

Winter Melon Soup

stories by sally mao

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DUST-SILK POUCH

Up ahead, the road widens to reveal a slipshod blockade of cars, carts, and cargo. A yellow-curry smoke stews the engine of Mr. Kendall's van as he bites at the tail of jagged traffic. James, neck pressed against the seat, awakens from a sweaty dream to the grind of sound.

He has just suffered the same nightmare again. It gallops with him wherever he goes. He sees its lean legs and mane, its relentless tawny hooves swerving outside car windows, airplane windows, bedroom doors, its acrid breath clogging his nostrils, a familiar stench. The ride up the mountain has rattled his dreamscape like some monstrous cataclysm, magnifying his terror. This time the rodents had done it. They were wearing green uniforms, the whole lot of them. They swarmed, they crawled, they carried nooses, planks, kerosene, and razor-tipped whips. They were out for blood.

James asks, "Dad, what's a Nazi?"

"Eh? Are we having this discussion again?"

"What's a Nazi, what's a Gestapo, what are they?"

"A Nazi is a kind of monster," Mr. Kendall declares.

"The kind that enslaves people, that performs cruel experiments. A Gestapo is their secret police."

"What kind of monsters are they? Are they some kind of furry creature? Rodents, maybe?"

"I wouldn't say that. But Nazis are less prevalent than they used to be."

"I just had a dream. It was the chipmunks, it was the rodents who made up the Gestapo, they wanted blood, Dad, they wanted blood, and they're right here in India—I'm not sure where but I think they're further up ahead. I'm scared!"

Mr. Kendall laughs. "Well, son, who could really blame the rodents? The very term 'guinea pig' implies some sort of cruel and unusual experimentation. Yes, if rodents took over the world, they'd be out for blood."

His father's hands sweat on the wheel. "This may take longer than expected," he says. "The hospital is beyond this village. If I get this right, it'd probably be within the next two towns. I hope that's the one she's staying in. Otherwise, we're out of luck."

What they are waiting for James doesn't grasp. He fidgets, chews on imaginary gum, plugs his ears. Before this trip, India was a haze of cast-bronze Hindu idols, boiled-blood sunrises, young girls in jeweled saris and deep crimson makeup, and all that kind of exotic drone that keeps a dish of samosas spicy. But like any vision, this one has been extinguished. India isn't carved out of ivory. India bakes and suffocates. India is dirty, damp, and cauldron-colored. India sticks to the inside of his skin.

Suddenly he looks up. "Dad, is there a fire over there?"

Mr. Kendall squints. A shift in the opaque smoke reveals an entire mountain burning behind the yellow mantle.

"Looks like a real conflagration," Mr. Kendall says. "So that's what the commotion is all about. Guess we'll be here awhile, until they clear it. That's if they can. Why don't you go fetch us some cold drinks?"

James opens the car door and inhales the smell of charred mountain. The unpaved street bulges with trucks, vendors, bleached billboards, and pools of reflective tar. He glances at an obsolete Pepsi sign and hand-gestures for two bottles. He pops one open and gulps it down. It fizzes, almost warm.

Just as he starts back, he sees someone. A boy, around his age, brick-skinned, two watery beetles for eyes, staring at him intensely. It isn't surprising. James is a Westerner, with sand-dune hair and pale eyes. He sticks out like a camel in a mangrove swamp.

The boy notices James staring back, and quickly averts his eyes. Behind him a voice calls out. It is the boy's little sister, teacup face framed with a tangled black braid. She carries a dust-silk pouch in her hands. Mourning eyes, black-and-gray like a mockingbird's. She stares past James, directly at the fire, as if in a delicate trance.

James recognizes her. This is a girl he witnessed burned by the Gestapo in his dreams. His vision of infinite loss, of time and pain melded, the stalagmites in a human heart. His vision of mercy defeated. She was burned like a sack of dry wood, a ritual mask, a ragged field of dandelions.

He motions toward her, letting out a sound. "Run," he hisses. "Run away! Please—Don't let the fire get you!"

The girl stares at him wide-eyed and tugs the torn robe of her brother. She doesn't understand. Her brother shakes a fist at him, his beetle eyes bulbous with fury.

Suddenly James felt ashamed. Someone he loves is lying in some ancient hospital in the middle of a sultry day in India, unconscious as newborn shrimp, probably plundered of her possessions, and the only thing he can do is recount silly childhood nightmares.

He runs back toward the car. He sees his father on the cell phone and slips inside.

"What took you so long?" Mr. Kendall asks.

"It was the vendor line."

"I got a call from the hospital she's staying in. She's frantic. Her injuries and exhaustion don't ensure her safe trip back."

"What's wrong?"

"Apparently she knows one of the folks who lived up there in the mountains."

"Who?"

"She is familiar with a certain family up there. The news says that a few houses were badly burned. Not sure yet of casualties. But one of the families are close friends of hers. Apparently they have one son and two daughters."

James opens his mouth. "I saw them."

"What do you mean, you saw them?"

"I saw both the sisters. One I saw just now. The other I saw getting burned. She died, Dad, she died!"

"Wait a minute—how could you have seen her getting burned?"

"I saw her, Dad, I saw her in my dream. She was the girl's twin."

"Don't tell me such things, son! Arson, death, is never a thing to joke about!"

James starts to cry. He remembers the girl's vacant face, her tongue that spoke a fragile Indian. He wants to see her again. He wants to explain himself. He wants to make sure she's okay.

"Sorry, Dad, I'll be right back!" James steps out of the van and runs toward the site where he spotted the girl. He runs past the vendors, a shop with cheap carved Buddhas, and the trees that obscure the burning village. He runs past the bleating drone of the traffic.

He sees the girl and her brother. James, panting, kneels down before them, and stares up, wild-eyed.

"You're...surviving," he says. The girl's expression, no longer in a stupor, suddenly gives a somber smile. Somehow, she understands. She holds out her satin pouch and inside is a wooden frame, a crude photograph of herself and her sister. They are identical. They wear red satin saris.

He smiles and weeps. Her braid brushes the side of his cheek. Her eyes are watery, like wishing wells. Behind him, his father's car trails. Mr. Kendall rolls down the window and motions for James to come back inside. James slowly rises, and waves goodbye. He wonders if the girl was only pretending to understand. He wonders whether she would cry.

"It's a little bit clearer down the road. The smog's descending," Mr. Kendall muses. "I wonder if we'll make it to the next town in time."

James presses his cheek to the window, and watches the girl disappear behind the smoke. The unpaved road shines with tar and footprints.

A VANCOUVER HUNGER

The last time I saw her, she was standing in the sandbox. Her legs had bruises the size and color of the anchovies in my living room fish tank, and her naked toes dug into the gravel. The sandbox stretched backwards toward the water and I had the strangest feeling that if I didn't hold fast onto her hand, then the river would swallow her whole and leave me alone. Back then loneliness was a sickness that could make you feel like you were tossing and turning in a sea; you could physically feel the brine up your throat, the salt catching under your eyelashes, the weight draining from your body into the roaring rapids all around.

At twelve I was a whole head taller than her. She was so tiny that when the bathtub filled, the water would reach up just past her nose. We used to take baths together back when we went swimming in the Saka river. Everything about it was too dirty; we could go for a five-minute dip and the brown slime still dripped out of our hair. The amount of soap we used for two skinny little girls was phenomenal; every bar of Ivory or Dove we touched melted into gooey lumps. Sunset would redden the clouds over the date palms outside the window, and we'd fall asleep with the lights on.

But that day I knew I'd never see her again, so I didn't take her hand. I handled the sickness myself. I wanted to push her into the river like the way I did in my

dreams and never see her face resurface. The water was the color of mirrors and that was how I wanted to lock her up - sweet and cold under my own image. She was my best friend, and eventually she would go on to become someone else's best friend, but I knew I would never have one again.

At the Vancouver airport, between the baggage check-in and the exit, there she is, wrapped in a poplin scarf, waving at me. Her contact lenses make her eyes honey-pale, like a foreigner's. I forget that in this case, I am the barbarian. We are eighteen. Beside her is her mother—a tall, fine-boned, beaming beauty. My own mother throws down our bundles of gifts and wipes her mouth with a tissue. "Six years," she whispers. "Believe it, it's been six years."

Lydia stumbles towards me in platforms and I worry she'd snap her ankles with those three-and-a-half-inch heels.

"Sadie!" she calls my name.

We meet. We cry. We hug. I take her hand in mine, and it's much heavier than I remember. There is something hollow and smoky about her touch that stuns me, that makes blood rumple my veins. Her hair has grown long and stiff, dyed three shades lighter, the color of maple. When she pulls away to stare at me I smell something like nectarines. She

is calculating my height, an inch shorter than her in my ballet flats.

"I was hoping you'd fall behind me, but I guess nothing changes," she says. "So much taller than me, still." She places her hand on my head. She isn't tiny anymore.

"Look at you two!" Lydia's mother, Ms. Xi, says. Since forever she's insisted I call her Ms. Xi, the English way, instead of the usual Xi Aa-yi. "You two used to be scared and small like little mice who chase each other around—and now I see this. Two mature, beautiful young women."

"Not nearly mature enough," my mother fusses. "Sadie here is still dreaming—big things, impossible things."

I pretend not to hear her.

Our mothers clasp hands and give each other sneaky grins, as if they'd just dined together yesterday over lobster and martinis. After we load the luggage into the burgundy Honda, I try to summon memories of corduroy pants and bruises near the knee, but all I can picture is the view from the plane that evening. Wind, trees, Vancouver's waters. The city, a lambent microchip under the clouds. It'd been hard to grasp that this is where Lydia and her mother escaped from her stepfather six years ago with three hundred dollars in the bank and a beat-up 1983 Volvo. Here, she legally changed both her other nationality half (Chinese-

American to Chinese-Canadian) and then her name (Lin An to Lydia). Here, she earned straight A's in high school, and got her first job as a waitress in a restaurant serving warm banana crepes and milkshakes.

Now I realize how listening to her disembodied voice over the phone is so much easier than listening to it live and unmitigated, how strange that this familiar childlike drawl escapes those polished lips.

A jazz station plays on the FM radio. Our mothers catch up to the shrill sound of Miles Davis's "Autumn Leaves". Lydia leans forward on her elbow, transfixed. "I played this before on the piano," she says, "but I like hearing this in saxophone." She says *in saxophone* as if it were a language.

"Five years, Lydia's been playing the piano," Ms. Xi says. "She's won seven or eight-eight, was it? regional competitions."

"I'd love to hear her play," my mother says.

"It's something thrilling in her fingers. Really, a marvel."

We spend the half hour home chatting—our mothers about the brevity of their marriages; us about our high schools. I think of the kind of friends I had in my high school in Santa Clara, California—Linda the peanut-eating nymphomaniac, Catherine the self-obsessed mannequin, and Cameron, their bland buck-toothed man-slave—and recoil,

wishing that other people could replace my memories. I make up names (Rylie, David, Pamela, Christie) and assign them roles as my friends.

"Rylie and I went to the high school formal together," I tell her. "It was night, and we swung in the swings at Memorial Park and ate this tiramisu we stole from the prom table. We ran across the mud - me in heels. It hurt like hell. I couldn't return them to the store afterwards."

"We did something similar," she says. "After my senior dance, we walked along the blue pebbles at English Bay. Watched the rising sun, so beautiful and pink. A couple of times I almost tripped and fell into the ocean."

I imagine her knees casting shadows over the tide pools, her blue dress floating, the sand rough and shifting like crawling tarantulas, and remember the day I last saw her in the sandbox. It's been four years now since I lost contact with her. In my dreams a small, lotus-white hand would shoot up, I'd fumble over; our fingertips would meet, I'd tease her, then let go.

Over dinner, Lydia peels her prawns with chopsticks. She handles the shrimp like a steak, holding it in place with one chopstick, sawing off the head with the other. To me this is really odd. She tears the meat with her small mouth, not speaking at all as her mother pushes baby tomatoes onto her plate. Our mothers discuss the raspberry vinaigrette and

rose petal sauce while their cat Pluto, an orange-striped tabby, yawns on the windowsill next to silt-filled flowerpots. Outside, June rains dry under the sun.

The apartment they bought is enviable in the way so much light floods the room, patterning the floor with arabesques of shadows and leaves. The baby grand piano is draped with a silver cloth that I swear was a gift from me. It has a familiar design - shirtless babies in suspenders and torn socks, running amok in a stone garden, hurling sticks and rice at each other. I own something identical, tucked in my closet with mothballs and sweaters my grandmother knit. Above their piano, one airbrushed scroll of Lydia and her mother in traditional clothes hangs, both smiling in a way I never smile in pictures with my own mother.

As we clear the dishes, Ms. Xi brings out a plate of sweet potatoes. Once she scrapes off the skin, the flesh turns waxy and bright purple. "They are Okinawan purple yams, *names*, they call them," she says, enunciating *na-meis* slowly.

They taste bitter and dry but they fill up my mouth with heat. Lydia chews the last chunks of spicy catfish without sound. She concentrates on our mothers' conversation, joins in from time to time. When she does, she talks about cooking sweet potatoes outside in a clay pot amidst the red and silver leaves. She talks about hikes up

Grouse Mountain, about her recent trip to Thailand with a group of strangers. There were pictures of her holding an alocasia-leaf umbrella, surrounded by a hot shower of rain and grinning bare-ribbed children. "The sun was so hot, I had these urges to run around naked. Which isn't a bad thing - I mean, I've always wanted to streak in a tropical climate."

"Lydia! Don't talk like that," Ms. Xi says. She quickly diverts the conversation to Lydia's testing for her GEDs three years early, her independent decision to become a bioengineering major, the seven top schools of Canada accepting her.

"It makes me shiver sometimes, the kinds of opportunities our kids have these days," my mother comments, glancing at me for a second and then darting her eyes. "Growing up in our generation, we had absolutely nothing. A few reams of paper, a pencil, if we're lucky. It was hard enough to keep our bellies full; our brains were always left to starve." She stares at me, arching her eyebrow.

"Look at what our girls can do now!" Ms. Xi shines. "No more countryside and farmwork. No more nightly cabbage soup and excessive dreaming. Today even in China everyone's using the Internet."

I am not brave. I do not speak. I try to hide myself from the way my mother talks like an old woman, smiling at

Lydia as if marveling this girl who is doing everything my mother has wished me to do. My mother does not mention my publications, gallery openings, art awards, how I got a full ride for RISD like I want her to. These are not topics worth mentioning.

The spring when I was eight years old, I answered the door of our third-grade classroom to a pair of blinking, thunderstruck eyes. At the time her name wasn't Lydia; it was Lin An, and her mother's lips were smiling, red like maraschino cherries. The young Ms. Xi was plump and proud then but for reasons different than now. She'd just gotten married to a half-Chinese American whose father was acquainted with her family. She'd crossed an ocean to let her daughter live with a heart filled with dreams, much like my father had six years before when I was a toddler.

Lin An carried a Donald Duck schoolbag on her arms, the taper of her white pants sliding down over her leather boots. Her mouth was a parabola of disorientation. I ushered her inside the classroom and chalked my name in Chinese on the blackboard.

Sheng Mei, the characters read, Sheng for "new" and Mei for "beauty". I'd missed the stroke on the top of Mei and Lin An did not hesitate to add it on, as if her sole purpose was to complete my name. It was the first thing she ever did for me and the first time I saw her laugh. I was so

touched I didn't recognize it was condescension, the kind most young girls harbored for those who weren't familiar with their home, their origins.

She came from Sha'anxi province of China, where her grandparents owned a farm, a well, and four strong water buffalo. Her father was a farmhand who died in a tragic road accident before she was born. Her mother had her at the age of twenty-three and for the first five years of Lin An's life they lived in the countryside between Xi'an and Xia He, fattening chickens and sweeping sunny ashes off the patio.

That morning I spoke broken Mandarin with an occasional burst of English. The way she gazed at me as if I were her savior made me proud and motherly. I was her interpreter, her protector, her vigilante; she was my wolf pup, so in return she gave me warmth and proximity, something I never got from the other kids.

Naturally we began to share a lot of things. We shared chalk, hair lice, swimsuits, snowglobes, arithmetic, and all kinds of cuts and bruises. Our masochism as children was a little appalling. The jungle gym blistered our hands badly, the yellow stuff twisting through broken skin. Roller-blading down the steep incline would pepper our knees and legs with torn skin, and we'd shriek with laughter as we fell and bruised ourselves.

"I want to climb on your back," she once told me, guilelessly. We were nine, and had known each other for a

year. We were standing in the middle of a vast abandoned Monterey beach during flu season, when the fog was as thick as the stuff inside our noses. She climbed onto me and I held her legs awkwardly. Her cheek lay against my back, and I felt her feet dangling limply against my legs. When I stepped onto the edge of the waves, her eyes scraped my neck and she closed them for the longest time, exhaling so deeply I thought she fell sound asleep.

The next afternoon, Lydia's mother takes us to Granville Island. It is Sunday, and the island is jammed with young mothers balancing handbags and toddlers and bags of fruits and nuts, kids riding scooters and skateboards, runners and cyclists slathering suntan oil over their arms. Gulls cry overhead as they land upon the rooftops, wings batting against the warm, blustery gust.

We pass by a flower shop, where a red-haired woman aligns pots of marigolds over the counter. She is skinny and her invisible eyelashes bat every few seconds in response to the wind.

"That's the shop where I bought you flowers," Lydia says. "I ordered them here a few days ago." Yesterday after dinner she had given me a bouquet of bluebells and baby breath, wrapped in periwinkle tissue paper.

She encloses her hand over mine, and we walk like a pair of schoolgirls.

"They sell beautiful lilies here," Ms. Xi says, stopping to stroke the tip of a marigold.

In the Granville Market, we part ways with our mothers. They walk toward the fish and meat market, the sales painted neatly on a sign hanging above a plastic salmon: fresh albacore, rockfish, Cornish hens, quail, all of them displayed under glass panels on beds of ice.

Lydia and I eat lunch in the Maritime Café on the dock, the sun and sea all around us. Lydia orders a crab sandwich. She balances her head delicately toward the city while we talk glibly about books and music. Over the quartz-blue water Vancouver rises, immobile and chillingly futuristic. The bulbous dome of the science center peeks out behind the Renaissance Hotel.

I can't believe I found you again, I want to say. I want to say many things—I've missed you so much, I've waited so long, the way I told her in my letters, but find myself stuffing the words with ham and tuna. In my mind, I've played this scene over and over again, the moment we can sit down and have a real conversation, minus the mothers, minus the pageantry of their daughter contest.

"You know, I don't go out on the town like this, but with you here I feel pretty good about it," says Lydia. "Like, I'm imagining myself in your mind right now, and I'm

taking in the scenery, and it's as if it's the first time. So lovely and new." She squeezes my hand.

Over on the next table, I notice a waiter, probably on his break, staring intensely at us. He is handsome, Italian-looking, with black bangs that sweep over his forehead. As soon as he sees me, he turns away a bit, puffing a cigarette, and then returns my gaze.

Minutes later, he walks over to us. "Anything to drink, ladies?" he asks, looking over at Lydia. Lydia glances up, a little surprised, and lets go of my hand.

"Yes, please," she says. "Two mango teas." She smiles at him and then me as he takes the order.

"Vancouver is beautiful," I say helplessly, fingering the remains of my sandwich.

"Sure is."

Lydia isn't even looking at the scenery - she is staring at something farther away. For a minute I feel as if I'm looking at a photograph of a young woman - her hair pulled back, the neckline of her green shirt revealing a fuller bust than mine. When and how she grew that figure, I don't know. The expression she has is calm, almost stoned, her eyelids lazy and squinting, her lips parted to a slight pucker, as if drawing in a smoke or waiting for a first kiss.

