float for a while like the rest of us in these otherwise sleepy little towns, or in Red Cross lines, or in cars, hotel rooms and shelters across the country. For a time, we “refugees” (as we have been labeled for the time being by national news agencies) have become unplugged from “normal” American life, that particular kind of reality that is defined by the expectation that things —ATM machines, gas stations, cell phones, grocery stores, police departments— tend to function correctly for the most part. In the America that I have lived in my entire life, I know who I am as a consumer, a worker, a student, a citizen of this, that or the other town, city, parish and state. This assumption is so automatic, it is like breathing.

Since the hurricane, however, all that has changed. Now those of us who have left have no identity to speak of. In a single day, thousands have scattered from a central point. Now we branch out in trajectories that are, for the most part, beyond our control, and beyond the capacity of local institutions to handle. We are little bits of dust spiraling out across the

universe from a single star gone supernova.

Floating can't go on forever, however. The heat of the stars inevitably burn themselves out. And so eventually, we will land. And when we do, my sense is that we will touch down as individuals inherently different than who we were before.

When Jeremy and Michael reach the end of the lawn, they notice that I am not with them. They turn around to search for me. I stand up and wave. Once they see me, they continue on their way across the campus and down the two street blocks to Micah's parents' house.

Upon arrival back at the house, Micah's mom offers us potato chips and tuna fish sandwiches. We eat numbingly, just as we ate at Casey's mom's house when we had again sat in front of the TV, mesmerized by the red ticker tape and the nervous buzz of the newscaster's voice.

Plopping ourselves down on some couch or another and staring unblinkingly at a television screen has become a kind of employment for us. Instead of going to an office to file papers or a restaurant to wait tables or a classroom to teach, we go to the couch and to the TV. We go to the waiting for the news that will tell us when we can return to the city and to our lives again.

"Why can't we see the French Quarter?" Cambria says. "All they are showing are aerals of the levies."

Chalaya is eating chocolate and getting brown stains all over Micah's parents white couch. D'mitri is trying to do a handstand on the rug. He lunges forward and almost knocks over a glass figurine on a shelf next to him. The kids are wound up tight like tops ready for a good spin. Cambria tries to calm them but it is too late. Eventually I shoo them outside,

tempting them with a game of four-square so that their mom can have some peace.

“Why can’t we just go home,” D’mitri says as we shut the screen door behind us. He slumps over and collapsed in a miserable heap on the front lawn.

“Get up D’mitri! Let’s play ball!” Chalaya says as she wipes her mouth with the sleeve or her shirt.

I bounce the ball a couple of times and then pass it to Chalaya, who lunges for it and misses. D’mitri runs after it, into the street just as a car approaches. The car slows down just in time. I shake my head as D’mitri saunters back with the ball tucked under his arm. He lobs it at his sister, who misses it again.

“Hey, I wasn’t ready!” she says and begins to cry.

“Baby!” D’mitri calls after her as he squats down on the lawn again, shoulders slumped. Then he turns to me.

“I am so *bored*. Why can’t we just go home?”

“There is a group of girls in *Tianjin*. They are my friends.”

Grandma and I sat together in the eating room munching on Cheetos and listening to the radio and to the love birds squawking in their cage outside. I watched Grandma paint her fingernails in straight, even strokes. Her hands shook a bit and she squinted to see the brush.

I have watched grandma paint her nails in these pastel colors — always a subdued, creamy, color, like cotton candy or the pink clouds at sunset — all of my life. I have not inherited her ability to paint nails in fine, even strokes nor to wear the polish for more than a day without chipping it. I bite my nails, which are always in a fluctuating state of unevenness. My fingernails are random, disheveled and unorganized. Grandma’s are orderly, frost-painted,

sharp-pointed and graceful. They are strong. After she finished painting them and they have dried, she tapped them on the table for good measure, one-two-three-four-five, as if she was playing piano. Then she shook her hand and inspected her fingernails, squinting with one eye shut then the other. Grandma had big hands, long fingers. Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

“We wear gold caps on our teeth,” she said, blowing a little on her left hand. Suddenly she was fifteen again. I waited. I have learned that sometimes it is best not to ask too many questions. One time I put a tape recorder on the table just as Grandma was beginning to tell a story. I thought it would be great to record it. Grandma, however, stared at the machine as if it were a poisonous insect. She answered my questions in short, jilted responses punctuated by outbursts of giggles until finally I turned the damn thing off. As soon as I put the recorder away, she started talking like her normal, animated self again.

“My mother is an elusive little woman,” my own mother said once about Grandma. But, of course, mother-daughter relationships are always a bit strained, no matter how close. As granddaughter, I was spoiled. Most of the time, I was able to see between the cracks.

“And we wear white gloves, Nikki,” she continued. “All of us have them. We show them off and we sit on the bench in the square just for fun.”

Grandma looked away, out at the harbor and the sunset. How many southern California sunsets have Grandma and I seen together? How many more to come? I felt a sinking in my stomach. I didn’t like to imagine life without Grandma — Grandma not at the table, not tapping her painted fingernails, not telling stories. I decided to ask a question, mainly to take my mind off of these thoughts.

“You were like sisters then?” I say.

“Like sisters, yes. We fight like sisters too, like your aunts and your mom. Too much fighting and jealousy. Boys and clothes, things like that. ”

Grandma paused and began to clean up the cotton balls that were scattered around the table. She screwed the top back on the fingernail polish and left the table for a moment with the stuff to put it away. When she came back, she had a photo in her hand. It was one I had seen before — six young girls poised around a park bench, some with their hands on their hips, others with gloved wrists bent and perched under their chins. They were fragile-looking things in straight dresses with short sleeves and collars buttoned all the way up their graceful necks. They were all pencil-thin except for one. Grandma stood out. She was big-boned, her Mongolian ancestry clearly evident. She was wide-faced. She had long fingers and big feet, perfect for traveling long distances.

“There is one girl,” Grandma said. “She is my best friend. We call her *Shu-Shi*. She is the smallest and youngest of us all.”

On the right hand corner of the sepia-toned photo, I think I see *Shu-Shi*. She is pouty-faced and twig-like, as if she could blow away in a *Beijing* breeze. I tapped my finger on the side of the photo.

“That is *Shu-Shi*,” Grandma said with a nod. Grandma’s eyes rested softly on the photo. Suddenly, in one of those rare moments when all becomes still in the city, the constant roar of traffic on the freeway came to a lull, airplanes ceased their flying and the lovebirds in the backyard settled in to the quiet of twilight. The silence lasted for just a few seconds but it was enough. In the last moments of daylight, I saw dust particles floating in the cosmos of air between the black corded telephone and the kitchen window. They were remnants. Like

Grandma's memories, they moved and settled randomly with a brush of a hand or a slight breeze.

Grandma spoke again, determinedly. I was beginning to recognize this new voice she used during the last few months of her life. She whispered her words low and guttural, almost under her breath.

"*Shu-Shi* is sold by her family to a man when she is fourteen. He is an old man, over fifty. She does not want to go. She tells me that if they take her away to be with him as third wife, she will kill herself. Then one day, she is gone."

Noises returned. A lovebird squawked. An airplane flew low overhead. Grandma folded her hands on the table, the well-manicured nails up and forming a "V" on the tabletop. Grandma could tell such a story just through the quiet that she kept. I, on the other hand, had to know.

"So did she..." I began.

"I don't know, Nikki." Grandma shook her head slowly. "I never see her again."

Memories are like specks of dust. As they fall, one piece lands in just the right place and an entire world opens up.

Chapter 2: Flow

“Such a significant formation as the dividing wall of the human heart can be understood out of the movements of the medium flowing through it.”

-Theodore Schwenk, *Sensitive Chaos*

September 4, 2005

“There were thousands,” Magenta explains as she describes the scene by the Superdome on the day she and her gang of tarot readers from the Square made a run for it in Jeremy’s green truck. She wears a long black and green dress and converse tennis shoes to match and sits on the bed of the Super 8 Motel in Eunice scratching a rash that has taken over her ankles and her lower calves. She thinks that the rash is from wading through the water on Rampart Street to get to the Winn-Dixie. The cops had opened it up and people were taking whatever they needed.

“It was like wading through puke,” she says as her fingernails poke and scratch the shedding skin on her left ankle.

Supposedly, they had a pretty close call. Some young men tried to jump the truck as she drove by the convention center, astro-gliding through two feet of sludge. Magenta explains how she punched the gas and how, miraculously, the engine did not flood. Somehow they made it to the Metairie Bridge and pass the checkpoint just as the cops that were guarding the area were preoccupied with something in the other direction. Once past the checkpoint, Magenta and her friends drove out to the Highway, to freedom and to Eunice.

The next day, Magenta and her boyfriend Matt, and Capricho and his girlfriend come to Micah’s parent’s house for a family meeting. At the meeting, it is decided that from Eunice, the family will scatter like seeds.

“The kids need stability *now*,” Cambria says, propping Chalaya up on her hip as the little girl rests her head on her mother’s shoulder. “We just can’t wait any longer.”

“Where will you go?” Jeremy asks. His face was pained.

“We’re going to Ellensburg,” Cambria is matter-of-fact. The family had lived in Washington state around the time that D’mitri was born. They all lived in a little town called Rosalyn, about fifty miles north of Ellensburg, which was famous for being the set for the popular television show *Northern Exposure*. When D’mitri was a toddler, Cambria had lived in Ellensburg for a spell. “D’mitri has friends there and we can plug back into the community pretty easily. It just makes sense.”

In all the years I have known Jeremy’s sister, she has always seemed to me to be a little like a statue — overpoweringly beautiful yet at the same time slightly out of reach. Suddenly, faced with the impending departure of her and the kids, I am saddened by the fact that I will be missing someone I never really got to know.

Cambria’s announcement is followed by others. Michael and Micah will go to California, where they will let the Southern California sun soothe them; then they will play it by ear. Capricho and his girlfriend will go to Pensacola and right back to New Orleans as soon as the city opens up again.

How interesting that it was the water that had pushed us out, that had changed our lives so completely and that we had waded through and fled from. Yet still we crave to be immersed within its salty embrace.

When it is my turn to talk, I speak up louder than I intend to.

“I want to stay!” I say. “I want to clean shit from buildings, help people into stretchers, comfort children!”

There is a silence as all eyes fall on me and then on Jeremy.

"I want to stay!" I say it again, louder still, as people nearest to me back away a few feet. I am not sure why I have to be so loud about it. I just know that I do.

How can I abandoned the city that never once abandoned me?

After I have spoken, I turn to Jeremy for confirmation. He has moved away from me, his head facing down and a little to the right. He will not look at me. *He has made other plans*, I think. Maybe he wants to go with Micah and Michael or maybe with Cambria and the kids instead. For a moment I am lost in my own fears. I feel my aloneness again as something corporeal, pungent and clear.

My mind begins to race. I open my mouth to speak, although I haven't the slightest clue what I am going to say. Then Jeremy turns to me and smiles a thin pencil of a smile. In an instant, I forget all about my fears of aloneness and rejection. Jeremy will stay with me and together we will be as close as we can to the little apartment and the garden on Dauphine Street. When the city opens up, we will be there to help rebuild. Together, we will clean shit from buildings and rake the streets and dress the wounds that lay open and vulnerable on the bruised and water-logged arms of the city of New Orleans. He nods and I sigh. It is settled, at least for the time being.

The next morning, all of us head up the 49 in a mini-caravan. Shreveport will be the sending off point for Cambria, Michael and the kids and for Magenta and Matt as well, who have friends there with whom they can stay for a while.

When we arrive, we drop Matt and Magenta off at a small two-story house in the middle of town with plans to connect the next day. Then Jeremy and I pool our resources and rent a hotel room for the rest of us in a casino resort near the Texas border. We arrive early in

the afternoon with enough daylight for a half hour swim in the pool. The kids jump in with their clothes on and dog paddled underneath a waterfall made of cement rocks meant to look like big Texas boulders. The children laugh. We all laugh. The cool water is immediate refreshment and a balm for us, washing away the stickiness of a Southern summer day and the unknown state of our lives.

Afterwards, we enter our hotel room dripping from the swimming pool. We drop our bags and wander around aimlessly, touching the shiny, expensive things in the room — crystal ash trays, a glass table top, the beveled shades of the lamps on either side of the queen-size double beds. We look out the window that faces the valet parking area and the city street beyond that. Out of habit, we turn on the TV. Instead of red ticker tape, this time we catch Celine Dion belting out lyrics in a televised benefit concert for Katrina victims.

In the middle of *My heart will go on...*, Cambria begins to cry. I sit down next to her on the cushy bed and put my arm around her shoulder, trying to be of comfort. She stiffens and stifles her tears in response, perhaps remembering that it is her place to be proud, strong, and responsible. Then she gets up from the bed to announce that she and the kids would be leaving within the hour.

“I just can’t stay here tonight. I have to keep moving...” she says and begins to gather Chalaya’s wet clothes which are scattered across the floor. Michael decides then that he will leave too. He will ride with her part of the way and then connect with Micah somewhere in Arizona, as soon as Micah has had a day or two to tie up loose ends in Eunice.

An hour later, without much fanfare and very little nostalgia, they leave. Then there are no kids running around and no family members to attend to. It is just Jeremy and I. That

night, the silence is oppressive. It saddens us. We lay in bed together awkwardly, like strangers do in the cold, only for the sake of staying warm.

There are dozens of Grandma Stories in my head, swimming around like luminescent fish. And then there is the story to begin all stories, the one everyone in the family knows so well that they each have their own slightly unique rendition of it. My family began with this story. And the story begins with an American officer, a pregnancy, a teen mom and a teen mom's mother, who was as tough as an iron pot and whose main goal in life, at least for a while, was to see to it that her only daughter was safe and on her way to a better life.

My version of the story begins with a guy named Charlie. Charlie was my Grandfather's tailor and also a friend of Great Grandma.

"I don't know much about these things, Nikki," Grandma said one summer day, looking down at a line of ants parading through the eating room floor. She ripped a piece of masking tape from the roll and began to peck the line with it, making the ants scatter pell-mell across the room.

"Charlie use to hold his hands in a certain way," Grandma blushed and giggled before she continued. "He is kind of like a girl, so maybe he is – how you say — gay? He used to go to the Officer's Club and dance too, like Grandpa and I do. In *Tianjin*, some Chinese get invited to these dances. Charlie knows the officers. He works for them because he knows English. And I am always with Grandpa, so I get to go too. Charlie never dance with girls, though, and that is why people make fun. Grandpa and Charlie are friends. When Grandpa leaves China to go back home, he leave Charlie in charge of me."

For an entire year, Charlie led Grandma through the delicate bureaucratic maze required to secure passage to the United States on what would be one of the last US ships to sail out of China. The year was 1941. It was the middle of the Sino-Japanese War and Mao and his Communist Party were gaining power in the country. At the same time, the US continued its retreat from what would soon become known as Red China.

“Charlie takes me everywhere- to buy clothes for travel and supplies for Victor, and again and again to the base and the embassy to fill out paperwork. So much paperwork! Grandpa sends me money and I give to Charlie. I don’t know what he does with all of it. He keep some of it for himself as his pay for helping me. I wonder if it is the right amount but whenever I ask, mother just say to trust Charlie, he knows what he is doing, and soon I be on my way to America.”

As Grandma spoke, visions of a tall, thin man in a tailored yellow suit, top hat, sunglasses and shiny black shoes with white stripes down the sides come to mind. I see this man leaning against the wall in a nondescript alleyway in the middle of *Tianjin*, making deals and exchanging cash for fake watches and other items he slips coolly out of the inside of his coat.

Suddenly, my imaginings were interrupted by a noise coming from the front room. Aunt Patty was home. I heard the crinkle of her shopping bags and the jingle of her car keys as she laid them on the piano stool. Grandma and I exchanged glances. Patty is known for her shopping sprees. This time, she came into the kitchen with a bag full of celery.

“It was on sale at Henry’s!” she exclaimed. “Only fifty-nine cents a bunch. I can make celery soup!”

Grandma continued to peck at the line of ants, which had trailed up the side of the kitchen cabinets.

“What y’all doing?” Patty asked, putting the bag down on the counter.

“Grandma is telling *the* story,” I said. Patty knew know exactly which story I meant.

“Oh boy! Let’s here it Ma!” Patty said. Grandma, however, remained silent. She didn’t often tell stories in front of Patty. She became too frustrated with Patty’s constant corrections of her English and her timeline.

“Come on, Ma. Just pretend I’m not here,” Patty said, as she removed stalk after stalk from the paper bag and placed them in a big heap on the cutting board.

The phone rang — first once, then a second time. At the Winder Street house, there is a policy that the phone must not be answered until whoever is on the other line begins to leave a message on the machine, blundering their way through the excessive beeping and static. This call, fortunately for Grandma and me, was for Patty.

“Hello?” Patty grabbed the receiver and began to talk to the woman on the other end of the line. Grandma collected all of her tape lines, peppered with the smashed bodies of hundreds of tiny black ants, and rolled them into a ball. She headed for the back door and the trash cans at the very bottom of the property. I followed close behind.

We descended the cement stairs Grandpa George had carved out with his bare hands so many years ago. The back yard of the Winder Street house is a big piece of property for the middle of the city and it is three-tiered, with patios on two levels and a large grassy yard at the bottom. Connecting each level are shallow flights of cement stairs, embedded with sea shells, tiles and shiny glass marbles. As we made our way to the cans, we stopped to collect a large bag of leaves on the second patio tier. Grandma threw the blob of tape and ants in the trash

bag and tied a strong knot in it so it wouldn't blow open in the breeze.

"Before I know it, Nikki, I am in *Shanghai*!" Grandma said, continuing the story as she hoisted the bag and threw it in the large plastic can. I raked up the remnant leaves that had shot out in all the commotion. "Mother and Charlie come with me but they only stay one week. When we get there, I remember it is all so fast and so big! Mother and I rent a room next to the dock. It is tiny, just big enough for us to sleep and for mother to hang Vic's diapers on a string from one end of the room to the other."

Grandma tilted the trashcan sideways so that I could put the last remaining leaves in.

"And the whole time we are there, we are very poor," she said as she gave the can a shake, settling all its contents at the bottom. "We just have the money Grandpa wired long time ago back in *Tianjin* and now it is almost gone. We must buy ticket and stay in the room and buy all things for the trip. Every day, we eat one meal in the cafeteria nearby and then we stay in the room until is time for Charlie to pick me up. Charlie and I, every day we go to the embassy or this or that office. And then, guess what?"

"You get to fill out more paperwork?" I ventured.

"You got it!"

Grandma put the lid on the trash cans and secured it tight. She rubbed her hands together to dust them off.