Later that evening, I say to Lydia, "I want to draw you."
Our mothers had gone for a walk to pick blackberries. Dinner is set on the table - walnuts and cod with a bowl of sangria Ms. Xi mixed for us. I don't like wine much, so I sip green tea as we watch a Chinese mafia movie.

"But you must have drawn me hundreds of times before," she replies.

"This is different. I have to draw you as you are now." I pull out my oilcloth-covered sketchbook and my bag of pencils. Her face turns toward me. I notice that her nose is smaller, with a slight bump, her eyes much larger than before, the poppy-shaped scar still there.

"What would you like me to do?" she asks. "Pose?"

"No, just watch the movie."

I say this as the gun goes off. A tall man with a rhubarb-colored tie and glasses stoically glances down at his best friend. The best friend is coughing globs of fake cochineal blood, clutching at his soiled designer shirt. His bangs fan out sexily in bewilderment and betrayal.

"Look at that tall guy," she says. "Doesn't he look so good, I mean innocent? Those glasses, that shave, the square jaw—he could be my father. But it's incredible; he's so chilling! So coldhearted, so terrifying!"

"I can imagine it," I say. "It's always the baby-faced people who do the murdering. They powder themselves up for the job. Really."

"I'm not saying he looks *angelic*. I'm saying he looks *innocent*." She fast-forwards through the ending credits. I wonder if she really thinks her father looks innocent. I don't dare ask her.

When Ms. Xi divorced her second husband, she started packing for Canada in a whirlwind. Ms. Xi and Lydia were running fast out of savings, and making a living in the Bay Area was nearly impossible. My mother tried to offer money, but Ms. Xi declined graciously, insisting on not "borrowing from friends".

She did, however, take money from her ex-husband. Lots of it. Perhaps that's why Lin An still called her mother's second husband *baba*, was still courteous to him, despite Ms. Xi's unabashed scorn for him. I've only met that man a couple of times in California, and every time something was off. He was short and stocky, yet his features were chiseled like a woodblock. He always had a placid look on his face that belied his unfriendliness. Every time he glanced at me his dark eyes pierced through thick square spectacles. He'd never spoken to me, and if he ever attempted to communicate, he would grunt, clearing his throat too many times.

Lydia never told me that the bruises from her knees were from when this man pushed her off the swing, his hands elevating her with a bit too much force. High in the air,

she flung her legs out and then the wooden swing seat cracked and she flew high before collapsing.

His remorse in the end made it look like an accident. He'd rush to her side where she'd sit clutching her knees throbbing on the pile of wood chips. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry," and there was real trembling in his voice, like he was scared, scared that she was smart enough to tell, he'd been doing it intentionally, and she was.

Lin An thought it was fun and games; falling off the swing hurt, but it was like roller-blading too fast, or biking down a hill with your eyes closed. For a child like her, it was a pump of fresh adrenaline. Those days she and I both did not harbor fear. We roller-bladed down the Shoreline coast just to hold hands with gravity. Danger enthralled us. It gave her a rush to let this untrustworthy man push her on the swing, and to my own surprise I understood it. Up in the air, at a loss for gravity, perhaps she felt it too, that uprooting, that sense of solitary thrill.

After Lin An moved, I sent her letters with drawings of ourselves as swashbuckling Chinese fighter-chicks with ropelike braids and mandarin-collared robes. We carried lances and javelins and daggers thin as paper. We smote thousands of fox spirits and evil warlords and saved boats from capsizing. She sent me back letters and occasionally

postcards, of Victoria's promenades and blood-red grapes, mockingbirds and kissing children. In the end, it was she who mailed the last Christmas card. I was the one to swirl into static. That was the Christmas my grandmother got sick in bed and I needed solace in the form of flesh and blood. I toyed with the idea of having a best friend again, someone to visit the hospital room with because I was too cowardly to go alone. I didn't tell Lin An about my troubles. She was adjusting to a new school and making new friends, out of reach and untouchable to me.

"Boyfriend?" she repeats. It's now past eleven and our mothers have not returned. It has started raining again, and Pluto snores quietly on top of the piano seat. Five sketches of her lay finished around me—all expressions I've made up—bafflement, joy, shock, yearning, and melancholy. The last one, sorrow, looks the most wrong. It's as if I've plastered my own sadness onto her face.

"Yeah. You have one?"

She smiles quietly and taps her spoon against her kneecap. "I do, sort of. Do you want a glass of wine?"

"Why not."

She points to the bottle of red wine left over from the sangria. She pours a glass for herself, and then for me.

"So who's this phantom?" I press. "Are you in love?"

"Maybe." She looks at me through her glass. She wants to tell me a secret; I know it by the way her mouth opens and closes, leaking out nothing. "Well, you've probably guessed already anyway. It was Sam, the waiter we met today at the café." She mouths the words carefully, one at a time, as she slowly sips her sangria.

"How come he didn't go out and introduce himself?" I ask, annoyed. Cunning, so cunning, of Lydia to hide that important fact from me.

"Well, he'd just started his shift working. And he's really shy. I had planned on telling you, but he was shaking his head the whole time."

"How old is he?" I demand. His face is still fresh in my memory, and the way we locked gazes, he didn't seem shy at all.

"Twenty-nine. He also works part time at a record store. I met him at a piano competition where I played."

"Have you done 'it'?"

"No!" Her eyes balloon. I find it funny, almost touching, the way she turns away as if sex isn't a part of everyday conversation. "We were friends for a while. He says he could get me to play in a real band. We meet for coffee sometimes."

"What? Then how are you going out?"

"We kiss," she exclaims, incredulous. It isn't just the wine that's making blood blossom in her face. "We kissed, what's wrong with that?"

I want to squeeze more details out of her, but the lock unhinges, and we hear the sound of sonorous laughter. "Play a song for us!" Ms. Xi's drunken voice cries out. With a swift kick she sends her brown pumps flying, making Pluto the cat sprint under the table. Our mothers' faces are round and carmine, like two pulpy tomatoes.

"Play a song. Pretty please." There is an ironical and cheery pleading in her voice. "Play a happy song."

"Fine," Lydia relents. "I'll play my favorite. It's an intermezzo."

She sets herself on the stool and with a crack of her knuckles and a tentative unveiling of the piano cover, her fingers dash over the keys. The moment is singular as the music blends into fleeting silence, every note stirring the air. My mother stares into the dustpan by the fireplace. Ms. Xi stares at Lydia, her expression luminous with stupor and fever. I stare at Pluto, licking the light from his fur on the carpet, his feet leaving pristine spots on the rug. This soundlessness only deafens the beauty of the music. Suddenly I'm making sorry attempts to hide the weird welling in my eyes. They do not notice. I clamp my hands over my face, fingers lapping against my lids. I ease away from the room, slowly. Lydia's music sets my mother in a trance. She sobs

without tears. Her reddish skin flickers in the yellow light.

"It's so sad," I hear Ms. Xi say as I find the bathroom. "I asked for something happy, and this is so so sad, Lydia. But I guess it's good too. Beautiful. Perfect delivery. The melody was so smooth."

The bathroom is brighter with lights, and then I see my face - horribly warm with wine. In the corner of my eye, a broken eyelash skirts.

Perfumes line the sink: Christian Dior's *Poison*, *Mademoiselle* by Chanel - scents I cannot imagine Lydia wearing. I put the bath on and slip in. Squeezing shampoo over my hair, I crouch in the bathtub, the showerhead hissing against my scalp: heavy, steaming, numbingly hot. My eyes are dry now, and I've forgotten any reasons why I freaked out and cried. A couple of minutes there's rustling outside the curtain, a snapping of the door. I half-expect it to be my mother ready to shout at me for leaving.

"What's wrong?" Lydia asks from behind the shower curtain. I could see her shadow looming behind the curtain.

"I had a nosebleed," I say. I can hardly hear her so I turn off the water. Cold air prickles the pores on my back and I hug my knees together. "Sorry, forgot to tell you I don't take alcohol that well."

"You only had half a glass," she remarks.

"I know. I'm sensitive."

"Was I that bad?" she asks. She sits down on the bathroom mat, resting her elbows on the toilet lid.

"No," I protest. The croak in my voice is terribly humiliating. "Your music was beautiful. Humbling, in a way. I can't describe it. I couldn't take it for too long, I'm sorry."

"I'm embarrassed about my mother."

"Why aren't you out there? Where are they?"

"They've gone to sleep. They had a long night." There is a quavering softness in her tone. No longer cold, I open the bath curtain and see her there, head buried in arms. I am stunned for a minute, and then the spell is broken too soon as she rises, her strong ankles tensing, the balls of her feet squeaking against the tiles.

"I'll get you a fresh towel," she says, and closes the door behind her.

Many years after we stopped speaking, I'd shut myself in an empty room and pretend to talk to Lin An. I missed her most when surrounded by laughter. Raucous laughter made me burst into tears. The parties were too airless, the people too red-eyed, deaf, silly. I'd touch my lips to my glass and sip the wine slowly, carefully so it wouldn't burn my throat and cause a stormy rash over my nape. Then I'd set the glass

down, tiptoe upstairs to an empty room where I could open the window and smell the euphoric wilderness.

I asked her questions then.

Hey, Lin An...when you are alone and see something beautiful, do you feel happy, or a little pained?

There was no answer, so I'd fabricate. Lin An was sad-eyed somewhere too. She was writhing in bed, awake after making love to a boyfriend, or eating a tiny supper - onions and clear broth. When she looked at the stars behind the rustling curtains, she'd think of me.

When you are hungry, do you have to stop and think what kind of hunger it was?

When I first had sex with someone, my mind was so blank, so crumpled with lunacy, that I clung onto him like I would a railing on a bridge. The bed roiled beneath us as dust invaded my nose. I screamed and sneezed. The ache in me turned into pleasure. Behind the touching a quiet Chopin's *Raindrop Prelude* played on the speakers. The strength of him, the muscle and bone, so heavy and grinding against the delicate piano notes, made me think of how much better Lin An's cold, dewy skin was. Then I wondered if it was really she whom I was actually in love with. I'd fantasize that she'd remember me after first experiencing it too.

Knowing that I'd never see her again gave me a refreshing liberty of construction. The Lin An I made up was fantastic and infinitely romantic. My An understood loneliness but was not afraid of solitude. My An was impenetrable. My An understood me best.

When you eat and fill your stomach up, do you feel like you have two stomachs and one of them will always, always be empty?

I crawl into bed after drying and dressing. In sleep, Lydia is unmoving, her chest barely rising and falling. When I sink my body on the mattress, she whispers something I can't hear. I blink back and see a pair of eyes that are wide-open, alive.

"What'd you say?" I ask, and there is silence for a minute as we each stare at nothing in particular. The shadows rise over the sheets like tiptoeing intruders, their long, extended arms reaching out to claw at our mouths.

"Don't tell anyone, especially my mother, that I am in love with him."

"How do you know you are?"

She swallows. "Something weird in my bones. I can't explain or describe. Not a moment goes by when I don't think of him. It's silly, it's so so silly and dumb and

meaningless but I can't. Stop." She stifles her sobs, hastily adding, "I have not told anyone this, so bear with me, please."

I reach out, clutch her shoulders, and hold her to me. Something wrenches in my stomach. To hold her now - it felt strangely comfortable, despite her tense body stiffening in my arms. "Don't act on this. You don't know what it is. It is strange. Think about what you have now—your mother, your songs. You have a beautiful life," the words scintillate from my mouth like volcanic sparks out of a crater, alien and hot and desperate. "Can I tell you about love, Lydia? Love isn't real. It wears costumes. It's weird and fleeting and mysterious and destructive. It is the Abominable Snowman. It's hard to catch without a shovel or a stungun. If he cannot come out and speak to your mother, if he has to stick to being elusive, then does he really want love?"

Lydia is biting her lip, hard. I hold her tight, and she starts relaxing. Her neck cranes and she is silent.

I am no longer sick with shame. I hear her ask me, *what are you saying this for?* and then I kiss her cold, stiff chin and whisper, *to find you. To clean you. I've missed you.*

HOME AMNESIA KIT

You have this ongoing dream. You don't know if it really is a dream, but tell yourself that to lessen the stress. The air, thorny. You, naked. Your body, sinking in sugar, salt. Against your moist cheekbones, the sting of raindrops. Stickiness. Sweat. Bugs. Bog. And Mike, guffawing. Mike, smoking a pipe. Mike, swaggering around, his bony hand gripping the Royal Waters Hotel umbrella you'd lent him one early morning downpour after you and him had had sex thrice in your San Francisco apartment, from which you are now evicted.

Remember what happened in reality. It isn't much different. That night, the smell of sangria all over your breath, you told him about a letter you'd wrote him the month before, a letter you know he never received. There'd been an accusation. There'd been a small confession. All night you'd had a funny kind of disdain for him that got you hot.

He never returned your umbrella. He never returned, either. It lightens you up to think that something that belongs to you is keeping sleet and hail from stinging his hair follicles.

You know what? you had said. The two of you, lying on the futon you'd bought imported from Japan, hipbone to hipbone.

What?

Your shoe polish really fucking stinks.

I don't polish my shoes.

I don't care; it really fucking stinks.

What?

Do noses fall off? Because if they do, I hope yours
does.

Wake again from the dream, toes cold, stomach lapping
like the Dead Sea. Decide that if the paroxysm of longing
ever returns to smite, you will no longer surrender. You
will be armed with a machine gun to drive bullet holes into
any yens or yearnings. Make a list of all the things you
need to stop doing: Pining. Craving. Dissecting. Then make a
longer list of things you *should* be doing: Throttling.
Clobbering. Seizing. Eating.

Lie in bed for a while, realizing that you have a good
twenty minutes to huddle before your mother calls. It is a
Saturday. Hobble over the hairball of your bed, slip into
your father's cotton slippers, walk into the kitchen. Open
the freezer. Dig into a frozen grapefruit. Taste its pungent
rind.

'Home' is now Menlo Park, a lemon-yellow house four
blocks from the Caltrain Station, where on weekdays you wait
for the 7:25 train to downtown SF, the Powell Street

station. The ride is about forty-five minutes. You work as a secretary for a design firm on Post Street, smack in the middle of the designer boutiques and their musk-scented panoplies.

It isn't bad. You get to see and feel San Francisco without being its captive. You wear high-cut pencil skirts and mayfly sunglasses and sometimes, if the caprice surfaces, a black bowler hat. You crack jokes that send the androgynous interns spitting with laughter over their thermoses of French Roast.

It's the house you are uneasy about. The house, like many of the things you own now, belonged to your father. You have convinced yourself that you are a glutton for the perverse. A normal person would pack up any traces of the dead into neat brown boxes and store them in a place that is meant for that—the dead. Attic. Basement. Bomb shelter. Sheets, towels, hats, jackets—all compacted, to grow musty, warm, and then cold, cobwebbed.

But you—you live in it. You don't dare deprive your father's things of the space to which they belong. His jackets next to your wool coats. His tartan sheets remain on his bed, his socks in his drawers, his towels on the rack. His travel journals, papers, that awful pyrite globe of the world, all still on his desk. The picture of his girlfriend, whom you've never met—still on the mantle, her hands pressed together as if in prayer; dry smile, dry lips. Since

you were seventeen she'd been sending you Christmas presents - always through your father. A topaz pendant one year, a box of truffles, a gift card to Bloomingdale's. You'd spent one of those gift cards on a set of forks and knives you never use. At his funeral, you'd searched for her -scoured all the faces of the middle-aged women, down to the shades of their lipsticks. No one had her face.

In the house, you allow yourself one indulgence - wearing your father's cotton slippers. For some reason, they fit your feet as if they were yours. Your feet start to smell like his. You become a human archive of your father. Try to remind yourself why, but fail. You did not even like him that much.

The call comes as you peel the grapefruit.

How's work? Your mother asks. A sound like ringing in the background. Indecipherable.

Say: Dreary. Or say: Fine. Lovely. Either way, it's not what she called about.

I saw a movie last night, she divulges. It was a very sad story.

As she says this, pull the receiver closer to your ear. She is seeing shows. You know what this means.

Accuse: You're seeing that man again! That dumb nut! That shithead!

Feel a satisfaction that this time it's you who's doing the scolding.

She sighs: It's temporary.

Say: No, no it's not. It's volleying. You are ambivalent.

Your mother, with Dan. He wears yellow argyle sweaters and smokes a long, curved pipe. He is seventeen years your mother's senior - childless, cynical, decadent. He takes her to see theater productions, plays, ballets, and once or twice to a Coldplay concert. He criticizes her English-speaking ability. He buys her self-help books.

Twice a week after you get home, you baby-sit the next-door neighbors' kid, Hye. Mr. and Mrs. Kim like to visit their friend's house in Fremont on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Whenever you watched their children they provide you with dinner and a small bit of cash.

Hye, with her planetary eyes, is a prodigy. You know it by the way her hair is slightly purple, how she stays up with you talking about galaxies, orbits, light-years, the beautiful symmetry of the universe. Her smile at times scares you with its wide-eyed squeamishness. She makes projects that aren't for school - projects like The Origin Apparatus, a map of her progeny, and Urania's Telescope, a weird pole-like projection in which to view the stars in different colors.

On one such night, as you eat blueberry yogurt, Hye builds something out of a cardboard box. She cuts out a large hole on the side of it, with a magnifying glass duct-taped securely to the other side.

What's that? you ask.

A home amnesia kit.

Should you be taping that magnifying glass there? It looks expensive. Isn't it your dad's?

Not nearly as expensive as what people would pay to get rid of their memories.

What?

People don't know how to forget things. Your spoon freezes in your mouth as you realize that she's right.

Admit: You're right.

How much would you pay to forget?

My right kidney and both my ovaries.

See? What'd I tell you?

How does it work, exactly? What's inside that box? She opens the top of the cardboard box, inside of which holds a portable freezer. The freezer is filled with sand. Glass marbles poke out like noses.

That's the problem, Hye says. It doesn't work yet. I'm trying to capture the sound of time passing. I'll experiment with radios, maybe. For now, the only sound I get out of time is sand.

For a normal person, forgetting is a process, with a goal to reach in the end. Once this goal has been reached, there is no going back. For you, it's a cycle. Mondays, you're over it. The world is brand new. Claim it with your stilettos. Step over every puddle aware of your pristine, untouchable youth. Never mind the San Francisco fog: think of it as a deep cloud of Zen. People shine in your presence. Get everything done.

By Friday, you are tearful, weary. You lie in bed numb with the want of someone. Not just someone, too, but *someone*: a face, a hand, a chuckle, so hearty, sensitive gums and funny teeth, some crooked; Mike, with his degrees in Biology and Metaphysics at Brown, how he cooed you to sleep with talk about reality, the nature of things, and homeostasis, what did he know about homeostasis? And how you hate and want to reject the nostalgia, how you want to bar it from your brain; you think of Hye and her home amnesia kit and laugh to yourself that someday when she's a genius, when she's won the Nobel Peace Prize for inventing something that finally makes people, the world, forget, and all love and hurt and guilt and grudges can evaporate like snow melting in a faraway town, then you'd be a champion, you could walk blindfolded through the fog and finally grow brave, brave enough to -

Your father's face kills you in your sleep. *Stand up. Stand up. Stand up*, he trumpets in your dreams, and it comforts you to dream that, though you know your father would never tell you to stand up. Your father hardly told you much of anything.

To muffle all the sound in your head, listen to experimental noise music with forks and knives clinking in the background.

Go to a party, hesitant. Your friend's 24th, 25th, 26th. Hang out around the bamboo plant, staring at the tassels, and the purple prisms in your drink. Casually pluck four crumpets - blackberry, mango, tuna, and olive - onto your Styrofoam plate. Flashes of déjà vu as you're reminded of middle school dances - the numbness, the Shirley Temples. Men's shadows skirt your field of vision. Decide on going downstairs to hang around the pool.

Before you could, your friend Margot struts over with some tall Columbian. He flashes a smile as soon as he sees you. You take it as a smirk. Resent him before you're introduced.