"This is sad time in *Shanghai*, the last few days before I leave," Grandma said, looking pensively out the traffic on the freeway and beyond to the airport. "Mother and I know that soon we do not see each other. Mother is tough and I try to be tough too. But also I am scared. I think that Mother is scared too and very sad. My whole life, it is just Mother and I. "

I think of the one picture that Grandma had of Great Grandma. It is a studio shot. Grandma's small mother is in between her young daughter and Grandpa George. Her face is stern and remote and she is wearing a dark black robe. In the photo, Grandma is still young and slender. She does not look pregnant. I wonder, however, if even then Great Grandma was contemplating how her life would be like without her only daughter. Maybe she was just beginning to formulate the plan that would send young Su away from the increasing instability in China and towards a better life in America. In the photo, Great Grandma's face is like stone. It is hard to tell just what she was thinking. Was this hard shell just a mask to hide the emotion that would come if she allowed herself to feel the pain that went along with losing a child to the world? There was no way of knowing for sure.

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't realize that we had reached the house again. We stood on the back stoop and watched the pigeons and wild doves peck at bugs on the top patio.

"Soon Charlie leave and then Mother leave. Then it is just Victor and I in the little room for one more day before the USS General Meiggs leave the port."

Both of us watch as my uncle, a grown man in his late fifties who has lived with Grandma for many years at the Winder Street house, walked up the stairs from the basement. He carried a coffee cup, no doubt coming back up to the house for a refill before going back down to finish his work. My uncle wrapped fishing rods for a living. He was one of only a handful of artists that still did this tedious work and he was always busy with rod orders from all over the United States. He smiled as he passed, obviously aware that Grandma and I were in one of our "story modes." It was hard to imagine my uncle as the tiny baby whom Grandma held in her arms as she boarded the Meiggs.

“We almost don’t make it, Nikki,” Grandma said, in a tone of disbelief, as if it all happened yesterday. “After all the running around Charlie and I do — to embassy, to the military base, to the ship — after all that, they say that I have wrong kind of visa to get on the ship! And that it is too late to get new one!”

Grandma fell silent for a moment before she continued.

“So here I am, Nikki,” Grandma said, a look of despair on her face, “in hallway of American Embassy, with little Vic in my arms and all my bags packed in the room. The boat will leave within one hour. I am so scared and frustrated, I start to cry right there.”

Grandma opened the back door of the house for us both to go back in. Patty was gone and the eating room was quiet again. We sat down at the table and looked out at the harbor below.

“Sometimes, I believe angels are here on earth,” she said, matter-of-factly.

“Why do you say that?” I asked her.

“Because that must be what that man is.”

“What man?” I ask. Grandma smiled at me mysteriously before continuing.

“I am in hallway and I cry. I am so scared that I might miss the boat! Then *he* comes down the hall. To this day, I never know what that man does. Maybe he work at Embassy. I don’t know. He reads all my papers and then he says, ‘No! Someone tell you wrong! You have everything you need but you need to get on that ship now!’”

“And so I run, Nikki. I run so fast, faster than when I am a child and I see the soldier kill the old man, faster than when the floods come to the farm. I run so fast — and with Vic in my arms too! I run to the hotel to get all of my things. The man, he helps me and together we wheel them all up the gangplank of the ship. When they ask for my papers, it is all good.”

Grandma paused for a moment and we both watched a random car drive up India Street and park in a stall outside of the Old Shakespeare Pub on the corner.

“Then I leave,” she said finally. “I leave China and my mom and Charlie and *Tianjin*. Everything I know I leave forever. Forever, Nikki! Can you imagine? I never come back!”

In the silence that follows, I contemplate what Grandma said. No, I couldn’t imagine forever and I couldn’t imagine never coming back to the place where my family lives and most of my childhood memories reside. I couldn’t imagine never seeing my own mother again, nor my brother or father. I realized how fortunate I and other members of my generation were. We have never been victims of war and, at least up until now, have never had to make choices such as the ones Grandma had to make.

“Do you miss it Grandma?” I asked after a while.

Grandma smiled in response but she did not answer; instead, she moved the topic to dinner. How about ordering a pizza from D’Flippi’s? And would we want to eat it out on the front porch?

“Sure,” I said. “That sounds like a great idea.”

I can’t sleep in the hotel room we have rented in Shreveport, so I switch on the TV and channel surf. Eventually, I stop on a channel that is soft porn. Two women undress while a man watches with a bland look on his face. The women — tall, blonde, unreal — are giggling and their gigantic tits are bouncing from one end of the screen to the other. Why am I watching this? At this moment, when the weight of our world is so heavy inside of me, lust is a welcome sensation.

I feel a gentle hand on my back. Jeremy is awake, his eyes on the TV as well. Both of us watch as the women on the screen continue to giggle. Shirts fly and then pants. The man is lying on the bed with an erection. I wonder if we have to pay the hotel to watch this channel. Then I decide that I don't care and continue to stare, ashamed that it is turning me on and ashamed as to why it is turning me on, feeling relief all of the sudden that it is just us in the bedroom and then guilt at the fact that it is.

Without taking my eyes from the television, I reach down under the covers and feel for him. I find him, hard and inviting under his boxer shorts. Jeremy pulls me to him. Our kiss is desperate, hard and forceful. I try to give in and relax. I close my eyes and attempt to empty my mind of everything — no levies, no New Orleans, no silence that was filled with the children's laughter just a few hours before downstairs in the pool. There is an indent on the bed next to us where Cambria sat watching Celine Dion, where she began to cry. I see a tiny hair ornament Chalaya left behind on the night stand. It is neon green plastic. It looks out of place on the dresser next to Jeremy's glasses, keys and cigarettes. Suddenly, I am lonely. Jeremy and I are the sad king and the lonely queen, in our royal bed all by ourselves. Why did they have to leave so soon? Why couldn't they have waited until morning? The change was too abrupt. One minute they were here with us and the next they were gone like lightning flashing in the sky.

I want the guilt and the uncertainty and the water and the levies and the struggles about money to leave me now. I don't want to think about any of it.

Suddenly, I know what it feels like to be a refugee. I have a mountain of worries inside of me yet nothing in my pockets to lose. I lean in to Jeremy as he begins to stroke my breasts and kiss my face. I arch my back and my neck, looking at the patterned swirls on the ceiling of

the hotel room. There are a million of them. They are stars in the sky. Their random bits are souls searching for their way back home.

Jeremy's hands are rough and clumsy, as if he is groping for something unfamiliar. I press myself into them. I want their roughness, their realness, their clumsiness, to embrace me. When he enters me, it is a plunge into darkness. I feel like I am falling. I moan and move my hips up to meet him. I cry out and then I cry for real. The tears fall in big drops down the sides of my face and on to the pillow. Jeremy, seeing my emotion, stops suddenly and looks down at me, concern awash on his face.

"Are you okay, babe?" he asks.

In response, I move away from him and sit up in bed. Suddenly I am suffocating under his weight. The porno station is playing infomercials now. A scantily-clad woman, similar in look to the women in the porno with her bleach-blond hair and larger-than-life bust, is demonstrating the use of a blender as the price — only \$19.95! — flashes on the screen underneath it. This is a different kind of ticker tape yet still I can't take my eyes off of it. I have been programmed to watch the letters and numbers that whiz by on the bottom of the screen. Like one of Pavlov's dogs, an instant reaction takes over me.

"I think I need some fresh air. I am sorry," I say. A wave of guilt, this time for letting Jeremy down, washes over me. I pull on my jeans and T-shirt and switch on the light. Jeremy watches me for a minute and then begins to get dressed as well.

"I'm coming with you," he says. At that moment, I crave to be alone with my thoughts, to be able to breathe on my own for a few minutes in the dead of the night in this hotel in this random Texas-border town. I do not say anything, however, as together we grab the hotel key and enter the stuffy hallway. In the lobby, a few late-nighters are wandering from one casino

to another. Cowboys saunter under their ten gallon hats and belt buckles as big as their knees. Their wives in pastel-colored T-shirts with sayings like “#1 Grandma” on them saunter on their arms. We look for a place to get something to eat but it’s late and nothing is open. We purchase snacks from a vending machine and munch on them as we window shop the overpriced resort stores that line the hallway back to the elevator.

I open my mouth to say something but nothing comes out — just air, my breath and the aroma of Cheetos.

“They sit outside of the park every day. I think they are witches,” Grandma said. She was eating Cheetos and waiting for the livers on the stove to boil for dog food. The smell of boiling meat rose with the tiny curls of steam from the pot and flowed into the eating room where, like many times before, we were sitting watching the sun set on another beautiful day in Southern California. We were talking about Grandma’s earlier years, when she was only thirteen or fourteen years old and she worked at a preschool in the middle of *Tianjin*. It was the first time she ever mentioned the astrologers.

“It is because they are old and they have dirty clothes, that is why I am afraid of them.” Grandma looked briefly out the window as an airplane landed at Lindberg Field.

“But I am curious too,” she continued after a while. “They look wise, like they know a secret.”

“What secret?” I asked.

“Right! What secret!”

Grandma looked at me for several seconds, a quizzical expression on her face. When her gaze did not waiver, I became nervous. Did she think that I had the answer? Not wanting

to let her down, I felt compelled to respond.

“Maybe...they could tell the future?” I said.

“That’s, Nikki!” Grandma said. Again, I had proved to be the smart one, the apple of my Grandmother’s eye. On the other hand, maybe Grandma just played ignorant to see what my answer would be.

“One day,” she continued, now in full story-telling mode, “I walk over to the park after I am finish working at preschool. Just an hour before, Nikki, all the children play on the swings and slides but now there is no one except the old couple with their little wooden box in front of them. I want to walk past them but I don’t. I stop. The old woman do this with her hand and she look me right in the eye!”

Grandma hunched over and beckoned me dramatically with her right hand, imitating the old woman.

“She is going to tell my fortune! So I put a coin in her box and I sit down on little stool in front. The old man, I think he is blind. He smile the whole time, but he not say a word.”

Grandma took a small, thin Cheeto out of the bag and munched it gingerly. Then she continued.

“Next, the old woman take my right hand and look at my palm.” Grandma holds up her own palm for me to see. Her fingertips are stained slightly orange from the Cheetos.

“She look at my hand that way for long time! Then she stare me right in the eye. I am so embarrass! I want to look away but I do not. I remember that old woman has green eyes — but they are clouded over, like there is fog inside of them.”

Grandma paused then and walked to the kitchen to give the livers a stir. Grandma boiled livers on the stove almost every day, a ritual that began with Grandpa George many

years ago. The livers were for the dogs — David the poodle and Gigi the Doberman. Gigi, who was lying in a large ball at the foot of Grandma's chair, perked up her ears at the sound of the spoon scraping against the metal pot.

"She had cataracts, maybe," I said. "Like what Grandpa had."

"Yes, maybe. And do you know what she tells me, Nikki?" Grandma said from the kitchen, looking over her shoulder at me.

Most of the time, I already knew the answer to Grandma's questions and just played along with this call and response game because it was the role I was to play. This time, however, I really didn't know.

"The old woman's eyes are in fog, but they look right at me for a long time. Then she tell me that I will fall in love and that I will travel far away from *Tianjin*. Of course, I not believe her!"

Grandma came back to the table and rolled up the Cheeto bag. She placed a clip on the open end, patting the bag flat. Then she looked at me with a mischievous smile. Now she was the one with the secret.

"The old woman place something inside my hand. She tell me it is to keep me safe on my journey. "

Grandma held up her left hand in a fist to demonstrate, then continued.

"After she gave to me, I am scared at what she say because I can't imagine me anywhere but *Tianjin*."

Just then, David, Grandma's poodle, padded in from the front room, lured by the smell of cooking meat. His sharp nails made a tapping sound on the hard linoleum. Both of us watched him come in. Grandma gave him a rub behind his ear.

“What was it that the old woman gave you?” I asked.

“Well,” Grandma said, “I don’t open my hand until I half way home. Then I stop in little alley and open up my fist to see. Inside is little plastic ring. It is green, the color of jade. I keep that ring for long time, but now I don’t know where it is. The girls play with it when they are young. Probably one of them lose it long time ago.”

Grandma folded her hands in her lap. David looked up at Grandma from the floor next to the heater vent and then at the pot on the stove. He let out a whimper. Grandma looked down at the dog and then continued.

“Only two years after the old lady gave me the ring, I meet your Grandpa and I come to America,” she continued. “Nikki, do you think it is all just a coincidence that she say that and then it happen?”

Grandma’s face was alit with the wonder. I looked at her for a while. Some questions even a college graduate cannot answer, no matter how smart she thinks she is. This was one of those questions.

September 5, 2005

The next day, we pick Matt and Magenta up and head to the Social Services office on the other side of town. We arrive at a little past seven a.m. and already the line jets out of the double doors of the old building and heads around the block.

“I need a rest before I can handle that,” Magenta says, motioning to the line and then making her way to a little grassy spot on the side of the building already awash in morning sun. The smell of coffee from a stand on the other side of the street beckons.

“Cappuccino, lots of foam, no sugar,” says Magenta.

“Americano, straight, extra hot,” I say.

Jeremy and Matt make their way across the street to get the coffee, leaving Magenta and I on the grass.

“It’s probably just going to get bigger,” I say, referring to the ever-growing line.

“Probably. Hey, want to see something?” Magenta says.

“What?” I ask. Then I see it. It is black and its fuzzy ears and tiny face peer out at me from inside Magenta’s ample bosom.

“What the...” I begin and then burst into laughter as she pulls the whole thing out from the inside of her bra. It is a kitten, pure black with big, green eyes and a tiny scar above its left eye. It is so tiny that I assume it can’t be more than four weeks old. Magenta puts it on the grass next to her. Immediately, it begins to cry. Impulsively, I scoop it up and cradle it like a baby.

“It’s so cute!” I say dumbly. I can’t help it. I have a thing for small, furry creatures.

“Tell me about it,” Magenta says with a frown. “It was behind the apartment where Matt and I are staying. The neighbor cat must have had a litter. Either way, it would have starved if I hadn’t snatched it. What else could I do?”

“Right, what else could you do?”

Both of us chuckle. Magenta is notorious for bringing in strays, both cats and people, of which there are always ample of in Jackson Square, where she works as a Tarot reader. Aysha as well liked to have a cat around her when she gave readings. She believed that felines were good for clearing the air after a particular heavy reading or with a person who was really out of sorts. I think of Aysha’s two cats still in New Orleans and a wave of guilt comes over me. We had to leave them, Cajun and Zydeco, as well as Zenbro, our own cat, at the Chartres

St. house when we evacuated. Up to the minute that we left, we were trying to find them. With all the craziness in the city that day, however, only Zydeco, Aysha's mellow white shorthair, was to be found.

Magenta is in between cats at the moment, so the little black fur ball that emerged from her cleavage that morning seemed to be a perfect match for her.

"You gonna keep her?" I ask, giving the kitten a pat and returning it to Magenta who carefully folded it up into the fabric of her skirt.

"I don't know. Matt is against it. You want her?"

"I'd love to but no thanks. Jeremy and I don't know where we are heading next and most shelters don't accept pets. You gonna stay here in Shreveport for a while?" I ask.

"I guess so. Not really excited about it. It's kind of a dump, you know?"

I do know. Although I am grateful for the services and the relative lack of crowds looking for those services (one of the reasons why we decided to come up here), Shreveport seems as far away from the real Louisiana as Dallas is.

"I feel like I'm in Texas," I say.

Jeremy and Matt come back from the coffee cart with steaming paper cups of liquid rejuvenation. Jeremy and I decide to do the first round of line-waiting while Magenta and Matt kick back in the grass and discuss the possible new addition to their family. By midday, all four of us have made it to the front of the line and are ushered into the makeshift waiting room. Others wait there as well — a young black woman and her mother from St. Claude, a few folks from Waveland, a man in his early forties who is a cook in a restaurant in one of New Orleans' Canal Street hotels.

Inside, there is nothing else to do but wait. It is not long, however, before I hear my name and am ushered in to yet another room where I see some of the same faces as before. The cafeteria cook is there, his long legs stretched out across the aisle before him. I sit down next to him, nodding a greeting. He scratches red spots on his legs in return and smiles. The spots look like the ones Magenta has on her legs.

“Do they hurt?” I ask.

“Sometimes, but mostly they just itch,” he replies and goes on to tell me that the sores developed soon after he waded through knee-deep water outside the hotel where he works. He had to wade through all that gunk in order to get to the car that would take him out of town.

“My wife works in another hotel but she got out of there earlier. She took our kids on up here to Shreve to be with her family. I stayed behind. I didn’t have to, y’know, but in Nawlins, hotel workers are considered essential personnel. We’re not supposed to leave in an emergency, even though a lot of folks did. For me, I figured had a job to do and I better get to it.”

He pauses to scratch a thick red patch on his right calf. It sounds like sand paper rubbing up against a wall.

“Two days into it, I had to split,” he says, shaking his head. “We fed a lot of people before I left though. We just took all the food we had from the hotel kitchen and brought it all down to Canal Street with them portable barbecues. We boiled us some red beans and some rice and whatever meat we had ‘cause it was all going to spoil anyways. Then we had ourselves a genuine soup line! We must have fed a thousand before we ran out!”

There were a lot of tourists still there, he said, and they fed them as well. Some of the tourists had dogs, which turned out to be a major problem.

“The smell in that hotel got to be pretty bad by Wednesday morning. All them tourists, they was bringing their dogs into the hotel to get ‘em out of the water and they was pissin’ and shittin’ all over the carpet.”

I recalled what I had told Cambria, Michael and the rest of Jeremy’s family back in Eunice. I said that I wanted to do the grub work, to scrub and clean shit from buildings. But dog shit? The thought had never occurred to me.

A portly woman wearing large gold earrings and a shiny, maroon blouse enters the lobby with a clipboard. She scans the papers clipped to it, looks around the room and calls out a name. A thin, black woman in a short miniskirt holding a baby on her hip stands up and walks towards her. We watch the woman and the child walk across the waiting room and disappear with the gold-earring woman behind a door.

“After a while, I was like, okay now I’ve done my job. It’s time I got to my family,” the man continues. “So I hitched a ride with a couple of tourists who had a car and we headed on out of there. That’s when I had to wade through all the crap. That water was rank with chemicals. It smelled to high heaven, but what could I do? I had to leave — and quick.”

Gold-earring woman returns and calls my name.

“Thanks for telling me your story,” I say, getting up to go. “I hope it all goes well for you.”

“Me too,” he says.

Then another question urges itself out of my mouth. It was a question for him, but also a question I was asking myself as well.

“Do you think you will return to New Orleans?” The man shrugs.

“Return, yes. Live, probably not. Our house is in Lakeview. It’s almost a sure thing that it got wiped out.”

Gold-earrings clears her throat and looks impatiently at me from across the room.

“Well, best of luck to you wherever you land.”

“Thanks, you too.” I shake his hand and leave him to his itchy ankles as I am led to yet another waiting room.

Later that afternoon, Jeremy and I say our goodbyes to Magenta and Matt. We don’t have any more money left for a motel room and the food stamps and the unemployment cash will take about a week to receive. In the meantime, there are the shelters. We were given a list of them by the social service office and decide to check one out on the outskirts of town. Magenta offers for us to stay with them. We thank her for the offer but say no thanks. We are anxious to get back on the road and on our way towards New Orleans first thing in the morning — and we will have a better chance of doing that if we are on our own.

Michael and the kids have taken the rented van and Magenta and Matt are settled in Shreveport for a while, so Jeremy and I are back driving his green truck, the vehicle we used when we were back in New Orleans. It’s only been a week and already I have begun to speak of New Orleans in the past tense.

There is a water line about three inches up from the bottom of the truck’s tires, residue of the chemical soup that sloshed through the city when the levies broke.

The line is a war wound. This truck has seen battle.

“We lay down on the hay stacks by where the cows are,” Grandma said. We were in the backyard of the Winder Street house and Grandma was picking weeds in the waist-high planter box. “My grandfather points to the sky. He tells me stories about the stars. There are so many of them and he has stories for them all.”

To the south was Grandma’s sapota tree, its twisted branches brimming with fruit. Grandma reached inside the planter and moved the thin, flat leaves of a fern away to pick a dandelion from the soft earth just below it. After we straighten up the planter, we will move on to the tree to do some pruning.

“That was when you and your mom were living on the farm to the north, right?” I ventured.

“That’s right,” Grandma said. She strained to pull the deep roots of a thorny weed from next to a marigold flower.

Grandma had many stories about her time as a young child at the “farm to the north,” each one brimming with details about smells, sights and sounds. What was missing from those tales, however, was the exact location of that childhood place. During the time that Great-Grandma was married to a retired officer of the Chinese military —before the flood, before the Japanese, before the Americans and before Grandpa even — Grandma and her mother lived in the countryside where they raised cows and sold dairy milk for profit. I knew that the farm was owned by Russians (Grandma claimed that she use to be able to speak that language when she was a child) and I also knew by the tone in her voice that it was Grandma’s favorite place of all. Most importantly, I knew that it was there, amongst the hayfields and farmlands of the north, that Grandma’s own grandfather had come to visit one time. It was Great-Great Grandfather who laid down upon the hay stacks that night with tiny

Su, looking up at the stars, telling stories of the constellations. According to Grandma, her grandfather was a Mongol. Maybe the Russian farm was located along the Mongolian border and that proximity was why Great-Great-Grandpa had finally been able to come for a visit.

There was a lot that Grandma never shared about her grandfather. I didn't know what he looked like, where he was from exactly, what language he spoke and who his people were. I didn't know if he was nomadic, like most Mongolians were back then. Perhaps he was only part Mongolian and, like Grandma, only his physical features — round face, big bones, stocky legs — remained of the connection.

What I did have at my disposal was a single image provided by Grandma on this one rare occasion. She spoke of her grandfather to me only once and this was what she described: a small, black-haired girl lying under the stars on a haystack as the smell of cow manure surrounded her. Next to her was an older gentleman, her grandfather, pointing to the sky and telling tales of dragons, lions and warriors in the sky.

All I had was the backbone of a scene and the rest was left to my imagination. Of course, my imagination was happy to fill in the blanks in the most extravagant ways. I pictured the older gentleman — wiry, short, but strong-faced like his daughter, big-boned and big-handed like his granddaughter. He gestured with bold strokes of his tan arm to the stars above him and to the lands to the north. The man's voice was low and soft, yet commanding, as if he took the stories out of the sky itself. He spoke of Mongolian astrology and told tales of Kabul Khan and Genghis Khan, of warriors and raids, of the conquering of good over evil, of pride and honor over shame. Then, he spoke of the gods and goddesses that lived in the night sky and the ancestors that lived there too, watching over all Mongolians, protecting them from harm.

I imagined that a wave of love came over the man for the little girl as they sat together. For a moment, he even wondered if he shouldn't just take her back with him to his tribe to live amongst her relatives so different from the Chinese. But in the end, he decided against it. No. His daughter lived for this little girl and he couldn't think of separating them. Little did he know that within ten years time, that child would travel far from home to a place and culture indescribably different than his own.

I imagined how the little dark-haired girl listened to the old man's stories with burning ears. Perhaps she was afraid of him at first, but soon she remembered her mother's smile when she had hugged the old man after he had dismounted from his horse and came around to greet them. Su's mother's smiles were rare, but when she did smile, they had a presence that filled an entire room. The little girl trusted those smiles more than anything in the world — and her mother had smiled at this man. That was why when her mother motioned for her to go with him into the dark night, she had not been afraid. She had taken his hand and he had led her to the haystack where, with one fell swoop, he had lifted her up and placed her on a high cliff of freshly-cut clover. She might have squealed, but only a little. She most definitely would have been surprised when the old man, in one graceful motion, lifted himself up on to the hay as well.

Sitting on the side of the stack with their feet dangling down, the old man looked at the little girl and smiled. LSu noticed his crooked, yellow teeth and the ancient, edged lines around his eyes, which themselves were sparkling and bright. And she found that when she looked into them, it was hard to turn her eyes away.

"Granddaughter," he said just then. "I will tell you a story." And from that point on, the little girl inevitably slipped into another world of ghosts and angels, demons, dragons,

magic spells, curses and large, fang-toothed animals that sometimes were there to eat humans and sometimes were there to save them. Together, grandfather and granddaughter lay down not amongst the darkness of the night and a halo of ordinary stars but, to the child at any rate, amongst an audience of thousands. As she listened, she vowed never to forget the stories her grandfather, this mysterious man from the north, told her that night.

This, at any rate, is what I imagined might have happened when Great-Great-Grandfather came to visit my grandmother so long ago, since I am devoid of the actual facts. I did know the rest of the story, however. Despite her vow, after many years of TV-watching, American acculturation and child-raising, the specifics of the stories my grandma's grandfather told her that night slowly faded as the night sky fades to the twilight of morning. What remained, however, and this is not fiction but fact based on repeated experience, was the ability to tell a good story, an ancient skill transferred from grandfather to granddaughter. Great-Great-Grandfather is the reason why I sometimes saw the sparkle in my grandmother's eyes not just as something human but as something ancient, wild and otherworldly.

And the imagining continues. It must have been later that night, after he had tucked his little granddaughter into bed, and kissed his daughter on the cheek, that Great-Great-Grandfather rode off to the north again, back over the bitter cold steppes of the Gobi, back to a small huddle of canvas yurts and to his tribespeople, who were already getting ready to migrate for the season and who needed his help, advice and stories just as much as the little girl on the haystack did.

The shelter on Nicole Street, we find out once we have arrived, is run by born- again Christians. There is a tight schedule of activities that one is "strongly encouraged" to

participate in order to stay there. There is evening prayer before dinner and wake up at six am for prayer before breakfast. There are prayer groups and one-on-one prayer counseling. There are computers available to use in order to search for housing, jobs and social services. Each computer station has a crooked piece of white paper stuck to the wall above it. The white strips have Bible verses on them, saying about good deeds and hard work and thanking the Lord for all of our blessings.

The overemphasis on religion is the bad news about the Nicole Street shelter, at least for us heathens. The good news for me is that every evening after dinner, the prim southern ladies who volunteer at the shelter lay out an assortment of desert items, served pot luck style on a fold-out table in the back of the gym. Most significantly, there is always chocolate cake, which to me is an example of divine intervention and the only reason why I almost consider joining in for prayer. The cake is baked by the same ladies who normally file papers in the office or read to kids in the preschool, but now have heard a different calling and devote their time to saving us poor, waterlogged folks who have come stumbling into their fine community.

"Hi there, sweetie," one little lady says to me on our first night at the shelter. To my delight, we have arrived just in time for desert.

"Would you like some cake?" the woman asks.

What are you, nuts? I think. *Of course I would like some cake. It is what I live for,* I want to say. Instead, I nod my head yes, eyeballing the dark rich goodness with greedy eyes. I reach for it. The woman pulls it away with a smile.

"Let us pray first," she says, her voice as sweet as syrup out of can. *You have got to be kidding.*

It is a strange fact that, although I never touched the stuff in New Orleans, I have eaten chocolate cake every day since we left the city. At shelters, restaurants, fast food joints, convenience stores and in people's homes, its not that I have sought out "the cake" but that "the cake" has apparently sought out me. It just appears, in one way or another, and its ritualistic daily consumption has been like a balm to my frantic moods, confusion and panic. It has brought at least one part of me — my taste buds — a little bit of hope in the process. Amen!

I wish I could say that chocolate cake is enough for me to really enjoy my stay here at Nicole Street, but it is not.

"Welcome," the pastor says as we pull up to the church parking lot. "You are welcome to stay with us. "

The pastor says that there is space on the gymnasium floor as well as cots to be picked up on the far end of the building. Then he hands us a little fold-out brochure printed on baby blue copy paper. *How Will I Know God?* is written in thick black on the front along with an outline of a dove and an olive branch. Jeremy and I look at each other with raised eyebrows.

"Damn," Jeremy says. He looks worn out in the dim light. "I don't want to deal with this shit. But where the fuck else can we go?"

Jeremy isn't the cussing type by any means, except when he is really tired or really drunk. Then the stream of obscenities that can pour out of his mouth could put a sailor to shame. It is already past ten in the evening and more than likely we won't be able to find another shelter to stay in until tomorrow. Renting a motel room is out of the question. Even if there was any available, at this point we just can't afford it. We will have to stay at Nicole Street until morning.

"Maybe it won't be so bad," I say, trying to be optimistic. "Looks like there is a lot of other people who need beds. Just look at all these cars! Maybe they will just leave us alone."

Jeremy and I put some things in an overnight bag and grab a couple of blankets. We make our way across the parking lot as a six-cylinder Ford, with a sticker that reads "How's My Driving? Call 1-800-EAT-SHIT" on the bumper, pulls up next to us.

"Hey!" a large man with a thick beard calls out from the driver's seat. "They got beds for us refugees?"

"Looks like it," Jeremy calls out.

The man parks and gets out of the truck. In the passenger seat is a young boy. I see his thin profile turn in our direction as he watches the older man approach us. "Name's T," says the man as he comes over to shake Jeremy's hand.

"I'm Jeremy. This is my fiancé Nicole," Jeremy says.

"Nicole at the Nicole Street shelter? This looks like your place, then."

"Not really," I say.

T spits a wad of dark green chew at the front tire of his truck and wipes his mouth with the sleeve of his jacket. He turns to us, a pensive look on his face.

"Listen," he says. "You folks seem pretty laid back so I have a feeling y'all would give me an honest answer. Is this joint safe for the less-than-God-fearing types? I'm not much into religion and even less into some asshole forcing it down my face, if you know what I mean. At the same time, my son and I just need a place to stay for the night."

Jeremy shows him the powder blue brochure. T shakes his head and spits again.

Another car pulls in to a parking space near us. A middle-aged couple gets out. The woman has long, curly hair and the man is portly and sporting a tattoo of a red rose on his forearm.

“Can you believe this?” the woman says, waving the brochure in our faces. “What kind of racket are these people running here? The only way we can get three hots and a cot is to get down on our knees and pray?”

The woman’s face is beet red by the time she gets to our little group.

“I’m Mazzie,” the woman says. “And this is my husband Rod.” Rod nods and holds out his hand. Brief introductions quickly go around. Mazzie and her husband are from New Orleans’ City Park area, close to where some friends of ours live.

“So what are we going to do?” I ask the group as the yellow streetlamp above me flickers.

“It looks like we don’t have a choice tonight,” T says. “It’s almost eleven and I don’t think my boy can stand another night in the truck. All the motels from here to Austin are packed full. “

“If they hand me a bible, I’m gonna use it to hit them upside the head,” Mazzie says. No one tries to talk her out of it.

Grandma had a thing for sweeping. She did it every morning and she never missed a corner or a crack — the front yard, the back yard, down in the “north forty” where concrete steps led to a big patch of dirt that was once a lawn. When Grandpa was alive, he cared for the grounds of his property with the same firm military hand he had for his regimen and then later, for his children. He poured concrete for a fish pond, molded stones and quartz into benches

and a fireplace, even built a chicken coop at the far end. When Grandpa passed away in 1980, Grandma's green thumb suddenly got greener. She made alliances with the plants and ferns that grew long and lush with her touch. Under her guidance, their leaves fell gracefully into soft piles that could easily be swept.

Most mornings, Grandma used a big bamboo broom to sweep. After I moved in to the little apartment next door, I often came by to help. Using broad strokes, we moved mounds of dark green Southern California leaves from one pile to another and from the piles to the waste basket.

"Listen Nikki," Grandma said one day as we raked leaves near the back porch. The summer sun bore down on our heads in heavy rays. Against her doctor's warning, Grandma was outside that day, wearing only a wide hat and long sleeves for protection. Early that same morning, we had all gone to the hospital— my mom, Aunt Patty, Aunt Kitty and I — for her fourth radiation treatment. I listened to the scratching of her broom on the hard cement and waited for Grandma to speak again.

"My mother sweeps the little courtyard of our house every afternoon before father comes home from factory," Grandma said dreamily, as if she were talking to herself. "She goes out there even when there are no leaves to sweep!" From past stories, I knew that Grandma's father owned a walnut factory. Grandma lived in relative opulence until the age of five, when her father passed away.

"Why you think she sweeps when there are no leaves, Nikki?" Grandma leaned against her broom and looked over at me. Her eyes twinkled. She didn't wait for me to answer.

"She do it so she can go outside and have a cigarette!" she said as she grabbed the handle of the broom again and resumed sweeping. "Listen Nikki, in China smoking is only for

bad girls and Americans. My father do not like it. But Mother, she do not care! She is...how you say? A rebel!”

Grandma reached down to pull a weed from a crack in the cement, throwing it in the trashcan behind her.

“My mother, she sweeps. Then she takes a puff. Then she put the cigarette back in its hiding place in the bamboo planter. Always she look over the courtyard wall to see if he is coming. As soon as my father’s rickshaw turns corner on to our street, Mother smashes out the cigarette quick! Then she wave her hand in the air to get rid of smoke!”

Grandma laughed and made wide arching motions with her hands, in imitation of the crazy ritual.

“And the whole time, I sit by window and watch her. I pretend that I smoke too. When mother see father coming into courtyard, she say to me ‘Shhh...’. She hold her finger up to her lips like this...”

Grandma placed her index finger over her own pursed lips.

“Later I sit in a little bamboo chair by the front door to wait for father. He always give me a shiny silver dollar when he come in. And my mother always smooth my hair with her hands while we wait. I remember the smell of cigarette on my head when I run to my room to put the silver dollar away.”

September 8, 2005

We have been at the Nicole Street shelter for four whole days. There are about a hundred of us crammed into the church auditorium — eating, sleeping and socializing in the evenings and wandering the city and cyberspace for housing, jobs and money during the day.

Jeremy and I are formulating a plan to get back in to the city earlier than the expected reopening date of one month from now. We study back roads into town on Google Earth and try to see if our little apartment and the Chartres Street house is damaged or under water. Our hours are spent like this — while one of us hunts and pecks on the computer, the other one stands nearby with ear clasped to cell phone, trying to get through to FEMA. Our maximum hold time has been three hours. Jeremy beat my record of two and a half hours just yesterday, but had to get off finally when his left ear started to go numb.

Sometimes it feels as if we are going to go crazy. We are starting to bicker again, Jeremy and I. This is the part in the relationship where I begin to feel worn out and old before my time, and like the nag I vowed I would never become.

In the low moments, at least there is Marianna.

I met Marianna the morning after we pulled in to the shelter. Everything about the woman is big, from her size ten shoes to her extra large skirt that flows from her hearty waist in giant swaths of cotton and denim. Marianna isn't obese, just big-boned and strong, like Grandma was. And like Grandma, the largest thing about Marianna is her heart. Her eyes show a wisdom gained from sixty-plus years of child-raising — her own kids, grandkids, nieces, nephews, neighborhood kids. Anyone small and lost-looking had a home at Marianna's house, it seems.

Like clockwork on the morning after we arrived, the harsh light of the gymnasium came on at six a.m. on the dot. In our early morning stupor, I heard the pastor call everyone to prayer. Our rebel group that had gathered the night before — T and his son, Mazzie and Rod, Jeremy and I — exchanged glances and raised eyebrows, but not a one of us moved from our cots.

Marianna was amongst the pious that morning, however. She and her group took up the entire stage section of the auditorium. On cue, her brood (there must have been about seven of them in all) had heads bowed to receive the word of God. Marianna did not look in any direction except down as all of the children around her did the same. A half an hour later, after prayers were done, I had chance to see her face, decorated with a permanently benign smile as if she had just eaten the most satisfying southern meal. Strange as this may sound given the circumstances, the entire time that I knew her — less than a week — I only saw that smile disappear from her face once. Listening, reading, knitting, coloring with one of the children who constantly gathered around her like little boats around a mooring, there was that smile looking like a perpetual sunrise.

After prayer, I got in line for breakfast and Marianna got in line behind me. I asked her if all the children with her were her own.

“Some,” she said, “and some not. Some are my grandchildren. That little one over there with the green ball, see her? That’s Tamika, precious little thing. And that little boy next to her, that’s Charles, my sweet grandbaby too. The lanky one in the corner bouncing the basketball, that’s my own boy. He’s seventeen. Thinks he’s twenty-five. The other four, they was on my street, left or lost, when the time come for us to get out of there.”

Marianne extended her hand modestly to receive a plate of eggs and pancakes.

“Thank you, ma’am,” she said, lowering her head slightly as the older woman in the white smock on the other side of the counter blushes and grins. When Marianna arrived at the shelter about a week ago, that very same lady had made the mistake of asking Marianna if she had accepted Jesus Christ into her heart. Marianna had let out a guffaw at the question and proceeded to spend the next two hours in intense conversation with the woman, quoting Bible verses all the while. By the end of their meeting, that poor volunteer was bending her own head in prayer, crying because of some situation or another. Marianna had held the woman’s hand and offered her “amen’s” and “there, there’s” periodically as a balm for the woman’s outpouring. Since then, no one has asked Marianna about the Lord, except for the pastor, that is. Always after looking over his shoulder to make sure no one is watching, he is in the habit of taking counsel with Marianna each night. The two whisper together until after all the lights have gone out and then the pastor, taking his leave, bows and says, “ Yes, yes, I see it more clearly now. Thank You.”

Those words have been the only part of the conversation I have ever heard as I spy from across the room, pretending to be asleep but keeping one eye slightly open.

Back in the breakfast line on that first morning at Nicole Street, I take my plate and so did Marianna. Together we make our way to a space big enough to sit side-by-side and continue our conversation.

“Those other children that aren’t my blood, they are like family though,” Marianna says. “I have known their mamas since they was little girls. I helped raise ‘em all, been in the neighborhood that long.”

Marianna leans in towards me as she speaks.

"I suppose those mamas are worried sick about their little ones right now," Marianna says. "Lord knows, I would be. I've tried so many times since I left Bay St. Louis to get through to someone on our street, but I guess all the phones are still out. As soon as I get through, though, and let them know that their babies are okay, they will come running for them for sure. And then I'll go back home to look for Walter..." Marianna pauses and holds her fork suspended in mid air.

"I left a husband in Bay St. Louis," she says matter-of-factly, putting her fork down gently on her plate. I choke on a bite of egg at the news and chug some juice in order to recover.

"What do you mean?" I ask. Marianna pauses for a moment before responding.