Natalie! She chortles, singsong, hugging you, smiling ear-to-ear. You have not seen such a smile on her face since senior year at Vassar, when she was presenting her creative writing thesis. During college, when you'd known her well,

she'd been called Melancholic Maggie: always smoking, downcast, writing poetry about injured antelopes.

She looks emaciated. Offer her your mango crumpet. She waves it down and chirps: Nat, I can't eat that! I begin my physical training tomorrow. I'm joining a kickboxing team, can you believe it?

Say: Really? Then you should eat this! Eye her with wonder and a bit of pity.

This is Camilo, she says, nudging the mute man in front of her. Giraffe-necked, gaunt, tanned.

Hello. He offers his giant hand that envelops yours.

Sometime during the evening, when you drink enough Cosmopolitans, trundle up the hardwood staircase in search of the bathroom. Thump your big toe against some slippery step, and fall, fall, right into Camilo's grasp. Cough in disgust, queasiness. Think: *Great. Now he's probably smirking to himself, here's another debonair histrionic who plotted this grand fall.* Notice: he smells vaguely of roasted almonds.

He holds your shoulders, politely. Nod. Mumble: Thanks. Hiccup a bit.

Spot Mike entering the room from the corner of your eye. Duck. Feel your insides jitter like a cage of ferrets. Feel hot, maladroit, and ready to run.

Is something wrong? says Camilo.

I have to go puke, you say.

Run up into the bathroom. Retch, neatly into the toilet bowl. Wipe some ex-crumpet off the porcelain rim. After you flush it all down, watch your reflection. Your bangs flare against your eyelids.

You okay, honey? calls a voice from beyond the door.

A sudden jolt rises, from belly to jaw.

Why should you be here, staring at a reflection of yourself in the toilet bowl, like Narcissus over his pond? Why aren't you out somewhere ravishing, teasing the world? A fictional voice interrogates. *Because your face, dear, is exquisite. Your brain, exquisite.* Since when did your head become a metrosexual man?

Feel riveted, inspired. It's as if the vomit inside you, no longer a part of you, was the estrogenic stupor that materialized when your hormones belly-flopped with your neuroticism. Well, the vomit is flushed. No longer in middle school, you are now super-chill. Super-chillax. Superbad. Walk down the stairs. Spot Mike. When you get close enough, hold up your hand. A dismissive wave.

He glances back in recognition. He does not smile back. He waits for you to stroll on over.

Be brief. Exchange a few words: *I haven't seen you in months*, or *How the fuck are you*. Or, if you're ballsy enough, say: *Where's my umbrella, assmunch? The rain hasn't let down and I hate wearing this itchy raincoat.*

He will say, *Oh, it's at Claire's house. I will need to get it for you soon*, but don't bother asking who Claire is. He is impressed; you can tell. Impressed at your command of words, perhaps, or your hair that has grown long, wavy, sumptuous. Or your ass, how rotund it is in your fire-engine red dress. Chuckle to yourself at how retarded he looks in person; how flesh rolls down his face in tiny mudslides; how pitied he must be by the many women he fucks; that the real him is infinitely less imposing than the illusory him. All people of flesh and blood cannot match up to their fantasy counterparts.

Later, at about one, bear the triviality no more. Dash out the oak doors and climb over a padlocked fence. Take off your coat in the forty degree weather - the dead of winter in California. The fog will snag up the hairs on your neck and arms like billions of little teeth. Revel in your gooseflesh. Take out the chapbook of poetry you bring in your purse to every party. Its title: *Loneliness, Hangovers, San Francisco Fog*. A friend of yours from graduate school, Irma, had written it. Paper House Books, small press on Kearny Street, had published it on goldenrod cardboard stock this past month. Turn to page sixteen, where you've dog-eared the only poem you liked, with the lines: I kiss a snake/ ssssss.

Ride the Caltrain home. It will be desolate, save austere middle-aged men with briefcases. Each one hides his face, but you know your father is all of them. All of them are your father. Huddle in your black raincoat.

As soon as you step into your house, realize your mistake of returning. The house is empty, silent. Not even a cat, because cats give you hives. Plop your jacket down on the couch. Say hello to your father's fern, Fern. Smoke a cinnamon clove, and contemplate on the fact that Fern has outlived Dad. Laugh a little, then realize it's not funny. Nothing's funny these days. Turn on the TV, for noise. Turn on the stereo system. Finger your father's record collection, second drawer. You've never heard him listening to these before, so you are mildly surprised. They are dusty, as if no fingerprints have dotted them in years. You do not put them on. You take out from your own record drawer *Either/Or*. Let Elliott Smith's sad voice coo you to a melting sleep.

There is no dream except for one you will not remember when you wake: the dream in which you are in a cellar, the center, the axis of a storm, and inside the tornado is his voice, his face. Your father tries to say something, his mouth opening, closing like a shutter, a shudder.

The next afternoon, Sunday, the phone rings. Once, and you think it's Mike, who finally understands that he owes you an umbrella. Twice, or it's your mother, reminding you to take vitamins. Three times, or it may be Margot, wondering what happened to you. On the forth ring, pick up.

What happened to you? says an unfamiliar voice.

Your mouth is full of pancake. Say: Huh?

I'm sorry; I got your telephone number through Marge.
This is Camilo.

Oh.

You disappeared yesterday; I was pretty concerned, for your safety, you know.

I'm fine. No deal. Sorry for my rudeness. Sorry I fell on you. It was an accident.
Your mouth, full of dumb, robotic words again. Shiver a bit because the house is unheated.

It's fine. Listen, I was wondering, since we didn't get to speak very long yesterday, would you like to get some tea in the meantime?

Say: Sure, of course. Where?

Agree to meet in Tsukino Teahouse for supper and green tea. Shiver some more. Hang up. Think about how you're going to introduce to Camilo to your father. Or, more aptly, your father's furnishings. For some reason you are thrilled.
Friday does not look so bland. Your mother would be impressed.

Half an hour later, she drops by unannounced, lugging brown paper bags of cantaloupes and honeydew.

Eat some, it's healthy, she says. So says the woman your neighborhood kids called the Papaya woman, who eats papayas and leaves the peels on her skin as she watches Lifetime TV.

Are those bags under your eyes? Better use some eye crème, she says.

Wear sunscreen! Sun oil! If you want dates, it's integral! she says.

Answer: no, no, no!

Cock your head away from her in irritation. Take out your tub of Dulche de Luche Dreyers and wolf down a few mouthfuls. As the ice cream melts in your mouth, tell her: I've a hot date with a Columbian.

See what she has to say to that. She doesn't. She's cringing. You've let your bangs grow too long again! she says. Who do you think you are? A blind person? Cut it off!

Are your parents divorced? asks Hye. The two of you, putting together a jigsaw puzzle of a night scene in Paris. It is Tuesday, 9:00PM.

Say: They've been divorced since I can remember.

Since when?

I was younger than you. I was probably eight.

Why'd they separate? Do you know?

I think it was my mother who left my father. He loved her for a long time. But love is simply not enough sometimes, I guess. Love is not enough to keep two people together.

Did she love someone else?

I don't know.

And like an odd lightning ray, a memory returns: that night your mother lost all her patience for your father, you in the background, watching. The fog was heavy and draining in San Francisco, and the three of you had been walking along the piers, watching the dark water devour the ocean mist. It was cold; you were wearing your father's dinner jacket, which hung down to your ankles. You looked like a drowned match inside a giant matchbox as you tried to catch up to your young parents, who walked side by side, not holding hands. Your mother was wearing a coat and a scarf, they were exchanging whispers, which soon enough ripped into raised voices. You saw your mother's eyes blaze up every time she heard your father speak, his great strange voice at first stern, then softer and sadder, as if he knew. *Helen. Helen. Helen.* Her name was already disappearing from his lips as he uttered it, over and over. And just like that, your mother, Helen, this woman of uncertain character, uncurled the scarf from her neck like lifting a giant anaconda weight, and flung it towards your father and the bay. She took off her coat, left it on the ground, and ran ahead to catch a bus

somewhere, where, god knows. That night you sat in the backseat as your father drove, you and him, not speaking, not saying anything, and the memory of bus's squeaking tires, its gas exhaling into the emotionless San Francisco fog, left you haunted for weeks.

That's sad, says Hye after a moment, as if she has just examined your memory.

I think my parents will divorce too soon. The sadness in her voice is subtle, not apparent at all. A long tendril of black hair trails over her eyes as she concentrates, staring at a puzzle piece in her hand. In this level of concentration, her beauty is astonishing - not childlike at all - a cold, inscrutable water nymph. The jigsaw puzzle is only half-finished, but already you can see the gigantic night sky of Paris, its stars bulging out like little eyeballs.

When you arrive at Tsukino, there will be a heavy rain. Loiter beneath the awning in your raincoat and yellow heels as you light a cigarette. Camilo's tires will be very distinct, sloshing the pavement and the dead wet leaves as he parks his sedan. As he leaves his car, stare at his hiking boots. Wordlessly gaze up at him. His bright skin, his flat dark lips, his shaggy black hair. Dodge any attempts he makes at locking eyes.

Over eel and fried mackerel, discuss the present.

Ask: So how did you meet Maggie?

Who?

Margot.

Oh. We met at a mutual friend's dinner.

He looks at you funnily, and then adds: But we are friends. I am not interested in her.

Your eel is so delicious you've already eaten all of it.

Wipe rice off your chin and play with your chopsticks. He is a bit thrilled by your inattentiveness; you can tell by the way he lazily swirls a spoon inside his teacup. When you've mustered it, be quick and smart. Say: Since college I've been wary of 'dates'.

Why?

Because of the bullshit. Dates, dinner parties, parties, meetings, events, celebrations, everything is bullshit, but no, bullshit is a bluff too. Because bullshit is really human shit. Humans probably shit more bullshit than bulls can ever hope to shit.

He laughs nervously, his head tilting upwards slightly, exposing his beautiful throat to you. His beautiful, dark, stubbly throat. When a stranger exposes his throat to a stranger, suddenly there is closeness, camaraderie. Throats were so fragile - so true - always the obvious access to a killing. Feel seductive. Invite him over. He will lurk up, his face to you, and say yes. He will drive, feverishly through the rain.

When you get home, weariness sets on your bones. It is an ancient weariness, familiar but unfamiliar, as if you've felt it all along but never knew until now. Now, when you've invited this stranger in your house. Funny to realize, but this house has been strangerless for so long. The desire this house had for strangers made this moment seem mundane, grossly inappropriate.

Sit awkwardly with him on the couch. Introduce him to your father's records. He explores the place with a gusto and curiosity that is surprising. Even the rabbit taxidermies in the kitchen that have always creeped you out seem to impress him.

It reminds me of something inexplicable, he says.

His father's mysterious American childhood, of which he never knew, growing up in the wilderness in the cabins. It felt like home to him already. Stare at him, horrified. Realize that it is not he who is the stranger in this house, but you. You were the stranger all along.

When he tries to kiss you, lower your head so his kiss lands on your eyebrow.

Smile apologetically.

He doesn't understand and starts aiming for your neck. Give him your neck. Give him your throat. It doesn't matter anymore.

There is no reason for needing skin. There is no reason for needing this. As you walk him out to his door, he is a bit furious, you can tell by the way he snaps and darts, his giant, dear giraffe neck so agitated, so bothered. He must have really liked you. There are words he can't spare for a stranger, words of a disappointed lover.

Back on the porch, there is a small package. A box. When you reach down to pick it up, you probably know what it is. It is a crazy, miraculous invention. A purple post-it attached to the top: *Ready for test-driving. -Hye.*

When you pick it up, you find that it is empty. No freezer box full of sand. No broken radio. At the bottom there is only a single sheet of paper:

Directions for Forgetting with Your Brand New Home
Amnesia Kit

1. Unpack everything you want to remember.
2. Pack everything you want to forget.
3. Bury it in good soil.
4. Enclosed are optional sunflower seeds. Around the place you bury your amnesia kit, plant these seeds to spring forth new life.

A few days later, you receive a phone call. It is Mike. His voice, meek, meaningful. He misses you. He has your

umbrella. He wants to return it to you. Say: I don't need it. Hang up. Buy a new umbrella. Return a dress you've bought recently at Nordstrom's.

It is not so hard to stare into the throats of strangers anymore.

Pack everything. Pack the sheets, the shirts, the dusty suits. Pack the paintings, the globe, the books, the records, the hideous rabbits. Pack the pictures of the father's girlfriend, whom you've still never met. Your birthday has passed, but there had been no gift from her.

Pack the drapes, curtains, towels. Pack the jackets, one by one. Glance at one of them - the navy blue dinner jacket. Keep that one, keep it next to your party dresses. Wear it sometimes over your pajamas on windy nights.

Pack, pack, until there is no more.

When it's all packed, and when there isn't anything left to forget, rub your finger along a mirror. The emptiness will look like a lover (or a father). Look into its eye, its throat, your pumping heart at last brave, and with all your might - remember, remember, remember.

NEVER EXTINCT

I received the first of my possessions from an aunt. Not much is known about this aunt, except that her chalk-white hands were streaked with pink and blue reservoirs like a delta valley on an atlas. The only coherent picture in my head was of those bony hands, detached from body or voice or face, handing me a lumpy thing wrapped in black crepe paper.

The item was a doll with a hole on its chest that was not actually a hole but a secret door that opened and closed. Now, if I deposited a coin through the doll's narrow hairline, the secret door would unlock and I could reach in and squeeze its red foam heart that never beat or ached or pumped blood. It did not come in a box, or even have any indication of a manufacturer. Often in my head I would imagine the dollmaker: a man, mid-thirties, a recluse who lived on a South Chinese mountain, who carved wood, who stole many hearts, who spent many nights sealing them in pickled fruit jars and locking them in doll's chests. My first possession was, I decided, the work of a heart-thief.

Later on, I stored many things inside my doll's chest: an opal ring I stole from the corner shop on Sterling Street, subway tokens, old toffee, and a copper key to my other possession, a brown diary. The diary looked like a discarded shopping bag on the outside, but it had clean pages. Of course, it was never used for the standard palette

of secrets. In this diary, I drew pictures of dreams. It drove me insane whenever I forgot a dream, especially a nightmare, because I've always enjoyed nightmares the most. Once I sprawled on a bamboo raft floating down the River Styx. Hundreds of corpses waited for my docking on the other side. Some of them were midgets, some were burned to bone ash, some were waving flags, some laughed, most twitched. But I felt no terror. Instead, I felt them welcoming me, the outsider, into their misunderstood world of bareness, unmended wounds, and lost causes. I had drawn my river corpses in running black ink and a flat Crayola marker, elephant gray. Most of the other pages had been torn out, but I managed to save just that one.

It was my foster parents' son, Andy, who tore out the pages of my diary. He was eleven, a year older than me; skinny as a mongrel, with fine, limp hair and depthless blue eyes. He hardly ever paid attention to me until he found my things. The day he discovered the secret of my orphan-doll, he ripped out its heart and ate it. Once his wagging tongue realized that it was red foam and not a piece of cherry candy, he spat it out, choking and furious, leaving the red fragments on the living room carpet. The idea suddenly occurred to him to take out the copper key and filch my book of dreams. When he found the pages of crayon witches burning, animal bones, old tin can alleys and ghosts, he

laughed, tore the pictures apart, and flung them in the dishwasher. He dissected my dreams like a drunken surgeon. Then he told every detail to my foster parents.

They didn't like the idea of burning effigies one bit. They didn't punish him for ripping out my pictures, or leaving the remains of the doll's heart on the floor, or even almost breaking the dishwasher. "She was drawing dead people," he said. "There was blood, and burning things. She's crazy. I told you I didn't want a sister. I told you so."

My guardians believed him.

"Where are you getting these thoughts? A ten-year-old girl shouldn't be having them!"

Now, if it had been the month before when my new foster brother said those words, they would have stung like limejuice. If it had been the month before, I would have been frustrated, rejected, dejected, and self-conscious. If it had been the month before, I would have wept. But the month had passed, a month of nothing but isolation and inertia and silence. Safety was so overrated. Safety was never one of my possessions. So I screamed. I told them I, a little girl, had seen things they'd never believe, and I knew the texture of the world's poverty-soaked streets like a bloodhound knew its scent trails, and if I could have it my way, I'd be out there again, happy and carefree and picking pockets!

The next day, by the skin of my ear, I was at the Children's Psychiatric Center, in front of a hissing fireplace and a mess of stuffed extinct animals. A stegosaurus. A mammoth. A turkey that looked more like a dodo. The lady who sat diagonally from me had hair the color of dry cinnabar, stacked in tiny spikes on the top of her head. In the firelight, her shining gray irises resembled frog eggs. I felt the urge to pluck them out and eat them. Other than that, however, I didn't feel inclined to become defiant. Apathy struck me. Lack of animosity struck me.

I managed to put up a convincing enough façade so that the lady, Dr. Ally, found me quite pleasant and a relief from her other young visitors. In fact, by the end of the month, we were on a first-name basis: she called me Kayla and I called her Amelia. Amelia Ally was her name—pretty, nondescript, a name I imagined would look apt on a placard surrounded by rosettes and other wispy things. Amelia gave my third possession—the stuffed turkey-dodo hybrid.

"You should give it a name," she said.

"Name...what kind of name?"

"You know. A name. Have you any other animals?"

"No. My first," I replied. Naming my possessions had never occurred to me before. But I liked the idea. It gave me a wonderful illusion: that I would never be alone.

"Well then, name it."

"I think I'll name it Never Extinct. Nev for short."

"Why?"

"Because I believe no animal can ever really go extinct. If humans have 'souls', then isn't it unfair that animals just sink to the earth and die? I think there are animal spirits. They remain. In my dreams sometimes, and in my stories."

Amelia's smile, even with its crookedness, wasn't disdainful. Her teeth shone like rows of sweet white corn.

"People have been debating for centuries what makes humans different from animals. There are the usual explanations. That we use reason. That we want knowledge. That we have language, clothing, intelligence, cultures, names."

"What's the best one, to you?"

"You know, I haven't really figured that one out. If I have a vote, I'd vote for creativity. People have limitless imagination. But at the same time, not everyone takes advantage of this. Some people get lost in preoccupations and surroundings, so their imaginations slowly die. They give up on possibility and only believe what they see."

"But if you don't have imagination, you can still live on. It's not that important."

"True. But living on is what animals do. When it comes down to it, I think we are all just mammals too. Our bones sink to the earth and become fertilizer for flowers."

Even with Nev's optimistic name, sometimes I grew tired of constantly believing. Andy hated me after the jelly heart incident. Every day his friends would come over and throw wads of wet tissue at me. One time in my small room I woke up to stare at a large spherical face with freckles dotted across the nose like red rabbit holes. I shrieked, expecting a cataclysmic collision against my poor sleeping head. But it was just some kid, another obnoxious friend of Andy's. The boy was carrying a purple flyswatter and he slapped the back of my head with it, screaming in delight.

By then I jolted up, head fuzzy with fury, to see my room in a shambles. Oh, no, not just a shambles. Someone had poured a bucket of water on my table, scrawled writing all over my book, and dismembered poor Nev, now just a sad, wet centerpiece on the carpet.

Nothing except for pure instinct prompted me for the next moment. I roared, kicked the fat blonde boy on the kneecap, and with the strength of a belligerent meteor branded my handprint across his fat cheek. To my intense satisfaction, his delight dissipated into slobbering sobbing and before I knew it I slapped him again, and again, each time building in momentum and pleasure, each time another trophy of my victory, my retribution, my vengeance.

A second later and Andy came along, face contorted into a walrus-like grin. "You can beat Flan boy," he sneered. "But you can't beat me. You're just a street kid with ticks

in your hair and a bad rash. If it was me who picked you off the street, I would've chucked you in the dumpster long ago."

"*Shut up! Shut up!!* You don't even know what it is to be alone! You've got your precious parents who took me in for charity anyway! Fine! You can call them yours! You have no idea!"