"I mean that the Good Lord may have already taken him," she says, swallowing hard and looking straight ahead. In the glare of the harsh, gymnasium lights, Marianna's chocolate-colored complexion is pale. She is not smiling.

"What happened?" I ask in as quiet a voice as I can muster, wondering if I am overstepping my boundaries by inquiring. The simple smile returns and Marianna looks at me gently, letting me know that she doesn't mind the question at all.

"Sweet girl," Marianna says then, taking my hand, "Do you know how good God is? He takes care of everything you can possibly need. The Lord has been so good to me. I have had a grand life. Do you know that I have lived in that same house for thirty years? Thirty years! Everything I own was in that house — every quilt I ever sewed and every sweater I ever knitted. I made the curtains and the covers for the couches and the tablecloths. Lord! I remember when Walter and I bought our first set of furniture. To be able to afford all those things and a TV to boot! Why, we were the envy of the whole neighborhood. He was making

good money in those days and everybody on our street was talkin' about us. They was sayin' how we was gettin' too uppity for our own good."

Marianna takes a small sip of her juice and motions for her tiny granddaughter to come to where we were. The little girl skips over and Marianna adjusts the girl's yellow skirt, which has started to sag half way down her butt, exposing her flowery little girl underpants. Marianna fixes the skirt and gives her a pat on the toosh. The little girl laughs as she runs back to where she had been coloring with one of the volunteers, looking over her shoulder at her grandmother and I as she goes.

"So what were we going to do?" Marianna continues. "It was quite a scene on that street for a while, with everyone talking bad about us. And we thought that it was just a matter of time before someone come and rob us. More than likely, it would be someone we know too, or even a relative. My husband, he's got lots of cousins on that street. I started getting really bothered about the whole thing. I was thinkin' that they ain't nothin' but talkin' trash about us and so what if we got new things and they don't? After all, we worked hard and we deserved it!"

Marianna dabs the corners of her mouth gently with her napkin before she continues.

"Then, one night, a strange thing happened." she says, "I was lying in bed and all of the sudden, I felt that someone was in the room with me. And I heard a voice."

Marianna stops for a moment and looks at me with raised eyebrows. I have the feeling that she is trying to gauge how I would respond to such a thing.

I look her in the eye and give her a nod.

"Well," she continues. "That voice said something to me I'll never forget. It said, 'Mar, you got to stop yellin' and start lovin.'"

Marianna smiles and scoops up the last bit of pancake on to her fork

“And that was when I got the idea to invite all of ‘em over for a party,” she says. “We invited the whole block! It must have been about forty people. What a do! We all sat around in our living room and watched TV shows on that shiny, new television set. And it was a hit. Ain’t no one else had a TV on that whole street. Then, to top it off, I made my famous peach pie. I remember it was so hot that day. Someone brought over bottles of coke and all day all we did was drink coke and eat pie and watch I Love Lucy and Perry Mason. And we laughed and laughed! Then that night we had ourselves a barbeque. Folks brought stuff to share pot luck style and we ate the sweetest pork ribs ever.”

I remain quiet, not wanting to interrupt her for anything. Marianna’s story and the way she told it is like the most delicate massage. Again, I am in my Grandmother’s living room, listening to stories from that black and white age that I can only get glimpses. A pang of gratitude for Marianna and, at the same time, loneliness for Grandma, comes over me. Suddenly, I miss her so much.

“Girl, you look like you’ve seen a ghost!” Marianna says.

How can I tell this stranger that her words are like a lullaby to me? And that she reminds me of my dead Chinese grandmother who use to tell me similar stories, in a similar way — simple and straightforward, yet subtle and tender, as if she were telling me a secret for the very first time? How can I explain to Marianna that my grandmother also went through hardship, lost it all, including people she knew, and came out the other end full of grace and gratitude for what life had given her, not full of misery for what was taken away?

“You remind me of someone, that’s all,” I say, trying to smile.

The silence that follows is punctuated by the muffled dialogue of a group of people at the other end of the auditorium. Jeremy had gone into town that morning to fill out more paperwork at the Social Service office and Marianna's children have gone outside with the volunteer to play in the church's playground. There are only a few other people in the large, open room, including two towheaded boys running in circles around their worn-out parents as the two adults stoop together whispering, drinking coffee and watching the boys with dull, uninterested eyes.

"I give thanks to the Lord every day for my life, do you know that?" Marianna says then. "And I give thanks for every day I spent with that man."

"Marianna," I ask after a while. "What do you think happened to your husband?"

I see Marianna's bottom lip quiver just the slightest bit.

"What happened to him?" she repeats, as if she is pondering the subject for the first time. "I don't know, sweetie. He did not want to leave our home."

Marianna averts her eyes for a moment, glancing at the young family with the two wound up boys at the other end of the auditorium.

"I had the grandkids, and all these others, and my boy, and myself," she continues. "I had to leave. So I left him there, child! I did. And it was the hardest thing I ever had to do."

I feel my heart race as I hear this news. She just left? How could she do that?

"In the end, something just came over me," she says, as if in answer to my question. "Never in a million years would I think that I could leave without him. And never in a million years would I think that I could live anywhere else but in that home, on that street, in that neighborhood. But suddenly, I just wasn't ready to die. I wasn't ready to risk it for all that stuff, all those years of things, you know — photo albums, knitting projects, furniture,

gadgets. Suddenly, I wanted to live! And I guess I decided that if I had to live without him, so be it. I left him sitting in his recliner chair about five hours before the storm was supposed to hit. He had his feet up and he was sitting in the dark watching the news reports and drinking his usual — Pabst beer out of the can. He told me not to worry, that he would leave if it got really bad. And I hope he did. My God, I hope he did...”

Marianna’s eyes are moist. What was up to this point one of the sweetest faces I had ever known, full of happiness, joy and satisfaction for life, has suddenly turned into one of the saddest.

When I was young, Grandma and I would go to the marine base on Barnett Street in San Diego together every week. I would swim and she would take a sauna and then we would go grocery shopping at the Commissary, the military equivalent of a supermarket. Sometimes we would go to the PX, the base’s version of a department store, and Grandma would peruse the women’s clothes, looking at delicate blouses and shoes or sometimes the jewelry that sat on display behind glass cases next to the lady’s lingerie. Sometimes she would put something on layaway, especially if it was expensive. Sometimes she would pick things up that she had finally paid off. We would walk out of the store with our big crinkly bags filled with goodies and cross the lawn to our car to go back to the Winder Street house. As we did, we would pass the large cement area where military processions practiced, their crisp blue jackets and brass buttons glistening in the mid-afternoon sun as they stomped together in rhythm. Grandma, holding my hand, always stopped to watch.

To me, Grandma seemed like she was searching for something every time watched the short-haired, broad-shouldered marines practice. I would not know until years later that it

was really her husband that she was looking for, thirty years younger. Grandpa in the flesh was an old man by the time I came along. In the late seventies, he was already a ghost, standing unmoving like a living statue in the back patio window with a jug of cheap gin at his feet, watching the airplanes land in Lindberg Field.

He was not always like that, however. Or so I have been told. At one time, George had been an up and coming man of the world, an officer in the marines and a family man in the making.

The story goes that one day my Grandfather sat drinking a beer in a shady bar on Kettner Street near downtown San Diego. The year was 1932. It was hot outside but inside the bar it was dark and cool and the beer was ice cold. As he sat on the barstool, Grandpa spoke with the bartender, a short, thoughtful man who was also a good buddy of his. They spoke of the ins and outs of a man's world — politics, family, the weather and the like. From across the thick oak counter, George leaned in to his friend and whispered something. The buddy gave George another frosty mug of beer and wiped the counter with an old, thin rag. Then he chuckled and nodded his head. Yes, yes, it was true. He did have a house to sell. My grandfather had nodded and they spoke a bit about the importance of providing a home in the world. A man has to put up roots, stake his claim. They both agreed.

"You should come and take a look, George. I think you'll like it," the bartender said.

"Don't need to," my grandfather said, taking a final swig of his beer and placing the empty glass firmly back on the counter, "Consider it sold."

Indeed, Grandpa had already seen the house his friend the bartender had for sale and he knew that that was the place where he would raise his family. Perhaps he thought of it only in practical terms — it was big enough for both a wife and his mother and with a little

work, it would be big enough to raise kids too. The price was right and the location was excellent.

Secretly he also thought that it was beautiful, sitting like a lone ship on the southern California horizon, its large bay windows blinking simultaneously with the night time glow of the stars over the bay. It was the first house in one of the newest suburbs, 2.5 miles from the lazy cluster of stucco-clay office buildings, luncheonettes and beauty parlors that was Depression-era downtown San Diego. The patent was still out for those pioneering spirits who dreamt of tacky housing, disinfected luxury for the middle class, the working white-collar millions. Grandpa had the means now to buy a ticket to this good life. As a military man and a single man, America's economic tailspin hadn't affected him that much. Indeed, everything went incredibly smoothly. By the end of that week, he was the owner of the only house on Winder Street. It cost him a little over three thousand dollars.

The house itself was small, tightly built and modern by 1930's standards, with running water, an inside bathroom, windows at every turn, lime green tile that trailed the walls of the kitchen and shiny maroon tile-ettes marching along the edges of the countertops. Even better, it came with half an acre of dusty earth, a mountain of bare potential that fifty years later would be worth over two million dollars.

By age thirty-one, the age when most men are in the middle years of child-rearing, my Grandfather got what he wanted — a house on the hill where he could raise a family. Maybe he was simply following the convention of the day in wanting to be the head of a household. Or maybe, he had a feeling in his gut that soon he would meet her, the mother of his children.

"Nikki," Grandma said as she watched the soldiers marching on the lawn, "your Grandfather used to lead this many men."

Later, after I had learned through my own experiences how a woman can hold the best image of the man she loves in her heart, even after the reality of who he was way back then has faded with time, I would come to understand that Grandma saw Grandpa always as a forty-year-old man she first met, broad-shouldered and strong in his military uniform. He would forever be her protector; even in the times when it was clear to everyone else that she needed protection from him.

To my child sensibilities, Grandpa was the exact opposite of Grandma, who I equated with gardening into the late afternoon, book reading, long walks that were like treasure hunts and ice cream cones. Grandpa scared me. He was seventy-one (and Grandma, forty-one) by the time I was born. And by then, he was fat and oily, pickling himself with cheap alcohol that glistened in its thick, glass gallon jug. He was forever standing in his light blue bathrobe looking out across the backyard at the freeway, his eyes fixated blurrily on the passing cars going 70, 80, 90 miles an hour. He was in a state of constant agitation, as if he was thinking of something that consistently disturbed him. Perhaps he was trying to will modernity away — the drone of the freeway, the airplanes, the rock and roll music, curse it all! And who could blame him? The world in the late seventies, at least at Grandma's house amongst my young, hip aunts and uncles and my parents, was one in which everybody was either high or on speed.

As the years passed and Grandpa aged, his drinking worsened and he spent more of his time standing at the low window downstairs. While the family was busy rushing about, he would shuffle into the kitchen, his round belly and white hair making him look like Santa Claus, although his constitution was anything but.

Sometimes when he was really drunk, something benign would suddenly tick him off. Then he would start to grumble like an active volcano and an angry flush of red would cover his face. He would yell indecipherable obscenities at anyone within earshot, including four-legged creatures who would slink out the back door or hide under the kitchen table. Damn you all! He would shout. At that point, the house would clear out fast. Friends would find other things to do and everyone left would duck and cover, preparing for a blow.

When it came to my Grandpa, it was my aunts and my mom's turn to tell the tale. Their memories came out more in direct conversations than in stories, though, told with sideways glances and wry smiles. Especially after Grandpa's death in 1978, the four sisters discussed these episodes that occurred in their "typical" American household. The stories were never discussed in front of Grandma. The whole point was to discuss them *about* Grandma.

"Remember?" my said to Aunt Patty as they drank coffee with cream on the back porch.

"I remember the sound of pop's voice, like a fog horn, and the sound of his big army boots coming up the stairs," Kitty said.

"And I remember poor mom hiding behind the kitchen door," Aunt Gracie added, a pouty frown on her face.

"And I remember the look on mom's face," my mom said.

"Fear," Kitty said, looking big-eyed at her older sister as she spoke.

"I never saw him hit her, though," Patty said. "But I wonder if he ever did..." All eyes turned to her as she described the thing that no one else dared to.

"Of course not," Kitty said. "He would never..."

“But poor mom,” Gracie said. As the youngest, she was the most sensitive. “She couldn’t hide from him, could she?”

“Could any of us?” My mom finally said, always the realist. In the silence that inevitably followed, they attempted to fill in the blank spots in their memories that only they were privy to.

September 10, 2005

Six days in Shreveport is more time than I will ever want to spend in this dusty town filled with cultureless strip malls and discount cowboy stores. It is mid-morning by the time we make our way out of the shelter, after respectfully refusing the thin pastor’s gift of a set of used bibles.

“It could be something you can pass on to your children,” he says in a defeated voice. When we say no to his offer for the third time, his shoulders slump.

“Well, God be with you,” are his final words.

“You too,” Jeremy says, holding out his hand and grinning in his good-natured way. When Jeremy smiles, his face fills out and finally fits his round glasses. His eyes crinkle, his eyebrows arch and he is suddenly not stiff, broken, a tired, old working man. Suddenly, he is folksy and fun, almost pan-like. Standing in the parking lot of the Nicole Street shelter looking at him, I am in love with my fiancé all over again. I watch him shake the pastor’s hands with amusement and I smile at the way Jeremy, when he is in this kind of mood, is just enough of a gentlemen to earn admiration and just enough of a ruffian to remain a manly man.

We say our goodbyes to T and his son. Mazzie and Ron had split the day after they arrived but T is waiting for his unemployment card, which has been delayed. Then Marianna and I exchange warm hugs and many God Blesses.

“You be good now,” she says. “Don’t be a stranger to God.” I promise not to be and then, in my own mind, add *in my own way*. As we drive out of the shelter and on the main street that will take us to the freeway, I see Marianna’s figure outside of the shelter, hands on hips, looking to the south. What will happen to her? I think. What will she discover about her husband once she goes back? With the shelter out of view, I turn straight in the cab of the truck and put my seatbelt on. The swamplands of our home beckons.

Three hours later, the moist, earthy air of the Delta reaches our nostrils. It is the smell of the bayou, tempting us with her thorny pleasures. By late afternoon, we have reached Vermillion parish and the town of Kaplan. We were told at Nicole Street that we could sign up for FEMA assistance at the temporary Red Cross shelter there, instead of by phone, which thus far has proved to be a fruitless act.

The American Legions’ shelter in Kaplan is tiny compared to Nicole Street. It is an L-shaped building dotted with cots, like our last accommodations, as well as beds on loan from a local health clinic. Jeremy and I arrive early enough to get a “luxury suite,” with a curtain to pull around us and a hospital bed that is big enough for two if we put down the railings on either side and remove the oxygen machine from the back. After arriving and signing in with the proper tangle of friendly but disorganized volunteers, we slide our overnight stuff, still packed from Shreveport, under the high bed. Then we go outside so Jeremy can have a cigarette and I can get some air before dinner.

That's where we first meet John and Doe, husband and wife straight from the Ninth ward. Kaplan is a dot-on-the-map located in the middle of Cajun country. It is conservative, Cajun-speaking and "white bread" through and through. John and Doe are the only black people at the shelter. They stick out like raisins in a bag of nuts as they stand there in the dirt parking lot smoking.

Jeremy takes off his glasses and wipes them on the side of his shirt. He crinkles up his forehead and purses his lips.

"Hey there," he says with a nod and a wry smile in their direction, "Where Y'at?" John and Doe look us over. Jeremy grins. I just nod. After what seems like several seconds, John extends a hand to Jeremy. A wide grin spreads over his face.

"Right here, man," John says, in a voice that is as smooth and low as buttered rum. "Right here."

John introduces himself and his wife, Doe. Petite Doe says hello with a nod and a shy smile. Jeremy and John talk about NOLA for a while, the usual topics of FEMA trailers, blue tarps and ineffective and seditious public officials at the Superdome — John knows some folks that got trapped there — while Doe and I stand there and listen to the men talk, as wives and girlfriends are often prone to do.

John says this little shelter in the middle of Cajun country is one of the only places in the whole state where FEMA has set up shop in person. After trying like we did to get someone on the horn, they finally decided that, Cajun country or not, they needed their FEMA money now. So two weeks ago they hitched a ride from Baton Rouge where they were staying with friends and made their way out here.

“We’ve been in this joint for that long, man,” John says, shaking his head and kicking at the ground in frustration. “Those dudes from FEMA only come twice a week. By eight thirty in the morning, man, this here dirt lot is filled with cars, all folks needing to sign up for the cash. You get on the waiting list and then you wait and wait and wait. We’ve already had our interview. Now we are just waitin’ for the check.”

John and Doe exchange knowing looks. John believes that the folks who run the shelter are keeping their check from them. Doe says its true and she explains why. If they get their money, of course she and John are going to leave.

“Why would we want to stay in this hell hole?” She asks and pops her gum hard against her cheek.

“Check it out,” John looks over at his wife and nods. “If we done pick up and leave, then no one will be staying at this here shelter at all and then the Red Cross will shut this whole operation down!”

Apparently, the American Legion was never supposed to be just a FEMA processing center. It was supposed to be a shelter through which to feed and house people in need. Yet John and Doe, on most nights, are the only ones here. And now us.

“Besides...” Doe says, as she pops her gum again — I can smell the grape essence of it as she chomps, “Who are they gonna get to clean the toilets, take out the trash and mop the floor if we leave?”

“Calm down now, Doe,” John says, suddenly the voice of reason. “We’ll get our money soon enough and then we’ll be out of here.”

Doe frowns and pops her gum one final time.

“I hope so baby,” she says, looking over at her husband with a pouty frown. “ ‘Cuz this place is really draggin’ me down.”

“No! Ma, that wasn’t his last name. His name was Fa...” Aunt Patty jumped from her chair and picked up a piece of chalk. She began to write the letters F...A on the chalkboard.

“See?” she said, dusting off her hands as if that would settle it. And, yes, perhaps it would. When I was a child, the chalkboard that hung on a tiny piece of wall between the kitchen and the eating room of Grandma’s house was the Great Clarifier of the household. To put it in chalk was like putting it in stone. Phone numbers, doodles, tidbits of information from the television — all were transformed into the gospel truth, like the letters F...A.

“But Ma, didn’t you always say his name was Li?” My mother peeled herself from the vinyl couch she had been laying on and marched over to the chalkboard. With the back of her hand, she erased Patty’s letters. In their place, she printed L....I. Sometimes the chalkboard could be a battleground.

From the kitchen, Grandma wheeled around to face her daughters. She held a spatula in her hand and little droplets of grease splattered in an arc across the room.

“Je-Jus! I tell you before his name was...”

“Oh, who cares what his name was,” Aunt Kitty said. She had been braiding my hair and stopped suddenly in mid-braid as she spoke. “We’ll never know, so why guess? Nikki, did Grandma ever tell you the story of her Ma and the dumplings?”

“Yeah, tell her that one,” Aunt Gracie said, coming in from the sun porch, dripping with sweat and wearing a white t-shirt over a crocheted bikini. Gracie reached in to the freezer for

the bag of M&M's and began to crunch them loudly as she plopped down onto a chair to join in.

With Gracie's arrival, the counsel was now in session. It always seemed to happen this way at Grandma's house. Members of the family came in at unexpected times, sometimes individually, sometimes all together as one great and massive herd. They came because they knew they could and because it was safe there between the thin walls and glass windows overlooking the powerful and sun bleached city. The eating room of the house on Winder Street was an untouched island of meat pies and caged birds squawking, of Grandma and her spatula and dust rags, brooms and constant worry.

"You're a lizard, Grace," My mother said. She looked up from the couch and stuck her tongue out several times at her sister. "Ma, tell us about the dumplings. We want to hear."

Grandma turned the fire on the stove down low and went out the back screen door, reaching for something in her pocket.

"She's going out for a smoke, I know it!" Aunt Patty shrieked. "Don't blow it in here!"

"Shut up, Pat!" Aunt Gracie responded, throwing an M&M at her. She missed, though, and the tiny green candy fell to the linoleum floor with a ping. Larry, Grandma's fat black terrier, waddled over to it, crunched it once, and spit the remnants back on to the floor.

Aunt Kitty rolled her eyes at the spectacle. She had just gotten out of rehab and was much too mature for all these shenanigans.

"For crying out loud! Will someone just tell the God Damn story? Look, it went like this. Grandma lived in a town called *Bei Tai Ho*. She lived on a dairy farm and one day her mother..."

Grandma stuck her head into the room from the back porch. The smoke of her cigarette curled around her head like a halo.

“Je-Jus!” she exclaimed, “It was *Tianjin*! How many times I have to say?”

“Get that cancer stick outta here!” Aunt Patty shrieked.

“Shut up Pat!” A chorus of voices.

My Grandmother stubbed her cigarette out with her sandaled heel on the wooden planks of the back porch. She smoothed out her hair and looked at me mischievously.

“Nikki,” she began. “My mother was, how you say, an or-a-tor. She could give speech very, very good. One day, it was the war and the soldier come in and say to her ‘Give us all your metal!’ ”

“For what?” I asked.

“For the money!” Grace said.

“Hush!” Grandma said. “No, not for the money. The Chinese army need weapon and they gonna melt down all the pot and pan and all the jewelry of the people. They is demanding it, but my mother...”

“Wouldn’t have anything to do with it!!” Aunt Patty blurted out.

“Yeah, so she bopped them on the head...” Mom snorted.

“No, she just refuse,” My grandmother said, her eyes twinkling. “She just say, ‘No, you can’t take my pot and my pan! I make the doughnut for the neighbors and I need that pan and I need that pot! So you know what they do then? They take her off to the jail!’ ”

“And she still had the dumpling dough in her hands! Can you believe it?” Aunt Kitty picked a piece of lint off her dress and flicked it on to the floor.

“It’s what they DID, Ma. Not what they DO,” said Patty.

“So then what happened?” I asked.

“She went before the judge,” Grandma continued with a shrug, walking into the kitchen. She picked up the spatula again and began flipping the meat pies that were sizzling in a half inch of thick corn oil. Grandma learned how to cook at first from her mother in China, who use to bake sweets to sell in illegal gambling houses in *Tianjin*. After Grandma came to the United States, she learned how to cook American-style. She never could get rid of her Chinese roots completely, however, especially where food was concerned. Grandma’s dinners were always a strange combination of exotic stews, dumplings and stir-fries as well as down-home American fare like mashed potatoes with the skins removed and iceberg lettuce and white onion salad with ranch dressing from a bottle. There was always a Christian blessing before the meal and always the peaceful eyes of Grandma’s Buddhas watching us from their places on paintings on the walls.

“And he say you have to give those pot and pan up,” she continued. “It is law. My mother get so mad she throwed that dumpling dough right at that judge!”

“...and that’s why she had to go to *Bei Tai Ho*.” Aunt Gracie said.

“What you talk about?” Grandma said. “That was later! But my mother made such big stink, she not have to give her pot and her pan.”

Grandma looked at me, thoroughly pleased. I looked back at Grandma, just as pleased.

“I think the last time you told that story, you went off to *Bei Tai Ho*. Didn’t she say that Kit?” Aunt Gracie asked. She jumped over to the chalkboard and erased the previous letters from the board with the back of her greasy hand. She began writing in dusty chalk the words *Bei...Tai...Ho*.

Grandma watched her youngest daughter write the words for a few seconds. Then, with a sigh, she went back outside to have another cigarette, slamming the screen door shut behind her.

September 13, 2005

Jeremy and I are finally seen for our FEMA appointment after two days at the shelter. We fill the out paperwork and are told that we would have to be contacted later for more questions before we could receive the check. In the meantime, John and Jeremy have become fast friends, sharing cigarettes, coca-cola and New Orleans stories throughout the day and into the night. I have had a few conversations with Doe too, but we do not speak as intimately as the men do. I don't press the issue. Being a refugee affects different folks in different ways. Soldiers aren't the only ones who can suffer from shell shock, or culture shock, for that matter.

On the afternoon after we had our interview, we are packing and preparing to leave. The FEMA team had offered to pair us up with a family in the area who was willing to take in evacuees. The whole process felt strange, as if we were stray animals put in the pound and picked up by a family looking for a brand new pet. As Jeremy put the last of the baggage in the back of the truck, John comes over to see us.

"I got a lead on something," he says, looking over his shoulder to make sure nobody overheard him. His caution makes Jeremy and I respond in kind. When he is sure the coast is clear, John continues.

"It's Red Cross money," John explains. "Word is it could be up to \$1,500 per person. They'll be in Baton Rouge tomorrow."

Jeremy is suspicious.

"You think it is legit?" he asks, in a tone of voice I recognized as reserved for the times we have ventured to the Treme' or lower Bourbon to score weed.

"Don't know," John says, shrugging. "Only one way to find out."

The next day, we leave the shelter and head for Baton Rouge in the darkness of early morning. It is just getting light as we pull into town and get off at the appropriate exit.

Suddenly the traffic comes to a stop.

"What the..." Jeremy says under his breath. The hand-written sign up ahead says RED CROSS in blocky red paint. We see the abandoned Belmont Hotel in the distant. The hotel's ample auditorium once held concerts and other events attended by hundreds of people. Today, however, rumor of a little cash has brought people out by the hundreds.

As we approach the parking lot to the building, we see that it is packed full. We keep on going down the road that skirts a massive field of asphalt and the round dome beyond it. Between us and it is a chain-link fence and next to that is a line of people looking like a serpent's tail as it wraps itself around the hotel's auditorium. There is a sense of foreboding in its somber presence as we watch more people join, setting up folding chairs and umbrellas, arranging bags of peanut butter sandwiches, calming already-grumpy children. National Guard members are scattered here and there, wielding machine guns in front of the swelling crowd.

Driving passed the string of people, I wonder if perhaps Katrina was the uncovering of an already-occurring epidemic of poverty hovering just beneath the fertile American soil.

John motions for us to pull to the side of the road. Jeremy stops and John hops out of the truck. He walks across the street towards a group of men who greet him with smiles and the knocking of knuckles.

Most of the folks around us are black. I see their eyes following Jeremy and I as we make our way slowly down the road. I wonder, as I watch the others in line watch us, if John and Doe see only our other-than-blackness as well. In this line, like in life, some judge and some don't. Some see the human in the eyes and others look you up and down and don't see nothin' but the shell that you are in.

After a while, John comes back to the truck.

"Those guys have been in this fucking line since yesterday afternoon. If we wait too, we are going to have to breakfast, lunch, and dinner and then breakfast, lunch and dinner again in the same damn place. No, thank you, sir."

John says that the guys in line told him about "Red Cross Distribution Center Number Two" in Denim Springs, just east of Baton Rouge. It too is supposedly open today and distributing money to refugees in need. It is only eight in the morning so we decide to buy a map and head over to the other ad-hoc center, tucked away in a park in the middle of a sprawling, tree-lined suburb.

The population in line at Denim Springs is decidedly more fair-skinned. The gates along the outside of the park, however, have been locked since 6:30 a.m. Supposedly this Center is only for residents of Livingston and Assumption parishes, yet by 2:30 that morning, folks from as far away as Lake Charles and New Orleans had caused a traffic jam for two miles in every direction. By dawn, someone had broken the lock on the main gate of the park. People from St. Charles, from New Orleans, from Abbeville, from Baton Rouge, from all over had poured in

to the facility, eager to secure their places in line. In the darkness of early morning, the police came, threatened arrest, and locked the gates. By the time we arrive, only a few folks mill around or sit in folding chairs near the gates, hoping that they may open and more people will be let in. Eventually, a sheriff comes around on a shiny motorcycle.

“Look folks, they might not even open the gates tomorrow. If you ask me, those people that are running things over there don’t know what the hell they are doing.”

Now you tell us, mister.

I have smoked a lot of marijuana in my still-short life, but I have only done opium one time, and that was enough. And it was only after I did it that the guy who gave it to me, laying in a grey lump on the couch, sunglasses on, bottle of Rolling Rock in his hand, said, “Now that some good poppy in there.” Shit.

I knew it was a mistake the minute the stuff started to have an effect. When I was about thirteen years old, Grandma told me the story of how her father had died. Ever since then, I vowed I would never touch opium. Acid, great. Ecstasy, cool. Reefer, right on. 'Shrooms, no problem. But opium? No thanks.

And now this. It was going to be a long night.

I suppose most people would find the effect of opium quite pleasant. There is a sensation that you are sinking down into a vat of smooth syrup, than a brief panic at the possibility of not breathing once you get to the bottom and finally an increasing inability to conceive of yourself as anything other than a gelatinous creature, swimming in a sea of cotton balls. I felt all these things too and it was all fine. The only thing different for me, however,

was that the panic feeling never went away. I wasn't panicking because I felt I couldn't breathe, however. I was panicking because of who I felt was breathing next to me.

In the dark little French Quarter apartment on the lower side of Conti, I felt my great-grandfather hovering above me, swirling in the humid night air as the drug began to take effect.

Grandma's father was a wealthy business man. He owned a factory that processed and packaged walnuts. When my grandmother was five, he died of starvation caused by a severe addiction to opium.

"Toward the end, he is very thin," Grandma said to me as we drove in her zippy *Karman Ghia* down the hill to get gas, her short hair going every which way in the wind. Grandpa George had died five years prior and soon after his death, Grandma had cut off her straight, long hair (it used to flow down to her hips) and bought the light blue sport scar. To my teenage self, I thought that the *Ghia* was the coolest ride around.

"Then he eats nothing but fruit," Grandma said. "All his attendants are around to feed him and to fill up his pipe."

Grandma held the gasoline hose up to show how big the opium pipe was.

"I am just little girl, but when I see my father lying on all the pillows in the back room of the house, I know something is wrong. Every time I come down the hall, I hear the door to his room close. But one time, I see all. Father is so skinny. He look like a skeleton! One of the men who work for him is in the room. He fill the pipe with water and resin and then he put it in my father's mouth. My father can't even lift his head to do it himself! He is so pale and he have bags under his eyes. He look like a ghost. I am scared of him when I see."

Grandma frowned as the gas from the hose clicked the gallons. She waited a minute, deep in thought, before she continued.

“And one day, he die,” she said, putting the pump back in its holder with a click. “His body stay in the house for three days, wrapped in white muslin. This is custom. People come from all over to see. Relatives, workers, everybody from the neighborhood — they all come to our house to see.”

Grandma watched me as I screwed the gas cap back in. I had just learned how to do it and was taking my time to make sure I did a good job. Then we got in the car and fastened our seatbelts.

“On the fourth day, his body is taken out of the house and put on a wooden carrier,” she continued. “A group of men carry my father through the streets. I remember the sound of firecracker and the smell of roasted peanut.”

As Grandma started the engine and pulled out of the station, I looked out the tiny front window of the *Ghia* at the scene before me. The corner of Midway and Rosecrans, where we had stopped to get gas on our way home from the store, was one of the busiest intersections in San Diego proper. Traffic whizzed by in all directions as car horns blazed. I tried to imagine a spectacle like what Grandma was describing happening right there, in busy Southern California. Years later I would learn that there are places in the US, such as New Orleans, where funeral parades do happen. At that moment, however, looking out fast food restaurants, chain stores and gas stations that flanked the street, it seemed hard to imagine.

Chapter 3: Alone on the Shore

“All I ever really needed to know I learned in Kindergarten.”

-Robert Fulghum

September 16, 2005

Jeremy and I have been adopted. We leave the shelter with Bonnie and Bozo who, like good-intentioned animal-lovers, they have come down to pick out a pet from the rest of the straggly lot. And they pick us. We accept the offer since the shelter has become packed full with more refugees and still New Orleans remains inaccessible. All we can do is wait.

Two days into our stay at their house, Bozo — a lanky, red-faced dude with an accent so thick you can slice it like a Cajun sausage — decided that it was time we learned how to eat a proper Cajun meal.

“First thing you do, bah, is you gotta catch ‘em yerself,” he says, standing in his neatly organized garage, smiling. Bozo has the most contagious smile. It consumes his entire face. It is a smile you just couldn’t help but return.

The next day is Saturday, a proper day for a crab boil, so Bozo gets us up at the crack of dawn and by 6 am, me, Jeremy, Bozo and his thirteen year old son, Ron, are bumping along the dirt roads that lead to Vermillion Parish’s outer limits and to the low-lying Delta lands where thin-walled, simple-storied houses dot the liquid landscape between patches of swamp. We travel pass residential areas and into a place where the road straddles waterways on both sides. Bozo stops the truck just as the sun is poking its head out over the horizon. To the south is the Great Delta, the belly fat around the Gulf area that at one time acted like a protective barrier between violent storms that regularly develop in the warm waters of the Gulf and the parishes that call this strange area home. Now, of course, this layer has thinned to almost nothing. Fifty years ago, the Delta protected her people like a stocky mama looking

after her young. In recent years, however, because of environmental pollution and human invasion, the Delta has gone anorexic. Nowadays, the people who live on the edge of these swamplands do so at their own risk.

“It’s beautiful,” I say, looking towards the never-ending expanse of water. This bland comment doesn’t do the scene justice but it is the best I can come up with at six o’clock in the morning.

Bozo smiles, nods his head. Then he pulls over to a little section where the road widens a bit. He stops the truck and the three men get out to mark their territory, heading in different directions to take a piss. I stretch a bit and walk across the street, to a tiny little cove that nestles itself between the road and the expanse of the Gulf. Tall cattails and grasses form the boundaries of the inlet, which spans only about a hundred feet in all directions and makes it a near-perfect circle for this microenvironment. I see the water bubbling and boiling by the cattails on the other side of the cove.

“That’s the spot, missy,” Bozo says, walking over to me as he adjusts his fly. His face widens into his characteristic cheek-to-cheek grin. “That there is where those little buggers are hidin’. We are gonna get us some good eats today!”

We begin unloading the gear — a dozen buckets, long poles with ropes tied to them and a pound of smelly mackerel which fill the early morning air with their pungent odor. Bozo shows us how to tie the fish to the line with thick string and what to do with it once it is secured.

“Those little guys aren’t the smartest monkeys in the barrel, if you know what I mean,” Bozo explains, “so you don’t need to cast the line very far. They go crazy over mackerel. All

you have to do is wait until one of them bites the line and then drag ‘em out and into the bucket.”

Bozo makes a graceful cast to a bubbling area about ten feet in front of him. Within minutes, there is a tug on the line and he scoops a large, grey crab out of the water. He holds the crab in mid-air for all to see. With legs and pinchers flailing, it hangs on to the gooey bit of fish from what I assume is his mouth, a narrow, adjustable slit between two plates of armor.

Ron hands his dad a bucket.

“Thanks, Son,” Bozo says as he nimbly places the crab inside. The sound of the crab’s pinchers against the sides of the plastic container echoes across the swamp.

I am amazed, quite frankly, with the stupidity of these crabs, or perhaps it is desperation. Within fifteen minutes of throwing our lines out, the water erupts. Crabs splash, bite, stretch and crawl. They are frantic to get to the fish, so much so that they often duel with each other at the bottom of the low water, pinchers up and haunches arched, vying for the cherished prize.

By eleven, all ten buckets are filled and the normally quiet air is filled with the sound of dozens of crabs knocking against the plastic containers that seal their fate as our dinner for the evening.

“After the floods came, we could not stay on the farm any longer,” Grandma said. She told the story about her stay at the mysterious beach town of *Bei Tai Ho* as Patty, mom, Grandma and I played bingo at St. Catherine’s on the top of the hill above Mission Bay. It had been six months since the diagnosis and three months since Grandma’s last radiation treatment. Grandma’s hair had thinned but not fallen out completely and she was slower than usual. She was now able to play only six bingo cards at a time instead of her usual

twelve, but still it was five more than any of the rest of us could keep track of. The numbers were being called in rapid order — B5, I25, O68 —but Grandma did not flinch nor break her line of concentration as she played her cards and talked at the same time.

“Everything is destroyed in the flood,” she said, as her purple dauber came down on square. “We had to let the cows go so they do not drown. The Russians hopes that they can find them again but they never do.”

“B4!” The plump woman on the stage of the church auditorium called out. It was close to Halloween and the woman on the stage wore earrings in the shape of tiny bats. Every time the woman moved her head to collect a little ball from the hopper, the bats’ tiny eyes blinked yellow and white.

“And after!” came the normal and expected chorus from the crowd of about one hundred, many of them regulars to St. Catherine’s. At one time, Grandma played bingo at least four times a week, at St. Catherine’s and other bingo haunts around town. Since the onset of her sickness, however, she had narrowed her gambling habit to just one night a week, and most of the time it was Catherine’s. I liked to go with Grandma there because they always served the best all-you-can-eat lasagna for intermission dinner.

“And then what happened, Ma...” Aunt Patty said absently, moving her green dauber back and forth between rows of numbers. Grandma looked over at her daughter’s cards and daubed a space that Patty had missed.

“Thanks,” Aunt Patty said, grinning sheepishly.

“Well,” Grandma continued, “we had no choice...”

In the silence that followed, my mom looked to me and smiled softly. In the past, we would assume that Grandma’s silences were merely part of her dramatic storytelling

technique, but on that night it was hard to tell for sure. She could be up to her usual tricks or she could have simply forgotten that she was in mid-story, a byproduct of fatigue or the tumor that, according to her oncologist, had slowed but was still growing.

“No choice but what?” mom finally asked.

“No choice but to go to the beach and eat crabs!” Grandma said.

A chuckle followed from all three of us.

As the water from a nearby river exceeded its banks and began to fill up the entire valley where the farm was, the Russian family decided it was best to evacuate. They took their chief ranch “engineer” — the retired Chinese military officer who was Great-Grandma’s second husband—with them, in addition to his new family. The entire lot waded through town in chest-deep water, where Grandma said she saw cows, sheep, doors to houses and other strange materials floating downstream.

“So many things came out of hiding that day, Nikki,” Grandma said, “They were swept away with the rest of us.”