With that, I didn't hesitate to send a white-knuckled fist straight to his jaw. To my surprise, it toppled him. The interrupter of my dreams, the devourer of my doll's heart, and the essence of all my suffering—contained in his little fragile jaw. I almost died of horror and joy as he fell, his face grazing the wall.

What could I have done in this situation? Run away? Swallow the knots of ecstasy in my throat and handle my eviction with dignity? Stand among the fallen in triumph and claim my loser's armor?

I was about to choose the third option when Andy groaned and grabbed my ankle. Unflinching, I slowly turned to meet his glance, my eyes narrowed, ready to collect my armor. A face I'd never seen startled me out of my wits. It was unbelievable—and quite frightening.

A look of—if my eyes and descriptive tongue could get it straight—admiration and defeat, the crooked corners of his mouth bent in a vulnerable smile, plastered on Andy's face like Saran wrap. It looked awfully misplaced, what with

his usual smirk, that I'm sorry to say it was not the least bit cute.

I snorted, wriggled out of his grasp, and left the room, picking up Nev on the way.

Never in a hundred cycles of reincarnation could I have imagined how a simple punch could change a person. Once as I slipped on a wet sponge on the kitchen tiles, Andy materialized out of nowhere and caught me before I fell. When his parents inquired about his injury, he said, "Oh, I fell off the stairs."

He walked me home after school, his sneakers squeaking and his eyes intent on the sidewalk, hands in his pockets, not uttering a word. Occasionally I would grow annoyed with him and walk faster until I was yards in front of him, kicking stones with the rubber soles of my loafers.

On Saturday he cleaned my room. With his mother's sewing kit, he attempted to stitch Nev together. Unfortunately, after he was finished, Nev looked unmistakably extinct, neither a dodo nor a turkey and more like the premature fetus of an ostrich.

Andy's behavior only made me put up my guard even more. What parasite stalked his psychological atlas? Had my fist inadvertently damaged his frontal lobe? Was he possessed by a demon of kindness? If so, was there a way to exorcise it?

I consulted Dr. Ally on the situation.

"That's really bizarre," she said. "Unnaturally nice, after so much mischief and abuse?"

"I'm kind of wondering where that all went," I admitted. "This nice-streak is creeping me out."

"You know, maybe he has a crush on you. It's a possibility. That's how boys his age act sometimes."

"I didn't want to know that," I replied.

"Don't worry," she chuckled. "Most aren't even aware of it. I'm sure you'd like to see Andy's reaction when he realizes. I'm sure he'll get over it."

"I hope he turns into a volcano and blows up."

That week Andy's parents decided to bring us on a hiking trip. By morning the food was all packed: baskets of bread and apple butter, pumpkin cookies, ham, seedless grapes, jars of pears and olives. We drove the languid hour to White Sequoia Park, silent save for the idle chatter of Andy's parents. Every window was rolled down and I could smell the rainy wood from outside.

I stole a few glances at Andy. He slept with his head bobbed to the side, his muscles awkwardly braided around the bones of his neck. The wind breathed through his thick, transparent eyelashes and across his brown bangs. He looked so innocent and young that I almost wanted to ruffle his hair and pet him like I would a puppy, but that thought was shot down quickly.

The first thing we did after parking, eating, and unloading the van was bike down the trail. Andy hauled out his dusty red bicycle and beckoned me to ride on the back behind his seat. Sitting with nothing to hold onto except the metal beneath my own butt, I screamed all the way down the path as he sped past the loitering flocks of geese, past the elms and hemlocks and oaks, past a couple of willow trees whose leaves whipped our faces with slimy dew. Four or five times I almost fell, either because I adamantly refused to wrap my arms around his waist or because I had the hiccups from morning's bottle of warm ginger ale. Every time I hiccupped the entire bike rattled in a most frightening way, and then a twig would snap beneath the wheels, sending my adrenaline hurtling over a cliff, my lungs breathless, my arms trembling. Even still, I refused to hold onto Andy.

Finally, as he screeched to a stop, I arched against his backside and lost my balance, throwing us both off the bike and onto the soft, grimy dirt. A sharp sting resounded in echoes through my arm.

"Owww!" I cried out, clutching my elbow.

"You okay?" he asked. Andy, who was wordless up until now, suddenly started stripping off his shirt.

"What are you doing?" I said uneasily. He was wrapping his cotton T-shirt around my arm. I yanked it away from him. "I don't need it."

"Come on."

I noticed that his legs and knees were also covered in cuts and splinters. There was torn skin above his ankle that bled into his white cotton socks.

"Dummy. Fix yourself first." I knelt down and wrapped the shirt around his leg, securing it with a knot. I took a handkerchief from my pocket and rubbed my elbow. "We need to clean our cuts. Why don't we wash our legs with the stream water?"

"No way. You don't know what germs wriggle around in there."

"Fine then. Suit yourself." Peeling off my sandals, I let my toes sink into the earth. The soil felt good, like a bear's wet fur. I hopped on a rock next to the stream and dipped both hands inside the crisp, cold water. I drenched my handkerchief and rubbed away the grime on my legs. It was lovely against my sun-dried skin. After awhile Andy caved in and joined me at the stream. He carefully dipped in his ankles, and a thread of blood washed away with the current.

We sat under the rustling hemlocks, our feet in the water, listening to the rapid heartbeat of the stream. On the other side was a small dell, all tangled in dandelions and rhododendron and ancient moss-covered logs.

"Want some?" Andy asked, offering me a pumpkin cookie.

I accepted. Combined with the rich woody fragrance of the forest, the cookie tasted good. Sugary and crunchy, with

a hint of nutmeg.

"You know, this has been bugging me an awful lot."

"What has?" He cracked open a Cola can.

"You've been so nice."

He faltered a bit as I continued. "If your parents forced you to be nice to me, you don't have to. Really, I'm fine all by myself. You can just keep on ignoring me like you did before. I won't be offended. You don't have to become a different person because of them or me."

He chuckled. "Just as I always thought."

"What?" I snapped.

"Most people like it when others are nice to them."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that you're as weird as I thought. You are so weird."

"And you're the most horrible person I've met. You know that?"

I spat at the ground in front of him, missing his feet by a few inches.

He started laughing. His laugh traveled through the entire wood, bouncing off rocks and hemlock branches, echoing the water, touching the streambed, blending into every sound.

"What are you laughing at?" I snapped, but the question swiftly drowned in his laughter.

He reached behind me and yanked my disheveled ponytail.

"You are my sister," he said, and burst into another laughing fit.

And then I realized this, and it all dawned on me in such a short time that my diaphragm instantly convulsed and I sprawled on my backside and laughed until the wind shook and the jays in the branches above me flew away, one by one, calling and melting into the sky.

"Right. And you're my brother."

Before we knew it the sunset blinded us, its glare sifting between the tree trunks. "We should be going," I said. I started to rise, but Andy grabbed my wrist.

"Wait," he said. "Here."

He dropped something onto my palm. "I found it in the water."

It was a very unusual pebble, a bright crimson stone, with a few dark spots like a ladybug. I couldn't understand at first, but then I realized that he wanted to replace the doll's heart he ate. I chuckled. "Where's my key?"

"In my pocket," he said sheepishly, dropping the key on my hand. "I'm sorry." With a bit of hesitation he added, "sister."

"It's fine. Don't need to beg for forgiveness. Let's go," I said, smiling.

The word resounded in my head. *Sister. Sister. Sister.* It was as if the word was always within me, in my pulses,

never extinct.

Across the dirt, the bicycle lay covered in mud like a drowned creature. We ran toward it, splintered and barefoot, our cuts bleeding freely as we laughed our heads off.

MAGPIES FROM HEAVEN

In the months I was a homeless pickpocket, I constructed a home from a garden of mint and jacarandas behind the library. Sometimes, particularly in the summer when I slept outside in the daytime, the jacaranda blossoms would fall on my cheeks and wilt by afternoon. My makeshift house was a cardboard box surrounded by spare bricks and discarded cinderblocks. On chillier days I slept inside it on a bed of newspapers. The young kids who came by the garden gave me names, but they never let me play with them. Flower Rat, they called me, or sometimes Newspaper Fairy.

Next to the library was a small Chinese restaurant. It always smelled of cold dumplings, and I would raid their trash every few days for discarded food and half-empty soy sauce bottles. Sometimes the older girl who worked there took pity on me and smuggled me the customers' leftovers. Usually it was a plate of scrappy duck bones, pineapple chunks, mushroom stumps, and broccoli stems. I would devour every morsel, gnawing and sucking away the bone marrow like a hyena, and the girl would look on, smiling at me or the sunshine, I didn't know which.

On the streets, I marveled at how every person who passed by seemed to have a purpose. Their eyes were always on some destination, never searching for other paths, never

concentrating on their surroundings. Heels scuttling, they trampled over their own shadows, huffs of breath disappearing behind them like engine smoke.

I used this observation mostly to my advantage. It made picking pockets and stealing steamed buns from marketplaces much easier, much more anonymous. After all, I was only a pair of Asian eyes, an inconspicuous head of coffee-brown hair, barely taller than a parking meter, with slim and swift hands.

In all my pick-pocketing days, I was caught multiple times, but one time stood out the most. I was caught, indirectly. My target was an elderly man in a black suede hat with curls of titanium-white hair climbing down his neck like milky vines. He was wearing tiny spectacles and a wool trench coat, walking with the stalwart gait of a greyhound. He carried a polished mahogany cane. It was a beautiful opportunity.

For such an opulent-looking man, I was surprised to see that the shape of his wallet was obvious inside his right coat pocket. I waited until we reached the four-way intersection. Right as he took off his round spectacles and started wiping them with his handkerchief, my right hand swept into his pocket and plucked his wallet into the linen bag swung over my shoulder. As if saluting me, the traffic light turned green and I turned the opposite direction, toward the bridge.

Victory! my mind cried. A bowl of steaming beef noodle soup at Chinatown by 4th Street! A fistful of berries from the marketplace! A fresh, hot chilidog at Logan's!

I did not stop walking. My feet persisted until I reached the park, where I slipped around a few hedges to settle on a bed of glinting gold grass. When I took out the wallet, I found ten crisp, unmarred hundred-dollar bills. Other than that, there was no business card, no credit cards, not even identification.

I wadded the bills securely into a secret compartment of my linen bag. It had been so easy. Almost too easy. Beneath the empty pit of my stomach a part of me quivered. It took the whole weight of my body to suppress this feeling and run away, into the prismatic rush of the city again. Faster and faster I ran, past the trendy boutiques, empty storefronts, the skaters, the alleys, the walking businessmen, the subway entrances, the floating newspapers, the dark garages, the urinating dogs. The wooden sign of Logan's appeared as I approached the end of the street.

Walking into the restaurant, all I saw were families, chatting around languidly at round tables and sharing little buckets of onion rings. I ordered number eight, a chilidog and a vanilla milkshake. A waitress with hair the golden greasy color of French fries gave me a toothy smile as she handed me a platter of food.

Even the whining kids and the infant screams dissolved

when I took that sensational bite—the first one I had since yesterday's dirty lump of potato. The chili was a spicy, sticky heaven. I ate and ate until my stomach felt raw. It was not until three quarters of the way through my sandwich when I realized I was being watched. Behind the counter a pair of intent eyes watched every dribble of sauce that crawled down my chin, every smack of my lips and bite of my teeth.

The eyes belonged to the *other* waitress, older, chubbier, with long brown braids. I pretended not to notice her, but her gaze was so inescapable it was like a pistol pointed straight at me. A few more minutes of her awful staring, and the lady began to approach me. I didn't know whether to run away or slowly sink under the mercy of the rotating leather seat.

"Rita...Rita?" Suddenly her face was searching mine with frantic abandon, and she balled her fingers into tiny fists. "My god, is that you?"

"Uh..."

"It *is* you! Ree-ta, your parents have been searching all over town for you the past four days! Where did you get your shiny little rump lost at?! You could have been kidnapped, You could have been picked up by those damn horndogs off of Ty Street, you could have been skinned alive, God Almighty, and I bet even though you such a stupid little fool your parents will weep with joy when I drag your

little ear to - "

I sure as hell didn't know who this Ree-ta was, but the moment called for reaction, so I uttered, "I'm so sorry! I swear I'll never do it again! I promise!"

In my best imitation of a lost child, I forced my aqueducts to rise and the tears tumbled out of my eyes. Worried parents looking for a missing child sounded like a good bet for a warm house and oven-roasted meals. That is, if I could trick them with a stolen identity.

"Well, little Rita, don't you worry, no more of that pathetic cryin', even though ol' Anna knows you a brat I will take you to your parents, right after I get my break in 15 minutes. Look at you, so dirty, I don't wanna even know where you been, probably pickin' discarded dog food or garbage or grasshoppers to eat for the past three days...all raggedy, my god, I dunno *why* you just took off and ran like that..." Suddenly her eyes averted to the wad of change I had stuffed in the wrapper of my chilli dog. "Holy mother of Jesus! Where you get that money? I worked as your mammy's housekeeper for two years and I ain't ever see that much money all at once." Her eyebrows arched sinisterly.

"Er...I won a contest," I blurted out. "A pie-eating contest...in the park. First place got me a thousand dollars."

"Don't you lie to me, little girl, if there any pie-eating contest I would've heard about it already. You as

skinny as a stick of celery and I bet those bones of yours crunch like one too - "

At this point I admit I was getting a bit nauseous. The woman looked like she was about to eat me alive, crunchy bones and all. "Sorry, lady, it was a joke," I said. "I'm not Ree-ta. I'm just some random homeless girl. You made a mistake."

Big mistake. At this she pinched my ear. It hurt. "Girl, don't you lie to me! In fifteen minutes I'll be done and you will have to face yer parents! Don't worry, I bet they'll just be happy to see ya. Ain't no problems. The worst thing ya can get is a scolding. Though if it were me I'd be slappin' coals on that little bum of yours, my god to have worried me like that..." Before I could escape, she took me to the back of the employee room and sat me on a chipped ochre chair. The smell of blistering grease clamped to the bristles in my nose. The woman disappeared outside the door, but I could still see her round shadow. She walked in a gait that was headstrong but delicate, feminine but commanding.

Nobody in the room paid attention to me. A dark-skinned boy who was skinnier than me accidentally stepped on my foot coming out with a platter of blueberry milkshakes. I swore my toes could have bled from the weight. He didn't apologize.

I snorted and shut my eyes.

Half an hour later I stood on the spotless driveway of a spotless white house, awaiting a spotless white sedan to arrive any minute. Auntie Anna, as my new compatriot called herself, waited with me, an ancient cell phone in her hands and a chewed-up toothpick in her mouth. "I just got off'a the phone with them," she declared. "They are sooooo overjoyed. Will be sweepin' up that driveway in a matter of minutes."

I gave her a half-smile as I looked at the tin bronze mailbox. In front of it was a placard framed with tiny rusted bronze violets: The Balder Family. I remembered reading about Balder once, the Norse God who was supposed to be immune but destined to die. He had been killed by the only thing in the forest not charmed to protect his body, a twig. When I had read it, I almost laughed, because that must have been one hell of a twig, to kill an indomitable god. I wanted that twig. I thought about what a hermetic seal of power it contained. Worlds would be decimated by the weight of my hand. It would be perfect.

My new identity was to be Rita Balder, at least if my resemblance to Rita was as striking as it seemed. For all I knew, Auntie Anna could be half-blind and through her eyes I could be an amorphous blob with Rita's face structure. Even if we were natural clones, there was a slim chance I would be able to sustain this act. It was like playing a part in a movie with no script. It wouldn't take much for Rita's

parents to recognize and vanquish my subterfuge and then send me hurtling out their garage door.

Even so, it was a worthy experiment for a homeless orphan with nothing to do except wander the city and scavenge like a vulture, day and night, a dizzy little carousal of skinned knees and hunger.

When the white Lexus slithered onto the driveway, my throat was coated with a film of dust. Something swelled inside me. I needed to spit. So I tried to furtively spit on the empty black flowerbed. Auntie Anna mistook this as an act of sabotage. "GIRL! What do you think you're doing! I won't let your ungrateful little self do anything else to hurt ya parents, even if it was jus' the dang flowerbed! HEAR ME! "

"Yes..." I mumbled, turning anxiously to look at the faces of these 'parents'. A door opened from the driver's seat, and a pair of slim legs exited, followed by a tangle of red-black hair and a pair of goggles. I could tell this woman was young, and Asian, right away. She looked to be in her early 30s, carrying a reptilian handbag, slim and petite with a lissome walk.

"My god, Anna...who is this?" she gasped, her voice so soft and feminine that syrup could have poured out of her mouth.

It must be the goggles, I thought to myself, stiffening

as she stared me down.

The next pair of shoes that stepped out were the longest, shiniest, most polished shoes I've ever seen. A long cane jutted out, along with a suit. And the face was familiar...strangely youthful, with large blue eyes, tiny spectacles, thin capillaries of wrinkles...curls of titanium white hair...

The realization fisted me. I stood there, unable to defend myself, feeling silly and girlish and naked. My eyes were about to peel off and spill their juices. Maybe a thief can handle these things, but sometimes a girl can't. I felt like a girl at that moment. A stupid little girl. Maybe I had overestimated myself.

The man was taller than six feet and his mahogany cane looked capable of drawing at least half my eight pints of blood. My muscles gathered themselves for the run, but somehow I just stood there, paralytic as a clam.

He was approaching. I could barely see above his waistline. My mouth was drained of all its fluids.

"Rita...Rita...it's you." he said as if reciting a name in a funeral eulogy or paying homage to some beloved diety. I felt a slender hand grasp a strand of my hair, and then cup my chin. "I don't know what to say...Rita."

His voice was so heartbreaking—if voices were solid, his would be made of dust or spider webs or aged Chinese silk or the bone marrow of little flightless birds—that I

suddenly felt my cheeks getting wet, little treacherous dots of tears nourished by excitement, relief, pity, guilt, and other emotions not meant for either thief or little girl.

He didn't recognize me. He thought I was his daughter. Or *I* thought I was his daughter. Either way, some divinity was testing me. I needed to repent for all the food I took from other kid's mouths, all the money I stole from well-meaning people, and there it was, karma hurtling toward me prematurely like a boomerang. I had to handle the task of playing daughter to a man I robbed. I had to handle the task of temporarily re-stitching his heart with illusory needles and illusory thread. Either way, sooner or later I would rob him of something far more than a thousand dollars.

"Rita...you must have been scared," the young woman said. At this point she had taken off her huge sunglasses and black streams of tears were running down her eyes like oil spills. She got out a silk handkerchief from her snakeskin purse, and bent to wipe my own rebel teardrops from my eyelashes. I couldn't say a word.

She had a pretty heart-shaped face I imagined would look good on a Valentine, and small but plump lips lined with dark lipliner. The skin on her cheeks was flawless other than her running black rivers of eyeliner tears. Her hair was dark and curly and framed her widow's peak perfectly. It amazed me that they both seemed to think I was their missing daughter.

Despite this lightening peal of luck, I realized I still had to breach more hurdles. Reality reached me: that no amount of cunning or steel could make a decoy out of the intimate connection between a parent and a daughter.

Suddenly I hit a milestone. Squinting my eyebrows and pressing my sweat-soaked palms together, I said, "I'm sorry...but what is your name? Who are you people?"

If my voice would give it away anyway, this would be my last desperate act. Either they'd realize they've got the wrong girl or they would think their daughter had amnesia. Both directions terrified me. If not for my sake then for theirs.

They were stunned. The man looked at me, his spectacles off, intensely. I shivered, and suddenly was aware of the tears on my face drying quickly like wax.

"Quent...maybe Anna's got the wrong girl," the woman exclaimed, astonished, her hand cupping my face and tilting it to the side.

So his name was Quent, I noted.

"It can't be...Anna's intuition..." he protested.

"Maybe Anna's just getting old, Quent...maybe this is the wrong girl..."

"No, this *has* to be her, I know it..."

Oh, drat. Anna was still there, probably in the living room, that vulture, that voyeur, staring at my idiotic expressions through the blinds. A few seconds later she came

out, a bandanna tied around her braids and a broomstick in her hand. "This is her, I'm certain. No doubts. She must have forgotten. I knew it. Must have been beaten ova the head with a club by those midget thugs over by the alley next to - "

"Anna. Please, just tell us the truth," the woman said impatiently.

"The truth? The truth is simple!! The girl has amnesia! Take a look at her yourself!" She took my chin in her hand. "Huh eyes have gone blank. No soul left in them. Probly got beaten and bloodied over huh head. Brain's a sad juicy pulp. Lips white and chalky. Sooty skin. Sooty face."

"But I see no wounds..."

"I know, I know. They probably took her to the witch doctor. He lives down in a basement in the plaza...nobody knows about it except - "

"Quent, I hope you don't believe this rubbish," the woman said, exasperated, fingers massaging her forehead so hard they left grooves on her perfect skin. Even when angered, her voice was sweet as canned peaches in syrup.

Without speaking, Quent took me by the hand and searched through his pocket for the key to the house. Now as I observed it, the house suggested nothing of Quent's sweeping demeanor. It looked normal, suburban, with its chipped slate shutters and its white paint thinned with a coat of dust and sun. The front yard was untrimmed and some

patches of grass were a pale golden color. The key squeaked and the door stood ajar.

They say that homes have distinct scents, sensed only by visitors and never by their inhabitants. This one smelled of bitter things, like ginseng and orange peels, and fragrant things, like jasmine and Chinese cooking oil. It made me wonder...was this really Quent's house? Or that woman's, for that matter? The walls were a vanilla color, adorned with scroll paintings of egrets and autumn leaves. Cluttered around the hard wood floor were cardboard boxes, rolls of masking tape, and magazines. There was a glass coffee table with a few stacks of paperbacks, and an Indian rug of soft wine and chartreuse colored fibers. Two bronze lily-shaped lamps stood on either side of the brown velvet sofa. A ceramic green vase near the door held a few long, metallic peacock feathers.

"Do you remember this place, Rita?" Quent asked, his expression a bit hopeful. "It was your mother's place. We've decided to move in here for awhile."

"Where is my mother?" I tentatively asked, glancing over at the kitchen table. A bag of sweet white rolls, cinnamon bagels, and a bowl of chilled soup. Despite the fact that I'd eaten only a few hours before, my tongue moistened and my stomach wrestled with itself. Stupid bodily habit.

"So you've forgotten." His voice was no longer on the

rim of sorrow, and as I glanced up his eyes were calm, free of water and shadows. "It's all right. Some memories are much too heavy to retain."

I didn't know why he was dumping all this enigmatic jargon on me now.

"I am your father," he said. "Lina here is your stepmother. Your mother died a year ago in a bus accident. You've lost your memory, but we will try to recover it. It will be a little easier, since this is your childhood home."

"If it hurts you to remember, don't try to remember." He pressed a hand to my temple, and smiled. A wan smile. A smile covered in snow.

He was right. It did hurt to remember, even if it was to remember the wrong mother. My own mother's face—ha! That mannequin's face beneath layers of veils and smoke! The face I've stopped searching for so long ago. I can honestly say that no, I don't remember if she died, how she died, or if she was actually still alive or searching for me. If she were searching for me, I would run far, far away, away from all these muddy puddles of her face.

And suddenly all of it was silly, like I was sputtering the wrong lines in a school play. My forehead was feverish.

"It hurts," I managed to utter.

"Then let's get you a hot bath, and you can rest in your room and we can talk some more," Lina said.

"Meanwhile I can make you some tea or hot chocolate, whichever you prefer. You've always liked your chocolate with cinnamon and your tea mixed with gingerale and flowers. I'll make sure to do that so maybe you'd get a sense of home again."

I was a little taken aback. Was she offering me home? To me, "home" had such a vague definition. The first time I heard it was in a public play at the park, the Wizard of Oz. I had only seen the last part, where Dorothy tapped her ruby shoes together, chanting "there's no place like home", in the presence of all her friends and a Good Witch in a pink nylon gown. I knew that Good Witch. She was Martha Hendricks, a girl who liked to give me funny stares and whisper with her friends. *Look at those brown socks*, she said. *Look at the holes. They look like pigeonholes*. And her friends would nervously giggle, and she would smirk, thinking herself the Empress of Wit. The skin between her eyebrows would twitch. Smugly. Not that I cared at all, but I found it ironic that she was the Good Witch. I often saw her legs twist together, probably because of the itchiness of that gown. But she always smiled her pink smile, her reddish hair frizzy as moss and her teeth a little crooked. Martha Hendricks was easy to understand.

But I could never understand the fictional character of Dorothy. I could never understand being in the center of so many people's attention and the object of such vast

devotion. I misunderstood like crazy. And I envied like crazy. Why can't people approach me in the street and be friendly without treachery, and tell me their dreams about missing hearts or brains. Why can't I make a friend walking down a dark forest path instead of an enemy or a victim. Why can't someone miss me. Why can't someone await my return home.

But then again, why would Dorothy *return home* after finding that somewhere over the rainbow? I wouldn't do it. I would fling those ruby slippers up over a telephone wire and see them glittering, glittering, glittering. They'd glitter, little metallic teacups, red Christmas bells, hot pokers; they'd glitter to rival the moon; they'd jingle in the sunset; they'd smile. And I would run barefoot in the wet grass, rain streaming down my legs, with my scarecrow in one arm and my lion in the other, their onyx glass eyes glaring, glaring.

After I officially became Rita Balder, it rained for three days. For breakfast I had tea with ginger ale and a piece of apple toast with marmalade. Lina had set it out for me like a centerpiece, immaculate china plate and all, before she went to work. Lina and Quent both worked. When Quent appeared from the room at the end of the hallway, he stopped and stared at me, as if marveling at a stolen Monet, impossibly rare and impossibly expensive. I stared back. He

was carrying a pink toothbrush and a magazine. *Harpers Bazaar*. He didn't smile, but his eyes glinted. There was a silence with the stillness of ice beneath a bridge. Everything in the room held its breath. I felt like splitting open the ice with a stone, or a knife, or my swollen knuckles.

"Rita." came his watery voice. "How did you sleep?"

"Well," I said. We stared at each other.

"Did you have those vivid dreams, like you always used to?"

So Rita and I did have something in common, after all. Just this neat little fact made me feel at ease with sharing her identity.

"Yes." I smiled. "I dreamed I was on a huge white parasol. With the gulls. Yes, the gulls. They talked to me in a strange gull dialect I didn't understand. I understand standard sea gull language, but these birds were from Europe." I hesitated. Why was I telling him this?

"Well. So did you end up getting to talk to them?"

"Yes, sort of. See, they could make motions in the air that communicated with me. They said they were delivering babies. They lent me a bundle. The name read 'Keenan'. They gave me a Japanese baby."

"I see. Keenan, hm. It doesn't sound very Japanese."

"Anyway, we were flying past Indonesia when one of the other gulls suddenly screeched. An arrow got him. The baby

he was carrying, Gloria Ann, fell with him, feathers flying, down the sea."

"That's horrible."

"And we tried to follow him, but it was too late. The gull landed in the water. The water turned red."

"That's too sad. What happened to Gloria Ann?"

"See, the blood of the gull turned Gloria Ann into a fish as soon as she touched the water. So Gloria Ann didn't end up being a Scottish girl. She became a beautiful fish."

"And did you get Keenan to Japan safely?"

"No." I shook my head. My fingers massaged the now-empty plate. "I lost him."

"How did you lose him?"

"It's horrible. They trusted me with him. But I dropped him. I dropped him in the ocean. My hands were tired and I felt sick. I dropped him."

"It wasn't your fault, then, if you were—"

"There is no excuse. I dropped him on purpose. I was a bad girl in my dreams. A horrible girl." For some reason I couldn't stop. And I knew it was a mistake, because I saw those eyes again, those same glittering eyes gone dull.

Suddenly his expression shifted. "What did Keenan turn into?"

"He didn't turn into anything," I said simply. "He died."

"How do you know that? How do you know he didn't turn

into a beautiful fish like Gloria Ann? Or a shark – or a sting ray – ”

“Because I saw his blood,” I whispered. “I saw his blood. And I couldn’t handle it.”

“Don’t say that, honey. It wasn’t your fault. You’ve changed a little, Rita. You’re more mature. You’re more responsible. It’s strange...but amazing.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say to this.

“I’ve got to get to work,” he said, rising. He flicked on the tiny flat-screen TV set on the dresser. “You can watch this while we’re gone. But in a few days you’ll have to get back to school.”

He winked, and shut the door.

I wished with all my wishing juices for Quent to recognize that there was something unmistakably wrong with me. Between the duck down sheets that were too soft for me to feel truly comfortable in, the wishes would pour. I was a shipwreck in a foggy, ostensible stillness.

But the feeling would always abate when Quent entered in the morning. I would take back the wishes of the night before as I continued to describe to him my dreams. He had marvelous ears. They could absorb any wilderness. His voice was timid and shallow, but his ears were endless urns. He listened to anything I had to say. I don’t think I’ve talked to anyone as much as I had to Quent.

One day in the afternoon Quent entered with a package of some sort. It was wrapped in red paper and tied with strings.

"What's this?" I asked sleepily as he handed it to me. It unwrapped to reveal a notebook, brown and crumpled and hardcover, with two black suede crescents on the cover.

"I got you this for a dream diary," he said. "I think you should record your dreams in a book." He handed me a silver pen.

It was positively one of the first gifts I had received. It was a gift I would use constantly from then on to the point where the pages fall off like scabs and the memories of dreams stick with me like movies and mental videos, long after the black suede moons peel off.

"I could still tell my stories to you, right Quent?" I asked.

"Always," he said, and smiled.

The only dreams I didn't tell him about were the dreams about my (real) mother. I dreamt constantly about her. They were not good dreams. They were sad and furious dreams. Her arms would stretch out like milky snakes and twine around me until they became ropes, and I would hear her laugh in the distance, as if she were far ahead of me, picking mushrooms and dandelions and wildflowers. But her face would still be close, breath twisting from her nostrils, her mouth shut

into a crooked smile and her curls dangling in front of my eyes. There was a small mole above her chin. And then her snakelike arms would squeeze, deflating the air from my lungs until I became breathless, empty, and so very angry.

On a Sunday after I had been with Quent and Lina for about two weeks, I was up early and climbing down the stairs when I heard voices coming from their bedroom. There was a tension in their voices that hung like a dull iron curtain. I tilted my head and peeked into the keyhole. I could tell that Lina was crying, judging from the shrill tremor in her voice.

"I tried...I tried to be a little like her, like Anli, but sometimes I can't, Quent..."

"I'm not expecting you to try!" His voice was harsher than normal. It was an eerie tone that I hadn't heard before.

"And how long are you going to keep this up, keeping that stray girl in your house..."

"Don't you dare bring Rita into this, if you know..."

"The girl, that girl, she's *not* your Rita, Quent, but because of your ridiculous delusions she *believes* she is! I know that you know that she's not Rita, Quent, and for both our sakes and for the sake of your Anli - "

"What about the sake of that child?" Quent's voice rose, free and fast, as his hands reached for her shoulders

in a desperate grip. "That child, who has no home? If she wants to be my daughter, to be *our* daughter, then I daresay we can *make* her our daughter!"

I flinched.

"Stop it, please stop it! She might be hearing this!"

"I don't care, if she hears it I want her to hear that I want her as my daughter!" His voice was high as singsong now. I clenched my fists at this statement. My legs were melting steadily into a warm pudding on the carpet.

There was a silence, and then Lina said, "What about Rita?"

Quent could not say anything. His hands were still on her shoulders, but now I could tell there was a tear that snaked down his cheek.

She did not stop there. "Are you going to abandon her? What about your weekly trips to the hospital, Quent? She's still in that same bed. She hasn't gone anywhere. She waits still, for you. You know that, don't you?"

His face dropped. She held his head between her arms.

"You know what you remind me of?" she said into his hair. "A magpie. In my girlhood, there were so many of them in my backyard. They are pretty birds, much more beautiful than crows. They had these long, iridescent tails and snow-white bellies." She was stroking his face now as if he were a little boy.

"Anyway, people hated the magpies because they stole

and ate other birds' eggs. But really, a lot of them were innocent. They just wanted to make their nests beautiful."

"I'm not stealing her. She has no parents. She has no home. She is an egg without a nest!"

"You have to realize that your Rita, your *daughter*, is actually in a hospital. This is Sunday. We always go on Sundays. Why not go there right now? We'll go for an hour, and no more than that, if you wish."

"My Rita is right there, sleeping in her room—"

"Please, I can't stand it. Find out her real name, her *true* name..."

Suddenly, I couldn't take it anymore. The door hissed ajar as I opened it. A flower of morning dust sneezed into my face.

"Kayla!" I exclaimed, my voice unnaturally high. I realized how alien my name sounded on my tongue. "Kayla. That's my real name!"

"Kayla," Lina repeated. "Quent, it's such a pretty name."

"I'm sorry too," Quent said. "I shouldn't have just let you—"

"I'm sorry about the wallet! About the money! I didn't spend it, I swear!" At this point, I could not let go. I kept going. "It's in my little bag. You can have it back, take it to your daughter, please!"

"That was the money I was going to take to the useless

hospital, for another useless cause..." He was sitting on the bed, leaning on his chest. "Even if they used my continuous donations to save lives...none of those lives would be my little girl's..."

"Why didn't you catch me when you could? Why didn't you—why didn't you grab me and take it back?" I was dropping to my knees. I felt like a human on brittle bird legs.

"Because you needed it more than my daughter did," he sighed. "She's always going to be in that hospital bed. She'll never recover."

"Don't give me that!" I said. "Go to the hospital. Go see Rita. And if you can, take me with you. I want to see her. I want to see this Rita, my sister."

The scent of the hospital for some weird reason was rainy and light. The three of us, tense and awkward, walked down the narrow blue corridor to room 342, where Rita Balder slumped over the bed, her sienna hair fanning over the pillow, a feeding tube pumping into her softly. It had been a full thirteen months since the last time she touched her nose to her father's, a full thirteen months since she's revealed the dimple on her right cheek, a full thirteen months since she's been with her mother who used to write fairy tales in Chinese calligraphy.

Rita did resemble me. She had the same white moonlike

skin. She was half-Chinese while I was a quarter Chinese. If she could open her eyes, our eyes would have been the same. Yellowtail eels with dark pupils in the middle. Her hair was longer than mine, but her body was just as skinny. If she stood up, she would have been two thumbs taller than me.

Quent and Lina sat on either side of her, staring vacantly at her. It was so apparent that Lina loved Rita as a daughter, even though the girl had never once spoken to her, even though the girl did not know her face or her name. Lina even played along with Quent's game of taking me in as a missing daughter. For this Lina touched me. She could stand atop Quent's past like a martyr. She could walk barefoot on the shards.

I could not question why Quent had taken me for his missing child. Her body was here, but Rita was missing. Rita Balder, the daughter of Quent, was a missing child like any of the black and white pictures on the newspapers or subway stations. In a sense, that was what bound us together. Both Rita Balder and I were missing children. Both Rita Balder and I had been forced to renounce our sanctuaries. In my dream about the storks, Keenan and Gloria Ann weren't the only babies to be dropped. I, too, was a package that was dropped into the sea. Rita was dropped too; like Gloria Ann, she turned into a beautiful fish, but she drowned. All the beautiful fish drowned like that.

Suddenly I was reminded of magpies. Quent and Linda were magpies from heaven. They took in this fallen child from the sea. I almost laughed when I thought of Lina's comment earlier. Thieving birds or not, magpies really were innocent. To me, only the storks were the culprits.

CRUNCHY ON THE OUTSIDE

When I heard that my uncle Hwang died of kidney failure way out in a dirty redbrick house in the middle of nowhere, I suddenly felt homesick for the one man who told me not to be afraid of swallowing scorpions. Liu Ming Hwang was his full name: he was my father's elder brother by nine years and the only one in our family who stayed in China.

I was a study-abroad student in Shanghai University getting my master's degree in Asian studies. For a moment I considered taking a train back to that green village Shanglong, somewhere near a pulse point of the Yellow River, and then realized it was impossible with my budget and my soul-eating study schedule.

His body had already been sent to the city to be cremated a week ago, and now it was buried near his favorite childhood lake, the Lake of Seven Cranes. He had been prized in his village for being a comedian, a philosopher, and a sometimes-poet; he gave the young children lectures on the legendary poems of the Song dynasty. I last met him when I was seven, when he had fed me a stick of fried scorpions, all the while chatting away about how the poet Tu Fu died drunk and stuffed after forty days of homelessness and four nights of ribald carousing. I had listened with little comprehension, noting that the fried scorpions tasted a bit

like overdone shrimp tempura.

The first time I saw him again, I was heating up bell peppers in the kitchen.

"Come here, Jung, I want to show you something." He was standing in the kitchen wearing a threadbare mandarin coat with a god-forsaken pattern of black roosters and clouds. To top it off he had matching trousers and a velvet cap adorned with a plastic jasmine. His goatee was shaved off, I noticed, and his bare feet long and bony as ever.

"Uncle Hwang, that outfit looks ridiculous." I said. I paused, and then added, "You're also supposed to be dead." I took out my supper and sampled it. The peppers had become soggy like wet sponges. It was tasteless except for the kitchen dust and soy sauce.

"The villagers dressed me. They had no sense of style. Come, Little Jung, look." He beckoned me toward my book of new listings, pointing at a downtown address.

"A new restaurant?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "And guess what they serve?"

"Panda fetuses?"

"No!"

"Komodo dragons?"

"No!"

"Then what?"

"Scorpions, Little Jung. Your favorite!"

"I can't eat scorpions now, Uncle Hwang."

"Why not?"

"Trust me, I would, but I have no money."

"Eating a single meal doesn't require too much money!" he laughed. "Five blocks south of here, Jung, there's a corner on Bai Hua Street. At the left you will see Cai-Guang. Go there. It's my last wish. You can't say no to good food and an uncle's dying wish."

"Silly. You're already dead."

"A-ah. Drop your chopsticks. Go on, go on."

Around the corner of my apartment complex there was a gate that the guard padlocked after midnight. It was a rusty gate and college kids were constantly scrambling over it in the dark hours before sunrise. Beyond it a sidewalk stretched out toward the carnival lights of Shanghai.

I followed Hwang across the dark street, my hair instantly dampening with sweat and moisture, my skirt sticking to my knees. We walked past the darkness toward downtown. Silhouettes of young strolling couples flitted against the bright-lit shop windows. We found the restaurant, a miniature building of freshly painted scarlet wood with two golden paper lanterns saying "grand opening" hanging from the mimosa tree in front. I noticed it used to be an accessories boutique, where I bought several paisley-printed belts a year ago.

On the menu, the special items were listed like this:

Firecracker Snake...145 Yuan.

Quail with Plum Sauce and Egg...135 Yuan.

Bird's Nest Soup...675 Yuan.

Live drunk Scorpion...145 Yuan.

I squinted. "Drunk scorpion?"

The waitress explained that the scorpions could be eaten live when submerged in a type of rice wine. "They thrash around," she said, "but after awhile the scorpions become inebriated. Then our chef cuts off the poison sac and stinger, and wham! They're ready to eat."

"So how many people die from this every year?" I asked, my Mandarin a little quivery. I wasn't going to wimp out on this one. After all, it was my duty to my uncle.

The waitress only laughed uneasily, her crimson lipstick stretched to reveal a set of beige teeth.

"I'll order it anyway," I said. "If I die, I will write a will on this napkin."

Right at the time she left and I took out my pen, I heard my favorite apparition's voice again.