Although I liked to hear about the tragedies that befell Grandma throughout her life, I especially liked to hear of the celebrations. Out of a tragic event, a festive one occurred as the Russians and their family and Great-Grandma and her family made it to dry land and then on to the resort town of *Bei Tai Ho*.

Ever since Grandma first told us about their flee to the quaint fishing village along the China Sea, I have attempted to locate it on the map to no avail. At Grandma’s house, out would come the gigantic old almanac, circa 1960 and together Grandma and I, along with anyone else who happened to be there, would peruse the possibilities. We knew that the town was possibly along China’s only real coastline or maybe a bit more to the north along

the Yellow Sea. The exact location, however, like the location of the farm, will forever remain a gap in our family history.

“G55!” The lady with the earrings called out as several people shook bean-filled soda cans to let everyone in the hall know that they had only one more number to go for a win.

“Damn!” Grandma said. Then she continued the story. “I remember the seafood the most. We wait until dusk when the stands on the boardwalk almost close. Then mom sends me out to buy for dinner. Just before they throw out the last of it, the fisherman mark all of it down, five cents for a pound for a jumbo shrimp and ten cents for a dozen crab! Can you believe it? I come home with brown paper bag full and Mother fry them up with butter, oil and spices.”

There are so many things that I wish I would have asked Grandma back when she was still able to tell me. Where did she stay in *Bei Tai Ho*? Did she make any friends or maybe even have a crush on one of the boys who lived on the docks?

I imagine Grandma about eight years old, wearing in a white dress and standing on the boardwalk as the sun sets on another day along the sea. The wind is whipping her dark black hair into her face and I imagine her brushing it away with one hand while pointing with the other at giant grey shrimp lying in a big barrel over a bed of ice. I imagine her carrying her prize back to her mother and the rest of the household. In a nondescript little room with beige walls and perhaps a small window looking out over the boardwalk, I see Great-Grandma slipping the shrimp into a giant skillet. It begins to sizzle in the pan and the aroma of butter and garlic fills the room.

“B5!” Called the woman on stage amidst the twinkling of tiny bat eyes.

“Bingo!” Came an exciting call from across the room.

“Nuts!” Grandma said. “Only one to go!”

On the way back from the crabbing spot, Bozo asks us if we would like to see where he used to work.

“Sure,” we say, sipping hot coffee out of Styrofoam cups.

Bozo drives slowly through the center of a town, which is bustling with weekend activity. He makes a couple of left hand turns and then pulls in to a half-acre lot where two massive grain silos stand like country versions of the Twin Towers. Bozo parks the truck in the dirt next to a trailer office and Jeremy, Ron and I pour out of the truck and on to the crunchy gravel.

“I’m goin’ over to Mike’s, dad,” Ron says, grabbing his backpack and nodding to us all.

“Okay, son. Be sure to be back by dinner. We got us some good eats, remember.”

“I will,” says the boy as he starts down the road. Bozo looks after him with pride.

“Y’all have any kids?” he asks Jeremy and I. We shake our heads.

“Well, maybe someday then,” Bozo says. “Come on now, I’ll show y’all where I worked for almost twenty years. And then, when you get bored with that, we’ll go pick ourselves some okra from my field. Bonnie wants to make you a gumbo. Boy, are you in for a treat! Now that I’m retired, that okra field is where I spend most of my days — when I’m not crabbin’ or eatin,’ that is.”

“Don’t let him fool you! He’s mostly eatin’!” A deep voice booms out from across the parking lot. Jeremy and I watch as a stout man in jeans, cowboy boots and a tight red t-shirt comes towards us. As he gets closer, we notice that the man has a thin film of white dust covering his entire body.

“Red, you shut your mouth! You knows I work hard!” Bozo says as Red approaches.

The two man exchange good-natured pats on the back.

“Or hardly workin’!” Red’s smile, accented by deep pockmarks on his cheeks, is as wide as Bozo’s. “Seriously, though, boss. You takin’ good care of yourself these days?”

Bozo gets serious. He gives Jeremy and me a quick glance and then looks down at the gravel. “I’m doin’ all right. Goin’ to the doc on Friday to see what’s up next.”

“Good then, bah,” Red says, giving his friend another pat on the back, this time gentler. His attention turns to Jeremy and me.

“And who do we have here? You gonna introduce ‘em or what, Boz?”

“Sure thing, if you let me get a word in edgewise...” The smile returns to Bozo’s thin face. “This here is Jeremy and his lovely fiancée, Nicole. They from N’awlins and theys here in Kaplan because of Katrina, stayin’ at our house until they can get back to their home in the city.”

“Well, then,” Red says. “Welcome.”

“Mind if I show ‘em around, Red?” Bozo says.

“Boss,” Red says, taking off his John Deere hat and scratching his thinning hair. “You know that wouldn’t be the best thing, right? How ‘bout you go on and look after your okra and I’ll show ‘em the operation. Then they can meet you over there in a little while?”

Bozo takes a deep breath and shoots a glance over at his field. The okra plants are high and the light green leaves wave in the slight breeze.

“I reckon you’re right,” he says after a bit, “I better see about the waterin’. They’re lookin’ a bit dry. You take good care of these folks, Red. Don’t let ‘em get lost in the chute!”

“Not a chance, Boss!” Red says, as he motions for us to follow him.

Jeremy and I follow Red into a large barn-like structure. I notice Bozo looking on until we round a corner and he disappears from view.

“So, unless you folks have been completely city-fied, you probably already figured out that this here is a mill,” Red explains. “Yellow corn, to be specific, is what we process here. The farmers bring their crops already hulled and threshed to us and we store it for a time in these suckers.” Red points to the sky. Jeremy and I bend our necks upwards to see the huge green hunks of circular metal that tower over us.

“Before too long,” Red continues, “we bring the kernels down, dry them some more and grind them into powder. We process hundreds of tons of corn every day.”

Red goes on to explain that the ground corn is used not only for hog and beef feed but also for corn oil, glue and other products. Jeremy and I watch as another man turns on the machine that allows the grain to come down from the silo. A million tiny kernels fly from the chute and into a large vat that spins and churns like bits in a thick stew.

“Watch out now! Don’t get your arm caught in that thing or else you won’t ever leave this place!” Red laughs and goes on. “But seriously, folks, this here country would stop in its suburban tracks if it weren’t for corn. It’s in practically everything that’s on the shelf these days.”

After a while, we thank Red and head across the lot again, to the okra field where we see Bozo, dressed in raggedy overalls, bending to pick some of the tiny bean- like vegetables that have fallen off the stalks.

“Hi ho!” Bozo says when he sees us. He has a piece of hay in his mouth and he looks like the happiest man in the world. “Welcome to my kingdom. Unfortunately, we only got a

few of these little buggers to work with for Bonnie's gumbo. The rest just aren't ripe yet. We'll have to wait another month for them to be ready."

Jeremy and I help Bozo pick the okra that is ready and put them in an orange bucket at the end of the row. Despite a slight hesitation at not wanting to pry too much, I decide to ask Bozo why he couldn't accompany us to the silo. In response, Bozo, who is squatting down next to me pulling the thick weeds that have gathered around a group of okra stocks, stops what he is doing and frowns.

"I'm sorry," I say, immediately regretting that I had asked the question. Jeremy, who is picking okra in the row in front of me, glances my direction. "It's none of my business..."

"No, no," Bozo says, holding up his hand, "It's okay. Doctor's orders. Can't go near the silos these days on account of my lungs."

Bozo reaches for a weed and pulls hard. It does not budge.

"Boy did I love workin' with those guys while it lasted, though," he goes on. Jeremy comes over to our row to listen and Bozo glances at him before continuing. "But now I can't get near it. Doc says it's because of the corn dust from the mill, of all things. That's how the cancer started. I never smoked one lick of a cigarette, not ever! Now isn't that a shame that doin' what I love was makin' me sick?"

"Bozo, I'm sorry..." I say.

"Hey, no matter!" he says, shaking his head. "Getting away from the silos is givin' me more time to do farmin.' Next season I'm gonna start with a rice crop. Takes a while to produce but eventually it's gonna be a cash cow!"

“So you’ll be okay then?” Jeremy asks. Inevitably, I think of Grandma. Her tumors were small, but because she had them in both lungs, she was labeled Stage Four Terminal from the beginning.

“Doc is hopeful. True, I have a hard road ahead and it ain’t gonna be easy. The good news is the little buggars are only in one lung right now. If the radiation and chemo don’t work, they can always take one of ‘em out. I never knew a fellow could live off one lung, but I guess I don’t know everything!”

Bozo yanks hard on the weed and it pops out root and all. He puts it in a neat pile with the long stalks of others ready to be dried out and burned. Cancer is often thought of as a weed by modern medicine. And radiation and chemo can be likened to the pesticides that can eradicate it in an area so that it never grows again. That’s one theory anyway.

“Bozo,” I ask, “how come you don’t use pesticides to kill the weeds on your okra crop?”

“Ah,” Bozo says, “what’s a little weed anyways? I don’t got nothin’ but time now so I can afford to come out here and pull ‘em. Besides, gettin’ rid of these weeds by hand helps me to get up close and personal with my okra. That way I know all that is goin’ on with my little babies.”

Jeremy and I laugh at the analogy as well as the accent. Bozo is thoughtful for a minute and then continues:

“I guess I also want to know that’s goin’ into my family’s mouths too. I never thought about it before, but I reckon it pays to pay attention.”

We have only known Bozo for a little over two days, but there is no doubt that Jeremy and I have grown fond of him. We both wonder what will become of him and his illness. I, at

least, know this: here in the middle of the corn fields and the crab ponds of Cajun country, we have discovered a truly wise man.

“Ma, tell the story, please?”

“Yeah, ma, tell the story.”

It was a tale we had heard a thousand times, yet here we were, in Grandma’s kitchen, ready to hear it again. Grandma was being elusive as always. Her daughters were being persistent, as always. And I was playing my role as well, forever in the middle as the observer, the note-taker. But this time was a little different. Nervous expectation hung in the air. In the beginning days of Grandma’s illness, we clung desperately to signs of hope like scared children to apron skirts.

“I imagined it gone. That’s all.” Grandma was painting her nails a soft creamy pink. She did not look up from her long fingers which were spread gracefully in a flat arch on the kitchen table.

“Ma, there is more to it,” said Aunt Kitty, exasperation and impatience in her voice. “Why do you always have to make everything so *difficult*?”

“Yeah, ma, just tell us the story.” My mother’s voice sounded muffled. She was lying on the long bench on the other side of the table, trying to recover from a migraine that had started the day she took Grandma to get the MRI. Her hand covered her face as the bright sun streamed in from the wide window behind her.

“What you want me to say?” Grandma looked up. “I pretend it to be gone! It is a miracle!”

“Every night mother would imagine the cancer as a giant ball of fire,” Aunt Patty said, looking at me. David, Grandma’s poodle, sat obediently between her legs as she brushed his curly hair.

“It would travel from right here,” Aunt Patty touched her left breast with the dog brush, “up her chest and through her throat, then out on to the floor!”

“It was orange and red and it rolled with fire,” Grandma said as she looked up from a second application of nail polish. “I spit it out every night and watch it burn on the carpet until it is only ash.”

“And that was fifteen years ago. See! Now it’s gone!” Aunt Patty exclaimed. “Yeah, Ma, it’s gone!” Aunt Kitty said. “You cured yourself once. You can do it again.” Her words sounded more like a question than a statement of fact.

I looked at Aunt Kitty and then at Grandma, remembering a time not too long ago when it was Kitty’s turn to battle cancer. Grandma stood in the kitchen in a white button-down shirt, staring at the thin mirror behind the sink. The first two buttons were undone and her bare skin, delicate as pastry, was exposed. She covered her nipple with one gingerly-placed finger. There, in the center of her breast, lying like a fat worm on her skin, was the scar. It was faded after many years, but the sections of chunky, discolored skin told the tale.

“See, here it is,” she had said, looking into the mirror like a teenager searching for blemishes.

“Wow, that was a big one,” Aunt Kitty had remarked, frowning at her own breast in the mirror. She had her shirt buttoned down in the same way as her mother’s. Her scar, however, was a severe indent into her skin, smiling upwards mockingly from the inside edge to near the nipple. The scar was from a biopsy only one week before and was fresh. Mother

and daughter had looked like mirror images of each other as they faced themselves that day— Grandma with her left breast exposed, Kitty with the right. The thin space of the mirror reflected back only half of their faces. The scars were in the center, smeared tawdry white. The two shared the silent space for a moment, co-patriots in an invisible war.

“Tell me how you did it,” Kitty had said then, her eyes no longer able to mask her fear. “I have to know.”

“They say I have five year to live,” Grandma had said. “I say no. I practice every day. I don’t go back to doctor. I know it gone. And then it is.”

Ten years later, Kitty and the rest of Grandma’s daughters waited again for their mother’s words of wisdom. This time, however, Grandma said nothing. Instead, she went back to her nails and the soft, cotton-candy color of the polish. Her hand shook a little as she screwed on the top and lifted herself up to leave.

It feels as if we have been gone for hours, but when we get back to Bonnie and Bozo’s, it is only a little past three. The house smells like chili powder and garlic. Bonnie has the massive pot of vegetables and Tony Chachere’s Cajun spices going over the big outdoor cooking stove, waiting for our catch. After a final cleaning with the hose, in go the crabs. Bozo puts them in the iron kettle live, amidst a chorus of tiny squeals. We are silent a minute as the crabs noisily succumb to their fate. Bonnie frowns.

“I hate this part,” she says, shivering. Once its quiet again, Bozo pulls the lawn chairs out from the back of the garage and Jeremy and I help Bonnie with the rest of the veggies. We

boil the stew heavily until the garlic cloves slide out of their peel, the potatoes are spicy mush in the mouth and the crab meat comes out of the shell with a light touch of the fork.

“Perfect!” Bonnie says as Bozo looks on wide-eyed and salivating. The garage’s make-shift kitchen is clearly Bonnie’s world and as mysterious a realm to Bozo as a tackle shop would be to Bonnie.

“She’s the boss for this part,” Bozo says with a sheepish grin.

Newspapers are spread out on the long picnic bench Bozo set up in their front yard. Neighbors and friends start to arrive with beer — Rolling Rock, Abita, Coors, Miller. The veggies and meat are taken out of the pot and placed in a huge pile in the middle of the table. Soon we are in crab heaven as we slurp and chew, sitting in lawn chairs watching the sparse traffic on the dirt road go by, getting crab juice all over our clothes and talking about Hurricane Rita’s arrival.

“Another one’s comin’,” Bozo says to no one in particular.

“Fuckin’ hell, Boz. I hope that shit don’t come around here,” a neighbor who had come by says. Both men pick their teeth with long toothpicks and stare across the street to a vacant school yard. “We don’t need no more fucking niggers coming down here if New Orleans gets hit again.”

“Watch yer mouth, Earl,” Bonnie says sharply, glancing nervously at Jeremy and me. “It’s not supposed to hit New Orleans this time. It’s supposed to hit Vermillion Parish. It’s supposed to hit us.”

Bonnie’s mom Peggy, who had come in from a neighboring town for the dinner, grunts in response while conversation erupts among the splattering of neighbors, friends and family

members lined up like onlookers on a parade route along the front of the garage. All are quiet for a moment, thinking about what could happen should the worst arrive.

The next morning, we learn that Rita will arrive by later that day and she will be packing a punch. Bonnie and Bozo decide to go over to a friend's house, Fernanda and Ernesto's in Lafayette, to weather out the storm. We decide to go with them.

It is a pleasant stay in Lafayette, albeit amongst stressful circumstances. As the winds blow outside and the ticker tape on the TV (again that damn ticker tape) announces shelters opening and schools closing, Jeremy romps and plays with the couple's three boys while their thirteen year old daughter and I spend the afternoon stringing necklaces from a big box of glass beads. It is a day of waiting out yet another storm, but this time we do it in the most enjoyable way, where we are able to revel in the simplicity of children, good company and home-cooked Cajun gumbo (compliments of Bozo's amazing okra).

We stay the night in Lafayette and the next morning, Bonnie wakes us up by knocking on the door of the room we are staying in, one of the boys' Superman-themed bedrooms. Without waiting for a response, she sticks her head in the door with the latest.

"The good news, folks, is that there are only few trees down in Lafayette," she says, "The bad news is that most of the damage has occurred in our neck of the woods. Vermillion parish is flooded up to the gills."

Bonnie's cousin, her cousin's husband and their small daughter, who live near Forked Island, were left homeless by the storm and are already on their way to Bonnie and Bozo's house, where they will stay for the time being. Their grown daughter's house on the outskirts of Kaplan had part of its roof blow off and they are on their way there as well.

“We’re fixin’ to head back to Kaplan,” Bonnie says. She looks strained and pale.

“Bozo’s anxious to get home and see about the house. You comin’?”

The answer is obvious. Bonnie and Bozo have been the perfect adopted parents for us mutts from New Orleans. Now, however, it is time for them to take care of their own pack.

As I hear our Kaplan family’s eight-cylinder Chevy truck pull out of the driveway, I sense a “here-we-go-again” kind of panic. It lodges itself in my upper chest. Jeremy, resting by my side, opens his eyes at the sound of the truck’s departure.

“There they go,” he states simply and looks at me through the fog of just-waking-up. His gaze shifts towards the window. Outside, trees sway back and forth like sea grass and leaves blow down the street in every direction. As partners often do, we are both thinking the same thing. What the hell do we do now?

Outside, the clouds billow and the sunlight streams in grey and weak. I think about the French Quarter, the smell of baking bread in the morning, the clinking of mule hooves, the hawkers and swindlers, the clip of the tourists’ cameras, the blowing of an odd horn. What I wouldn’t give to take just one step again into that microcosm of humanity, history and mysticism, to walk down Dauphine Street on a sweaty summer night, to watch for ghosts along Gov. Nichols, to curse the tourists who call out for directions when I am on my bike and in a hurry, to hear the hourly chimes of St. Louis Cathedral or the *Woo, baby!*’s of idle men cat-calling to big-bootied women, myself included, along Rampart St. The longing to be back home makes my whole body ache.

Jeremy stirs. It’s time to talk about where we will go next, in what direction and for how long.

Perhaps the skillet that I imagined Great-Grandma sautéing shrimp in in *Bei Tai Ho* was the same one that she saved from the fires of the Chinese military a few years later, at the beginning of World War II. I would like to think that it was, although I don't know for sure.

Sitting in the eating room in a light blue terrycloth bathrobe — the same kind of bath robe that Grandpa George use to wear when he was alive — Grandma Su told me the story of Great-Grandma and her precious cookware.

On the day she told it, she sat at the eating room table doing nothing. She was too tired to paint her nails, too thirsty to eat Cheetos, too dizzy to bend down and pet Gigi the gentle Doberman who, like always, lay like a warm blanket at her feet, fast asleep. All she had were her words. On that day, I don't think she even knew I was in the room. Her audience was her mother, was China, was herself, waiting anxiously for the punch line to a life lived as full as possible but still and inevitably lived with some of its dreams unfulfilled.