"You're not going to die, don't worry." My uncle Hwang was still wearing the same outfit, but his bald head was devoid of the jasmine cap.

"I never got a chance to try them, those live critters," he said. "I wonder if you taste the wine when you eat them."

"Of course you taste the wine," I said. "They've probably been dipped for a while."

He grinned. "You can even say that by doing this you're braver than me."

"A feat I will never accomplish," I replied.

Minutes passed by and the waitress placed a large dish in front of me. In the center were four limp scorpions, slick with wine and smelling fresh. Their thornlike legs sometimes tapped the plate as if their bodies had stopped twitching just a moment ago. They were rather scrawny and I had a feeling my hunger wouldn't be sated. I picked the one that wasn't moving between my chopsticks and bit off a half.

"So?" my uncle asked. "How is it?"

"Crunchy," I said. "Very crunchy on the outside. Soft on the inside, like raw oysters. Without the sea salt."

"It sounds so tasty," he said ruefully.

"It's nothing that special. You haven't missed a thing."

There was silence as I popped the second critter into my mouth. Uncle Hwang took the table centerpiece, a flower stuffed with a ring of lettuce, into his hands. Even in his after-death form, his hands were fleshy and red. I noticed

something then: one of his fingers seemed to be prosthetic. His wedding ring finger.

Suddenly he asked me, "Jung, how are your parents? And your sisters?"

"They're good," I said, a bit surprised. "Swell, in fact. They just moved to California. Bought a fine house there in Redwood City."

"That's wonderful," he said. "I miss them. I miss them all. Your aunties, and sisters, and brothers..."

I didn't mention to him that I had no brothers or sisters. The orchid was wilting under his palms.

Walking back to my apartment, the air was more foreign than it had ever been since I got here. It was as if my nostrils had transformed into magical filters: no stink of raw market meat or smoky perfumes from cosmetics shops, no coughing exhaust from taxis and busses. Even with the languid summer heat, the odorlessness was refreshing.

"I feel like I'm in California again," I sighed. "Maybe it was the wine or the scorpions or whatever, but suddenly I can't smell a thing."

"Oh? *Jia Zhou*?" Hwang said. Now that I'd examined him, I noticed that his left hand was always in his pocket. "You know, I haven't heard many stories about *Jia Zhou* from my brother. He's always avoided me."

"I wonder why."

"He hasn't visited or sent a letter for the last fifteen years. I'm lucky if he even knows that I'm dead."

"He's just not settled," I said, truly apologetic. "My dad has been moving the family around for so many years. I went through five different middle schools and high schools. Every day was hectic. It was all a huge stress, especially for him. I'm sorry for his carelessness."

"Don't be ridiculous!" My uncle laughed a half-chuckle, half-cough. "It was the biggest pain growing up with him. He was the youngest, the baby. When he didn't have his way, he'd act like an angry musk ox tied to a fence by the neck. Me, I had to take care of him myself many times. Occasionally I'd beat him up, but it was usually he who riled it up."

I chuckled. "In America, my father acts more like a flapping fish on a chopping board. Desperate, stubborn, but for his own good."

"Sounds just like him in a foreign situation."

We stopped at a small grocery shop, where I picked up a bottle of sesame oil, a carton of eggs, and face cream. The label on it said in gold foil English: 'Lovely White'. In Shanghai, white was the color of beautiful skin. If this were true, my uncle would not have come close. His complexion was red-brown and brittle as a yam skin. But in his own right, he was kind of a marvel to look at. He had slanted eyelids, and black, surprisingly long eyelashes that

looked like they belonged to an infinitely sad person. Except I couldn't imagine my uncle ever showing his own sadness. He was more the type that would suppress something like that at all costs.

As I waited in line, I flipped through a copy of Chinese *Marie Claire*. People didn't notice my uncle, standing and staring in front of the registers, but one time a Pekinese sniffed his pants, then his feet, and wagged its tail.

"I've always liked dogs," he said to me. "I used to own several of them back when I was young, and alive. One died because some scoundrel threw a brick at it. Hit it straight on the head. It left such a bloody mess, the neighbors had to hold me back from throttling that kid."

"That's too sad," I said. "I had a puppy once too. I pretended it was mine. It was actually my neighbor's. I used to play with it and dogsit it before they moved away."

For the rest of the way back, we talked about our respective puppy tragedies. His he lost by accident or death; mine I lost because they were never mine to begin with.

When we finally entered the apartment again, I finally asked him the question.

"This has been eating at me for a while."

"What? The fact that I'm dead, but yet I'm sitting on your chair right now? The fact that you have only gotten to see me after they'd already buried me in my casket?"

"Well, that, and..."

"And?"

"Your finger. Your left ring finger. What happened to it?"

"Oh."

"If you don't want to tell me, then it's -"

"Inconsequential, right? No, no, my Jung. I'll tell you."

He took his left hand out of his pocket, and with it a ring.

"Let's just say the ancestors got angry. After my wife died, I couldn't really admit that I hated being alone." I tried to picture Hwang's late wife in my mind, but failed. All I got was a grainy image of long silvery tendrils and a round full-moon face.

"Then there was a young girl who helped me clean my house sometimes for a small salary. Well, maybe she loved me or something, I'm not sure. I was fifty-eight and mourning; she was in her twenties. This one day, she had shined my floor, and put away my cleaning supplies. She came up to me and cupped my face in her hands and just stared at me, like that, for a long time. There was something inexplicable, comforting, lonely, mysterious, and kind about that look she

gave me, and the image of her face would remain in my mind for always until now, even after my death. And then..."

A ghostly tear ran down his cheek and disappeared at his jaw. He pulled himself forward on my armchair, his hands rubbing his forehead.

"Then?" I said gently.

"She kissed me on the forehead. That was it. She left shortly afterward and I never saw her again. But it made me so unbelievably happy. I couldn't remember a time when I was more buoyant than in that moment.

The next day, I got in a bicycle accident. My finger was completely offed when I crashed full on into someone's rickshaw. I swore that rickshaw driver was blind. My wedding ring dropped into the blood and mud, and I was so injured and in shock that I couldn't pick it up. That day I understood for sure that some entity was infuriated with me, so I never thought again of the girl whose kiss revitalized me.

Within a few hours a rickshaw took me to the doctor across the town, who bandaged my hand. He referred me to a clinic in the next city, at least fifty miles away, which specialized in western prosthetics. Now, I wasn't so mad about the loss of my ring finger—I've had much deeper losses before, so I just went home. I didn't think about it. A finger—who cares, right? I wasn't expecting to find my ring again. It was one of the few vestiges of your aunt. I

buried most of her things with her, and only kept my own wedding ring. We didn't have many photographs, but there were a couple stored in the back closet.

Then at night, I couldn't really sleep, so I opened the window and let the night wind wash over me. The mountain scents seemed to come alive in the darkness. I could hardly hear my own thoughts, I was so entranced. A few seconds later, I heard footsteps. Quiet, cautious footsteps, like a burglar's. At this time I neither cared much for my possessions nor felt the need to protect myself, so I just waited, to see what would happen next. After all, I'd just lost my only treasure. There was nothing whole that was left of me.

After awhile, the footsteps grew fainter, until there was no sound at all. I listened to silence for the rest of the night. At some point I probably fell asleep, but in the morning I found in my mailbox a paper box, wrapped in foil. Inside was, as you've probably figured, my wedding ring. The next day I went to that doctor and got my finger replaced.

A pretty useless finger, when you think of it. And the ring - it got all dull and light. But the recovery of these things that I was so sure I'd lost reconstructed me in some odd way or another. Somehow I was able to return to somewhere I hadn't been before. My will to live was no longer all junky and decomposed." He laughed a little, and rubbed his cheek. "Well, all that nostalgia was a bit of an

overload. Ironical that I remember so much about a will to live, if you think about it."

For some reason I couldn't come up with a decent reply.

"It did remind me of why I came here in the first place, though."

He reached out and held my hands. "I'm leaving my treasure to you. You've made me very happy, eating those scorpions and all."

"Uncle Hwang, I— "

But before I knew it, he was saying goodbye. He slowly turned around, and the clouds and roosters on his shirt started dissolving into the air, like cars vanishing into tunnels. He gave one last humungous grin before disappearing forever.

I hardly realized that a ghost had just touched me. In my palms my uncle's wedding ring was warm with my own sweat. I dropped it on the table, where it glistened under the lamplight, the gold of it dulled into thin copper. The only other ring I had on was a smoky rose quartz, which I bought while visiting a rock and crystal factory in Guilin.

Before long I realized I was hungry again. Or maybe I'd always been hungry and it only just dawned on me.

After Hwang left, I sliced a small piece of cod and added sesame oil and pepper to it, cooking it in coconut juice with dried orange slices. I found the recipe in an

American culinary magazine I'd borrowed from the university library. The cover had a photograph of a braised lamb leg with lime slices and a cracked crème brûlée. I poured a glass of cold chrysanthemum tea and brought the fish to the table, sitting where Hwang sat just a few moments ago.

As I ate, I pictured my father. Stern, thick-skinned, hardboiled Dad. When he glanced at you, his eyes were narrow and penetrating. Peering into them was like being on a plane, trying to look through the fog at a pair of dark, soulless ships. I know every time I looked into them, they swallowed up my energy.

He had something you could call a superhuman power—the ability to pinpoint every white lie anyone ever tells him. Even with media he had this ability. He disliked stories or novels—they were “well-constructed lies”. He didn't like memoirs, either—those were “lies verging on truth”. He never went to the theater or watched movies.

There was a time in high school when I risked it all and told him I had a boyfriend. I was seventeen. Benny was twenty and half-Caucasian, half-Vietnamese. He went to the local community college to study mechanics and worked part-time as a waiter. He loved me, and I loved him. We'd only slept together once, but we believed in all the workings of fate. Fate, like magnets installed in the soul, he'd explain to me. Everyone has a unique magnet inside of them, and this magnet may loosely attract various other magnets, but only

one other magnet in the world is identical to it. When a lucky person finds this other magnet in another person, the two would naturally come together, and no fleeting emotion, hesitation, or circumstance could prevent this. It could take many years to finally attach, but once the two magnets come together it would be impossible to pry them apart. So impossible that eventually they become the same magnet.

Everything about Benny made me all woozy with foggy, disturbed love. The one time we did it was in a dark gazebo at a Japanese garden, the night after he told me about the magnets. We had taken a long, winding walk and gazed at the koi, wine-dark, slippery darts of color underneath the water licked by moonlight. We felt as crazy and spirited as lovers can get. We thought we were in some kind of foreign movie.

I didn't know what I was thinking when I introduced him to my father. I knew he was the type my father didn't like. I tried to mask his appearance by making him wear a dress shirt, an argyle sweater-vest, and tie. But my father saw right through it. The first question he asked was, "When do you plan on transferring to a large university?"

My boyfriend twitched, and said something like, "Um, next fall, if I'm lucky."

"Which college?" My father interrogated.

"One of the UCs, maybe. Or a technical school."

"What's your major going to be there? Is it mechanics?"

"I don't know yet." Actually, he wanted to become a philosophy major. He wanted to study Locke, Kant, Marx, Hume. He wanted to write long, sprawling papers about the metaphysics of human response to music and machinery. Mechanics was just not his thing, he'd realized in his year as a college student.

"Berkeley has a great mechanical engineering department."

"Yes, I've heard."

"You should make that one of your choices."

"No worries. I am."

My father only nodded at him suspiciously, sipping his bitter black tea and adjusting his collar.

"Jung here is going to major in some history or humanities or something like that. If you ask me, it's a waste. She's a smart girl."

"I don't think it's a waste, sir. I think she's going to put to use her talents. She'll do fine, if only you believe in her."

"I don't like him," he said, rather loudly, while Benny was in the bathroom.

"Somehow I don't find that very surprising, for you," I replied icily, trying helplessly to sting him back.

"You know I can always tell when a person lies to me. He's not going to transfer. He's just going to stay here. He'll graduate from that community college and continue

being a waiter. He's not much older than you, but he's not going anywhere. You want someone like that?"

"Actually, you're wrong, Dad: he *is* transferring. And he's changing his goddamn major too, to philosophy. That's right, philosophy. Does the word even strike a chord in your thin, brittle mind?"

The next day I ran away from home and stayed over at Benny's. It was the obvious choice. It was also addictive, trying to disprove all my father's conceptions. While I was there I worked on all of Benny's transfer applications. He ended up getting into four out of five UCs, and the next spring he packed his bags and went to UC Davis. I got busier and busier in my studies and he stopped responding to my phone calls. While he was there he probably found someone new, but he was able to major in philosophy.

I enjoyed the feeling I got out of correcting my father's misconceptions, but usually, in the end, the purpose would always disappear.

After I ate, I left the dishes in the sink. Suddenly the crazy idea came to me, and I picked up the phone and called my father.

The voice that answered seemed tired and out of focus.
"Hello?"

"Dad."

"Oh, Jung!"

I knew he had nothing to say, but the voice gave me such hope.

"Do you remember Uncle Hwang?"

"Yes. Why do you bring that up now?"

"Something important has just happened."

"Can I call you later and talk about it?"

"Uncle Hwang, he—"

"I know he's dead. I heard it from your aunts." He was getting impatient, but something about his voice had an anxiety in it. Bittersweet, urgent.

"Oh, well—"

"Listen, Jung, I'm at a meeting right now, but I'll call you back."

"Hey, dad."

"Yes?"

"You remind me of the scorpion I ate for dinner."

"What's that?"

"Yeah, that's right. You are neither musk ox nor flapping fish. You are scorpion."

"I've got to go, I'll call you back soon, Jung."

"Fried scorpion. Live drunk scorpion. Crunchy on the outside."

"Bye."

The phone clicked, and I smiled, and stared at my uncle's wedding ring. It fit my thumb perfectly, a ring of skin, blood, and memory. I tried picturing where Hwang would

be tomorrow, or the week after, or a year later. Time would no longer affect him. If he navigated with his spirit's senses all the way to where my father was, maybe he would get some answers. Maybe he could travel all around California—*Jiazhou*—with his bony bare feet, his laughter streaming in the sea breeze and teasing random dogs on the beach. Maybe he would find that girl. Maybe she was somewhere in this city. Somewhere beyond the din of the rainy Shanghai nightclubs, the scattered lights zigzagging like subway lines on a map, she would be sleeping soundly in a tidy little apartment. She might be married, she might not be. When my uncle visits her, she would smile at him and remember.

I decided to open the window. I knew there would be no wind, but to my surprise a soft breeze blew against my hair. I heard it rustling the willows outside my window. I breathed in and sure enough - I smelled the mountain. The humidity and simmering heat were no longer there. I tried to look through the darkness, to see if I was finally in Shanglong, where my uncle died, where the scent of the mountain drifted thick and fragrant in the fog, where the only music was the sound of lonely brooks and swallows' wings fluttering in the early morning breeze. I looked, and squinted, but couldn't see.

STAY HEALTHY

Within a few hours, the rash on Oa's face blossomed into a faint, coy blush that looked so natural all the men in the room could clearly see. They noticed, too. They were allured. A spell of spring pollen had settled over the room, blending with the scents of rhubarb and freshly fermented grapes.

The sadist that was her husband left her in a corner of the cocktail party again, fluttering her bangs by the heater. The party was May Day-themed but the snow hadn't melted yet. The only desire Oa had was to shut herself inside a closet, any closet, as long as it was cool, dark, and had something to sit on—a stack of photo albums, a wooden shoe rack, a pile of unwashed laundry. Whenever her friends dragged her into parties, she tried every closet in sight, smelling and touching the coats, the must and mothballs of the tweeds, rabbit furs, houndstooths, unfamiliar and exciting but ultimately not as terrifying as the people who wore them. Several times a couple slammed against the closet door with their backs to her, and she'd hear their gasps and sighs and hoots and hollers so clearly she could shed her own skin and slither into the skin of the moaning woman stranger, the crinkled dress falling to her knees, her legs splayed like a giraffe dipping its head for water.

None of the men she's heard was her husband; at least, she was fairly sure. Trenton was so young. If he'd had an affair, she imagined it would be with one of the older, seasoned housewives: Judy, perhaps, with her lush, premature-graying hair and annoying set of white teeth that made a clacking noise while eating dinner. Or maybe Tanya, the quiet damsel-like thing tangled in too many necklaces that her husband Tom bought from flea markets.

The young men's drunken glances made Oa dizzy and wary. If she was going to enter her closet, it'd better be quick, insidious. Scratching her face and shutting the door, Oa settled on top of a leather guitar case, between a paper-wrapped gown and a peacoat.

The rash dipped far into the gorges behind her ears now, raw and unrelenting. From the closet, she could faintly make out Trenton's voice. At the moment he was leaning against a walnut table clutching his glass of cold sherry, listening to the host's single thirty-six-year-old sister Melinda Smith talk about her beach house in Baja. Oa was certain he'd been looking for her, but she wasn't going to leave the closet anytime soon.

Trenton's laugh was blustery, half-choke, half-chuckle, the unmelodic warble of it at times charming, at times infuriating. During conversation, his eyes wandered around his listener's face in a twitchy, bird-like way. More than once some woman would take this as captivation, so she'd

slip her fingers under his sleeves and simper until he blushed. If Trenton were a germ placed under a microscope, Oa concluded, he would be the leader, the nucleus, the one the other germs danced around. How he remained so loyal to her she could only wonder.

Oa let out a sigh. She was missing something terribly, she knew it and it made her lip tremble. But what? It should be enough that Trenton thought she was beautiful. No other man or thing before him thought so. But she was wary that his dumbness was like a magnet, and past that, she suspected herself. It was as if she could not relish her own possession. When standing next to him, she often felt like a man, a pauper. Trenton was prettier than her—in fact, he was everything that embodied a princess: baby-faced, fair-skinned despite the years he spent as a teenager under the perpetual Laguna Beach sun. He had chin-length corn silk hair, the long neck of a singer, and when he spoke he smiled wide like a child. Even Pierce, Oa's best friend since high school, agreed: "Men seem like pineapples, all hard to tear on the outside. *Him*, though, he's like a peach, soft and mushy all over, with a fuzzy skin. I wouldn't mind dining on him." Pierce said it with a straight face and a wink, and in that sparkle Oa decided she would seduce Trenton and hoard him for herself.

The last time she'd had too much to drink, she was only nineteen, a freshman at NYU. That evening she took four urgent cold showers trying to dampen her delirious itch. Trenton, who was there with her, was passed out on the bed. Through her deliberate bouncing and creaking of the bed he slept like a hibernating skunk, jolly and stinky in his hangover.

When he found out that she was allergic to alcohol, he shrugged his shoulders and wrapped his arm around her. "Poor thing," he cooed, as if the allergy was cancer. The next few weeks they avoided going to parties and hung out at his college apartment alone, kissing fervently through scenes of the Midway battle, of American panic and grenades blowing up. On Saturdays they never slept; they watched movies until well into the morning. They both harbored a bloodlust for violent films, she because of her gleeful cynicism, he for conventional, boyish reasons.

The third week they had sex to a samurai drama, which was strangely erotic: the ribbons of blood streaming; the clink and clunk of metal clashing; the shrill but curt battlecries; the slice of sword against sensuous human neck. It was as if they were sword-fighting themselves, and Oa was always the one to surrender. She was the weaker, the decapitated, her hair a thick tassel for Trenton's fists, her cries the ultimate medal on Trenton's belt.

Afterwards they lay fragile and spent, wrapped in a

moist cocoon of duck down sheets, eating nuts from a clean ashtray. Their legs made a zigzag across the bed like a set of cutlery as they watched the Korean revenge film, *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*.

Trenton ate his peanuts whole, shell and all, and spit each salty mess into an empty can. This repulsed and beguiled her; she tried to do it herself but ended up chewing too much and spitting too little.

"How do you do that?"

"This?" He did it again, seamlessly spitting out the shell in a neat little globule.

"Teach me." She'd seen this movie before, but they were getting to the good part: where the vengeful parents were bringing out the cleavers and scimitars and the child murderer was tied up and gagged.

He explained—something about incisors and molars; she stopped listening because she was examining his reaction to the violence: fascinated, amused, almost certainly with a strange innocence that belied his sexual expertise.

The sweat on his scalp smelled good, like sugar cane or something, and she mistakenly wished for something to tie them together, something beyond just the violence and disconnected laughter and skin and warmth, the dining hall dinners and the walks in the rain. She knew she was selfish for wanting that, because she had what many girls craved - a haven away from the din, the throaty hip hop and groping

hands, beyond the anxiety of college virginity, into peace and security. It was the kind of security that made her weak at first but kept her inside the room, sleepless and disenchanted at times, watching the shadows of moths stiffen above the pale light fixtures. After the movie ended, Trenton fell asleep on her chest, his frame pinning hers down and shifting with her breathing. In his sleep he smiled, stretching his face wide, and it made wondering hard to resist.

Not through their fourth year of college, Oa got pregnant. It gave her no relief that Trenton immediately put together a trust fund and arranged an engagement party.

Over the next few weeks nightmares (or were they dreams?) popped up, one by one, all about killing a baby. Her baby. Sometimes she'd drop her baby into a hot tin tub and watch it float and sink and choke and drown. Sometimes she'd tie her baby to a one-kid rickshaw and push it down a steep, rain-whipped incline, watching it tumble as the surrounding trees pelted it with cherry blossoms. The pits of cherries on the ground looked like gory, half-eaten hearts: sad, strewn, stranded.

Now that she thought of it, so much violence was exposed to the baby already! Why, it must have even been conceived through a scene of carnage!

She imagined how this kid would be as it grows older.

It might become a problem child. It might go to school one morning with a stolen M-16 and a chaotic mind. The neighbors, the teachers, the strangers who read the article in *The Times* would question her, pass judgment on her: how could you have let your kid *fester* like this? How could you not have been aware? Did you neglect him? Did you drink a lot? Did you beat him with a broomstick or a spatula?

She would sob and sigh and attempt to blame Trenton, but no one would believe her. Trenton wouldn't have been home enough. It was obviously she who did the raising, was it not?

She took Trenton's entire collection of DVDs and threw them out the window into the rainy dumpster below. Trenton was at first devastated because that collection included his father's gift for his twenty-first birthday, which was a rare collection of Japanese horror flicks. He had a special fondness for the poignant story about a man who nursed his lover's beautiful rotting corpse back to life.

He seethed quietly, not revealing to her his disappointment. He promised her that they'd raise this child properly, with all their power and prowess. There would be no more duels and wars. They would now watch family films about heroic goldfish and telekinetic cats. He got down on his knees and presented her with the makeshift ring he bought at the local mall.

They got married and there were chocolate-covered

strawberries and cheese cubes on the table. Oa's dress was a towering froth of old lace, so brittle one touch might crumble it like dried starfish. To her mother's insistence and as a form of repayment for her lost college credits, she wore this dress that once belonged to her dead aunt Bethel. Her mother had always been jealous of Bethel because of the woman's early widowhood, all that somber glamour wrapped like a fox fur around her neck, her husband a rich businessman who died of stroke at forty. The last time Oa saw her mother was, in fact, at aunt Bethel's funeral, hiding her smiling face behind a black lace fan.

Both sides of the family came and collided. His side, a little cautious, her side, presumptuous, brazen. Her mother attempted to dance the jitterbug with his uncle Ned, and ended up stabbing his foot with the heel of her stiletto. There were no bandages or first aid kits around, much to their chagrin, so Ned walked around the rest of the night with a bruised foot and a Ziploc ice bag, his eyes pierced with sullen paranoia.

When Trenton kissed her, Oa had a terrible premonition. The slick tease of his tongue grazing hers triggered something unpleasant and sickly to race through her head. This premonition was an amalgamation of all her dreams about killing the baby, which had recently turned into dreams about the baby killing her. Sometimes she'd be sleeping in her bed and the baby's head would pop up, under the sheets

and between her legs, then pin down her arms and suck the blood out of her throat.

She made a choking noise and started coughing. Tears scalded her eye sockets. Everyone was touched. Even the bored ones seemed to come alive. The bride, crying in jubilation—what could be more beautiful? Pictures were snapped of her tearful nausea, her petrified presentiment.

The only person she felt she could trust with the knowledge of this premonition was Pierce, who was standing in the corner in a white tuxedo, cutting strawberries into cubes.

"It was the most horrifying thing I could ever imagine," she told him over cake. The caterer had done a seamless job on it; the apricot crème saffron-and-sienna roses looked hand-picked from a sunken garden.

"As it should be. All of life is pretty horrifying, but wedding premonitions must be the worst." He was collecting the abandoned plates, neatly sweeping the crumbs off them with a silver knife.

"Me, Trent, sitting at the dinner table. After I clear the dishes, I take off his pants. I bring out a bucket of water and wash his feet. The water turns brown and sooty as soon as I start scrubbing, and after I finish I get down on my knees and drink down the entire goddamn bucket of water."

"What? That's it?" Pierce's dark eyes widened

handsomely. More than once Oa wished he wasn't gay so they could use each other for sex.

"You don't think that's horrible?"

"Oa. It's okay. You have no history of clairvoyance. Why worry now?" He patted her bridal veil and wiped a cake crumb off her chin. "It's your wedding day. Angst of this nature is acceptable. It's correct. Keep crying. Pretend to smile. Soon the distress will turn into something else. Horniness maybe."

"What's okay? The second my new husband kisses me on my wedding day I have a vision of drinking his stinky feet juice. Tell me that isn't the most depressing thing you've ever heard."

Trenton got two part-time jobs. For the first company, he designed brochures. They were brochures for little known places—the umbrella museum, the hidden arboretum, the button factory. He salvaged photographs of famous and exotic parasols, one of them with a pistol attached to its stem that was supposedly used in a famous assassination. For his second job he worked at a ticketing booth in the subway station. The tinny smell of metal and dirty coins rubbed onto his hands, and Oa noticed it at night after he fell to bed without washing himself. She wondered how many fingers brushed his hands as they paid for tickets.

Because there was nothing else to do, Oa watched video

after video of anthropological studies required for her stay-at-home curriculum. These portrayed daily accounts of mothers and babies from all over the world. In one video, Margaret Mead's voice alleged that the Indian mother rubbed soot on her baby's forehead and the soles of its feet in order to ward off evil. Oa considered this, wondering if anything could prevent her baby from becoming evil. A little dragon liver oil? A sprig of poppy seed incense?

On one of her aimless afternoons she happened upon a book of magical spells at Borders. Flipping through it, she realized that many of these spells would solve life's most dire boredoms and predicaments. There was a spell for forgetting. A spell for the banishment of stalkers. A spell for dreamicide. It had to be hers, so she bought it.

How to forget? She sliced an apple, sprinkled it with nutmeg, dipped each slice in olive oil, and then flushed it all down the toilet.

How to banish dreams? She wrapped a mixture of chopped sage, lavender oil, basil, and organic wheat germ with a scarf and placed it under her pillow.

How to fend off evil? She dabbed soot on her own soles and forehead, hoping it would work for the baby too.

Sometimes Pierce visited with bags of medicinal pregnancy herbs, some of which she used in her now daily routine of witchcraft. He also brought textbooks, old and new, that he picked up from the campus bookshop.

"So I found out that drinking your husband's feet water is actually a tradition practiced in Siberia," he said one day, leafing through a scribbled textbook.

"You can't be serious."

"No, it's true. The wife must wash the husband's feet and drink the water it's washed in, to show her devotion."

"That's lovely. Does she clip his toenails and eat them, too?" By then she'd gotten over the premonition.

"Are you still revolted by it?"

"Not anymore. This marriage thing is all about devotion. Devotion is sexy."

She tried at least a third of the spells in the book. Not a word was said about the makeshift cauldron she constructed from an old unused wok. Trenton took it as one of the signs of a healthy pregnancy—a natural increase of curiosity, a "branching out", as he called it. The only advice she got from him was not to ingest any sketchy fluids. One time she broke this rule and sipped a bit of the lust potion she was concocting from bitter ginger root, ginkgo nut, honey, almond paste, and melted fudge. It tasted funky, and indeed a little arousing, so she spent the rest of the afternoon watching rips of *British Queer as Folk* that she borrowed from Pierce.

Sometimes at night Trenton would drop to his knees in front of her and place his cheek right on her belly, his

hands reaching around her waist, fingers probing the ridges on her spine. Those moments she never recognized how warm and flushed his face was, how alarmed his expression as her flesh touched his ear; she only felt the slow, drowsy shiver of his eyelashes against her navel. Outside, the New York snow pelted the window with its special dirt, and she couldn't help feeling far removed, as if she stood on the edge of a mesa, the vague wilderness empty and inscrutable in front of her. All senses hushed. She never did smell the pepper steak Trenton was sautéing for her. Its piquant aroma funneled through three floors of their apartment, sweeping into the nostrils of the noiseless children next door, who waited hungrily for their oldest sister to return as they watched the prime-time dramas.

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The day Oa shrieked all the way to the hospital was, surprisingly, the day she's completely forgotten. It happened four months into her pregnancy, and the only image she actually remembered was of the doctor's nose: a long, hairy nose, shaped like a prickly pear, just like her father's. Throughout her screaming the nose comforted her. She saw it through the yellow liquid that filmed over her eyes. She imagined her father's apparition there, grim but sympathetic, his big hands rocking against her head

comfortingly, as if knocking on somebody's door. *Father, I'm sorry.* She'd try to explain herself, but he'd press his mile-long finger against his lips.

The amount of blood she lost didn't shock her at first. She felt fuzzy but fine, if not a bit empty. But it made Trenton bomb. She didn't see how he reacted, to the viscera, to the twitching, candied thing on the sterilized blanket, and she was somewhat glad she didn't. It's not like she told him all about her harrowing adventures in the dreamworld, escaping or pursuing the baby like a terrorist. She might as well have been the one to point a pistol at her own womb.

Before she went home she held up her arm, and the veins glared at her through translucent skin. Across the bed lay metal instruments, a heap of moist towels, and a carton of unlabeled bottles. Her doctor sat by her on a brown stool, telling her that she was going to be okay. Things were going to be okay. When he offered his big hand to her, Oa accepted. It was not his fault. It was nobody's fault except hers. She smiled and tried to thank him but no words came out. The bright lime of the curtains blended into the beige walls. She was suffering from slight synesthesia, a confusion of the senses. When she touched something, a sharp whistling would break loose. When there was actual noise, a stinging would erupt over her skin, as if sound could pinch her hard.

Come late January, the depth of winter was frozen and captive. For a few weeks they did not speak much; they only ate and ate. Groceries filled every crevice and crater of their refrigerator. Trenton cooked so much she had to give away most of the food. She left plates of cookies, bread pudding, and chunks of eggplant lasagna to the kids who lived next door. She didn't have the guts to introduce herself, so she just packaged and wrapped them without leaving a note.

They found her out too easily, having been so familiar with the taunt and tease of the cooking smells from next door. One night there was a feeble knock on the door, and four scissor-sharp dark eyes peered up at her. Giving in, she introduced herself, took them in, and then brother and sister and Oa became a family. On Thursdays the three of them watched *Walosh*, their show, and the brother would comment on every minute irony. Oa would laugh and banter and give them crumb cakes to take back for their older sister. By midnight she was stuffed and tired but happy.

One night Trenton trudged home huffing, his skin bitter with near-frostbite. Oa watched him as he sat on the kitchen chair peeling off his wet socks, the woolen scrunch of them against his skinny ankles hurting her heart, oh heart, her heart the matchbox, the jukebox, the clean but empty ashtray. The bags beneath his eyes began to droop, red and plump like pitcher plants, and when he noticed her

paralyzing stare he stiffened. And smiled.

"How are you, Oa?" he asked. He was rubbing his toes with ointment and shea butter, pinning his foot awkwardly against his knee.

She didn't answer at first, only stared at him. The annoyance came back momentarily like sudden breath.

"You're my husband, Trent, but you don't have to be my husband!" She nearly shouted.

"What the hell do you mean?" His expression twisted up in half-dejection, half-anger.

"For heaven's sake, you are still a little boy!" Oa went up to him and rubbed his webbed temples with her knuckles and fingers. She aimed to grate his nerves, but just as soon her harsh pressing turned into massages and then strokes. Trenton, in his confused state, gripped her arms. Her frame still fit so well against his body he could smother her. They began to make clumsy, confused love on the kitchen floor. She rubbed his head, his scalp, his neck tenderly. She breathed all over his toes to warm them up. She kissed his frozen blood vessels. Her deflated belly was hot and cold like a geyser breaking through ice.

"Go get wild again," she said as he held her. "Go make out with other girls. Go be young and free and drunk. Go buy drugs."

"No," he said. "I won't do it without you."

"Go ahead. I look at you and see you dying. Go live

life. We are young." She said it without bating her breath.

"I'm not dying. I'm a little fatigued."

"I'll get a job too. I'll learn how to cook. I'll become a real anthropologist and move far away. I'll study the Najar people. You can forget about your jobs. I'll make something out of this—"

"Shut up!" he exploded, snapping the floor with a resounding crack. He rolled to his side limply. His sudden candor was feather-light, refreshing, and for a moment the wind rushed back inside her, hollowing out her lungs.

"What?"

"Don't act as if you're the only one who has to bear this. This—weight! This responsibility! It makes me sick the way you look at yourself, as if you feel pity!"

"Pity? What pity? Don't make me laugh!" She clenched her hands over her thighs.

"Self-pity is normal and it doesn't have to be laughable. I know you secretly enjoy it. Don't think I don't, either. It hurts, but sooner or later the hurt starts feeling good. You're *free* now—Free! You don't get this?"

"I got it. This freedom. What do you expect us to do with it? You really think we can amount to anything?"

"We'll make it," he said firmly. He truly meant it. Her nails left white crescents on his skin.

"Let's drink to that," she replied.

"You'll get sick," he said. "You'll get a fever, a

rash."

Because of his sincerity, she didn't. Instead, she watched him down six shots of vodka. After that, he calmed down and draped his arms around her, half-singing. But she wanted more than that. She wanted the drunken teenage Trent back, desperately—she would even nurture him through the vomiting; she would rub his bare back with a hot soaked rag, hold his head up and protect it from shattering against the porcelain toilet rim. She'd do it if only it'd stop him from giving her that pleading look again, that look as if he were staring into tragedy, that meandering, moping look of a man at least thirty years his senior.

He didn't throw up, only passed out, and she was almost disappointed. "Stay healthy," he whispered before he went. It could have been "stay stealthy"—she couldn't tell. Stealth, sure—she was a master, a virtuoso. But health? Health he said. Health—for what? Her body was an abandoned bungalow, a bed-and-breakfast, a temporary stay for a stranger. She deposited this stranger into the coin slot of time before she could tap its shoulder, let alone murder or be murdered. Trenton was right. The hurt did feel good.

At night the fantasies returned to her. Suddenly she and her baby were both in that rickshaw, tumbling so fast the cherry blossoms cut and ribboned both their faces. She was spring and she was free, her hair long and waving like a sash; baby wearing a white cotton yutaka that the young

Japanese boys wore in the anthropology videos. She felt its hair feather like so much evaporated sugar under her lips, and she bit its scalp playfully with her front teeth. This time she did not draw blood, only laughs, and when she realized they both were no longer afraid of gravity, the rickshaw turned into a bicycle. Her feet tapped the pedals and they were flying, flying!—imagine that, two spindling creatures over the clouds on an antique flying machine, hurtling so swift and far away the cherry blossoms no longer touched them at all.

She invited Pierce for dinner and dancing the following weekend. The desire to dance again almost gave her a seizure at night when she stayed up sleepless but full of dreams. Her body's cork-bottle emptiness helped it move like a machine. Pierce knew how to dance. They grinded like teenagers. The music was shrunken and sun-dried and Caribbean. She was terribly misplaced in a pale flapper dress, vase-shaped and falling over her wobbly hips.

It was a gay club. The theme that evening was beach. She considered the simulated palms, the pine shavings, the tiny ovules of light, the muscular calves of half-clad women and men. Every arm and leg was beautifully brown, tanned, smooth as egg white doused with soy. If Trent wasn't going to make out with pretty Mexican girls, maybe she would. "Don't attempt it," Pierce said. "I think you should

leave, and go home."

"I don't want to." She stepped on his toes.

"Then why go home? Why not Brazil?"

"Why Brazil?"

"It's not here. And it's got rainforests. I'll go if you go." He smiled. "Or Africa."

"I'd love Africa."

"I know. If only for the sunsets."

Pierce was limber and charming. He looked at her the way a cow looked at its clumsy, dying calf: full of concern but unattached because of the mother's extrasensory ability to smell death. But she was touched by his self-sacrifice. For her, he ignored the fever-pitched stares of the younger boys standing in the shadows. She knew herself that Pierce longed too, just as much as those boys did, just as much as she did. But because she was flimsy, because she was out of breath, she surrendered, she continued, she gave her body over and over to the music.

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The sudden realization hit her—she was twenty-six. Oa decided this was too young to be locked up into closets. Her eyelids were heavy, and an eyelash was caught in her eye. She blinked over her cell phone and the hour was already over, 1:57 AM, the noise hushed, save for a mysterious

rustling. When she heard the asthmatic breathing of Melinda Smith, that wheezing bitch, who sounded like a hungry dog with rabies, all her exhaustion died and she wanted to cry out from the closet. "*Skanky scum! How dare you!*" She'd clad herself in the luxury white mink coat wrapped in wax paper and come out sporting a bad rash and bedraggled hair. A furious geisha-ghost, was what she'd be. The lust would drain from Melinda Smith like a fart, and a crazed, rampaging fear would take its place.

Oa couldn't recognize whether the male huffs were Trent's, but she decided it didn't matter. She needed to kick somebody's ass, and soon. The wild urge ate her up, so she kicked the door down.

A deluge of light pierced her pupils and as if the real world were one big onion, Oa's eyes welled up. A steaming tear escaped, and through it she could see the pictographic bedroom, the pretzel of brown pantyhose on the floor. Melinda Smith was in the process of unbuckling the pants of Tom Lewis, one of the miscellaneous young husbands who earlier had been spotting Oa like a carnivorous bat.

Assuming her true role as the noble, narrow-browed mother, Oa came forth and firmly placed her hand on Tom's shoulder. "It's late, Tom," she said. "Tanya's waiting for you down in the kitchen."

Both were speechless. Both looked at Oa as if she were the Messiah. Tom's blue eyes clouded and dilated. His small

hand automatically reached to cover hers. She took it, gripped it, and yanked it. He stood up. She gave him a hard look, and his lip trembled. Tom was freckled, dimpled, and blonde-haired. Though he was only two years her junior, he could well have been her very own folly-driven, rosy-cheeked child.

Come to Mama, her mind commanded. He did. They left the bedroom and she shut the door behind them, leaving Melinda Smith barelegged and covered in goosebumps.

"Oa, you have a rash! How much did you drink?" When she came downstairs, Trenton's eyebrows rose high in concern, but Oa didn't hear him.

"We're going home!" she screamed. There were all sorts of things she wanted to scream—Fever! Flight! Fancy! "Let's go home!"

They didn't even call a cab. Holding his hand, she ran. She ran three blocks past the late winter debris, the hoarfrost painted watery gold in the lamplight. Across the street a line of cars parked, their tire tracks carving the dirty snow. The city night was as dead as dry timber.

He hobbled after her, not protesting but not completely in sync. He did not attempt to understand her. It was as if her earliest wish had finally been granted, the wish that someday her skin and membranes and cuticles would molt and she would emerge, new and alive. Her brain was a toilet, she concluded early on in seventh grade, and only through

rebirth can it truly be flushed.