Sometimes when Grandma told this particular story, Great-Grandma held a pot in her hands. Other times, it was a pan or a big flat skillet. On this day, according to Grandma, Great-Grandma grasped an iron skillet as big as a table top in her small fist. When the poor Chinese soldier entered her house and demanded that she give the skillet up so that it could be melted into weaponry to fight the Japanese, she refused. She held it close to her face, shaking it defiantly, as if it was already was a weapon.

"My mother," Grandma said, "was very stern and very stubborn. She would not let anyone push her around. When the soldier came in to take the skillet, she threatened to hit him over the head with it if he came any closer."

The soldier did not take the skillet. Instead, he and his comrades took Great-Grandma to jail. The next day, she would appear before the judge of her province to plead her case.

“Mother wanted keep that skillet because with that skillet, she made a living for herself and me. She make the doughnuts she sell to the ladies who play mahjong on our street.”

Great-Grandma’s profession as a baker occurred during Grandma’s pre-teen years, when mother and daughter again lived in *Tianjin*. This time they were devoid of a male figure in the household to add security and stability to their precarious lives. The military officer had died, Great-Grandma’s second husband, and the tiny family unit needed to make ends meet somehow. Mahjong houses were illegal in *Tianjin* in the early forties, but that did not stop Great-Grandma. Her baking and business talents provided the women of these clandestine gambling operations with sweets and treats to keep them going for hours, immersed in the clinking of the hard, ivory mahjong tiles and the clanging of the coins that they took gingerly out of their purses to wager for each game.

“Sometimes I come to visit Mother as she worked,” Grandma said. “I remember the smoke. All day, the women smoke cigarette, drink tea and eat Mother’s doughnuts. Mother pass her basket around and they take the doughnut and drop the coin in the basket. Sometimes mother spend her earnings right there, taking the place of a player who is out for a break. Sometimes she lose all, sometimes she win big. Always, her face is serious and her moves are — how you call? — deliberate. If I need to ask her something, she give me stern look. In the mahjong houses, gambling is serious business.”

Grandma paused and slumped a bit. She closed her eyes and looked like she was about to fall asleep right there in the hard-backed chair by the phone stand and the big, thin window that separated the eating room from the city outside.

“What happened with Great-Grandma once she got to jail?” I asked, afraid that Grandma was going to fall out of the chair and bang her head against the window. Of course, I knew what happened next. The story did not change that much over the years. At the same time, however, I sensed that it was important for Grandma to finish the story for herself this time. Maybe she needed to do so in order to let it go. Grandma rose a little in her seat and chuckled a bit.

“She is so angry, of course, when they take her away. When the soldiers come in to the house, mother is making big batch of doughnuts. When they put her in the back of the big police van to see the judge, she still have ball of sticky dough in her hands.”

Grandma stopped a bit and adjusted her robe. She was getting almost too tired to continue.

“She still had the dough,” I repeated.

“Yes, and when she go before the judge, she still have the dough too! She is so tough. She go right over to the judge and she say, ‘Leave me alone with my pot!’ ”

I didn’t mention to Grandma that Great-Grandma’s skillet had turned in to a pot in mid-story.

“And then do you know what she say to that judge?” Grandma asked.

“No, what?” I lied.

“She tells that judge that if he do not let her go and let her keep her pot, she will throw that dough right at him!”

I imagine the spectacle that Great-Grandma, all five foot two of her, made that day.

“And do you know what? That judge let her go, pot and all. She got to keep her pot, keep her dough and keep her business selling sweets to mahjong ladies, at least for a little while anyways,” Grandma said. Then her eyelids drooped and she slid into a sitting slumber.

They are called the Barbie Twins, the co-principals of Green T. Linden Elementary School in Youngsville, Louisiana near Lafayette. They sit with me amongst the deafening roar of 300 plus evacuee elementary school educators trying to sell their wares, talents and availability to teach the 35,000 new students that have begun to crowd the schools around Lafayette since the hurricane. The children, like the teachers, come from Waveland and Bay St. Louis in Mississippi. They come from St. Bernard and, of course, from New Orleans. Out of necessity and, yes, curiosity, I have come to check out the scene. The FEMA check still has not arrived and our money is running out. The unemployment benefits are helping, but not for long. Jeremy has already found temporary work in Lafayette as well, helping evacuees obtain private social services in a clearinghouse whose office is in the center of town.

The Barbie Twins sit opposite me around a little table in a hallway of the Lafayette School District office. Both of them are tall, dressed to the nines, thin and very made up. One is chocolate-skinned, the other bleach-blonde. They look over my resume’ and then look up at me behind designer spectacles.

“Why do you want to work for the Lafayette School District?” they ask.

Well, I imagine telling them, I am flat broke, just about homeless, and don’t have any other choice but to get a teaching job in the public schools.

Of course, I don’t tell them this. I tell them a lie based on flattery. It works every time.

“I have done research on the districts in the area and have found Lafayette to be far superior than any other I have found. I would be honored to be considered for this position.”

Chocolate Barbie grins, pushes her glasses up on her pug nose, nods her head and scribbles something on a notepad. Blonde Barbie is less convinced and chooses the direct approach.

“Listen,” she says, taking her glasses off for effect, “we have a position to teach kindergarten, but it’s not going to be easy. Most of the kids are evacuees and they are coming from all over the affected area. We don’t know how long they will stay and how many there will be. You will have to be flexible and able to work with limited supplies.”

“I think I know a little about flexibility and lack of resources,” I say. This time I am not lying. “I think I can handle it.”

Now Chocolate takes her specs off as well. They both look at me like they would a new pair of shoes they are considering purchasing. Then they break out in smiles and hold out their hands, neatly trimmed and polished fingernails glistening in the overhead lights.

“Welcome aboard,” they say.

One day about two months before her death, Grandma had an urge to say something that just couldn’t wait. She opened the back door and began to descend the hard concrete steps that connected patio one to patio two in the back yard of the Winder Street house. She was making her way down the last few steps to the basement where Victor was working when we heard the thud.

There is nothing quite like the sound of flesh and bone hitting stone. There is no buoyancy. It is like a smack stifled on the carpet of a padded room. Its significance, when I

heard it that day, made my stomach turn. Vic and I rushed to the apex of the sound on instinct. We both saw Grandma lying on her back with her head facing downhill.

In an instant, a switch had been pulled in Grandma's brain and she had become an infant. Falling a flight of stairs was no big deal, breaking an arm did not hurt and busting open a skull a little where the blood began to ooze out was not call for concern. With a gentle smile on her face, she looked up at us blinking.

When it happened, Uncle Victor scooped his mother up, arms and legs limp, eyes blank and looking forward. He carried her to the eating room and deposited her in the very same chair she had sat in two weeks prior when she told the story about her mother and the skillet/pot for the very last time.

"Mom, are you okay?" Uncle Victor shouted frantically, shaking his mother about the shoulders. There was no response. She sat slumped, breathing heavy, sweat forming beads on her forehead as her skin grew clammy and grey.

From that point forward, Grandma would be a sleeping giant, a body in a bed, a smile on a face, a mysterious entity whose mind and heart belong not on terra firma but some place higher up, some place far away.

October 13, 2005

We are back in New Orleans for the first time since the hurricane. Helicopters patrol the skies. Members of the National Guard walk the streets. We have entered the war zone.

I am glad to be here, even if it's just for the weekend. Being in New Orleans again helps me remember that I belong somewhere, that I am more than just a number.

Before we make it to the Quarter to assess the damage in our apartment, we ride down Banks Street to the middle of the Bywater. I don't recognize any of the streets I have ridden my

bike through hundreds of times. The city is under a cloud of contamination. Cars have thick layers of scum to the tops of their windows.

An old guy stands shirtless in rubber boots on his front porch. A pile of junk sits between him and the gritty street. Everything in the pile is grey — chairs, books, tables, lamp shades. He talks to two other men who are either getting in or getting out of a cab.

“The worst one was the flood of 1917. That was before my time,” says one of the guys as he leans against the hood of the car.

“Are you sure that was before your time, Bob?” The one with the rubber boots asks. Chuckle, chuckle. Grin, grin.

Despite all the muck, mess and contamination, how do I know that this town will survive? Because New Orleans is a town of wise asses, peddlers, magicians and survivors. We survive by telling stories, laughing and celebrating even in the midst of the most painful of tragic events.

Eventually, we cross Esplanade Street, move down Royal Street, and up to Dauphine Street. We are home. Jeremy slows the green truck as we park on the side of the street. The front gate that leads to the garden has fallen off. We step over it and make our way down the narrow open-air hallway between the side fence and the front house.

The palm tree that butts up against the wooden fence has fallen over as well. The patio furniture is on its side. The fish pond has been drained of water. We open the door to the apartment and see that inside, however, is how we left it two months ago, except for the stench of the refrigerator. We hold our noses against the smell of the rotten meat that has sat in our freezer for weeks during the hottest time of the year. The first thing we must do is move that fridge outside, and quick. Before we get in to that, however, I need walk the streets of the Quarter.

“Just for a little while,” I tell Jeremy. “I’ll be back soon.” There are memories clamoring for my attention.

I enter the sidewalk and walk to Royal Street. Then I head down towards Canal. Each block has significance for me. I know I must tell the story of all I experienced here, just like Grandma had to tell her stories before she died. She told her stories to me. I tell my stories to myself. *Who is dying here?* I think.

Heraclitus said that change is the only constant. Maybe also then life is a series of mini deaths that eventually lead to rebirth.

I stop next to the A&P. Its broken windows have been boarded up with plywood. In the little doorway next to the store was where Grandpa Elliot showed me that the harmonica can be played as if it was a cello, a flute, or a violin.

“Slow down,” he had said, addressing my incessant desire to get down and boogie with the patience of an old schoolmaster. “Learn to play the basics first. Then, eventually, you can play the blues.”

Amidst the aroma of old beer, vomit and baking bread, Grandpa Elliot would play a little Mozart, a little Vivaldi, a tiny bit of Beethoven. Sometimes tourists stopped to hear the amazing sounds that flew like water from his harmonica. Sometimes they put money in his open hat that sat on the ground next to his amp and sometimes Grandpa would stop playing and pose for a photo. He would give the folks listening a card and show them his CDs.

“Buy this, my friends, and you can listen to this sweet stuff every day of the week!”

The Quarter was my home until two months ago. Finally, here I am back in it. Yet, as I walk its streets, the memories of my life here come to me as if they had happened to someone else.

Suddenly, I feel sick to my stomach. My head hurts, my eyes burn, and my chest heaves. It could be a reaction to the chemical dust that sticks to everything now that the waters have receded or it could be caused by a fearful thought that is beginning to rise in my stomach, getting stuck in my throat.

Maybe I am not meant to stay here anymore, I think. I cough and lean against the wall of a building as dizziness takes over. The city in fall is normally cool. Right now, however, it feels cold.

After the dizziness passes, I continue walking. I come to the store I used to work in on St. Louis Street. My old boss was the costume designer at Rick's Cabaret. The front window is busted in. High heel shoes lay scattered on the floor next to their boxes amongst plastic clothes hangers, moldy bits of waterlogged carpet and old tissue.

As I peer in at the spectacle, I remember the clientele that use to come in here. They were mostly showgirls from Rick's and other topless bars on Bourbon. They would come in to try on outfits for work or for work offers that happened after their official shifts had ended. Sometimes they came in just to talk, concern on their faces for bodies that were once assets, but, with the coming of "old age," have become liabilities. They fretted about turning thirty-five and how in the world they were going to pay the \$3,000 it costs to get a boob lift that would keep them working.

"You like it?" one woman asked me as she twirled and pranced in front of the mirror in a lime green pair of shorts that left more of her ass showing than it hid.

"Great," I said.

Standing in front of the washed out store, I feel a pang of remorse for not telling that woman the truth. In reality, it was all an illusion— the sizes on all the clothes had been changed before they even went out on the rack. An eight was not an eight; it was really a three, and so on. It's a psychological game to keep the females that walked in to the place in a kind of panicked

frenzy, thinking they have gained weight when really they haven't, keeping them bulimic, keeping them on the edge, and keeping them thinking that they needed to keep spending money on cheap garbs that will rip and tear way before their time.

Finally, I turn around and head back up Royal to the only public elementary school in the Quarter. It is just across the street from the Royal Street Coffee, a local hang out I use to buy mochas at in the mornings before heading to work. I walk in the middle of the cobblestone street, passed the dead vines on the schools outer wall and over to Dauphine Street again.

That night, Jeremy and I lie in our bed in our garden apartment, still messy from our frantic packing on the day we left. I am dead tired but restless. I listen to the quiet of the evening as the city settles in to sleep between the beating of the chopper wings.

My mother was the one who told me about the scarves that she and her sisters use to dance with when they were children.

Mom was making coffee on the stove. Grandma was sleeping as usual. In those grey winter days, Grandma slept and that was about all she did. The house was quiet. The love birds peeped and pecked in their cage by the big window and the traffic hummed outside on the I-5. Other than this, there was nothing to come between us and our thoughts.

"What about the scarves, mom?" Suddenly I wanted to smash the quiet with words. Mom did not respond.

"Mom? Mom!" I said. Throughout my life, my mother and I have had a relationship based on who was listening and who wasn't. As a child, I never thought that

she heard me and I know that she felt the same. The result was that we often spoke to each other in circles, like dogs sniffing each other's tails for a threat.

"Mom?" I said quietly but directly, trying a different approach.

"What?" she said finally, looking at me as if stunned to find me in the room with her at all. I could see that she had been crying.

"Mom..." I began.

"It is all happening too fast," she said, wiping a tear. "I just can't believe it. Mom always had so much life inside her. And now..."

"Tell me about the scarves," I said again, not knowing what else to do. Perhaps a good story may lighten up the mood. Grandma would have appreciated that. Mom smiled and walked over to the eating room table. She put her coffee cup down and grabbed the newspaper from the corner of the bench that hugged the large window. She folded it up and placed it on her lap.

"Mom kept an old basket in the bottom of her closet," my mother said. "Inside there were at least a dozen scarves of all colors — pink, blue, green, black and white polka dot and a few that she carried with her to the U.S. from China."

My mother was sitting in the chair that Grandma normally sat in, looking out at the city scene before her. Suddenly, I felt threatened. I wanted to keep that chair and that space empty for Grandma, until the day she could get up out of bed, cancer free, and sit back down at the table to tell us stories, paint her nails, eat Cheetos and laugh like she used to do, with squinted eyes, throwing her head back in gleeful abandon.

No one in my family of heavy-set, stocky people possessed the grace and poise that Grandma did most of her life, and my big-hipped mother was no exception. Still,

looking at her profile, I could see how mom was her mother's daughter. She could be just as quiet as Grandma when she wants to be and just as contemplative.

"In the evening, right before going to bed, Grandma would always sit at her big vanity mirror and fix herself up. She used Pond's. I can still smell the almond scent of it."

I recalled that there was a jar of the creamy white beauty cream sitting at that very moment on the same dresser in Grandma's room, covered over with packages of intravenous tubing, medicine bottles and wash cloths.

"We loved to be with mom when she was doing getting ready for bed," mom said. "All of us girls would gather together at her side. We would lean on mom's elbow, vying for her attention and begging to use a little cold cream for our faces. Sometimes mom would put a dab on our noses and we would squeal at how cool it was. And on most nights, when eventually we got bored of watching mother, we headed for the closet and her big basket of treasures."

My mother stopped speaking then and clutched at the maroon scarf hanging around her own neck. I wondered what Grandma and her girls did on those nights when Grandpa was in one of his rages. Did Grandma still sit at her vanity dabbing herself with cold cream and acting as if nothing was happening? Did my aunts and my mother hide under the bed as the sound of his heavy military boots got louder? She didn't say and I knew it wasn't the right time to ask. Mom often talked about her childhood in terms of her being the oldest and having the most responsibility of them all. Maybe she also carried the greatest burden of memory from those times. If she did, she kept those memories locked away. She shared them with no one, or at least not with me.

We heard the front door open. Aunt Kitty came in to the kitchen. She carried two shopping bags in her hands and her upper lip was moist with perspiration.

"I had to park all the way down the hill," she said, huffing and puffing. "How is she?"

"Not bad. She had a pretty big seizure this morning but then we were able to get a little yogurt down with a half of powered med," mom said. She hesitated for a moment and then continued. "I don't know how much longer we can do it this way, though, Kit. I don't think she is getting enough Dilantin. Since last night, the seizures are happening more."

Kitty frowned. She put the bags down on the couch by the TV. "What are we going to do?"

"I think we need to call hospice today. I've already told Patty and Vic. It's time to get some help."

"Let's wait just a little longer, Cat. Maybe she will turn around."

Mom looked at me with wide eyes. I knew instantly what this meant. Mom and I share Grandma's tendency for practicality while her sisters and, to a certain extent, her brother, shared her tendency for avoidance.

"Kit, she's not going to get any better. We have to start thinking..."

"No! This is our mother you are talking about! And I *don't* want to talk about it right now," Kitty said as she rushed into the bathroom.

"How long can we avoid this subject?" Mom called out after her.

When Kitty came out of the toilet, she glanced quickly at Mom and then turned to me, smiling. "Hey Nik," she said. "What are you up to?"

“Mom was telling me about the dancing scarves.”

“The dancing scarves?” Kitty asked.

“You know, Kit,” Mom said, not glancing up from the newspaper she had gone back to reading. “Remember the basket of scarves and old jewelry we use to play with when we were really young?”

“Wow, I hadn’t thought of that in a long time,” Kitty said, her voice lowering to a whisper. “You know, that basket used to be right there in Grandma’s bedroom, always on the bottom left hand corner of the closet,” Kitty said. “Cat, do you remember the dance mom tried to teach us?”

“Not the moves, just the song...” Mom began to hum a simple tune. “She tried to teach us the words in Chinese, but I don’t remember any of them.”

“And the dance!” Kitty said, glad to have a happy memory to focus on.

“Remember how we would grab for scarves as Grandma brought out the basket and we would fight over who got to hold the best ones? Then we would jump and jump on the bed swinging them around until mom had had enough. Then she would hum the tune and do the dance.”

Kitty stood with her bent legs shoulder-width apart on the linoleum floor. She lifted her arms up to the left as if reaching for the sun and then scooped them down to the floor, facing to the right while pointing her feet in the same direction and bending her legs even more.

“It was just like tai-chi!” Kitty said.

“Of course it was like tai chi!” mom said, rolling her eyes. “It was part of the school exercises Mom used to do when she was a girl. Don’t you remember?”

Watching Kitty, I tried to imagine my big-boned aunties and my mom as little girls, jumping and laughing on my grandparent's bed. I saw them spinning in a circle, the colorful scarves flying and waving like tiny wings. I imagined Grandma watching them from the mirror, a mixture of sadness and love in her eyes and I imagined Grandma humming the tune that brought her back to her own childhood. Perhaps seeing the scarves dancing in her little girls' hands reminded her of when her own mother used to hang laundry on the line in *Tianjin*. Maybe she remembered the way the wind, heavy at times, would pick the sheets, shirts and socks up and send them flying. As a grown woman, maybe she recalled how she loved to stand in the middle of all that fabric and pretend she was in a great balloon ready to take off over the clouds.