Before they slept she told Trenton that she loved him. He gave her a small, cornered smile, and stroked her hair.

"Would you ever fall in love with another person?" she asked him.

He considered this, as if for the first time.

"It never really occurred to me."

"Nor would I."

Then she told him that she had to escape. She would go on a journey to Africa—to Senegal, Namibia, Ghana. "Let me go for a bit," she begged. "I won't die. You trust me, don't you?" She didn't want to see him again, at least not for a couple of years.

What she caught in his eyes was not shock, but relief—relief, for the fact that they were freed, for the fact that she would go. They kissed, quietly, languidly, and for a second she opened her eyes, gazing past the cinders suspended on the glassy light, into the last fine snowfall of March.

THE DRESSES

On Sunday, without meaning to, Nevi woke up from a half-quivering sleep on her dorm room floor. Through custardy eyes she peered at the rock doves flapping over the zelcova trees outside, the bile in her belly rising. That night, in between sleep and sliding, sweat-laced limbs, a boy had vanished from the room.

In nineteen years she'd never been kissed like that—never with such purpose, such flight, such lackadaise. In her stupor Nevi had felt insignificant, adventurous, letting the boy slip his guitar-strumming fingers dangerously close to that soft part of her. Under the covers they'd lain there — a pair of scissors — for a long time. She told stories about little Vietnamese villages in the rain, about extinct species of macaws and seabirds (oh, majestic extinct Great Auk!), about miraculous things — things a normal girl could never say and a guitar could never do.

Now he was gone; he panicked. Light filtered through the blinds, and she lay there, spent. She felt a soft, terrible awakening—an awakening of the hormones. In the span of hours, Nevi learned to hate her hormones — those places where her body ached for the absent. She wanted to murder them the way she murdered cockroaches, with a firm fist and a paper towel, a thump and a wad.

Her chest convulsed as the phone rang. *Come out*, said a friend - Cerrah's - voice. *Come out*. Time for a walk - a march away from other bare-legged young people, away from the ballads and bagpipes of college, the picnics and tears. Nevi sighed, relieved. She was sure she would spend all day under covers - thighs, chest, and eyes shut tight. But here was Cerrah chirping her awake. Cerrah, of paint and flowers! Cerrah, a neutral soul! Relief pounded through Nevi's body like quiet cymbals.

They met in the hall, where Cerrah leaned against a staircase railing, smoking a Parliament, her foot arched against a red bicycle. Inside its basket was a plastic bag of daisies. She was wearing a dove-gray dress. Her arms were smeared in turquoise and yellow paint.

"I've been painting daisies all night," she said. "Nonstop." Cerrah was an art major who did not usually sleep, and when she did she liked it to be in public places, like bus stops and coffee shops. In the span of her year in college, Cerrah had hung herself from a clothesline, broken up with two grad students, and posed nude for five paintings by her peers, three of which hung in the freshman gallery.

"Daisies are pretty good. Nice and asexual," said Nevi.

"Today," said Cerrah, "we'll be fictional characters."

"Fictional characters?"

"Like from a movie, or a book." She declared, smoke rushing from her nostrils. "I'm feeling untouchable." She had just gotten a haircut, and the black bob of it wagged against her cheekbones. She reached into her bag and offered a cig to Nevi, who accepted.

"What do you mean, untouchable?" asked Nevi.

"It's a state of mind," explained Cerrah. "I'm filming a documentary about being a fictional character. Or feeling like a fictional character in the world of starving reality - feeling far removed, as if you are really in a different dimension." She set down a small camcorder held together by duct tape, and chained her bicycle to the staircase railing. "No one can touch us if we're fiction."

They started walking. Out of the stone dorm building, Lancaster House, with its tall wooden windows and automatic baroque door, past the winterberry trees, with their uncurling leaves and seeds. They didn't have a place to go, they only walked; the sun lapped its sticky tongue against their backs. They passed houses with bright lawns, tire swings and tricycles, and patches of tulips, the bulbs of which flashed in the white heat. In the sun, they were two liquid, sexless, infantile creatures.

Cerrah swung her camera around her neck with a rope thread. She was filming her footsteps, one at a time, taking care to take each step with weight.

"How do you become fictional?" Nevi asked. She thought about which fictional character she could be: Sumire, from Murakami's *Sputnik Sweetheart*, the girl writer who disappeared in Greece, leaving a lovesick narrator in bewildered suspense. That was who she wanted to be. She wanted to confound, entice, then disappear.

"Simple, really," said Cerrah. "You have to just melt. Think of yourself as a water creature. You're swimming through this light."

Cerrah continued filming their surroundings: the abandoned nests, the broken stone angels, the branches, the gardens. Her thumbs stroked the camera like it was a child, and her eyes were morose, hammering. Houses grew more and more decrepit. Curly vines and branches pawed the dirt. Dogs barked, the land staled, twigs snapped and floated. Their pockets heaved with key chains and gum. Every step took them farther away, into the sweaty, disintegrated heart of Pittsburgh.

"Tell me about your fiction," Cerrah said. She turned her camera toward Nevi.

Nevi paced ahead, kicking the yellow dirt, spreading her arms, imagining the wingspans of falcons. She laughed, and it was a laugh she summoned from the bottom of her diaphragm—that muscle of suppressed breaths and tears held back!—where she let everything burst like a hundred balloons in sync with each other.

"This is my fiction!" she croaked. She swung her purse, spun in circles, arched her back to the sun.

Cerrah clicked the camera. "It's okay, Nevi, to act normal. Try to be yourself. Being fictional in a way is about reaching your authentic self. You don't need to act like you're happy."

"This is myself," said Nevi.

"No," said Cerrah, her eyes full of empathy. "No, it's not."

Nevi had met Cerrah at an art show, "Metallic Wonderland", where all the displayed pieces came from a junkyard or metal shop. In the gallery space, a tawdry mulberry curtain marked "X-rated" concealed a side room. Nevi had entered it, blinking at the metal penises and little sculptures of Gods and goblins in various sex positions. There was a metal bra with two thick spikes covering the nipples that hung on the wall's center, which Cerrah had been checking out shamelessly. When she turned around and looked at Nevi, they both burst into laughter at the same time.

"Artful pornography," Nevi had said. "Or pornographic art? Or perhaps just artful erotic sculpture?"

Without words the two of them walked around the next room together, running their fingers over the silver eggshells, the steel wool nests, the hanging aluminum cranes. At one point they lost interest in the displays and sat down between the tin panoply and the bronze tiger, where they tuned the music on the speakers.

"What's your name?" Cerrah had asked.

"Nevi."

"Wow. Strange name. Not that mine is any less strange, though. It's Cerrah."

They shook hands. Cerrah's hand was cold, smooth, Nevi's warm and papery.

"Nevi is named after my grandfather's birthmarks. It's apparently the plural word for moles, birthmarks. That sort of thing."

"What?"

"My parents were both artists. My dad did a piece on the birthmarks of his father's body after he died. He recreated them on a stretched piece of canvas that he plastered over a sofa. It's his masterpiece. It's sitting in a museum."

"That's creepy. But what kind of artist is your father?"

"He was really interested in the perennial quality of the flesh, and human skin."

"Wow." After a pause, she said, "I made up the name Cerrah. One day I decided that the name my parents have chosen for me - it wasn't good enough."

"So you escaped inheritance. That's daring. What was your original name?"

"I'm in the process of forgetting. I'd rather keep it a secret."

That night they ended up getting drunk, hurling bottles over the empty tennis courts, listening to the distant crack of glass shattering, rolling down the steep cement, breaking apart. Cerrah told Nevi about Don, her boy, the boy she had wine and strawberries with one night while autumn still shed leaves, the boy she committed crimes with. When Nevi asked her what kind of crimes, Cerrah laughed without answering, saying that she only committed crimes because crimes are always being committed against her, every day. Don ran away, Cerrah said. Don was the first boy she loved. He said he couldn't be with her, he needed to stay free, and she felt the same, but did not understand.

And so Nevi and Cerrah were cynical together. They complained about people. They spewed at the fake; the meaningless. They made up stories about The Girl Who Cried Sex and The Boy Who Cried Soul. They clasped hands. They scorned. They slandered.

Up ahead, there was a fork on the road, and an enormous bridge. Three beams held up an expanse of empty freeway. They were swallowed with graffiti, the colors piled high like illustrated totem poles - cryptic words, messages, skeletal cartoons. Having practiced fictionalizing herself all the way up there, Nevi felt her entire body turn into royal jelly - sugar-sweet, soft, bludgeoned by touch and wind.

"Can you tell what the graffiti is saying?" she asked Cerrah. From her position the giant lemon and pink bubble lettering looked like a cross between *fungus* and *fugly*. Cerrah didn't answer; she only filmed. Like an aerial satellite or a ghost, she crept, absorbing the setting, which to Nevi was too disorienting, surreal: all around them the graffiti colors seemed to swirl, pile, disseminate, reorder themselves, bright and slapdash as circus paint. Trees inched out of the broken cement and pillows of weeds, their branches whirling with the wind gusts. Tiny alabaster blossoms sprouted from their twigs.

Nevi shuffled through the discarded newspapers, picking up cans of discarded spray paint, the nuzzles of which were all stained and crusted like plasma from wounds. "This is such a special place," she mumbled out loud.

Cerrah didn't answer. She reached into her bag and pulled out a thick black Sharpie. "Maybe you can write something," she said. "I'll film you."

Nevi stopped for a moment. What could she possibly have to write? She remembered the boy brushing back her hair, puncturing her body with his jointed fingers, his olive eyes. He'd been so temporary, so sudden: like a small earthquake.

With large, loopy handwriting that was not her own, Nevi wrote down in Sharpie ink: *Perennial Things Are Absurd*. Against the dried spray paint, the declaration was a watery, dark absurdity itself.

When she turned around, she realized that the camera was still pointing at her, Cerrah's face hidden behind it, her hand wheeling upwards as if to say "speak". Nevi thought of the poem she'd recited on the fly, eyes stinging, as the boy listened, quietness in his throat. Last night she'd had words built up like thousands of bees inside her throat as she weaved her fiction. He'd told her at first that he couldn't stay with her - he had an unrequited love. He was on the run. His heart was somewhere else, he had said.

To this she had replied, her heart was right here. *You do not do this to a girl who has never been loved*, she kept thinking. *You do not do this. Steal this enormous kiss, touch her, and leave.*

Lowering her head, Nevi recited what she'd said to him:

My heart is swinging on a swing inside the meadow.

My heart skips stones.

My heart is playing hopscotch with the schoolchildren.

My heart plays tetherball.

My heart is the tetherball.

My heart does not want to be connected to this pole on a string.

My heart is in a rabbit hole.

She said it slowly, swallowing saliva, throat drying as she finished.

"That was perfect," said Cerrah, snapping the off switch. "Oh my god. You are perfect." Setting her camera down, she wrapped her arms around Nevi, kneading the ridges of her spine, pressing upon her waist, shivering slightly against Nevi's uncertain heartbeat. In Cerrah's embrace, Nevi brought an arm up and with her fingertips, flicked off the gunk that had built up in her eyes, squinting slightly at the sun as if through tears.

After another mile of walking, they took a rest in front of an empty restaurant. Having finished filming, Cerrah was especially cheerful and offered to buy Nevi lunch. When they couldn't find a restaurant that was open at

four PM, they went to a Korean grocer where they attempted to buy the strangest and most delectable-sounding things they could find: dried sweet hot gooseberries, a jar of quail eggs, canned lychees, sweet red bean buns. Carrying their bags out, they settled in front of a closed Thai restaurant on a picnic table.

Cerrah was talkative again. She was talking about the twenty-five year old grad student she rendezvoused with the night before - how he had a plaid hat, a cute lisp, and a girlfriend who told him to date other people.

"He touched me. He was *good*," Cerrah said. "And I was so selfish. I told him I was just going to lie there and let him make me feel good. That I was fictional, and I can't touch him. That it was okay for me not to be loved. I feel like being alone and weightless and graceful and unreal."

"You are right. Love is a curse," said Nevi. She had marveled before at how tactile Cerrah was to the people she liked - how she could get them to inhale, to shudder, how her hands could trace such routes in strange and unmappable bodies, whereas Nevi suspected her own hands would get abysmally lost.

"The problem with it is that it's insatiable," said Cerrah. "Fucking insatiable."

"I was mislead by these biological weeds. Those chemicals."

"Biological weeds?" Cerrah looked up, puzzled.

"You know. Like, hormones. They were messing me up. I'm going to apologize. I'm going to present to him this box of dried sweet spicy gooseberries, and I'm going to tell him I'm sorry for even having asked anything of him."

"Hormones naturally bely any sense of self-worth, values, or thoughts you have. But you owe him nothing. You should just eat the gooseberries yourself. Eat and then forget. Don't think. Just consume."

They did. She cut open the box and the sugar sprinkled over their fingers. The gooseberries were neither sweet nor hot; they were more sour and bitter, like lemon rinds. They spat the tiny seeds into napkins which they folded into geometric shapes.

Nevi tried not to think, to obsess. But there in the dry wind she remembered, how his hand had squeezed then suffocated that tiny bit of her that had been sleeping so restlessly, starving, for so long. He'd whispered things like "you're wonderful. I've never met anyone like you." And then he ran away, like a charming thief with a pomegranate in his palm. How robbed she felt. That was hers. It was her pomegranate. And now she had no seeds. She was seedless.

"My heart's not broken," said Nevi, between eating gooseberries. "It's not, at all."

"Mine is," said Cerrah. She said it simply, tonelessly, and for a moment she looked at her jewelless

hands.

Nevi put an arm around Cerrah's shoulder. The late afternoon washed the rooftops of the closed stores with a rosy, alien warmth. Paper bags fluttered around the gutters like butterflies. Their knees were scratchy, dry, pink. Maple leaves stuck to their shoes. With a knife, Cerrah stabbed open the can of quail eggs that they bought. They ate these with their fingers, plucking them one by one out of the can. When the salt was too much, they started the can of lychees.

"What's broken is my ego," said Nevi, sucking the syrup from her dirty fingers. The ego was more mechanical; the ego had metal joints. The ego was repaired easily with a technician. The heart was not. The heart was too tender; too much squeezable flesh, too many chambers, too much muscle, too much to protect. Her ventricles and atriums were filling with silt.

After a pause, she added, "It's like we're sisters in broken things."

Cerrah nodded.

They felt the wind grow strong then. It murmured, as if to say they were lost. Nevi felt it brush the hair off the nape of her neck. Something caught in her throat. The fruit slid down to her belly in a cold heap, and she waited for Cerrah to say something. Not a word came out. Cerrah was

choking back something; tears? Laughter? Her expression was calm, warm: lips curved shut, eyes moist.

Nevi felt her fictional self evaporating. "How long can we keep at it? Being fictional?"

"I don't know." Cerrah's voice did not quiver; it was surprisingly strong. She buried her head in her arms. "I don't know. I wish it could be forever."

"But nothing's forever. "

"I know. And that's why I feel like nonfiction right now. I feel real. It hurts."

Nevi felt herself solidifying, rising above. She saw herself and Cerrah down on the ground; she saw their own smallness, their reality. They were those antique ballerinas shut still inside music boxes, surrounded by cold, dust-filled darkness. When someone opened their music boxes, they spun around on their own bent axes, dizzy with song.

As they sauntered back toward campus, Cerrah's dress flailed behind her like a comet. It clung to her knees, fluttering against the wind. "Where did you buy that dress?" Nevi asked.

"It was seventy five dollars," Cerrah responded, not hearing the question.

"Wow. But where did you buy it?"

"I didn't buy it."

Nevi looked at the dress again, and suddenly it was a million times more beautiful. Dangerous. What was it about being stolen? Cerrah's dress seemed to dissolve against her body, the fibers of it like pores on skin, turning liquid, golden. It was grey, but there in the red light it was the color of fire.

Oh, Don, Nevi wanted to sigh, to send a message. *She is so beautiful. Why do you run?*

"Can we go do that today?" Nevi asked. She was serious. She was curious. She understood now - how it was, to be so robbed of the skin, of pores, of tissue, of self. She needed to become something new; to pilfer.

Cerrah smiled. "You need to be calm. That's the key to committing a crime."

They took the 65-A bus to the Mission District. The sun was setting, and they had hardly any time because it was a Sunday and the stores closed early. "This is a good time," Cerrah said, "because things are winding down. The employees at this point can think of nothing but going home to their buckets of ice cream and their speaker systems."

Lights like sirens shimmered. They got off at the corner, where there was a row of neatly manicured lilac bushes. One by one, they walked past the perfumed shops - Banana Republic, Victoria's Secret, Saks. Nevi thought of her New Jersey suburban life - of shopping malls, of retail fulfillment, and all at once the loss of it all steeped down

in her, how glib it all was, the stiff-jointed mannequins, their curly eyelashes, their cheekbones and scowls. All so incredible; all so tantalizing and fake. She remembered the last perfume she owned, how in a fit of self-discovery she took the Vera Wang that she'd saved up \$150 for and let it spill over her unpainted toes in the bathtub, how it stung and thrilled her wet skin, how it exhilarated her to know that she would never be defined by another person's scent again.

Arm in arm, Nevi and Cerrah walked into one of the stores, which was almost empty except for a middle-aged woman in gym shorts holding a baby in her arms. The salesgirl was yapping behind the counter into a cell phone and twisting her long cherry hair in her fingers as if rolling a pretzel.

A rack of dresses stood brightly in the center of the room. One dress immediately caught Nevi's glance: it was strapless, weightless, the color of blood—dark and deep. They stared and sorted. They draped their arms in pastels and plaids, tartans and calicos. They kept the dresses they wanted in the center of the colorful swirls, and slipped into the fitting rooms unnoticed.

Cerrah snipped each tag with her teeth and stuck them all behind the mirror. When they stripped, their naked backs to each other, Nevi did not catch Cerrah's sideways stare, the momentary penetration of it. Nevi was not ashamed of her

breasts shaped like small plums, her back with all its moles and birthmarks.

"Someday I'll make a sofa of your nevi, too," Cerrah said teasingly. "I'll call it 'The Nevi of Nevi'."

"I'd rather you not," said Nevi, "because for you to do that, you'd have to examine my cadavar. I may have to die first."

They tried each dress on and the slippery rustle of cold fabric flaring against sun-dried skin made a feeling like being purified—washed in mineral water; the bath of priestesses. Cerrah in a turquoise smock, Nevi in the blood-colored charmeuse. Through the mirror they studied each other for a long time. Beauty, eating them up. Haywire youth, incurable as love. "We're disgustingly narcissistic," Nevi sighed. Cerrah replied with another sigh.

They ran their hands over the dresses—invasively, the way those boys ran their hands over their thorn-touched hearts—wadded them, and buried them in their bags. Then, hands in pockets and barely trembling, they walked out, past the clean racks, past the door, their necks stretched out long like swans.

Nevi was almost surprised at her own lack of guilt. What she felt was derailment; a helpless greed fraying her at the edges. She wanted to take and to take. Giving meant too many weeds, wounds, hopes. She wanted to be selfish and

fictional. How trivial and small was all this—a girl's want of repayment—the strange, sausage-like weight of it, the exertion, the reasoning. How grand it felt to break away from that starvation. In the future Nevi would spill all kinds of liquids on that dress: water, wine, eggnog, champagne. But it would never stain; its sheen would shrivel up, but she'd keep it dusted and powdered in the empty recesses of her closet, until its threads stretched and broke like millions of fine capillaries.

Outside, a storm. The sky had a texture like black sesame seeds—shadowy, grainy, chalk-like; the kind of sky you'd spit out. Nevi gripped her bag, bracing herself for wind. She took Cerrah's hand, her fingers still sticky and cold with syrup. Wordlessly they stared at the sun's lost, cindery glow, waiting for the thunder to whine.