Kitty continued to prance and glide around the TV room and mom to read her newspaper until all of us heard a thud and a creak coming from Grandma's room. We had gotten accustomed to being on guard for such noises. In an instant, all three of us jumped up and rushed out of the kitchen, heading for Grandma's bedroom. Mom came to the side of the bed and held Grandma's hand as Grandma's body shook with tiny spasms. There was nothing we could do but wait until it was over.

"We have to call hospice and order the intravenous right now," Mom said with a firm voice. "I can't stand to see her suffer this way!"

"No!" Kitty shouted back at her sister. "They will fill her with morphine and then she won't even know us anymore. "

"Damn it, Kitty," my mother was livid. "I have had enough. Get your head out of the sand and face the facts. Maybe she will pull through; there is always a chance..."

Mom stopped talking for a moment as Grandma's body relaxed and laid limp in mom's arms. "... but more than likely not."

My aunt Kitty looked away. She bit her lip and nodded as mom slowly left Grandma's side and reached for the phonebook on the dresser nearby.

December 29, 2005

I sit on the bed in our little apartment on Dauphine Street and play with the beads on our orange bedspread. In the low glow that comes from a nearby street light, I see the half-collapsed palm tree in the patio. The sturdy iron table we had used a dozen times for cozy get-togethers is now hosting piles of leaves and dirt.

Jeremy is in the bathroom. He has his back to me. I am a ghost to him now. Perhaps it was inevitable. This evening I told him what I had been avoiding telling him for weeks.

"Jeremy," I had said, "I can't stay in the city. It is making me sick."

Every time I spend more than two days in the chemical dust that covers every square inch of our apartment, our patio, our neighborhood, the entire city of New Orleans, my head begins to hurt and my lungs flair up in pain. For weeks I have struggled with why this is happening. Other people seem to handle it fine. At first I tried to ignore it. I tried to be tough as Jeremy and I ran into people we knew in the hardware store, the market and out on the street.

"Fuck the feds," we said. "We can do it ourselves!"

During the day, I cheer along with the rest of them. But by evening, while the others celebrate their new-found mission at our favorite watering holes, I collapse in bed, aching from head to toe.

Some bodies can handle just about anything. Feed them bologna sandwiches on white bread and coca-cola and they do just fine. Others are more sensitive. The slightest thing sets them off. My body is of the latter, as much as I don't want to admit it. The funny thing is is that whole time we were away from the city, I could think of nothing else but coming back to New Orleans.

Jeremy will not look me in the face. At that moment, I despise his cowardess. Why not just come right out and say it? I am not worth it to him to make a compromise and live somewhere else for a while. Maybe I never was worth it to him. My fingers clutch the sides of the bedspread, as if I am getting ready for take-off. I am not sure I can handle this kind of hurricane.

Please let me hold on to just one little thing. The words are a mantra.

"Nicole," he had said. "maybe it is for the best that you cannot stay ..."

The marriage had been a mistake, he said. We had done it for the wrong reasons. It shouldn't have happened and he wanted it annulled. I hear the words but they sound like a foreign language. I do not understand them. He was breaking up with me for the fifth time, the sixth time. I have lost count. This time, however, I know that it is different. This time, I will not be coming back.

An hour later, I leave our house on Dauphines Street carrying only a small box with a few of my personal things.

"Take the rest," I say. He says he will store my things in boxes just in case. I remember this part. This is how it starts, the retreat and then the eventual reeling back in. *I have your things.* *Would you like to come get them?* he will say three months from now, when he is finished working it all out and wants me back.

"No," I say. "I will not be coming back for it. If you don't want it, then give it away."

As I step out on to the street carrying only my purse, my lips pursed in determination, the city speaks to me as a final goodbye. She is my family. She loves me enough to send me on my way,

and will kick me in the butt with her big steel boot to do it if that is what it takes. I see the twinkling of Christmas lights around the Quarter and smile. Even though I am leaving New Orleans, I love her more and more.

As I get in my car and start it up, Jeremy comes out on to the sidewalk. He stands in the middle of Dauphine Street, his hands shoved down in his pockets. I see his slightly rounded figure and the glint of his glasses in my rearview mirror as I head towards Elysian Fields and the freeway entrance. And then he is gone.

Back on the road that night, I decide that I will not cry. Best to have a game plan first, then the emotional breakdown can come.

What will I do? Where will I go? What the hell will I DO?

My mind races as I hold on to the last semblance of sanity, just enough to keep the car from careening off the side of the soggy road.

That is when I see her.

Grandma. Her silhouette hovers on the freeway in front of the car, ricocheting off the headlights and the rain that comes down all around me. I feel a movement in my chest, as if someone has pushed me hard from behind.

It is a thought that hit me. Some say thoughts are things. I have always taken this to mean that thoughts are made up of the same particles of energy as everything else in the universe. I have never known a thought to literally throw a punch. Until that night, that is.

The thought that comes to me was not really a complete sentence nor even a meandering phrase, as thoughts sometimes are. It was an image in my mind, clear as day.

It is a vision of an island in the shape of an elongated heart. Is it Maui or perhaps the Big Island? Right after Grandma died, my Aunt Patty had bought land on one of the Hawaiian Islands. She had bought it in honor of Grandma.

“It was the one place that she wanted so much to visit, but never did,” Aunt Patty, whose intuition was often as uncanny as her comments, had said. She had shrugged. “Maybe one of us will go there someday. This way she can see Hawaii through us.”

Now even the little yellow lines on the highway fall away. All is silent. I remember the words Grandma had said the last time she told me about the floods that came to the farm country where she use to live:

“ All you can do when you are in middle of all that water, Nikki, is try to get out of the way and go with current.”

It was then that I knew that would not be going back to New Orleans. I would not be going back with Jeremy. I would be starting anew.

I will help as much as I can from where I am right here and now and then, when I have helped all that I could, I will go someplace far away and completely differen. I will go to Hawaii. I will step foot firmly on the island soil that Grandma always wanted to see. I will plant Grandma’s Sapota seeds on the land that Aunt Patty bought. I will do it for me and for Grandma.

I will do it because my heart tells me to.

When I opened my mouth and closed my eyes to cry, I did not know that the sound was going to come. It pierced through me like a bullet, shooting past teeth and tongue and into the stuffy air of Grandma’s bedroom. Its tone floated through the ceiling and blended

with the collective cries of widows in the Middle East, of mourning women in Africa, of grieving mothers singing in second lines in New Orleans, of girls dressed in white walking in funeral processions in China. The wail resounded alongside the memories of the times when Grandma herself had wailed. It was a woman's dance of sound — first floating up to the sky and then down deep into blackness of my own despair.

The wail lasted two minutes and nothing anybody said or did could stop it. When, finally, the last breath of sound faded, the silence dripped like honey from the walls of Grandma's bedroom.

"Nikki, are you okay?" It was Aunt Patty. She poked me with her index finger.

"She's okay. She's okay," my mother said. I am not sure if her words were directed at me, Patty or herself. It seemed in the moment, however, as if she was begging for quiet so that her mother could sleep and wake up healthy and happy, laughing and telling her stories in the eating room surrounded by the chirping of the love birds, the swooshing of the cars on the freeway and the rush of the airplanes coming and going from Lindberg Field.

When I opened my eye, I saw Mom and Aunt Patty sitting on the bed, rocking back and forth, tears smearing their mascara. The three of us sat in the still space between the living and the dead for what seemed like a very long time.

Then we did what I suppose women have done for thousands of years right after their loved ones die. With the door still closed, we prepared Grandma's body for death.

Aunt Patty walked over to Grandma's closet and picked out an outfit that we knew she would like — smooth, cream-colored slacks and a blouse to match, comfortable yet sharp. We took off her old nightgown and, with a damp cloth, wiped away the moisture that had accumulated underneath her from the releasing of muscles. We gently slipped on her new

outfit, brushed her hair, and applied a light powder to her face. We lifted her up — Aunt Pat with her arms around her waist, mom and I at the bottom by her feet. We slipped a plastic sheet underneath her to protect her newly-clothed body from the saturated bed.

We did not look at each other as we worked, only at Grandma, whose face had turned waxen. The cheeks seem hardened, the eyes more slanted than before. Grandma looked in death more Mongolian than ever. When we were finished, we sat back down on the bed again, wondering what to do next. That's when we saw it.

Could it have been a slight whisper of a smile on Grandma's face? Despite our grief, we couldn't help but smile back. Aunt Pat and mom reached for each other's hands. Then they both reached for mine.

After a while, we opened the door to Grandma's bedroom, inviting the rest of the world to come in.

Epilogue

Each tiny petal is a nail that could potentially pierce through skin. Yet they are delicate, too, these tiny offspring of giants. They are sprouts that fall by the dozen from the sky and land in the middle of the school yard, vulnerable, still and waiting. They are seeds that would eventually turn into monoliths but could just as easily be kindling or something to be kicked or picked apart by an inquiring mind, some third-grader playing in the back field or a fifth grader hunting for a science project.

The petals are from the pine cones the children have collected today and they are also the children themselves, twenty of them ages four, five, and six who are now in my Kindergarten class in Green T. Linden Elementary School. I have been teaching now at Green T for more than two months. I have already given my notice. I will work until the Christmas break and then I will go. The Barbie Twins understand. The parents understand. I haven't told the kids yet, but that will come. These are chaotic, uncertain times. I will get the children, who sometimes leave my class as suddenly as they arrive, through the weeks leading to winter break and fill them with smiles, sweets and glitter. And then I will move on.

Three days before I was to start, I visited the classroom that would be ours. There was nothing but bare walls, a few chairs and two tables. Jeremy helped me set up my classroom. We played house as we gathered mismatched seats from other classrooms and scoured the supply room for posters. Then, just in time, the FEMA money came and of course, we had to spend a little bit (which turned out to be a lot) on the children. We bought bean bags and wind charmers, sparkle and glitter, special papers, a fuzzy rug and two puppets in the shape of giant butterflies that we hung at the corners of the little trailer classroom.

On the first day of class, the children were wide-eyed when they entered the room, as children this age usually are. They were also, however, uncharacteristically alert and on edge. None of them had been in Lafayette for long. Many no longer had homes to return to, whether they actually understood it or not. On that first day, we sat in a circle and shared the “talking stick,” a soft material ball with an image of the earth painted on it. They liked to throw the ball up in the air and catch it as they talked, giggling and chatting away until it was their turn. Once they had the ball in their chubby little hands, of course, they became silent and shy. They bounced the soft blue planet-ball in their lap or threw it up in the air, their faces turning beet red until it was time to pass it along.

“Don’t be afraid,” I said. “We will listen.”

As the stick was passed around a second time, I taught them hand signals to use in lieu of talking. Thumbs up meant “I agree.” Shaking hands in the air could be done instead of clapping. And if you really didn’t agree with something that someone else said, you can quietly give a thumbs down or simply not say anything at all.

“Remember,” I say often, because a five-year-old’s memory is short, “Everyone will get a chance to speak.”

“I miss my house,” one tiny boy said when it was his turn to talk. His voice was as small as he was. “I want to go home. “

The kids began to talk at once. I put a single finger to my lips and eventually silence ensued. What do we miss most about our homes? I asked. Again the talking stick was passed around.

“Ice cream!”

“Grandma!”

“The park!”

“Television!”

“My bed!”

I did not offer solutions because I did not have any to give. I did tell them that I know how they felt. I had to move from my home too.

“Did you have to leave your cat behind?” A little girl to my left asked.

“I had to leave three cats behind,” I replied.

“I had a dog...”

“Me, a bird...”

“We have a cat. She came with us but then we lost her. I hope she comes back.”

And on and on and on. Then, after a while, silence ensued and that was okay too. I had learned from the best storyteller ever how silence works its magic. After a while, I handed out crayons and pieces of paper and we drew pictures of our homes to hang on the walls of the classroom.

“So we will never forget them,” I said.

“I don’t need to remember. I am going back.” That was Katelyn, age five going on thirty-five. Besides the occasionally violent outburst, she was by far the most mature child in the class. She was borderline genius in reading, smart as a whip in math, deeply sensitive and sometimes very emotionally unstable. Every classroom I have ever taught seemed to have one.

“Are we always going to just draw and talk in this class?” Little Brett asked.

“Oh no.” I said, “We have serious work to do too. So you better watch out. Pretty soon I’m gonna crack the whip!”

With my left hand, I pretended I had a whip and I was about to crack it. A squeal and several giggles erupted from the group.

“But I’m not good in math,” Brett said, a worried look on his face.

“That’s okay,” I said, turning serious. “All you need to do, everybody, is the best that you can. Work hard, don’t give up and be sure to give yourself a pat on the back when you feel proud!”

Just for fun, we broke into pairs and practiced patting ourselves on the back. Then we patted our neighbors. Then everyone started to pat me. And that was it. I was in love with teaching all over again.

Now, a month later, the brand new carpet has the appropriate amount of chocolate milk stains and the puppets have been used and abused just enough so that they look like they have been loved. Finished math sheets with golden stars and silhouetted art projects with fish and crayon watercolors line the windows. And today, we celebrate, even though it is just another ordinary Tuesday.

We celebrate a lot in this class because here in the midst of our topsy-turvy lives, as we come and go from the shelter, from hotel rooms, from relative’s houses, from New Orleans and back on weekends now that the city has opened up again, we have to remember that we have a lot to be thankful for. Also, I have a lot of parent help and they seem to appreciate parties as well. Twenty sets of parents who at one time were too busy to pick their kids up from school now flood my classroom daily, crouching on tiny stools, coloring in paint-by-number worksheets, hanging out on the play yard at recess as they wait for FEMA checks, unemployment benefits and insurance claims to come in. It is only the middle of October, the very beginning of the holiday season, but no matter. We have decided to begin celebrating

Christmas early. Why not? After all, it is the most important holiday of them all.

So today, we collect pinecones to paint and make into miniature Christmas trees. My children hold them in their hands and tuck them into the bottoms of their shirts. They run with them like they are gold nuggets to be coveted and traded for candy canes and sweet cakes and past Christmases when they were back at home, nestled into the breast of the city like little birds.

To the children, the pinecones, just like the red-breasted Cardinals that fly mysteriously past our classroom window every afternoon, are precious gems. Each pointed pinecone piece is a memory of a smile on the day before it happened or a toy left on a soggy floor. Where did they all go — these tiny fragments of childhood? They have been washed out into Lake Ponchartrain or swooped up into the air and tossed a hundred miles to the north. Perhaps they floated out at sea and soon a child in some far away land — maybe India, maybe China — will claim the Dora lunch pail, the Lego blocks, and the dollhouse furniture that had washed away last August.

What also of these bright eyes and chubby hands? The eyes are here now, focused on me with expectation. Those chubby hands hold pine cones tightly in their grip. I had said before recess that day: “Let’s collect pinecones! Let’s turn them into ornaments for your Christmas trees!” The children cheered.

“Let’s do it right now!” they had said and abruptly got up to leave, sending swirls of name-writing practice sheets into the air like leaves in a storm.

“No, no,” I had said, internally bristling at the commotion, externally trying to be an example of teacherly patience. “Not now, but soon. At recess we will go.”

It was on an impulse that I had made the suggestion in the first place. But once said, it

could not be taken back or revised. The idea immediately took on a life of its own. The hour before they were excused for the playground felt like an eternity. Little feet moved under the desks. Math time was nearly impossible. Suddenly, no one knew what digit came after the number 17 but everyone in the class became expert time-keepers. Twenty minutes to go! Fifteen! Ten! Five! The minutes clicked away and some, the more contemplative of the group, began to have second thoughts about the whole thing. These wise ones weighed the options and consequences of making ornaments for Christmas trees like athletes do about speed, trajectory and competition before an Olympian event.

“I will not be getting a tree here to put my ornament on because soon I will be going home.” Of course, that was Katelyn, who, by then, had been sent to the office at least fifteen times — seven times to be tested for advanced reading levels and eight times for erratic and destructive behavior to life and property. Katelyn is from New Orleans’ Garden District. When she goes home, which would be any minute now according to her, she will drive with her mom and dad to the little place where they always purchase their Christmas tree, the lot next to “the Big Park with the pond and the little ducks.”

“You know.” she had said impatiently, “Where the zoo is.”

Katelyn was talking about someplace near Audubon Park. Indeed, I remember seeing the lot near that area the year before but could not say if it would be there this year. Katelyn thought so. She sat with arms folded. She would not be participating in the pinecone hunt.

The memories of the recent past are now set in stone for all of us. One month ago is like a year. Two month is like a decade. The mental images of how things use to be are now icons to be revered on a thousand mental shrines. This is what the Hurricane and its aftermath has done to them— and to me. It has given us a past that will never be forgotten. As for the

future, that is still a vague notion that no one can wrap their head around.

I ponder these things as I give each child a plastic bag to put their pinecones in. I notice the familiar feeling in my stomach, like vertigo, at the possibility that a certain reality, that reality that says *nothing will ever be the same again*, seeps into every cell inside of me.

Kids are lucky, I think. Five-year-olds do not think about the obvious questions that grownups tend to ruminate over most of their adult lives. They are simple. The very young hold on to the thoughts of happy times while the bad times become lodged inside of them only to come out later when growing older catches up with them.

After recess, the children line up with armloads of little brown pinecones. Even Katelyn, to my joy, has collected two or three. She holds them gingerly in her hands, not wanting to squish them by putting them in the bag. Then we march to the classroom all together with the autumn wind whipping at our cheeks and chins. As we file in, the children sit themselves in a circle — they are use to this procedure by now — and put the pine cones in the center of the floor. We count them, chanting the numbers like an incantation. When they reach the really big numbers — the thirties, forties and fifties — the room suddenly grows quiet. They whisper. This is serious business. The count has to be perfect. Somehow it matters, this little detail. When it is over, a cheer breaks out. There are fifty-six in all.

“Fifty-six! That’s like a million!” Brent says, jumping up and down on his little orange square of carpet. We do third grade math and use division to figure out how many each student will have to work with.

Then we get down and dirty. Out comes the green paint, the red paint, the purple paint, the silver and, of course, the gold paint. The glitter, the feathers, the sequence and the Elmer’s glue hold each one all together.

When we are finished, those pine cones have become jewels in the children's paint-covered hands. They are fairy castles. They are houses that no wind can blow over nor levee break bow down. The children hold their works of art up to the hazy light that shines in through the classroom window. They sparkle. At the end of the day, as we put on jackets and get ready to leave, those painted and bedazzled seedlings leave the classroom with us dangling from strings—twirling, twirling, sparkling and twirling.

Vita

The author was born in San Diego, California. She obtained her Bachelors of Arts degree from the University of California, San Diego in 1997, where she majored in Ethnic Studies with an emphasis in Mexican-American Literature. She obtained a teaching credential (Bilingual/Multicultural K through 8 certificate) from National University in Vista, California in 1999. In 2005, she joined the University of New Orleans Low-Residency Creative Writing Program with an emphasis in Creative Nonfiction.